

SASKIA WITTEBORN. *UNRULY SPEECH: DISPLACEMENT AND THE POLITICS OF TRANSGRESSION.* STANFORD: STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS 2023. 250 P. ISBN: 9781503634305

WESLEY CHAN¹

Saskia Witteborn's ethnography on the unruly communication practices of Uyghurs both at home and abroad has offered crucial insights into their multi-faceted struggle surrounding cultural identity, language and claims to social recognition. By highlighting the spatial character of transgressive communication practices spreading across geographical and social spaces, her ethnography serves as an important contribution to understanding the under-studied potential of proactive transnational migration in advancing contemporary political struggles.

In Chapter 1, Witteborn reflects on how transgression and limits are mutually constitutive, specifically regarding how transgressive speech enables the speaker to make visible the limits of acceptable political speech. This act creates a communicative space for immanent critique that exposes the arbitrary mechanisms of power that have hitherto remained hidden. She applies these reflections in a much more spatially dispersed context of the Uyghur community, which has continued its unruly communication practices across geographical and social spaces and co-created its national topographies and identities.

In Chapter 2, Witteborn examines the Chinese state's strategy to impose cultural assimilation with its offer of upward social mobility, which has attracted cosmopolitan Uyghur youths to relegate the preservation of their cultural identity to the private sphere of the family. She notes that in order to erase the Uyghur ethnic identity, the Chinese state has portrayed the Chinese language education as the language of collective optimisation promising socio-economic improvement, and through linguistic inequalities perpetuate the erasure of the Uyghur culture. This erasure is poignantly captured in her informant's account that '[the Chinese] want us to understand them but they don't want to understand us', exposing how hierarchies of language are interwoven with hierarchies of ethnic and social standings (65).

While older generations of Uyghur seek to preserve their cultural identities through intergenerational religious teaching and the communicative practices of oral traditions, Witteborn also reveals the generational divide evident as a younger generation of Uyghurs have turned to the promise of a modern Westernised life of celebrated individualism. This movement led to their co-optation within the Chinese state strategy of assimilation that engages them in state-sanctioned spaces of socioeconomic production and leaves cultural preservation in the public space behind. For those that seek to preserve their communicative repertoires of oral traditions, the further securitisation of Xinjiang has made many kinds of expressive identities difficult among the Uyghur population.

¹ MPhil candidate, School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, St Antony's College, University of Oxford. Email: tak.chan@sant.ox.ac.uk

In response to the challenges of self-preservation and representation, Chapters 3 and 4 shed light on the transgressive communication practices practised by the Uyghur diaspora. This group calls for political participation through human rights discourse and uses testimonio as embodied narratives of suffering to break out of their discursive erasure by the Chinese state. Overall, the book offers much-needed critical analysis of the ongoing project of cultural and social preservation by the Uyghur population and reveals the discursive significance of their unruly communication repertoire in the context of embodied surveillance and suppressed speech.

The strength of this study of communication practices among the Uyghur population lies in Witteborn's ethnographic sensitivity to the study of societies of distrust and political repression. Informed by her upbringing in East Germany, she appreciates how silence can be a meaningful reflection of society. In the introduction, Witteborn observed the verbal sanctioning and silencing among Uyghur youths who seek to utter the name 'East Turkistan', rather than the official name 'Xinjiang'. This silencing reveals the often-overlooked context of embodied surveillance and repression that existed before the imposition of digital surveillance, which has been the primary focus of Western academic literature. For instance, Witteborn references a video testimony within a re-education camp that seeks to show the larger infrastructure of violence and social engineering at work. By exploring the potential of place names as vehicles of collective belonging and beliefs, Witteborn offers valuable insights into how Uyghurs continue to cultivate communicative spaces to counterbalance transgression by the state.

Witteborn's comparative scope in documenting the domestic and diasporic discourses both inside and outside China has unearthed uncanny parallels between the discursive strategies of the Chinese state and the diasporic activists. In Chapter 2, Witteborn notes that the Chinese state has resurrected female historical figures in rewriting the history of Uyghur-Han relations to give the Uyghur identity a feminine and non-threatening appearance. In Chapter 4, Witteborn argues that transgressive speech by Uyghurs activists had to appeal to the human rights discourses in Western democracies, utilising the trope of the suffering ethnic mother to feminise their political struggle. With her comparative lens on the politics of Uyghur self-representation across geographical spaces and generations of Uyghur informants, Witteborn reveals that both discourses exclude and marginalise the increasingly cosmopolitan Uyghur youth in China that have challenged their preconceived notions of gender and traditions in search of life beyond the borders of China. In highlighting the apparent advantages and pitfalls behind strategic essentialism exercised by different parties in defining what it means to be an Uyghur, Witteborn's ethnography demonstrates the importance of studying the politics of self-representation in a fragmented landscape.

This work is copyright of the author.

It has been published by JASO under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NonDerivatives ShareAlike License (CC BY NC ND 4.0) that allows others to share the work with an acknowledgement of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal as long as it is non-commercial and that those using the work must agree to distribute it under the same license as the original. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

