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ADAPTATION OF ETHNIC KAZAKHS FROM CHINA IN THE KARAGANDA REGION

Following its independence in 1991, Kazakhstan launched an extensive repatriation initiative designed to motivate ethnic Kazakhs residing overseas to come back to their ancestral homeland. Even though these migrants have a shared ethnic identity with the local community, their experiences of adaptation expose various unforeseen difficulties. This article explores the migration and adjustment experiences of ethnic Kazakh migrants from China who moved to the Karaganda region from 1991 to 2021.

The research utilizes a mixed-methods strategy that integrates statistical data, archival resources, and comprehensive interviews with migrants. The results indicate that, even with ethnic and linguistic closeness, returning migrants face multiple obstacles in the job market, administrative processes, and daily social exchanges. Particular attention is paid to the role of migration networks in shaping mobility decisions and settlement patterns. At the same time, the analysis traces how linguistic repertoires, the uneven reach of institutional support, and subtle socio-cultural divergences condition divergent integration outcomes.

By situating these dynamics within both historical legacies and the post-Soviet institutional landscape, the article advances ongoing debates on ethnic return migration. It demonstrates that integration processes in contemporary Kazakhstan are not merely a function of ethnic proximity, but are instead mediated by historically sedimented practices and evolving governance regimes.

Keywords: ethnic migration, Kazakhstan, repatriation, migration networks, integration, Karaganda region, Kazakh diaspora

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Қытайдан келген этникалық қазақтардың Қарағанды өңіріндегі бейімделуі

1991 жылы Қазақстан тәуелсіздікке ие болғаннан бастап шет елдерде тұратын этникалық қазақтарды тарихи отанына қайтаруға бағытталған ауқымды саясат жүргізе бастады. Жергілікті халықпен этникалық бірегейлігі ортақ болғанымен отанына оралған қандастардың бейімделуі бірқатар күтпеген қиындықтарға кезігеді. Мақалада 1991–2021 жылдары аралығында Қытайдан Қарағанды өңіріне қоныс аударған этникалық қазақтардың көші-қоны мен бейімделу үдерісі қарастырылады. Зерттеу жұмысы статистикалық мәліметтерді, архив материалдарын және тереңдетілген сұхбаттардың деректерін талдауға бағытталған аралас әдіснамаға негізделген. Зерттеу нәтижелері қандастардың этникалық және тілдік бірегейлігіне қарамастан, күнделікті әлеуметтік қарым-қатынаста, еңбек нарығында, әкімшілік рәсімдерде әртүрлі кедергілерге кезігетінін көрсетеді. Сонымен қатар қоныс аударуды көші-қон желілерінің жеңілдетудегі рөлі айқындалып, тілдік құзыреттілік, институционалдық қолдау және әлеуметтік-мәдени айырмашылықтардың интеграция нәтижелеріне ықпалы көрсетілді. Мақала қазіргі Қазақстандағы репатрианттардың бейімделуіне этникалық қазақтардың көші-қоны туралы ғылыми әдебиетке үлес қосып, тарихи тәжірибелер мен посткеңестік институционалдық ахуал қалай әсер ететінін көрсетеді.

Түйін сөздер: этникалық көші-қон, Қазақстан, репатриация, көші-қон желілері, интеграция, Қарағанды өңірі, қазақ диаспорасы.

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Адаптация этнических казахов из Китая в Карагандинском регионе

После обретения независимости в 1991 году Казахстан инициировал масштабную репатриационную политику, направленную на стимулирование возвращения этнических казахов, проживающих за рубежом, на историческую родину. Несмотря на общую этническую принадлежность с местным населением, адаптационный опыт этих мигрантов выявляет ряд непредвиденных трудностей. В данной статье рассматриваются процессы миграции и адаптации этнических казахов из Китая, переселившихся в Карагандинский регион в период с 1991 по 2021 годы.

Исследование основано на смешанной методологии, сочетающей анализ статистических данных, архивных источников и углублённых интервью с мигрантами. Полученные результаты показывают, что, несмотря на этническую и языковую близость, репатрианты сталкиваются с множеством препятствий на рынке труда, в административных процедурах и в повседневных социальных взаимодействиях. В работе подчёркивается значимость миграционных сетей в процессе переселения, а также демонстрируется, каким образом языковая компетенция, институциональная поддержка и социокультурные различия влияют на результаты интеграции.

Статья вносит вклад в научную литературу по проблематике этнической репатриации и показывает, как исторический опыт и постсоветский институциональный контекст формируют процессы адаптации мигрантов в современном Казахстане.

Ключевые слова: этническая миграция, Казахстан, репатриация, миграционные сети, интеграция, Карагандинский регион, казахская диаспора.

Introduction

After gaining independence, Kazakhstan enacted a comprehensive repatriation initiative designed to motivate ethnic Kazakhs residing overseas to come back to their ancestral land. This policy emerged as a key aspect of the country's national demographic strategy and a vital element of the nation-building initiative of the newly independent state. Its main goal was to boost the demographic proportion of the named ethnic group by bringing back the Kazakh diaspora that developed beyond the historical homeland and to remedy the demographic disparities caused by migration policies from the Soviet era.

As a result, Kazakhstan witnessed one of the most significant processes of ethnic return migration in the post-Soviet space. In total, since independence in 1991, approximately 1.07 million ethnic Kazakhs have migrated to the Republic of Kazakhstan. This process is considered one of the largest ethnic repatriation movements in the post-Soviet region and has played a crucial role in reshaping the country's demographic structure (MLSPP RK, 2020).

While most ethnic Kazakhs who relocated to Kazakhstan originated from Uzbekistan, Mongolia, and Turkmenistan, migrants from China and Russia also represent a notable portion. In academic literature, these groups were formerly called oralman, and more recently identified as kandas. They have

been instrumental in influencing the demographic, social, and cultural framework of modern Kazakhstani society.

Overall, the Kazakh diaspora primarily developed beyond the borders of Kazakhstan as a result of historical and political conditions. Recent academic studies show that most ethnic Kazakhs living overseas are primarily found in three nations: the People's Republic of China, the Republic of Uzbekistan, and the Russian Federation (Baltabayeva K.N. et al.: 97).

The formation of the Kazakh community in China is closely linked to the establishment of the state border between Russia and China in the second half of the nineteenth century and subsequent political developments. After the border was formalized, some Kazakh clans that had traditionally inhabited both sides of the region found themselves within the territory of the Chinese Empire. Later, additional waves of migration from Kazakhstan to the Xinjiang region occurred, particularly during the 1916 national liberation uprising and the collectivization and famine of 1931–1934 (Baltabayeva K.N. et al.: 97).

Currently, the Kazakh diaspora in China is viewed as one of the largest Kazakh populations outside of Kazakhstan. By the close of the twentieth century and the onset of the twenty-first century, the scale of this community showed consistent expan-

sion. For instance, from 2000 to 2010, the population of Kazakhs in China grew from 1,250,458 to 1,462,588 individuals (Baltabayeva K.N. et al.: 99). This trend shows that Kazakhs are among the national minority groups in China that exhibit steady demographic growth.

While Kazakhstan's repatriation policy aimed to motivate ethnic Kazakhs to return to their ancestral homeland and support their social integration, the real adaptation process turned out to be much more complicated than originally anticipated. Though shared ethnicity and culture imply that fellow nationals would swiftly adjust to their new surroundings, many migration studies reveal that these assumptions frequently disregard variations in historical experiences, social structures, and cultural contexts.

In many cases, repatriates returning to their historical homeland encounter difficulties in accessing the labor market, completing documentation and bureaucratic procedures, and adapting to everyday social relations. Within the scholarly canon, this phenomenon is frequently framed as the "paradox of ethnic return migration." What appears, at first glance, as a seamless return predicated on shared ethnicity and cultural affinity often unfolds otherwise: migrants arriving in their putative homeland encounter forms of social distance alongside entrenched institutional barriers. Divergences in linguistic practice, educational trajectories, and everyday cultural norms shape the contours of repatriates' lived experiences. These disjunctures do not merely complicate adaptation; in certain contexts, they actively generate symbolic and social boundaries between returnees and the local population, thereby recalibrating expectations of belonging within the receiving society.

Against this backdrop, the migration trajectories of ethnic Kazakhs arriving from China offer a particularly revealing lens through which to examine the dynamics of ethnic return migration. Although Kazakhstan has received co-ethnic returnees from several neighbouring states, Kazakhs from China constitute a distinctive cohort – one shaped by markedly different historical trajectories and socio-political formations. Raised within a cultural and institutional milieu that diverges significantly from that of post-Soviet Kazakhstan, many of these migrants enter the receiving society with repertoires, expectations, and dispositions that do not readily align with local norms. Their settlement experiences, therefore, do more than illustrate individual pathways of adaptation; they illuminate the underlying social mechanisms through which ethnic repatriation is

negotiated, contested, and, at times, reconfigured in practice.

This article examines the migration trajectories and post-arrival adaptation of ethnic Kazakhs from China who resettled in the Karaganda region between 1991 and 2021. The region itself offers a particularly instructive empirical setting for analysing these processes. Shaped as a major industrial hub during the Soviet period, Karaganda is marked by a multi-ethnic social composition and the pervasive use of Russian in public and institutional domains. For migrants arriving from China – many of whom sustained their ethnic identity through Kazakh-language education – such a linguistic and cultural environment can prove disorienting. In practice, this disjuncture often translates into unexpected challenges, complicating their incorporation into local integration regimes and reshaping their everyday encounters within the host society.

Karaganda region has also figured prominently among the territorial sites selected for the implementation of state-led repatriation programmes targeting qandas. Its settlement landscape – combining large industrial urban centres with smaller, peripheral localities – offers a differentiated socio-economic terrain against which processes of incorporation unfold. Such internal variation enables a more fine-grained analysis: not merely whether repatriates adapt, but how their trajectories diverge across contrasting local contexts. In this sense, the region provides a vantage point for tracing how structural conditions mediate adaptation, reshaping migrants' lived experiences within distinct segments of the receiving society.

This study seeks to interrogate the migration trajectories and adaptive experiences of ethnic Kazakhs from China in the Karaganda region, situating these processes at the intersection of historical legacies and contemporary social dynamics. It further aims to identify how linguistic repertoires, institutional configurations, and socio-cultural divergences shape the terms and outcomes of their integration within the receiving society.

The findings indicate that, while migration networks and kinship ties facilitate initial relocation, longer-term incorporation unfolds within a far more complex matrix of social and institutional conditions. Early support mechanisms ease entry; they do not, however, guarantee sustained integration. Language-related constraints, the opacity of bureaucratic procedures, and mismatched social expectations between migrants and host communities collectively shape the contours of adaptation. It is through these intersecting dynamics that migrant trajectories are

reconfigured, often in ways that extend well beyond the initial moment of settlement.

Materials and methods

The study draws on a set of general analytical procedures – analysis and synthesis, analogy, systematization, comparison, and descriptive interpretation – deployed in combination to capture the complexity of migrant incorporation. To address the comparative dimension of the research, a comparative-historical approach is mobilized. This framework makes it possible to trace both convergences and divergences in repatriates' adaptation trajectories, situating them in relation to educational attainment, professional capital, and the presence – or absence – of kinship-based support networks. Viewed through this lens, the adaptation of ethnic Kazakhs arriving from China does not present as a uniform or linear process. Rather, it unfolds as a constellation of differentiated pathways, shaped by migrants' social positioning, their access to labour market opportunities, and the specific socio-economic environments into which they settle.

Simultaneously, the research's methodological basis relies on an interdisciplinary approach that merges aspects of social history, oral history, and microhistorical analysis. This methodological framework enables the exploration of the migration and adaptation of ethnic Kazakhs from China who moved to the Karaganda region, considering not just state policy, but also the daily experiences, social strategies, and cultural perspectives of individuals.

Oral history methods occupy an important place in this study (Shcheglova T.K., 2011: 203). Biographical interviews are treated not merely as a collection of factual information, but also as a form through which respondents interpret their own life trajectories, construct self-representation, and articulate historical memory. From this perspective, interview narratives reveal not only factual information but also the respondents' systems of values, their understanding of ethnic identity, their perceptions of the historical homeland, and their life priorities. Particular attention in the analysis was paid to the "turning points" that participants themselves identified as especially significant. These include the decision to migrate, the first arrival in Kazakhstan, the process of document registration, obtaining citizenship, entering the labor market, the first experiences of social tension, and the process of settling into a new social environment.

The microhistorical method used in this research enables the interpretation of personal life stories as typical historical examples that illuminate wider structural dynamics. A comparative study of personal biographies with archival resources and statistical information enables us to investigate the implementation of state migration policies in actual contexts, pinpointing areas of effectiveness as well as those that encountered challenges. In this regard, the microhistorical approach helps uncover the connection between macro policies and individual human experiences at the micro level.

Furthermore, the research employs qualitative content analysis. Using this approach, various significant thematic areas were recognized in the interviews and archival documents. These encompass: reasons for going back to the ancestral homeland; experiences of constraints and pressures in the country of origin; first impressions of Kazakhstan; cultural and linguistic hurdles; types of institutional aid; informal community networks; and methods of daily adjustment. This systematization enabled the recognition of common thematic patterns in the sources and allowed for the interpretation of personal experiences as elements of a larger repatriation process.

Consequently, the theoretical and methodological framework of the research is rooted in comprehending migration not just as physical movement, but as a multifaceted historical and social occurrence that takes place at the convergence of structural elements and personal experiences. This method allows for the uncovering of the specific aspects of the economic, social, and cultural adjustments of repatriates.

This study draws on a combination of sources, including official records and oral history interviews, which together form its empirical foundation. This blend of sources allows for an analysis of the repatriation process of returning migrants in Kazakhstan from both the perspective of state policy and the realm of daily lived experiences. Utilizing both written and oral sources concurrently enhances the study's comparative and multidimensional nature.

The first group of sources consists of administrative documents preserved in the National Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the State Archive of the Karaganda Region. These documents mainly cover the period of the 1990s and 2000s. They include official correspondence between regional migration and demography departments and city and district administrations, as well as materials con-

cerning quota allocations for repatriates, documentation procedures, housing provision, and employment issues.

The second and particularly important group of sources consists of oral biographical interviews recorded within the framework of oral history. The study includes in-depth interviews conducted with ethnic Kazakh migrants who relocated to Kazakhstan from the People's Republic of China. Chronologically, these interviews cover migration experiences from the early 1990s to the late 2000s. This makes it possible to compare the difficulties encountered by repatriates, the strategies they adopted, and the ways in which they adapted to a new social environment during different stages of Kazakhstan's migration policy.

Biographical interviews address a wide range of themes, including motivations for migration, perceptions of the historical homeland, first impressions upon arrival in Kazakhstan, document processing, employment experiences, the role of kinship networks, linguistic and cultural adaptation, as well as the subjective perception of institutional barriers. These data allow researchers to uncover internal dimensions of everyday life that are rarely reflected – or entirely absent – in official documents.

Within this study, oral testimonies are not treated as merely illustrative supplements to archival materials. Rather, they are approached as autonomous historical evidence – endowed with their own narrative logics, mnemonic mechanisms, and systems of value attribution. Accordingly, the analysis attends closely to recurring narrative patterns in respondents' accounts, the metaphors through which they articulate their experiences, and their evaluative framings of both the historical homeland and the local social milieu. Particular emphasis is placed on those semantic nodes through which a shared memory of repatriation takes shape. Bringing archival documentation into conversation with in-depth interviews enables a more layered interrogation of the research object. Official sources illuminate the institutional architecture of state policy – its administrative instruments and normative frameworks. By contrast, oral narratives reveal how these policies are apprehended, negotiated, and enacted in migrants' lived experiences, including the points at which they generate friction or unintended consequences. Repatriation thus emerges not solely as an element of statecraft, but as a multi-layered social process – one structured by institutional constraints, yet continuously reworked through migrants' own strategies of navigation and adaptation.

Results

Following Kazakhstan's independence, a dedicated state migration policy was developed to facilitate the return of ethnic Kazakhs to their historical homeland. Important evidence regarding the regional implementation of this policy is preserved in the documents of the State Archive of the Karaganda Region. For example, in 1998, in order to implement Decree No. 3894 of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated 3 April 1998, "On the Immigration Quota," the regional Department of Migration and Demography was established in Karaganda Region, and systematic work was undertaken to receive and resettle repatriates. According to the documents, under the 1998 state quota the region planned to receive 230 repatriate families (KRSA. Fund 193, Vol. 2. File 3).

During the first seven months of that year, 76 repatriate families (294 persons) were admitted to the region. Of these, 47 families arrived from Mongolia and 29 from the CIS countries. These data suggest that in the initial phase of repatriation, the majority of Kazakhs resettling in Karaganda Region came primarily from Mongolia and the post-Soviet space. At the same time, the document indicates that 3,579 repatriate families (approximately 16,900 persons) were residing permanently in the region, including 10 families from China (KRSA. Fund 193, Vol. 2. File 3). Although the share of Kazakhs arriving from China was relatively small, these data show that they had already begun to participate in Kazakhstan's repatriation process. In particular, from the late 1990s onward, the number of kandas arriving from China gradually began to increase.

According to an official report from 2005, a total of 117,698 kandas households – amounting to 464,426 individuals – resettled in Kazakhstan between 1993 and 2005. The migration flow was overwhelmingly dominated by ethnic Kazakhs arriving from Uzbekistan, who accounted for 61.5 per cent of all repatriates. Other sending contexts contributed more modest shares: 15.4 per cent arrived from Mongolia, 9 per cent from Turkmenistan, 4.8 per cent from China, and 4 per cent from the Russian Federation (NARK. Fund 53, Inventory 1, File 256, p. 179). Read against the broader architecture of state-led return migration, these figures point to a geographically uneven pattern of co-ethnic mobility – one in which proximity, historical ties, and existing migration networks appear to have shaped the composition of inflows. Archival data reveal the true demographic extent of the repatriation process and

allow for the interpretation of information gathered from oral interviews within a wider historical framework. Archival evidence indicates that most repatriates originated from Uzbekistan and Mongolia, whereas the percentage of Kazakhs from China was merely 4.8%. This might be attributed to limitations in China's migration policy and the intricacies of citizenship renunciation processes. Consequently, the adaptation experiences of repatriates from China vary in specific ways from those of other migration groups in Kazakhstan (NARK. Fund 53. Inventory 1. File 256. P. 179).

In the initial phases of Kazakhstan's repatriation strategy, the matter of citizenship allocation emerged as a key focus of national migration policy. Archival documents indicate that this process was executed inconsistently across the regional spectrum. An official report from 2004 indicated that a total of 329,472 repatriates were registered in the republic. Among these, 246,488 acquired citizenship of the Republic of Kazakhstan, whereas the applications of 18,734 individuals were still being processed. Simultaneously, 40,506 individuals held temporary residence status (NARK. Fund 53. Inventory 1. File 230. Pp. 28–29).

Regional indicators show that repatriates were concentrated mainly in the southern and northern parts of the country. For example, 102,844 repatriates were registered in South Kazakhstan Region, 45,424 in Almaty Region, and 27,440 in Zhambyl Region. This indicates that migration policy in Kazakhstan was implemented in accordance with regional labor market demands and demographic needs (NARK. Fond 53. Inventory 1. File 230. Pp. 28–29). Archival documents also provide statistical data by country of origin. According to the 2004 data, the majority of repatriates registered in Karaganda Region had arrived from Mongolia. For instance, the report of 1 July 2004 recorded 14,348 persons who had migrated from Mongolia. By contrast, the number of repatriates from China was significantly smaller – only 77 persons were registered (NARK. Fund 53. Inventory 1. File 230. Pp. 28–29).

Archival statistics make it possible to interpret the experiences reflected in oral interviews within a broader historical context by demonstrating the actual demographic scale of repatriation policy. The geographical composition of the migration flow is also important. Archival data show that Kazakhs from Mongolia constituted the dominant share, whereas the number of repatriates from China was far smaller. This suggests that migration from China was more complicated due to legal and political re-

strictions. Such differences are among the important factors to consider when analyzing the adaptation experiences of repatriates.

Economic Adaptation of Repatriates

One of the key issues in the process of ethnic repatriation is the adaptation of migrants to a new socio-economic environment. Although ethnic Kazakhs returning to Kazakhstan are ethnically and culturally close to the local population, their integration into the labor market is not always smooth or uniform. Research shows that the economic adaptation of repatriates is significantly influenced by such factors as differences in educational systems, the non-recognition of professional qualifications, language barriers, and the structure of the labor market (Baltabayeva et al., 2015: 351).

Oral interviews reflecting the life experiences of ethnic Kazakhs who moved from China to the Karaganda region reveal the concrete social dimension of this process. Interview materials show that many repatriates found themselves in economically unstable circumstances during the initial period after arrival in Kazakhstan. For example, in the recollections of Respondent 3, it is noted that during the first days after migration several families were forced to live together in one house and jointly overcome everyday difficulties (INT3). According to the respondent, when three families from China arrived in Karabas, eleven people lived together in a single house. During the early stage of adaptation, such issues as housing, living conditions, and document processing were among the main challenges.

Respondent 1 stated that he obtained a higher education in the People's Republic of China and has been employed in the education sector. He completed his studies at a higher educational institution in that area on a state scholarship and subsequently taught in Manas County. Moreover, throughout his career, he was honored with the title of "best teacher" multiple times. Nevertheless, after relocating to Kazakhstan, his professional experience was not immediately in demand in the labor market. As one respondent recalled, securing employment in line with his professional qualifications proved particularly challenging in the initial period following arrival: "When I had just arrived, there were times when some managers would say, 'We don't need a specialist like you' [INT1]. This illustrates a phenomenon often mentioned in scholarly literature: the discrepancy between the professional skills of repatriates and the job market of the host society. The life experience of Respondent 1 distinctly dem-

onstrates this phenomenon. During his initial years in Kazakhstan, he had to work as a stoker due to the inability to secure stable employment. He stated that even though the pay was minimal, he was willing to take on any job to support his family: "I didn't remain inactive; I was employed as a stoker." We were supplying the furnace.

Family ties and social connections were crucial in the early phase of economic adjustment. In migration research, this occurrence is analyzed using the idea of "migration networks." In other terms, family members or compatriots who had settled earlier offered informational, material, and social assistance to newcomers. This element is also clearly apparent in the interview materials. For instance, Respondent 2 states that when her family relocated to the Karaganda Region, they first depended on the help of her older brother, who had previously settled there.

This factor is also clearly evident in the interview materials. For example, Respondent 2 notes that when her family moved to Karaganda Region, they initially relied on the assistance of her elder brother, who had migrated there earlier (INT2). Such kinship ties became an important social resource during the first stage of adaptation to the new environment.

Interview materials also show that adaptation to the labor market was accompanied by a degree of occupational transformation. In some cases, people with prior professional experience in China were forced to work in different sectors after arriving in Kazakhstan. According to Respondent 2, her husband had worked in a mine in China operating excavator machinery, but after moving to Kazakhstan he shifted to rotational work in the railway sector (INT2). Such examples indicate a mismatch between the previous professional experience of repatriates and the demands of the new labor market.

This issue is also frequently noted in the scholarly literature. According to existing studies, many repatriates, despite having higher education, experienced difficulties finding employment in their profession and were compelled to engage in trade, services, or low-skilled labor (Baltabayeva et al., 2015: 351). This situation is linked both to high competition in the labor market and to the problem of recognizing diplomas obtained abroad.

Interview materials also show that family strategies played an important role in the economic adaptation of repatriates. For example, according to Respondent 3, his brother worked at a brick factory in the town of Karabas and was able to save money there. Later, other relatives who moved to Kazakhstan also began working at the same enterprise. This

indicates that repatriates often entered the labor market through mutual support and assistance from one another.

Economic adaptation was not limited to finding employment; it also included the stabilization of everyday living conditions. The interviews contain information that newly arrived families in the initial period sometimes bought livestock on credit in an effort to sustain themselves. Such practices demonstrate that repatriates sought to apply their rural and traditional economic experience in the new environment as well. At the same time, the socio-economic aspects of repatriation policy are widely discussed in the scholarly literature. Some researchers emphasize the contribution of repatriates to the labor market, their role in demographic growth, and their impact on expanding the public use of the Kazakh language. Critical studies, however, describe such issues as housing, employment, linguistic adaptation, and the attitudes of local residents as factors that complicate the full integration of repatriates into society. This indicates that ethnic repatriation is not merely a demographic or political phenomenon, but also a complex process of social adaptation and public integration (Kuşçu I., 2014: 178-197).

The materials indicate that the financial status of repatriates steadily improved over time. Respondent 1 claims that in Kazakhstan, one can earn extra money through providing private tutoring. He started teaching kids in mathematics and thereby could utilize his background in the area of education. Subsequently, this work experience allowed him to secure a permanent position. He stated that eventually he started teaching mathematics at a secondary school in the city of Karaganda (INT1). Eventually, his career progressed, and he was presented with an opportunity to join a prestigious educational institution in Karaganda. This shows that repatriates can slowly navigate the economic challenges of the early phase and eventually establish their position in the job market. His interview also indicates that state social programs had a specific influence. As a member of a big family, he took part in the "Baқытты Отбасы" housing initiative and ultimately obtained his own house.

Respondent 2 stated that upon reaching Kazakhstan, the family managed to educate their children and create chances for them to pursue higher education and find jobs. Currently, one of her kids serves as an English instructor at a school in Abai (INT2). This demonstrates that repatriates managed to surmount the economic challenges of the early phase and slowly adapt to the new social setting.

Thus, the economic adaptation experience of ethnic Kazakhs from China in the Karaganda region can be characterized by several key features. First, during the initial stage, housing and employment were among the principal difficulties. Second, kinship and social networks served as important support factors in the adaptation process. Third, some repatriates were compelled to adapt to new sectors of employment that did not correspond to their previous professional experience. This example suggests that, once the initial barriers were negotiated, repatriates gradually carved out a place for themselves within the labour market.

Adaptation of Returnees to Society

Within the realm of ethnic repatriation, the matter of social adaptation holds significant importance. While ethnic Kazakhs returning to their ancestral homeland have a shared ethnicity with the local community, their social experiences and daily practices have been influenced by distinct historical and cultural contexts. Thus, adaptation is influenced not solely by economic aspects, but also by integration into social relations, the creation of connections with the new community, and the development of social support networks. Research indicates that the successful integration of repatriates primarily relies on the strength of the social connections they build with the host community and their access to social resources (Kalish, Kassymova, 2015; Baltabayeva et al., 2015).

Oral interviews reflecting the social adaptation experiences of ethnic Kazakhs from China in the Karaganda region show that this process was complex and multidimensional. The life recollections of Respondent 1 demonstrate that certain difficulties existed during the initial stage of social adaptation. In the first years after arriving in Kazakhstan, people's attitudes toward repatriates varied. According to the respondent, some local residents referred to them using the label *oralman*. Recalling this situation, the respondent noted: "When we first arrived, people's attitudes were different. Some would say that you had fled because you were wealthy back then, and now that the country has improved, you have come back" (INT1).

Simultaneously, studies indicate that the execution of repatriation programs was not consistently uniform. The integration of repatriates into socio-economic and cultural spheres continued to be a significant concern. Even though they were theoretically part of the named ethnic group, variations in social experience, linguistic context, and cultural

integration created specific distinctions between them and the host society. Thus, the adjustment of repatriates to the new surroundings is seen as a complicated and protracted social process (Sayat Orazalyuly, 2010).

Interactions with local residents were crucial in the initial phase of social adaptation. For instance, Respondent 2 stated that neighborly support greatly facilitated their adjustment to the new surroundings during the initial years in Kazakhstan. During their stay in Abai, a local woman named Asiya provided guidance and helped address everyday practical issues. These instances demonstrate that the backing of the local community significantly influenced repatriates' adjustment to their new social surroundings.

According to researchers, the main difficulties encountered by repatriates in Kazakhstan were related to entering the labor market, housing, and bureaucratic procedures (Gaziza Shakhanova, 2025: 781–797). In this regard, interview materials show that the economic adaptation of repatriates often relied on informal social networks, kinship ties, and support from the ethnic community. According to Respondent 2, although Kazakhs arriving from China did not know one another at first, they later met in Kazakhstan and began to socialize. This corresponds to the formation of "diasporic social networks" described in migration studies. Shared historical experience and a common cultural environment strengthened ties among repatriates and contributed to the formation of a new social community.

Respondent 3's memories also highlight the communal aspect of social adjustment. According to one participant, in the early years after arrival it was common for several families to share a single house, pooling resources and dealing with everyday problems together. When relatives or friends arrived later, they were usually hosted for a short period and helped to navigate the new environment (INT3). Such practices point to the importance of informal networks and mutual assistance among returnees. Respondent 1 stated: "We united individuals from China residing in Saryarka and established a group. "Whenever someone encountered challenges, we provided assistance" (INT1). In this way, informal ties helped ease both the emotional strain and the practical challenges of adaptation.

The scholarly literature highlights the significant role of community connections in the social adjustment of repatriates. Researchers suggest that the integration of migrants into a new society frequently occurs via familial connections, countrymen, and

cultural relationships. These networks enable the sharing of social information, aid in job hunting, and help tackle routine issues (Kalish, Kassymova, 2015a: 71-76). Moreover, these connections help maintain the cultural identity of repatriates and promote psychological stability in their new surroundings.

Another important aspect of social adaptation is education and the integration of the younger generation into the new society. Interview materials show that the adaptation process of children was significantly faster than that of adults. For example, according to Respondent 1, after arriving in Kazakhstan his child entered a local school, later obtained higher education, and currently works as an English teacher in one of the schools in Abai (INT2). This indicates that the next generation of repatriates adapted more quickly to the new social environment and gradually became full members of local society.

Some interviews also reveal the emotional dimension of social adaptation. For example, according to Respondent 3, during the first period after moving to Kazakhstan his brother often said that he missed his friends from his place of origin (INT3). This shows that part of the repatriates' social ties remained in their former place of residence and that adaptation to the new environment was accompanied by certain psychological difficulties. In migration studies, such phenomena are often described as "social rupture" or the weakening of transnational social ties.

Archival documents show that the social adaptation of repatriates was also one of the important directions of state policy. For example, in Karaganda Region a special regional program was adopted concerning the reception and settlement of repatriates, with provisions for housing and social assistance. According to the documents, several types of social expenditure were planned in order to receive and adapt repatriates. These included state allowances, housing acquisition, transport costs, and social support during the adaptation period. For instance, according to the 1998 report, a total of 5,368 thousand tenge was required to meet the social needs of 76 repatriate families (KSRA. Fund 193, Vol. 2. Inventory 1. File 3).

Archival materials also show that the integration of repatriates into the healthcare system was considered at the state level. Documents from the Karaganda Regional Health Department note that, in accordance with the legislation of the Republic of Kazakhstan, repatriates were entitled to the same volume of free medical care as citizens of the republic. In particular, repatriates were provided with

emergency medical care, primary healthcare services, outpatient diagnostic care, and inpatient treatment financed from the state budget (KSRA. Fund 193, Vol. 2. Inventory 1. File 3).

These data show that access to medical services played an important role in the social adaptation of repatriates. In particular, for Kazakhs arriving from China, access to social protection and healthcare services in Kazakhstan also appears in interview materials as one of the important motivating factors for migration.

Overall, the social adaptation experience of ethnic Kazakhs from China in the Karaganda region is characterized by several features. First, during the initial stage, neighborly relations with local residents facilitated adaptation to the new environment. Second, repatriates' own social networks and kinship ties played an important role in ensuring their social stability. Third, children and young people adapted relatively quickly to the new society through the education system. Thus, the process of social adaptation appears as a complex social phenomenon formed through the interaction between the personal experiences of repatriates and the social structures of the receiving society (Baltabayeva et al., 2015: 366-367).

Linguistic and Cultural Adjustment

During ethnic repatriation, linguistic and cultural adjustment hold a significant role. Even though ethnic Kazakhs returning to Kazakhstan are part of the same ethnic group as the dominant population, their language environment and cultural background were developed over time within the socio-political and cultural contexts of different countries. As a result, variations in language and disparities in cultural experiences are significant factors that influence repatriates' adaptation to the new community. In academic writings, this occurrence is frequently described using the ideas of "cultural distance" and "culture shock." Researchers indicate that even when repatriates come to a society that shares ethnic similarities with them, varying historical developments have resulted in specific differences in their social experiences (Kalish, Kassymova, 2015b: 195).

The particular linguistic landscape in Kazakhstan also influences the adaptation of repatriates. While Kazakh gained the designation of state language after gaining independence, Kazakh-Russian bilingualism persists in various areas of public life. As a result, to engage completely in social and professional settings, repatriates require fluency in both Kazakh and Russian (Kalish, Kassymova, 2015b: 206). Researchers highlight that Kazakhs coming

to Kazakhstan from China, Mongolia, and other nations encounter specific challenges due to variations in writing systems. For instance, Kazakhs residing in China utilize Arabic script, while Cyrillic is employed in Kazakhstan. This makes adapting to written communication and the educational system more challenging (Kalish, Kassymova, 2015b: 203).

Interviews reflecting the life experiences of ethnic Kazakhs from China in the Karaganda region reveal the concrete social expression of these issues. For example, according to Respondent 2, although certain linguistic differences were noticeable during the initial period after arrival in Kazakhstan, this issue gradually began to be resolved through the children's schooling. According to the respondent, upon arrival their child entered the first grade, later studied within Kazakhstan's educational system, obtained higher education, and currently works as an English teacher in one of the schools in Abai (INT2). This demonstrates the important role of the education system in facilitating repatriates' adaptation to the new society.

The recollections of Respondent 3 also reveal the social dimensions of linguistic adaptation. According to the respondent, linguistic specificities were noticeable in everyday interactions during the initial period after arrival in Kazakhstan. However, over time, these differences gradually diminished through communication with neighbors and local residents (INT3). Such experience shows that everyday communication is one of the key mechanisms of social adaptation.

Materials from interviews indicate that cultural adaptation took place slowly over time. Repatriates noted that despite observable differences in their lifestyle and social interactions initially upon arriving in Kazakhstan, they gradually adjusted to the cultural norms of the local community over time. Researchers observe that this is a social phenomenon inherent to ethnic repatriation. Ethnic groups coming back to their ancestral homeland cannot instantly and completely integrate into the cultural context of the host society; this transition takes time (Baltabayeva et al., 2015: 368).

Academic research indicates that the cultural adjustment of repatriates typically occurs in two different ways. They embrace the cultural standards of their historical homeland while also maintaining specific aspects of the cultural experiences from the countries they came from. This occurrence is recognized as cultural amalgamation or cultural evolution. The arrival of ethnic Kazakhs in Kazakhstan from various countries, while maintaining some differences in cultural backgrounds, is also a con-

sequence of this process (Baltabayeva et al., 2015: 314-315).

According to Respondent 1, one of the important stages of cultural adaptation was active participation in public and cultural life. On his initiative, community events were organized in the Karaganda region to bring together Kazakhs who had arrived from China. One such initiative was the celebration of Nauryz. According to the respondent, the main purpose of this event was to create opportunities for people to get to know one another and to acquaint children with traditional Kazakh culture. For example, during the celebration a yurt was erected, national games were organized, and traditional songs were performed (INT1).

Interview narratives further indicate that, over time, repatriates became increasingly embedded in the social life of local communities. For example, Respondent 2 noted that after arriving in Kazakhstan, she gradually became involved in the social life of local society and established close ties with neighbors. She also pointed out that Kazakhs who had arrived from abroad sought one another out and maintained contact (INT2). This indicates that repatriates sought not only to preserve their cultural identity but also to adapt to the new social environment.

Overall, the linguistic and cultural adaptation experience of ethnic Kazakhs from China in the Karaganda region is characterized by several key features. First, linguistic differences and differences in writing systems created certain difficulties during the initial stage of adaptation. Second, everyday social interaction and the education system contributed to gradually reducing these differences. Third, in the course of cultural adaptation, repatriates accepted the social norms of the new society while preserving certain elements of their own historical and cultural experience. Thus, linguistic and cultural adaptation constitute important components of repatriates' integration into a new social environment (Kalish, Kassymova, 2015b; Baltabayeva et al., 2015.)

Migration Reasons and Historical Remembrance among Kazakhs from China

A significant aspect of ethnic repatriation is the influence of migration motivation and historical memory. The motivations for ethnic Kazakhs moving to Kazakhstan from other countries cannot be attributed only to economic or social factors. Researchers indicate that repatriation is frequently associated with collective memory of the ancestral homeland, ethnic identity, and cultural connections. Viewed from this angle, the movement of ethnic

Kazakhs to Kazakhstan can be seen as an aspect of the notion of “returning to the ancestral homeland” and the effort to rejuvenate national identity (Baltabayeva et al., 2015: 109).

In scholarly writing, ethnic repatriation is frequently characterized as a form of reestablishing historical justice. Following independence, the Kazakhstani government welcomed ethnic Kazakhs residing overseas to return to their ancestral land and established favorable conditions for their relocation. Consequently, this policy led to the migration of hundreds of thousands of Kazakhs from China, Mongolia, Uzbekistan, and various other nations to Kazakhstan (Baltabayeva et al., 2015: 97). This procedure is perceived not merely as a tool for demographic.

Interviews with ethnic Kazakhs residing in the Karaganda region vividly reveal the historically and culturally embedded nature of migration motivations. For example, the recollections of Respondent 2 indicate that the family’s decision to move to Kazakhstan was linked not only to economic reasons, but also to a sense of connection with the historical homeland. According to the respondent, her husband’s ancestors had once migrated to China from the Semey region due to historical circumstances. In the family, elders often said that “times will change, and one day the descendants will return” (INT2). This statement is a concrete manifestation of historical memory transmitted from generation to generation.

Similarly, in the interview of Respondent 1, who lives in the Karaganda region, it is evident that the family’s migration decision was closely connected with collective memory of the historical homeland. According to the respondent, their ancestors were Kazakhs who had crossed from East Kazakhstan into China. The idea of the historical homeland was preserved within the family, and the aspiration to return to Kazakhstan was transmitted across generations. In the interview, he noted: “We had long been thinking about coming to Kazakhstan; returning to the land of our ancestors was our dream” (INT1).

Interview materials indicate that the choice to repatriate frequently occurred at both the family and intergenerational levels. Respondent 2 stated the primary reason for relocating to Kazakhstan as: “We moved for the next generation, to ensure our children receive their education here and create their future in this nation” (INT2). This suggests that migration choices were considered long-term social tactics. These motivations are often addressed in academic writings: numerous repatriates believe it is essential that relocating to Kazakhstan allows their

children to grow up in a national cultural setting and gain education in the Kazakh language (Kalish, Kassymova, 2015: 87, 203-206).

The memories of Respondent 3 also showcase the historical and emotional aspects of migration motivation. The respondent noted that while there was an initial yearning for the place they departed, the sense of arriving in the historical homeland provided the strength needed to adjust to a new life. This illustrates the psychological elements of the “return to the ethnic homeland” phenomenon as outlined in migration research.

Interview materials also show that the current socio-political situation in China influences migration motivation as well. According to Respondent 3, although some Kazakhs in China would like to move to Kazakhstan today, this process has become more difficult due to certain administrative and political restrictions. In the respondent’s view, some people’s freedom to migrate is constrained by the Communist Party system, while others encounter difficulties in sending their children abroad (INT2). This indicates that migration motivation is shaped not only by historical or cultural factors, but also by political and institutional conditions.

Scholarly studies likewise emphasize the multifactorial nature of migration decisions. Historical memory, ethnic identity, the desire to return to a familiar cultural environment, social opportunities, and political conditions all influence the repatriation process simultaneously (Baltabayeva et al., 2015: 109). In particular, for Kazakhs from China, the idea of returning to the historical homeland is important in terms of preserving national culture and strengthening the ethnic identity of future generations.

Thus, the migration motivations of ethnic Kazakhs from China in the Karaganda region are closely connected with historical memory, ethnic identity, and strategic decisions concerning the future of the next generation. As the interview materials show, for most repatriates migration to Kazakhstan is not merely an economic choice, but is perceived as a return to the historical homeland and a reintegration into the national cultural space. This makes it possible to formulate an important scholarly conclusion for understanding the socio-cultural content of ethnic repatriation.

An examination of the migration and adjustment experiences of ethnic Kazakhs who moved from the People’s Republic of China to the Karaganda region reveals that repatriation is a complex social phenomenon. Utilizing archival data, academic texts, and biographical interviews, the research demonstrates

that this process represents a multifaceted change occurring concurrently across economic, social, and cultural dimensions.

The results indicate that shared ethnicity does not inherently ease repatriates' adjustment to a different society. This relates to the idea of the "paradox of ethnic return migration" outlined in global academic research. To put it differently, ethnic communities returning to their ancestral land face specific challenges within an unfamiliar social and institutional setting, even with their ethnic closeness (Natsuko Oka, 2013). Simultaneously, the adjustment experience of Kazakhs from China in the Karaganda area occurred on multiple levels.

First, economic adaptation, although marked by difficulties in the initial stage, gradually stabilized over time through education and professional experience.

Second, social adaptation was achieved through the formation of communal ties and social networks.

Third, cultural adaptation was characterized by adjustment to a new cultural environment while preserving elements of national cultural experience.

Thus, the adaptation experience of ethnic Kazakhs from China demonstrates that repatriation is a complex and multidimensional social process. Although ethnic proximity did not fully ease integration, such factors as social capital, education, and cultural identity contributed to their successful adaptation to the new society.

Conclusion

This article has explored the migration and integration experiences of ethnic Kazakh migrants from China who established themselves in the Karaganda region of Kazakhstan from 1991 to 2021. The re-

search examined migration dynamics and the daily adaptation experiences of migrants by integrating statistical data, archival resources, and qualitative interviews.

The results indicate that ethnic return migration does not guarantee successful assimilation in the ancestral homeland. Although migrants from China share a common ethnic background with the local population, their adaptation is shaped by a combination of linguistic barriers, institutional conditions, and socio-cultural differences.

Family ties and migration networks often make the initial stages of relocation easier, helping newcomers find housing and navigate everyday challenges. At the same time, these forms of support cannot fully overcome the structural constraints that become more visible over time.

In this sense, the case of Kazakh migrants from China illustrates a broader tension typical of ethnic return migration: common ethnic origins do not automatically translate into full social inclusion, and migrants may still encounter various institutional and social barriers.

The findings indicate that a successful repatriation strategy ought to be enhanced by supplementary integration-focused initiatives. Language training, assistance with validating foreign credentials, job placement services, and cultural assimilation initiatives could greatly enhance migrant adjustment.

Furthermore, this research adds to the global academic discourse on ethnic return migration by presenting new empirical data from Central Asia. Examining the relationships between migration networks, institutional frameworks, and cultural variations provides a fresh viewpoint for comprehending the assimilation of repatriates in post-Soviet contexts.

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