

Stephen Jones: a blog

Daoism—lives—language—performance. And jokes

Chinese-Russian Muslims: the Dungan people

Posted on 13/04/2020 by StephenJones.blog



Source: wiki (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dungan_people).

Among the many ethnic minorities of the former Soviet Union (see e.g. Cheremis, Chuvash (<https://stephenjones.blog/2018/12/27/cheremis-chuvash/>), and Kazakhs (<https://stephenjones.blog/2020/02/01/the-kazakh-famine/>)), the **Dungan** people are Chinese Hui Muslims who fled in waves from Shaanxi and Gansu in northwest China by way of Xinjiang, following the uprisings of the 1870s ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dungan_Revolt_\(1862-1877\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dungan_Revolt_(1862-1877))). Mainly living in Kazakhstan and Kyrgystan, by 2003 they numbered around 100,000. Along with their traditional customs they preserved their original Chinese dialects, using Cyrillic instead of Chinese characters.

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In the West, knowledge of the Dungan people sets forth from the work of the remarkable **Svetlana Rimsky-Korsakoff Dyer**, great-granddaughter of the composer.* The following is adapted from this post (<https://www.kuleuven.be/verbiest/sml/svetlana>). I do hope she's been writing her memoirs.

Her father Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakoff, a high-ranking officer in the Czarist army, had fled to China after the 1917 Revolution. After the fall of St Petersburg he joined the Russian community in Harbin in northeast China, where Svetlana was born in 1931.

Later the family moved to the capital Peking, where the young Svetlana received a mixed Russian–Chinese education. During the Japanese occupation of Peking the family took refuge in the southwestern province of Yunnan, where they were eventually granted Chinese citizenship.

In 1945, after the retreat of the Japanese, the family returned to Peking. Svetlana's second father, the last governor of Kamchatka under Czarist rule, took up a professorship of history at Tsinghua University. Svetlana enrolled at the Catholic Fu Jen University in Peking and became one of the rare foreigners studying and living among the local Chinese students, witnessing violent clashes between Communist and Nationalist troops. She was present during the siege of the campus by Communist troops, and was forced to attend anti-foreigner and anti-missionary campaigns under Mao Zedong.

Following the 1949 Communist revolution, the Rimsky-Korsakoffs were stripped of their Chinese nationality. A period of economic and psychological hardship began for the family. The father was forced to quit his professorship of history for ideological reasons, and to teach Russian instead. In the 1950s the family fled China by boat, along with the last missionaries expelled from China. Svetlana was now stateless, a plight that would only end many years later when she received Australian citizenship.

In 1960 she enrolled in the master's programme for Asian languages at Georgetown University, Washington. Hoping to study Chinese proverbs, she sought the advice of Fr Paul Serruys, professor of Chinese philology at the university. But once he learned of Svetlana's mixed Russian-Chinese background, Serruys promptly steered her to work on the language of the Dungan minority. In 1965 Svetlana submitted her master's dissertation *The Dungan dialect: introduction and morphology*—the first scholarly work on the Dungans in the West. Virtually no other written materials on them were available in the West, and no fieldwork had yet been done among the Dungans themselves. Victor Mair pursues the Dungan language [here \(https://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=51189&utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter&utm_campaign=dungan-a-sinitic-language-of-central-asia-written-in-the-cyrillic-alphabet\)](https://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=51189&utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter&utm_campaign=dungan-a-sinitic-language-of-central-asia-written-in-the-cyrillic-alphabet), with links.



After Georgetown, Svetlana began teaching Chinese at Australian National University (Canberra) as she worked on a PhD. While still engaged in projects on early Chinese literature, her fascination with the Dungans remained.

In 1977, she embarked on the first of several stays with the Dungans, who were then living in *kolkhoz* collectives in the Kyrgyz and Kazakh republics. Svetlana shared their daily life, attending their weddings and funerals and recording their language. In the 1980s she also worked with the “national Dungan poet” [Iasyr Shivaza \(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iasyr_Shivaza\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iasyr_Shivaza).

Among her publications on the Dungans are

- *Soviet Dungan kolkhozes in the Kirghiz S.S.R. and the Kazakh S.S.R.*, Oriental monograph series, 25, Canberra (1980)

- “Soviet Dungan nationalism: a few comments on their origin and language”, *Monumenta Serica* 33 (1977–8).
- “Karakunuz : An Early Settlement of the Chinese Muslims in Russia (<https://web.archive.org/web/20070630174635/http://www.nanzan-u.ac.jp/SHUBUNKEN/publications/afs/pdf/a916.pdf>)”, *Asian folklore studies* 51 (1992), citing impressive early Russian ethnographies as well as later fieldwork under the USSR, with an Appendix on her own visits in 1977, 1985, and 1991.



FIG. 1. Masanchin girls dressed as present-day brides.

Karakunuz (renamed Masanchin in 1965), Kazakhstan, 1991, from Dyer, *ibid*.

Much as I'd like to offer a photo of the Dungans during the Soviet period, media images revolve predictably around weddings and cuisine.

More recently the Dungans feature in the work of scholars of the Hui Muslims, such as Dru Gladney, Jonathan Lipman, and Ha Guangtian. Inside the PRC, while the Uyghurs bear the brunt of recent persecutions (<https://stephenjones.blog/2019/10/23/uyghur-culture-crisis/>), the Hui Muslims are not exempt.

On the cultural front, Vibeke Børdahl kindly alerts me to the work of the Russian sinologist **Boris Riftin** (1932–2012) on Dungan folktales, notably

- Li Fuqing 李福清 [Boris Riftin], *Donggan minjian gushi chuanshuo ji* 東干民間故事傳說集 [Collection of Dungan folktales and legends] (2011, translated from original 1977 Russian edition), reviewed in *CHINOPEL* 31 (2012), along with the tribute
- Rostislav Berezkin, “Academician Boris L’vovich Riftin (1932–2012): the extraordinary life of a brilliant scholar”.

Riftin first visited the Dungans in 1950, going on to work as a volunteer there in 1953—a period when ethnography of the changing times would have been instructive, yet impossible.

And now Kenneth J. Yin (<https://kji.georgetown.domains/publications/>) is publishing major collections in English translation:

- *Dungan folktales and legends* (2021)
- *Mystical forest: collected poems and short stories of Dungan ethnographer Ali Dzhon* (2023),

with more to follow.

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As ever, what interests me in particular here is the lives of people, and their culture, through the turbulent, distressing period of Stalin's regime (cf. The Ukraine famine (<https://stephenjones.blog/2018/11/24/famine-ukraine-and-china/>), The whisperers (<https://stephenjones.blog/2019/05/13/lives-in-stalins-russia/>), Svetlana Alexievich (<https://stephenjones.blog/2020/01/21/soviet-lives-at-war/>), and again the Kazakh famine (<https://stephenjones.blog/2020/02/01/the-kazakh-famine/>)); I'd like to read details of the early years of the revolution, the Great Purge, the Great Patriotic War and the aftermath. But it seems that such stories for the Dungans remain elusive.

Even in 2020 a violent ethnic clash occurred that resulted in more cross-border flight:

Who Are The Dungans Of Central Asia?



With thanks to Beth McKillop.

* For a superfluous yet wonderful link, do listen to my violin teacher Hugh Maguire (<https://stephenjones.blog/2017/04/22/the-late-great-hugh-maguire/>)'s 1964 recording of *Scheherazade* with Pierre Monteux and the LSO.

This entry was posted in China, fieldwork, language and tagged Beijing, Iron Curtain, Uyghur. Bookmark the permalink.

2 thoughts on “Chinese-Russian Muslims: the

Dungan people”

Vibeke Børdahl says:

on 13/04/2020 at 10:27 am

Shouldn't you mention that Boris Riftin wrote about the Dungan storytelling traditions and their dialect?

Reply.

StephenJones.blog says:

on 13/04/2020 at 10:34 am

Ha, thanks, will add links in due course...

Reply.

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