



Dungan heritage learners' Chinese acquisition in multilingual Central Asia

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Abstract. Dungan learners in Central Asia constitute a distinctive group in Chinese acquisition because they combine historical links with Chinese dialects, Cyrillic-based literacy, and long-term multilingual contact. As descendants of Hui migrants from north-western China, many possess partial oral familiarity with Sinitic forms but lack a continuous tradition of Chinese-character literacy. This review aimed to synthesise existing research on Dungan learners' Chinese acquisition and to clarify its significance for heritage language acquisition and Chinese language education in Central Asia. The study applied a thematic review method to bibliographic records concerning Dungan language, Chinese acquisition, Central Asian Chinese education, and heritage language learning. The review showed that Dungan learners' Chinese acquisition is characterised by an asymmetry between relative oral familiarity and persistent literacy difficulty. Specifically, tone perception and production, Chinese character writing, word order and the *ba*-construction, and register control emerged as the most persistent problem areas. Phonetic and lexical learning benefited partially from continuity between Dungan and north-western Chinese varieties, whereas Chinese character learning, written production, and register awareness were constrained by script discontinuity and by contact with Russian and Turkic languages. In the sociocultural domain, Chinese learning was found to be embedded in identity negotiation between Central Asia and China, and learners' double positioning shaped motivation, classroom participation, and cross-cultural adaptation. Existing studies remain limited by concentrated research sites, small samples, and insufficient longitudinal, corpus-based, and experimental research. These findings implied that Chinese teaching for Dungan learners should be differentiated, script-sensitive, multilingual, and culturally responsive, combining contrastive pronunciation training, component-based character instruction, corpus-informed grammar teaching, and identity-supportive classroom practice. The practical value of this review lies in supporting heritage-oriented Chinese education in multilingual Central Asia

Keywords: script discontinuity; Cyrillic literacy; language contact; Chinese characters; learner identity; Putonghua teaching; cross-cultural adaptation

Introduction

The Dungan people of Central Asia are descendants of Hui migrants from north-western China who moved to the territories of present-day Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan in the late nineteenth century. Over more than a century of settlement, they have maintained a distinctive ethnolinguistic identity shaped by Chinese Muslim heritage, Islamic traditions, Russian influence, and interaction with Turkic-speaking societies. The Dungan language is generally regarded as an overseas variety of north-western Chinese dialects, especially those historically associated with Shaanxi and Gansu, but it has developed independently under sustained contact with Russian and Central Asian languages. How the descendants of this

community acquire standard Chinese is therefore a question of both theoretical and practical significance: it bears directly on heritage language acquisition, multilingual education, and the growing demand for Chinese language teaching in Central Asia, yet it remains insufficiently understood in international scholarship.

A central feature of Dungan is its complex relationship with Chinese. S. Honkasalo (2024) notes that Dungan preserves many phonological, lexical, and grammatical features related to north-western Chinese varieties, but its development in Central Asia has involved extensive borrowing, code-switching, and structural influence from Russian and other regional languages. Dungan is

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also written mainly in Cyrillic script, following a history of Soviet language planning, alphabet reform, and Cyrillic-based print culture (Knüppel, 2024). Consequently, although many Dungan learners have partial oral familiarity with Sinitic forms, they do not inherit a continuous Chinese-character literacy tradition, distinguishing them from both typical foreign-language learners and heritage learners whose communities retain character literacy. Dungan learners can therefore be understood as a distinctive type of Chinese heritage learner. Heritage learners are commonly defined as individuals who have family or community exposure to a minority language but receive dominant education and literacy development in another language (Montrul, 2010), positioned between second language acquisition and community-based language maintenance. Dungan learners fit this definition only partially: they approach Putonghua, or Standard Mandarin, through a historically related but structurally divergent Sinitic variety, while their education is mediated by Russian, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, or other dominant languages. Their Chinese learning involves not only second language acquisition but also dialectal comparison, script learning, multilingual transfer, and identity reconstruction.

The Dungan case also challenges the conventional binary distinction between foreign-language and heritage-language learners. Dungan learners are not complete beginners in a cultural or linguistic sense, because Dungan language, oral traditions, religious customs, and family memory preserve connections with Chinese and Hui heritage. Yet their acquisition of standard Chinese is not a straightforward continuation of a home language: the shift from Dungan to Putonghua involves phonological adjustment, lexical re-mapping, grammatical restructuring, and the acquisition of Chinese characters. This combination of dialectal continuity and script discontinuity is one of the most important features distinguishing Dungan learners from other groups of Chinese learners. Previous research shows that Dungan learners' acquisition contains both advantages and difficulties. X. Kang & H. Wu (2021) found that in pronunciation, learners may benefit from similarities between Dungan and northwestern Chinese varieties yet still struggle with Mandarin tonal perception and production; in grammar, word order and the *ba*-construction, a Chinese disposal construction marked by *ba* 把, have attracted attention because Dungan, Russian, and modern standard Chinese differ in syntactic structure and usage (Hou, 2020; Wu, 2024); and in literacy, Chinese characters represent a major obstacle because learners are familiar with alphabetic writing but lack experience with the structural, semantic, and graphic principles of characters. The sociocultural dimension is equally important: for many Dungan students, learning Chinese is also a process of negotiating ethnic memory, cultural belonging, and future mobility, and studies of Dungan identity emphasise region, religion, homeland imagination, and transnational networks in the construction of Dungan ethnic consciousness (Imyarova, 2022). When studying in China, Dungan students occupy a double position. In Central Asia, they

are often viewed as descendants of Chinese-speaking Muslims, whereas in China they are institutionally categorised as international students. This double positioning turns Chinese learning into a space of identity negotiation.

Research on Dungan learners has expanded considerably. Early studies mainly discussed the general teaching of Chinese to Dungan students and their linguistic background (Meng, 2009); Later work became more specialised, addressing phonetics, characters, word order, vocabulary strategies, classroom interaction, and cross-cultural adaptation; and recent studies have adopted corpus-based, experimental, and mixed-method approaches, including research on the *ba*-construction, Dungan language maintenance, and digital processing of low-resource Dungan language data (Liu *et al.*, 2024). Despite this progress, scholarship remains fragmented: many studies appear in Chinese journals or master's theses and are little known internationally; research sites and samples are concentrated; methods rely heavily on questionnaires, interviews, observation, and error analysis rather than longitudinal, corpus-based, or experimental designs; and findings are rarely connected to frameworks such as heritage language acquisition, cross-linguistic influence, script transfer, multilingual acquisition, and identity negotiation.

The aim of this review was to synthesise existing research on Dungan learners' Chinese acquisition and to situate it within international discussions of heritage language acquisition and multilingual education. It addressed three questions: first, what are the major developmental stages and thematic trends in this research? Second, what linguistic, pedagogical, and sociocultural features characterise Dungan learners' Chinese learning? Third, what limitations remain, and what directions should future research take? In doing so, the review clarified the academic value of the Dungan case and provided an integrated framework for future research on Chinese acquisition in Central Asia.

Materials and Methods

This review adopted a qualitative thematic synthesis design. The design was chosen because research on Dungan learners' Chinese acquisition is fragmented across languages, publication types, and disciplines, so a thematic review was more appropriate than a quantitative meta-analysis for identifying research patterns, theoretical gaps, and future directions. The review was guided by the three research questions stated at the end of the Introduction. The review drew on a curated corpus of bibliographic records retrieved from Chinese and international academic databases, including CNKI, Google Scholar, Web of Science, and Scopus. Search terms covered Dungan people, Dungan language, Chinese acquisition, heritage language education, and Central Asian Chinese education, and core studies directly concerned with Dungan learners' Chinese acquisition were identified from these records for thematic analysis. Additional theoretical and international studies were included to situate Chinese-language



scholarship within broader discussions of heritage language acquisition, multilingualism, script transfer, language contact, and identity.

Studies were included if they focused on Dungan learners, Dungan language background, Chinese language acquisition or teaching, learner identity, cultural adaptation, or Central Asian heritage Chinese education; duplicated records, news reports, and marginally related studies were excluded. The selected literature was coded by publication year, document type, research site, learner group, linguistic domain, pedagogical focus, sociocultural theme, and methodological approach. The analysis synthesised the coded literature thematically from linguistic, pedagogical, and sociocultural perspectives. The theoretical framework combined heritage language acquisition theory (Polinsky & Kagan, 2007; Montrul, 2008; Polinsky, 2018), research on language contact and cross-linguistic influence, work on script transfer and literacy development, and studies of identity negotiation in multilingual education. This framework was chosen because the Dungan case involves a historically related community language, a non-character literacy tradition, sustained multilingual contact, and complex identity positioning, none of which can be explained by a single theoretical model.

Results and Discussion

Research on Dungan learners' Chinese acquisition has developed gradually from descriptive teaching reports to more specialised applied linguistic studies. Although Dungan language and culture had already attracted attention in ethnology, dialectology, and Central Asian studies, systematic research on Dungan learners as Chinese language learners emerged relatively late. Early studies described learners' linguistic background and practical teaching issues, while recent work has expanded to phonetics, characters, grammar, vocabulary, pragmatics, classroom interaction, adaptation, and identity.

Developmental stages of research on Dungan learners' Chinese acquisition

The early stage of research was mainly concerned with Dungan language, ethnic education, and the general teaching of Chinese to Dungan students. Hu's study of the Dungan language and Chinese language teaching in the Kyrgyz Republic was one of the earliest systematic discussions of Dungan learners' linguistic and educational context, linking language maintenance with the practical problem of Chinese education in Kyrgyzstan (Hu, 2000). C. Meng's studies expanded the discussion to Chinese teaching for Dungan students from Kazakhstan, connecting Chinese education with Dungan cultural traditions (Meng, 2005; Meng, 2009). These works emphasised Dungan learners' cultural and linguistic closeness to China, but the framework remained pedagogical and descriptive, asking how to teach Chinese more effectively rather than how Dungan acquisition could inform acquisition theory. Three examples illustrate how this descriptive orientation limited the field. First, C. Meng's (2005)

discussion of Chinese teaching for Kazakhstani Dungan students focused on course arrangement, teaching content, and learners' cultural closeness to China, but did not analyse learners' actual performance data, so the assumed advantages of Dungan learners remained an untested assumption rather than an empirical finding. Second, C. Meng's (2009) account of Dungan cultural traditions and the development of Chinese teaching in Central Asia described the macro-level teaching context without examining how Cyrillic-based literacy shaped character learning or how Russian-medium education influenced classroom interaction. Third, because neither study employed error analysis, experimental, or corpus-based methods, the specific linguistic difficulties of Dungan learners, such as tones, characters, and word order, remained invisible until later domain-specific studies addressed them directly. Dungan language was treated mainly as a background factor; later studies showed that it had developed into a contact-influenced Sinitic variety shaped by long-term interaction with Russian and Turkic languages so that Dungan learners' acquisition fits neither simple foreign language learning nor dialect-to-standard-language transition (Honkasalo, 2024).

After the initial descriptive stage, research began to focus more systematically on specific linguistic domains, especially phonetics and Chinese characters. This shift was driven by classroom observations of relative oral familiarity alongside persistent pronunciation and writing difficulties. In phonetic acquisition, X. Kang's (2019) acoustic and experimental research on Mandarin monosyllabic tones and X. Kang & H. Wu's (2021) study of disyllabic tonal patterns showed that tonal acquisition remained a major challenge even for learners with a Sinitic dialectal background; earlier work also identified phonological interference from Dungan (He, 2012). Dialectal proximity thus creates both facilitation and interference rather than automatically yielding accurate standard phonology.

Chinese character acquisition became another major focus. Because Dungan is written mainly in Cyrillic, learners may know Chinese-related oral forms yet lack knowledge of stroke order, character structure, components, radicals, and orthographic conventions. H. Li (2015) examined Dungan learners' acquisition of strokes and stroke order, emphasising basic graphic awareness; Y. Hou (2016) analysed character writing errors among Central Asian Dungan students, identifying recurring problems in form, structure, and component arrangement; and S. Wang (2021) discussed component cognition among Central Asian heritage learners, highlighting the role of orthographic awareness. Collectively, these studies suggest that script discontinuity is one of the most important factors shaping Dungan learners' literacy development. Grammar and syntax also received increasing attention. J. Fan (2012) showed that syntactic transfer played an important role in Dungan learners' word order errors; Y. Hou (2020) demonstrated that such errors should be attributed not only to Dungan influence but to learners' broader multilingual ecology; and corpus-based research on the *ba*-construction has

connected learner errors with corpus evidence and construction-specific analysis, marking a movement from error description toward data-based analysis (Wu, 2024).

In recent years, research has diversified beyond linguistic errors to learner variables, classroom interaction, teaching models, cultural adaptation, identity, and learning strategies. Dungan learners' motivation is shaped by both instrumental and identity-related factors: they may show relatively strong cultural-integration and instrumental motivation (You, 2015); learner investment relates to achievement and classroom participation (Zhang, 2019); and multilingual background shapes approaches to vocabulary, reading, and character learning. Pedagogical studies have explored strategy-based instruction and action research, including the production-oriented approach and formative assessment in listening classes (Sang, 2018; Li, 2020a). N. Zhang's (2020) analysis of teacher-student interaction in elementary oral Chinese classes for Dungan learners, based on the improved Flanders Interaction Analysis System (iFIAS), showed the importance of balanced participation and responsive feedback; Y. Zhu (2019) analysed unexpected classroom events and proposed strategies for classroom management and intercultural adjustment; and F. Yang & Y. Zhang (2018) approached oral Chinese teaching through schema theory, arguing that activating learners' prior knowledge improves oral performance. Identity and cultural adaptation have also become prominent: studies of Dungan identity emphasise region, religion, homeland imagination, and transnational networks (Li, 2015b; Ma & Ma, 2018; Imyarova, 2022), and research on Dungan students in Chinese universities shows that cultural adaptation and social networks affect learning experiences and belonging (Shen, 2021).

A notable recent trend is corpus-based and digital research: work on the ba-construction among learners whose mother tongue is Dungan shows how corpus evidence can reveal frequency patterns, error types, and developmental tendencies invisible to questionnaires (Wu, 2024), indicating a shift toward more empirical, replicable research. Digital research on Dungan itself has

also begun to influence the field: M. Liu *et al.* (2024) used transfer learning to develop low-resource Dungan speech synthesis, work that may eventually support comparison of Dungan and Putonghua phonology, bilingual teaching materials, and documentation of language change. Beyond corpus and computational work, two further trends are emerging. First, mixed-methods designs have begun to combine quantitative measures with qualitative evidence: correlational studies of motivation, engagement, and achievement, as shown by X. Zhang (2019), and interaction analyses based on the improved Flanders system, as demonstrated by N. Zhang (2020), show a movement toward triangulated, learner-centred research, in contrast to the single-method questionnaire studies of the expansion stage. Second, experimental and intervention-oriented work has started to appear, exemplified by tone-training experiments with Dungan learners, which move the field from describing errors toward testing whether targeted instruction can remediate them (Xie *et al.*, 2018). A further trend concerns Dungan language transmission and possible shift, with studies discussing the weakening of Dungan inheritance among younger generations (Han, 2019). Since learners' Dungan proficiency ranges from active family use to merely symbolic knowledge, future research should differentiate learners by language background, script experience, and degree of maintenance rather than treating them as homogeneous.

Overall, existing research can be grouped into four interconnected themes: linguistic acquisition (phonetics, tones, characters, grammar, vocabulary, written production, pragmatics); pedagogical response (classroom teaching, curriculum design, methods, strategies, intervention); sociocultural adaptation (identity, language attitude, social networks, cross-cultural communication); and Dungan language background (maintenance, writing system, contact-induced change, transmission). As shown in Table 1, the field has moved from descriptive accounts of background and teaching experience to specialised studies of linguistic acquisition, learner variables, identity negotiation, and digital resources.

Table 1. Developmental stages and thematic features of research on Dungan learners' Chinese acquisition

Stage	Approximate period	Main focus	Representative topics	Research features
Early descriptive stage	2000-2010	Background and teaching experience	Dungan language, Chinese teaching in Central Asia, Dungan cultural traditions	Descriptive, pedagogical, context-oriented
Expansion stage	2011-2020	Linguistic errors and acquisition domains	Phonetics, tones, Chinese characters, word order, grammar	Error analysis, questionnaires, classroom observation
Diversification stage	2021-2026	Pedagogy, identity, and learner variables	Learning motivation, classroom interaction, cultural adaptation, identity negotiation	Mixed methods, learner-centred perspective
Emerging methodological stage	2023-2026	Corpus and digital approaches	Ba-construction corpus research, low-resource Dungan NLP, language transmission	Corpus-based, computational, interdisciplinary

Source: compiled by the author based on the reviewed literature

Nevertheless, development remains uneven: error analysis still outnumbers longitudinal research; vocabulary development, discourse competence, reading

comprehension, and academic writing remain less studied than phonetics and characters; and identity is often discussed separately from linguistic acquisition. Future



research should integrate linguistic, pedagogical, and sociocultural dimensions more closely. In sum, the field has progressed from establishing learners' linguistic and cultural background, through identifying difficulties in pronunciation, tones, characters, grammar, and word order, to examining classroom interaction, strategies, cultural adaptation, identity negotiation, corpus-based grammar acquisition, and digital Dungan resources. Taken together, existing studies suggest that Dungan learners should not be treated as ordinary foreign-language learners: their learning is shaped by Dungan linguistic background, Cyrillic literacy, Russian and Turkic contact, Chinese cultural memory, and transnational mobility. However, the field still needs stronger theoretical integration and more diverse empirical methods. The following section turns to the linguistic features of this acquisition.

Linguistic features of Dungan learners' Chinese acquisition

The linguistic acquisition of Dungan learners shows a distinctive pattern shaped by both continuity and discontinuity. Continuity lies in the historical relationship between Dungan and north-western Chinese dialects, which may partially support oral comprehension, lexical association, and some grammatical intuition; discontinuity lies in the gap between Dungan and modern standard Chinese in phonology, grammar, vocabulary, script, and literacy practices, compounded by contact with Russian and other regional languages. Dungan learners' acquisition therefore cannot be explained by a simple mother-tongue transfer model but involves dialectal transfer, multilingual contact, script transfer, and heritage-related identity awareness. The most discussed domains are pronunciation and tones, characters, word order and grammar, vocabulary, written production, and pragmatics; phonetics and characters have received the most attention, while the rest remain relatively underexplored.

Pronunciation is one of the most frequently discussed areas in this research. Because Dungan is historically related to north-western Chinese dialects, learners may more easily recognise Chinese syllable structures, lexical items, or dialect-related pronunciations; however, standard Mandarin initials, finals, tones, tone sandhi, and prosody may still differ from Dungan phonological habits. X. Kang's (2019) acoustic and experimental study of monosyllabic tones and X. Kang & H. Wu's (2021) study of disyllabic tonal patterns indicate that Dungan learners' tonal acquisition involves both perceptual and articulatory challenges, and that their errors often reflect systematic differences between the tonal categories or pitch patterns of Dungan-related speech and standard Mandarin rather than random confusion. Y. He (2012) argued that Dungan students' phonetic errors should be understood in relation to their original speech system and proposed that phonetic teaching should target predictable problem areas based on Dungan phonological features rather than repeat general Mandarin training; and the experiment by M. Xie's *et al.* (2018) with nine Dungan learners provided

concrete evidence of this asymmetry: their participants produced very few tonal contour errors (only three instances across the four tones, in the rising and dipping tones) but substantially more tonal register errors (thirteen instances, concentrated in the high level and dipping tones), their tonal register was generally narrowed, with the high level tone often realised as 33 or 44 instead of 55, and their acquisition order was fourth tone, first tone, second tone, third tone. Because Dungan itself is a tone language with a narrow register, the authors attributed the few contour errors to positive transfer and the narrowed register to negative transfer, and they accordingly recommended that tone teaching for Dungan learners should move beyond contour training to focus systematically on expanding the tonal register. Since pronunciation may be influenced by Dungan, Russian, and regional languages simultaneously, future research should combine acoustic analysis, perception experiments, and background surveys to distinguish sources of transfer and track tonal development longitudinally.

Chinese character acquisition is perhaps the most distinctive difficulty for Dungan learners; teaching-oriented studies identify characters as the main barrier for elementary learners, especially in stroke order, component recognition, and structural balance (Wang, 2014; Zhou, 2017). Unlike heritage learners exposed to characters in family, community, or religious contexts, Dungan learners usually come from a Cyrillic or other alphabetic literacy tradition that provides no direct access to Chinese characters. H. Li (2015) showed that learners struggle at the most basic level of writing, including stroke direction, sequence, and structural balance, reflecting a lack of prior experience with the visual-spatial organisation of characters, and Y. Hou (2016) identified recurring writing errors in character form, component arrangement, and structural organisation, suggesting that alphabetic literacy does not automatically transfer to morphosyllabic character literacy. Component awareness is especially important: S. Wang (2021) showed that the ability to recognise, analyse, and use character components affects learning efficiency, yet components and radicals may initially appear as arbitrary graphic units, so uninstructed learners rely on visual memorisation, with slow learning, high forgetting rates, and frequent form errors. Script transfer usefully explains this pattern: alphabetic literacy, with relatively direct sound-symbol correspondence, must give way to processing stroke order, spatial configuration, semantic radicals, phonetic components, and whole-character recognition. This represents a major change in visual processing, memory strategy, and writing habit, which helps explain stronger oral than written performance at beginning and intermediate stages. Character acquisition should thus be analysed as script transfer rather than simple memorisation difficulty; more empirical research should compare component-based, visual, and digital approaches across proficiency levels.

Grammar acquisition is shaped by the interaction of Dungan, modern standard Chinese, Russian, and other

regional languages; since Dungan and Chinese are historically related but not identical systems, errors may arise from multiple sources, not Dungan alone. Word order has been one of the most frequently discussed issues, with recent research extending the topic to spoken business Chinese among intermediate and advanced Kazakhstani Dungan learners (Cheng, 2022). J. Fan (2012) argued that word order errors were closely related to transfer from learners' existing language systems, while Y. Hou (2020) interpreted them in relation to learners' broader multilingual background, since many Dungan learners are educated through Russian or national languages. The *ba*-construction is typologically and functionally complex, involving word order, disposal meaning, information structure, verb-result relations, and discourse conditions. W. Wang's (2020) study of the *ba*-construction in Dungan literary works provides useful background on how related structures function in Dungan itself, analysing *ba*-sentences in Chinese transcriptions of Dungan literary works. W. Wang (2020) identified six basic structural types and showed that, alongside types shared with modern Mandarin (with an object, complement, or adverbial following the verb), Dungan productively uses several types absent from Mandarin: negative forms with the negative adverb placed after the *ba*-phrase, zero-predicate *ba*-sentences expressing cursing or reproach, *ba*-sentences with bare or even monosyllabic verbs, sentences in which *ba* functions as a focus marker rather than a disposal preposition, and serial-verb *ba*-constructions. W. Wang (2020) attributed these special types partly to the preservation of north-western Chinese dialect features and early modern Chinese usage, and partly to the influence of Altaic languages. These findings demonstrate that the Dungan equivalents of the *ba*-construction diverge systematically from the Mandarin construction in both word order and conditions of use, so that learners' difficulties reflect genuine structural differences between the two languages rather than simple unfamiliarity. T. Wu's (2024) corpus-based research on *ba*-construction acquisition by learners whose mother tongue is Dungan uses learner data to examine actual usage patterns, error types, and acquisition tendencies. Learners must grasp not only surface word order but semantic and pragmatic conditions; similar but non-identical Dungan constructions may invite overgeneralisation; Russian and Turkic backgrounds may influence object placement and information focus; and instruction may present the construction as a fixed pattern without discourse context, producing mechanical but inaccurate use. Beyond word order and the *ba*-construction, learners may struggle with adverbials, function words, aspect markers, complements, sentence-final particles, and complex sentences, with adverbial errors particularly frequent in learner production (He, 2019). These areas remain less studied than phonetics and characters; future research should use learner corpora to trace grammatical development and identify which errors are Dungan-specific and which are common among Russian- or Turkic-background learners.

Vocabulary acquisition involves both facilitation and interference: because Dungan contains many items historically related to Chinese dialects, some words may feel familiar in sound, meaning, or cultural association, aiding oral comprehension; but Dungan vocabulary has also absorbed Russian and regional elements, so learners may face false correspondences, semantic mismatch, register confusion, and difficulty distinguishing dialectal forms from standard Putonghua vocabulary. Vocabulary development is closely related to learning strategies, classroom participation, and learner investment (Zhang, 2019): learners with weak character knowledge may rely on oral association, Russian mediation, or pinyin-based memorisation, which limits reading and writing development. Written production is important but still underdeveloped. S. Wen (2023) shows that even intermediate and advanced learners may struggle to distinguish spoken and written styles, so writing problems involve discourse organisation and register awareness, not only character form or grammar accuracy. Orally supported learners may transfer spoken expressions into writing, and those with Russian-medium academic literacy may need explicit instruction in Chinese academic and formal styles. Vocabulary development among advanced learners may also show non-linear patterns, with lexical complexity and accuracy fluctuating according to task conditions, motivation, and individual learning trajectories; this is consistent with second-language vocabulary research showing that lexical growth is non-linear and that receptive and productive vocabularies do not develop at the same rate (Laufer, 1998). Future research should use longitudinal and corpus-based methods to trace lexical and register development, comparing Dungan learners with other heritage and non-heritage Central Asian learners.

Pragmatic competence, understood as the ability to use language appropriately in social interaction, is closely related to cultural background, identity position, and social experience. Although Dungan learners may have cultural memory related to China, their everyday communicative norms developed in Central Asian societies, so they may experience pragmatic mismatches in Chinese institutional, academic, or interpersonal contexts. Y. Jia's (2017) study of Chinese refusal speech acts found that learners' pragmatic choices were influenced by both linguistic proficiency and cultural norms, showing that pragmatic acquisition also requires understanding politeness strategies, indirectness, social distance, and power relations. Difficulties may be especially visible in requests, refusals, invitations, apologies, compliments, and classroom communication, where learners may transfer communicative habits from Dungan, Russian, or local languages; conversely, Chinese speakers may assume cultural closeness based on ethnic or historical ties and misread learners' behaviour, creating communicative tension. Pragmatic teaching should combine language instruction with intercultural training, including role plays, discourse completion tasks, authentic dialogues, and reflection, helping learners develop flexible communicative competence rather than treating



Chinese norms as fixed or superior. In sum, Dungan learners' acquisition is asymmetrical: oral familiarity with Dungan-related Sinitic forms may support some learning, but it does not eliminate difficulties in pronunciation, tonal

accuracy, character literacy, grammatical restructuring, written production, or pragmatic appropriateness. Table 2 summarises these domains, typical difficulties, possible sources, and representative studies.

Table 2. Major linguistic difficulties in Dungan learners' Chinese acquisition

Linguistic domain	Typical difficulties	Possible sources	Representative studies
Phonetics and tones	Tone perception and production; tonal range; disyllabic tone patterns; standard Mandarin pronunciation	Dialectal transfer from Dungan; partial similarity between Dungan and Putonghua; influence of Russian or regional languages	M. Xie <i>et al.</i> (2018); Y. He (2012); X. Kang (2019); X. Kang & H. Wu (2021)
Chinese characters	Stroke order; component arrangement; radical awareness; structural balance; slow recognition and writing	Cyrillic-based literacy; lack of Chinese-character tradition; weak orthographic awareness	H. Li (2015); Y. Hou (2016); S. Wang (2021)
Grammar and word order	Word order errors; ba-construction misuse; function words; complements; complex sentences	Interaction of Dungan, Russian, Turkic languages, and Putonghua; partial structural similarity; insufficient discourse-based grammar teaching	J. Fan (2012); Y. Hou (2020); T. Wu (2024)
Vocabulary and register	Semantic mismatch; dialect-standard confusion; limited academic vocabulary; oralised written style	Partial lexical continuity; Russian-mediated learning; limited exposure to written Chinese registers	X. Zhang (2019); S. Wen (2023)
Written production	Character errors; sentence-level errors; cohesion problems; spoken-style writing	Script discontinuity; weak genre awareness; insufficient academic writing practice	Y. Hou (2016); S. Wen (2023)
Pragmatics	Inappropriate refusals, invitations, requests, or classroom speech; mismatch in politeness strategies	Transfer of Central Asian communicative norms; identity expectations; limited sociopragmatic exposure	Y. Jia (2017)

Source: compiled by the author based on the reviewed literature

As Table 2 shows, these are not isolated errors but interconnected outcomes of a multilingual, multi-script background: weak character knowledge affects vocabulary and writing, pronunciation habits influence oral communication, and grammar errors reflect the combined influence of Dungan, Russian, and other languages. Research and teaching should therefore move beyond error correction toward an integrated approach considering linguistic structure, literacy background, identity, and communicative context.

Pedagogical responses in Dungan-oriented Chinese teaching

The linguistic profile discussed above indicates that Dungan learners require differentiated teaching: they cannot be treated as beginners with no prior connection to Chinese, nor assumed to share the character-literacy foundation of other heritage learners. Their background of partial oral familiarity, Cyrillic-based literacy, multilingual contact, and complex identity expectations calls for teaching that combines contrastive linguistic instruction, script-focused literacy development, learner-centred interaction, and culturally responsive pedagogy. Existing studies have proposed responses from targeted pronunciation training and component-based character teaching to schema-based oral teaching and intercultural support (Yang & Zhang, 2018; Zhu, 2019; N. Zhang, 2020), but many remain small-scale and experience-based. A more systematic framework is needed, connecting linguistic difficulties with instructional design and taking

account of Dungan learners' position as heritage-related multilingual learners.

Pronunciation teaching should begin with a contrastive understanding of Dungan, Putonghua, and learners' other dominant languages, focusing on the error patterns predictable for Dungan learners, including Mandarin tones, disyllabic tonal patterns, tonal range, and standard pronunciation (Xie *et al.*, 2018; Kang, 2019; Kang & Wu, 2021), rather than following a general beginner sequence. A data-informed approach is especially useful, involving the collection of pronunciation samples, the identification of recurring tone and segmental errors, and the design of targeted exercises with pitch visualisation, perception discrimination, and production feedback. Teachers should also help orally confident heritage-background learners distinguish between "being understood" and "approximating standard pronunciation", treating oral familiarity as a resource, not a substitute for systematic phonetic training. Connected-speech practice also matters: since tonal difficulties become more complex when tones occur in sequence (Kang & Wu, 2021), classroom activities should move from single-syllable drills to word-, phrase-, and discourse-level practice through dialogues, reading aloud, shadowing, and communicative tasks.

Character teaching should be central in Dungan-oriented pedagogy, since most Dungan learners come from alphabetic literacy backgrounds and lack the graphic and structural awareness required for character learning (Li, 2015; Hou, 2016; Wang, 2021). First, teachers should introduce the basic logic of characters, including strokes,

stroke order, spatial structure, radicals, semantic and phonetic components, and common formation patterns, rather than asking learners to memorise isolated visual forms. Second, component-based teaching can reduce memory burden: learners can identify recurring components, group characters by radicals or phonetic elements, and compare similar-looking characters, learning how semantic radicals relate to meaning domains and how phonetic components may cue pronunciation. Third, handwriting and recognition should be integrated: overreliance on pinyin or digital input may improve short-term communication but weaken character production, so teachers should balance handwriting, reading recognition, dictation, digital input, and contextual use. Digital tools such as spaced repetition and handwriting feedback applications can support repeated exposure and correction, which is consistent with Dungan learners' strong reliance on visual strategies (Wei, 2021), but such tools should reinforce, not replace, structural instruction.

Grammar instruction should address both structural accuracy and functional use. Learners' difficulties with word order, the *ba*-construction, function words, complements, and written sentence structure result from the interaction of Dungan, Russian, Turkic languages, and Putonghua, so teaching should combine contrastive explanation, contextualised examples, and usage-based practice rather than presenting rules as abstract patterns (Fan, 2012; Hou, 2020; Wu, 2024). The *ba*-construction is illustrative: learners may memorise its surface pattern yet fail to use it appropriately in discourse, and corpus evidence reveals recurrent error types and developmental tendencies (Wu, 2024); learner corpus examples can highlight semantic conditions, verb-result relations, object definiteness, and discourse function alongside word order. Contrastive teaching should not overemphasise negative transfer: it should also highlight where learners' partial structural intuition from their Sinitic background can facilitate learning. Task-based practice can further connect grammar with meaning through communicative tasks requiring learners to describe events, narrate experiences, and write short texts using target structures, plus, at higher levels, work on sentence cohesion, complex clauses, and written-style patterns.

Vocabulary teaching should consider the relationship between oral familiarity, dialectal knowledge, and standard Chinese vocabulary. Learners may recognise words similar to Dungan forms without knowing their standard written forms or register or may rely on Russian or local-language equivalents as the main mediation route; instruction should build form-meaning-use connections across pronunciation, characters, collocation, and context, helping learners distinguish heritage-related familiarity from standard Putonghua usage through semantic comparison, example sentences, and register information. Wen shows that writing difficulties, including spoken-style expressions, weak cohesion, insufficient academic vocabulary, and limited genre awareness, persist even after basic communicative competence is acquired, so writing

instruction should be strengthened at intermediate and advanced levels (Wen, 2023). A process-oriented approach is recommended, involving planning, drafting, revising, and editing, supported by model texts, genre analysis, peer feedback, and revision tasks. Academic writing instruction should also cover paragraph structure, cohesive devices, formal vocabulary, and summary writing, along with cross-linguistic comparison of writing conventions for learners accustomed to academic literacy in Russian.

Strategy-based models such as the production-oriented approach connect strategy training with language skills and content learning, and achievement is influenced not only by linguistic background but by how learners manage tasks, use resources, and participate in class (Zhang, 2019; Li, 2020). Teachers should foster skill-specific strategies: component analysis, spaced repetition, and self-testing for characters; collocation and register recording for vocabulary; shadowing and self-recording for listening and speaking; and self-revision for writing. N. Zhang's (2020) iFIAS-based study of elementary oral Chinese classes highlights the importance of teacher-student verbal interaction and balanced participation: if teachers dominate classroom talk, learners have insufficient opportunity to produce Chinese and receive feedback. Dungan learners also vary in confidence: some speak readily because of heritage identity, while others feel anxious about expectations to outperform ordinary international students. A supportive environment is therefore essential. Y. Zhu's (2019) study of non-preset classroom events shows that teachers need intercultural sensitivity and flexible management, and classroom norms should be explained clearly, since learners' expectations may be shaped by previous education in Central Asia.

Chinese teaching should also address cultural identity and emotional experience: learners' relationship with Chinese is not purely instrumental but connected with ancestral memory, ethnic identity, religious background, and future mobility, and language learning is closely related to social networks, cultural belonging, and identity negotiation (Ma & Ma, 2018; Shen, 2021; Imyarova, 2022). Teachers should recognise learners' dual or multiple identities. Perceived as having Chinese roots in Central Asia, Dungan students may be treated mainly as foreign students in China. This double positioning creates both motivation and psychological pressure, and learners should not be assumed to automatically understand Chinese culture or identify with mainstream norms. Culturally responsive teaching can incorporate materials on Dungan history, Hui culture, north-western China, Central Asian societies, and Chinese Muslim communities; cultural teaching has even been extended to classical Chinese poetry, where themes such as migration, homesickness, and moon imagery may resonate with Dungan learners' historical memory (Li, 2020). Classroom discussion can compare cultural practices across China and Central Asia, and institutions should provide orientation, peer mentoring, and interaction with Chinese students. Identity support is integral to language learning: recognised learners participate more



willingly, while misunderstood or simplified identities reduce motivation. Dungan-oriented teaching should therefore integrate linguistic instruction with cultural recognition and learner agency. As the discussion above suggests,

effective teaching should integrate linguistic, literacy, strategic, and sociocultural dimensions. Table 3 summarises the major learning difficulties, possible causes, and corresponding pedagogical responses.

Table 3. Pedagogical responses to Dungan learners' Chinese acquisition difficulties

Learning difficulty	Possible cause	Pedagogical response	Representative studies
Tone perception and production errors	Differences between Dungan and Putonghua; limited awareness of standard tone contours	Contrastive tone teaching; pitch visualisation; perception-production training; connected-speech practice	X. Kang (2019); X. Kang & H. Wu (2021); M. Xie <i>et al.</i> (2018)
Chinese character writing difficulties	Cyrillic literacy background; lack of Chinese-character tradition; weak component awareness	Explicit stroke and component teaching; radical-based grouping; handwriting feedback; spaced repetition	H. Li (2015); Y. Hou (2016); S. Wang (2021)
Word order and ba-construction errors	Multilingual transfer; partial structural similarity; insufficient discourse-based grammar teaching	Corpus-based grammar instruction; contrastive examples; contextualised tasks; discourse-level practice	J. Fan (2012); Y. Hou (2020); T. Wu (2024)
Oralised written Chinese	Strong oral learning route; limited exposure to written registers; weak genre awareness	Process writing; model-text analysis; formal vocabulary instruction; cohesion and register training	S. Wen (2023)
Inefficient learning strategies	Reliance on memorisation; limited strategy awareness; varying motivation	Strategy training for characters, vocabulary, listening, speaking, and writing; self-regulated learning	X. Zhang (2019)
Limited classroom participation	Teacher-dominated interaction; anxiety; identity-related pressure	Interactive classroom design; peer tasks; supportive feedback; balanced teacher-student talk	N. Zhang (2020)
Cultural adaptation difficulties	Dual identity; differences between Central Asian and Chinese academic/social norms	Culturally responsive pedagogy; intercultural reflection; social network support; peer mentoring	L. Shen (2021); J. Ma & H. Ma (2018); Z. Imyarova (2022)

Source: compiled by the author based on the reviewed literature

As Table 3 shows, responses must match the specific sources of difficulty: phonetic comparison and feedback for pronunciation, orthographic awareness for characters, usage-based and corpus-informed practice for grammar and register and genre development for writing. Motivation, classroom interaction, and identity support should also be integrated into teaching design. An integrated framework should follow four principles: the contrastive-resource principle, according to which teaching is contrastive but not deficit-oriented, systematically comparing Dungan, Putonghua, Russian, and Turkic languages while treating the Dungan background as a resource as well as a source of transfer; the script-sensitive principle, which recognises that character literacy is not automatically supported by oral heritage and therefore assigns explicit instruction in strokes, components, and orthographic structure a central place from the beginning level; the multilingual principle, which takes account of Russian, Turkic, and other language experience and mobilises learners' full linguistic repertoire for metalinguistic comparison; and the culturally responsive principle, which supports identity negotiation and intercultural adaptation by integrating cultural recognition into linguistic instruction. Together, these four principles link the linguistic difficulties summarised in Table 2 with the pedagogical responses summarised in Table 3 and provide a reference framework for curriculum design and teacher training.

In summary, pedagogy should rest on a clear understanding of the Dungan learner profile: oral familiarity

facilitates some learning, Cyrillic-based literacy creates major challenges in character learning and writing, the multilingual environment influences all linguistic domains, and identity position affects motivation and adaptation. Existing studies offer useful suggestions, but the field needs systematic intervention research testing these approaches and examining how country of origin, Dungan proficiency, Russian dominance, Chinese proficiency, and prior script experience affect outcomes. Dungan-oriented teaching should thus move from experience-based adaptation toward evidence-based, heritage-sensitive, and multilingual pedagogy.

Cultural adaptation and identity negotiation

Chinese acquisition among Dungan learners is not only a linguistic and pedagogical process but also a sociocultural one involving identity, belonging, and adaptation. Because the Dungan people have historical, linguistic, and cultural connections with China while having lived for generations in Central Asia, learners enter Chinese learning with complex expectations. For some, these expectations involve ancestral memory, cultural return, and ethnic identity; for others, they involve education, employment, mobility, or practical communication. Occupying an intermediate position between foreign students and heritage learners, they must negotiate how to understand and present themselves in different cultural contexts.

Dungan identity has developed through migration, settlement, language maintenance, religious continuity, and adaptation to Central Asian societies. The Dungan

maintain a distinctive ethnic consciousness through language, family memory, Islamic practice, food culture, marriage customs, and transnational connections, while also being shaped by Russian, Turkic, and broader Soviet and post-Soviet influences (Ding, 2005; Yeoh *et al.*, 2011; Imyarova, 2019). This layered identity matters for Chinese acquisition because language use among Central Asian Dungan descendants is closely connected with ethnic belonging, community memory, and identity construction: Chinese is not completely foreign, being tied to community history and ancestral origin, yet standard Chinese may also feel distant given the independent development of Dungan language, literacy, and society (Zhang & Yang, 2017). Learners may thus experience both familiarity and estrangement, and Chinese-language identity has been shown to vary among heritage learners from different Central Asian countries (Wang, 2023). The notion of “return” is correspondingly complex: J. Ma & H. Ma (2018) emphasise that Dungan communities’ relationship with China is not a return to an unchanged homeland but a negotiated process shaped by memory, mobility, and present conditions. Z. Imyarova’s (2022) research on Osh Dungans shows that Dungan identity is not fixed but constructed through balancing relations with different majority groups. Chinese learning thus adds another layer to learners’ repertoire of belonging rather than simply recovering a lost ancestral language.

In many Dungan communities, Dungan carries symbolic value as an ethnic identity marker, Russian and national languages serve educational and economic functions, and Putonghua is associated with international education, employment, heritage, and mobility. Motivation is correspondingly multidimensional: X. Zhang (2019) found motivation, learning engagement, and achievement closely related among intermediate-level learners, and research on Central Asian heritage learners indicates that strategy use is shaped by language background and learning goals. Instrumental and identity-related motivation often coexist: Dungan learners may show relatively strong cultural-integration and instrumental motivation, while cultural identity may also correlate with affective learning strategies (You, 2015; Zhai, 2016). Instrumental motives (academic advancement, scholarships, trade, translation, cross-border employment) and identity-related motives (ancestral roots, Hui and Dungan history, Chinese culture) may reinforce each other. This pattern is consistent with classical and contemporary motivation research, in which instrumental and integrative or identity-related orientations are understood as complementary rather than mutually exclusive (Gardner, 1985; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). Identity-related motivation can also create pressure: teachers or Chinese peers may assume Dungan learners should learn Chinese more easily, producing anxiety when learners struggle with characters, tones, or academic writing. Teaching should therefore avoid essentialising Dungan learners as “naturally close” to Chinese; heritage provides resources but not a substitute for systematic instruction and emotional support.

In China, Dungan learners face cross-cultural adaptation challenges similar to those of other international students, but with distinctive features, including culture shock related to modern campus norms, social etiquette, and interpersonal expectations (Shen, 2021). L. Shen’s (2021) fieldwork in Xi’an universities shows that social relationships play an important role in adaptation: co-ethnic, Central Asian, Chinese, religious, and online networks provide emotional support, academic help, and language practice, though remaining within co-ethnic or Russian-speaking circles may limit Chinese interaction. Religion and daily life also matter, because Islamic practice remains an important component of Dungan ethno-cultural identity: food practices and religious observances may differ from those of classmates, and where halal resources or Hui communities are absent, institutional support may be needed (Ortikov, 2023). These factors affect emotional stability and campus participation. Academic adaptation is a further issue: learners accustomed to Russian- or Central Asian-influenced educational systems may need academic orientation, writing guidance, and intercultural advising, not language courses alone.

Social networks shape language development through the quantity and quality of Chinese interaction. Co-ethnic, Central Asian, Chinese peer, institutional, and online networks each offer different resources, including emotional security, shared languages, authentic input, and academic guidance, and their balance shapes outcomes: reliance on co-ethnic or Russian-speaking networks maintains support but limits practice, while interaction with Chinese students brings input but also communicative pressure. Institutions should therefore create structured opportunities for meaningful interaction, such as peer mentoring, mixed-group projects, conversation partnerships, and community-based learning, rather than simply encouraging “more contact”. Pragmatic competence is especially influenced by such interaction: the speech-act difficulties discussed in Section 4 are best addressed through guided exposure, reflection, and authentic communication; social networks are thus sites of pragmatic development as well as emotional resources (Jia, 2017).

For Dungan learners, Chinese acquisition may therefore be interpreted, with appropriate caution, as a process of identity reconstruction, an interpretation supported by Dungan-specific evidence that language use among Central Asian Dungan descendants is closely connected with ethnic belonging and that Chinese-language identity varies systematically among heritage learners from different Central Asian countries (Zhang & Yang, 2017; Wang, 2023). This does not mean simply becoming “more Chinese” but rather reconsidering one’s relationship with Dungan identity, Central Asian identity, Hui heritage, Islam, China, and global mobility. Heritage language theory helps explain this process: much heritage research concerns immigrant families in which a home language weakens under pressure from a dominant language, and Dungan learners share this connection between community language and identity (Polinsky



& Kagan, 2007; Montrul, 2010). Yet they differ in that their heritage-related language is not modern standard Chinese and their literacy tradition is not character-based; they are acquiring a standard language historically related to, but not identical with, their community language. Learners may therefore ask whether Chinese learning strengthens or weakens Dungan maintenance and may view Putonghua as a bridge to ancestral culture or as a separate practical language. Pedagogically, comparing Dungan, Putonghua, Russian, and local languages, writing reflective essays on language and identity, interviewing family members, and creating bilingual cultural projects can all connect language learning with learner agency and cultural knowledge.

Language maintenance and the future of Dungan

The relationship between Chinese acquisition and Dungan language maintenance deserves careful attention, given that Dungan language development involves both adaptation to surrounding societies and inheritance of community linguistic resources (Zhou, 2018). Chinese learning may strengthen interest in linguistic heritage by revealing historical connections, yet if Putonghua becomes more prestigious or useful, Dungan may be further marginalised among younger generations; Chinese acquisition should therefore not replace Dungan maintenance. Transmission studies document challenges of intergenerational transmission, language environment, education, and sociolinguistic change and since transfer patterns and identity motivation may differ by Dungan proficiency, future studies should include detailed language background measures (Han, 2019). Chinese teaching can also support Dungan language awareness through Dungan-Putonghua comparison, the history of Dungan writing and discussion of language contact in Central Asia, framing Dungan, Putonghua, Russian, and regional languages as complementary resources (Sinitsyn, 2023). Digital resources may contribute as well: low-resource Dungan speech synthesis points toward bilingual corpora, digital dictionaries, and comparative platforms connecting community language maintenance with formal education (Liu *et al.*, 2024).

In sum, Dungan learners' Chinese learning involves not only linguistic development but adaptation to Chinese academic and social environments, negotiation of cultural belonging, and reconstruction of heritage-related identity, shaped by migration history, Dungan language, Islamic culture, Russian and Turkic contact, and contemporary educational mobility. A distinctive ethnic identity maintained in Central Asia meets new forms of classification and expectation in China, and social networks, cultural recognition, and institutional support all shape participation. Future research and teaching should therefore integrate sociocultural analysis with linguistic acquisition, viewing Dungan learners not through their errors or deficiencies but as multilingual heritage-related learners whose acquisition is embedded in identity negotiation, language maintenance, and transnational mobility.

Research gaps and future directions in Dungan learner research

Taken together, the findings of this review converge on a central asymmetry: Dungan learners' partial oral familiarity with Sinitic forms coexists with persistent difficulty in character literacy, written production, and register awareness. This pattern is consistent with heritage language research showing that heritage speakers typically develop stronger oral than literacy skills and that their proficiency is shaped by the literacy practices of the dominant society (Polinsky & Kagan, 2007; Montrul, 2008; Polinsky, 2018). The Dungan case extends this research in an important direction: it demonstrates that heritage language learning may involve dialectal continuity without script continuity, a combination rarely addressed in heritage language studies focused on immigrant communities in North America and Europe.

The findings also align with research on heritage Chinese learners in other contexts. Studies of heritage Chinese education in the United States have shown that learners with home exposure to Chinese varieties still require systematic literacy instruction and differentiated curricula (Carreira & Kagan, 2011). Dungan learners resemble these learners in their uneven proficiency profiles, but they differ in that their community language is a distinct Sinitic variety written in Cyrillic and their schooling is mediated by Russian and Turkic languages. The linguistic difficulties summarised in Table 2, particularly tone perception and production, character writing, and the *ba*-construction, therefore reflect not a single source of transfer but the interaction of dialectal continuity, script discontinuity, multilingual contact, and identity negotiation, supporting the four-dimensional integrated model proposed in this review.

Comparing the reviewed findings with previous studies also reveals several tensions. Early pedagogical reports assumed that Dungan learners possessed a natural advantage in Chinese learning, whereas later experimental and corpus-based studies showed that dialectal proximity produces both facilitation and interference (Kang, 2019; Kang & Wu, 2021; Wu, 2024). Sociocultural studies similarly qualify the assumption of cultural closeness: Dungan learners' identity is negotiated between Central Asia and China rather than simply inherited (Ma & Ma, 2018; Imyarova, 2022). These tensions indicate that the field is moving from experience-based description toward theoretically informed explanation, but this movement remains incomplete. Although research on Dungan learners' Chinese acquisition has expanded, the field still faces limitations in research scope, methodology, theoretical framing, and data construction. These limitations indicate a field moving from description and error analysis toward theoretically informed, empirically diversified research.

One major limitation is the concentration of research sites: many studies are based on Dungan learners at a small number of universities in north-western China, which limits generalisability. Samples are often small convenience groups, and learners are treated as

homogeneous despite differences in country of origin, educational background, Dungan and Russian proficiency, script experience, and motivation. Future research should sample across countries and institutions and collect detailed language background information to distinguish Dungan-specific difficulties from broader Central Asian multilingual effects. A second limitation is methodological: research relies heavily on questionnaires, interviews, classroom observation, and error analysis, which reveal error types but often cannot explain how errors develop or how instruction changes interlanguage. Acoustic and experimental phonetic studies and corpus-based research on the ba-construction point to a more empirical direction, but remain relatively limited. Future studies should adopt longitudinal, experimental, psycholinguistic, intervention, and mixed-methods designs (Kang, 2019; Kang & Wu, 2021; Wu, 2024). A third limitation is insufficient theoretical integration: findings are rarely connected to broader frameworks, so the Dungan case has not been fully integrated into international discussions of heritage language acquisition, multilingual acquisition, language contact, script transfer, and learner identity. The case is theoretically important because learners' community language is Dungan rather than modern standard Chinese and their literacy tradition is Cyrillic: heritage learning may thus involve acquiring a related standard language through a different script under multilingual influence (Polinsky & Kagan, 2007; Montrul, 2010). Language contact theory is equally essential: Dungan developed under long-term contact with Russian and Turkic languages, so learner errors should be attributed not only to "mother tongue interference" but to multiple sources of cross-linguistic influence. Future research should develop an integrated model combining four dimensions: dialectal continuity, script discontinuity, multilingual contact, and identity negotiation (Honkasalo, 2024).

A fourth limitation is the lack of large-scale learner corpora and digital resources: most studies rely on

manually collected, difficult-to-compare classroom data, so developmental patterns, frequency effects, and writing improvement cannot be examined systematically. Specialised corpora for Central Asian Chinese heritage learners have already been proposed as promising for data-driven research and a Dungan learner corpus would enable cross-proficiency analysis and comparison with other Central Asian learners (Zhao, 2022). Digital Dungan resources are also needed: recent low-resource Dungan speech synthesis shows that computational methods can be applied to Dungan data and future comparative corpora, lexical databases, and learning platforms would support research on script transfer and language maintenance (Liu *et al.*, 2024).

Most existing studies are cross-sectional and cannot explain developmental change, such as which pronunciation errors persist after instruction, how character awareness develops across levels, or how identity motivation changes during study in China. Longitudinal research following the same learners over months or years could show whether oral familiarity provides long-term advantages or script discontinuity continues to constrain higher-level literacy. Comparisons with non-Dungan Central Asian, other heritage Chinese, and Russian- or Turkic-background learners would clarify which features are Dungan-specific and which are shared.

Based on these limitations, future research should establish detailed learner profiles covering Dungan proficiency, script experience, multilingual background, and identity orientation; adopt longitudinal, experimental, corpus-based, and intervention designs; integrate theories of heritage language acquisition, multilingualism, language contact, and script transfer; develop digital resources, including learner corpora and Dungan-Chinese comparative databases; and examine the relationship between Chinese acquisition and Dungan language maintenance. Table 4 summarises the main limitations and corresponding directions.

Table 4. Limitations of existing research and future directions

Current limitation	Typical pattern in existing studies	Future research direction
Concentrated research sites	Samples mainly from a small number of universities in north-western China	Cross-institutional and cross-national sampling in China and Central Asia
Small and homogeneous samples	Dungan learners often treated as one unified group	Detailed learner profiling by country, Dungan proficiency, script background, and multilingual experience
Overreliance on questionnaires and error analysis	Many studies describe errors or perceptions but do not track development	Longitudinal, experimental, psycholinguistic, and intervention research
Insufficient theoretical integration	Findings not always linked to heritage language acquisition, language contact, or multilingualism	Integrated model based on dialectal continuity, script discontinuity, multilingual contact, and identity negotiation
Lack of learner corpora	Data are often small, local, and difficult to compare	Spoken, written, and multimodal learner corpora for Dungan Chinese learners
Limited digital Dungan resources	Dungan remains a low-resource language in computational research	Dungan-Putonghua databases, speech resources, digital dictionaries, and comparative platforms
Weak connection between acquisition and identity	Linguistic errors and cultural identity often studied separately	Integrated research on language learning, identity, social networks, and language maintenance

Source: compiled by the author based on the reviewed literature



As Table 4 shows, future research should improve the quality, comparability, and theoretical relevance of the field, treating Dungan learners as multilingual heritage-related learners and thereby connecting Central Asian Chinese education with broader debates in applied linguistics.

Conclusions

This review set out to synthesise research on Chinese acquisition among Dungan heritage learners in Central Asia from linguistic, pedagogical, and sociocultural perspectives. The analysis yielded several specific findings. First, in the linguistic domain, Dungan learners' difficulties are concentrated in tone perception and production, Chinese character writing (including stroke order, component arrangement, and structural balance), word order and the ba-construction, register control, and oralised written style; these difficulties arise from the interaction of dialectal transfer, Cyrillic-based literacy, and Russian and Turkic contact rather than from any single source.

Second, in the pedagogical domain, the reviewed studies converge on responses matched to these difficulties: contrastive tone teaching with pitch visualisation and connected-speech practice for pronunciation; explicit stroke- and component-based instruction for characters; corpus-informed, discourse-level teaching for grammar; and process writing with register and genre training for written production, supplemented by strategy training, interactive classroom design, and culturally responsive support. On this basis, the review proposed an integrated pedagogical framework organised around four principles, namely the contrastive-resource, script-sensitive, multilingual, and culturally responsive principles, which link specific learning difficulties with corresponding instructional responses. Third, in the sociocultural

domain, Chinese learning among Dungan learners is embedded in identity negotiation between Central Asia and China: learners' double positioning as descendants of Chinese-speaking Muslims in Central Asia and as international students in China shapes motivation, classroom participation, and cross-cultural adaptation, making identity support an integral part of language teaching rather than an optional supplement.

Current research remains limited by concentrated samples, small-scale designs, overreliance on questionnaires and error analysis, insufficient theoretical integration, and the lack of learner corpora and digital resources; future studies should adopt longitudinal, experimental, corpus-based, comparative, and interdisciplinary methods and should test the proposed framework in intervention research. The Dungan case enriches heritage language acquisition research by showing that heritage learning may involve dialectal continuity without script continuity, and it therefore provides an important perspective for understanding the relationship between language, literacy, culture, and identity in multilingual Central Asia.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Көп тилдүү Борбордук Азиядагы дунган мурас тилин үйрөнүүчүлөрдүн кытай тилин өздөштүрүүсү

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Аннотация. Борбордук Азиядагы дунган окуучулары кытай тилин өздөштүрүүдө өзгөчө топту түзөт, анткени алардын тилдик тажрыйбасы кытай диалектилери менен тарыхый байланыштарды, кирилл жазуусуна негизделген сабаттуулукту жана узак мөөнөттүү көп тилдүү карым-катнашты айкалыштырат. Кытайдын түндүк-батышынан көчүп келген хуэй мигранттарынын урпактары катары алардын көбү кытай тилдик формалары менен жарым-жартылай оозеки тааныштыкка ээ болгону менен, кытай иероглифтик жазмасын үзгүлтүксүз өздөштүрүү салтына ээ эмес. Бул серептин максаты дунган окуучуларынын кытай тилин өздөштүрүүсүнө арналган изилдөөлөрдү жалпылоо жана анын мурас тилдерин үйрөнүү менен Борбордук Азияда кытай тилин окутуу үчүн маанисин аныктоо болду. Изилдөөдө дунган тилине, кытай тилин өздөштүрүүгө, Борбордук Азияда кытай тилин окутууга жана мурас тилдерге байланыштуу библиографиялык булактарга тематикалык сереп жүргүзүлдү. Жыйынтыктар оозеки тилге салыштырмалуу жакындык менен жазуу сабаттуулугун өздөштүрүүдөгү түрүктүү кыйынчылыктардын ортосундагы асимметрияны көрсөттү. Негизги көйгөйлөр тонду кабыл алуу жана туура айтуу, кытай иероглифтерин жазуу, сөздөрдүн орун тартиби жана ба конструкциясы, ошондой эле тилдик регистрлерди туура колдонуу болду. Фонетика менен лексиканы өздөштүрүүгө дунган тили жана Кытайдын түндүк-батышындагы кытай тилинин түрлөрүнүн ортосундагы уланмалуулук белгилүү деңгээлде өбөлгө түзсө, иероглифтерди үйрөнүү, жазуу жүзүндө тилди колдонуу жана регистрдик компетенттүүлүк жазуу системаларынын айырмачылыгы жана орус жана түрк тилдери менен байланыш аркылуу чектелген. Социомаданий жактан кытай тилин үйрөнүү Борбордук Азия менен Кытайдын ортосундагы өздүктү калыптандыруу менен байланыштуу болуп, окуучулардын мотивациясына, сабакка катышуусуна жана маданияттар аралык адаптациясына таасир этет. Учурдагы изилдөөлөр чакан тандалмалар, чектелүү изилдөө жайлары жана узак мөөнөттүү, корпустук жана эксперименттик эмгектердин жетишсиздиги менен чектелет. Жыйынтыктар дунган окуучуларына кытай тилин окутуу дифференцияланган, жазуу өзгөчөлүктөрүн жана көп тилдүүлүктү эске алган, маданий жактан ылайыктуу болушу керектигин көрсөтөт. Ал айтылышты салыштырма окутууну, иероглифтерди компоненттер боюнча үйрөтүүнү, корпустук грамматиканы жана окуучулардын өздүгүн колдогон класстык практикаларды айкалыштырууга тийиш. Серептин практикалык мааниси көп тилдүү Борбордук Азияда мурас тилге багытталган кытай тилин окутууну өнүктүрүүгө көмөк көрсөтүүдө турат. Мындай ыкма окуучулардын тилдик тажрыйбасын эске алып, кытай тилин үйрөнүүнүн натыйжалуулугун жогорулатууга жана билим берүү менен мурастын байланышын бекемдөөгө мүмкүндүк берет.

Негизги сөздөр: жазма уланмалуулуктун үзгүлтүккө учурашы; кирилл сабаттуулугу; тилдик байланыш; кытай иероглифтери; окуучунун өздүгү; путунхуа тилин окутуу; маданияттар аралык адаптация



Освоение китайского языка дунганскими наследными учащимися в многоязычной Центральной Азии

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Аннотация. Дунганские учащиеся в Центральной Азии представляют собой особую группу в процессе освоения китайского языка, поскольку их языковой опыт сочетает исторические связи с китайскими диалектами, грамотность на основе кириллицы и длительный многоязычный контакт. Будучи потомками хуэйских мигрантов из северо-западного Китая, многие из них устно частично знакомы с китайскими языковыми формами, однако не имеют непрерывной традиции владения китайской иероглифической письменностью. Целью данного обзора являлось обобщение исследований, посвящённых освоению китайского языка дунганскими учащимися, и определение их значения для изучения наследных языков и преподавания китайского языка в Центральной Азии. В исследовании применялся тематический обзор библиографических источников, посвящённых дунганскому языку, освоению китайского языка, преподаванию китайского языка в Центральной Азии и изучению наследных языков. Результаты показали асимметрию между относительной устной знакомостью с китайским языком и сохраняющимися трудностями в освоении письменности. Наиболее устойчивыми проблемными областями оказались восприятие и воспроизведение тонов, написание китайских иероглифов, порядок слов и конструкция *ba*, а также владение различными речевыми регистрами. Освоению фонетики и лексики частично способствовала преемственность между дунганским языком и разновидностями китайского языка северо-западного Китая, тогда как изучение иероглифов, письменная речь и владение речевыми регистрами были затруднены различиями в письменных системах и языковым контактом с русским и тюркскими языками. В социокультурном аспекте изучение китайского языка связано с формированием и переосмыслением идентичности на стыке Центральной Азии и Китая, что влияет на мотивацию учащихся, их участие в учебном процессе и межкультурную адаптацию. Существующие исследования ограничены небольшими выборками, узкой географией исследований, а также недостатком лонгитюдных, корпусных и экспериментальных работ. Полученные результаты показывают, что преподавание китайского языка дунганским учащимся должно быть дифференцированным, учитывать особенности письменности и многоязычной среды и быть культурно ориентированным. Оно должно сочетать сопоставительное обучение произношению, поэлементное обучение иероглифам, преподавание грамматики с опорой на корпусные данные и педагогические практики, поддерживающие идентичность учащихся. Практическая значимость обзора заключается в содействии развитию преподавания китайского языка с учётом языкового наследия в многоязычной Центральной Азии

Ключевые слова: разрыв письменной преемственности; кириллическая грамотность; языковой контакт; китайские иероглифы; идентичность учащихся; преподавание путунхуа; межкультурная адаптация