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Reclaiming Uyghur Agency Through Artistic Practices: A Conversation with Mukaddas Mijit

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Abstract This interview details the professional and personal journey of Mukaddas Mijit, a Uyghur artist and ethnomusicologist navigating the complexities of life in the diaspora. Mijit explores the systemic challenges she has faced within both Chinese and Euro-American institutions, highlighting how her identity is frequently subjected to different forms of racialization. In the Chinese context, she describes a colonial framework where Uyghur culture is manipulated into staged, state-approved performances of "happy minorities" designed to serve a political agenda. Conversely, she critiques the Euro-American perspective for often reducing Uyghur identity to a one-dimensional narrative of victimhood or an exotic relic of the past. Through her work in film, podcasting, and performance, Mijit rejects the need for "rescuing" Uyghur culture from the outside. Instead, she emphasizes the contemporariness, vitality, and individuality of Uyghur people, seeking to reclaim the right to define Uyghurness on their own terms.

Interview with Mukaddas Mijit

Gavin: Can you tell us about your experience as an Uyghur diasporic artist and scholar?

Mukaddas: My journey as a Uyghur diasporic artist and scholar began in 2003 when I moved to Europe after graduating from the Xinjiang Art Institute in Ürümchi, in the Uyghur Region. The excitement of leaving my homeland alone was palpable. Growing up, I was influenced by a blend of Western classical music and the unauthorized pop/rock music that permeated

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through Dako cassettes (De Kloet 2005). These songs, though I did not fully understand its lyrics, gave me a sense of what "being free" might feel like (in political and social sense), making me feel more connected to it than to the music my parents listened to or what was broadcasted on XJTV.

Arriving in Paris, everything felt new and different, from the people to the buildings. I made friends quickly, mostly with other young people who from other countries, like me, were experiencing Paris for the first time. Initially, I aimed to continue my studies as a solo pianist. However, I soon encountered the harsh reality that my musical training at Xinjiang Art Institute did not align with the expectations of the Western classical music system in France. Maybe for the best, the struggle with this cultural and educational mismatch made me look for other directions.

Another challenge in Paris was the lack of awareness about Uyghurs. Nearly every new encounter required me to explain where I came from, often involving drawing maps of Central Asia and detailing the history of the Uyghur region and its colonization by the Chinese government. In a very naïve way, I was surprised and disappointed that while I thought, before coming to Paris, Uyghurs were as well-known in Paris as Paris was to me, the reality was far from it. This realization instilled in me a sense of mission to raise awareness of the Uyghur experience urgently (which I think also comes from a very naïve place). Quickly enough, this realization led me to meet people in the cultural sector, including the founder of the "Maison des Cultures du Monde." This meeting was pivotal in introducing Uyghur traditional music to Paris, culminating in the participation of ten musicians and state officials in the Festival de l'Imaginaire in 2005. This event marked a significant historical moment for Dolan Muqam and generated in me an interest in ethnomusicology.

As I delved deeper into this self-imposed mission, I grappled with the complexities of representing non-Western music in the West. While I initially embraced labels such as "world music" and "traditional artist," I soon realized that these terms often perpetuated imbalances, often legitimizing one over another, between Western and non-Western, contemporary and traditional, art and exotic entertainment. There is a significant gap in how non-Euro-

pean musical forms are represented in the West, often through a colonial lens that views them as "far away," "less virtuous," and "traditional = from the past."

This kind of flat one-dimensional reception also affected my own experience. Over time, I struggled with presenting my artistic practice in a way that was not seen and consumed as distant or exotic. I recognized the systemic roots of this problem and understood that it required ongoing negotiation with cultural institutions to reshape public perceptions. But, I also realized that I might have contributed to maintaining an exotic image, by presenting primarily the staged version of Uyghur dance and costume. As the decolonization of my artistic training needed to be part of this process, I began to assert that my artistic practices were (and still are) as contemporary and relevant as any other and reduced my participation in "world music/dance" events wearing Uyghur traditional stage costumes. I start defending the contemporariness, liveliness, and vibrancy of Uyghur dance and music on any occasion. Defending the legitimacy of Uyghur culture took on a different weight around 2016. As the political and humanitarian crisis in the Uyghur Region intensified, public discussion increasingly invoked terms like "cultural genocide" and "erasure." Journalists and others began asking how my work contributed to "saving" or "safeguarding" this allegedly endangered culture. My answer was clear: no culture needs rescuing from the outside. As long as the people who carry a culture are alive, they will continue to practice it in ways that make sense to them. Many of us still inhabit Uyghur culture every day, holding its arts and expressions in our bodies and minds.

My experience as a scholar had similar points to my experience as an artist. When I began my studies in ethnomusicology around 2005, I was lost, struggling with the language and unfamiliar with the Western educational system. Plus, Western anthropology was developed by Western scholars to study "people like me," and much of its methodology was not adapted to include native scholars from the regions being studied. My presence at the university was noteworthy to some professors, because I was the first Uyghur student in ethnomusicology. While I was glad to meet people who knew something about where I came from, it was also revealing that I was the first person of my background they had ever encountered. My interaction with

a French researcher who had built her entire career on Uyghur (my) culture, exposed the exclusionary mechanisms within Western anthropology. She saw me as a threat to her academic territory and actively tried to block my entry into French academia, even after I had earned a PhD. One might attribute her behavior to jealousy, but the deeper issue lies in how her deliberate obstruction never provoked any reaction from colleagues who knew exactly what she was doing. They chose silence, protecting the established French scholar and leaving a precarious native scholar in the shadows. This silence raises serious questions about the ethics of the discipline and the unresolved colonial legacies that continue to shape it.

Finishing my PhD and the subsequent years were marked by challenges in defending my position as a legitimate scholar. My objectivity and research abilities were often questioned, and I was seen more as an informant than as a trained researcher. This experience underscores the systemic barriers that scholars from marginalized cultures face in Western academia. Similarly, my experience as an artist and filmmaker has been shaped by unequal access to funding, especially when telling stories that don't conform to a Western gaze.

My journey as a Uyghur diasporic artist and scholar has been one of navigating cultural misunderstandings, challenging colonial frameworks, and asserting the legitimacy of Uyghur culture and my scholarly work. It is a continuous process of negotiation and self-reflection, aimed at reshaping public awareness and decolonizing both my artistic practice and the academic field.

Gavin: What has been your experience working with Chinese versus Western institutions, including academia, state funding bodies, and performing groups?

Mukaddas: My experience working with Chinese institutions is somewhat limited, primarily because I moved to Europe shortly after completing my studies in the Uyghur Region. However, I did have the opportunity to collaborate with a few Chinese music tour organizers, which provided me with insights into the workings of Chinese institutions and individuals in the cultural sector. As an academic, my interactions with Chinese institutions

have been confined to a few conferences and roundtables. Due to the limited scope and the fact that these exchanges occurred over a decade ago, I cannot provide a comprehensive comparison, especially concerning recent changes.

Despite these limitations, some key differences stood out in my experience, particularly in terms of transparency, efficiency, and the treatment of collaborators. While I am fully aware of the inequalities present in European institutions and acknowledge that efficiency can also be debated, these issues were noticeably more pronounced in my interactions with Chinese institutions. For example, organizing concerts for an international music band through a relatively well-established touring agency from Shanghai was a cumbersome and complex process. Communication was often chaotic, with the Chinese partners keeping basic information secret for reasons that were never fully explained. There was little to no room for negotiation on logistical matters such as accommodation, travel dates, or the selection of touring cities. Any attempt to discuss or request changes in these areas often provoked strong, sometimes defensive reactions from the tour producers, making these conversations intense and exhausting.

My understanding of this excessive rigidity is that it likely stems from the broader political framework governing the Chinese cultural industry. Additionally, the frugality of semi-independent cultural actors, who must navigate this complex system, also contributes to the challenges in these collaborations. Working with Chinese cultural institutions often generates a significant mental burden due to the unpredictability of censorship and the ambiguity surrounding what constitutes acceptable expression. The ever-present concern about crossing an invisible "red line" where artistic or scholarly work could be deemed politically sensitive or subversive, adds to this tension. There's a constant worry about potential accusations or repercussions resulting from even unintentionally breaching these boundaries. This atmosphere of uncertainty and self-censorship can stifle creativity and limit the freedom to fully explore complex or controversial subjects. The fear of state censorship looms large, affecting not only the content of the work but also the emotional state of those engaging with Chinese institutions. This creates a challenging environment where one must navigate the complexities of cultural expression while staying mindful of the risks involved.

In contrast, while similar projects with European institutions can also encounter tensions, they generally benefit from more solid institutional and social support, especially in Western Europe. Artistic expression is often seen as an essential part of daily life and the society at large, unlike my experience in China, where attending concerts or cultural events still seemed exceptional, particularly during my work on the China tour around 2015. However, working with European institutions can also lead to frustration. Even though there is more freedom in terms of expression, non-European art is often received through a postcolonial lens as discussed earlier. This means that instead of engaging with the art on its own terms, it is frequently interpreted within the collective memories of historical colonial power dynamics. This framing can reduce the complexity of non-European art, including Uyghur art, to a narrative that reinforces cultural stereotypes, rather than acknowledging the individuality and depth of the creative work.

Gavin: How do you see your positionality in relation to Chinese versus Western institutions, including academia, state funding bodies, and performing groups?

Mukaddas: As an Uyghur diasporic artist and scholar, my positionality in relation to Chinese and Western institutions is shaped not only by my identity but also by the broader political and cultural dynamics at play. Navigating these institutions requires me to confront how I am perceived and how my work is understood, while also challenging the assumptions and narratives imposed upon me.

My interactions with Chinese institutions are inherently complicated by my Uyghur identity and the political situation in the Uyghur Region. This means, as an artist/scholar in the diaspora my work would always be viewed through a lens of scrutiny. Especially, in the recent years, the Chinese government's control over cultural expression and its systemic oppression of Uyghur people have strongly affected my positionality. For ethical and security reasons, today I could not imagine a collaboration with any Chinese institution. Even engaging in relatively benign cultural projects, might be subjected to tension. This creates a position where, as an Uyghur, I am both marginalized and monitored, and even criminalized in the Chinese context,

by the Chinses government. This is also the reason why I haven't engaged in any artistic collaboration with artists still living in Chinese territory since 2017.

In Western institutions, the dynamics are different but no less complex. As an Uyghur artist and scholar, I am often seen as a representative of a culture under threat, which positions me as both a subject of interest and an object of sympathy. While this can open doors in terms of visibility and opportunities for my work, it also comes with the risk of being pigeonholed as a "victim" or as someone whose primary role is to represent a "genocided" people. I struggle to resist this label and the victimizing posture that often accompanies it. While the world looks at Uyghurs; and by extension, people like me, through the lens of victimhood, I feel the need to raise my voice independently. I believe in both cases, my work should not only be about representing a culture that is under attack but also about asserting its vitality, creativity, and contemporary relevance. I aim to highlight that Uyghur culture, art, and scholarship are living, evolving, and capable of standing on their own terms, outside of the narrative of genocide and erasure.

Gavin: What is your experience in terms of identity, navigating your own self- and group-identity, versus racialization by Chinese and Western others?

Mukaddas: My experience of identity has been shaped by tensions between my individual sense of self, my group identity, and the ways I am racialized from Chinese and Western perspectives, as well as within the Uyghur community. As part of a community living under intense stress and trauma, I constantly navigate a space where my personal identity intersects with broader political and social narratives imposed on me by others. In times of crisis, the discourse of unity and collectiveness becomes especially dominant. It often carries unspoken expectations about how community members should behave, for example, using the same vocabulary in public discussions or participating in political actions as a form of duty. Even artistic production can come under pressure from these expectations. Balancing my own individuality with the collective needs of my community remains one of the greatest challenges of my life.

In the Chinese context, my identity as a Uyghur has always been racialized and minoritized. Growing up in Ürümchi in the 1980s–90s as part of the last generation able to receive a full education in the Uyghur language gave me access to a deeper understanding of Uyghur culture. At the same time, it made me aware of the segregation that already existed. While Han Chinese students had better opportunities to enter top universities and secure higher–paying jobs, students educated entirely in Uyghur were left behind in an unequal job market that relied primarily on Chinese as the working language. This is only one example of how Uyghurs were viewed through a lens of otherness and suspicion within Chinese society. Because we attended different schools and were educated in a different language, we were constantly labelled as a "minority," reminded of our difference, and subjected to state surveillance and control. Our image, our dance, our music, was often reduced to a performance of the "happy minority under the Chinese Communist Party" narrative.

This racialization denies us full humanity and equality, stripping away the individuality each of us possesses. Our existence becomes politicized and managed through state propaganda. Much of my own professional training as a stage dancer was shaped by this system, designed to produce cultural workers who would uphold and reproduce this official image.

In Europe, my experience with racialization is different but still deeply impactful. As we mentioned earlier, Western societies often view me as a representative of endangered culture. There is an emphasis on my identity as an Uyghur and a member of a persecuted community, which can overshadow my individuality. The West's engagement with Uyghur culture and people is often shaped by news stories about re-education camps and forced labor. These narratives generate indignation, sympathy, and sometimes curiosity, but they place far less emphasis on understanding the full depth and diversity of who we are. As a result, Uyghur identity is frequently essentialized, reduced to the aspects that fit global human rights narratives, while the richness of Uyghur culture and the individuality of its members are overlooked. This racialization can be limiting for me as an artist, especially when it comes to how my work is received. It often places me in a position where my work is understood primarily as an expression of my ethnic identity or as

a political statement against oppression, rather than being recognized as art in its own right.

Despite the complexity of this situation, being both an artist and a scholar has helped me find a measure of balance. These dual roles allow me to remain engaged with my community while carving out space for my own individual expression. As an artist, I can explore the personal and intimate dimensions of identity and culture, while as a scholar, I can address broader, more collective issues. This combination grants me a degree of independence, allowing me to move between my personal needs and the needs of my community. Still, I know that this balance is not always easy to maintain. The weight of the crisis facing the Uyghur people is ever-present, and there are moments when I must prioritize the collective over the individual. Yet I also believe that preserving my individuality and personal voice is essential, not only for my own well-being but also as a way of showing the complexity and diversity that exist within Uyghur identity itself.

Gavin: What are ways to counter racialization and stereotyping?

Mukaddas: One of the most effective ways to counter racialization and stereotyping is to offer nuanced perspectives that challenge dominant narratives and give space to intimate stories, rather than relying on broad meta-narratives. This allows the complexity and individuality of people to come through instead of reducing them to labels or clichés. Here are some ways I approach this in my own work:

In my fiction film Nikah (2023), I deliberately chose to explore the intimate, personal journey of a young Uyghur woman navigating the tensions between traditional expectations and state oppression. By focusing on her inner struggles, desires, and contradictions, I sought to move beyond generalized portrayals of Uyghurs as victims of political repression. The film humanizes her, showing how her daily life is shaped by her own choices and circumstances rather than solely by a predefined political identity. In doing so, viewers are invited into the emotional world of the main characters, ultimately witnessing a politically complex moment in Uyghur history. Through this approach, personal narratives disrupt stereotypical portrayals and open new paths for understanding Uyghur experiences.

Another way to challenge racialization is by elevating contemporary voices that defy conventional narratives. My work performing Uyghur poetry seeks to bring modern Uyghur literary expression to the forefront. These readings highlight the depth and vibrancy of Uyghur cultural production beyond the political frame, allowing audiences to engage with Uyghur thought and creativity in a deeply personal way. Also, through WEghur Stories, the podcast I co-created, we tried to offer a platform for young Uyghur artists, musicians, and intellectuals living in the diaspora to share their stories, work, and reflections. It gives listeners direct access to Uyghur voices that are often underrepresented or misunderstood in mainstream media. By featuring diverse perspectives from within the community, the podcast challenges monolithic portrayals and highlights the plurality and creativity that exist across the diaspora. Ultimately, countering racialization requires sustained efforts to foreground plurality of Uyghur voices. I have been collaborating with a wide range of young artists to create more poetically engaged work, under the concept of *Geopoetics* (2024–25), breaking through the borders and boundaries that, for now, too often define who we are.

Gavin: What do you regard as "colonial" and "decolonial" in your practice and scholarship?

Mukaddas: In my view, "colonial" refers to any form of cultural production shaped by the dominant Chinese state narrative that frames Uyghurs as one of China's "ethnic minorities." Over the past decades, this narrative has manipulated and re-engineered Uyghur art and culture. The state's portrayal of Uyghur identity in official performances, media, and cultural productions is one of the clearest examples of this colonial framework.

A particularly visible example is the state-owned stage productions that present Uyghur dance, music, and clothing in ways that serve the Chinese government's agenda. These performances not only follow strict censorship rules but also embody an aesthetic shaped by colonial influence: exaggerated costumes, stylized choreography, and the use of bright red costumes or backdrops that reinforce the narrative of national unity under Han leadership. Even the fixed smiles of the dancers become part of this staged aesthetic.

Such representations are colonial because they erase the lived experiences and voices of Uyghur people, feeding back distorted images into the collective memory and disrupting cultural transmission. As the rest of Uyghur culture becomes increasingly restricted, these state-promoted performances have begun to occupy the entire cultural space and, in some cases, their influence even extends into the diaspora.

One key aspect of decolonial work is the effort to engage with and present Uyghur culture in ways that are diverse and free from political manipulation. Decolonial work is fundamentally about recentering the narrative, learning, understanding, and imagining the history and future of Uyghurness on our own terms. In doing so, we create a space of resistance against the forces that seek to control how Uyghurs are seen and understood. It is an ongoing process that demands vigilance and creativity as we navigate pressures to conform to colonial narratives while asserting our own identities.

For me, this work always involves using art and scholarship to tell stories that reflect the diversity, complexity, and vitality of Uyghur life. It is about reclaiming the right to define ourselves and our culture and ensuring that our voices are heard not only as a "minority" or as "victims of human rights abuses," but as individuals and as a community with unique perspectives and contributions to humanity.

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