

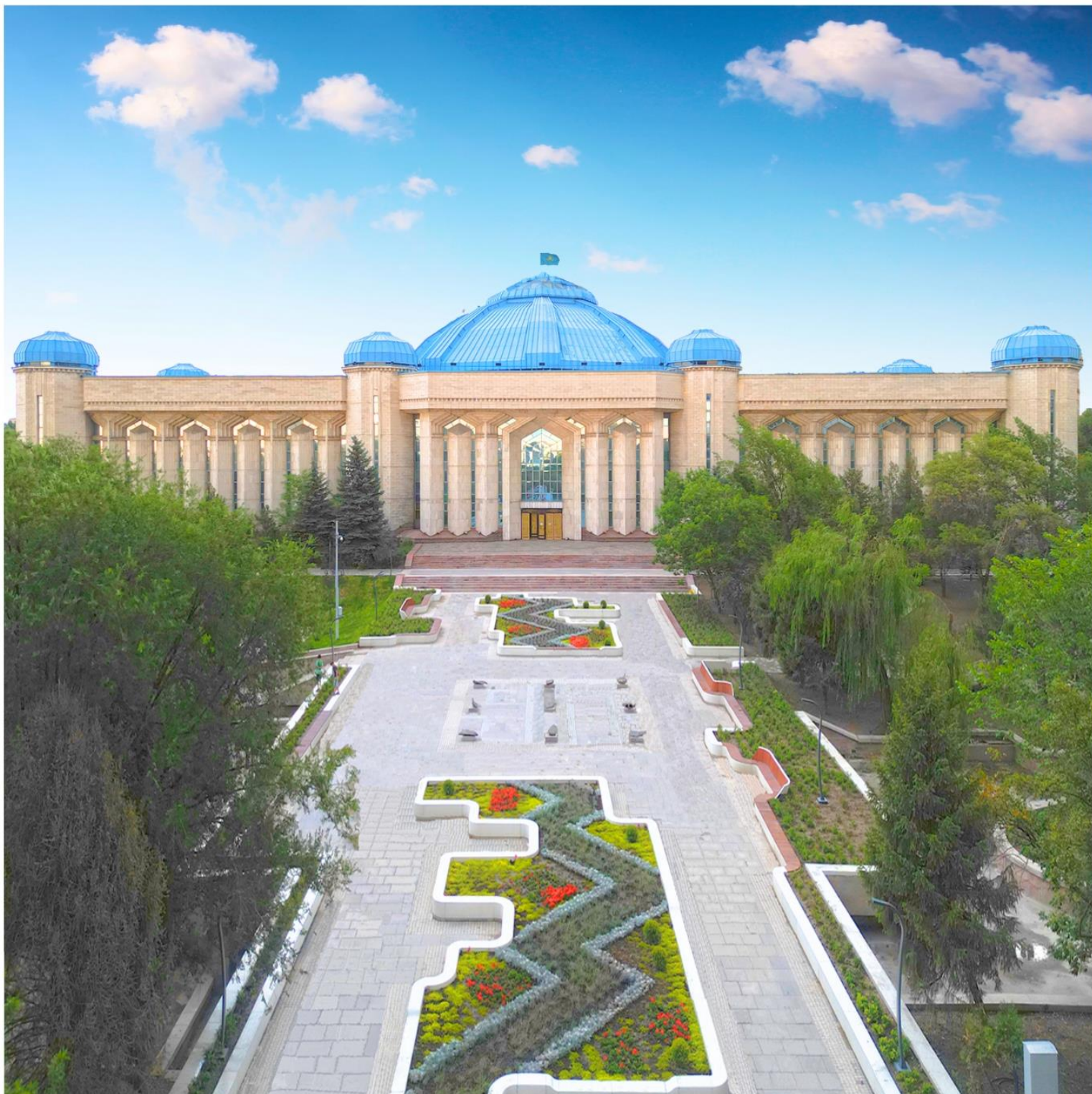
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MUSEUMS AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION: DUNGANS AND UIGHURS IN THE QAZAQ SSR

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Abstract. This paper examines how Soviet knowledge about Dungans and Uighurs was produced through institutional practices rather than simply discovered. While existing scholarship has emphasized the role of population censuses and academic ethnography in managing ambiguities surrounding national classification, this article shifts attention to a less examined site of knowledge production-the museum.

Drawing on acquisition acts, expenditure records, and departmental plans from the Central Museum of Qazaqstan, the paper argues that museological practice in the 1930s functioned as a key technology of classificatory governance. Targeted collecting campaigns conducted by the Museum in 1936–1937, in cooperation with the Qazaq Base of the Academy of Sciences, resulted in extensive and carefully documented Dungan and Uighur collections that exceeded acquisitions for many other population groups. These patterns of collecting indicate institutional prioritization. By translating classificatory decisions into inventories, prices, and exhibition narratives, the museum rendered previously fragmented categories materially stable and administratively legible.

The paper further traces how this stabilization of knowledge was reorganized spatially over time. From the mid-1950s onward, Dungan studies became institutionally consolidated in the Kyrgyz SSR, while Uighur studies remained centered in the Qazaq SSR. This redistribution of scholarly authority reflects a “single-space” principle embedded in Soviet nationalities policy, demonstrating that governance of diversity operated not only through territorial administration but also through the structuring of knowledge infrastructures.

Materials and methods of research. This study analyzes the formation and institutionalization of Soviet knowledge about the Dungans and Uyghurs in the Kazakh SSR from the 1930s to the 1950s. A historical and archival approach was used to reconstruct the institutional practices of museums and academic institutions. A comparative approach was used to compare the scale and structure of Dungan and Uyghur collections as national minorities during the formation of stable national categories. Institutional analysis was used to identify the role of museums and academic institutions in the Soviet nationalities policy system.

Keywords: knowledge production; museums; national categories; Soviet nationalities policy; Qazaq SSR; Dungans; Uighurs.

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МУЗЕЙЛЕР ЖӘНЕ БІЛІМ ӨНДІРІСІ: ҚАЗАҚ КСР-ДЕГІ ДҮНГЕНДЕР МЕН ҰЙҒЫРЛАР

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Аңдатпа. Бұл мақалада кеңестік дәуірдегі дүнгендер мен ұйғырлар туралы білімнің мазмұны жай ғана ашылмай, институционалдық тәжірибелер арқылы қалай қалыптасқаны қарастырылады. Қолданыстағы зерттеулер ұлттық жіктеуге қатысты белгісіздіктерді шешудегі халық санағы мен академиялық этнографияның рөлін баса көрсеткенімен, бұл мақала назарды білім өндірісінің аз зерттелген көзі - музейге аудартады.

ҚР Орталық музейімен жинақталған жазбаларына, шығындар туралы есептеріне және ведомстволық жоспарларына сүйене отырып, мақалада 1930 жылдардағы музей тәжірибесі

жіктеуді басқарудың негізгі құралы ретінде қызмет еткені айтылады. Музей 1936-1937 жылдары Қазақ Ғылым академиясымен бірлесіп жүргізген мақсатты жинақ науқандары дүнгендер мен ұйғырлар туралы кең және мұқият құжатталған коллекциялардың жасалуына әкелді, бұл көптеген басқа азшылық халық топтарының жинақтарынан асып түсті. Жинақтың бұл үлгілері институционалдық басымдықты көрсетеді. Музей жіктеу шешімдерін түгендеуге, бағаларға және көрме сипаттамаларына аудару арқылы, бұрын әртүрлі санаттарды материалдық тұрақты және әкімшілік тұрғыдан түсінікті етті.

Мақалада білімнің бұл тұрақтануы уақыт өте келе кеңістіктік тұрғыдан қалай қайта ұйымдастырылғаны бақыланады. 1950 жылдардың ортасынан бастап дүнген зерттеулері Қырғыз КСР-інде институционалдық тұрғыдан мойындауға ие болды, ал ұйғыр тілі туралы зерттеулер Қазақ КСР-інде назардан тыс сол күйінде қалды. Ғылыми талдаудың бұл қайта бөлінуі кеңестік ұлттар саясатына енгізілген «біртұтас кеңістік» қағидатын көрсетеді, бұл әртүрліліктің тек аумақтық басқару арқылы ғана емес, сонымен қатар білім инфрақұрылымын құрылымдау арқылы да басқарылатынын көрсетеді.

Материалдар мен зерттеу әдістері. Бұл зерттеуде 1930-1950 жылдар аралығында Қазақ КСР-індегі дүнгендер мен ұйғырлар туралы кеңестік білімнің қалыптасуы мен институционалдануы талданады. Музейлер мен академиялық мекемелердің институционалдық тәжірибесін қалпына келтіру үшін – тарихи және мұрағаттық тәсіл қолданылды. Тұрақты ұлттық санаттардың қалыптасуы кезінде дүнген мен ұйғыр коллекцияларының ауқымы мен құрылымын ұлттық азшылық ретінде салыстыру үшін – салыстырмалы тәсіл қолданылды. Кеңестік ұлттар саясаты жүйесіндегі музейлер мен академиялық мекемелердің рөлін анықтау үшін - институционалдық талдау қолданылды.

Тірек сөздер: білім өндірісі, музейлер, ұлттық санаттар, кеңестік ұлттық саясат, Қазақ КСР, дүнгендер, ұйғырлар.

Сілтеме жасау үшін: Әлия Болатхан. Музейлер және білім өндірісі: Қазақ КСР-дегі дүнгендер мен ұйғырлар // MUSEUM.KZ. 2025. №4 (12), 28-38 бб. DOI 10.59103/muzkz.2025.12.03

МУЗЕИ И ПРОИЗВОДСТВО ЗНАНИЙ: ДУНГАНЫ И УЙГУРЫ В КАЗАХСКОЙ ССР

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Аннотация. В данной статье рассматривается, как советские знания о дунганах и уйгурах формировались посредством институциональных практик, а не просто обнаруживались. В то время как существующие исследования подчеркивают роль переписей населения и академической этнографии в разрешении неопределенностей, связанных с национальной классификацией, эта статья переключает внимание на менее изученный источник производства знаний - музей.

Опираясь на акты о приобретении экспонатов, отчеты о расходах и планы департаментов Центрального музея Казахстана, в статье утверждается, что музейная практика в 1930-х годах функционировала как ключевой инструмент управления классификацией. Целенаправленные кампании по сбору экспонатов, проведенные музеем в 1936–1937 годах в сотрудничестве с базой Казахской Академии наук, привели к созданию обширных и тщательно документированных коллекций дунганов и уйгуров, которые превосходили приобретения для многих других групп населения. Эти модели сбора указывают на институциональную приоритезацию. Переводя решения о классификации в инвентаризацию, цены и описания выставок, музей сделал ранее разрозненные категории материально стабильными и административно понятными.

В статье также прослеживается, как эта стабилизация знаний пространственно реорганизовывалась с течением времени. Начиная с середины 1950-х годов, исследования

дунгана получили институциональное закрепление в Киргизской ССР, в то время как исследования уйгурского языка оставались незамеченными в Казахской ССР. Это перераспределение научного анализа отражает принцип «единого пространства», заложенный в советской национальной политике, демонстрируя, что управление многообразием осуществлялось не только посредством территориального управления, но и посредством структурирования инфраструктуры знаний.

Материалы и методы исследования. Исследование направлено на анализ процессов формирования и институционализации советского знания о дунганах и уйгурах в Казахской ССР в 1930-1950-е годы. В работе использован историко-архивный метод – для реконструкции институциональных практик музеев и научных учреждений. Сравнительный метод – для сопоставления масштабов и структуры комплектования дунган и уйгуров как национальных меньшинств в процессе формирования устойчивых национальных категорий. Институциональный анализ – для выявления роли музеев и академических структур в системе советской национальной политики.

Ключевые слова: производство знаний; музеи; национальные категории; советская национальная политика; Казахская ССР; дунганы; уйгуры.

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Introduction. Representations of the Dungans in late-imperial and early Soviet sources were remarkably inconsistent. Some authors described them simply as “a name used by Turkestanis for any Chinese person professing Islam” («название, даваемое туркестанцами всякому китайцу, исповедующему магометанство»). Others characterized the Dungans as “Sunni Chinese Muslims” («китайцев-мусульман суннитского толка»), as “Sinicized Turks who migrated from Eastern Turkestan, from the Kulja region, in the 1870s” («окитаевшихся тюрок, выселившихся из Восточного Туркестана, Кульджинского района в 1870 годах»), or even as “Chinese who speak a Turkic language” («китайцев, говорящих на турецком языке») [Vasil’ev 1884: 1; Tsibuzgin and Shmakov 1909: 2; Pototsky 1925: 65; Chernyakov 1931: 264; Kagarov 1931: 8]. As Magazy Masanchi pointed out in his 1927 report, almost nothing had been written about the Dungans in the Soviet press, and the few existing references were rare, superficial, and accidental [QR PA, fond 141, opis 1, delo 1545, page 19]:

“Thus far, the Soviet press has published virtually nothing about the Dungans as a national minority; when references do appear, they are rare, superficial, and incidental. The Soviet public has no clear understanding of this people, and whenever the Dungans are mentioned, audiences respond with surprise and bewilderment, despite the fact that everyday Party, professional, and public work clearly requires sustained coverage of the Dungan question in the press.”

Academic discussions of the period often offered little more than a brief acknowledgment of the contested nature of the group’s origins-or avoided the question altogether-turning instead to the documentation of selected ethnographic details [Gins, 1911: 696–699; Vasil’ev, 1931: 142].

Results and discussion. Prior to the 1924 territorial delimitation, the Dungans lived predominantly in the Chu Valley of the former Semirechie oblast. The redrawing of republican borders divided these settlements between the Qazaq and Kyrgyz ASSRs, leaving the Dungan population dispersed across two administrative units. Statistical data on the Dungans remained notably inconsistent throughout the early Soviet period, as contemporary researchers themselves acknowledged. While the 1926 census recorded 14,600 Dungans in the USSR (8,455 of them in the Qazaq ASSR) other estimates varied widely, reflecting both the limitations of available information and the ongoing mobility of these communities. The report of the 1930 Dungan Expedition observed that contemporary claims of a fifty-thousand-strong Dungan population were likely overstated; a more plausible estimate of twenty to twenty-five thousand was proposed, taking into account natural demographic growth as well as the return of several Dungan families from China in

1926, where they had migrated during the Civil War years [QR PA, fond. 141, opis 1, delo 954, page 10; Vsesoiuznaia perepis', 1928: 22; Vsesoiuznaia perepis', 1928a: 15-16; Vasil'ev, 1931: 141]. This prolonged uncertainty-in definitions, demographic estimates, and territorial affiliation-created the conditions for subsequent Soviet efforts to stabilize and institutionalize knowledge about the Dungans through censuses, museum practices, and academic research, transforming a historically fluid category into an administratively legible one [Pianciola, 2020: 1830–1834].

Existing scholarship has compellingly traced how this process unfolded through censuses and academic ethnography. This article shifts attention to a less examined but no less consequential site of knowledge production: the museum. I argue that, in the Qazaq ASSR of the 1930s, museums functioned as key institutional technologies for converting classificatory decisions into durable material and visual form.

Methodologically, I read acquisition acts, expenditure records, and departmental plans as traces of classificatory governance-documents through which institutional priorities become visible, measurable, and comparable. Focusing on the Central Museum of Qazaqstan, I show that until the 1940s, efforts to render the Dungans a consistently classifiable population-across census work, ethnographic research, and museological practice-were concentrated in the Qazaq ASSR. This process unfolded through a series of coordinated initiatives, most notably the establishment of the Department of Eastern National Minorities and the state-sponsored collecting campaigns of 1936–1937 conducted jointly by the museum and the Qazaq Base of the Academy of Sciences.

By reconstructing the scale, cost, and documentary mechanics of these expeditions, and by situating them within the museum's broader acquisition patterns, I demonstrate that collecting devoted to Uighurs and Dungans was not marginal but institutionally prioritized. In this sense, the Central Museum did not merely represent national minorities; it actively participated in the production of standardized knowledge about them. The Dungan case is particularly revealing because museum collecting and exhibition served a dual function: fulfilling the ideological imperative to display the USSR's multiethnic composition while simultaneously advancing a cognitive-administrative project of ordering a category that had previously circulated in fragmented and contradictory form.

The Central Museum of the Qazaq SSR as an institution of classification. The Central Museum in Alma-Ata traces its institutional origins to 1831, when a provincial museum was established in Orenburg as a regional (*kraevedcheskii*) institution devoted to the collection of objects related to nature and everyday life. In the early 1920s, during the process of national-territorial delimitation, a portion of its collections pertaining to Qazaqstan was transferred to the Qazaq ASSR. On this basis, the Central Museum of Qazaqstan was formally established in Alma-Ata in 1929 and housed in the former cathedral. Shortly thereafter, it also absorbed the collections of the Semirechie Museum, founded in 1898 in Vernyi on the initiative of N. Pantusov, which had included archaeological and historical -ethnographic departments [Alimbay, 2004: 12; Zakharova, 1956: 81]. From the early 1930s onward, the museum entered a new phase of development marked by the expansion of its collections and exhibitions and the refinement of its organizational structure. In 1937, it was transferred from the Committee for Science under the Qazaq Central Executive Committee to the People's Commissariat of Education of the Qazaq SSR. By that time, its holdings comprised 8,435 registered exhibits, alongside approximately 4,300 coins and an unspecified quantity of paper currency.

The museum's permanent exhibition was organized into four principal departments (*otdelyi*). *The Natural history department* included an introductory section devoted to the origin of the Solar System, the history of the Earth, the development of life, and the emergence of humankind. It also contained sections on geology, featuring samples of rocks, minerals, and natural resources of Qazaqstan, as well as displays on nature and productive forces, which presented information on climate, seismic activity, soils, flora and fauna, materials on human-environment interaction, and data on the republic's system of nature reserves. *The Historical-revolutionary*

department was intended to reflect the social and political history of the region. It presented a pre-revolutionary *aul* with its everyday life, crafts, class stratification, religion, and art. Another section was devoted to what was described as the “expansion of Russian military-feudal imperialism into the Qazaq steppes,” encompassing conquest, administrative governance, military and civilian colonization, and national liberation movements. A central place within the department was occupied by the exhibition on the revolutionary movement, tracing developments from the early stages of the labor movement and the events of 1905 through the imperialist war, the 1916 uprising, the February and October Revolutions, the Civil War in Qazaqstan, and the history of party and komsomol organizations. A separate permanent exhibition was dedicated specifically to the 1916 uprising.

The third department focused on socialist construction and showcased the achievements of the Soviet period. Finally, *the fourth department* - *otdel vostochnykh natsional’nykh menshinstv: uigur i dungan* (the Department of Eastern National Minorities: Uighurs and Dungans) - was still in the process of formation. Its planned exhibition was conceived as a comprehensive presentation introducing the history of Uighur and Dungan migration to the Russian Empire, their cultural and everyday life in the pre-revolutionary period, and the transformations that had taken place under Soviet rule. The department was also intended to reflect the development of Soviet administrative organs, agriculture, arts, and culture among these populations [QR UOMA, Book 1, pages 254–264].

Collecting as policy: Uighur and Dungan collections in the Central Museum. The formation of the collection for this department was carried out through specially organized expeditions to areas of Uighur and Dungan settlement in the Qazaq SSR. According to official reports, during the December 1936 expedition to the Uighurs in the Chilik raion, the Central Museum acquired 172 items for a total sum of 23,014 rubles. In 1937, the collection was further expanded by an additional 151 items of Uighur household material, including clothing, jewelry, tools, utensils, and footwear [QR UOMA, Book 1, pages 348–357; 429–437].

In parallel, as a result of a joint expedition conducted by the Qazaq Base of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR and the Central Museum of Qazaqstan between 7 and 20 December 1936 in the village of Qaraqoniz, Qordai district of the Alma-Ata oblast, more than forty items of everyday material culture of the Shaanxi group of the Dungans were transferred to the museum, formally documented through acquisition acts [QR UOMA, Book 1, pages 3–15, 21–22, 25–28, 31–32, 34–45, 47–50, 52–54]. One such act illustrates the nature of these acquisitions:

“Akt No. 1 (December 7, 1936).

We, the undersigned, have carried out the appraisal and purchase from Mashanlo Aisha, a resident of the village of Karakunuz, Kurdai district, Alma-Ata oblast, of the following items of Dungan folk culture: one upper women’s dress made of blue satin (description follows) for 75 rubles; one light-gray sleeveless garment for an elderly woman (description follows) for 40 rubles.

A total sum of 115 rubles has been paid for the aforementioned items. From the questioning of the owner, it has been established that these items were made in the village of Karakunuz in 1891 and belong to the Shaanxi group of the Dungan people, who have been living in the village of Karakunuz since 1878.

Inventory no. 3201, 3202.

Member of the expedition of the Qazaq

Branch of the Academy of Sciences

of the USSR and the Central Museum of Qazaqstan

(signature)

Certified by the chairman of

the Karakunuz Village Council

(signature)”

The collection effort continued the following year. In May–June 1937, the museum acquired additional items of Dungan household culture, collected primarily within the city of Alma-Ata. Some of these objects were identified in the documentation as belonging to the Ili group. According to the acquisition lists, 158 items—including clothing, jewelry, utensils, tools, footwear, and harness equipment—were transferred to the museum for a total sum of 3,934 rubles [QR UOMA, Book 1, pages 119–124, 127, 135, 137, 143, 147, 429–437].

For comparison, in the same year of 1937 the collection of Qazaq household items was supplemented by 64 objects (clothing, jewelry, belts, utensils, yurt furnishings, carpets, felt coverings, and harness equipment); the Tatar collection by a single child's cap; the historical section by 12 items (including chain mail, shackles, a badge, a watch, models of cannons, and other objects); and the fine arts section by 8 paintings, 86 photographs, 2 illustrations, 1 sculpture, 1 map, and 1 album [QR UOMA, Book 1, pages 429–437].

Against this background, the Dungan and Uighur collections assembled through the targeted expeditions of 1936–1937 appear particularly large in both scale and diversity. The documented imbalance in acquisition patterns makes it possible to speak of a priority orientation in museum activity toward the formation of exhibitions devoted specifically to these two national minorities. It also points to the institutionalized and deliberate character of the collecting efforts, carried out within the framework of specially organized expeditionary campaigns.

The Institutionalization of Dungan studies. 1940s, cultural and educational institutions were active in both settings: in the Qazaq ASSR, a Dungan pedagogical college functioned as a key center of training, while in the Kyrgyz SSR a Dungan section operated within the Central Pedagogical Technical School. Print culture developed concurrently, with literature published in the Dungan language in both republics, reflecting a growing, though still uneven, infrastructural commitment to the community. Research activities of the decade likewise followed a pattern of inter-republican duplication but remained coordinated under the general oversight of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. In the mid-1940s, the Central Asian Anthropological-Ethnographic Expedition collected anthropological and ethnographic materials in the Dungan settlements of Milyanfan in the Kant raion of Frunze oblast, Yrdik in the Jeti-Oguz raion of Issyk-Kul oblast, and Shortobe in the Jambul oblast. The anthropological study encompassed approximately four hundred Dungans and Kalmyks, producing the first systematic anthropological data on these groups. At the same time, substantial ethnographic material was collected—primarily concerning material culture such as housing and clothing—and a detailed report was prepared for publication [Levin, 1946: 235]. Parallel scholarly work unfolded within the Kyrgyz Branch of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, which, operating under a centrally approved plan, undertook a series of ethnographic essays on the peoples of the republic. Among these was Grigorii Stratanovich's dissertation, *The Dungans of the Kyrgyz SSR: An Ethnographic Essay* (1946). During the same period, senior researcher Z. Amitin-Shapiro compiled an extensive bibliography on the Dungans covering the years 1917–1946, comprising more than nine hundred entries; it was submitted for publication through the Academy of Sciences of the Qazaq SSR [Stratanovich, 1946: 4].

In early 1949, the specialized divisions for the study of Uighur language, literature, history, and ethnography within the Institute of Language and Literature and the Institute of History, Archaeology, and Ethnography were consolidated into a single Sector of Uighur–Dungan Culture under the Presidium of the Qazaq SSR Academy of Sciences. The sector's mandate encompassed the preparation of grammar and literary histories (including folklore), the development of a history textbook, and the training of national scholarly cadres [Hasanov, 1950: 5]. A decisive institutional shift occurred in 1954 with the establishment of the Academy of Sciences of the Kyrgyz SSR and the creation within it of a dedicated Sector of Dungan Studies (later reorganized as a department).

This development marked the beginning of sustained, systematic research on the history, ethnography, language, and literature of the Dungans, now with the participation of emerging national scholarly cadres. From the late 1950s to the 1970s, this institutional foundation supported the publication of dozens of monographs and hundreds of articles on the Dungan ethnos. These

included the works of Muhamed Sushanlo on the migration of the Dungans from China to Semirechie (1957) and his monographs *The Dungans* (1959, 1979); studies by Il'ias Yusupov on the Dungans' role in the establishment of Soviet power in Semirechie (1959), during the Great Patriotic War (1971), and in the socialist transformation period (1977); and works by Lodja Shinlo on Dungan culture and everyday life (1965) and on socialist transformations (1982). This period also saw the publication of dictionaries (e.g., the Russian–Dungan Dictionary in 1959 and a dictionary of socio-political terms in 1972), folklore collections (such as *Dungan Tales* in 1970), and so on. Several candidate and doctoral dissertations were defended under the auspices of the Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences [Shinlo, 1955; Yusupov, 1958; Yusupov, 1973; Sushanlo, 1969; Djon, 1986].

Republican division of scholarly Authority: Uighur and Dungan studies. While Dungan studies became institutionalized within the Kyrgyz SSR, Uighur studies remained firmly anchored in the Qazaq SSR. Research on Uighur history, culture, language, and ethnography was conducted under the auspices of the Academy of Sciences of the Qazaq SSR, which also oversaw the production of an extensive body of literature in the Uighur language. Within the republic, a wide range of publications appeared, including socio-political works addressing industry, technology, medicine, sports, and tourism, as well as popular science literature [Mamadjanov and Korotovskii, 1977: 109].

Moreover, the Qazaq SSR functioned as the principal all-Union center for Uighur-language publishing. Any scholarly work produced under the auspices of the Academy of Sciences was required to undergo review by the Department of Uighur Studies of the Academy of Sciences of the Qazaq SSR, while works of fiction were published through the Uighur literature editorial office of the *Kazakhstan* publishing house. A particularly illustrative case occurred in 1975–1976, when Z. Ibragimov, a Uighur personal pensioner residing in Tashkent, addressed a petition to Dinmukhamed A. Konaev, First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Qazaqstan, requested assistance in publishing his memoirs, *“How a communist is tempered.”*

The manuscript, exceeding five hundred pages in length, underwent multiple rounds of expert evaluation. It was initially reviewed by M. Kabirov, a senior researcher in the Department of Uighur Studies of the Academy of Sciences of the Qazaq SSR, who identified a number of shortcomings but nevertheless issued an overall positive assessment. Subsequent reviews conducted through the *Qazaqstan* publishing house, however, characterized the text as “unsystematic,” “excessively autobiographical,” and “of no interest to a broad readership.” On these grounds, the manuscript was ultimately rejected for publication.

What is particularly revealing in this case is not the outcome of the review process itself, but the consistent reproduction, in official correspondence between the Academy of Sciences of the Qazaq SSR, the *Kazakhstan* publishing house, and the Department of Propaganda and Agitation of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Qazaqstan, of the formula: “given that the possibility of publishing literature in the Uighur language exists only in Qazaq SSR” [QR PA, fond 708, opis. 67, delo 30, pp. 140, 141–147, 149, 152–157, 168].

This formulation reflects the operation of the principle of a “single space,” embedded in official policy and institutionalizing the responsibility for Uighur studies within the Qazaq SSR. In this context, the capacity to publish in the Uighur language and to conduct research on Uighur history, culture, and ethnography functioned not merely as an academic resource, but as an administrative instrument through which the production and circulation of scholarly and cultural knowledge were regulated.

The distribution of research on Uighurs and Dungans between the Qazaq and Kyrgyz SSRs can be understood as a concrete implementation of what may be termed a “single-space” principle embedded in Soviet nationalities policy. In the 1930s and 1940s, Qazaqstan still functioned as a shared field of “Uighur–Dungan studies,” as evidenced by the museum expeditions of 1936–1937 and the establishment of the Sector of Uighur–Dungan Culture within the Academy of Sciences of the Qazaq SSR in 1949. This configuration changed decisively in 1954, following the creation of

the Academy of Sciences of the Kyrgyz SSR, after which Dungan studies became institutionally consolidated in Bishkek, while Uighur studies remained centered in Alma-Ata. Such decisions were shaped not by scholarly considerations but by administrative allocation: each republic was assigned responsibility for particular national minorities, and only within those designated spaces were the conditions for their institutional development created. From this perspective, the later association of Dungan studies primarily with the Kyrgyz SSR should be understood as the outcome of administrative delimitation rather than the result of long-standing scholarly continuity.

Conclusion. This paper has argued that Soviet knowledge about the Dungans did not emerge through a straightforward process of discovery or documentation. Instead, it took shape as a gradual and uneven project of institutional stabilization. In the 1920s and early 1930s, the Dungans occupied an uncertain position within Soviet administrative and scholarly discourse: they were described through shifting ethnonyms, counted inconsistently, and only weakly anchored to territory. This ambiguity did not disappear on its own; rather, it became the very condition that prompted systematic state intervention.

Through the combined work of population censuses, museum practices, and academic institutions, Soviet authorities gradually rendered this historically mobile and ambiguously defined group administratively legible. Museums—and especially the Central Museum of the Qazaq SSR—played a crucial role in this process. By assembling collections and constructing exhibitions, they translated abstract classificatory decisions into material and visual forms, thereby consolidating and standardizing forms of knowledge that had previously been fragmented and contradictory.

At the same time, the stabilization of knowledge about the Dungans unfolded alongside its territorial redistribution. The institutional separation of Dungan and Uighur studies across republican boundaries reveals that knowledge production was inseparable from spatial organization. The emergence of Dungan studies in the Kyrgyz SSR and the consolidation of Uighur studies in the Qazaq SSR exemplify what this article has described as a “single-space” principle—an officially sanctioned logic that assigned specific republics responsibility for producing, validating, and circulating knowledge about particular national minorities. Within this framework, scholarly authority was concentrated in designated institutional centers, while access to publication and recognition operated as instruments of administrative regulation.

By tracing these processes across museums, and academic infrastructures, this study contributes to a broader understanding of Soviet nationalities policy as a system that governed diversity not only through territorial and political arrangements, but also through the organization of knowledge itself. The case of the Dungans demonstrates how ethnographic and historical expertise functioned as a tool of governance: transforming uncertainty into order and embedding national categories within a carefully structured geography of scholarly authority.

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Archives

QR PA — Qazaqstan Respublikasy Prezidentiniñ Arkhivi (The Archive of the President of the Republic of Qazaqstan);

QR UOMA — Qazaqstan Respublikasy Ulttıq Ortalıq Muzeyinin Arkhivi (Archive of the Central State Museum of the Republic of Qazaqstan).

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