

An Encounter With History

Dungans, a group of Kazakh people of Chinese origin, manage to retain their traditions

By SU YUEMIN

“My brothers and sisters live far away from here; China is my mother,” Suahunov Dau says as recites one of his poems in Chinese with a strong Shaanxi accent. As he talks, he glances toward the towering Tianshan Mountains, beyond which is China, where his ancestors were from.

Suahunov, in his 60s, is a famous Dungan poet in Kazakhstan. He has written many poems about China, the country of origin of the Dungan people. He said one reason he writes poems is to let younger generation of Dungan people not forget their own language.

There are approximately 130,000 Dungans in Central Asia, who primarily reside in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, said Husai Daurov, head of the Association of Dungans in Kazakhstan. Of these, about 50,000 to 60,000 Dungans now live in Kazakhstan.

The ancestors of these Dungan people were a group of Chinese who fled to Central Asia to escape wars in late Qing Dynasty (1636-1911). Most of them came from northwest China's Shaanxi and Gansu

provinces, so the places they reside today are called “Shaanxi Villages.”

Chinese tradition

Dungans have lived in Central Asia for more than 130 years. They have never forgotten their Chinese origin, and have made great efforts to preserve traditional customs. “Shaanxi Villages” are called the living fossils of ancient Chinese culture and customs. Many folk customs there are no longer practiced in China.

In addition to speaking Russian, most Dungans speak Shaanxi dialect at home. They call the government “yamen,” a teacher “jiaoyuan” and a wife “poyi,” Chinese terms previously used in Shaanxi Province.

Early Dungan migrants were primarily farmers, and were not well educated. Separated from China for a long time, today's Dungans no longer read or write Chinese characters. To preserve Shaanxi dialect, they invented a unique way to record the dialect in Russian script. Now, Dungan people still use their Chinese surnames and have both Chinese and Russian first names.

In Dungan Villages, people wear either suits or traditional Chinese clothing. At a wedding, a young couple invariably dress in

traditional costumes. The groom wears an embroidered robe, a pair of riding boots and a skullcap. The bride's hair is combed into a traditional bun and decorated with red flowers. She puts on embroidered shoes in Qing Dynasty style, and a red silk wedding gown embroidered with patterns of dragons and phoenixes. She keeps the dress on for weeks following the wedding ceremony, which incorporates rituals in the Qing Dynasty that are now often seen in Chinese movies or TV series.

Lamian, a type of noodle popular in northwest China, was still cooked by the same method used 100 years ago among Dungan people. *Lamian*, together with other traditional Chinese food that Dungan people hand down from their ancestors, has been well received by local people. Today, many restaurants in Kazakhstan offer Dungan *lamian*.

Farming tools brought in by Dungan people are displayed in a Dungan cultural museum in a Dungan Village in Masanchi, a Kazakh town where Suahunov lives. In addition, traditional Chinese musical instruments such as *erhu*, as well as Qing Dynasty costumes, are also exhibited there.

Yarchube Iskokov, head of the town, said traditional cultural events are also held every year.



CLOSE TIES: Husai Daurov explains cooperation between Dungan villages in Kazakhstan and China in recent years



DUNGAN SCHOOL: A classroom of the Middle

Dungan people believe “more children mean more happiness.” Many families have four or more children. In Kazakhstan, a mother with more than six kids is called “Hero Mother.” Only in Masanchi and another town Sortobe in Kazakhstan, there are more than 600 hero mothers.

Hardworking

A hundred years ago, Dungan people climbed over Tianshan Mountains and fled to Central Asia, bringing with them farming tools and seeds. Various difficulties they encountered turned them into hardworking people. Upon their arrival in Central Asia, they opened up wasteland and sowed seeds of vegetables such as tomatoes, cucumbers, garlic and scallions. Many of the vegetables were not grown in the region previously.

Today, many Dungans make a living from growing these vegetables and selling them in Kazakhstan’s Almaty, or even exporting them to Russia and elsewhere. Statistics show more than half of the veg-

etables consumed in Kazakhstan are grown by Dungans. The vegetables have enriched local people’s dining tables, and increased the Dungans’ income.

The average annual household income in Dungan Villages is around \$3,000 to \$4,000, and each household owns one to two cars or vans, Daurov said. Vehicles are not for showing off, but necessities to work in the fields and for selling vegetables.

Since the late 1980s, Dungan Villages in Kazakhstan and China, especially Shaanxi Province, have engaged in economic and cultural exchanges more and more frequently. A greater number of Dungans are doing border trade with China. Daurov has visited China many times, bringing back equipment and technologies. They learned greenhouse-planting skills in China, which enabled Dungans to grow vegetables all year round. In recent years, Dungans have also introduced brick making machinery and equipment to produce biscuits and paint from China.

The Kazakh Government carried out

quite favorable policies toward Dungans. In 2002, the government canceled most toll stations along the routes where Dungans transported vegetables to facilitate the vegetable sale of Dungans. After that, the routes were called “green passages” by local people.

Friendly ties

Dungans attach particular importance to culture and education. In Masanchi town, there are four schools with more than 3,000 students. In two of the schools, students learn Dungan language, as well as Kazakh, Russian and English. In addition, the Association of Dungans in Kazakhstan selects 60 to 70 students each year and sends them to study in China’s universities such as Northwest University, Xi’an International Studies University and Lanzhou University. Daurov’s son is now studying Chinese in Shanghai-based Fudan University.

Although many Dungans have never been to China, they miss the land. To better preserve their traditions and promote trade and cultural exchanges with China, the association plans to set up Chinese classes in Kazakhstan, aiming to make it more convenient to learn Chinese.

The association now has an office in Xi’an, capital of Shaanxi Province, which facilitates exchanges and cooperation with China. In the meantime, the Shaanxi Government sends Chinese teachers to Kazakhstan to help young Dungan people to learn Chinese and sends agricultural experts to teach vegetable growing and crop planting skills. ■

The Origin of Dungan People

In 1864, during the Taiping Rebellion, Hui people living in northwest China (today’s Shaanxi, Gansu and Ningxia) began a large scale rebellion against the Qing government which send troops to quell it. In 1877, about 10,000 rebels migrated westward to escape the troops, crossing over the Tianshan Mountains. Several thousand people died on the road, but 3,000 eventually arrived in Central Asia, where they settled down in the border region of the Russia Empire. They were called Dungans (people from the east) by the Tsarist government.



YANG JIA

School in Masanchi Town



COURTESY OF THE ASSOCIATION OF DUNGANS

TRADITIONAL WEDDING:
Traditional wedding dress worn by Dungan women



YANG JIA

NEW GENERATION:
Dungan children in the backyard of their home in Masanchi town

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