

The Dongxiang People of Gansu - Ethnic, Religious and Local Identities

Mikko Suutarinen

East Asian Studies, Institute for Asian and African Studies, University of Helsinki

E-mail: mikko.suutarinen@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the Dongxiang, an Islamic ethnic group living in rural Gansu (Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture) speaking a Mongolic language. The Dongxiang have been an official *minzu* since the 1950s, before which they were categorised as Hui. However, they have been a locally important historical actor in the Old Hezhou Region with a relatively great influence on the Islamic currents of thought within China. I argue that during the past fifty years, the official recognition of the Dongxiang as a *minzu* along with the end of their geographic isolation has prompted the development of a nationalist identity. Previously the group was defined merely on terms of religious faith or locality, although these factors still remain strong as components of their identity. Furthermore, it should be noted that linguistic difference, though a major distinction in the minds of outsiders, has little importance to the subjective identity of the Dongxiang.

Introduction

It has been clear for a long time that the Chinese nation-state has been working in ambivalent ways with its minorities. On one hand, there has been the concept of *Zhonghua minzu*, which brings all citizens of China under the same umbrella, being 'Chinese' (*Zhongguoren*). On the other hand, the categorisations themselves tend to create new groups that previously did not really exist.

Therefore, the *minzu* system works in both ways: simplifying the actual ethnic complexity in multi-ethnic areas by including very distinct groups under the same category and, by contrast, creating entirely new groups out of relatively homogeneous entities.

The study of Chinese Muslims has mainly concentrated on the most culturally sinified group of them, the Hui, which has integrated into the Chinese culture and has mostly lost all traces of their foreign origin. The category of Hui is a notable exception in China's system of nationalities, since the only notable distinction to the Han majority is that of religion. But obviously, the Hui are not the only Muslim people in China. Apart from the several Muslim peoples of Xinjiang, there is also considerable diversity among the Muslims of China Proper, as well as inside the Hui group itself. The Hui are notably the most geographically dispersed people in China as they can be found in all provinces of the PRC with a considerable cultural diversity. The core area of the Hui culture is, however, Northwest China, provinces of Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai and Shaanxi.

The topic of this article, the Dongxiang people, could be seen historically as a minority within a minority, a linguistic minority inside the Hui that has fairly recently received a status of an independent *minzu*. The question is, to what extent do the Dongxiang people themselves identify themselves to the concept of Dongxiang *minzu*?

The **Dongxiang**, also known as Santa or Santa-Mongols, amount approximately 380000 people (373669 according to the census of 1990). The majority of them live in an arid and mountainous area in Gansu about 100 km south of Lanzhou, in the Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture, where they have their own autonomous county (*Dongxiangzhu zizhixian*). The name *Dongxiang* means ‘East Village’ and thus refers to the location of the area in relation to the city of Hezhou (modern Linxia), an old centre of the Silk Road. The centre of the area is a town called Suonanba or Suonan.

The Dongxiang language is related to Mongolian, but is not intelligible to Mongols. The language has received plenty of influence from Chinese (mainly from the peculiar Hezhou dialect) and has lots of loanwords from Arabic and Persian. The language has no official writing system, but a pinyin-based orthography has been developed which is gradually being introduced in local schools.¹ Some people that have a high level of Quranic education can use the Arabic script, although it is yet to be documented whether the Arabic script actually is used to write the Dongxiang language. Many Dongxiang know Chinese characters, but the level illiteracy is one of the highest among China’s minorities.² Still, there are many Dongxiang, especially women that do not even speak any Chinese.

During the Qing and Republican periods, as all Muslims in China, the Dongxiang were included in the Hui category (out of five; others were: Han, Manchu, Mongol and Tibetan). In the local context, the Dongxiang were known with such appellations as *Dongxiang-hui*, *Menggu-hui*, *Dongxiang-menggu* or *Dongxiang turen*.

In the 1950s, the governmental system of nationalities (*minzu*) was introduced and the Dongxiang were recognised as a separate nationality. It is unclear who actually decided to apply for official recognition, as the Dongxiang themselves probably would have been content to stay in the Hui category, which, at the time, still had the general notion of ‘Muslim’ instead of ‘Hui nationality’.

¹ Kim 2003

² Yin 1998

The idea of Mongolian ancestry is strongly rejected by the Dongxiang, both by intellectuals and ordinary people. They prefer the theory of Central Asian origins, which actually is more probably true, despite obvious the Mongolic linguistic affinity.³

Nowadays, the area is politically sensitive, not only due to its history of rebellion and violence, but also due to cultivation of poppy and smuggling of narcotics in the area. The Dongxiang play a considerable part in the trade of narcotics in the streets of Lanzhou, although their Han customers usually think they are Hui.⁴ Because of this, the area is still officially closed for foreigners, but as some Christian missionaries have been working in the area for several years, the authorities interpret the rules in a rather relaxed way.

Ethnic Identity

In modern scholarship, ethnic identity is usually seen as negotiated and socially constructed.⁵ But in the modern PRC, it is often the state that has taken an active role in defining ethnic boundaries when it forces its citizens into often rather arbitrary categories. The subjective perception of the people in question can be very different.

The connection between ethnicity and religion among the Dongxiang seems exceptionally important. The most important thing about distinguishing ‘us’ and ‘others’ is whether they are Muslim or not, whether they eat pork or not.

The central concept in the study of all Chinese Muslims is *qingzhen* (“pure and true”), i.e. ritually pure, often interpreted as the translation of the Arabic concept of *halal*. The connection between ethnicity and food has been the centre of attention, since among the Hui eating can be seen as a political act, a way to express one’s ethnic identity⁶. Indeed, the Dongxiang are no exception to this, eating *qingzhen* is the most important way of showing one’s faith in everyday life.

The language spoken by a group is often one of the most important factors of defining an ethnic group. But for the Dongxiang, language does not seem to make a big difference when ethnicity is considered. The Dongxiang do not usually call their language ‘the Dongxiang language’ but it is often called simply ‘the language of this place’. Therefore, a person knowing the language is not automatically a member of the Dongxiang ethnic group.

³ Ma Zhiying in *Dongxiangzu zizhixian* pp. 608-613; Ma Zixiang 1987: 7-10.

⁴ Beech 2002

⁵ Barth 1969

⁶ Gladney 1991; Gillette 2000

Locally, the name *Dongxiang* is used only to denote the inhabitants of the area whereas in their own language they call themselves *Santa* (etymologically comes from the name of Central Asian Muslim traders, Sart), which means generally ‘Muslim’ and thus interestingly denotes also all other Muslim groups. It is problematic that, prior to the introduction of the modern name Dongxiang, there is no exact ethnonym that would make a clear distinction between the speakers of the language and other people.

However, there is a desire among the Dongxiang intellectuals to change the official name of the *minzu* to *Saerta* (Chinese rendering of Santa) instead of the present, geographically derived ethnonym. If ordinary people more often call themselves *Saerta* even when they speak Chinese, it is surely a sign of a wider separation between ethnicity and religion, since in Chinese the word lacks the meaning of ‘Muslim’.

No serious ethnic tensions exist in the Dongxiang area between different ethnic groups, but apparently non-Muslims are treated with suspicion. When asked about the situation of non-Muslims living in the area, an informant replied: “Such people really have no reason to live here. They should run away to Beijing or Shanghai, they would be better off there!”

Religious Identity

It is to be noted that the Dongxiang consider themselves among the most pious Muslims in China and feel great pride on the purity of their faith and resistance to secularisation.

The prevailing opinion among the Dongxiang is that Islam arrived to the Dongxiang area directly from the Middle East through Arab missionaries and is therefore purer and more original than the forms of religion among the Hui. The area has several tombs (*gongbei*) of Arabic Sufi Saints. The oldest ones of these are claimed to date from Yuan era.⁷

Some of the influential sects of Chinese Islam originate among the Dongxiang. The sole occurrence of Wahhabism in China, the Ikhwan (*Yibewani*) movement was founded by Ma Wanfu (b. 1849 d. 1934), a native of Guoyuan village in the Southeastern rim of the Dongxiang area. Ma Wanfu studied in Mecca and after his return he declared the prevailing Beizhuang sect and other Sufi sects incompatible with true Islam.⁸ The proximity of Hezhou, “the Mecca of China”, facilitated of emergence of influential imams hailing from the Dongxiang area.

The Ikhwan is commonly known as the ‘Recent Faith’ or ‘New New Faith’ (*xinxinjiao*) and the older Sufi sects, like the Beizhuang sect (*menhuan*) are known as the ‘New Faith’

⁷ *Dongxiangzu zizhixian*: 144

⁸ *Ibid.* 576-7; Dillon 1999: 101. (Dillon erroneously claims that Ma Wanfu’s birthplace is Salar area.)

(*xinjiao*), whereas the most traditional form of Chinese Islam, the *Gedimu* is called the 'Old Faith' (*laojiao*). There are followers of all these sects among the Dongxiang, although the Ikhwan and Beizhuang are by far the most influential. May it be noted, that the newer sects of Chinese Islam, in fact, emphasise a more centralised organisation, as opposed to the more locally defined *Gedimu* in which every mosque was a relatively independent unit.⁹ Therefore, the rise of Ikhwan may have created a more outward-looking attitude among the Dongxiang.

According to Yang Haiying¹⁰, there is a group of Islamic Mongols in the Alashan League of Inner Mongolia called Qotung, whose imams (*abong*) are mainly of Dongxiang origin. This is primarily because the Dongxiang language is related to Mongolian, but also partly because the Dongxiang were considered pure in their faith. However, the Qotung follow the older sects, whereas the Dongxiang have in large numbers converted into Ikhwan.

Scholarly Islam aside, the ordinary people in the Dongxiang area know little about the religious doctrines, but are still very observant in the basic regulations of Islam in their daily lives. When asked about typical traits of Dongxiang culture, the informants would mostly mention different Islamic customs, like observing Ramadan (*zhabaiyue*) or different religious festivals.

As with the Hui, the religious Arabic name of an individual (*jingming*) is used in everyday life, as the official Chinese name (*guoming*) is restricted mostly to relations with outsiders or bureaucracy.¹¹ But it seems that the Chinese name is used even less than among the Hui, and never in the domestic sphere.

Local Identity

As already mentioned, language is not a major factor of ethnic identity among the Dongxiang, it is more a factor of local than of ethnic identity. Members of other ethnic groups residing in the area are likely to learn to speak the Dongxiang language for everyday purposes.

The Dongxiang area was jokingly referred to as *Suonan gongheguo* 'The Republic of Suonan' by some outsiders, which shows well that the area is still quite isolated from the outside

⁹ Lipman 1997: 47

¹⁰ Yang 2004

¹¹ Gladney 1991: 141

world, as if an independent country. A person is moving from elsewhere in China surely will feel alienated in this environment, especially if not being Muslim.

Many of the cultural traits considered distinctive for the Dongxiang by native intellectuals, are actually just local culture common among the other Muslim groups in the area. A good example is the traditional songs known as *bua'er*, which are common to all Muslims in Northwest China but still mentioned as distinctive to the Dongxiang. For example, a children's poster depicting all 56 *minzu* has a caption about the Dongxiang: "They like to sing *bua'er* folk songs". Like all minorities in Chinese propaganda, the Dongxiang are also very good in singing and dancing. The modern pop version of *bua'er* published nowadays has plenty of themes that seem rather propagandist: idealisation of modernisation, patriotism and praise of the beauty of local landscape.

It can be easily observed that the low level of education of the Dongxiang is becoming a source of embarrassment overlapping the pride felt for their high level of Islamic knowledge. Slogans like 'First finish elementary and middle school, then go to work.' (*Du wan chuzhongshu, chumen zai da gong. 读完初中书，出门再打工*) can be seen everywhere in Suonan. Foreign guest is often faced with questions like 'Why do you want to visit such backward places as this?' But on the other hand, as illiteracy in China is defined as not knowing Chinese characters, even highly-educated imams that can read Arabic and Persian are classified as illiterate, which some Dongxiang feel is rather unfair.

Concluding Remarks

I argue that a considerable change has occurred in the subjective identity of the Dongxiang people since the founding of the People's Republic of China. The categorisation of the Dongxiang as a separate nationality has changed the previously religiously and locally defined group identity into one that centres on the idea of *minzu*. What was formerly a linguistic minority group among the Hui has started a development towards an ethnic identity of its own.

The religious and local components of identity have slightly diminished while a formerly unknown nationalist identity has emerged. The process of nation building has started as few native intellectuals (most notably Ma Zixiang) have been writing the narratives of the Dongxiang history and culture. In the usual *minzu* writing fashion, the Dongxiang are anachronistically presented to have been an independent historical actor long before they

were actually recognised as a separate ethnic group. The controversial question of the origin of their ancestors also seems very important to the native intellectuals.

By introducing the Dongxiang language as a medium of civilisation (instead of the present cultural languages of Chinese and Arabic), the Dongxiang are gaining a stronger identity as a *minzu* among other *minzu*, not just a subdivision of the Hui. In local politics, there are talks about gaining independence of the Linxia Prefecture by obtaining the status of prefecture (*zhou*) for the Dongxiang area. It should be noted, however, that most high cadres in the area have been Han Chinese and only recently some native Dongxiang have been appointed to any important positions in local government.

Separation of the area from the PRC does not seem an option even to the Dongxiang intelligentsia, as it is, of course, very unrealistic, but also because the Dongxiang area is an integral part of the Chinese Northwest cultural area and there is great solidarity with the Hui. Even during the periods of Warlordism, the Dongxiang area has been in line with the local Hui leaders and has acted independently only to protect its vital trade routes.¹²

According to Dru Gladney¹³, the prominent Ikhwan sect is inclined to modernity and is positive towards the Chinese education system. It will be seen whether this will lead to quicker pace of modernisation among the Dongxiang than among the more conservative Hui, though the natural conditions of the area does not provide a very good starting point for development.

This paper summarises some of the ideas of my forthcoming MA thesis. All ideas presented here are subject to change.

¹² Lipman 1997: 150

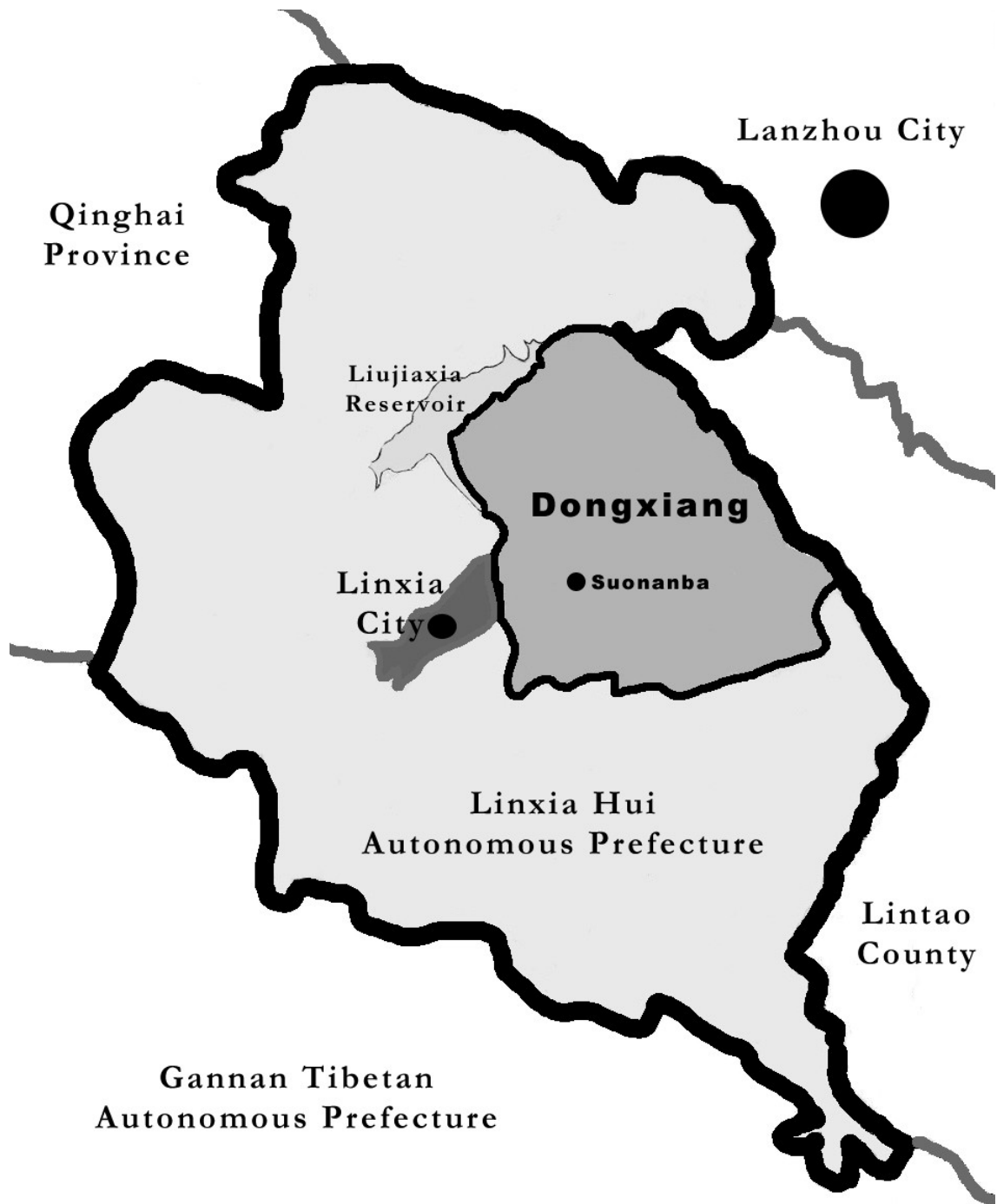
¹³ Gladney 2004: 268

List of Chinese characters

ahong 阿訇	Linxia(huizu zizhizhou) 临夏(回族自治区)
Beizhuang 北庄	
dongxiangzu (zizhixian) 东乡族(自治县)	Ma Wanfu (Guoyuan) 马万福(果园)
dongxiang-menggu 东乡蒙古	menhuan 门宦
dongxiang turen 东乡土人	minzu 民族
gedimu 格底目	qingzhen 清真
gongbei 拱北	saerta 撒尔塔
guoming 国名	Suonanba 锁南坝
Hezhou 河州	Suonan gongheguo 锁南共和国
hua'er 花儿	xinxinjiao 新新教
hui 回	Yihewani 伊赫瓦尼
jingming 经名	zhaiyue 斋月
Lanzhou 兰州	zhou 州
laojiao 老教	

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Qinghai
Province

Lanzhou City

Liujiaxia
Reservoir

Dongxiang

Linxia
City

● Suonanba

Linxia Hui
Autonomous Prefecture

Lintao
County

Gannan Tibetan
Autonomous Prefecture

Map of Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture and Dongxiang
Autonomous County in Gansu Province