

Imagined and «Real» Homeland: Ethnic Kazakhs Return Migration

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This paper will explore the post-migration experiences of Kazakh returnees from China, Russia, Uzbekistan, and Mongolia. I argue that unmet expectations about homecoming produce disappointment feelings and feelings of not belonging in Kazakhstan. My fieldwork shows that all Kazakh returnees groups experienced a mismatch between their expectations and the realities of homecoming. There seems to be a difference between returnees from China and Mongolia who experience linguistic difficulties and returnees from Russia and Uzbekistan. However, despite this difference, it is difficult to establish with certainty that returnees from Russia and Uzbekistan experience homecoming in a systematically different way. My findings of the difficulties that study participants encounter support the previous literature on Kazakh return migration, which state that they confront issues in various fields, including language, the attitude of locals, economic insecurity, corruption (Kuscu, 2013; Diener, 2009; Bokayev et al., 2012). Nevertheless, the findings from my fieldwork go beyond current approaches to suggest that the feeling of disappointment about homecoming produces feelings of not belonging to the homeland.

This paper will explore Kazakh returnees' post-migration experience, organized according to the main themes research participants emphasized in the interviews. The main factors of disappointment they brought up are language problems, economic insecurity, corruption, locals' attitudes towards returnees, and how all these experiences transmit into feelings of not belonging. The paper concludes with a demonstration of the main points raised.

Research background

The collapse of the Soviet state has led to massive migration, as more than seventy million people turned to ethnic minority groups outside of their home countries (Barcus & Werner, 2010; Diener, 2009). People who had voluntarily or forcibly settled in Kazakhstan started to return to their home countries. In 1991-1994 most of them returned to Germany, Russia, Ukraine, and their return migration induced a sharp decline in the number of Kazakhstani citizens. Moreover, the government perceived the smaller number of Kazakhs than other ethnicities among the population as a national issue. So, as the newly independent state, Kazakhstan launched the ethnic repatriation program (Kuscu, 2008). The number of Kazakh people abroad is near to five million (UNDP, 2019). As a result of the program, from 1991 till 2020, more than one million ethnic Kazakhs migrated to their ethnic homeland, Kazakhstan (Forbes. kz). Since 1992 they have returned mainly from Mongolia, China, Russia, and Uzbekistan. The most significant number of Kazakh diaspora live in China, Uzbekistan, Russia, Mongolia.

However, the implementation of the repatriation program needs extensive and complex work from the government. Alexander Diener (2009) writes that such policies should ensure the complex adaptation of repatriates in their ancestral homeland (Diener, 2009). The term homeland is symbolic as most of these people have always lived in their 'host' countries (Laurelle, 2015). Most of them have left Kazakhstan's territory more than several decades ago because of historical events, such as famine, repression, collectivization, and etcetera. Despite the long-living experience in another country, most Kazakh diaspora representatives saved the Kazakh language and culture. However, arriving at the ancestral homeland, Kazakh returnees did experience different problems unexpected by them. They were spurred by cultural and linguistic differences, high unemployment rates, economic insecurity, corruption, and mainly with local people's negative attitudes towards them.

Defining Key Terms

In this section, I will clarify the terms used in this study, namely "oralman", "qandas", "return migration". In 1993, the government of Kazakhstan gave to Kazakh repatriates the official term – oralman (Diener, 2005) (in Kazakh means "returned"). According to the Law 'on Migration', oralman is "ethnic Kazakh residing permanently beyond the borders of the Republic of Kazakhstan at the time of acquisition of its sovereignty, and his or her children of Kazakh nationality born and resided permanently beyond the boundaries of the Republic of Kazakhstan after the acquisition of its sovereignty, arrived in the Republic of Kazakhstan for permanent residence and receiving" (2011, within amendment in 2013). In the last years, the use of the term was discussed in the Kazakhstani society and the government. The term oralman acquired negative connotations among Kazakhstani citizens due to different events. For instance, the labor dispute of the oil sector workers in Zhanaozen city (western Kazakhstan) on the 16th of December 2012 led to the massive tensions between local and foreign workers and police, where 14 people died (Beisenbayeva et al. (2017). Satpayev and Umbetalieva (2015) write that nearly 3000 striking workers were Kazakh returnees. Beisenbayeva et al. (2017) claim that this event resulted in the rise of public debate about the Kazakh returnees. In their study, Werner et al. (2017) also acknowledge that the term oralman sets a boundary between local and diasporic Kazakhs.

In May 2020, the Kazakhstani government replaced the term oralman with the term qandas (in Kazakh means "a person with shared blood/people of the same nation"). "Return" is controversial when referring to the descendants of migrants. The reason is that people might not "return" to the country they did not live in (Wessendorf, 2007). In this paper, I will use the term "Kazakh returnee", "return migrants", "repatriates" to indicate successors of Kazakh migrants from neighbouring countries who took part in this study.

Diasporic expectations about homecoming

The literature about diasporic homecoming recognizes that returnees might encounter the differences between how they expect their life upon the return and the real post-migration experience (Eriksson-Baaz, 2015; King and Christou, 2011; Baldassar, 2007). Some studies have found that such discrepancies between expectations and realities often produce feelings of disappointment. Analysis of the literature demonstrates that the reasons for discontent vary for different groups of returnees. Semi-structured interviews with four groups of Kazakh returnees support these findings and reveal the main factors of their disappointment. Therefore, this section explores why four groups of Kazakhstan returnees experience disappointment about their homecoming process. In other words, it attempts to examine the facts or events that produce a rift between their expectations about homecoming and the realities they met. The interview analysis shows that even though returnee-participants came from different countries, with various backgrounds, having different forms of capital (human, social and cultural), they experienced feelings of disappointment about homecoming.

Participants of this study frequently mentioned linguistic issues, economic hardship, corruption and deceit, locals' attitude towards returnees, and feelings of not belonging as the main factors of their discontent. During the interviews, participants emphasized that they did not expect to encounter such an experience in their cultural homeland. In the following sections, I discuss these factors and Kazakh returnees' post-migration experience at the homeland.

The first perception of Kazakhstan

Before asking about post-migration experiences, I always asked participants about their first impressions of Kazakhstan. While most of the participants emphasized how their first impression was positive, several participants felt like they stepped into a less developed country. An example from each group of participants demonstrates the outer range of participants' emotional experience.

Esil, Mongolia: "When I came to Astana [current Nur-Sultan city], it looked like New York for me." "We immediately arrived in Astana, then left for Almaty. We have relatives there. However, we initially wanted to get a job in Astana. I am from a small city, where we had only the drama theatre, small stadium, and nothing there, just aul at 'maximum speed' in

Kazakhstan). And in Astana, everything was, all, as beautiful as a new city. In the beginning, my thoughts were, "wow" we live in Astana, the city which was for a little boy like New York".

Zhibek, Uzbekistan: "For me, Triumph of Astana was the peak of a masterpiece". "The infrastructure was the first thing that impressed me because we did not live in the city in Uzbekistan. At that time, there were only Baiterek and singing fountains. Everything seemed so big to me, and it seemed to me that Astana's Triumph was a peak of a masterpiece".

Kunekey, China: "Astana and Almaty looked like Urumqi, but here Kazakhstan is twenty years behind it". "When I first came to Kazakhstan, the first impression was not very good, in the city development or something else. Because Kazakhstan was only constructed for 20 years, if I am not mistaken, however, it is not compared to China. So, in Kazakhstan, all people live 10-50 years behind China. I just thought it looked like the countryside. It did not look perfect. It only had Astana and Almaty, a very good city, but not as big as in China. They are ten years behind China. It looks like Urumqi in China, but here Kazakhstan is 20 years behind it. So, which made me a little bit disappointed" (quote without translation).

From these quotes, we might see that returnees from Russia, Uzbekistan, and Mongolia, perceived Kazakhstan as the "step forward." as a step towards development. Participants acknowledged that they like how modern Kazakhstan is, that the infrastructure in cities they came from could not be compared with Astana and Almaty. However, those participants who have lived in big urban cities in China immediately after their migration to Kazakhstan noted that "Kazakhstan is behind China, that Almaty looked like Urumqi twenty years ago." These impressions upon the participants' return to their homeland allow us to suggest that some returnees might experience disappointment on the stage of arrival.

Language

Concerning the reasons for discontent among participants, the first factor to discuss is Kazakhstani society's language use. The interview data proposes that most respondents regard language as essential because language proficiency determines how effective communication with locals would be. The language background of four groups of returnees is based on their language use in the host countries. Most of the respondents who attended schools in the host country studied at local language medium instruction schools. An exception could be participants who were raised and studied in Kazakh villages with Kazakh instruction schools.

In 1991, after getting independence, the government declared Kazakh and Russian the state languages of Kazakhstan. This decision caused some debates in society on the status of languages (Dave, 2004;). After these debates, in 1997, the government declared Kazakh as "state language" and Russian as the second official language and means of interethnic communication (Genina, 2015;). So, both Kazakh and Russian are in use in Kazakhstan. Thus, the knowledge of both languages is essential to function adequately in Kazakhstan.

The importance of the Kazakh language in social relations

Interviews with participants show that they did none of the four groups, as a rule, spoke fluent Kazakh language before migrating. During interviews, returnees from Mongolia, China, and Uzbekistan, emphasized how little local Kazakhs speak the Kazakh language in Kazakhstan. In contrast, participants from Russia did not raise this question. For the Chinese, Mongolian, and some of the Uzbekistani returnees, Kazakhs' high cultural and linguistic Russification is a major barrier and problem for Kazakh returnees. It should be mentioned that literature indicates that one of the Kazakh diaspora's main return motivations is the desire to preserve the Kazakh language and culture (Orazalyuly, 2010; Diener, 2009).

Some of the participants were disappointed that they could not speak the Kazakh language as locals do because it frustrates their social relations. Studies on the ethnic return migration in other contexts reveal similar language issues that returnees face. For instance, ethnic Italians from Argentina and Europe (Prontera, 2014); Brazilian-Japanese (Tsuda, 2003); Soviet Greeks (Popov, 2010) all encountered problems with the knowledge of local languages. In this study, the majority of participant-returnees were satisfied with their level of Kazakh language. They used Kazakh while living in host countries, as their parents retained the knowledge and use of the native language. Most participants lived in Kazakh auls in their host countries. But some participants lived in cities where the number of other ethnicities substantially outweighed the number of Kazakh diasporas, so Kazakhs were an ethnic minority there. Thus, it was harder to use the Kazakh language for Kazakh (ethnic) minorities in urban areas. Dara and Zhaniya lived in urban regions

of Russia, as were Kunekey and Aru from China. Before their return to their homeland, they had little practical experience with the Kazakh language. As a result, in Kazakhstan, they faced challenges with the Kazakh language, while other participants encountered problems with the Russian language in Kazakhstan.

Kunekey: "I was born in China, in Tarbagatay, and it was just normal Chinese life. I only could speak Kazakh; I did not know how to write it. All schools and kindergarten in China consist of 95 percent of Chinese. When I went to kindergarten, my tongue started to become Chinese. My behavior was like Chinese, and even I Kazakh myself because it is hard to find Kazakh examples in that community. In kindergarten, we had 16 Chinese, only 3 Kazakh children in my community, so I could not speak Kazakh. So, I started to speak Chinese, and in school, only 2-3 people were Kazakh. All of these Kazakh people were my friends, but we communicated in Chinese... We do not speak Kazakh well because of this community. Before I came to Kazakhstan, I only spoke Kazakh, but did not write it, and did not know how to read. My vocabulary was very poor. I could not change the form of the word. I was raised in China, and 98 percent of my friends and community were Chinese. All in Chinese, without the Chinese language, we can not live in China. Nevertheless, we retained customs, Kazakh culture, e.g., Nauryz, festivals, Kurban Ait and all of that stuff" (quote without translation).

The experience of Kunekey shows the context for the language background of ethnic minorities who lived in urban cities of China. Kunekey came to Kazakhstan without knowledge of Russian and with little understanding of the Kazakh language. She still knows Chinese and English languages better than Kazakh and Russian, but now her knowledge of the Kazakh language increased. When I asked her if she considers a lack of knowledge of these languages as a problem, her answer was no. She plans to apply for work at international organizations locating in Kazakhstan to use English and Chinese languages. Kunekey's friends are Chinese Kazakhs and local Kazakhs who speak either Chinese or English, or both.

The fact that there are different Kazakh alphabets in these proximal countries creates a significant barrier for returnees. Kunekey, Torgyn, and others in their group mentioned that Chinese Kazakhs are used to the Arabic alphabet. Thus, upon their arrival in Kazakhstan, they could not read signage either in the Kazakh or Russian language.

Aru studied at a Chinese-language school in Kuldja, the chief city, agricultural market, and commercial center of the Ili River valley. She migrated to Kazakhstan in 2015 though her family

remains in China. Like Kunekey, she described how she used the Chinese language in communication with Kazakhs in China.

Aru: "I studied from 1st to 9th grade in Kuldja. I was in a Chinese class. I was not taught in Kazakh; my parents taught me Kazakh. I could not write or read in Kazakh. In my multinational school, most were Chinese people, then many Uygur, Kazakh, Dungen, Mongol. Most of the time, I make friends with Kazakh and Chinese. Even though my friend is Kazakh, we speak Chinese most of the time".

After several years of studying in Kazakhstan, Aru learned the Kazakh language very well, as she gave me an interview mostly in Kazakh. Moreover, when I asked which language is closer to her, she replied that Kazakh and Chinese are equal after five years in Kazakhstan. Like Kunekey, Aru's friends also migrated from China, and they often speak Chinese. However, she has more friends among local Kazakhs than Kunekey and also speaks Kazakh with them. Aru emphasizes the four years of living with locals and Kazakh returnees at the boarding school and then in the university dormitory improved her proficiency in the Kazakh language and the communication with locals.

Zhaniya and Dara do not perceive the lack of Kazakh language knowledge as the major problem. Instead, they say that the Russian language is widespread here to live comfortably, although their Kazakh level is not extensive. Maksat, unlike Zhaniya and Dara, lived in the Kazakh village near Omsk, where the environment allowed him to acquire both Russian and Kazakh before relocating to Kazakhstan. Returnees from Uzbekistan often know Russian and Kazakh languages because of their historical past and geographical proximity with South Kazakhstan. The geographical proximity with the south border of Kazakhstan and visa-free regime for Uzbekistani citizens facilitate travels of Uzbekistani Kazakhs in Kazakhstan¹. Therefore, it could be said that returnees from Russia and Uzbekistan experience relatively fewer linguistic issues with Russian and Kazakh language in Kazakhstan than returnees from China and Mongolia.

The importance of the Russian language in social relations

¹ The visa-free regime of entry, stay and departure from Kazakhstan for citizens of Uzbekistan (for 30 days), Russia (for 90 days), Mongolia (for 90 days).

The majority of respondents who attended school in the host country highlighted the challenges they had and are still having because of the Russian language's lack of knowledge. The language environment in Kazakhstan should be considered in terms of using the Kazakh and Russian languages (Orazalyuly, 2010). All the representatives of the Russian group of Kazakh returnees migrated to the North of Kazakhstan. They note that they mostly use the Russian language in their everyday communication. In contrast, in southern Kazakhstan, returnees use the Kazakh language more often than in northern Kazakhstani cities. There is a tendency among Kazakh returnees, those who want to live in a more Russified environment choose Northern Kazakhstan. In contrast, those who prefer to live in the Kazakh-speaking community and Kazakh culture usually settle in southern Kazakhstan, and their cultural consumption remains only Kazakh. In the same vein, Sayat Orazalyuly (2010), in his thesis, emphasizes that South Kazakhstan, Zhambyl, Kyzylorda, and Mangystau oblasts demonstrate a greater adherence to national Kazakh culture and traditions.

For people who know the Kazakhstani context, it is known that Uzbekistan's and Russian citizens very often know the Russian language. From my own life experience, I know that some people might suppose that Kazakh returnees from Russia and Uzbekistan experience a settlement process easier than Chinese and Mongolian Kazakhs. People think that one cultural/historical past with Kazakhstan and knowledge of the Russian language give them an advantage. Even though interviews demonstrate that most of the participants from Russia and Uzbekistan know the Russian language, they face issues in other fields, which will be discussed later in the chapter.

One of the participants. Zere, shared that the Kazakhstani government in 1998 appointed her family in North Kazakhstan. The main problem that her family members faced was a lack of Russian language knowledge. The scale of that problem became higher when they understood that no people in the city could understand the Kazakh language. The majority of people in town are still Russians. Zere adds that her parents became confident Russian language users only in 2005. Another participant from Mongolia who shares her parents' story is Saida. She mentions that in

contrast to her father, who studied in Kazakhstan, her mother never knew the Russian language, and still, it is challenging for her.

Saida, Mongolia: "My father spoke the Russian language, he knew Russian mentality, so he did not experience severe difficulties, because he was a talented person. But it was difficult for my mother because she did not know Russian before. Her entire environment was Kazakh speaking and at work as well. She does not speak Russian to this day. It was difficult for her to adapt. She immediately found work after our relocation here in 1993, and until 2019 she and my father worked at one place".

Interview data demonstrates that Mongolian Kazakhs had problems with the Russian language. For instance, the next participant, Esil, notes that he has been embarrassed about his accent and even afraid of being accused of it. However, eventually, he learned the language because it would be challenging without Russian in Kazakhstan.

Esil, Mongolia: "When we moved to Kazakhstan, I entered the 7th-grade class, and until the end of school, I did not know the Russian language, I already understood but did not speak Russian at all, I was embarrassed to speak because I had an accent. I was afraid that my peers would laugh at me. Later, when I moved to university, I got a job at the EXPO in the summer, where I began to speak Russian and improved my speaking... It is tough to live here without knowledge of Russian. Even *konduktory* spoke Russian. I could not ask people on the street how to get home".

Regarding the Chinese Kazakhs, none of them knew Russian on their return to the ancestral homeland. The amount of time that they live in Kazakhstan ranges from fifteen to two years. All participants from this group lack knowledge of the Russian language. As they note during the interviews, the Russian language is tough to understand and acquire for them.

Torgyn and Gaziza from China raised the problem of the language of documents in Kazakhstan. Gaziza says, "Our first challenge in Kazakhstan is the Russian language. In China, all our documents were in the Kazakh language". In Kazakhstan, a vast number of organizations use the Russian language in their document flow.

The next participant, Azhar, migrated from China almost three years ago. She was first from her family who came to Kazakhstan; her husband and children were meant to come later to join her in Kazakhstan. When the turmoil started in China, she was afraid of the situation and family members' safety, so she decided to apply to the university in Kazakhstan as an ethnic Kazakh from

China. Luckily, she was accepted, and, in the summer, she came to Kazakhstan. The following interview excerpt illustrates her first post-migration experience.

"When I first arrived, I was very excited that I moved here to study. Then I began to worry because they [the Chinese government] did not want my children to leave for a while. Then my husband often traveled to China to finish some work. So, there were just three of us, me and my children. We did not communicate with anyone. Therefore, to be honest, I could not immediately get involved in the study, which was very difficult for me. I could not fit here immediately because we came from repressions, and we still have not escaped from there. We are afraid to speak about that place, if someone here asks about home, about Xinxiang, I cannot reply, we do not know this at all, we did not hear it, I do not want to talk about it, I can only say this because such questions remind me of what we experienced there. So, we were in a depression. I could not fit here because of that anxiety. I did not come along with people. I am older than my groupmates at university, so we will not be able to communicate easily. Whatever we were raised in two different places, as we have different norms, I am not young, thus I did not get along with my groupmates".

This quote demonstrates that political insecurity in the host country made Azhar consider her ancestral homeland as a place that might provide stability. It also could be said that this unstable situation with her children and then with her husband, that her extended family stayed in China, and her "return" to the homeland made her feel guilty for leaving others behind. Similarly, scholars in the field of migrants' well-being note that immigrants might often feel anxiety and depression because of leaving behind family members (Sussman, 2010; Vathi, 2017). The quote below demonstrates how cultural differences produced Azhar's anxiety (Pitkanen et al., 2020):

"I had no relatives in Kazakhstan. It is only this time when they also migrate here. Now it is much better, for the last two years I had no one here, relatives reside in Almaty. Also, in this city, most speak Russian. If you speak with them in Kazakh, they reply in Russian, especially on the street. If we go shopping and ask them [local Kazakhs] to speak in Kazakh, they might be offended or even do not talk to us. These people do not know English, could not speak. Such situations cause hard times, as we were upset that Kazakhs do not speak Kazakh with Kazakhs. This is a Kazakh state. To be honest, we are tired of asking to speak Kazakh».

From the interview with Azhar, it is seen that she had little contact with the locals for the first few years. Moreover, it seems that she was in isolation, as her and the locals' social spaces did not mix for a while. Azhar and other participants of this study shared that the Russian language's ignorance caused a negative attitude they did not expect from local Kazakhs. Azhar's interview shows that language differences might make returnees feel uncomfortable and stressed in the homeland. In the same vein, Brenik et al. (2012) claim that local people's negative attitudes

make migrants feel insecure and anxious. However, all participants who did not know Russian recognize that the Russian language's widespreadness in Kazakhstan created a huge barrier. Recent studies about Kazakh returnees made by local scholars support this finding (Kalshabayeva and Seisenbayeva, 2013; Bokayev et al., 2012; Mahmudova, 2009).

To conclude, it could be said that interview data demonstrates that language knowledge was a reason for colossal disappointment for returnees from China and Mongolia. Also, there seems to be a difference between returnees from China and Mongolia and returnees from Russia and Uzbekistan because the latter do not experience such linguistic difficulties that the former do. However, despite this difference, it is difficult to establish with certainty that returnees from Russia and Uzbekistan experience homecoming in a systematically different way. Except for linguistic issues, respondents also raised the economic challenges they encountered after their arrival to Kazakhstan.

Economic insecurity

Research participants during the interviews mentioned the 'negative' image of the returnee. For instance, Zere made the point that often Mongolian Kazakhs who migrate to Kazakhstan are uneducated. Likewise, in her thesis, Anna Genina (2015) reveals that Mongolian Kazakh returnees might wish to pass for "local" Kazakhs. To be precise, they prefer not to advertise that they came from Mongolia and claim to be from Shymkent or Kyzylorda² (Genina, 2015). These wishes are probably related to the image of poor and uneducated returnees from Mongolia among Kazakhstani Kazakhs. For instance, Esil notes, "Oralmans do not "return" if they are rich," and then he continues:

"When we just came [to Kazakhstan] we bought the land in [the village outside the city]. We wanted to build a house, the rest of the money we had, father invested in our business [his father became a small entrepreneur in Kazakhstan]. We lived five people in a small room, thank God we studied at gymnasium school. They kept us there from morning to evening. After two years, we started to build our house, and it became easier".

² Shymkent and Kyzylorda are cities located in the southern part of Kazakhstan. This part of Kazakhstan is considered as mostly Kazakh language speaking community, which maintains Kazakh traditions.

Genina (2015) finds that assumptions about Mongolian Kazakhs precede their migration to Kazakhstan, "perceived as rural and Kazakh speaking, they were also assumed to be uneducated, culturally backward, and unproductive" (p.87). Contrary to Kazakh returnees' "uneducated" image, my fieldwork shows that at least one of the participants' parents had an educational degree earned in Kazakhstan or their host country. Those participants who are older than 18 years either study at university or already have a degree.

Returning to the interview with Zere, she explained that her parents got their degrees in Kazakhstan. Her parents met during their university education as externals from Mongolia in Kazakhstan and then returned to Mongolia. After some time in Mongolia, they decided to return to their cultural homeland, Kazakhstan. The following excerpt from the interview with Zere constructs an assumption that Mongolian Kazakhs occupy furniture manufacturing niches in the Kazakhstani market or other manufacturing sectors. They face obstacles with finding jobs for their qualifications. It also assumes that Kazakh returnees migrating to Kazakhstan are employed in industries specific to their ethnic backgrounds.

Zere, Mongolia: "There is such the fact that the Mongolian Kazakhs are divided into two groups. The first is engaged in furniture manufacture, seconds to the manufacture of the windows in Kazakhstan. My parents were in the first category until they found a stable job [in Kazakhstan]. Windows production is mainly occupied in southern Kazakhstan. By the way, I heard that in Almaty, for example, in Altyn Orda bazaar, Mongolian Kazakhs sell the straight rows of furniture made by them."

Another factor contributing to returnees' economic insecurity is that many Kazakhstani employers do not accept foreign diplomas (Diener, 2009). It relates to the diplomas from neighbouring countries, such as Uzbekistan, Mongolia, China, Russia. Interview with Botagoz raises this problem.

Botagoz, China: "There are a lot of Kazakh returnees who left their diplomas and are now busy with their entrepreneurship or work not related to their diplomas. They have a diploma and a bachelor's degree. For instance, I have a sister who graduated from China with a degree in accounting. Now she has been sitting at home for five years after her return, her diploma does not work here, and she does not know the Russian language. There are a lot of such people here".

Similarly, Sayat Orazalyuly (2010) writes that Kazakh returnees experience significant problems with employment because of two factors, ignorance of the Russian language and non-recognition of their diplomas.

While some participants note the unwanted shift in the work sphere because of the non-recognition of foreign diplomas (Diener, 2009) and lack of knowledge of the Russian language, some participants acknowledge that returnees might intentionally make a switch in their work activities. For instance, Banu shares that her parents decided to change their work area: "My parents could not find a job after our relocation to Kazakhstan. My father did not have a profession, my mother was a schoolteacher, but it was unprofitable to be a teacher in Kazakhstan. So, by her own will, she changed her profession".

Dimash, on the question about his parents' job after the relocation to Kazakhstan, says:

"My mother did not work; father got a job as a security guard at the bazaar [ohrannik]. They did not retain their profession. They went to the Labor exchange [birzha truda], but they were offered only to sweep the yards [dvornik]. So, my mother did it. They also tried to trade something. To be brief, they did everything they could".

Dimash's father was employed as a military officer when they lived in Uzbekistan. However, after returning to his homeland in Kazakhstan, he could not save his profession.

It should be mentioned that some of the research participants and their parents did not encounter challenges in the labour market of Kazakhstan after their return. For instance, Saida's father is a musician, composer who studied at the conservatory in Kazakhstan and Russia. Her mother is a college teacher. Both of her parents found jobs as soon as they returned to Kazakhstan. However, their case is unique because Saida's family was among the first ones for whom President Nursultan Nazarbayev offered the return to their cultural homeland. "We were among the first ten families who were transported by the state by plane; after arrival, we were immediately settled in a hotel." From this excerpt, it could be seen that Saida's parents had a privileged offer in the early 1990s. However, this is more an exception than typical for Kazakh returnees. The next factor returnees mentioned during the interviews was their experience of corruption and deceit in Kazakhstan.

Corruption and fraud

Return migration scholars recognize that corruption might produce disappointed feelings for returnees when migrating to their homeland (Baser and Toivanen, 2019; Paashe, 2016; Emanuelsson, 2008). For example, Paashe (2016) writes that returnees compare their post-migration experience with pre-migration time in host countries' political spheres that they perceive as relatively transparent and more unrestricted. In Baser and Toivanen (2019) study, Iraqi Kurdish returnees highlighted corruption, political instability, and the intense tribal system as the main reasons for their disappointment after a return. Among Kazakhstani scholars, Orazalyuly (2010) and Diener (2009) states that corruption is one of the main threats for the repatriates' integration. Similarly, some of my respondents mentioned corruption and deceit as factors of their discontent and even undermining the local norms' credence.

Zhaniya, Russia: "...This corrupt environment, such a ubiquitous approach, sets an example for young people in Kazakhstan. When I lived in Russia, for comparison, I did not have such attitudes of such concepts. So many years I lived there, my parents worked in different cities, and I have never seen them pay someone a bribe for their work. Dad is a production worker, and mom is a doctor. None of them gave bribes to work.

Moreover, in Kazakhstan, even for the most straightforward job with a penny salary, you still have to go and bring some amount for this place so that you will be taken. It is just outrageous, but it happens everywhere, no matter what kind of structure it is everywhere. It works that way, unfortunately. An example could be my story with the test for this job. I wanted to serve my homeland, just left from me because of my naivety of simplicity and ignorance of the system here".

In the same vein, German and US Greeks, in the study of King and Christou (2011), mentioned their frustration and disappointment about Greece's homecoming. They noted that corruption and xenophobia in Greece produced anger and massive discontent for returnees. Moreover, King and Christou (2011) and Paashe (2016) disclosed that such negative experiences made their participants reappraise their former host countries.

Zhaniya, Russia: "After some time, I decided to move to Almaty, as it was my small dream, and again, I was confronted with corruption. I had to sell my apartment to help my relatives. When I found a buyer for an apartment, I went to an organization that relates to the process of selling and buying real estate. And what do you think? They said that this apartment is not mine yet, and some documents are missing from the side of the house contractors while I lived there for several years. Then the man who would buy my estate went to that organization, and our deal took a 'successful outcome'. Of course, he kept the bribe amount from the cost of the apartment..."

Moreover, these are only some occasions of corruption I confronted. I can not believe that I exchanged all this to be in the homeland! I had a very, very big disappointment, enormous stress. I unwittingly became an accomplice in such cases".

During the interview with Zhaniya, when she spoke about the confronted corruption cases, she sounded like a person having a moral dilemma in adapting to the homeland culture. This intense moral dilemma might be produced because of her professional interest, as in Russia, she completed five-year governance management education. Upon her return to her homeland, she aimed to work in governance. As she emphasized in the interview, "I wanted to serve my country... here, I had intense internal resistance...". Similarly, Baser and Toivanen (2019) revealed that returnees in Iraq had a moral dilemma in adapting to the homeland culture full of corruption.

Botagoz is 40 years old, returned in 2010 from China, and raised corruption and fraud as a factor of her negative and disappointing experience at her ethnic homeland.

"I know people who moved to Kazakhstan, and then their economic condition worsened. Some were deceived for money. We, in China, have robust legislation. For example, if organizations ask for money, we calmly give it, since we are sure that it will be recorded on the computer as expected. We are sure there that no one will deceive us. Over the decades of living there, some of them have come to Kazakhstan and are faced with deception. For example, I was also deceived. Everyone had this, even though they were all deceived. In general, we wanted to buy land. We were told that we needed money to seal. We gave them money. We thought that as it would be in China, it will be here as well. However, we were deceived by the land and the seal. My sister was also a victim. After that, we are all afraid, and now we do not trust at once, we find out everything thoroughly, we ask. Because we do not know Russian, and contracts are written in Russian, those in Kazakh, sometimes we also may not fully understand.

For this reason, we used just to put signatures on documents. Those people who deceived us, ran away, are still hiding. We did not file a lawsuit because we knew that the money would not be returned to us. But here I must say, of course, that this happens not only here, if we went to America, this could also happen there. Everywhere you need to be careful. Nevertheless, here, we did not know the norms in Kazakhstan, we came to another country, and we need to understand that this is not China, in which we know the norms".

During the interview, Botagoz further highlights that the economic situation of returnees plays a high role. She adds:

"Maybe I am lucky because I know the English language and works in the English instruction organization. While most of the returnees have economic issues, I have work and earn money that covers my family's living expenses".

From these quotes, we could see that Kazakh returnees were defrauded, had to deal with corruption, and lost money. Such economic issues might have a significant negative impact on

returnees' post-migration experience and, as interviews show, produce upset feelings about the return.

Moreover, Zhaniya and Botagoz express that they had not expected to be deceived by people in their homeland. They started to compare their host countries with their homeland, recognizing that there nobody deceived them. The experience they got in their homeland made them acknowledge that fraud and corruption are common in Kazakhstan. Therefore, they decided to be careful with local people and norms. However, local people attitude towards them was another factor of their disappointment about homecoming.

Locals attitude towards Kazakh repatriates

Participants in this study acknowledged that they or their acquaintances experienced division and alienation in their homeland. When talking about such experiences, some participants went into details while others did not. Participants at the first touch to the question of division and alienation did not admit that they faced it, but at the same time did not deny the existence of such towards ethnic Kazakhs. However, the number of reports was high, so I decided to cover them in this section.

Regarding the term "oralman," a few participants stated that this term could be used only for people with an oralman passport, after getting citizenship returnees to obtain the right to equal to residents, as Kazakhstani citizens. Returnees also mention the negative connotations of "otherness" and being uneducated and poor, and at the same time being privileged by the government.

Kunekey, China: "The state gives us the oralman status. Actually, this is not very good work for us, yes, it is true that we are oralman because we came from another country, but they regard us as another type of person. Like those who do not speak Russian, this is not very good actually".

Here, I want to share the story from my personal experience, which shows how locals might perceive Kazakh returnees as a privileged group of migrants. So, when I was in the "next-door" coffee and bakery where I know all the team, I was working on my laptop, asking the bakery's driver about his home city. He mentioned that in the part of the city where he lives, a lot of

Mongolian Kazakhs reside. Of course, I was interested to know more and asked for some details.

Our dialogue looked like this:

Driver: "They live very well, we [locals] could not touch them [*оларга тийуге болмайды*]".

Me: "What do you mean by this?"

Driver: "We could not beat them or quarrel. We were warned several times by *uchastkovyi*. He warned us: "Do not touch oralmans. Our law is on their side. If something happens to them, you will immediately go to the court without any proceedings".

Bakery's owner: "They are very privileged, the state gave them houses, lands, jobs, money, and Kazakhstani citizenship. They have many opportunities".

There were a high number of such dialogues I have heard or were involved in while working on this study. My research participants also mentioned the locals' perspective about the repatriation of former Kazakh diaspora. Interestingly, during the interviews not married Chinese and Mongolian returnees (20-30 years old) emphasize that it is difficult to find a partner in Kazakhstan.

Medet, China: "I think [pause] discrimination exists. [pause] In short, I wanted to marry one girl. She is from Kazakhstan, but when she told her parents that I came from China, their reaction was not good. Her parents told her that it was better not to marry me. Therefore, there is discrimination most likely, but they [local Kazakhs] do not say it to your face. They think you are the second class, that is what they are" (quote without translation).

This interview excerpt illustrates Medet's negative experience in the relationship with a local person. He discloses the feelings of being frustrated and disappointed, not only because his partner left their relationship but also because local Kazakhs are biased, which produces injustice. Saida also talks about the division by origin she faced in Kazakhstan. But in contrast to Medet, who notes that locals do not want to marry returnees, she emphasizes how Kazakh returnees avoid relationships with locals. So, it could be said that both cases exist when Kazakh returnees might encounter division from local Kazakhs and when returnees divide themselves from local Kazakhs in terms of relationships.

Saida, Mongolia: "When locals find out that I am from Mongolia, I still feel this neglect, arrogance, and even I can say that the returnees try not to marry local girls because this difference in mentality is very felt in everyday life. And on the part of relatives, whether it is a girl or a man, this neglect is felt, and Kazakh returnees feel second-class or third-class people".

Quotes above have another similarity in talking about being not good enough, being second and third class among co-ethnics. Kunekey also acknowledges that kind of experience in the

relationship with local Kazakhs. She talks about the division by origin, unequal attitude towards Kazakh returnees and expresses huge disappointment, misunderstanding, and rejection. Moreover, she states that this division produces the feeling of not belonging to her homeland, to the Kazakh nation. This disappointment redoubles because, in such a situation, she does not understand where she belongs, to Chinese Kazakhs, Chinese or local Kazakhs.

Kunekey, China: "Some local people hate Chinese people. For example, when I am in China, I am different, and when I am in Kazakhstan, I am also different. I do not know where I belong. This is a question now for me. When I want to find a boyfriend, I do not know which local Kazakh, Chinese Kazakh or Chinese, for whom I should be looking.

Moreover, if I get along with local guys, they will have some consideration because you are from China. But I am also Kazakh. I have the same culture. I am the same. These aspects, but maybe they do not go along with people from Chinese Kazakh, so they do not understand these people, who are forgotten in other countries - China. We can be regarded equally because we are Kazakh, we have the same culture. So, I do not think that is good behaviour. I do not know how other people think. I cannot control it. Of course, these feelings [love] between people grow. It does not regard your nationality, your personality. However, when it comes to your different reality. Because I know the reason is that I am from China, I am different. Most people will think like this, but I do not like this, and if they do continue this, I will more often not know where I belong" (quote without translation).

Interview with Azhar demonstrates her concern about the division for those raised in auls and those in cities. She says that ignorance of the Russian language means that the person is backward, uneducated, which worsens Kazakh returnees' status among the homeland society.

Azhar, China: "...It is hard to ask people to speak Kazakh because this is a weird request for them. Local people think that we are an uneducated group of people because we can not speak Russian. I recently learned about a local concept that states that if the person is ignorant of the Russian language, he is from aul. I was shocked to know that people might still use this concept. Even the guys with whom I studied have such an opinion... The whole country was born in auls. They know a lot because you can find and learn everything through the Internet. So, I was surprised to find out that such a concept is still in use. In general, such things make a person very sad. After all, there are people from the villages who also come so that their children have an opportunity to understand Kazakh and speak Kazakh. So that they might not be afraid, not defend their language. They come here but still experience the embarrassment of speaking Kazakh; they feel strange".

Overall, semi-structured interviews collected during the fieldwork show several discussions about the experience of being divided, alienated and major disappointment feelings. In general, participants express their concern about being involved in some sort of hierarchy among Kazakhs in their ethnic homeland. They were disillusioned about living in the hierarchical environment in their former host countries, and after returning to their cultural homeland, moving to the 'new'

hierarchical world being second class. The following section will cover the feeling of not belonging to the homeland society.

The feelings of not belonging to Kazakhstan

Arriving at the ancestral homeland, most of the participants did experience something unexpected. For instance, Torgyn recalls his arrival:

"When I was twenty years old in 2009, I was the first in my family to cross the border of China, set foot on our Motherland, on Kazakhstani land. Before my departure, my father kept repeating, "don't worry, there are all Kazakhs, your brothers, as you step on our land, you will understand everything, all will be easy". I trusted him, crossed the border, stepped onto the Kazakh land and the first thing I heard was "*Пирожки, сосиски в тесте, булочки*" [Pies, sausages in the dough, buns (in Russian)]. I did not understand what these words meant, came closer, then realized that it is better to eat something before the long road to Almaty. Somehow, I bought *пирожки* and was thinking about what *пирожки* are. I thought that these were Kazakhstani Kazakh's food and that I had never eaten anything like that in China... Only later I knew that it is Russian food and language".

During the interview, he mentions that his father instilled the feeling of belonging to Kazakhstan from his childhood. Then Torgyn's father decided that he would first migrate to Kazakhstan, so later all family members will join him in the homeland. Thereby, Torgyn, while living in China, felt the attachment to Kazakhstan.

Similarly, Fehler (2011), Carling & Erdal (2014), and Saar (2018) show that identity-driven motivations and feelings of belonging to the 'homeland' play a role in return decisions. In their study, Yehuda-Sternfeld and Mirsky (2014) investigated Israeli returnees' homecoming from the US. Their main finding was that those who return in seeking the feeling of belonging experienced disappointment and disillusionment because of the difficulties faced after a return. In the same vein, studies conducted in Switzerland (Wessendorf, 2007), New Zealand (Chaban et al., 2011), and the UK (Reynolds, 2010) pointed to difficulties experienced by returnees dealing with discrepancies between the idealized home image before return and experienced after resettlement, in addition to the emotional challenges experienced by redefining their identity.

In this study, Kazakh returnees experienced various difficulties related to their post-migration life in Kazakhstan. Participants disclosed their feelings of disappointment and

frustration by local norms and attitude towards Kazakh returnees in the homeland. Analysis of the fieldwork data demonstrates that most participants had a time questioning their identity and belongingness to the homeland. They recognize that the negative experiences that happened to them contest their feeling of belonging to Kazakhstan.

The following quote from Azhar shows that Kazakh returnees come to Kazakhstan searching for belongingness to the place. But upon their arrival, they understood that Kazakhs in Kazakhstan and Mongolian/Chinese Kazakhs are different, culturally and linguistically.

Azhar, China: The difference between local Kazakhs made me feel very depressed. I do not know, it is different here, but it was a dream for us Kazakhs from abroad. They come repeating 'Қазақстан Қазақстан'. However, no one here meets us with open arms. Many people can not speak Kazakh, so many Kazakhs who came from our places become disappointed about their homecoming. Then they think this is the land that I dreamed of so much? We could not be Kazakhs there, and if we come here to be Kazakhs, we will instead be like Russians here. I had the same idea, but then I learned a lot, saw a lot, talked to many people, and now I refused this idea... I still remember my talk with people who came from China. They still question why they [local Kazakhs] do this, why they do not want to be Kazakh, why they do not become Kazakh, why they use the language of others... It is time to speak Kazakh. It has been thirty years, they say".

Similarly, Medet admits that he is not related to the country he was born in and to the homeland.

"In my opinion today Kazakhs are so different, I do not know, e.g. their appearance, personality, religion, beliefs are so different. In Korea and Japan, all people are the same. They have the same beliefs, religion, and understanding. However, for Kazakhstan, this seems to be a problem I feel sometimes they are like other people" (quote without translation).

When I asked him if he was doing something to cope with the feeling of not belonging to China or Kazakhstan, he said he did not have the answer now. He added that he would live in Kazakhstan and build his family, working on his goals and see what will happen in the future.

Conclusion

To conclude, the mismatch experienced upon return tends to cause Kazakh returnees' disappointment. In turn, disappointment and confusion experiences "bolster the sense of alienation of returnees" (Chi, 2020, p.1). Upon returning to the homeland, Kazakh returnees understand that

they might have different norms, accents, languages from local society, which create the concept of being "different" for both groups, locals and returnees. Some of them might even hide the fact that they were returnees from the neighbouring country in response to being perceived as different.

I claimed that the discrepancy between real homeland and imagined homeland results in feelings of disappointment. This paper shows how certain attitudes of the majority members of society and difficulties experienced might cause the sense of not belonging to it. Participants of the study note that the homeland might not always welcome returnees. This paper demonstrates that Kazakh returnees from China, Russia, Uzbekistan, and Mongolia experienced a mismatch between their expectations and homecoming realities. There seems to be a difference between returnees from China and Mongolia and returnees from Russia and Uzbekistan because the latter do not experience linguistic difficulties that the former do. However, despite this difference, it is difficult to establish some kind of hierarchy with any certainties that returnees from Russia and Uzbekistan experience homecoming in a qualitatively different way. Kazakh returnees encounter various issues after their homecoming.

However, considering all the above, the mismatch of expectations on homecoming does not always generate conflict. Nevertheless, this paper discusses returnees' disappointment about homecoming; it should be mentioned that I note that the homecoming journey could also bring positive impacts on returnees. Kazakh repatriates decide about returning to their ancestral homeland while living in the host country. Some aspects of their diasporic experience influenced their return decision. Thus, although that Kazakh returnees' expectations fail after returning, still, they find life in their homeland better than in the former host country. Once again, the Kazakh diaspora usually decides to return to the barely known ancestral homeland because of the host countries' push factor. It could be that the homecoming process might also heal some wounds that emerged from their pre-migration experience.

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Appendix A

The list of participants with a short bio

Russia:

Dara – migrated to Nur-Sultan city, Kazakhstan, from Omsk in 2010; she was almost 30 years old. She obtained her bachelor's diploma in Russia.

Zhaniya – migrated from St. Petersburg in 2005-2006 at the age of 20+. She obtained her bachelor's diploma in Russia. Now she lives in Almaty.

Maksat – migrated from Kazakh aul (Omsk) to Nur-Sultan city in 2010. He was at the age of 15. He got a bachelor's degree in Kazakhstan.

Mongolia:

Zere is 20+ years old and lives in Lisakovsk city, located in the Kostanay Region of northwestern Kazakhstan. Currently, she pursues her bachelor's degree in Kazakhstan.

Esil – migrated from Bayan-Ulgii at the age of 13 with his family. He lives in Nur-Sultan city. Currently, he pursues a bachelor's degree in Kazakhstan.

Saida – migrated from Bayan-Ulgii city at a very young age with her parents and older siblings in 1993. She is 25+ y. and lives in Nur-Sultan city. She completed the university in Kazakhstan.

Uzbekistan:

Zhibek – her family migrated from a small village in Uzbekistan when she was 10-11 years old. They relocated to Nur-Sultan city. She completed the university in Kazakhstan.

Dimash – his family, migrated from Tashkent in 2004, when he was five years old. They relocated to Kokshetau city in northern Kazakhstan. Currently, he pursues a bachelor's degree in Kazakhstan.

Aida – migrated from Uzbekistan after her marriage with Kazakhstani Kazakh. She was 20+ at that time. She got her bachelor's degree in Uzbekistan.

Banu – migrated from Uzbekistan in 2010 at the age of 14 with her family. They live in Shymkent city (Southern Kazakhstan). She completed the university in Kazakhstan.

Tomiris – migrated from Tashkent in ~ 1994-1998, where she studied nursing. After the marriage, her husband decided to "return" to the ethnic homeland, Kazakhstan. Thus, she had to migrate with him. She is 45+ years old.

Elnar – his family "returned" to Kazakhstan, Almaty city, in 2000, when he was five years old. Currently, he pursues a bachelor's degree in Kazakhstan.

China:

Torgyn – after completing school in China, he migrated to Almaty city. He completed the university in Kazakhstan.

Akylzhan – migrated from China in 2016 to Nur-Sultan city at the age of 25. He completed the university in Kazakhstan.

Medet – his family migrated from China in 2005; he was 15 years old. They live in Nur-Sultan city. He completed the university in Kazakhstan.

Azhar – she migrated from China in 2018 with her family at the age of 30+. She lives in Nur-Sultan and Almaty cities. She completed the university in Kazakhstan.

Botagoz – in 2010-2015 she began to live between two states, China and Kazakhstan.

Later she completely moved to Kazakhstan. She is 40+ years old. She completed the university in Kazakhstan.

Gaziza – migrated with her family to Kazakhstan more than ten years ago. She completed the university in Kazakhstan.

Aru – migrated from China in 2015. Currently, she pursues her bachelor's degree in Kazakhstan.

Kunekey – migrated with her family and young sibling several years ago, when she was 16 years old. They live in Almaty city. She completed the university in Kazakhstan.