

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

All Static & Noise

1. What is the meaning of your title?

All Static & Noise — 杂音和噪音 (záyīn hé zàoyīn) — found its inspiration from [an article](#) by Anthropologist Darren Byler, who was reporting on a speech by Communist Party officials at Xinjiang University in 2017. Party officials gathered thousands of students and faculty in the university gymnasium to “explain” their version of the “Global War on Terror.” They painted Uyghur and other ethnic minorities in the Uyghur Region as “terrorists” guilty of “separatism.” During the speeches, the Xinjiang University Party Secretary and others, referring to Uyghur and other ethnic minorities, declared that “all static (杂音, záyīn) and noise (噪音, zàoyīn) would need to be eliminated.”

The film’s intention is to reappropriate this language, to make louder the voices of resistance and inspire the masses to challenge the hate that sits behind this inflamed speech.

Note that in English, the term “static” can have two meanings. The film’s title refers to the crackling sounds you might hear on a radio or television caused by electricity in the air, not stagnancy.

2. Did you film in China?

Yes, parts of the documentary were filmed in China. Footage of the Uyghur Region, the Great Wall, and the camera installations were all shot inside China. Some of it was provided by people who lived in or visited China and carried the footage out when they left. The footage of Ilham Tohti’s interviews with Tsering Woeser and Tohti’s teaching came from Chinese independent filmmaker Wang Wo. The historical footage from the region came from Uyghur filmmaker Tahir Hamut Izzil, who also is interviewed in the film. The footage of the camps in and around Qumul, Turfan, Ürümqi, and Korla was shot by a Han Chinese citizen journalist Guan Guan, who used BuzzFeed’s reporting to track down camp locations and film them. His work was published on YouTube and he granted us permission to use it. Much of the archival footage came from tourists and academics who had traveled in the Uyghur region. Abduweli’s footage of his university days in Beijing came from an anonymous source.

3. Why did you decide to make this film?

David: The answer is rather simple. How could I not? The more I learned about the crisis facing Uyghurs and others in the region, the more angry I got. I could not divorce it from my own Jewish family’s experience in 1930’s and 40’s Europe – first stripped freedoms and endless terror, and ultimately concentration camps and road-side ditches where half my family were killed. The strongest tool at my disposal to take a stand against human rights atrocity is filmmaking, and so I embarked on a journey that I will never forget, and never regret.

Janice: I felt like I didn't have a choice. In 2017, I was living in China when I started hearing about increasingly restrictive policies in the Uyghur region – no beards, no reading the Koran, forcing Muslims to drink alcohol, etc. What I was hearing got worse over time and it was absolutely horrifying to me. I knew that a documentary film would have the power to break through what I saw as a world too busy and too preoccupied with other concerns to pay attention to what was happening to a minority group whose name they had a hard time pronouncing. I also realized that the Chinese government's history of retaliation against those who exposed its rights abuses meant it would be difficult for a Chinese citizen to tell this story. In China, there is a very clear red line about what gets said and what doesn't. If art of any form runs counter to the party line, the artist runs the risk of detention. As a result, there's a lot of self censorship that happens in the art world. No criticism, just an observation. This story needed to come out uncensored.

At the time, it was impossible to think a Uyghur filmmaker could have executed this project. Most of the artists and intellectuals were already in the camps and those living in the diaspora with family's still in China were plagued with concerns about retaliation against their family members if they spoke out. You see this in the film. Fortunately, we later met the Uyghur filmmaker Tahir Hamut Izgil, whose work is included in *All Static & Noise*. As news of the atrocities in the Uyghur region trickled out, it just seemed so barbaric to me. How could this be happening? I watched as a few of my friends had their parents taken away and their passports confiscated. These accounts and the way I felt when I was trying to digest them reminded me of interviews I had conducted 30 years ago with survivors of the Holocaust for the [Shoah Project](#). It was happening again. I called David and he said yes.

3. How did the making of this film differ from your previous films?

David: Actually, it bares many similarities to my first and second film. My first film, *Burning the Future*, gives voice to frontline fighters in West Virginia protecting land and health against policy-makers and corporations who are willing to do anything for profit, a micro-totalitarian regime in many ways. My second film, *Finding Babel*, crosses international borders with dozens of interviews in languages I don't speak and looks at the past for hints at what the future in Russia would bring. So I see more similarities than not. The biggest difference is in the challenge for footage. The Uyghur region is closed. Some of the footage that has been smuggled out has been shown elsewhere, because there is so little. Even the main subjects are known because they have been active in testifying. We have had to rely on a large number of sources, which also means varying degrees of video quality. And I have not been able to go there to capture my own poetic, cinematic images for visual storytelling. I have tried to overcome that difference via sound design, with the help of my designer Tarun Madupu.

4. What were your greatest challenges while making the film?

David: There were many challenges to making the film, and I leave it to Janice to discuss the funding challenges, which are important because they speak to the world's unwillingness to engage, for all sorts of reasons. As a director, however, the first challenge was in language.

Conducting interviews in languages you don't understand is very difficult, because the iterative back-and-forth of a dialogue becomes impossible, as does knowing when information has been delivered in a concise enough manner. That problem is compounded in the edit room, where we have to work off of translations that are rough. Where we are saved in this area is via emotion. In spite of language barriers, the emotions felt by our subjects were always palpable and able to relate a different kind of meaning, perhaps an empathic one, during interviews and editing. Another challenge was in the sheer volume of material. For instance, we would arrive in Almaty, Kazakhstan to an office where a few witnesses have agreed to be interviewed. Instead of 3 or 4 people, 12 people would pour out of a van. Why? Because they were all determined to tell their stories to whomever would document. As a result, it felt extremely unethical to choose not to interview some. So we would interview them all and only decide during writing and editing who to include in the film.

Another challenge lies in creating a narrative that balances traumatic testimony, personal action, and enough exposition to explain the situation. This challenge could not have been met without our very talented editor Nancy Novack.

Lastly, and very personally, I faced an ethical challenge with this film as an American. My first film was critical of the American government, the government of the state of West Virginia, and of corporate control of policy at the expense of human rights. But here, I am an American showing the world a film that, while not focused on China itself, exposes atrocities committed by the Chinese government. To what extent should this film be made by a Chinese citizen? The problem is, it is very hard for a Chinese citizen to make this film, and, as a Jew who lost half the family tree in concentration camps and mass shootings, how could I turn away from the plight of the Uyghurs and others in the region once this film came across my lap. This ethical dilemma has turned into a practical one, as I do not wish for *All Static & Noise* to be construed as an "American" film, a film of western propaganda, and simply being American allows that charge to be made, however inappropriate and erroneous.

Janice: Fundraising was one of our biggest challenges. I really wanted to make a film that would appeal to mainstream audiences, beyond the people already familiar with the crisis. In order to do that it would have to be of high production value. That's why I engaged Odessa Films. We also wanted to be able to pay people for their work. Relying on volunteers was unsustainable. We applied to about 20 film grants, none of which we received. We also could not find a production partner who was willing to finance the film because the film was not demonstrative of having "commercial value." In the end, we were funded by individuals and a few organizations and foundations, many of whom remain anonymous because of concerns about potential Chinese government retaliation. We've had to carry some debt, but that's unfortunately expected in documentary filmmaking.

The threat of Chinese retaliation has been a dark shadow over this entire project. During production in Turkey and Kazakhstan, where the local authorities are friendly with China, we were fearful for the safety of our subjects and crew. You see that in the film when a car is following Aina and the crew. During post-production, the security of our footage was another

concern. We stored our content on external drives and used encrypted platforms. I still at times will carry the project hard drives in my backpack because I'm afraid someone will break into my home or car and confiscate them. This kind of paranoia is hard to shake. It is the kind of fear that the Chinese government seeks to instill in people to keep them in line. It is the panopticon in action.

In deciding to make this film, I made the choice to cut myself off from direct communication with my Chinese friends living on the Mainland. I fear that I will bring harm to them because my role in making this film will be construed by the government as an act against the state and will likely be painted as a "black hand" or a "foreign enemy." For Chinese citizens at home or abroad, meddling with these "black hands" is grounds for detention. I also no longer feel safe traveling to China for fear of being detained for some fabricated charge, as have other foreigners whose activities expose the Chinese government's human rights abuses. I love China – the people, the culture, the country. So, that hurts. As for my friends with whom I have not communicated in recent years, I hope they understand.

5. Can you share something about your transcription and translation team?

The transcribers and translators were critical to giving the film its voice. The transcribers would take the audio from the interviews and transcribe verbatim their words. The translators would then translate the source language into English. Because the film does not use narrators or experts, the voice of the film is that of those living this experience, and they, more often than not, were non-English speakers. This made it all the more necessary for precise translations into English so the writers and editors had a clear understanding of every word spoken in an interview. This would not have been possible without the very time-consuming work of our 23 transcribers and translators. They served as the bridge between the filmmakers and subjects speaking Uyghur, Kazakh, or Mandarin. It then was the writers and editors' job to find where the similarities in their testimonies existed and piece together a coherent narrative. Nancy, our phenomenal editor, was the one to see how the overlap and repetition in the testimonies could be used to strengthen the storytelling.

6. What was the greatest value you gained in making this film?

David: As with all my films, the greatest value I take away personally lies in the relationships built over time with people from a culture to which I would otherwise not be exposed. The Uyghur people are simply amazing; in their language, cultural aspects like music, food, literature (especially poetry), and with a family sensibility that actually reminds me of my own Jewish roots. I am at home in their homes. Beyond that, my sensitivity to indigenous and human rights concerns is even more heightened now than when I began this journey. That's what happens when people we tend to think of as victims or the other become real human beings through our connections.

Janice: *All Static & Noise* was huge for me personally and professionally. I made some incredible friends and accumulated some of my richest life lessons. I also learned an enormous

amount about documentary filmmaking. It was as if I went to film school under the private tutelage of David Novack. That's been fun.

Professionally, it has been an extremely satisfying experience. In the beginning, it sort of felt like jumping off a bridge when I accepted my first donation. Once people commit money to something, there's no turning back. I was terrified. I really had little idea what I was getting myself into and how difficult it was to make a documentary film. But I trusted David and his ability to guide the process.

The life lessons were huge. I discovered that it is ok to trust your intuition and let curiosity be your guide. Somehow things work out, often in ways you never could have imagined. I learned to accept the disappointments and the dark days, not as failures but as indications of something else that was asking for my attention. There was a point when we had run out of money. We had footage that needed transcription and translation, but I had no money to pay people and there was no way to move the project forward without those translations. Then out of the blue, our fiscal sponsor sent me an email that someone had anonymously donated a sizeable sum to our account. This kind of stuff would happen again and again. Gradually I learned to simply keep my eyes open to everything and respond when my intuition or curiosity prompted me.

7. How did you two meet?

Janice: We met in Guangzhou the night of December 10, 2010, when Liu Xiaobo was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. This was quite auspicious. David was on a tour of China with his film *Burning the Future*. We kept in touch and exchanged ideas for several years. I had been thinking for a while about making a film about human rights in China but needed an experienced filmmaking partner who had both the compassion and the skills to bring the story to the screen. That was David.

8. Did you put anyone at risk for harm during production?

We certainly hope not, but we would be remiss if we didn't recognize that those who appear on camera are, in fact, taking a risk, both personally and for family and friends back in the Uyghur region. We discussed these risks with our on-camera subjects and if they chose, we interviewed them with identity obscured. Those who participated in the film decided that telling the truth and bringing the story to the world was more important than their personal risk or that of families back home. One Uyghur musician in Istanbul noted, "If we don't speak out, there will be no one left for us to return to anyway."

9. How did you find your subjects?

Jewher was introduced to us by our associate Cao Yaxue at China Change. Abduweli came to us through a media contact and he in turn connected us with others in Turkey. Aina was introduced to us through an international human rights organization and she brought us to those we filmed in Kazakhstan. Some people we saw in the media and reached out to them directly. It is a small community.

10. Why did you settle on Jewher and Abduweli as your two main protagonists?

Jewher is a young woman who is Uyghur, but raised in Beijing so culturally as comfortable in the Han world, and moreover has come into adulthood in America. She has the perfect trajectory and life experience to communicate the plight of the Uyghurs to the world, especially to a younger international audience that speaks English. Jewher is Tohti's daughter and therefore, by proxy, he also is a protagonist of the film. As someone who has received awards for his peaceful efforts and yet has been given a life sentence in prison, he represents the ultimate paradox – the Party says it wants to build bridges with the minorities and create a “harmonious society”, but they remove those minorities who build bridges. Below the surface, there is no paradox, rather it illustrates that the bridge the Party wants is one that wipes out the indigenous culture. And yet, Jewher survives and is strong, and is filled with love. Together they embody so much.

Abduweli was more of an accidental protagonist. We were introduced to him as someone who brought together media outlets and Uyghurs in Turkey who wanted to share their story. Upon meeting him, we fell in love with him and his family. This kind, gentle, empathic, poetic, and emotive man was drawn to social action simply by abiding to his own ethics and moral judgement. One couldn't ask for a better role model, and therefore a protagonist in a film.

11. What are your distribution plans?

We hope to break through the “Chinese-soft-power-glass-ceiling” that is ever-present in the lives of anyone seeking to expose atrocities in China. We are well aware that distribution companies, streaming outlets, sales agents, and film festivals measure risk against reward when considering onboarding this film. We cannot compel them to consider that their risk pales in comparison to the risk of those in the film and the millions of people who are subjected to arbitrary detention and imprisonment back in the region. What we pray for are those breakthrough, brave folks who just may be media heroes. In the absence of that, we are raising funds to run our own distribution, bringing the film to educational institutions and governments across the world. A big media partner would certainly expand the reach and help bring the voices of Uyghurs to the world.

12. How can I book a screening

Write us through the website. It starts there.

13. What is your hope for this film?

We are neither lobbyists nor policy-makers. What we can do with *All Static & Noise* is provide a working tool that brings the voices of the Uyghurs and others to the world. We are currently working on our impact strategy and will provide details on this soon.

14. What's next?

We have a few projects in development.