



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

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Mongolian-Kazakh Oralmandar: Repatriation, Citizenship, and National Belonging in Kazakhstan

Topic of Research

My research examines the role of ethnic Kazakh returnees from Mongolia in shaping conceptions and practices of citizenship and national belonging in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. This report describes the fieldwork undertaken December 2006-September 2007 in the Almaty region of Kazakhstan. I plan to return for additional 9 to 12 months of field research in 2007-2008. Therefore, all arguments and conclusions presented in this report are preliminary and contingent in nature, as more fieldwork research and analysis of data is forthcoming.

Research description

How do locally situated practices and sociopolitical structures interact with and shape conceptions, practices, and institutions of citizenship and national belonging? How can we, as researchers, trace the circulation of local practices of repatriation to national understandings of the legitimate citizen? My research investigates how in post-Soviet Central Asia, the return of a

diasporic population to its titular homeland has resulted in a breakdown between state policies and local priorities, and has provoked radical new discussions of what constitutes ethnicity, belonging, and citizenship.

As a Soviet republic, Kazakhstan was often referred to as “the laboratory of the friendship of peoples”. With the break-up of the Soviet Union and the attainment of political independence in 1991, Kazakhstan emerged as a “multiethnic” state in which ethnic Kazakhs constituted less than fifty percent of the population. Thus, as some scholars point out, the political elites in Kazakhstan have walked somewhat of a tightrope: trying not to alienate ethnic Russians and other non-Kazakh “Kazakhstanis” while at the same time fostering expectations of Kazakhstan as the homeland of Kazakhs. Return migrants are caught in the resulting social and political ambivalences. Oralmandar (plural, meaning “people that return”) have been coming to Kazakhstan since 1991, when President Nursultan Nazarbayev called for the return of diasporic Kazakhs to their “historic homeland”. Although never officially acknowledged, the motivation for President Nazarbayev’s policy of repatriation was a perceived need to increase the number of ethnic Kazakhs. This “demographic struggle” is exemplified in the formation of a quasi-nongovernmental body (chaired by President Nazarbayev himself), The World Association of Kazakhs (WAK), which bears responsibility for developing and maintaining Kazakhstan’s amorphous diaspora policy. Through WAK, President Nursultan Nazarbaev appealed to ‘all Kazakhs to unite under a single flag on the soil of Kazakhstan’.

The promotion of “return migration” occurred not only through official and semi-official governmental channels, such as Kazakhstan’s embassy in Mongolia and WAK, but also through mass media, especially Kazakh language newspapers and radio, available to Kazakhs in Mongolia. Articles serving to promote ‘return migration’ circulated widely in Kazakh-language press in the early 1990’s and include titles such as: “Come to Our Homeland Saying ‘Homeland How Are You’”; “Will All Kazakhs Return to Kazakhstan? Uniqueness of Our Nation is Our Language – Come Back to the Homeland Kinsmen”; “Let the Great Migration Never Stop”; “It is Better to be a Common Person in Your Homeland than to be a Sultan in a Foreign Country”. Mongolian Kazakhs I interviewed told me that many people in Bayan Olgii Autonomous District regularly read newspapers and listened to radio broadcasts from Kazakhstan.

Kazakhs from Mongolia were among the first to heed the call for repatriation. Of the estimated 120,000 ethnic Kazakhs living in Mongolia prior to 1991, 60,000 have moved to Kazakhstan during the first 2 years of independence, 1991 and 1992. A small group of Kazakh intellectuals, based in Mongolian capital, Ulaan Bator, decided to move to Kazakhstan and actively encouraged repatriation among Kazakhs in Bayan Olgii. I had a chance to meet with and interview several of those members of Mongolian Kazakh intelligentsia in Almaty where they now live. They included a distinguished academic and a former member of Mongolian government, Zardykhan Kinayat, as well as a journalist, a businessman, and an engineer, whose names I have kept confidential. They related their experiences of what one man called “a nationalist euphoria” and a spirit of patriotism that spread among the Kazakh intelligentsia in Mongolia with Kazakhstan’s independence. As the same man told me later in the interview, describing the disappointments and hardships he has been experiencing in Kazakhstan for the past 16 years, “we have forgotten what we came here for in the first place”. While Kazakh families continue to repatriate from Mongolia every year, most of my informants agreed that repatriation has lost much of its initial sense of euphoria and promise, as well as its mass character after 1993. In fact, some claim that as many as 10,000 repatriates have returned to Mongolia since then, many with negative reports of their experiences in Kazakhstan, further discouraging repatriation among those remaining in Mongolia.

Approach and Research Methodology

My research has changed significantly during my stay in the field. While developing my research proposal, I planned to focus on the interactions between returnees and local state institutions in two different regions of Kazakhstan. I hypothesized that Mongolian-Kazakh oralmandar are transforming the conceptions and practices of citizenship in Kazakhstan through their interactions with local institutional practices and competing ideas of nation, homeland, and belonging. My research proposed to examine processes of nation-building at the local level, and posed the following research questions: What are the differences between the central government's nationalist rhetoric and actual practices oralmandar encounter in different regions of Kazakhstan upon their arrival? How are oralmandar dealing with those differences? How do their notions of identity and belonging become intertwined in current political discourses of the newly independent Kazakhstan?

The nine months I have spent in the field, have led to some changes in my methodological and theoretical approaches to the research topic. Initially, I proposed to conduct my research at two field sites, located in different regions of Kazakhstan. I hoped this would provide a comparative perspective necessary to examine the importance of local state officials and locally situated processes and relations in the emergence of new practices of citizenship and national belonging in different regions of Kazakhstan. However, during the first couple of months in the field, I began to realize the advantages of staying at the same site for the duration of the research project. It was taking me some time to establish relations of mutual understanding and trust with the Mongolian-Kazakhs and government officials whom I have met. It is only after several months of knowing me that people began to talk to me about topics that many found too sensitive or uncomfortable to discuss with a stranger and an outsider. These included feelings of frustration and disappointment some returnees expressed about their "historic homeland", about complicated and sometime hostile relations between migrants and other locals, and about the interpretation and implementations of laws and regulations by local officials, which often differed considerably from the official government line.

Living with a Mongolian-Kazakh family in the village of Chimalgan, near Almaty, I was quickly drawn into networks of mutual hospitality and visiting. Besides interacting with and interviewing repatriates in their homes, I spent time at the local bazaar, where many Mongolian-Kazakhs work, chatting and drinking tea, regularly visited and talked with other villagers and attended frequent feasts and celebrations given by local families, such as during Nauryz , when visiting and gift-giving among friends and neighbors is common. I was able to observe a variety of situation in which Kazakhs from Mongolia and other locals interacted with and talked about each other, such as while going shopping, visiting a health clinic, or registering a child for school. Even during my frequent trips to the city people sometimes passed the time in a crowded bus talking and making jokes about "oralman".

For the last 3 months of my research, after my host family decided to return to Mongolia, I lived with a family of a local government official. I maintained friendly relations with three other officials in the local government administration (akimat), spending whole days in their office, observing and talking to them about their work. Thus I was also able to examine the officials' perceptions and representations of Kazakhs from Mongolia and other countries. In addition to 6 months in Chimalgan, I spent 3 months in the city of Almaty, interviewing scholars, journalists, filmmakers, and NGO workers who were involved in working with and talking for and about return migrants. I also worked in the Library of the Academy of Sciences surveying accounts and representations of return migrants in Kazakh and Russian-language newspapers for the

past 17 years. This has helped me to form a fuller picture of their role in the discussions about the nature of national belonging and Kazakhstani statehood in mass media.

While I continued to pay attention to the interactions between repatriates and local state officials, I became more interested in tracing ideas and practices of belonging and relatedness through a variety of sites and interactions. Thus, my research focused on the role Mongolian-Kazakh returnees play in shaping the ideas and practices of citizenship and national belonging. Through my observations, conversations, and interviews I became aware that conceptions and practices of citizenship and national belonging may best be illuminated through a focus on discursive constructions of kinship and hospitality, seen as the defining characteristics of “Kazakhness” and as essential part of Kazakh “nomadic heritage”. I began to follow discursive interactions, whether they be highly ritualized occasions of nation-building rhetoric or the so-called “everyday” interactions of ordinary people, in which conceptions of relatedness and belonging and processes of inclusion and exclusion based on such discursive constructions are significant.

Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions

My field research indicates that official government rhetoric and national-level policies that encourage repatriation differ significantly from the migrants’ local experiences, in the places where they encounter difficulties acquiring promised citizenship status and assistance. I argue that, in Kazakhstan, ideas and practices of citizenship and national belonging and their relationship to statehood and political legitimization are being actively shaped in such locally situated interactions between returnees, government officials, and other local inhabitants. These might be structured and constrained, but they are not determined by state policies.

Policy of repatriation is intimately tied to the legitimizing claims of the political elites involved in promoting ambiguous, often contradictory, and broadly formulated notions and policies of Kazakh national revival. While the central government officially encourages repatriation, local officials described their work with repatriates in terms of efforts to “limit”, “control”, and “organize” what they interpret as chaotic and overwhelming migration processes. It is local government officials in individual districts, who decide which among the returnees deserve to be included in a small quota of those eligible for state assistance, and who should be allowed to become a citizen. In my conversations with government officials (themselves local inhabitants of the towns and villages where they worked), they connected locally situated discussions of the “oralman problem”, such as their perceived differences from “our” Kazakhs, as well as their economic, social and political impact on local communities, to ideas about modernity and tradition, about the impacts of cultural and linguistic Russification and the Soviet past, and to their visions of the future of Kazakhstan and the Kazakh nation.

In this respect, oralmandar from Mongolia hold a special place in the national imagination as the authentically traditional other of Kazakhstan’s national modernity. While conducting research, I found that Mongolian Kazakhs are often represented, and many see themselves, as having retained the traditional purity of Kazakh language and culture lost among “russified” and “deculturated” Kazakhs of Kazakhstan. This view is exemplified in the official acknowledgement by the World Khurultai (Counsel) of Kazakhs in 1992 as having enabled “the retention of traditional Kazakh culture and language to a far greater degree than any other Kazakh community in the world (including that of the former Kazakh SSR)”.

With the continuing use of the Russian language in many spheres of Kazakhstani life, representations of Mongolian oralmandar play an important role in public debates on the

relationships among language, ethnicity, nation, and state. The new law “On Migration of Populations” adopted in 1997 was drawn up at the same time that the law “On Languages” was under consideration in the Kazakhstani parliament. The law “On Migration of Population” was the first draft law to be formulated and written in the Kazakh, rather than the Russian, language. As Denier also argues, “the authors of the law were purported to be those seeking to prove that the Kazakh language is suitable for legal purposes, and the migration of diasporic Kazakhs provided a perfect issue through which this case could be made” (2003:336). The migration legislation concerning oralmandar was drawn up against a background of heated discussion pertaining to national language policy - the role of Kazakh and Russian languages in the construction of Kazakhstani state.

Nevertheless, as in other contexts that feature discourses of cultural loss, there seem to be tensions between notions of “civilization” or “modernity” and cultural “authenticity”. During my preliminary research, I often encountered what seemed to be a widespread perception among Kazakhstani Kazakhs: that oralmandar from Mongolia are the poorest, most backward, as well as the purest and most traditional. They were contrasted with, for example, oralmandar from Uzbekistan, who were often described as better educated. The Mongolian oralmandar I spoke with were very aware of these attitudes and representations, and while some embraced the discourses of cultural authenticity and tradition, they also expressed resentment at being seen as “museum pieces”, as one Mongolian-Kazakh woman poignantly put it to me. Thus, the symbolic resources of cultural authenticity and legitimacy on which Mongolian-Kazakh oralmandar can draw also serve as hindrances to their claims of membership and belonging in the modern state. Many repatriates shared with me their ambivalent feelings of belonging and estrangement they felt upon arrival to their “historic homeland”. Some referred to themselves as “second-class citizens” and one Mongolian Kazakh journalist told me: “we feel like a diaspora in our own homeland”. Thus, my research also began to address how the repatriates are negotiating complex alignments and identifications within Kazakhstan. How do diasporic returnees position themselves in relation not only to non-Kazakh Europeans but also to Kazakhstani Kazakhs who do not speak Kazakh? How do they variously map onto, reflect, and challenge currently salient divisions within Kazakhstan, such as Russian-speaking vs. Kazakh-speaking, urban vs. rural, modern vs. traditional? When looked at through a purely institutional, state-level perspective, the practices of statehood, citizenship and national belonging seem to be relatively (and deceptively) uniform. To focus on Mongolian- Kazakh repatriates, by contrast, illuminates their contingent complexity.

From the beginning, my research was guided by specific questions that people I spoke with focused on as significant to talk about, and the ways they made connections between those statements and other social phenomena. Thus I focused on exploring ideas and practices employed by repatriates in negotiating various identifications and forms of belonging and the connections they and others made between locally situated processes and understandings and debates about cultural authenticity and tradition, ideas about the role of Kazakh and Russian languages, and the authority and legitimacy of the state circulating translocally. Specifically, I found that many oralmandar negotiate such claims and identifications through recreating connections between ideas of kinship and hospitality and conceptions of citizenship and national belonging.

Ubiquitous trope of “hospitality” (*qonaqzhailylyq*), as a defining characteristic of “Kazakhness” (*Qazaqtyq*) and an essential part of Kazakh nomadic ‘heritage’ was often used to explain the reason for harmonious interethnic relations in Kazakhstan. However, it also serves to reiterate the position of all non-Kazakhs who live in Kazakhstan as “guests” and Kazakhs as “hosts”. Moreover, a “guest”, (as Andrew Shryock (2001) similarly describes for Jordanian Bedouins), is

a deeply ambivalent category, often loaded with fear and a sense of burden. A sense of an “honored guest” could be quickly turned into that of proverbial “uninvited guest” (aytpay kelgen qonaq in Kazakh or nezvaniy gost in Russian) or the one who has transgressed the unspoken norms of hospitality by overstaying her welcome. A telling example of the complex interplay among the notions of blood, family, ethnicity, nation, and state is the following passage from a Russian language textbook for 4th grade students: “In our republic, sons and daughters of one hundred and twenty peoples and nationalities work together in friendship. We are not of the same blood but we are from one family. Republic of Kazakhstan – our beloved and common Motherland!” Such understandings of nationhood and statehood, ambiguously employed by various actors within and outside Kazakhstan, allow for the notions of national belonging and membership both to overflow state boundaries and to exclude large segments of the populations residing within state borders. At the same time, Mongolian-Kazakh returnees challenge such familial conflations of statehood and nationhood: while being an important part of the conception of the Kazakh nation, they are denied in practice entry to membership in the state.

While still in the field, I began to draw on approaches from linguistic anthropology to help me analyze the discursive constructions of kinship and hospitality and their relation to ideas and practices of citizenship and national belonging. My research experience challenged an assumption, implicit in some of the studies of globalization and public culture: that mass mediated forms of communication, such as “public culture” or “public identity”, require analytical frameworks, vocabularies, and ethnographic practices different from those used to examine microdiscursive practices employed in more “intimate” interactions. Focus on finished products, which seem to appear as durable forms of text-artifacts, identity stereotypes, and other images, misses the fact that these represent just one phase in a broader conceptualization of continuous cultural processes of negotiation and struggle. Instead, attention to the entextualizing practices that link particular utterances to existing discursive models illuminates important aspects of such power struggles. It points to the central role of indexical meaning in establishing connections that can extend far beyond the present settings and link a particular act to other times, places, and persons.

Attention to specific metapragmatic and metanarrative devices, used by returnees to either distance themselves from or link themselves with authoritative textual precedents, helps to trace how locally situated experiences come together with ideas circulating beyond specific locales. I focused on the ways various forms of identification, belonging, and difference are constructed through specific intertextual and narrative devices. For example, one Mongolian-Kazakh man I interviewed cast his story in the culturally familiar narrative form of shezhire, that is, reciting the names of the seven generations of his patrilineal ancestors and naming and describing specific places and landmarks that marked their migration routes and seasonal pastures. Thus he ascertained that his ancestors have lived in western Mongolia for the past 700 years and so he should not be called an oralman, a label he and many other Mongolian-Kazakhs greatly resented. Discursively constructed categories of “kin”, “guest”, and “host” are recursively applicable and nested conceptions of relatedness and belonging that could be reproduced repeatedly by projecting them onto a narrower context or a broader one. Therefore, they index other distinctions, such as national vs. local, public vs. private, traditional vs. modern. As they are constantly subject to multiple reframings and subdivisions, it is precisely their shifting applicability and changing alignments that give them their great signifying and communicative power in Kazakhstan.

Finally, I argue that practices of citizenship and national belonging in Kazakhstan seem to point to the reconfiguration rather than uniform decline of the powers of the nation-state within a

global network of international political and economic systems. As other studies of return migration and transmigration suggest, processes of globalization (often described as increase in the ease of information and capital flows, as well as greater long-distance physical mobility) are not necessarily erasing national identity but are, in many cases, catalyzing new re-conceptions of homeland and de- and re-territorialisation of ethnic and national identifications. Since 1991, active construction of specifically “diasporic” identities among Kazakhs living abroad was undertaken by the government through very active media campaigns and official encouragement of return. This research examines processes of reterritorialization and reconfiguration of national identifications and imageries. Thus, it contribute the study of the role of states and governments in the construction of diasporic public spheres and in building connections between the “homeland” and its ethnics abroad.

I plan to return to the field for additional research during 2008 – 2009. I will focus on exploring the connections between conceptions of kinship and hospitality and ideas and practices of citizenship and national belonging in relation to Mongolian Kazakh repatriates in Kazakhstan.

Relevance and Contribution to Field

This study contributes to, as yet, nascent understanding of processes of identification and belonging in post-Soviet Central Asia. It highlights the importance of locally situated identifications and practices for understanding the symbolic and practical emplacement of people within larger contexts, such as those constituted by patterns of power and authority, of citizenship, nationhood, and state. By combining the methods of sociocultural and linguistic anthropology, this project explores conceptions of kinship and hospitality and their relation to ideas and practices of citizenship and national belonging. I examine the construction of such linkages as continual processes of (re)creation, in which relations between citizens and the state as a political body are continuously shaped in specific interactions. Rather than treating ‘the local’ as an unproblematic and coherent spatial unit, I investigate the multiply mediated contexts through which ideas of citizenship and national belonging come to be constructed and represented.

Thus, this project also contributes to a growing ethnographic literature which examines citizenship as an on-going process and a social practice, rather than a static category. It entails complex and often contradictory struggles over the definitions of membership and belonging, over categories and practices of inclusion and exclusion, and over different forms of participation in public life. My research explores various forms of membership, identification, and belonging that go beyond the dichotomy of “formative” and “substantive” citizenship, or the difference between citizenship as an institution and citizenship as lived. Attention to narrative devises and entextualizing practices used in specific discursive interactions will help to trace how local level encounters come together with ideas and representations circulating beyond specific locales. By focusing on the role of Mongolian-Kazakh returnees in transforming the ideas and practices of citizenship and belonging in Kazakhstan, this study traces the interactions among ideas, practices, and institutions and questioning the theoretical separation between determining macro-structures of state power and the micro-discursive processes on the ground.

Suggestions for Future Research

Labor migration to Kazakhstan from neighboring countries, such as Uzbekistan and Kyrgystan, has been growing in the last 5 years. While undocumented migrants are now a familiar site in Almaty region, I am not aware of any studies on labor migration being conducted in Kazakhstan.

As Kazakhstani government attempts (mostly unsuccessfully) to control undocumented migration and plans to import thousands of foreign workers under labor contracts in the next few years, this topic would make a very interesting and important research project.

Recommendations for the Policy Community

Closer attention to locally situated processes of state and nation building would prove very useful to the US policy community. Various scholars working in post-Soviet Central Asia, as well as other post-socialist states, describe processes of increasing redistribution of powers and responsibilities in cultural, political, and economic spheres to the local level and the consolidation of local power regimes. Far from exercising strong control, the government leaves considerable leverage for actual implementation of its policies. The political elites at the center of President Nazarbayev's government are involved in broad discourses of ethnic redress and entitlement. However, state actors in individual locales must translate these nationalist discourses into specific practices on the ground. As I describe above, in Kazakstan, ideas and practices of citizenship and national belonging are emerging and being shaped by actors and agencies on the local level. These might be structured and constrained but are not necessarily determined by state policies.

Works Cited

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