

A Comparative Study on the Cultures of the Dungan and the Hui Peoples

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The Dungan people derive from China's Hui people, and now live mainly in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Their population is over 110,000. This people has now developed a separate ethnicity outside China, yet they have close relations with the Hui people in culture, ethnic characteristics and ethnic identity. This paper aims to compare the cultures of the two peoples in terms of ethnic identity, religion and lifestyle so as to show the influence of region, political context and ethnic background on the two peoples.

This paper is a research report based mainly on materials collected during two periods of fieldwork carried out in Shorqube and Almaty, Kazakhstan and Alishandarofuka and Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, from November 1996 to August 1997 and from June to September 2000. I speak from the point of view of someone who is herself a Hui from China.

Comparisons of Ethnic Identifications

Ethnic identity grows stronger and exerts its influence through contact with other ethnic groups and other cultures. Its basic function is to make a subjective distinction between 'my group' and the 'other group'. Since the formation and development of every ethnicity can be achieved only through certain contacts with other ethnic groups, ethnic identity is vital to the maintenance of nationality and the development of an ethnic group.

Once the ethnic identity has formed, it will remain relatively stable. But following migration or other changes, its symbol and content will change as well. The contrast of ethnic identities between the Hui and Dungan demonstrates this point.

For historical reasons, the Dungan people may have broken off contacts with China. With a small population of a little over 110,000, they have scattered across the three countries in Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. It is their ethnic identity that unites Dungan people into an ethnic entity with a well-developed economy and culture. In this sense, the ethnic identity serves not only as the coherent power for the existence of the Dungan ethnicity but also as the impetus for their development to keep abreast with other ethnic groups.

The Dungan people live in a Muslim-occupied area and distinguish themselves from other peoples around them mainly by language instead of by religion. This is quite different from China's Hui people. Since China is not a Muslim society, the Hui cannot

distinguish themselves from the peoples around in terms of language, lifestyle and costume, and even their ideology and value system are nurtured by the Han culture in some way. In this sense, Hui people cannot exist as a separate ethnicity without using Islam as their spiritual sustenance.

Historically speaking, Islam has been a common cultural foundation for the Hui people. To them, religious emotion is inseparable from ethnic feelings, because Islam is not only the dominant power in their spiritual world that serves as the main channel for them to communicate with each other but also functions as the guide for their secular life and originates the unique customs of their own. These unique customs are an important part of the cultural differences between the Hui people and other ethnic group (mainly the Han group). That is why previous ruling classes, who adopted a discriminatory policy, always targeted these unique customs of the Hui people. Such acts hurt the ethnic feelings of the Hui people and pushed them to attach special importance to the customs and conventions of Islam by considering it as the most important of their ethnic symbols. Therefore, the different effects that Islam has exerted on the ethnic identity of Dungan and Hui people are the result of the different social environments that surround them.

It is worth noticing that the Dungan have adopted some traditional Han cultural elements, such as the dragon. In the training schools of martial arts (*wushu*) run by the Dungan people, there are always pictures of flying dragons painted on the front walls, symbolising the development and progress of the school. Even in the early architecture of mosques, such as the Perrovarsk Mosque built at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Dungan people carved dragons on the outside walls.

This phenomenon can be partly explained by the fact that the Hui culture is deeply indebted to the Han culture, and Dungan people have inherited these elements and made them part of the legacy of their own culture. But what deserves more attention is that the Dungan people incorporate many elements of the Han culture into their life, identify these elements as their traditional cultural heritage, and use these elements to distinguish them from other Muslim groups around. The traditional folklores popular among the Dungan people, for example, are largely borrowed from the Chinese folk literature, such as ‘the tales of Meng Jiang’, ‘the stories of the Three Kingdoms’ and ‘the legends of the Tang monk’s acquisition of scriptures’.

Also, some of the customs of the Dungan people can trace their origins to Han culture. Whenever there is a drought, they will pray for rain. In certain Dungan villages, there have been rituals that see the whole village sharing the cost of the cattle and sheep, sacrificing the heads of the animals to the ‘dragon head’ and praying for rain, while the Imam would be invited to recite verses from the Koran. The Dungan also regard the *cheongsam* as their ethnic costume and the royal style of court dance of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) as their ethnic dancing style. So it is not surprising that other ethnic groups around them regard their culture as a window of knowledge of Chinese culture. The Dungan people do not confine their sense of identity just to the Hui people but also have a sense of consciousness of belonging to the ‘Chinese people’ more generally. This transcendence of the ethnic identity also exists among other groups of Chinese emigrants in foreign countries.

Comparisons in Religious Development

The Dungan people have developed their Islamic practices on the basis of the relationship between the Hui people and their religion. Unlike China, where the Hui

people have lived, the Central Asian countries that are home to the Dungan people have a long Islamic history. Yet the influence of Islam is not strong among the local ethnic groups such as the Kyrgyz and Kazaks. The fact that these Muslims are nomadic or semi-nomadic makes it difficult for them to set up mosques. Sometimes, when people come back late after a day of herding, they perform rituals facing west on the grasslands. It is with simple and appropriate forms of this kind that the herdsmen incorporate Islamic culture into the domain of their daily life.

In the long history of Islam in China, the Hui people have always held that the religious cultivation and rituals are vital to maintaining the purity of the Islamic faith, so Muslims are required to follow strictly the basic creeds and rituals of Islam. Since China's Hui people are mainly agriculturalists and lead a comparatively stable life, it is easier for them to meet these requirements. For this reason, when China's Hui people first moved westward to Central Asia, they always built mosques after they had settled down. The Hui living patterns build on a mosque-based community model, that is, every household is subordinated to a mosque, which requires people to follow the disciplines and canons of Islam strictly. The mosque is not only for the people to perform religious rituals but also for Muslims of a common mosque-based community to discuss important issues, get together and share information.

Because of their poor living conditions, the Dungan people first built their mosques in a rather crude style, which could scarcely meet their need to perform the Muslim rituals. When their living standards improved, they took greater aesthetic interest in the architecture of the mosques and made great efforts to preserve the Chinese architectural style. It is for this reason that the Perrovarsk Mosque, built in 1910 and preserved to the present, has been hailed as a miracle in the history of Dungan architecture and is even highly valued by other Central Asians. At present, it is under the protection of the Kyrgyzstan government as an important culture relic.

During their early life in Central Asia, the Dungan people mainly adopted the traditional Maddras educational system which trained religious scholars and disseminated religious knowledge. It was Muslims coming from the west who first introduced this kind of education into China after the middle period of the Ming Dynasty. Because many famous Hui scholars, such as Hu Dengzhou promoted it, it became more widespread throughout China, and finally became regarded as the educational system of the Hui people.

During the late years of the Qing Dynasty (late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), Hui people who migrated westward introduced this educational system into Central Asia. Similar to the Maddras education of the Hui people, the religious schools of the Dungan people in Central Asia initially also adopted the system of transliterating Chinese characters into Arabic script called *xiaojing*, using the northwestern dialect of China. To some degree this *xiaojing* contributes to the formation of the Dungan language, since the initial Dungan language adopted the Arabic letters.

The Maddras schools have been indispensable in enhancing the ethnic sense of ethnicity of the Hui people in China and helped them to reject assimilation and maintain the fundamental faith in Islam. On the one hand, the schools are due to racial discrimination and oppression by the local governments; but on the other hand, they also reflect the emotional demands of the people to preserve the special features of their ethnic culture. When the Hui people migrated westward to Central Asia, they continued to look upon the Maddras education as a way of preserving and popularising Islamic knowledge among Dungan youth and of offsetting the influence of Russian and other forms of education.

As a result, the Dungan people's belief in Islam has been passed on from generation to generation. The Maddras education system has continued to produce generations of clergy, scripture instructors and religious scholars. But the Maddras education is mainly concerned with learning, Arabic language and Islamic teachings, so it can hardly keep pace with social development, a failing that the Hui people felt keenly when they first moved westward and settled down in Central Asia.

At that time, the biggest problem was to find a language through which they could communicate with the local people, and religious education could not provide any solution. So learning Russian and other ethnic languages appeared to be the most urgent task. Actually, the conflict between religious education and learning of other ethnic languages was nothing new since, during the ethnogenesis of the Hui people, Chinese had been chosen as the common language. Such a choice was partly for the sake of communication between the different tribes that made up the Hui people, but it was also made in order to adapt to the peculiar living environment in which Han culture predominated. But the educational system in which the main concerns are learning about Islam in Arabic and Persian had existed for hundreds of years and gradually become an important educational form for the Hui people, so that those Huis who had been educated in the Mosque school from an early age could only speak but not read or write Chinese.

But since the Dungans learned the Arabic alphabets through the Maddras education, they developed a new writing system for communication that used Arabic letters to transliterate Chinese, namely *xiaojing*. When the teachers were giving lectures, they would use Chinese to interpret the scriptures in Arabic and Persian, but would also intersperse an abundance of Arabic and Persian vocabulary through their comments. Gradually what developed was a jargon composed of Arabic, Persian and Chinese, which the Hui people commonly call the Maddras language. The invention of *xiaojing* and Maddras language had positive effects on communication among the Hui people, but was harmful to intercommunications between them and other ethnic groups in China.

So it became necessary to reform the Hui people's education system in order that they could keep pace with the progress of Chinese society. The result was the 'new style of education' that arose in the early twentieth century. Similar reform was also necessary for the Dungan people. But since they lived in Central Asia among the Turkish ethnic groups, it was not enough for them to master only Chinese; Russian has also gradually become the 'international language' in the region. For the sake of their own survival and development, they had to learn Russian and Turkish in all their dealings with other ethnic groups, for example, so as to master scientific and cultural knowledge. However, some of the high-ranking members of the clergy remained unconvinced of the need of language reform and even discouraged the masses from learning Russian, asking young people to learn to read the scriptures in the mosques instead of accepting education in the official schools. To some degree, this phenomenon has hindered the development of the Dungan people.

Comparisons in the Means of Livelihood

Judging by their social and economic activities as they first moved into Central Asia, the Dungan people are the emissaries of Chinese culture, who not only introduced China's advanced farming technology into the area but also brought with them the spirit of hard work and the astute, flexible way of life of the Hui people. Although the

Hui people originate in China, they have their own peculiarities compared with other ethnic groups living in China. The Hui people have made contributions to China in such areas as farming and herding patterns in the frontiers, with their vast areas and few inhabitants, and the irrigation and water conservation projects in the northwest and Yunnan. It is through their hard work that they have struck deep roots in Chinese society and lent new colour to the Chinese lands. In Central Asia, the Dungan people have made full use of their advantages in agriculture and learned from other nationalities to offset their weaknesses. In Central Asia, where the nomadic life predominates, they have turned grasslands into fertile lands and dug irrigation canals.

In addition, the Hui people hold the belief that one cannot become wealthy without doing business. This has its historical origin as early as the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) dynasties, with Hui people doing business both along the famous Silk Road and the Spice Road that connected China and the Middle East. The forefathers of the Hui people, the Muslim foreigners, were active both on land and sea. The business activities of the Hui forefathers in the Tang and Song Dynasties bridged the communication gap between Eastern and Western cultures, enhanced the relationship between the frontiers and the inland areas and contributed to the prosperity of the cities along the road.

This strong Hui tradition of excellence in business became a distinctive aspect of their life in China. The Yuan Dynasty not only witnessed the development and popularisation of the Hui people's commercial economy but also laid the foundation for stronger economic activity. What is more, since they had taken up residence throughout the country, their business also spread to all the parts of China. During the early stages of the Ming Dynasty, the Hui ethnic group came into being in China and commercial activities became more popular among them. The Hui enlarged the scope of commercial activities in the Qing Dynasty.

Later, when the Hui moved westward, they brought their business skills to Central Asia. They promoted the relationship between the frontier and the inland by travelling to Qinghai, Tibet and Mongolia and carrying out commercial activities there. The Dungan people also transported modern industrial products to the mountainous areas of Kyrgyzstan and the nomadic areas of Kazakhstan. Such activities have helped them contribute to economic cooperation not only within the Central Asia regions but also between Central Asia and Eastern Europe, as well as between Central Asia and China.

The Significance of the Comparisons

Hui culture has preserved its unique features under the strong influence of Chinese culture. As carriers of Hui culture, the Dungan people live within the Islamic societies of Central Asia a long way from the influence of Chinese traditional culture. However, Chinese cultural elements have not lessened in Dungan society, nor have the local peoples of Central Asia assimilated the Dungan, even though they belong to the same Muslim community.

Yet because they live in Central Asia, it did not take the Hui long to adopt some of the clothes of the surrounding peoples, such as the Tunisian *daban* (a costume for Turkish people), the Kyrgyzstan robe and colourful scarves. But what is important for them is not so much adaptation but the preservation and highlighting of the unique features of their own ethnic culture. It is very clear that it is Chinese cultural elements that differentiate them from the surrounding Muslims. During their process of adaptation, they have preserved the Chinese language, living style and architectural

style. They have strengthened their spiritual sustenance in Islam, but they also differ from the local people in the styles of their houses and mosque architecture.

The Dungan people have different 'identification symbols' from Chinese Huis. In China, the white cap differentiates the Huis from the Han Chinese. But in Central Asia, this kind of cap is very common among Muslim people with only some very small differences in style and colour. So the white cap is not a marker for the Dungan people. They highlight their distinctiveness through the *cheongsam* as their ethnic costume.

The Dungan people have a much shorter history than the Hui, whose culture is a combination of Islamic and Chinese traditional cultures. The Dungan have absorbed Hui morality, value systems, costumes and living style. They have also absorbed elements from other Central Asian and Russian cultures and also developed their own modern culture. The Dungan culture is clearly an example showing that different socio-economic environments can produce different ethnic cultures.

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