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To privilege voice over silence and secrecy as evidence of empowered agency ignores the transformative potential of a complex mix of choices. Indeed, Gal argues that the relationship among silence, speech, gender and power must be taken into account (Jane Parpart).

This presentation forms part of an ongoing study, as yet at an early stage, which seeks to problematize the coming-to-voice of Chinese believing women within the interlinking frameworks of aural ethnography and cross cultural feminist theory. The focus of the presentation is the traditional soundscape of Chinese Hui Muslim women’s nişi, women’s mosques – resonating throughout history with issuances of authoritative instructions and the sound of lively debates, with collective memorizing of scriptural texts and sermons delivered by the resident nü ahong (female Imam) on zhuma, and with the collective voices of women nüan jingge (chanting Islamic chants). But sound without sight, appearance, smell, movement, architecture and material life is wanting in important respects; it calls for the ethnographic lens, a close-up on how social life reproduces itself in the daily rhythm of ritual, renewal and mundaneess. The gendered observer moreover seeks to construct meaningful interpretations in what Jane Parpart identifies as a crucial and fluid ‘relationship among silence, speech, gender and power.’ Expanding this ‘complex mix of choices’ in relation to the feminist core concept of ‘voice’ (or agency), serves to raise I would argue, interesting issues. If the sound of a female voice, according to an influential Kaifeng-born ahong is xiuti (shameful, and thus allowed only if off-stage), how do we evaluate the rich oral tradition of jingge, transmitted and cherished by generations of Hui Muslim women in central China’s women’s mosques? If ‘safe space’ is a necessary pre-condition of voice (Parpart), what does the history of its aural architecture, of nişi, tell us about the nature of collective agency, transformation and the impact of piety on gendered choices?

All seminars take place on Wednesdays (unless otherwise arranged) at 5pm in rooms 8 & 9 in the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, Sidgwick Avenue, Cambridge. Tea will be served at the same venue at 4:45pm. All are welcome.

Maria Jaschok is Research Fellow and Director of International Gender Studies Centre at Lady Margaret Hall, University of Oxford, Dr Jaschok is also affiliated to the Oxford China Centre, Interdisciplinary Area Studies. Her research interests are in the areas of religion, gender and agency; gendered constructions of memory; feminist ethnographic practice; marginality and identity in contemporary China. She is involved in on-going collaborative research projects in central China. Currently, she is researching the place of sound in re-connecting Henan’s Hui Muslim female communities with their ruptured memory of past communal practices. She is also contributing to an international project in Shaanxi Project which addresses issues arising from abiding tensions between official rhetoric on religious tolerance and commercially driven development policies. She has published widely on gender, Islamic feminism and indigenization of religion in China; for instance, among her more recent indicative publications: "‘Outsiders Within’: Speaking to Excursions Across Cultures” in Researching Gender. Situated Knowers and Feminist Standpoint. Vol.1. SAGE Publications; ‘Sources of Authority: Female Ahong and Qingzhen Nüsi (Women’s Mosques) in China’ in Women, Leadership and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority, Brill, Leiden; Women, Religion, and Space in China, Routledge NV; ‘Gender, Religion, and Little Traditions: Chinese Muslim Women Singing Minguo’ in Women in China. The Republican Tea in Historical Perspective. Berlin: Litt Verlag; ‘Sources and methods for research on women and Islamic cultures in China, 1700-1900’ in Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures Volume I Brill, Leiden; The History of Women’s mosques in Chinese Islam: A Mosque of Their Own Richmond: Curzon Press.