THE XINJIANG SOUND

As a Uighur pop star, Ablajan Awut Ayup is a model not just for his troubled homeland but for all of China

BY EMILY RAUHALA/SANGZHU

SANGZHU IS NOT THE SORT OF PLACE YOU'D expect to find a pop star. An oasis town of some 30,000 people off the old Silk Road in China's northwestern Xinjiang territory, Sangzhu is home to ethnic Uighur farmers, mosques and a bazaar. Women move quietly through courtyards, pulling their kerchiefs tight against the wind from the Taklamakan Desert. Bearded men lead donkeys down the road.

Then a bus rattles around the corner, shaking sleepy Sangzhu to life. From the backseats of the rusty clunker comes the kind of feral scream that can only be produced by wild packs of teenage girls. They pound the windows and wave their hands with boy-band abandon, jostling for a better view. "Ablajan!" they yell as they roll by. "Ab-laaa-jaaan!"

Standing street-side in a studded leather jacket and shades, glancing down at his iPhone, is the object of their frenzy: Uighur pop star, and hometown hero, Ablajan Awut Ayup. He looks up at them, smiles a little sheepishly, and touches his hand to his heart. Then he turns to me and pops his collar with all the mock swagger he can muster. "The ladies," he says in English, "they like my style."

Ablajan, 30, is one of the hottest singers in China's vast and restless northwest. His catchy songs fuse the rhythms of Central Asia with the stylings of global pop—a sort of Sufi poetry–meets–Justin Bieber vibe. On stage, he channels the theatricality of his childhood idol, Michael Jackson, and the tight choreography of K-pop. His first album, *Shall We Start?*, sold more than 100,000 copies, no small achievement in a limited market. Local businesses vie to endorse Ablajan, and his face graces billboards in Xinjiang's capital, Urumqi.

For Uighur youth growing up amid marginalization and strife, Ablajan's story is the stuff of legend. Born and raised in a mud-brick courtyard in one of China's poorest and most isolated counties, unable to speak Chinese or English until his teens, and lacking training and connections in the music industry, Ablajan somehow made it. To his fans, Ablajan symbolizes the possibility of a life that is at once modern, successful and Uighur. He often gives free shows and, during performances, tells kids to study hard

The show can't go on *Ablajan, center, rehearses with his dancers on July 31 for a webcast concert that the authorities would later cancel*

Photograph by Adam Dean for TIME

Price of fame *From left, an Urumqi restaurant with an Ablajan billboard; members of his crew; the pop star dejected after his show is canceled*

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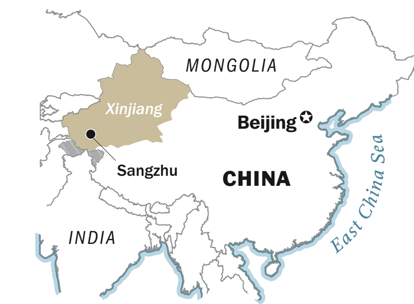
and get a good job. "The message is that this is the 21st century," says Ablajan. "We cannot make a living buying and selling sheep."

Now Ablajan wants to take his music east to the Chinese heartland. He sees his story as proof that there is more to Xinjiang than what you read in the news. He is right, but Xinjiang is a region on edge, and conflict has a way of creeping in. When my Chinese colleague Gu Yongqiang and I returned to our hotel after visiting Ablajan's childhood stomping grounds, the police were at the door. They thanked us for coming and asked us to be on our way. Said one cop: "It's a sensitive time."

China's Outsiders

UNLIKE THE COUNTRY'S MAJORITY HAN Chinese, Uighurs are of Turkic origin and mostly Muslim. As with Tibet, Xinjiang is historically a contested space, held by a series of Turkic, Mongol and Han empires, including the 18th century Qing dynasty, which gave the region its current name, meaning "New Frontier." In the 1930s, Uighur leaders in the ancient Silk Road entrepôt of Kashgar declared the first of two short-lived East Turkestan Republics.

When the People's Republic of China (PRC) came into being, its troops marched into Xinjiang, followed by waves of military personnel and migrants to settle a territory three times the size of France. In 1949, the year the PRC was founded, Han Chinese accounted for roughly 6% of Xinjiang's population; today the figure is about 45%. Uighurs say they are outsiders in their own land.



While Beijing has brought development to Xinjiang, which is rich in minerals and arable land, most of the new wealth is concentrated in Han hands. Many Uighurs want greater autonomy, some even independence.

The party views those demands as an existential threat. In recent years, any unrest has been met with ever escalating force by Beijing. In 2009, protests in Urumqi degenerated into clashes that claimed nearly 200 lives, both Han and Uighur. The authorities responded by detaining Uighurs and cutting off the Internet for nine months. They have since further curbed the teaching of the Uighur language in schools, banned under-18s from praying in mosques, and stopped civil servants and students from fasting during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. On Sept. 23, Uighur scholar Ilham Tohti, a moderate activist, was sentenced to life imprisonment for "separatism," a charge many said was trumped up and a verdict many condemned as excessively harsh.

Such government action has radicalized some Uighurs. In October last year, a vehicle carrying three members of a Uighur family crashed through crowds of sightseers in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, killing five, including the passengers. Some months later, eight knife-wielding assailants—whom the authorities called "Xinjiang separatists"—slaughtered 29 civilians at a railway station in Kunming, capital of southwestern Yunnan province. Two subsequent attacks by extremists in Urumqi killed dozens more and sparked what Beijing calls an anti-terror campaign that has resulted in mass trials, convictions and executions. On Sept. 22 state media said that blasts in Luntai County, which is about a day's drive from Urumqi, killed at least two people and injured several others.

Security personnel in riot gear now blanket Xinjiang's major cities, and towns like Sangzhu are increasingly sealed off by police checkpoints. Chinese security posters feature racist caricatures of Uighurs: scowling, bearded men with big hooked noses—reinforcing the perception many Han have of Uighurs as backward, dissolute and violent.

Rhythm and Blues

IT'S AGAINST THIS BACKDROP OF SUSPICION and prejudice that Ablajan—and other young Uighurs—try to climb the economic ladder. Most of Ablajan's dancers and aides are from the countryside. They live between worlds, learning Chinese to survive, and English as a mode of free expression, while still clinging to a language and culture of their own. Ablajan attended Uighur-language school and spent his evenings toiling beside his father in the fields, singing folk songs to pass the time. Ablajan looks back fondly on his youth. "Xinjiang used to be peaceful," he says. "Then we lost the peace."

At 14, Ablajan caught a glimpse of Michael Jackson on TV and, for the first time, imagined a life outside Sangzhu. "When I saw him, I was like, Oh my God," he remembers. Ablajan started practicing his moonwalk and writing songs, and at 19 made the 32-hour bus journey to Urumqi to study dance. The next six years were a struggle to make it as a musician, and a struggle with the reality of being poor and Uighur in an increasingly expensive, segregated city. He worked as a wedding singer and practiced English and Chinese. It was exhausting. "I wanted to give up and go home," he says.

Ablajan eventually befriended another young Uighur musician who gave him a computer, his first, and a workspace in his studio. He spent his days writing music and his nights working Urumqi's restaurant and wedding circuit. One of his breakthrough hits, "Is There Space to Play?," turns rural-urban migration into a metaphor for coming of age, according to Darren Byler, an anthropologist at the University of Washington who studies and translates Uighur music. The song opens with the sights and sounds of Xinjiang childhood: the call to prayer, distant mountains, a bleating goat. By midway, we're in China's pressure-cooker schools, where book bags are heavy. It ends in the city—skyscrapers and cars are everywhere. *Where are the stars at night? Is there space to play?*

Ablajan now has enough to live on in Urumqi and to send money and gifts to his family. When he returns to his hometown, he takes a flight, not the grueling overnight bus. And Uighur girls from as far away as Europe and the U.S. send him messages on Instagram. Yet Ablajan encounters obstacles too. Many of his fans do not have the money to buy tickets for his shows, and organizing a concert requires multiple layers of state approval.

The Politics of Music

ABLAJAN RARELY TALKS POLITICS, WARY, no doubt, of jeopardizing his career. But on July 31, violent clashes erupted in a village outside Kashgar, leaving at least 100 dead, according to state media reports. (The cause of the violence and the death toll are still disputed.) When the authorities then canceled a long-planned concert in Urumqi, Ablajan could no longer hold back. His team spent nearly a month, and a whole lot of money, preparing for what was to be a display of ethnic unity performed in front of officials and broadcast to audiences. Police shut it down less than an hour from showtime. Ablajan posted a picture of himself on Instagram, with a caption that read like a cri de coeur: "My name is Ablajan! I am not a terrorist."

Late last year, Ablajan released his first Chinese-language music video, "Today," an MJ-inspired epic featuring a car chase and shots of his entourage dancing on rooftops and roads in Urumqi and Kashgar. The goal was to generate some excitement online for the Mandarin single, his first, giving him a foothold in the bigger, more lucrative Chinese-language market. His manager, Rui Wenbin—a Han Chinese born and raised in Urumqi and formerly of Xinjiang's culture ministry—believes Ablajan's music can help bridge the divide between the Uighur and Han worlds. Says Rui: "He can be a messenger of peace."

It won't be easy. On my last night in Xinjiang, Ablajan and I walk to a public square near the local government office. It's a warm evening and many people are out, walking arm-in-arm or pushing strollers. On one side, a group of elderly Han women practices a synchronized dance. Nearby, clusters of young Uighurs listen to music. Before the clock strikes 9, however, the cops come out in golf-cart-size squad cars, sirens blaring. Everyone has to go home.

As we walk back, Ablajan talks about going to Kazakhstan in the fall. If he can scrape up the money, he'd love to see Beijing someday too. "I need proper equipment, a choreographer, costumes, but ..." He pauses and searches for the right expression. *"Mei banfa,"* he says in Mandarin: No solution. "I mean, this is Xinjiang, man." —WITH REPORTING BY GU YONGQIANG ■