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## Identity Transformation and Authority Reconstruction: The Social Organization of Dungan Elites in Central Asia after the Collapse of the USSR

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**Abstract.** Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the construction of nation-states, the evolution of market economies as well as the religious revival gradually unfolded across Central Asia, profoundly impacting the living conditions, social identities, and authority of individuals and groups. This research draws on the fieldwork conducted among the Dungans in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan from September 2014 to July 2015 and in late July of 2017, to explore how different types of Dungan elites have navigated identity transformations and constructed authority in response to the “new context” of Central Asia. It is found that the post-Soviet era has led to a reorganization of Dungan elites with merchants and religious figures emerging as the primary group. While intellectuals and public officials still wield social influence, their numbers have relatively declined. Some individuals and groups from lower social strata have successfully transitioned into the elite ranks by leveraging economic, social and cultural resources. Those who occupied higher social levels during the Soviet period have either consolidated their social authority by reorganizing societal resources, or gained prestige through personal conduct, or slipped into lower social tiers amid the reconfiguration of social elites. Therefore, the process of organizing Dungan elite authority is completed through the interplay of cooperation and competition among various groups. This dynamic of cooperation and competition forms the fundamental characteristics of the authority organization process among the Dungan elites, and is closely linked to the intertwined political, economic, religious, social and cultural factors in the post-Soviet “new context” of Central Asia.

**Key words:** Dungan, Post Soviet, Social Authorities, Reconstruction, Central Asia

## **I. Identity Transformation of the Elite Groups**

In the Encyclopedia of the Dungan People compiled by Mr. Imazov, a corresponding member of the Kyrgyzstan Academy of Sciences in 2005, the author categorizes the emergent elites among the Dungans into distinct groups: “Scientists and Educators”, “Writers and Artists”, “Public and State Figures”, “Military Soldiers”, “Workers and Service Industry Personnel”, “Medical Doctors”, “Clergies” and “Athletes” [1]. Several aspects of this directory of elites merit attention. Firstly, the list is topped by intellectuals involved in science, education and arts, whereas the final categories comprise medical doctors, clergy and athletes. Secondly, the directory enumerates a greater number of “Scientists and Educators” (96 individuals), “Military Soldiers” (55 individuals) and “Workers and Service Industry Personnel” (45 individuals), contrasted with fewer “Medical Doctors” (9 individuals), “Clergies” (3 individuals) and “Athletes” (17 individuals). Thirdly, the majority of those listed have attained their notable status during the Soviet era. Most significantly, the categorization of Dungan elites reflects the class distinctions prevalent during the Soviet era, indicating that the compiler’s method of classifying elites was shaped by the prevailing class ideologies. Although the book being published 13 years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union (2005), the compiler’s classification of Dungan elites still carries substantial Soviet imprints, exemplifying the relationship between class affiliations and elite categories of that era. However, with the post-Soviet economic, political, social and cultural transformations in Central Asia, the current status of Dungan elites no longer aligns with the Soviet-era framework. The notable rise of business and religious elites, coupled with a relative decline in intellectual and bureaucratic elites, distinctly marks their contemporary situation.

### **Business Elites**

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Central Asia’s economic transition to a market economy based on private ownership has led to an increasing number of individuals, either voluntarily or out of necessity, engaging in commercial activities (particularly cross-border trade). The Dungans were no exception as well. According to the research report in 2009, including interviews with representatives of the Kazakhstan Dungan Association in Xi’an, approximately 30 percent of Dungans were involved in border trade between Central Asia and China at that time [2]. Although not obtained through rigorous statistical methods, the figures could sufficiently indicate a growing trend of Dungans engaging in commerce after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, during which numerous business elites have emerged from the ranks of these merchants.

In urban areas, numerous Dungan workers, scholars and even public servants abandoned their previous professions to engage in transnational trade. As early as the initial period following the Soviet Union’s dissolution in 1996, Ding Hong observed that many Dungans were actively participating in cross-border trade between China and Central Asia [3]. To this day, a number of successful merchants have emerged from the urban Dungan population.

Many Dungan merchants transitioned from the agricultural sector. While entering the commercial realm, however, they often continued to engage in agriculture with few completely

abandoning farming for commerce. Additionally, since a significant portion of rural merchants primarily deals in agricultural products, their commercial activities are highly susceptible to the risks associated with natural conditions. This, in turn, impacts their capital accumulation and subsequent business investments. Consequently, the identity transformation from farmer to merchant among the Dungans is not entirely thorough, especially when compared to urban merchants and those who have decisively shifted from agriculture to commerce.

This also implies that although numerous Dungans engage in commerce, not all are able to ascend to the ranks of business elites. Generally, only those who are adept in the art of trading, who accumulate substantial wealth through their business activities, and who can transform their financial advantages into social influence, are considered business elites. Consequently, the urban merchants who forsake other professions to engage solely in business, and the rural merchants who have decisively shifted from farming to commerce, often have a better chance of becoming business elites. This is because the more complete the identity transformation, the more distinct the professional characteristics, and the sharper the business acumen. These dynamics collectively facilitate a competitive advantage, enabling them to consistently precede others in realms such as capital accumulation and strategic investment transfers.

### **Religious Elites**

In the early days of their settlement in Central Asia, religious leaders held considerable prestige among the Dungans. However, during the Soviet era, policies restricting religious practices led to an underground shift in Dungan religious activities. The number of religious practitioners decreased, and their influence became relatively limited. Around the time of the Soviet Union's dissolution, with the relaxation of religious policies, the practice of Islam in Central Asia gradually became more public, thereby highlighting the importance of religious figures.

After the Soviet dissolution, the first wave of religious figures to emerge from the Dungans primarily consisted of individuals who, after obtaining secular education, completed formal Islamic education and became religious practitioners. Prior to their religious vocations, these individuals were either university graduates, veterans or farmers. Nowadays, the number of religious figures among the Dungans has noticeably increased compared to the early post-Soviet period. Interestingly, however, nearly none of these religious practitioners come from the groups of scientists, educators and artists during the Soviet era.

### **Intellectual Elites**

During the Soviet era, the majority of Dungan elites comprised intellectuals, including scholars, writers and educators. These intellectual elites developed the Dungan script, established Dungan-language newspapers and radio stations, authored numerous Dungan-language textbooks, and produced scholarly and literary works drawing on their national history, culture and other materials. Through their endeavors, the national culture and identity of the Dungan people were developed and enhanced. Concurrently, the Soviet government provided these intellectuals with favorable treatment.

As times and conditions changed, with adjustments in national policies of Central Asian countries and new shifts in economic and social sectors, the living conditions and social status of the intellectuals significantly declined. Some Dungan intellectuals turned to other professions that were more financially promising. With the older generation of intellectuals retiring or passing away, and younger generation increasingly opting for business or other economically rewarding careers, the total number of Dungan intellectuals gradually decreased, leading to a situation where there was no new generation to take over.

In the field of education, although the majority of male teachers switched professions due to economic necessities, there were still those who remained dedicated. In fact, owing to the respected nature of the education sector, there were also young people, particularly women who chose teaching after completing their education. This trend was influenced by the prevailing mercantilism, leading most young men to prefer professions that promised better financial returns.

### **Bureaucratic Elites and Others**

During the Soviet era, many Dungans held leadership positions within collective farms and state institutions. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the newly independent states implemented national language policies, and laws explicitly required public officials to be proficient in the languages of the titular nationalities (such as Kyrgyz or Kazakh).

This requirement deterred many Dungans who could not or were not proficient in these languages from entering the bureaucratic system. Overall, the Dungans did not actively compete for political power. Those Dungans who were more influential in the public service system tended to continue their careers after the Soviet era. Although some younger individuals were familiar with the languages of the titular nationalities entered the bureaucracy, they often found themselves at the lower levels of the bureaucratic hierarchy, with few ascending to the upper echelons of power.

In comparison to merchants, religious leaders, intellectuals and public servants, there were fewer opportunities for Dungans to ascend to social elites through other professions. Many professions that were prominent during the Soviet era, such as engineers and artists, gradually faded from public view in post-Soviet Central Asian society.

## **II. Diverse Pathways to Reconstituting Authority**

The methods by which different elite groups construct their authority vary significantly. Generally, business elites primarily gain or bolster their social authority through philanthropy and power competition. Religious elites enhance their authority mainly through religious hierarchy, which is determined by scholarship and practice. Intellectual elites earn prestige through their personal integrity and research into their nation's language, history and culture. In contrast, the authority-building approach of bureaucratic elites appears more uniform, with the primary pathway to consolidating and elevating their authority being the acquisition of power as extensively as possible.

## Classical Knowledge and Religious Practice

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Islam emerged as a dominant social current in Central Asia, influencing both the titular nationalities and the “minority” Muslim groups alike. Within this context, religious figures aiming to gain prestige and establish authority must not only be proficient in Islamic scriptures and religious rituals, but also adhere strictly to Islamic practices, achieving unity of knowledge and action. The former qualifies them to preside over religious affairs, while the latter forms the basis of their credibility among the faithful. For the Dungan Muslims, a “good Imam” is expected not only to be well-versed in religious knowledge but, more importantly, to embody and enact Islamic principles in their daily life.

The vast majority of Imams with reputable standing typically undergo over a decade of formal religious education or travel-study before presiding over religious affairs. After qualifying to preside religious services, they often begin their careers in mosques with smaller congregations. Once they accumulate sufficient experiences in teaching Islamic scriptures and managing religious affairs, their reputation and authority begin to be recognized within the mosque community. At this point, they become eligible to serve in larger mosques with bigger congregations, where the presiding religious services further enhance their religious authority. Additionally, if an Imam came from a family with a long history of religious service and gained recognition from official religious institutions, their prestige and authority would be correspondingly higher.

## Philanthropic Activities

Just as not every religious figure could ascend to the elite, not all wealthy merchants automatically could gain social prestige and authority. For businessmen, except for their financial base, they must also contribute to social affairs or engage in the competition for power so as to join the ranks of societal elites. A common way for Dungan merchants to gain social influence is by allocating a portion of their wealth to philanthropic activities.

Supporting the impoverished and the weak, funding religious and ethnic affairs are the most common philanthropic activities among Dungan merchants. Many of their social relief efforts are conducted through mosques. Merchants who have accumulated substantial wealth through business often donate a part of their funds or goods to mosques (this is also commonly seen as a way of practicing one of the “Five Pillars of Islam”–the giving of Zakat). Typically, these contributions are converted into essential supplies such as oil, rice and flour to be distributed to those in need. It is noteworthy that these funds and goods are not limited to the Dungans or village collectives, but are available to any Muslim in need, regardless of their ethnicity.

In addition to public donations, some Dungan merchants also discreetly send relief materials to mosques. This form of private donation, while not attributed to specific merchants, tends to enhance the community’s impression of the merchant group. Furthermore, some economically stronger Dungan merchants often choose to sponsor religious affairs. These sponsorships include renovating mosque buildings, constructing ablution facilities, providing carpets for prayer halls, and funding large religious events in the name of the village or ethnic group on certain commemorative days.

## **Language Acquisition and Interethnic Marriages**

In the power structure of post-Soviet Central Asia, the titular nationalities have a clear advantage over other ethnic groups in both representation and power hierarchy. In this context, few Dungans actively pursue political engagement. In fact, both a substantial economic foundation and considerable social capitals are indispensable for the Dungans aspiring to enter the power contest. Therefore, mastering the national language and intermarrying with members of the titular nationalities are crucial forms of social capitals for those Dungans who have entered or are striving to solidify their positions within the power system.

Dungans involved in the power contest are typically fluent in the national language. They believe that holding office is contingent upon individual capabilities rather than ethnic identity, and anyone who masters the national language can participate in the bureaucratic system. For example, in the Osh region of Kyrgyzstan, some Dungans have secured more opportunities within the public service system for knowing Kyrgyz well due to a deep level of localization resulting in the loss of their ethnic language, even though they generally occupy the lower echelons of the power hierarchy.

Furthermore, intermarriage with members of the titular nationalities serves as crucial social capitals for those Dungans within (or aspiring to enter) the power system, bolstering their positions and competitiveness in power contests. Such marriages create favorable conditions for the Dungans to engage in political life in at least two ways. First, they provide a context for the Dungans to speak the language of the titular nationality fluently, a prerequisite for working within the power institutions. Second, some of these marriage alliances are into families with substantial power resources, clearly augmenting their political capitals.

## **Writing for the “Nation”**

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Dungan intellectual elites faced a temporary shortage, with few young people choosing research careers and some intellectuals from the Soviet period forced to change professions or take on multiple jobs due to economic pressures. Despite these challenges, a small number of intellectuals continued to dedicate themselves to their professions. Although they lived in less than ideal circumstances, they persisted in studying Dungan language, history, culture and literature. This perseverance not only earned them a reputation but also safeguarded the dignity of intellectuals.

Just as Dungan intellectuals during the Soviet era made their culture known in the Russian-speaking world and beyond through their writings, today's Dungan scholars continue to focus on their ethnicity as a subject of study. Amidst a sea of works filled with nationalist discourse created by titular nationality intellectuals on language, history and literature, the efforts of Dungan intellectuals to document their own national history and culture are particularly invaluable. In discussions with the Dungan scholars, almost every one conveyed that despite the limited financial incentives, they continued their scholarly endeavors, driven by the conviction that if they ceased to write, no other would undertake this crucial task. However, due to a shortage of publishing funds, many of their manuscripts remain unpublished. Regrettably,

however, influenced by economic conditions or commercial trends, most Dungans have opted for other professions, and the Dungan intellectual elites who are few in number are gradually disappearing from the public views.

### III. Conclusion

The identity transformations and authority reconstruction experienced by the Dungans in the post-Soviet context are the primary aspects of the elites' social organization. Within this process, while the Dungans exhibit significant agency, they are also influenced by the structural transformations of Central Asian society and various interwoven relationships. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the previous class-based elite system transitioned to the one characterized by social mobility. In the class-based system, elites, as class representatives, derived their authority and prestige from the relationship between the state and their class. In contrast, in the transforming societies of Central Asia, the core element of elite formation is the interaction between individuals and society.

In the process of societal transformation, the transformation of elite identities and the reconstruction of their authority are intrinsically linked. In other words, the more complete the identity transformation is, the more necessary the reconstruction of authority becomes, and vice versa. Moreover, the more extensive the interaction between individuals and society, the greater the likelihood of an individual ascending into the ranks of the elite. Another aspect of the Dungan elites' social organization involves the interaction of competition and cooperation among various types of elites in their pursuit of social prestige and authority.

In specific social processes, for business elites to gain social prestige and authority, it is necessary not only to recognize the influence of religious and intellectual elites but also to cooperate with bureaucratic elites. Although religious and intellectual elites possess high social prestige, they require the support of economic and bureaucratic elites when handling village or ethnic affairs. This support, in turn, further confirms and enhances their social prestige. Bureaucratic elites, when engaging in power contests, not only need the support of specific social groups but also draw upon cultural symbolic capitals. Those who manage to garner cooperation from other types of elites often establish higher prestige or authority within their groups. Conversely, social elites who have accumulated significant authority and prestige within their group are more likely to gain support from other types of elite groups. This interdependent relationship further intensifies the competitive nature of the prestige and authority organization process among the same or different types of elites.

The formation of these dependent yet competitive relationships is not unrelated to the release of social forces from the old regimes following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in Central Asia. In the new political and social context, the foundations of prestige and authority for various types of elites are mostly rooted in society, and although each elite group has its basic path to achieving prestige and authority, the "legitimacy" of their authority also requires societal recognition.

The process of prestige and authority organization among the Dungan social elites well illustrates the intertwined impacts of religious, economic, political, social and cultural elements

on people's lives in the post-Soviet "new context" of Central Asia. The interplay of these factors is equally significant when observing the authority organization process of other ethnic elite groups and the people's "new lives". Without examining the organization of various social relations and elements of economy, society, power and culture in the identity transformation and authority reconstruction within the Central Asia's new context, it is challenging to understand the daily lives of "Central Asians" today.

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### **Идентификацияның өзгеруі және билікті қайта құру: КСРО ыдырағаннан кейін Орталық Азиядағы дүңген элиталарының әлеуметтік ұйымы**

**Андатпа.** Кеңес Одағы ыдырағаннан кейін ұлттық мемлекеттердің құрылуы, нарықтық экономиканың эволюциясы, сондай-ақ діни жаңғыру Орталық Азияда біртіндеп кеңінен таралып, жеке адамдар мен топтардың өмір сүру жағдайларына, әлеуметтік идентификациясына және беделіне терең әсер етті. Бұл зерттеу Қырғызстан мен Қазақстандағы дүңгендер арасында 2014 жылдың қыркүйегінен 2015 жылдың шілдесіне дейін және 2017 жылдың шілдесінің соңында жүргізілген далалық зерттеулерге негізделген, оның мақсаты — Орталық Азияның «жаңа контекстіне» жауап ретінде дүңген элитасының әртүрлі топтары қалай өздерінің идентификациясын өзгертуді және биліктерін нығайтуды жүзеге асырғанын зерттеу. Посткеңестік дәуір дүңген элиталарының қайта ұйымдастырылуына әкеліп, саудагерлер мен діни қызметкерлердің негізгі топқа айналғаны анықталды. Интеллектуалдар мен мемлекеттік



қызметкерлер әлі де әлеуметтік ықпалға ие болғанымен, олардың саны салыстырмалы түрде азайды. Әлеуметтік төменгі топтағы кейбір адамдар мен топтар экономикалық, әлеуметтік және мәдени ресурстарды пайдалана отырып, элитаға сәтті өтті. Кеңес дәуірінде жоғары әлеуметтік деңгейлерді иеленгендер не қоғамдық ресурстарды қайта ұйымдастыру арқылы әлеуметтік беделін нығайтты, не жеке мінез-құлқы арқылы беделге ие болды, не болмаса әлеуметтік элитаның қайта құрылымдалуы нәтижесінде төменгі әлеуметтік деңгейлерге түсті. Осылайша, дүңген элитасының беделін қалыптастыру үдерісі әртүрлі топтар арасындағы ынтымақтастық пен бәсекелестік арқылы аяқталады. Бұл ынтымақтастық пен бәсекелестіктің динамикасы дүңген элиталары арасындағы билік ұйымдастыру үдерісінің негізгі сипаттамаларын қалыптастырады және Орталық Азияның посткеңестік «жаңа контекстінде» саяси, экономикалық, діни, әлеуметтік және мәдени факторлардың өзара байланысуымен тығыз байланысты.

**Түйін сөздер:** дүңгендер, посткеңестік, әлеуметтік билік, қайта құру, Орталық Азия

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**Трансформация идентичности и реконструкция авторитета:  
Социальная организация дунганских элит в Центральной Азии после распада СССР**

**Абстракт.** После распада Советского Союза строительство национальных государств, эволюция рыночной экономики, а также религиозное возрождение постепенно развернулись по всей Центральной Азии, оказав глубокое влияние на условия жизни, социальную идентичность и авторитет отдельных лиц и групп. Это исследование основано на полевых исследованиях, проведенных среди дунган в Кыргызстане и Казахстане с сентября 2014 года по июль 2015 года и в конце июля 2017 года, с целью изучения того, как различные типы дунганской элиты осуществляли трансформацию идентичности и укрепляли авторитет в ответ на “новый контекст” Центральной Азии. Установлено, что постсоветская эпоха привела к реорганизации дунганской элиты, в результате чего торговцы и религиозные деятели стали основной группой. Хотя интеллектуалы и государственные служащие по-прежнему обладают социальным влиянием, их численность относительно сократилась. Некоторые люди и группы из низших социальных слоев успешно перешли в элиту, используя экономические, социальные и культурные ресурсы. Те, кто занимал более высокие социальные уровни в советский период, либо укрепили свой социальный авторитет за счет реорганизации общественных ресурсов, либо завоевали престиж за счет личного поведения, либо опустились на более низкие социальные уровни в результате реконфигурации социальных элит. Таким образом, процесс формирования авторитета дунганской элиты завершается взаимодействием сотрудничества и конкуренции между различными группами. Эта динамика сотрудничества и конкуренции формирует фундаментальные характеристики процесса организации власти среди дунганских элит и тесно связана с переплетением политических, экономических, религиозных, социальных и культурных факторов в постсоветском “новом контексте” Центральной Азии.

**Ключевые слова:** дунгане, постсоветский, социальные авторитеты, реконструкция, Центральная Азия.

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