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Dungan ethnicity in transformation: from totalitarianism to contemporary adaptation

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to analyse the transformation of Dungan ethnic identity from the era of the Soviet Union to the present day. The Dungans, an ethnic group related to the Chinese Hui, are widespread in post-Soviet Central Asia. Their ethnic identity is influenced by a combination of Islamic and Chinese traditions, which is reflected in their distinctive language and way of life. The primary focus of this study was the influence exerted on the formation of Dungan identity by totalitarian regimes in the Soviet Union and China. The research combined historical analysis with fieldwork and oral history to analyse the impact of political, social and economic factors on ethnic consciousness. The findings illuminate how these regimes affected not only political and social structures but also the personal beliefs and behaviour of citizens.

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Dungans; ethnic identity; totalitarian regimes; Soviet Union; China; cultural adaptation

Introduction

This study explored the transformation of Dungan identity, which has been shaped by historical ties to China and the territories that later became part of the Soviet Union. Embodying a blend of Chinese and Central Asian cultural elements, Dungan identity has undergone significant changes from its official recognition as a separate nation in the Soviet Union to the present day. The aim of this research was not only to document and analyse the historical and contemporary manifestations of Dungan identity but also to provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between the totalitarian state and ethnic identity.

The Dungans are a Central Asian ethnic group with a specific cultural and historical background. The main difference between the Dungans and the majority population of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan is their traditional way of life, which consists of sedentary agriculture. This resonates with Jimenez-Tovar's (2016) exploration of how 'diaspority' is both defined and contested for Dungans in Central Asia, particularly in the political and cultural dynamics of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The Dungan language, closely resembling Chinese, contrasts sharply with the Turkic languages spoken by the majority population. Historically, Dungans spoke various Chinese dialects, later codified into a single language

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in the USSR. However, as Russian remains the regional lingua franca, their distinct language holds less significance as an identifier. Upon arriving in modern Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, the Dungans were a heterogeneous group, united mainly by their shared experience of forced migration from China. The shared cultural link between the Dungans and the surrounding majority society is the Muslim religion. Another element unifying them with the majority society is the declared common Soviet past. Nevertheless, the Dungans are still often perceived as an alien element, which could be problematic in conflict situations. Within the Soviet Union, attempts were made to create a single official Dungan nationality to unite this heterogeneous group under one ethnic identity, an example of the totalitarian regime's interference in ethnic identity.

Research objective

It is from this specific cultural and historical context that the following research question was formulated to guide my analysis: 'How did totalitarian regimes, particularly in the Soviet Union and China, shape and influence the ethnic and national identity of the Dungan minority, and how did this identity evolve and change in response to the shifting political and ideological directions of these regimes?' This permitted exploration of the dynamics between state control, ideological pressure and ethnic identity in the context of the Dungan minority.

To answer this question, I focused on the political, social and economic factors that have shaped and transformed Dungan identity and sought to understand how this identity has changed over time, particularly in terms of how it was created and defined by Soviet policies.

Political, social and economic factors resulting from the Soviet Union's changing ideological policies towards ethnic minorities constitute an important element of Dungan identity. Examining these influences and comparing them with the Hui people of China, who, like the Dungan, derive their ethnicity from the Muslim religion, is essential for a full understanding of state-directed identity formation and its wider implications for the field of ethnic studies.

Totalitarianism, a key concept in this discussion, is characterized by the absence of political pluralism, widespread personality cults, extreme ideology, unbridled propaganda and, in most cases, the use of state terror. Its impact on ethnic identities is crucial, as totalitarian regimes seek not only to control political and social structures but also to deeply penetrate the personal beliefs and behaviour of citizens.

Hannah Arendt (1968) defines totalitarianism as a system marked by absolute loyalty to the ruling ideology, terror as a tool of governance and the monopolization of power. Such regimes reshape social structures and create an illusion of stability by constantly rewriting history to fit their narrative. Halberstam (1999) highlights totalitarianism's structural features: hierarchical organizations, centralized power and suppression of dissent. The Soviet Union exemplified this, especially under Stalin. Although Stalin's death in 1953 ended his brand of totalitarianism, a 'softer' form persisted, maintaining control through labour camps and psychiatric repression until the USSR's collapse in 1991 (Hornsby 2013).

After the Soviet Union's dissolution, communist totalitarianism in Central Asia was replaced by 'nationalist totalitarianism' (Mineau 1992), aiming to homogenize ethnic groups and strengthen national identity. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, this pressured

the Dungan people to assimilate into Kazakh or Kyrgyz identity or face marginalization. Research on the Dungans shows that totalitarian regimes, while seemingly rigid, can exhibit 'elasticity' in adapting to social, cultural and political challenges – a concept termed 'elastic totalitarianism'. Fulbrook (2011, 259–270) similarly notes that such regimes are not monolithic but adaptable systems capable of tactical retreats or policy shifts to maintain power and control.

For the Dungans, the Soviet regime initially granted cultural autonomy in the 1920s but quickly imposed repressive measures in the 1930s when this autonomy appeared to threaten Soviet authority. This shift between liberalism and repression illustrates the practical workings of flexible totalitarianism.

Research background

The Dungan Survey, conducted from 2011 to 2019 with additional research in 2023, aimed to gather comprehensive data on the Dungan population in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. In Kyrgyzstan, research focused on both Dungan villages (Milyanfan, Yrdyk) and mixed-ethnic areas, including Bishkek. In Kazakhstan, the study covered Dungan villages (Sortobe, Masanchi) and mixed areas like Kordai. The survey included 95 respondents: 46 over 60, 31 of working age and 18 under 20, with a gender distribution of 66% male and 34% female. The qualitative approach comprised historical analysis, oral history and participatory observation. Historical analysis traced the evolution of Dungan identity and the influence of political, social and economic factors through documents and archival materials, providing crucial historical context. Oral history was based on in-depth interviews, offering authentic insights into the changes in Dungan identity under totalitarian regimes. Participatory observation involved stays within communities, allowing a deeper understanding of Dungan daily life and cultural practices.

Interviews from 2010 to 2019 emphasized the Soviet period, as it greatly shaped Dungan identity. Soviet policies reshaped ethnic identities, deeply affecting the Dungans. Many Dungans, as shown in online discussions, recall the Soviet era positively for its stability and order, reflecting how Soviet totalitarianism still influences their collective memory. This nostalgia justifies the study's focus on this period to understand current attitudes and identity dynamics.

To complement field research, online discussions from platforms like YouTube, VK and Reddit were analysed, capturing a wider range of authentic opinions. Despite limitations like profiling commenters, this method offers valuable real-time data on trends. Comments related to the Dungan community were processed and analysed using the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) method (Jelodar et al. 2019), with ChatGPT 4 interpreting key themes. Eighteen discussions with over 6000 comments identified five main themes, revealing more negative attitudes toward Dungans than personal interviews, especially after violent events in Kazakhstan in 2020. This contrast highlights the value of multiple data sources for understanding public opinion.

The themes identified through LDA were integrated with field research findings, offering a more comprehensive view of Dungan identity dynamics. The combination of direct observations and online discussion analysis enriched the overall understanding and provided a framework for examining the transformation of Dungan identity under totalitarian influences.

Soviet ethnic policy: theoretical and historical aspects

Understanding the transformations of Dungan ethnic identity during totalitarian rule requires insight into the historical and theoretical frameworks that shaped the approach to ethnicity and the national question in the Soviet Union. In this analysis, I employ the term 'elastic totalitarianism' because it reflects well the adaptive nature of totalitarian regimes that modified their ideologies to cope with internal challenges and maintain control over diverse populations. It is a concept evident in the Soviet regime's approach to the national question, where ethnic identity was often constructed and reconstructed according to the needs of the state and its leaders.

Totalitarian regimes like the Soviet Union and China have adapted by manipulating historical and philosophical notions of the ideal society, particularly the ambiguous concept of nationhood, which resists rational definition. As Baldauf (1991) notes, these states exploited this ambiguity to define ethnic identities officially, creating new nations to serve their purposes while suppressing indigenous groups.

The Soviet approach to the national question drew from nineteenth-century European radical leftist ideas emerging after the French Revolution. Thinkers like Proudhon, Marx and Engels envisioned a new socio-economic system, advocating common property and opposing traditional institutions, including marriage. Engels' radical stance sought to abolish both the nation and the state (Engels and Marx 1845, 22–40), complicating socialism's response to nationalism in diverse regions. Tsarist Russia's ethnic diversity, with only 43% ethnic Russians and regions like Finland, Poland and Turkic-speaking Asia, shaped Lenin's and Stalin's strategies. Initially sympathetic to the national question to garner revolutionary support, some radicals still sought to erase the concept of the nation (Masaryk 1898, 298).

Historical roots of Dungan identity

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, as Tsarist Russia encompassed many non-Russian peoples, Turkic Muslim populations from Xinjiang and Chinese-speaking Muslims – later known as the Dungans – fled to Russian Turkestan to escape uprisings against Chinese rule. The migration occurred in two main waves.

The first wave followed the 1862–1877 uprisings, when Muslims from the Gansu and Shaanxi provinces fled to Central Asia to escape persecution. These refugees arrived in three groups in what is now Kyrgyzstan, specifically in Osh and around Lake Issyk-Kul. One respondent (aged 85, interviewed in 2011) recounted:

> Our ancestors fled China through Torugart in the harsh winter of 1877, where many, especially women and children, perished from the cold. Only a third survived. As they crossed the border, the Kyrgyz mistook them for Chinese and fired, but ceased upon hearing my mother and sister praying in Arabic. The refugees then divided into three groups: one headed to Osh, another to Karakol and the last to Tokmak via Naryn. They struggled for survival daily.

The second wave of refugees (1881–1883) from areas under new Chinese administration received Russian citizenship under the 1881 Treaty of Saint Petersburg. These ethnically and linguistically diverse Dungans, including Turkic Muslims (later Uyghurs) from Xinjiang, mainly pursued agriculture but also engaged in trade. In Osh, land shortages led some to

become artisans or traders, while others founded the village of Yrdyk near Lake Issyk-Kul, later relocating to Tokmak and Kazakhstan.

Despite this linguistic and social diversity, the Dungans preserved their cultural distinctiveness, as confirmed by a respondent from Miljanfan (aged 84), who stated that they settled according to their original groups, helping maintain their cultural and linguistic differences.

During the Stalinist purges of the 1930s and World War II, some Dungans migrated back to Xinjiang. In the 1950s and 1960s, due to the Cultural Revolution and Sino-Soviet split, many chose to return to the USSR. These Chinese Muslims settled in the Almaty and Zhambyl regions of the Kazakh and Kyrgyz SSRs, where they continued farming and integrated into kolkhozes and sovkhozes (Imiarova and Dzhon 2022).

Soviet nationality policy and identity formation in Central Asia

In the early years of the Soviet era, contradictions emerged in the approaches Soviet leaders took to the national question. Whilst Lenin favoured the USSR as a loose confederation of nation states, Stalin advocated strong centralization. Lenin was opposed by several European Marxists, such as Otto Bauer (1907), who believed that Lenin's conception ignored the deep socio-economic roots of national conflicts.

After Lenin's death, Stalin promoted national autonomy within the Soviet Union (Stalin 1935), departing from Lenin's internationalism to consolidate power. This policy fostered linguistic and cultural identities, creating new national identities in Central Asia, where identification had previously been geographical. The changes are evident in the 1926 Soviet census compared to the 1897 Tsarist census, particularly among ethnic groups with autonomous republics. During this period, the Uzbek population increased 5.37 times, Kyrgyz 3.78 times and Turkmen 3.04 times, driven largely by administrative decisions defining new ethnic groups (Kokaisl 2013, 407–433).

Dungans and the Soviet construction of national identity

The Soviet classification of Dungans as a Turkic group from China, initiated in the 1920s, disregarded their historical and cultural heritage, enforcing new national definitions. This reclassification suppressed key cultural elements and necessitated adaptation to linguistic and cultural shifts. Furthermore, the widespread illiteracy among Central Asians, including the Dungans' ancestors, hindered their understanding of Soviet nationality concepts (Kokaisl 2018).

In the 1920s civil war, Dungans, alongside other groups later known as Uyghurs, fought with the 'Reds' but still endured persecution, impacting all affluent communities. A Dungan historian described the situation thus: In 1918, 'the army ordered the expulsion of all Dungans from the city as unreliable. When Dungans approached Red Army patrols, they were robbed and imprisoned, making it easier to loot Dungan homes' (Kokaisl and Usmanov 2012, 100).

After the civil war, the Dungans were recognized as an independent Soviet nation, while Turkic-speaking groups from China were labelled 'Uyghur'. Though absent in Tsarist statistics, 'Dungan' was an exo-ethnonym used by the Tsarist government, categorizing them as Chinese by language. With the Soviet codification of their language, the 1926 census introduced 'Dungan', aligning with Stalin's belief that a nation requires its own language. In the 1920s, Soviet authorities recognized the Dungans as a separate

nationality, without territorial autonomy, similar to Eskimos and Gypsies (Shcherbakova 2021), to counter Chinese nationalistic views and win support for the Communist revolution (Ali 1948, 171–190).

Dungans in southern Kyrgyzstan

State efforts to shape nations often conflicted with actual ethnic and cultural dynamics. Research in southern Kyrgyzstan highlights diverse developments among Dungans within a single administrative unit. In the 1920s, the creation of the Kyrgyz Autonomous Republic exposed regional contrasts: the north aligned with Russia, while the south, ethnically diverse, maintained a settled peasant culture. Under the 1924 Uzbek SSR, Uzbeks dominated leadership in both Uzbekistan and southern Kyrgyzstan. There, minorities like the Dungans, seeking career and party advancement, often registered as Uzbeks, leading to significant assimilation and reclassification in censuses. This was described as follows by a respondent from Osh region (72 years old):

> As Dungans, we were faced with a choice that was not a choice. Dad was forced to register as an Uzbek. It was a way to a better job, to greater recognition. But the price we paid? Our history, our culture – it all disappeared. The younger generation doesn't even see it as a loss. They have accepted the Uzbek identity and forgotten who we were. It feels like we sacrificed part of our identity for acceptance in a society that never fully embraced us.

In southern Kyrgyzstan, Dungans formally and informally assumed Uzbek nationality, highlighting a paradox in Soviet nationality policy. Instead of promoting Kyrgyz culture in the region, top party and state roles were held by Uzbeks, encompassing members from other nations like the Dungans.

The turn in Soviet national policy: from support to repression

In the Soviet Union, support for national minorities was fleeting. Initially, following the Bolshevik Revolution, the regime seemed to support national autonomy and cultural growth for minorities, recognizing their languages and cultures. This aligned with Lenin's theories regarding national politics, advocating for the acknowledgment and encouragement of national identities to bolster the socialist state (Smith 1999, 72–85).

Stalin's policy towards national minorities, though ostensibly inclusive, served to consolidate control and suppress separatism (Martin 2001, 350–351). This reflects 'elastic totalitarianism', where the regime adapted to circumstances while preserving power (Conquest 2017, 58–59). By the 1930s, minorities were increasingly viewed as threats, prompting purges targeting national minorities and intellectuals. National identity, once celebrated, became a focus of repression (Fitzpatrick 1994, 100–123), culminating in a shift towards Russification and anti-nationalist terror under the guise of combating 'nationalist deviation' (Martin 2001, 350–351).

In 1938, the Soviet Union abolished schools teaching minority languages such as Dungan, resulting in the suppression of national identities, the alienation of children from their native cultures, Russification and the execution of officials and teachers from autonomous regions. Insight into these changes is provided by the story of an uncle of a Dungan interviewee (Dzhon-Ali, Bishkek):

> The shift in Soviet language policy caught us off guard. Initially, we were compelled to adopt the Latin alphabet, severing our traditional cultural connections. But soon, under Stalin's Russification policy, we were forced to switch to the Cyrillic alphabet. This wasn't merely a script change; it was an erasure of our identity. Dungan language newspapers and books were discontinued, and education in our language ceased. Only in 1953 did a new Dungan alphabet project, based on Cyrillic, reemerge, but by then, parts of our culture and language had already faded away.

The interviewee's uncle, involved in creating the alphabet and authoring the first syllabary, Elifbe, in the 1920s, was forced to flee to avoid the crackdown on Dungan intellectuals. This repression led to the execution of 48 Dungans in the Dzhambul region alone.

During the 1940s, the pressure exerted by the Soviet Union on minorities to unite in national defence lessened, yet certain groups deemed 'unreliable' (such as Germans, Poles, Koreans, Tatars) still faced persecution.

Soviet nationality policy after World War II and Chinese adaptation

After World War II, Soviet nationality policy hardened, replaced by an intensified Russification campaign. This emphasized the Russian language, increased Russian officials in minority regions, and promoted Russian dominance. Soviet-Kyrgyz writer Aitmatov critiqued this imposed culture in his novels, particularly its enforcement of traditional customs like weddings, funerals and regulated naming (Kokaisl and Usmanov 2012).

Post-war Soviet historiography recast Tsarist Russia as a liberator, rather than an oppressor of non-Russian peoples. Simultaneously, increased transfers of people to industrial areas of the Soviet Union diminished national differences and led to the removal of national units in the Soviet army (Hutchinson 1962, 222–223).

Soviet ethnic diversity policies influenced socialist China, which initially observed and later adopted key elements. While tailored to the Soviet context, these principles guided Chinese leaders in shaping their own approach. Following diplomatic ties in 1950, China embraced Soviet economic models and cultural Russification, impacting food, clothing, family structures and the arts (Li 2017).

China's adaptation of Soviet nationality policies diverged by addressing local contexts. While the Soviet Union aimed to unify its diverse territory, China sought to unite ethnic groups unfamiliar with those in the Soviet sphere. The 1953 Chinese census identified 400 ethnic groups based on self-chosen affiliation (Fei 1980). Unlike the Soviet model, Chinese ethnicity often stemmed from place names, clan ties, or social status (Yang 2008). From the 1950s, China initiated an ethnic classification project influenced by Stalin's conception of ethnicity (Zhou 2019, 67–83). Mao's 'minzu' concept contrasted with Stalin's, as Mao incorporated religion, while Stalin disregarded it (Horálek 2011, 79–80).

China partially adopted the Soviet model of arbitrary nation-building. In the USSR, the term 'Uyghur' was introduced for diverse ethnic groups, and China followed suit by grouping various communities under the same label (Li 2020). However, China did not adopt the term 'Dungan', using it only in the Soviet Union. Instead, China introduced 'Hui' to describe Chinese Muslims, defined as 'Chinese Muslims who do not identify with or are not accepted by the eight other Chinese Muslim "minzu"' (Gladney 2003, 451–467).

Hui Muslim identity, recognized during the interwar period, was defined by Chinese culture and Islam. Known as followers of the Hui religion (Huijiao), they were variously viewed by the 1930s as a religious, ethnic, or racial group (Hammond 2020).

Connor notes that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) promised ethnic minorities, including Mongols, Hui and Tibetans, political independence to secure support against the Kuomintang. After 1949, however, these groups were incorporated into a centralized state, abandoning this pledge (Connor 1984). Mao rejected Lenin's self-determination principle, promoting a unified destiny for all Chinese 'minzu', while integrating minority leaders, including Hui religious figures, into government structures (Leibold 2016).

The establishment of the Ningxia Autonomous Region in 1958, following the Soviet model, was intended to provide the Hui with a historical homeland, but their cultural unity remained elusive (Leslie 1972) due to their diverse backgrounds – Han, Arab, Turkic or Tibetan. Despite a shared Islamic identity, Hui culture is diverse and shaped by local environments (Dillon 2013).

Despite seventy years of homogenization, Hui diversity remains significant. Yang and Li (2020) highlight linguistic variations in phonetics, lexicon, syntax and religious terminology. A central unifier is 'qingzhen' (halal) food, which strengthens their religious identity while integrating them into Chinese society through restaurants. This cuisine preserves their distinctiveness within China but creates distance from the global Muslim community due to regional variations (Jianchun and Daming 2007). Additionally, arranged marriages, often involving cousins, remain common among the Hui, contrasting with Han practices (Zang 2004).

Yusupov (2020) explores how Chinese Muslims integrate into society through business, education and government collaboration while preserving their religious identity. These strategies enable societal participation without losing distinctiveness. Stroup (2022) highlights the fluidity of Hui ethnic boundaries, with internal debates on identity aiding state management of ethnic affairs. While some Hui disassociate from others, the term remains meaningful for many. Central Asian Dungans see Chinese Hui as counterparts, but key differences persist. Hui are fluent in Chinese, with ancient communities and influential historical figures, especially during the Republican period (Hammond 2020), while Dungans are recent immigrants facing language assimilation and economic marginalization.

Khrushchev thaw

After Stalin's death, Soviet nationality policy changed. In 1954, minority education, including Dungan language instruction in Cyrillic, was partially reinstated, with native languages taught as minor subjects (Kokaisl 2018). Although education improved, it aimed to unify the Soviet nation. The 1961 policy emphasized economic integration, cultural assimilation and prioritized Russian to combat nationalism and promote state centralization (Vardys 1965).

While titular nationalities gained higher political roles, Russians remained the Soviet elite. By the 1960s, Moscow-appointed first secretaries in Union republics were often titular nationals, yet Russians still made up two-thirds of the Kyrgyz Communist Party by 1970 (Kokaisl and Usmanov 2012). After Stalin, the 'partyocracy', as termed by A. Avtorkhanov, persisted, relying on the Politburo's dictatorship with less overt tyranny, maintaining Communist Party dominance until the Soviet Union's collapse (Avtorkhanov 1981).

During a period of Soviet political easing and intense Russification, China engaged in severe repression and communist experimentation during the Great Leap Forward,

echoing Soviet experiments of the 1930s. While Soviet Dungans had fled to China in the 1930s, by the 1950s and 1960s, political chaos in China reversed the trend. The more relaxed Soviet Union offered a repatriation programme, which Dungans eagerly accepted despite harsh labour and poverty. Some also returned from China due to persecution for their roles in the defunct East Turkestan Republic.

One Dungan respondent (86 years old) living in Kyrgyzstan described this situation:

> Around September or October 1958, life felt like we were at war. Everything we owned, from houses to simple kitchen tools, became commune property. Private ownership vanished, and our days were spent endlessly working in fields or factories, yet hunger never left us. I saw many die – Dungans, Uyghurs and others. Then, Chinese expelled by the government arrived in Xinjiang, and we Muslims were pushed closer to the desert. It was a tough, fearful time, with accusations of nationalism everywhere. When we heard we could go to the Soviet Union, we jumped at the chance. Some left normally, but in places like Tarbagatai, where attacks happened in 1962, people abandoned everything – even family. Kazakhs, Dungans, Uyghurs, Kyrgyz and Russians were all in the mix.

Dungan migration between the Soviet Union and China illustrates how totalitarian regimes adapted nationality policies, highlighting the fluidity of ethnic groups across borders. This 'elastic totalitarianism' saw minorities like the Dungans seek refuge in the Soviet Union during China's Great Leap Forward, reflecting how regimes shaped minority movements to maintain control and stability.

Soviet Dungan language, influenced by Turkic and Russian, was declining due to a small population and limited home use, making communication with Chinese Dungans difficult. Chinese policies promoting 'putonghua' further widened this gap, as it differed from the Dungan language in Central Asia and the Hui dialect in China (Imiarova and Dzhon 2021).

The Dungans entering the USSR in the late 1950s and 1960s were a diverse group, including Tsarist-era refugees from the 1916 Central Asian uprising, victims of the 1930s Kazakh SSR collectivization that caused a humanitarian crisis affecting over 1.5 million people, and those fleeing religious persecution in the Uzbek SSR.

In Xinjiang, Dungans from Tsarist Russia and the 1930s Soviet Union lived around Kulja, with children attending Uyghur schools, men in agriculture and trade, and women managing households. When they returned to the USSR in the 1960s, they spoke multiple languages and had adopted Uzbek customs. Within a generation, these differences faded, enriching Dungan culture and compensating for the loss of Dungan language education in the USSR (Imiarova and Dzhon 2021), illustrating elastic totalitarianism through language policy.

Applying the theory of elastic totalitarianism to post-Stalin Soviet nationality policy reveals how the regime adapted its repression to maintain control, affecting minority life and sustaining power amid internal and external changes.

Soviet goals and post-Soviet reality: a Dungan ethnic group on the periphery of statehood

Following Khrushchev's forced resignation, the Soviet nationality policy underwent several changes but maintained its character of Russification until the demise of the Soviet Union. In the various republics, the cultural life of the titular peoples flourished,

whereas minorities were limited to folkloric expressions without comprehensive development. The Brezhnev era further solidified the policy of Sovietization of the peoples, presented as successful, although national differences persisted. Andropov, Brezhnev's successor, acknowledged that there was still a long way to go before the 'fusion' of the peoples, implying that the proclaimed success of Sovietization was not entirely true (Nahaylo 1990).

To illustrate Russification and Sovietization during this period, it is instructive to consider the statistics related to schools teaching the 'republican' language. In the capital of the Kyrgyz SSR, Frunze, only three out of 69 primary schools offered instruction in the Kyrgyz language (Huskey 1995).

During Brezhnev's era, many interviewees retrospectively viewed Sovietization as a positive phenomenon. The population identified with Soviet culture, and living standards improved significantly. This sentiment was expressed as follows by a Dungan respondent from Yrdyk village in 2011: 'For Dungans in Kyrgyzstan, there has never been a golden age. Life was relatively good under Brezhnev, but after the Soviet Union's collapse, the situation worsened. The most challenging period was during the war when hunger prevailed. The present is also challenging, with a lack of machines and tractors'. Although living standards rose, the Central Asian region was well below the global average on most indicators (Kokaisl and Usmanov 2012).

During the brief leaderships of Andropov and Chernenko, there were tentative signs of a potential shift in nationality policy. However, no substantive changes occurred, and the Dungans remained categorized within the broader group of Chinese-speaking Muslims.

At the same time, Western theories of ethnicity, such as the concept of 'reinventing tradition', began to gain traction. These ideas starkly contrasted with the Soviet primordialist perspective, which viewed ethnic identities as fixed and immutable. Soviet authorities feared that any internal instability within ethnic groups could threaten the state's cohesion. This concern reinforced the emphasis on a primordialist framework, particularly as the Soviet Union's union republics were officially structured along ethnic lines.

After gaining independence, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan initially pursued relatively moderate approaches to ethnic relations. They accommodated their sizable Russian minority populations and recognized Russian as the second official language in both countries. This bilingual policy was beneficial for members of other national minorities, many of whom were proficient in Russian.

However, it became evident that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the leaders of these republics aimed to grant their titular nationalities a more prominent role in the state. This approach paralleled certain aspects of Soviet policies. New language laws, enacted before independence, required proficiency in the titular languages before achieving a certain social status within the newly independent countries, rather than citizenship (unlike the Baltic states, for example).

This shift in language policy had significant consequences for ethnic groups with lower levels of education and predominantly rural populations such as the Dungan community. For instance, Dungans in Kyrgyzstan experienced difficulties in selling produce in markets owing to market control by Kyrgyz individuals. Additionally, land prices for Dungan farms increased significantly in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

The Dungans faced structural disadvantages in both the Soviet and post-Soviet systems due to the absence of their own union republic, which limited their political

representation and cultural development opportunities and placed them on the periphery of the broader ethnic and state structure.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, relations between Dungan-Kyrgyz and Dungan-Kazakh shifted as the prestige of the Dungan nationality declined. The Kyrgyz and Kazakhs asserted themselves as titular peoples in the newly independent states, relegating the Dungans to a minor nation without their own state. Among the Dungan interviewees, this shift led to nostalgia for a time when Soviet nationality held greater significance.

Masanchi, a revered Dungan hero who fought against anti-Soviet elements (Basmachi) in the Semirech region during the 1920s, is celebrated in Dungan culture. A Dungan village in Kazakhstan is even named after him. The memory of Dungan heroism during World War II plays a crucial role in relations with the Kyrgyz and Kazakhs, as they fought together for a common cause. This shared destiny is also remembered during the period of Soviet national repression when Kyrgyzstan (or Kazakhstan) provided a haven for persecuted peoples, with the local population offering protection. These stories are revived during celebrations commemorating the anniversary of the Dungans' arrival in present-day Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan and are well-known to most respondents: 'When our ancestors settled down, the Russians didn't help us, they decimated food prices, but the Kyrgyz did. When the Kyrgyz fled to China in 1916, some of them went to work for the Dungans' (male, Milyanfan, 86 years old).

The state employs these narratives to promote harmonious coexistence and prioritize citizenship over ethnicity, encouraging individuals to identify as Kyrgyzstanis or Kazakhstanis, thereby demonstrating greater loyalty to the state than their ethnic groups (Nesterenko 2017, 62–78).

Dungan ethnicity has long been characterized by complex ambivalence, both during the Soviet era and after its dissolution. Despite their marginalization and peripheral status under Soviet rule, many Dungans recall shared historical moments with fondness, such as collective efforts during World War II and mutual support with Kyrgyz and Kazakhs – experiences that remain celebrated today. However, in contemporary Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, the Dungans face renewed marginalization amidst the growing emphasis on the national identities of the titular peoples.

Main elements of Dungan ethnic identity

The earlier sections of this study examined the history of the Dungans from historical and political perspectives, focusing on the transformation of their ethnic identity during the Soviet era. These chapters established a foundation for understanding the contemporary challenges faced by the Dungans. The theme of totalitarianism also emerges in current online discussions, where users reflect on Dungan experiences under the Soviet regime, including political repression, arrests and deportations based on political views or ethnicity. Participants frequently recall state surveillance and control over daily life, typical of totalitarian systems, and how these experiences shaped their lives and collective memory.

Some participants express nostalgia for the Soviet era, praising its social and economic stability, which often leads to sharp debates with younger generations who are more critical of the Soviet system's flaws. This generational divide underscores differing perceptions of the Soviet past.

In contemporary Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the Dungans actively work to preserve and promote their ethnic identity through community initiatives and traditional practices. Field research and online discussions provide valuable insights into their ongoing cultural efforts. While earlier chapters focused on oppression and identity preservation under totalitarian regimes, this chapter highlights the Dungans' proactive cultural preservation and transformation in a changing context.

This chapter thus examines the evolution of Dungan identity, tracing its trajectory from past challenges to present initiatives, offering a deeper understanding of their enduring efforts to sustain and strengthen their ethnic identity.

Language

The Dungan language presents a unique linguistic situation, as it was considered a separate language by Soviet linguists but a variant of Chinese by Chinese linguists (Rukodel'nikova 2012). In the Soviet Union, the Gansu dialect of Dungan was selected for codification. This language had already incorporated Arabic and Turkic borrowings, with a significant number of Russian words introduced since the nineteenth century (Akiner 2013, 354).

In the Soviet Union, Dungan underwent several changes, including the switch from the Arabic alphabet (1927) to the Latin alphabet (1932), subsequent to which, in the late 1930s, preparations began to switch Dungan from the Latin alphabet to the Cyrillic alphabet. The first Dungan language textbooks and literature for Dungan children were published in 1956 (Nedopekina 2017, 1124).

Dungan language teaching began in the 1920s under the influence of the 1917 Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia, promoted by Lenin and Stalin to support minority language development. However, due to a shortage of Dungan teachers and textbooks, most Dungan students were taught in Russian or Tatar. In 1931, only 8 out of 3000 Dungans in Alexandrovka were literate in their own language. To address this, teacher training schools for Dungan teachers were established in the early 1930s in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tashkent and St Petersburg. Graduates of these schools authored the first Dungan textbooks and literary works in the Dungan language (Madzhun 1992).

In the 1940s, there was a degree of progress in teaching the Dungan language, but this was interrupted by World War II. After the war, Dungan education resumed on a limited scale. Despite the Soviet Union's ban on certain Dungan-related subjects, the friendly relations between the USSR and China contributed to the development of Dungan culture (Clark and Kamalov 2004).

Teaching Dungan in schools after the war was a limited exception, especially when compared to other small nations that had to wait until the 1980s for language instruction, facilitated by the political reforms under Gorbachev (Kokaisl and Kokaislová 2019, 181–196). However, Dungan education was not universally available, as some regions lacked qualified local teachers, leading to Russians teaching instead.

The Dungan language continues to form a significant part of Dungan ethnic identity, with over 95% of Dungans in northern Kyrgyzstan and Lake Issyk-Kul considering it their mother tongue. This pattern is also evident among Dungans living in Kazakhstan. Such a high percentage of native speakers of their language within the Soviet Union was more commonly associated with the major nationalities of the Union republics, whilst other

ethnic groups in the USSR had much lower proportions of native speakers. Russian, which remains the lingua franca among various ethnic groups in Central Asian countries, is the second language for nearly two-thirds of Dungans, whilst the state languages (Kyrgyz and Kazakh) serve as secondary languages for only 1%. (Perepis' naseleniia … 2010). Marat (2016) noted that there is a reluctance among ethnic minorities, including Dungans, Slavs and Koreans, to learn the Kyrgyz language. This phenomenon is particularly noticeable in the vicinity of the capital, whilst in the southern areas around Lake Issyk-Kul, many Dungans are proficient in Kyrgyz. By contrast, Dungans living in the Osh region of southern Kyrgyzstan, particularly in the Kara Suu district, exhibit different language dynamics. Only 10% use Dungan as their mother tongue, whilst the majority, 90%, use Uzbek. Additionally, less than a third of Dungans in southern Kyrgyzstan speak Russian (Perepis' naseleniia … 2010).

Historical awareness

Dungans refer to their counterparts in China as 'relatives' and consider themselves part of a single Dungan nation, with one part residing in Central Asia and the other in China. In Central Asia, they use the term 'Hui' interchangeably with 'Dungan' to refer to Chinese Muslims.

In fact, the two groups (Dungans and Hui) differ somewhat from their surroundings in most respects. Soviet Dungans in present-day Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan emphasize their Chinese origins in local folklore. By contrast, the Hui living in China define themselves in relation to their surroundings on religious grounds, and their folklore includes Qur'anic and Muslim figures and motifs (Gladney 1996, 324–325). Dungans in Central Asia tend to emphasize their Chinese identity as a way to strengthen their sense of self and cultural identity, whereas the Hui in China often downplay their Chinese identity, despite being influenced by various aspects of Chinese culture.

Recalling their common history is an important element employed by many Dungans to emphasize their distinctiveness. For instance, respondent from Milyanfan (86 years old) stated the following: 'For the Dungan community, remembering their history and the challenges they've overcome is of great importance. They take pride in their ability to survive under various rulers, including Chinese, Tsarist and Soviet regimes. Their resilience and the preservation of their traditions and cuisine are a source of pride and strength for the Dungan community in Central Asia'.

On the other hand, even after several generations, Dungans are still perceived by the majority as outsiders, bearing the stigma of being immigrants. A 40-year-old female respondent from Masanchi, interviewed in 2019, stated: 'We've been here for a hundred years, yet we're still seen as immigrants. How much longer until this land is ours too? But no, the Kazakhs say, "Stay quiet, and no one will bother you". They get to stand tall while we're expected to keep our heads down, just because this place is called Kazakhstan and they think it belongs to them more'.

Emphasizing historical differences presents an ambivalence for Dungans: it reinforces their ethnic distinctiveness but also creates distance from majority societies. Online discussions reflect a range of perspectives on the Dungan community. Some voices are overtly negative, blaming Dungans for societal issues, viewing them as a threat to national security, and advocating severe measures such as deportation to China. Others argue for

Dungans' integration into Kazakh society, criticizing their resistance to learning Kazakh and adopting Kazakh cultural norms.

The demands for Dungan assimilation echo earlier Soviet policies of Russification and cultural assimilation. However, some discussants recognize the Dungans' industriousness, resilience, and contributions to agriculture and trade, as well as their cooperation with local ethnic groups such as Kazakhs and Kyrgyz. These contributors call for tolerance, equal rights and respect for all citizens. A further group advocates for dialogue and mutual understanding, focusing on the shared history and cultural connections between Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and Dungans, particularly their solidarity in challenging times.

Dungan religion

Svetlana Rimsky-Korsakoff's 1985 study highlighted stark contrasts between the religious practices of Soviet Dungans and their Chinese counterparts. Among Soviet Dungans, Islam held little prominence; villages lacked a strong Muslim atmosphere, and religious works, schools, or institutions were scarce. In contrast, Chinese Muslim areas maintained visible religious practices and functioning Islamic institutions.

In the Soviet Dungan community, Muslim customs were largely observed by the older generation, with only a few elderly individuals observing Ramadan and none undertaking the pilgrimage to Mecca. However, the avoidance of pork and the wearing of traditional hats by men were universal. Notably, many Dungans resisted religion, often due to professional or personal concerns. Soviet Dungan writers emphasized non-Islamic Dungan traditions, portraying religious customs as outdated (Rimsky-Korsakoff 1991).

In the 1980s, Islam was not central to the identity of Soviet Dungans, setting them apart from their Chinese ancestors. While both groups shared a common ancestry, Soviet Dungans harboured negative memories of Chinese oppression, viewing life in the Soviet Union as comparatively more comfortable despite the lack of contact with China due to closed borders. They perceived their language, food, customs, clothing and stories as distinct, even though parallels with Chinese traditions existed.

A key difference between modern Dungans and Chinese Dungans (Hui) lies in the role of religion. For some Dungans, Islam has become a crucial aspect of their ethnic identity, differentiating them from the Hui. After the Soviet Union's collapse, there was a widespread search for new identities within the emerging states, with religion playing a pivotal role in redefining ethnicity. Despite Soviet-era religious suppression, ethnic groups entered this period with varying starting points regarding their religious traditions.

Following the Soviet Union's collapse, a religious revival emerged among Muslims, with radio stations providing guidance on prayers and fasting during Ramadan. Christian-associated groups, such as Russians, Germans and Poles, also resumed practicing their faith, influencing their interactions with local Muslims. This marked a departure from the Soviet era, when atheistic policies minimized religious distinctions and united diverse groups. A respondent from the Batken region (82 years old, female, Russian) described it as follows: 'When the Russians would not allow a priest at the funeral, a Muslim cleric conducted the ceremony and even recited Orthodox prayers. It showed respect and understanding between us, despite all our differences'.

In the Soviet era, smaller Muslim nations often aligned themselves with larger nations like the Kyrgyz and Kazakh against the atheist government. However, after the collapse of

the Soviet Union, the dynamics shifted. The Soviet government ceased to exist, and former allies found themselves on opposing sides regarding religious matters. Their focus shifted from fighting for religious freedom to competing for social space.

Some Dungan respondents from the Kyrgyz village of Ivanovka (2013, aged 45–67) who visited China were disappointed with their compatriots, the 'Chinese Dungans'. They described them as not following the Muslim religion, not resembling Muslims in appearance, and even practicing pagan rites, in contrast to the Dungans in Kyrgyzstan who were proud of their Muslim faith.

This example highlights the fluidity and evolution of individual elements that contribute to ethnic identity, such as religion. In the 1980s, Soviet Dungans were described as having a minimal religious presence, whilst their Chinese counterparts were more religious. However, three decades later, younger Soviet Dungans are proud Muslims who consider religion an essential part of their ethnic identity, whereas some 'Chinese Dungans' do not prioritize Islam in their identity.

Ethnographic aspects of Dungan culture

The Soviet regime's assimilation policies led to a partial loss of Dungan traditions, affecting their current culture. In Kazakhstan, national identity is a charged topic, with many Kazakhs criticizing groups like the Dungans for not respecting Kazakh traditions and fearing the erosion of national identity amidst globalization.

Ethnographic aspects remain vital for both communities, but Soviet interference in personal life, such as restricting names and celebrations (Kokaisl and Usmanov 2012), led to an erosion of cultural heritage. Today, objections to Dungan expressions in public spaces persist, yet online discussions also reveal moments of cultural exchange, particularly in cuisine, blending Chinese and Central Asian influences.

Dungan cuisine

Dungan food is characterized by a certain conservatism, both in terms of the ingredients used and the methods of preparation. Based on traditional nineteenth century Chinese gastronomy, Dungan cuisine has gradually been enriched by the influences of Central Asian cuisines, particularly those of the Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, Uzbeks and Russians. This cultural interaction and adaptation has created a unique culinary style, combining techniques and ingredients from both regions (Khishanlo 2018). Dishes such as plov, beshbarmak and borscht have been incorporated into the 'typical' Dungan menu, but are also seen as a traditional component of the diet of neighbouring ethnic groups. A Kyrgyz respondent (female, 42 years old), who lives in the Dungan village of Yrdyk and is married to a Dungan, expressed her views on these cultural differences:

> I've got the hang of Dungan food and picked up some of their traditional dishes – couldn't have managed without it. But otherwise, I stick to my usual Kyrgyz recipes. You know what I just can't get used to? How Dungans behave. Sure, they're polite at the table, but the way they talk to each other and treat their parents – it's just unbelievable to me.

Twentieth-century changes in Dungan cuisine were shaped by agricultural shifts in the Chui Valley, particularly reduced rice production due to irrigation and urbanization. Dungans began specializing in oil crops like rapeseed and sesame, alongside melons and vegetables. Vegetable gardens remain central to Dungan households. Their diet

now includes dairy and horsemeat, though some conservative groups abstain from horsemeat for religious reasons.

Dungan girls learn cooking from a young age, highlighting the cultural importance of culinary skills. Traditional dishes feature noodles, rice porridge and meats like beef, lamb and chicken, often accompanied by fruits and vegetables. Spicy ingredients such as onions, garlic, chili and vinegar are staples, with diverse doughs being a hallmark of Dungan cuisine.

Lagman, a hand-pulled noodle dish with meat and vegetables, is a key Dungan food, preserving family and community traditions. Dungan cuisine plays a central role in celebrations, featuring dishes like 'orze' (meat, salads, pastries) and 'plov' (meat, rice, vegetables). During Ramadan, Dungans prepare special lagman, sweets and manty (meat dumplings), also enjoyed by other Central Asians. Meals follow social etiquette, beginning with a tea ceremony and ending with soup. Influenced by Chinese culture, chopsticks are used and seasonal eating is promoted, with lighter meals in summer and heartier, spicier dishes in winter.

Weddings

Dungan weddings blend traditional Chinese and Muslim elements. Red, symbolizing luck and prosperity, features in decorations and clothing. While the qipao was once standard, Western-style weddings are now common. Weddings may include Chinese customs like gift exchanges and tea ceremonies, alongside Islamic rituals such as Koran readings. Typically held for those aged 18–20, brides are often chosen by female relatives, usually the groom's mother. In the past, couples sometimes met only on their wedding day (Imiarova 2019), but today many date via social media, arranging weddings themselves or eloping if faced with parental disapproval or financial constraints.

Dungan wedding ceremonies prominently feature food, with sypan meals common in Uzbek areas and a set of nine dishes, shchi, served in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Plov, prepared in the Uzbek style, is now popular at Dungan weddings. Historically, up to 108 dishes were served, though this is now reduced to 18, 24 or 36, including lagman and plov. Weddings involve significant financial investment, with families often saving for years. Dungan weddings blend Kyrgyz, Russian and Dungan traditions, creating a culturally rich event.

Dungan families

Dungan families have evolved from large, multi-generational households with deeply entrenched patriarchal relationships, where the eldest male had the final say, to the smaller, more independent family units of today.

This was described as follows by a respondent from Milyanfan (born 1929):

> As a child I used to hear stories about life in Dungan families, where the eldest man was the head of the family and everyone knew their place and responsibilities. I didn't experience it much myself, but I saw the changes, especially after Soviet collectivization, when large families broke up and children began to live more independently. It's even more different now, but we've kept the respect in our families.

Strong family and kinship ties remain central to Dungan society, with respect for parents and elders persisting alongside younger generations' independence (Savurov 2007).

The ethnographic aspects of Dungan culture reflect a rich blend of traditions and adaptations that have shaped their identity over generations. Despite pressures of assimilation and modernization, the Dungans have preserved many of their traditional values and practices, which continue to play a vital role in their daily lives and social interactions. This cultural continuity and adaptability significantly influence Dungan cultural consciousness.

Economic relations

Dungans have above-average capital, often earned through agriculture. Previously, they sold goods directly in markets, but the collapse of the Soviet Union, particularly in Kyrgyzstan, limited market access. At present, they mainly sell through wholesalers and Kyrgyz middlemen in the bazaar trade. Since the 1990s, Dungans have invested in restaurants, capitalizing on their 'Muslim' cuisine reputation and good relations with Dungan farms for fresh produce (Laruelle 2009).

Due to high land prices, Dungans are moving to nearby regions, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and China. In Russia, they are attracted by shared Soviet history and linguistic ties. The 2010 census recorded about 1,700 Dungans in Russia, double the 2002 figure (Vserossiyskaia perepis' … 2013). Dungans in Russia maintain ties with Central Asia, hiring workers from Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan for harvests and staying with relatives in Central Asia during winters.

China is no longer seen as an enemy of the Dungans, as explained by a respondent from Kazakhstan (Masanchi, 52) who has relatives in China: 'Everything is different in China. People there don't have to worry so much about survival'.

Economic ties between Chinese Muslims and other Muslims are shaped by China's central policies (Bhattacharya 2014). Before 1949, relations were limited and stopped after 1950. However, Hui Muslims in Xinjiang maintained contacts with Dungans in Soviet Central Asia, though cross-border trade mainly involved Turkic Muslims (Gladney 1996, 328).

China supports Central Asian Dungans, and trade links with China have expanded. Dungans adopt Chinese slogans to highlight their connection to China. While opium was once significant in early twentieth-century trade between Russia and Xinjiang (Pianciola 2020), this is no longer the case. Dungans now focus on ethnic entrepreneurship, using language skills for cross-border trade between Central Asia and China, dealing in goods common in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan bazaars. About one-third of border-area Dungans are involved in this trade (Laruelle 2009).

The Dungans' proximity to China has led to growing suspicion and hostility from neighbouring communities in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Online discussions often focus on China's influence on Dungan economic activities, with many expressing distrust towards China and fears of cultural and economic domination, labelling the Dungans as 'Chinese spies' or accusing them of 'taking over our country'.

Other commenters express concerns about China's impact on Kazakh cultural and linguistic identity, noting that the Dungans import goods from China to sell in Kazakh and Kyrgyz markets, which is seen as undermining national identity. Criticisms of China's economic expansion often focus on fears that Chinese investments and business practices may harm local enterprises and the economic self-sufficiency of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Kazakh contributors often reference historical and political concerns, viewing China's influence as a threat to political stability and independence, which translates into suspicion towards the Dungans, who are frequently associated with China.

On the other hand, some contributors adopt a mixed or neutral stance towards China, acknowledging the economic benefits of Chinese investments but expressing caution about cultural and political influence. Typical comments mention that 'cheap Chinese goods are plentiful, but of poor quality' and that 'economic ties can be useful, but political independence is more important'.

Overall, negative perceptions of China prevail, with concerns about its influence on culture, economy and political autonomy. This distrust extends to the Dungans, seen as Chinese allies, fostering suspicion and hostility. Nevertheless, some recognize the economic advantages of Chinese investment, indicating that the issue remains polarizing and directly influences how the Dungans are perceived.

Conclusion

This study examined how state power shaped Dungan ethnic and national identity and how their identity adapted to shifting political and ideological pressures. The concept of 'elastic totalitarianism' revealed alternating periods of autonomy and repression, which both shaped and challenged Dungan identity. The findings demonstrate that ethnic identity is not merely a product of state policy but is shaped by negotiations between internal self-perception and external societal pressures. Understanding 'elastic totalitarianism' sheds light on how the Dungans' identity was actively redefined through efforts to maintain cultural traditions despite homogenizing forces.

In the Soviet Union, the Dungan identity was strategically constructed as part of broader political objectives, such as demonstrating inclusiveness towards minorities. However, as political conditions changed, the Dungans faced pressures of Russification and assimilation. In China, Muslim communities like the Hui retained their diversity despite Sinicisation attempts, particularly during the Cultural Revolution. The Dungans, originally from these Chinese Muslim communities, developed their unique path in Central Asia, shaped by Soviet totalitarianism and different historical experiences.

Despite strong assimilation pressures, the Dungans displayed resilience. Throughout the Soviet era and after its dissolution, they maintained a connection to China as their cultural homeland, emphasizing their 'Chineseness' as part of their identity. This paradoxically helped them preserve their distinctiveness during efforts at homogenization. It was only after the collapse of the Soviet Union that Islam re-emerged as a key element of their identity. This development underscores that ethnic identity is a continual negotiation in response to external pressures.

The post-Soviet era brought new challenges. China's support of their 'Chineseness' strengthened their ties to their homeland, but this also created difficulties, particularly in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, where China is viewed negatively. Online discussions reveal that Dungans are often seen as agents of Chinese influence, reflecting broader geopolitical anxieties. In response, Dungans emphasize shared history, especially during the Soviet era and World War II, to highlight common bonds with the majority society.

This study shows that both totalitarian regimes and ethnic identity are highly flexible, adapting to suit the interests of the ruling power or ethnic group. The concept of 'elastic

totalitarianism' explains how the Dungans preserved and evolved their identity in a changing environment. Despite sharing physical traits and religious beliefs with the majority, Dungans remain perceived as outsiders after over a century, with their 'Chineseness' continuing to cause conflict. This highlights the complex, fluid nature of ethnic identity and social integration.

Thus, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of how ethnic groups in totalitarian and post-totalitarian regimes not only survive but also adapt and maintain their identity amid political changes and societal pressures. The Dungans serve as a model for understanding similar processes among other ethnic minorities in diverse political and social contexts.

Ethics

This study adhered to the ethical standards set by the Ethical Committee of the Czech University of Life Sciences, which ensures compliance with all research integrity norms. Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. They were also made aware of the option to anonymize identifying details to prevent unequivocal identification while maintaining transparency for readers. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, including approval for the use of any potentially identifiable information, with full consideration of confidentiality and data sensitivity.

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