

DUNGANS

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The Dungans (*Dungani*) are descendants of the Hui people who traveled to the northwestern provinces of China, namely the Kansu and Shensi provinces from the seventeenth to thirteenth centuries. Originally scholars, merchants, soldiers, and handicraftsmen, they gradually intermarried with the Han Chinese. While they learned the Chinese language, they also retained their knowledge of the Arabic language and Muslim faith. From 1862 to 1878 the Hui people rebelled, and the Chinese emperor ruthlessly suppressed them. Three groups of Hui rebels fled across the Tien Shan Mountains into Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Those who lived in the Kansu province settled in Kyrgyzstan and today number approximately 30,000. Rebels from the Shensi province generally settled in Kazakhstan, where they number roughly 37,000. The third group fled to the Russian Empire later in 1881.

After their exodus, the rebels (named Dolgans by the Russians) cut off all contact with China, but nevertheless continued to refer to themselves as "Chinese Muslims" (*Hui-Zu*). They settled mainly along the Chu River on the banks of which the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek (named Frunze in the Soviet period) is situated. This river also forms part of the border between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

The Dungan language is Mandarin Chinese, but with heavy influence of Persian (Farsi), Arabic, and Turkish. In addition to Dungani, many also speak Kyrgyz, and

the younger ones also speak Russian. Dungan is written not in Chinese characters but Cyrillic script, and has three tones rather than four.

Generally, the Dungans in Kyrgyzstan are less devoted as Muslims than their kin in Kazakhstan. All Dungans subscribe to the Hanafite Muslim school of thought, established by the theologian *Imam Abu Hanifa (699–767)*, who has shaped the Central Asian form of Islam. While elderly Dungans strictly observe Islamic law, their younger offspring usually ignore Islam until they reach their forties. Elders run village mosques, and the clergymen are supported by property taxes and the worshipers' donations. At present, although the Bible has been translated into Dungan, no Dungans are Christians. Living mostly in the river valleys, the Dungans are primarily farmers and cattle breeders, although some grow opium.

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