Identity of Kazakhstan's Uyghurs: Migration, Homeland, and Language

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Abstract

This article examines the ethno-national identity of Uyghurs in Kazakhstan, which, during the period of independence, has been undergoing a complex process of transformation from 'Sovietness' to 'Kazakhstanness.' This transformation is shaped by the ethnic policy of Kazakhstan, aiming for the consolidation of society and formation of a united Kazakhstani nation. Post-Soviet development not only produces threats to the Uyghur ethnic identity, but also creates new perspectives for it. The article focuses on some dimensions of the Uyghur identity determined by cross-border migration from the Xinjiang-Uyghur autonomous region of the neighboring People's Republic of China and Soviet national policy, such as language, cultural institutions, and existence of the Uyghur district in the Almaty province. Analysis of the discourse of *vätän* (motherland) shows a shift to a perception of Kazakhstan as a homeland.

Keywords

Uyghurs – Kazakhstan – identity – migration – homeland

The emergence of new identities in former Soviet Central Asian countries is shaped by a nation-building process; the core elements of which include transformation of the titular ethnic groups into state-forming ones and attempts to build civil societies. These processes have affected not only titular ethnic groups, but also ethnic minorities, who have to adapt to a new distribution of power and changes in dominating ethnic groups, as well as the ideologies of new nation-states.

The disintegration of the once united Soviet space into independent states, separated by guarded borders, led to fragmentation of ethnic communities. Some of which, after the demise of the USSR, found themselves living in different separate independent polities. New nation-states demand loyalty from ethnic minorities and set them certain conditions for maintaining their languages, cultures, and links with their historical homelands. The process of adaptation of ethnic minorities to post-Soviet realities differs not only state by state across the region, but even within a given country due to their diversity. They differ in terms of size, type of settlement, cultural and linguistic proximity to state-forming ethnic groups, nature of historical links with their homelands, and their potential for creating potential threats to the national security of their host countries. All these dimensions create a complex mosaic for the identity of particular ethnic groups.

This article examines the main factors of self-identification of the Uyghurs of Kazakhstan, who make up the largest Uyghur community outside their historical homeland of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China (XUAR PRC), also known as 'East Turkestan,' where the Chinese authorities have been carrying out for many decades a policy of enforced assimilation of local Uyghurs. Uyghurs of Kazakhstan combine belongingness to the transnational community of an Uyghur stateless nation with citizenship of Kazakhstan that fosters their 'Kazakhstanness,' distinctive traits differentiating them from the rest of their ethnic brethren. The post-Soviet reality in Kazakhstan offers local Uyghurs new perspectives for strengthening their ethnic identity at the same time as producing certain threats to it. This article examines identity-building process of Kazakhstan's Uyghurs with a special focus on discourses of migration and homeland.

The Uyghur Community of Kazakhstan

Uyghurs, as one of the largest ethnic groups in Kazakhstan, recently ranked fifth in the ethnic structure of the population after the Kazakhs, Russians, Uzbeks, and Ukrainians. Catching up with Ukrainians, they will most likely move to fourth place in the years to come. According to the latest statistics, in early 2020, Uyghurs made up 274,509. That is, 1.47% of the total population of 18,735,896 people.[1] Unlike many other ethnic groups, Uyghurs live compactly, concentrated

1 Statistics 2020. Number of ethnic groups in the population of the Republic of Kazakhstan at the beginning of 2020 (27 April 2020). Committee on statistics of the Ministry of the national economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan. https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Национальный_состав_Казахстана (retrieved 20.01.2021).

mainly in southeastern Kazakhstan, namely in the territory of Almaty province (*Kaz*. Almaty oblysy) (159,110 people or 57.96% of the total Uyghur population) and the city of Almaty (103,830 people or 37.82% of the city's population). In Almaty, they compactly inhabit the Enbekshikazakh (53,219), Panfilov (37,313), Uyghur (36,763), and Talgar (19,498) districts.[2] Smaller Uyghur communities can also be found in some other parts of the country.

The emergence of the Uyghur community in the territory of present-day Kazakhstan was determined by the proximity of the Semirech'e region of the Russian Empire to the historical homeland of Uyghurs—East Turkestan, officially called Xijiang (*Chin*. new territory) after its conquest by the Qing Empire from 1759–60.[3] Although, due to geographical closeness, groups of Uyghurs appeared on the territory of Central Asian countries long ago. The first mass migration of Uyghurs in modern times to Semirech'e was a result of the Russian annexation of the territory of the short-lived Taranchi Ili Sultanate.[4] At the peak of the rivalry with Great Britain for dominance in Central Asia, which became known as the Great Game, fearing British influence in the Yettishar state established by Yaqub-bek in Kashgaria, Russian troops conquered the Taranchi Ili Sultanate in 1871.[5] The ruler of the Sultanate Abil-ogli, with his relatives and close associates, was resettled by the Russian authorities to the north of the city of Verny (present-day Almaty). That settlement in 1960 became part of the city of Alma-Ata, comprising a neighborhood called *First Alma-Ata* (*Rus*. Pervaia Alma-Ata). Uyghurs call it *Sultan-qurgan* (*lit*. built by Sultan). Russians ruled in the Ili (Ghulja) region in 1871–1881. During this time they moved the border with China from the Borokhudzir river eastward to Khorghos, incorporating the territory of the Ketmen volost' into Semirech'e oblast'.[6] The new Qing-Russian border was recognized by the 1881 Treaty of St. Petersburg, on the condition that Russia would return the Ili (Ghulja) region to the Qing Empire in exchange for indemnities and territorial concessions in the Far East.[7] Thus, the vast territory of the Ketmen volost' with its Taranchi-Uyghur settlements became a part of the Russian Semirech'e.

2 Ibid.

3 Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press, 2005), 289–293.

4 Immanuel C.Y. Hsü, *The Ili Crisis. A study of Sino-Russian Diplomacy, 1871–1881* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), 183–188.

5 Alexander Morrison, *The Russian Conquest of Central Asia. A Study in Imperial Expansion, 1814–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 168–215.

6 P.P. Rumiantsev, *Taranchi* (St. Petersburg: n.p., 1914), 83; Ch. Valikhanov, "Zapadniy krai kitayskoi imperii i gorod Kulja," in Ch. Valikhanov, *Sobraniye sochineniy v pyati tomakh*. T.2. (Alma-Ata: Glavnaya redaksiya Kazakhskoi sovetskoi entsiklopedii, 1985), 174–177.

7 Hsü, *The Ili Crisis*, 183–188.

In accordance with the St. Petersburg Treaty, the population of the Ghuljia area that was willing to keep Russian subjecthood was allowed to move to Semirech'e. As a result, 45,373 Uyghurs moved to Semirechi'e from 1881–1883, thereby joining their ethnic brethren living in the Ketmen volost' and within the vicinity of Verny. Settlers founded the city of Yarkend (*Kaz*. Zharkent) and about 80 villages in Semirech'e.[8] At the very beginning, 42 new Uyghur settlements were established in the province and their number reached 99 in early 20th century. Initially, five new counties (*Rus*. volost') were set up for Uyghur settlers in addition to the already existing Ketmen volost': Zharkent-Taranchi, Aksu-Charyn, Malybay, Koram, and Karasu.[9] In 1909 Akkent volost' was withdrawn from the Zharkent-Taranchi volost'. This new volost', together with Aksu-Charyn and Ketmen volosts, was included in the Zharkent district (*Rus*. uyezd), with Malybay, Koram, and Karasu volosts in the Verny district. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Uyghur population of Semirech'e was concentrated in the Zharkent and Akkent (present Panfilov district), Aksu-Charyn, Ketmen (present Uyghur district), Malybay, Koram, Karasu volosts (present Enbekshikazakh district), and in four settlements (*Rus*. sloboda) of the city of Verny.

In the period after the migration, the Uyghur population of Semirech'e increased, not only due to natural growth, but also due to a constant influx from China. The dynamics of this growth can be seen from the following statistical data: in 1885 Uyghurs comprised 47,097 people; in 1888, 49,202; and in 1892, 51,097. According to the first census of the Russian Empire, in 1897 Uyghurs (called at that time 'Taranchis' and 'Kashgaris') in the Semirech'e oblast' comprised 55,999 people. A slight but steady increase of the population was observed in the following years: 62,044 (1900); 77,492 (1906); 86,526 (1911).10 The Kashgari population of the Ferghana valley also grew due to migration from Kashgar (southern Xinjiang).[11]

Uyghurs in Semirech'e settled mainly in the foothill river valleys, similar to their former places of residence in the Ghulja region. Their settlements were based on communal-compatriot relations. Therefore, settlers often called new

8 Malik Kabirov, *Ocherki istorii uyghurov sovetskogo Kazakhstana* (Alma-Ata: Nauka KasSSR, 1975), 76.

9 Galina Baratova, "Uyghuri v Kazakhstane i Srednei Azii v XIX–XX vv. (dinamika chislennosti)," *Izvestiya Natsional'noi Akademii nauk Respubliki Kazakhstan. Ser. Obshestvennikh nauk*. #6/198 (1994): 17.

10 Baratova, "Uyghuri v Kazakhstane i Srednei Azii 16," 16.

11 Ablet Kamalov, "Uyghur Studies in Central Asia: A Historical Review," *Asian Research trends. New Series*. #1 (Tokyo: The Toyo Bunko, 2006): 3–32.

villages by the names of places they had moved from. The economic life of Uyghurs was determined by the traditional system of irrigation agriculture.[12] Furthermore, they were engaged in gardening, while cattle breeding. As noted by P. Rumiantsev, they had 'almost exclusively the aim to provide labour' and the crafts had 'an auxiliary character.'[13] The Russian author also drew attention to the fact that the Uyghurs, being a 'peaceful, hard-working people,' experienced the 'hard school of the Chinese yoke' and became very mobile and energetic.[14]

Uyghurs in Semirech'e became actively involved in all local significant events of the imperial period, such as the Revolt of 1916.[15] Later, they took an active part in the revolutionary events, were involved in a civil war, and contributed to establishing the Soviet power. The civil war episode is associated with a tragic page in their history, which led to a rather sharp reduction in their numbers in Semirech'e. In 1918, the Bolsheviks organized a mass shooting of the civilian population of the Uyghur villages located along the Ghulja road (*Rus*. Kulzhinskii trakt), stretching from Verny to Zharkent. Accusing civilians of sympathizing with the Cossacks and counterrevolutionaries, a group of Bolsheviks, led by Commissar Mitrofan Murayev, shot dead about 6,000 Uyghur farmers.[16] Because of that 'red terror' action, many Uyghurs left for China. The massacre, known as a 'tragedy of shooting' (*Uyg*. Atu pajiäsi), became a collective trauma, although its mention was forbidden during the Soviet times. After Kazakhstan gained independence, monuments to the victims of the massacre were erected in several villages. Stalin's repressions did not bypass the Uyghurs of Kazakhstan either. Among numerous leaders and intellectuals killed in prisons were prominent communist leaders, Abdulla Rozybakiev, and Ismail Tairov. Collectivization and the following famine of 1929–1931 led to other waves of cross-border migrations of the Kazakhs, Uyghurs, and Dungans to neighboring China.

12 Galina Baratova, "Geographiya rasseleniya i dinamika chislennosti uygurov na territorii Kazakhstana na rubezhe XIX–XX vv.," in *Voprosi istorii i kultury uygurov* (Alma-Ata: Nauka KasSSR, 1987), 85–88.

13 Rumiantsev, *Taranchi*, 5.

14 Ibid.

15 Ablet Kamalov, "Links across time: Taranchis during the uprising of 1916 in Semirech'e and the 'Atu' massacre of 1918," in *The Central Asian Revolt of 1916. A Collapsing Empire in the Age of War and Revolution*. Ed. A. Chokobayeva, V. Drieu and A. Morrison (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 227–254.

16 Ablet Kamalov, "Links across time," 245–249.

Migration from China to Kazakhstan in the 1950–1960s

A significant increase in the Uyghur population of Kazakhstan occurred because of mass migration from XUAR in the 1950s–1960s.[17] Although the exact number of migrants for those years is not known yet, scholars estimate the total number of those who fled to Kazakhstan during the 1962 exodus to be between 62,00018 and 100,000.[19] The Soviet census shows a doubling of the Uyghur population of Kazakh SSR over a decade. In 1959 there were 59,840 Uyghurs in the Central Asian republics and a total of 95,208 people in the entire Soviet Union. Then the 1970 census reported 120,881 Uyghurs in Kazakhstan and a total of 173,276 in the USSR.[20] The circumstances of the migration of the 1950s–1960s was recently studied by N. Ablazhei.[21]

One of the consequences of migration was the emergence of a new segment among the Uyghur population of Kazakhstan.[22] The newcomers settled in the already existing Uyghur villages of the Almaty and Tarldy-Qorgan provinces.[23] Most of them concentrated in the city of Alma-Ata and its suburbs. Without knowledge of Russian, migrants faced serious problems in terms of communication and employment. Therefore, they tried to settle in the Uyghur villages and neighborhoods. Some of them moved further from Kazakhstan to Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Local Uyghurs called migrants *khitailïq* ('those from China') by the name of the country of origin, while the previous Uyghur population acquired a name of *yärlik* ('local'). Thus, the migration resulted in the emergence of a differentiation between these two groups. In subsequent years, when the newcomers gradually adapted to the local environment and a new generation fluent in Russian grew up, especially with a growth of anti-Chinese sentiments due to repression in the historical homeland of Uyghurs,

17 William Clark and Ablet Kamalov, "Uighur migration across Central Asian frontiers." *Central Asian Survey* 23, no. 2 (2004): 167–182.

18 Donald McMillen, *Chinese Communist Power and Policy in Xinjiang, 1949–1977* (Boulder-Folkstone: Westview Press/Dawson, 1969), 123.

19 A. Bazilbaev, *Chetyre goda v khaose* (Alma-Ata: Kazakhstan, 1978), 12.

20 Galina Baratova, "Uyghuri v Kazakhstane i Srednei Azii," 17.

21 Natalya Ablazhei, *Kazakhskii migratsionniy mayatnik "Kazakhstan—Xinjiang." Emigratsia. Repatriatsia. Integratsia* (Novosibirsk: Novosibirskiy gosudarstvenniy universitet, 2015); Mao Sheng, "More than a Famine: Mass Exodus of 1962 in Northwest Xinjiang," *China Review* 18, no. 2 (2018): 155–184.

22 A similar process occurred among the Dungans and Tatars, while smaller numbers of Kazakh and Russian migrants were easily absorbed into the respective dominating ethnic groups living in Kazakhstan.

23 On April 22, 1997, the Taldy-Qorghan province was liquidated and its territory was merged with the Almaty oblast'.

the word *khitailïq* acquired a negative connotation and was at some locations replaced by a more neutral word, *ghulzhilïq* ('those from Ghulja'). Even though the migrants from China included some people from other oases of the Tarim basin, especially Kashgar (*Uyg*. qashqarlïq), all of them identified themselves with the city and district of Ghulja (*Chin*. Ining) that they arrived from.

In connection with the division of the Uyghur population of Kazakhstan into *yärlik* and *khitailïq*, one should bring to the discussion the interesting phantom of the third group called *kälgänlär* (*lit*. newcomers). The existence of such a group has been articulated in academic literature since the early 2000s. Pietr Kokaisl recently again referred to the existence of three distinct groups of Uyghurs in Kazakhstan, mentioning *kälgänlär* alongside the two above mentioned groups.[24] Researchers making fieldwork trips to Kazakhstan nowadays can confirm that there is no such group of *kälgänlär* among Uyghurs.

Social processes in the Uyghur community of Kazakhstan in post-Soviet period were studied by the outstanding American anthropologist Sean Roberts, who conducted field research among the Uyghurs of Almaty and its vicinities in the mid-1990s. He published the results of his research in a series of articles, where he described various social groups of the Uyghurs.[25] The 1990s were the 'dashing' years of the post-Soviet history of Kazakhstan, when blossoming trade with China brought a large number of traders to Kazakhstan. In the northern part of Almaty, the then capital of the republic, a large market Barakholka (*Ru*. flea market) became a center of trade of goods shipped from China. Uyghur traders from China settled in the surrounding neighborhoods, including that of Zarya Vostoka (present mikrodistrict Shapaghat).[26] They stayed in this and other Uyghur neighborhoods for many years and engaged in trade business. Even though their number was not that significant, they were quite visible and influential in the surrounding neighborhoods.[27] Uyghurs applied to them the same name, *khitailïq*: a situation typical for contextualization of identity within the dichotomy 'they and us,' with the only difference

24 Petr Kokaisl, "State building in the Soviet Union and the idea of the Uyghurs in Central Asia," *Asian Studies Review* 44 (2020): 709–725.

25 Sean R. Roberts, "The Uighurs of the Kazakhstan Borderlands: Migration and the Nation." *Nationalities Papers* 26, no. 3 (1998), 511–530; Sean R. Roberts, "A 'Land of Borderlands': Implications of Xinjiang's Trans-border Interactions," in *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*. Ed. by S. Frederick Starr (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2015), 238–260.

26 Sean R. Roberts, "'The Dawn of the East': A Portrait of a Uyghur Community Between China and Kazakhstan," *Situating the Uyghurs Between China and Central Asia*, ed. by I. Bellér-Hann, M. Cristina Cesàro, R. Harris and J. Smith Finley (Ashgate, 2007), 203–218.

27 Sean Roberts, *Uyghur Neighborhoods and Nationalism in the Former Sino-Soviet Borderland: An Historical Ethnography of Stateless Nation on the Margins of Modernity*. Ph.D. Dissertation (Los Angeles: University of Southern California, 2003).

being that newcomers were labeled as 'those from China' by representatives of both previously existing groups of Uyghurs *(yärlik* and *khitailïq)*. Emergence of the newcomers consolidated Kazakhstani Uyghurs who contacted them. Migrants of the 1950–1960s readily passed over a status of *khitailïq* to newcomers, while from the perspective of *yärlik* Uyghurs, they remained in the same category.

This situation did not last long. After establishing the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2001, gradually all Uyghur traders returned to XUAR, with a few of them migrating to Turkey or European countries. Increased control over the Uyghurs in their homeland followed by severe repressions which ended cross-border communications, thereby making it impossible for Uyghurs of Xinjiang to travel to Kazakhstan. Shortly after the New York attack on 11 September 2001 few Uyghur traders remained in Kazakhstan.

Coming back to the group called *kälgänlär*, our interviews of representatives of both of *khitailïq* and *yärlik* groups showed that the group identified as 'newcomers' never existed in the Uyghur community of Kazakhstan. Uyghur ethnographer Risalat Bibi Karimova, a head of the Center of Uyghur studies at the Institute of Oriental studies, named after R.B. Suleimenov and located in Almaty, says:

> I have been studying the Uyghurs of our countries since the 1970s. I conducted field research among the Uyghur communities not only in South-Eastern Kazakhstan, but also in other Central Asian republics, including the Fergana valley. I have never come across any social group called *kälgänlär*. As an attribute it can be used to designate any newcomers, including *khitailïqs*, but it does not exist as a category.[28]

Karlin Makhpirov, a Chairman of the Foundation 'Turan duniyasi (Turkic world),' whose father was *yärlik* and mother was born in Ghulja, expresses similar opinion:

> Uyghurs differentiated between the two distinct groups *yärlik* and *khitailïq*, but over time differences are not that clear-cut as it was before, in the Soviet times. Descendants of the *khitailïqs* who were born and grew

28 Interview with Risalat Bibi Karimova, 16 May 2021, Almaty, Kazakhstan. R. Karimova is an author of the book "*Traditsionniye khudozhestvenniye remiosli i promysla uygurov [Traditional artistic handicrafts and domestic crafts of the Uyghurs]*" (Almaty: Daik-Press, 2005).

> up in Kazakhstan no longer identify themselves with those from China and do not have memory of migration.[29]

Indeed, there is much evidence that differences between *yärlik* and *khitailïq* groups are weakening and becoming minimized to smaller psychological issues. For example, *yärlik* Uyghurs are more concerned about preservation of their language and development of their culture in this country, while the *khitailïq* prioritize development in their homeland (XUAR) and trans-national solidarity with the Uyghur diaspora of Turkey, the US, Europe, and other regions. At the same time, one should not essentialize such differences: the leading advocator for independence of Eastern Turkistan and Uyghurs of XUAR is Kakharman Ghojamberdiyev, a representative of the local *(yärlik)* Uyghurs, while numerous descendants of *khitailïq* Uyghurs contribute to development of Uyghur community of Kazakhstan. However, both the ethnic policy of Kazakhstan's government, aiming at the formation of a united Kazakh(stani) nation, and China's repressions and policy of genocide in XUAR,[30] diminish the differences between various groups of Kazakhstan's Uyghurs.

Language and Identity

Soviet national policy emphasized the necessity of developing language, which according to Joseph Stalin's definition of 'nation,' was considered as one of its most important criteria. Therefore, since the early years of the Soviet regime, education in native languages and development of cultural institutions has been prioritized in the national policy. Promotion of education in both Russian and local languages was an effective mechanism of liquidation of illiteracy during the cultural revolution. The Soviet Uyghurs were not an exception. The first Uyghur schools in the territory of Kazakhstan were opened in the 1920s. They were facilitated by the creation of the Turkic section under the People's Commissariat for Education (*Rus*. Narkompros,) in accordance with the decree of September 25, 1918.[31] To determine the content of the program and methodological work of the Kazakh and Uyghur schools in Semirech'e, a scientific and methodological council called Academic Center was set up in 1921. The

29 Interview with Karlin Makhpirov, 21 April 2021, Almaty, Kazakhstan.

30 Joanne F. Smith, "Why scholars and activists increasingly fear a Uyghur genocide in Xinjiang," *Journal of Genocide Research* 44 (2020): 1–23.

31 Aliyam Arziyeva, "Nekotoriye tendentsii razvitiya obsheobrazovatelnikh shkol s uyghurshim yazikom obucheniya v Kazakhstane," in *Mongolskii mir: noviy vek—noviye vyzovy (Ulimzhiyevsjiye chteniya-IV)*, ed. V.D. Dugarov (Ulan-Ude: Belig, 2011), 396.

curriculum of the Kazakh seven-year school compiled in 1922 became the basis for Uyghur schools teaching the program. The first textbooks for the Soviet school were *Uyghur literature* by A. Mukhammadi, published in 1923, while the first Uyghur ABC textbook for adults was compiled by Aitoldy in 1928.[32]

From 1925–1926, the number of Uyghur schools in Almaty province reached 32 with 3,490 students. From 1928–1929, this number went up to 42.33 Uyghur educational and cultural institutions suffered during Stalin's rule. By 1939 almost all Uyghur schools and editorial offices of educational and fiction publishing houses were closed in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and a bit later, in Uzbekistan. In Kazakhstan, only the first and second grades in the Uyghur language were preserved.[34] Uyghur schools were re-opened in the post-war period in the frame of a state economic and cultural reconstruction program and partly due to the events in the historical homeland of Uyghurs, where the pro-Soviet East Turkestan Republic (1944–1949) was established in three districts neighboring Kazakhstan: Ili, Tarbagatai, and Altai. The need to support this republic in the fight against the Guomindang prompted the Soviet authorities to promote the education and culture of the Soviet Uyghurs. Similarly, support of Chinese communist power after 1949, and especially the Sino-Soviet confrontation of the 1960–1980s, once again prioritized the necessity of investing in Uyghur educational and cultural institutions of Soviet Central Asia. Therefore, it was not accidental that the 1970–1980s saw blossoming cultural development of the Soviet Uyghurs. At the peak of this period, for example, in the 1972–1973 academic year, the number of Uyghur children studying in their own language reached 24,242.[35]

The system of education in the languages of ethnic minorities created in the Soviet era has been preserved in independent Kazakhstan. Secondary schools function not only in Kazakh and Russia, but also in the Uzbek, Uyghur, and Tajik languages. In 2020 Uyghur was a language of instruction in 63 secondary schools, out of which 12 were pure Uyghur schools (three in the city of Almaty) and 51 mixed Kazakh-Uyghur and Russian-Uyghur schools. The total number of students enrolled in Uyghur classes was 16,660 in the same year.

The post-Soviet period was characterized by a steady decline of Uyghur students, whose number reduced annually by 400–500 people. There are many reasons for the weakening interest of parents for placing their children in Uyghur schools. They include, among others, a lack of material and technical

32 Ibid.
33 Arziyeva, "Nekotoriye tendentsii razvitiya," 397.
34 Khelyam Khudaiberdiev, *Äsirgä ulashqan ömür* (Almuta: Mir, 2020), 156–157.
35 Arziyeva, "Nekotoriye tendentsii razvitiya," 400.

equipment in comparison with the Kazakh and Russian schools and a shortage of textbooks and manuals. It is interesting that parents prefer Russian schools even in the rural areas, where the Russian population is not that big. A gradual reduction of Uyghur schools suits the interests of the Kazakh nationalists who always considered Uyghurs a threat to national security.[36] Besides, they continue to call to cease the funding for ethnic minority schools completely, believing that education in the Kazakh language is the only way to achieve integration of ethnic minorities into Kazakh society. At the same time, the status of Russian education in the country is still strong and most non-Kazakh ethnic groups prefer to get an education in Russian. The outflow of Uyghur students to Russian schools has promoted the process of russification of Uyghur youth.

Functioning of the Uyghur language in Kazakhstan is maintained by a wider infrastructure of educational and cultural institutions, of which secondary schools are an important part. During the Soviet Union, a network of such institutions and establishments included the inter-republican newspaper, *Kommunism tughi* (Flag of Communism), in Cyrillic and ts supplement, *Yengi hayat* (New Life), published in the Arabic script, local newspapers printed in the Panfilov, Chilik, and Uyghur districts, Uyghur sections in main publishing houses (Mektep, Qazaqstan, Zhazyshi, Nauka), a radio broadcasting editorial group, and the Uyghur section in the Union of writers of Kazakh SSR.[37] During perestroika in the mid-1980s, TV programs were broadcast on the channel Alatau. Since 1949 the Department of Uyghur studies has functioned within the Kazakh Academy of Sciences. It was re-organized in 1986 into the research Institute of Uyghur studies. Specialists for Uyghur schools were trained at the Department of Philology of the Abai Pedagogical Institute in Almaty. Another cultural center was the Uyghur musical theater, which was one of the six theatres in the capital city of Alma-Ata.[38]

During the first decade of independence, there was a dramatic decline in Uyghur cultural institutions, which I had a chance to discuss earlier.[39] Uyghur editorial offices in the publishing houses printing textbooks and manuals for

36 Natsuko Oka, "Transnationalism as a threat to state security? Case studies on Uighurs and Uzbeks in Kazakhstan," in *Empire, Islam, and Politics in Central Eurasia*, ed. Uyama Tomokiho (Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, 2007), 360–368.

37 Ablet Kamalov, *Uyghury Kazakhstana* (Astana: Akademiya gosudarstvennogo upravleniya, 2016): 115–116.

38 Akhmetzhan Kadyrov, *Uigurskiy sovetskiy teatr* (Alma-Ata: Oner, 1984).

39 Ablet Kamalov, "Uighur community in 1990s Central Asia: Decade of change," *Central Asia and the Caucasus. Transnationalism and Diaspora* (London-New York: Routledge, 2005), 148–168.

the population (Ata-Mura, Rauan) have been reduced to a minimum. The Institute of Uyghur Studies at the Academy of Sciences was transformed into the Center of Uyghur Studies, operating within the Institute of Oriental Studies. Uyghur studies are no longer prioritized in state programs and the Center is experiencing a gradual decline.[40] A few years ago, the Uyghur radio program in Almaty was closed down. During the Soviet period, about 50 students annually graduated from the Uyghur Section of the Philological Department of Abai Pedagogical Institute. Nowadays this educational institution trains several students per year. The Uyghur section at the Faculty of Journalism at al-Farabi Kazakh National University was closed in the 1990s. The only center for training teachers for Uyghur schools nowadays is Pedagogical College in Zharkent, whose graduates are qualified to teach classes up to the 9th grade at secondary schools. The once full-fledged local Uyghur district newspapers, which published in the Uyghur, Panfilov, and Chilik districts, are now closed, but the local Kazakh newspapers provide 1–2 pages of materials in the Uyghur language. Only the government-funded *Uyghur avazi* (former *Kommunizm tughi*) newspaper is still in full operation.

Post-Soviet reality not only diminished the achievements of the previous era, it also created new opportunities for cultural development of Uyghurs. Market conditions enabled the operation of the private newspapers and magazines, such as *Aziya Bügün* (Asia today), *Maripat* (Enlightenment), *Akhbarat* (News), *Izhatkar* (Creator), as well as new mass media channels in the form of websites. Publication of private periodicals depends on fundraising, rendering them non-sustainable. Electronic versions of newspapers contribute to the distribution of copies outside the country, thereby providing access to a wider audience. Financial support of cultural institutions by Uyghur entrepreneurs and public organizations seems to be sporadic and not sustainable. For instance, one of the attempts to run a TV channel in the Uyghur language failed after half a year.

Uyghurs of Kazakhstan, as well as other Turkic peoples of post-Soviet Central Asia, use the Cyrillic alphabet.[41] During the Soviet period, they also went through the process of script reforms. From 1928–1932 the Uyghur Arabic script was replaced by the Latin alphabet, which was very close to the Kazakh Latin script. Unlike other Central Asian peoples who moved from Latin to Cyrillic

40 Ablet Kamalov, "Uyghur Studies in Central Asia: A Historical Review," *Asian Research trends. New Series* no. 1 (2006), 3–32.

41 Ablet Kamalov, "Latinskiy put" v intellektual'noi istorii uygurov Sredney Azii i Kazakkstana," *Vestnik Natsionalnogo universiteta imeni al-Farabi. Seriya vostokovedenya* 3, no. 82 (2017): 40–45.

in the pre-war period (1940), the Uyghur language accepted Cyrillic later, in 1947. The Cyrillic alphabet, worked out by Ayshem Shamiyeva for the Uyghur language, was close to the Kazakh alphabet. In 2017, President Nazarbayev in his program article announced that the Kazakh language should fully move to Latin by 2025, the ethno-cultural center of Uyghurs initiated working out of the Latin Uyghur alphabet and the Uyghur *Avazi* newspaper announced the final version of the alphabet. When discussing various versions of the alphabet, the Uyghur organization and intellectuals preferred the version, which is based on the new Kazakh alphabet from a practical point of view.[42] New attempts to Latinize the Uyghur language in Kazakhstan were terminated following the decision of the administration of President Tokayev to slow down the process of adoption of Latin for the Kazakh language.

Uyghur District in Almaty Province

Uyghurs of Kazakhstan are proud of the existence of the district called by the ethnic name, *Uyghur*. Uyghur district (*Kaz*. Uygyr audany) is located in the southeastern part of Almaty province in the foothills of the Trans-Ili Alatau (*Rus*. Zailiiskii Alatau) between the Ketmen mountain range and a plain of the Ili depression. Its territory, with a total area of 875,752 hectare, extends in the latitudinal direction for 150 km and in the meridian direction for 100–160 km. It borders with the PRC in the east, in the west with Enbekshikazakh and Rayimbek districts, and to the north its border runs the river Ili, which separates it from the Panfilov district. The population of the district, according to statistics in 2020, comprised 62,763 people, including 36,763 Uyghurs (58.5%), 24,713 Kazakhs (39.4%), and 980 Russians (1.5%).

The Uyghur district's history goes back to the time of the Anglo-Russian rivalry for domination in Central Asia. As already mentioned above, in 1871 the Russian Empire occupied the territory of the Taranchi Ili Sultanate, which was set up in the Ghulja region as a result of an uprising of the Muslims against the Qin-Manchu power in 1862.[43] Russians ruled in the Ili (Ghulja) for one decade,[44] during which, in 1876, they made territorial changes, namely moving the eastern border of the Semirech'e oblast' from the Borohudzir river to

42 Ablet Kamalov, "Uyghur tilidiki latin alphavitining ishle chiqishning asasiy principliri," *Uyghur avazi* no. 48/7852: 5.

43 Rumiantsev, *Taranchi*, 84.

44 Dmitriy Vasil'yev, *Bremya imperii. Administrativnaya politika Rossii v Tsentralnoi Azii. Vtoraya polovina XIX v.* (Moskva: Rosspen, 2018): 348–367.

Khorgoz-Ghalzhat line, thus including a huge territory which became the Ketmen volost' within Semirech'e. With these changes, the Taranchi population of the village of the Ketmen area found themselves on the territory of the Russian Empire. A list of villages was provided by P. Rumiantsev as follows: Ketmen volost' consists of 17 villages: Kalzhat, Tegermen-Bashi, Bolshoy Achinokho, Malyi Achinokho, Bolshoy Ketmen, Malyi Ketmen, Dardamty, Dulaty, Shunkar, Naryn-Kol, Aktam, Udoty, Tiermen, Dobun, Sary-Bulak, Kos-Agach, and Uzun-Tam.[45]

The territorial acquisition of the Russian Empire was recognized by the St. Petersburg Treaty of 1881, according to which the Qing Empire ceded this territory to Russia in exchange for monetary compensation and territorial concessions in the Far East. Soon, from 1881–1883 when Russia returned the Ghulja region to the Qing Empire, 45,373 Uyghur Taranchis moved to the Semirech'e province.

In early Soviet times, territorial and administrative divisions created during the imperial period were preserved. In 1930, Zharkent County had 32 village councils (*Rus*. sel'sovet). Later, the Semirech'e oblast was renamed Zhetysu and then Alma-Ata. The next major changes in the administrative structure of Almaty province were made in 1935, when the policy of unbundling (*Rus*. razukrupnenie) administrative units was announced by the Soviet government. On February 10, 1935, the Bureau of the Alma-Ata provincial Committee of the CPSU (b) passed a resolution 'On unbundling districts of Almaty province.' According to the resolution, five districts of the region (Urzhar, Kurday, Ili, Zharkent, and Lepsinsk) were liquidated and, instead, the following new districts were set up: Makanchinsk, Krasnogorsk, Uyghur, Kaskelen, Sarkand, and Andreyevsk.[46]

The Uyghur district was established based on merging 15 village administrations of the Zharkent district and 5 administrations of the Kegen district. The new district thus included 20 village councils and 30 collective farms (*Rus*. kolkhoz), with 2,348 units in total. The population of the Uyghur district then made up 10,522 people. Its administrative center was first the village Dobun, located not far from the river Ili, and then it was moved to the village Bolshoye Aksu (*Uyg*. Chong Aqsu), and in 1964 to the village Chonzha.

The decision to create a district with the ethnic name, *Uyghur*, was in line with the Soviet policy towards neighboring Xinjiang. In 1933, the Soviet Union

45 Rumiantsev, *Taranchi*, 82.

46 On this archival document, see "O razugrupleniyi rayonov Alma-Atinskoi oblasti. Postanovleniye Byuro Alma-Atinskogo obkoma VKP (b) Presidiuma Oblispolkoma gor Alma-Ata," no. 5. 10 Fevralya 1935, Gosudarstvenniy arkhiv Almatinskoi oblasi (Almaty oblast state archive), fond 69, opis' 1, delo 28, 79–80.

intervened in the political struggle in that province of China and helped Sheng Shih-cai come to power. The decade of this warlord's rule (1933–1943) was a period of rapprochement between the USSR and the Xinjiang local government, when the USSR exerted a great influence on the political, economic, and cultural life of the province. Sheng Shi-cai put into practice the Soviet nation-building model. Economic and cultural cooperation with a pro-Soviet regime of Xinjiang was organized from the territory of Soviet Central Asian republics, primarily from the Kazakh SSR (before 1936: the Kazak ASSR) and the Uzbek SSR.[47] Central Asian Soviet republics rendered assistance in developing the culture and education of local Muslim Turkic peoples of Xinjiang. Central Asian State University (SAGU, later renamed Tashkent state university, TashGU) and other universities helped train national cadres for Xinjiang. They hosted a large number of Uyghur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Tatar youth from China. Publishing houses in the Soviet republics printed textbooks, books, magazines, and other literature in the Uyghur language for the population of Xinjiang. By setting up the Uyghur district in southeastern Kazakhstan, the Soviets intended to create a platform for providing support to national liberation movements of the Uyghurs in China.

The need for support of the Uyghurs of Xinjiang increased in 1944 with the establishment of the East Turkestan Republic (ETR) on the territory of three districts bordering Soviet Kazakhstan: Ili, Tarbagatai, and Altai. This polity, set up with Soviet support, existed until the communist takeover in China in late 1949. The Soviet Union was interested in exploiting the mineral resources of the three districts, especially precious metals such as uranium, necessary for development of nuclear weapons.[48] The Soviet government considered the frontier Uyghur district in Almaty province as strategically important. That is why, in 1947, the first Secretary of the Communist party of the Kazakh SSR Zhumabay Shayakhmetov presented to Moscow a plan establishing the Uyghur autonomy in the districts of Almaty province, bordering the ETR and populated by Uyghurs. That administrative unit would provide further assistance to the pro-Soviet regime in Xinjiang.[49] Moscow did not support Shayakhmetov's proposal, which became unnecessary shortly afterwards with the defeat of the Guomindang in the civil war.

47 Valeriy Barmin, *SSSR i Sinjian. 1918–1941 (Regionalniy faktor vo vneshney politike Sovietskogo Soyuza)*, (Barnaul: Barnaulskiy gosudarstvenniy pedagigicheskiy universitet, 1998), 127–153.

48 Thomas Laird, *Into Tibet: The CIA's First Atomic Spy and His Secret Expedition to Lhasa*. (New York: Grove Press, 2003).

49 Vitaliy Khlyupin, *Geopoliticheskiy treugolnik Kazakhstan-Kitay-Rossiya: proshloye i nastoyashee pogranizhnoi problem* (Washington: Mezhdunarodniy evraziyskiy institut ekonomicheskikh i politicheskikh issledovaniy, 1999), 227–231.

The decision of the Soviet government to use the district ethnic name, *Uyghur*, caused discrete discontent among the Kazakh population. In the late Soviet period, Kazakh nationalist-minded intellectuals articulated their dissatisfaction with the name of the district but were still not able to oppose it publicly. Representatives of the Kazakh intelligentsia, who were born in the Uyghur district, were reluctant to talk about their place of birth to avoid being ridiculed by others. To be born in the *Sart* district was shameful for Kazakhs.[50] The First Secretary of the Kazakhstan Communist Party, Dinmukhamed Kunayev, raised the issue of renaming the district many times in communications with the CPSU Central Committee, but Moscow did not give permission, since the district was still considered to be of strategic geopolitical importance.

Kazakh nationalists more insistently called for renaming the district after the breakup of the USSR, but Nazarbayev's administration did not change the name to prevent ethnic conflict. These calls became especially intensive after a conflict between Uyghur and Kazakh youth in Chilik in 2006. After that conflict the Chilik district, where Uyghurs comprised the majority of population, was liquidated and its territory joined the Enbekshikazakh district to change the proportion of ethnic groups. Since that time, Kazakh websites have regularly expressed demands to rename the Uyghur district. If, in the Soviet and early independent times in non-official discussions, there were proposals to call the district by the name of the Soviet Uyghur leader Abdulla Rozybakiev, over the last decades the Kazakh nationalists insisted on calling it *Qaradala* (*Kaz*. Black steppe).

Along with the district name, Kazakh nationalists demanded a renaming of the administrative center of the district, Chunzha (*Kaz*. Shonzhy). Widespread opinion argues that it is necessary to rename all toponyms which have a Jungar origin, since Jungars were enemies of the Kazakhs. The name, Chunzha, is also interpreted as a word of Jungar origin. It is ascribed to the Jungar hero named, *Shonzhy*, who was beaten at this location by the Kazakh hero Almerek. They believe that the place where the latter died was fixed in Kazakh as *Shonzhy ölgen* (a place, where Shonzhy died). It is also believed that over time the second word (*ölgen*) fell away and the name turned into the simple form, *Shonzhy*. Even though the story about Almerek is based on legend and there is no written evidence of such etymology, proponents of renaming the district set up the Almerek Charitable Foundation for implementing the plan. The Russian and

50 On *Sarts* see Sergei Abashin, *Natsionalizm v Sredney Azii v poiskakh identichnosti* (Moskva: Aleteya, 2007).

Chinese maps of the imperial period call the place *Chunzha* (*Chin*. Chun-ji), which was the Qing frontier outpost (*karun*51).52

One of the promotions within the renaming campaign was a conference jointly organized by the Almerek Charitable Foundation and the Institute of History and Ethnology, named after Ch. Valikhanov, on April 18, 2018 in Shonzhy. The conference, moderated by the former vice-akim (deputy head) of the Uyghur district, Dauletzhan Demenbayev, passed a resolution to appeal to authorities to rename Chunzha.[53] The Uyghur population of the district firmly opposes plans to rename Chunzha. They insist on the Uyghur origin of this name, saying that it derived from *chong* (big) and *zhai* (place) meaning 'big place.' For local Uyghurs who have been living here for generations, renaming the district and its administrative center is perceived as an assault on their identity. Hot debates between Kazakhs and Uyghurs on this topic occur regularly on social media.

The latest case of such debates was caused by a conflict between Uyghur and Kazakh youth on June 16, 2020, during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pattern of the conflict in the Uyghur district was identical to that of the Dungan-Kazakh conflict in the Korday district of the Zhambul province earlier that year (February 5–8, 2020). The latter allegedly began with an incident involving two cars with Kazakhs Dungans that did not want to give way to each other. A skirmish between young Uyghurs and Kazakhs occurred on a road not far from the village Bahar in the Uyghur district. The similarity of the cases made some observers think of a certain common scenario developed by groups interested in the escalation of ethnic conflict. The conflict between these young people, fortunately, was peacefully resolved. However, immediately afterwards, a rally was organized by Kazakhs in front of the mayor's office in Shonzhy, where protesters demanded the renaming of the district, its administrative center, along with several central streets named after Uyghur figures. The mayor of Almaty region arrived to settle the conflict and promised to investigate the case and discuss their demands.

51 Millward J. writes on *karun*: "Xinjiang's karun were enclosed forts built in frontier zones between territoryunder close Qing supervision and the pastures of independent nomads not enrolled in the banners." James A. Millward, *Beyond the Pass: Economy, Ethnicity, and Empire in Qing Central Asia. 1759–1864* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 46.

52 Shiluode Xinjiang: Qing Li Xi-bei bianjie bian qian tiaoyuede yutu tezhan 失落的新疆：请李西北边界变迁条约輿图特展 / 陈维新文字撙述：李天鸣主编。- 初版。台北市：中华民国九十九年 (Taipei, 2020), 54; Valikhanov, "Zapadniy krai kitayskoi imperii," 173.

53 Demenbayev D. was accused of bribery and dismissed from his position.

This incident opened debates on Uyghur history in social media. Kazakh political opponents living outside the country, such as Yermek Narymbayev (who uses problems to launch attacks on the government, willfully), added fuel to the fire. Numerous videos on the history of Uyghurs distributed via social media depicted Uyghurs negatively and even expressed support for China's repressions of Uyghurs in XUAR. Some of their arguments included statements that modern Uyghurs have no connection to the ancient ones or that their homeland is Kashgariya, while northern Xinjiang belongs to the Kazakhs. Anti-Uyghur articles flooded Kazakh websites such as abai.kz and qamshy.kz.[54]

As a continuation of these events, the newspaper of the district, *Qaradala*, from September 11, 2020, announced a meeting on the renaming of four streets in Shonzhy scheduled for October 12, 2020. The agenda was formulated as follows: "On renaming Kintal Ismalov Street of the village Shonzhy in the Uyghur district to Abay Street, Nurshriddin Appasov Street to Al-Farabi Street, Izim Iskanderov Street to Mukaghali Makatayev Street, and Nazugum Street to Kintal Islamov Street." This announcement again stirred up feelings of protest amongst the Uyghurs. Uyghur organizations and intellectuals appealed to the government, asking it to restrain from acts that might lead to conflict. As a result, the meeting was canceled and discussion of renaming the streets was postponed to the future. Later, on April 1, 2021 the Almaty oblast onomastic commission decided to rename the streets accordingly and giving names of the prominent Uyghurs Abdulla Rozybakiev, Kental Islamov and Nurshidin Appazov to peripheral streets in the town.[55]

The Soviet Identity of Kazakhstani Uyghurs

The current identity-building process among the Uyghurs in Kazakhstan can hardly be understood without insight into their recent past. Even though the politics of 'Soviet people' was not successful in general, it was effective for some ethnic minorities, including the Uyghurs. The Soviet identity united all Uyghur communities, scattered across various Central Asian republics, and at the same time their 'Sovietness' put them in opposition to their ethnic brethren in XUAR. The advancement and superiority of the Soviet Uyghurs was always

54 Sharipkhan Qaisar, "Batalovting uedesi. Uygyr audanyn kimder basqarady?" https://www.abai.kz/post/114931 (retrieved on December 30, 2020).

55 O pereimenovanii i prosviyenii naimenovanii ulits sela Shonzhy [On renaming and naming streets of the village Chunzha] (https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/V21DS005938), retrieved on June 20, 2021.

emphasized by ideology and propaganda, which demonstrated their successes and achievements compared to Uyghurs living in their 'historical homeland.' It accentuated the primacy of the cultural development of Soviet Uyghurs. For example, Kuddus Kuzhamyarov was represented as the first ever Uyghur professional composer in history and Ayshem Shamieva as the first Uyghur woman to receive an academic degree of *kandidat nauk* (equal to PhD degree). Similarly, the Uyghur musical theater in Alma-Ata was 'the only Uyghur theater in the world.' The Institute of Uyghur studies of the Academy of Sciences of the Kazakh SSR was 'the only research institute in the world,' etc.[56]

The constant emphasis on the 'superiority' of the Soviet Uyghurs created a sense of pride and a feeling of being more advanced in comparison with Xinjiang. Common Soviet space and an absence of borders between the republics also supported a sense of unity of the Soviet Uyghur, who could freely move and migrate within the country, subscribe to Uyghur 'inter-republican' newspapers, receive books in the Uyghur language, and attend performances of the Uyghur theater of Almaty, which frequently toured other republics.

Soviet identity disappeared with the collapse of the USSR. Nevertheless, psychological commonality of former Soviet people still exists. It is interesting to note that the Uyghurs of Xinjiang still call Uyghurs of the post-Soviet countries *sovetlik* ('those from the Soviets'). At the same time, during the 30 years after the Soviet breakup, Uyghurs in Central Asia became fragmented. Since 1991 their communities in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan have been developing in different political conditions (a small group of Turkmenistan Uyghurs are totally isolated).[57]

The fact that Uyghurs of Soviet Central Asia had quite a strong Soviet identity does not imply that the Uyghur community was homogeneous. From the very beginning of the formation of the Uyghur community in the Russian Empire, and then in the Soviet Union, two distinct local groups of Uyghurs were formed: (a) those of the Semirech'e based on the Taranchi substratum and (b) those from the Fergana valley, consisting mainly of people from Kashgaria. At the same time, by the 1980s, the Fergana Uyghurs had been largely assimilated by Uzbek both in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan parts of the valley.[58] The emergence of the 'Chinese segment' among Uyghurs, due to the mass migration from Xinjiang in the 1950s–1960s, did not affect these two already existing groups of Soviet Uyghurs with their own linguistic differences. New migrants

56 On achievements of the Soviet Uyghurs, see Mashur Ruziev, *Vozrozhdenniy uygurskiy narod* (Alma-Ata: Kazakhstan, 1976).

57 Daut Isiev and Mämätzhan Mämätov, *Bäyräm-älilik uyğurlarniŋ ötmishi ve hazirqi hayati* (Almuta: Nauka, 1976).

58 Gozhakhmet Sadvakassov, *Yazyk uygurov Ferghanskoi dolyny. Chast' I. Ocherk fonetiki, texty i slovar* (Alma-Ata: Nauka KazSSR, 1970).

did not reach the Fergana valley in sufficient numbers and mostly concentrated in southeastern Kazakakhstan, northen Kyrgyzstan, and the Tashkent region of Uzbekistan.

Discourse of 'Homeland': From Soviet to Kazakhstani Civic Identity

The formation of the Kazakhstani identity amongst the Uyghurs was determined by two factors: (1) links with the homeland (XUAR/East Turkistan), and (2) identity politics of the host country (Kazakhstan). Revival of their ties with the historical homeland began during the *perestroika* period (1985–1991) when, due to improved relations with China, Uyghur migrants of the 1950s–1960s got an opportunity to visit their relatives living in Xinjiang. For the first time in more than 20 years, relations with the Uyghurs of Xinjiang resumed both at the official (exchange of delegations, tours of concert groups, etc.) and at personal (family) levels. At the same time, the Uyghur community of Kazakhstan for the first time felt a way out of Soviet isolation. Contacts were established with relatives in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Western countries. It was the *perestroika* years when the Uyghurs began considering themselves part of a large Uyghur nation whose historical homeland East Turkestan was under the rule of China.

Revival of public life in the Uyghur community intensified in the period of Kazakhstan's independence. The desire to have an independent homeland was overwhelming in the 1990s, as reflected in Sean Roberts' documentary film 'Waiting for Uyghurstan,' which showed how reinterpretation of ties with the historical homeland actualized a discourse of *Vätän* (homeland) in the Uyghur community. In the context of this discourse, we can consider the dispute among the Uyghurs regarding what to call their historical homeland: 'East Turkestan' or 'Uyghurstan,' which began during *perestroika* and reached its apogee in the first decade after the collapse of the USSR.

The image of homeland in the Uyghur community of Kazakhstan, as well as in other Central Asian countries, was undoubtedly shaped by the state policy towards ethnic minorities. In Kazakhstan, main principles of the national policy were declared at the first Forum of peoples of Kazakhstan in 1992. Later, it became a basis for establishing the Assembly of Peoples of Kazakhstan, headed by the President Nazarbayev. Since then, different ideas about models for a civil nation have been put forward in the country. The official approach assumes that a civil nation should be based on the equality of all nationalities of the country and creation of a single 'Kazakh nation,' the most important, but not the only part of which should be the Kazakh ethnic group. In the line with this idea, the Assembly of Peoples of Kazakhstan was renamed the

'Assembly of People of Kazakhstan' in 2007, which fully expressed the desire to see the entire multi-ethnic and multi-confessional population as a single and united people.[59] Further implementation of this idea resulted in renaming all 'national cultural associations' as 'ethno-cultural associations (centers),' which demonstrated the difference between 'nation' and 'ethnicity.' At the same time, the nationalist vision of the civil nation also differed between civil and ethnic nations; but it believed that the civil nation should only be represented by a titular ethnic group, that is, the Kazakhs, while all other ethnic groups are perceived as 'guests,' temporarily allowed to live in the country. In contrast, the 'doctrine of national unity,' adopted by the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan in 2010, considered the crucial role of the ethnic Kazakhs in the formation of a Kazakhstani nation, which incorporates not only the Kazakhs, but all other ethnic groups.

The discourse of 'homeland' is an important marker of identity of ethnic minorities. That is why the perception of a homeland by different ethnic groups was a focal point for sociological research by Kazakh scholars. In 1997, the late historian and ethnographer, N. Masanov, published the results of a collective study in the brochure, 'Situation of ethnic minorities in sovereign Kazakhstan,' which aimed to study how 'awareness of oneself and others as an ethnic minority' depends on the form of governance.[60] Germans, Koreans, and Uyghurs, who have different relations with their historical homeland, became an object of investigation. These three groups were selected, since they demonstrated 'three special socio-cultural stereotypes and value orientations both in their own perception and in the perception of surrounding ethnic groups.'[61] The survey covered 334 Uyghur respondents, 211 of whom were from the city of Almaty and 123 were from Chunzha. The study showed that of the three ethnic groups, Uyghurs had the highest percentage of self-awareness as an ethnic minority (50.9%), while representatives of the other groups demonstrated rather low self-awareness of being citizens of Kazakhstan (average: 35.3–37.8% of the respondents). At the same time 70.1% of the respondents gave positive answers to the question 'Do you feel a citizen of Kazakhstan?' For 46.7% of the respondents for whom the 'motherland' was their place of birth, 18.6% believed that historical homeland falls under the category of 'motherland,'

59 Gulnara Mendikulova, German Kim, Ablet Kamalov, "Deyatel'nost Assamblei naroda Kazakhstana," in *Initsiativy napravlennliye v mir (kollektivnaya monografiya)* (Almaty: Qazaq entsiklopediyasi, 2011), 165.

60 Nurbolat Masanov, *Polozheniye etnicheskikh menshistv v suverennom Kazakhstane*. Fond Fridrikha Eberta (Almaty: n.p., 1977).

61 Masanov, "*Polozheniye etnicheskikh menshistv v suverennom Kazakhstane*," 7.

26.3% of the respondents defined 'motherland' as the land of their ancestors, and for 26%, 'motherland' was associated exclusively with Kazakhstan.[62]

Unlike Masanov's study, B. Bekturganova conducted special research on the Uyghurs of Central Asia and her survey had a much higher level of representativeness. She interviewed 2,400 people, of whom 2,100 were from Kazakhstan (Almaty and Almaty region), 150 respondents were from Kyrgyzstan (Bishkek), and 150 people were from Uzbekistan (Tashkent). She also used a method of expert interviews.[63] More than half of the surveyed Uyghurs from Almaty (59.3%), Bishkek (59.5%), and Tashkent (72.7%) believed that XUAR was a territory conquered by China, while 17.1% of the respondents from Kazakhstan, 31.5% from Kyrgyzstan, and 10.5% from Uzbekistan identified it as their historical homeland.[64] Only a few respondents agreed that XUAR was an integral part of China. At the same time, age determined the image of homeland:

The older the age, the higher the level of perception of the XUAR as a territory of Uyghurstan (East Turkestan) annexed by China, and the more often people associate their historical ethnic homeland with it. Moreover, men adhered to these attitudes more actively than women.[65] The survey recorded a low level of desire of Uyghurs to migrate to their historical homeland. The main reason was that 'they considered the country they lived in as their homeland' (43.2% Almaty, 45.2% Almaty region, 23.4% of the respondents from Bishkek and 50.3% from Tashkent).[66]

Unfortunately, there have been no recent sociological studies on the perception of homeland of Central Asian Uyghurs. However, discourse analysis of the Uyghur literature of Kazakhstan (and partly in Kyrgyzstan) shows that the theme of 'motherland' was one of the most important topics addressed by Uyghur writers and poets. Until the 1960s, in the literature the Uyghur homeland was exclusively associated with the Soviet Union. Thus, early Soviet writer Ismail Sattarov wrote:

Marx ilimi bar bizning dilda,	*Passion to Marx exists in our souls,*
Izhat küchimiz u kureshtä.	*Our power of creativity in the struggle.*
Lenin qeni qaynar tomurimizda.	*Lenin's blood is running in our veins.*
*Vätän ishqi zhuräktä.*67	*Love to Motherland in our hearts.*

62 Masanov, "*Polozheniye etnicheskikh menshistv v suverennom Kazakhstane*," 21.

63 Bakhytjamal Bekturganova, *"Uygurskiy extremism" v Tsentralnoi Azii: mif ili realnost? (sotsiologicheskiy analiz problemy)* (Almaty, 2002).

64 Bakhytjamal Bekturganova, *"Uygurskiy extremism" v Tsentralnoi Azii: mif ili realnost? (sotsiologicheskiy analiz problemy)* (Almaty, 2002), 159.

65 Bekturganova, "*Uygurskiy extremism" v Tsentralnoi Azii*," 161.

66 Bekturganova, "*Uygurskiy extremism" v Tsentralnoi Azii*," 165.

67 *Uyĝur Sovet ädäbiyati*. 10 sinip üchün därislik (Almuta: Mektep, 1976), 106.

A new perception of the Uyghur homeland was introduced in the literature by Uyghur poets and writers who had migrated from XUAR in the 1950s–1960s from Xinjiang to Kazakhstan. That wave of migration injected new intellectual life into Soviet Uyghur communities.[68] A significant number of authors from XUAR joined Uyghur writers of Kazakhstan because of the migration. The brochure, 'Uyghur writers of Kazakhstan,' published in 1982, named 34 Soviet Uyghur writers and 11 persons out of the 24 contemporary individuals who were migrants of the 1950–1960s. These newcomers wrote nostalgic poems about the lost motherland of East Turkistan, describing the beauty of native places where they were born and grew up. Identification of motherland with historical homeland (XUAR) was particularly typical for the poems of the well-known poet, Dolqun Yassenov (1938–2006).

The restoration of relations between the Soviet Union and PRC during *perestroika*, followed by an intensive exchange of visitors in the late 1980s and early 1990s made the discourse of motherland popular not only in the works written by the *khitailïq*, but also by the *yärlik* authors. Intensive cross-border relations stimulated the interest of local intellectuals in East Turkistan's history and culture, which was reflected in the thematic repertoire of works of Uyghur writers and poets in Kazakhstan. However, love of a 'historical motherland' did not repress and oust the primacy of 'little motherland,' which was associated with villages and neighborhoods of Kazakhstan.

The discourse of homeland is still popular in modern Uyghur literature in Kazakhstan. Now, representation of Kazakhstan as a homeland is articulated stronger than before. Quite symbolic in this regard is a publication of a volume of poems of the young Uyghur authors called *My homeland is Kazakhstan* (*Uyg.* Qazaqstan mening vätinim) in 2008, which was published after the announcement of the 'doctrine of the Kazakhstani nation.' The conceptual framework of the book, which contains poems of 17 authors, was described by the editor Abdumezhit Dolyatov as follows:

> The book you hold in your hands is a voice of the heart that sings eternal existence of our nation in the sacred homeland of Kazakhstan … Chanting the Motherland, dedication of high feelings to it is a sacred duty of every person. This was once again proved by Uyghur young men and women holding pen in their hands … Along with dozens of nationalities living on the territory of Kazakhstan, the Uyhurs, long ago having taken deep roots here, call it the most blessed place … Without it

68 Ablet Kamalov, "Uighur community in 1990s Central Asia: Decade of change," in *Central Asia and the Caucasus. Transnationalism and Diaspora* (London-New York: Rutledge, 2005), 151.

> we have no life … They say: "Long with Kazakhstan we praise the seven rivers—Zhetissu. Zhetissu!" Generations have left their traces in the countless channels dug by shovel. Among those traces are the those done by Uyghurs' plows … They witnessed friendship and close personal ties through the system of *tamyr* between Kazakhs and Uyghurs.[69]

As discourse analysis shows, the word *vätän* in the Uyghur literature, as well as in periodicals, is applied now to both Kazakhstan and XUAR (East Turkistan). The latter is also called *Uyghurstan* in literary works. Uyghur periodicals propagate the identification of motherland with the place of birth, which is aligned with the official ideological campaign of 'tughan zher' (place of birth), proposed by Nazarbayev in his program on spiritual modernization (*Kaz*. ruhani zhangyru). Republican ethno-cultural centers of Uyghurs of Kazakhstan organize numerous activities focusing on the history of villages and neighborhoods. One of them, held in 2014, was called 'Motherland starts with the home, where you have been born.'[70]

Kazakhstani identity of the Uyghurs is also reflected in the local historical writings, which emphasizes local stories of Uyghur villages and neighborhoods, rather than a general history of the Uyghur nation.[71] Local history writing in Soviet times was well structured within the domain of *kraevedenie* (local area studies), which has been a dominant theme in all local museums and has involved local historians and schoolteachers. The first samples of local histories included books about the pasts of Chong Aqsu and Ghalzhat of the Uyghur district.[72] Local histories of the Soviet period were written 'from above,' by order of the Communist party, within the officially accepted schemes, worked out by official historiography.

Writings about the history of the Uyghur villages and neighborhoods has increased considerably during the period of independence of Kazakhstan. During this time the histories have been published for the villages Ketmen, Bayseyit, Qaraturuq, Malivay, Dovun, Shungqar, Qoram, Achinoqa, a town of Zharkent (*Uyg*. Yärkänt), Almaty urban neighborhoods Dostyq (former Druzhba), Sultan-qorghan, etc.73 They show a growing interest in history of

69 Abdumezhit Dolyatov (ed.), *Qazaqstan mening vätinim* (Almaty, 2008), 10–11.

70 Newspaper "Uyghur avazi," 19.09.2014.

71 Ablet Kamalov, "Ethno-national and local dimensions of the historiography of Kazakhstan's Uyghurs," *Central Asian Survey* 31, no. 3 (2012): 343–354.

72 Hashim Arziyev, *Güllängän ölkä* (Almuta: Qazaqstan, 1987); Asim Qasimov, *Yengilanghan Ghalzhat* (Almuta: Qazaqstan, 1987).

73 Kamalov, "Ethno-national and local dimensions."

their 'small motherland' from Uyghurs. The increased interest in local histories can be compared with heroization of the past so widely spread among the titular ethnic groups in Kazakhshan and Kyrgyzstan, where establishing monuments to heroes (*batyrs*) became an integral part of the construction of collective memory. Histories of the Uyghur villages and neighborhoods in Kazakhstan strengthen a sense of local identity and distinctiveness of the Kazakhstan Uyghurs from those of XUAR PRC and other countries. Discovery of this dimension of the past was strengthened by the local Uyghur periodicals, which focuses on the life of the community.[74]

Conclusions

As Shirin Akiner showed in her typology of ethnic minority groups in Kazakhstan, the diversity of the multi-ethnic population of the country is 'a product of an extraordinary complex demographic history.'[75] The demographic history of the Uyghurs, whom the British scholar put in the category of peoples of Central Asian origin, was determined by the policy of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union towards their homeland, East Turkistan (Xinjang/XUAR). It embraces not only several waves of mass migrations from and to the neighboring Ghulja (Ili) region of Xinjiang, but also annexation of the Ketmen volost, which was included in Semirech'e oblast' of the Russian Empire in the 1870s.

While the imperial policy did not affect the identity of the Taranchi group of Uyghurs, mass migration of Uyghurs from XUAR to Kazakhstan in the 1950s–1960s fragmented the identity of the Soviet Uyghurs. It led to the emergence of a new segment in the Uyghur population, labeled as *khitailïq* (those from China), while previous Uyghurs identified themselves as *yärlik* (local). The flow of visitors from China in the 1990s who stayed engaged in trade for quite a long time in Almaty, the former capital of Kazakhstan, and its suburbs, did not lead to the emergence of any sizable group of newcomers. The category of *kälgänlär*, widely referred to in the literature, was a phantom that reflected the flow of Uyghur traders from China in the 1990s, which disappeared due

74 Ablet Kamalov, "Uyghur Historiography in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan," *The state in Eurasia. Local and Global Arenas*, ed. A. Sengupta, S. Chatterjee (Kolkata-New Delhi: KW Publishers Pvt Ltd, 2013), 84–87.

75 Shirin Akiner, "Towards a typology of diasporas in Kazakhstan," *Central Asia and the Caucasus. Transnationalism and Diaspora* (London-New York: Rutledge, 2005), 21.

to the oppressive policy of China in XUAR. Differences between two distinct groups of Uyghurs in Kazakhstan are being gradually minimized due to termination of new Uyghur migration from China and the strengthening of the state ethnic policy, aiming at construction of a single Kazakhstani nation.

The identity of Kazakhstan's Uyghurs has cultural and political dimensions, expressed in specific contexts and conditions. This article examined some of these dimensions (language, cultural institutions, etc.), while many of them, such as cuisine, costumes, social institutes of *zhighit beshi* and *mashraps*, were not tackled.[76] It mainly focused on the dimensions of identity, linked to migration (locals versus newcomers) and dual perception of the homeland. Analysis of the discourse 'homeland' or 'motherland' shows that during the period of independence of Kazakhstan, a transition from 'Soviet people' to 'Kazakhstani people' occurred. If the Soviet Uyghurs identified their homeland exclusively with the USSR, in the late Soviet period, a new understanding of homeland as a 'historical homeland' (Xinjiang/East Turkistan) was introduced by migrants of the 1950s–1960s. During the period of independence, homeland is associated, first of all, with Kazakhstan, while East Turkistan is considered a 'historical homeland.' Feelings of 'localness' to Kazakhstan are reflected in local histories of Uyghur villages and urban neighborhoods of Almaty province, which accentuate events of local significance in the life of Uyghur communities, such as involvement in the Revolt of 1916, the mass shooting of Uyghurs of Semirech'e, organized by Bolsheviks in 1918, and the participation in the Great Patriotic War (World War II).

Kazakhstani identity is maintained by the existence of educational and cultural institutions, which have been developed especially during Soviet times via a network of Uyghur language schools. Uyghurs are also proud to have a district called by their name in the Almaty province, set up during the Stalin's rule, which is considered by Kazakh nationalist-minded circles as a potential threat to national security.[77] Thus, in maintaining their identity, Uyghurs of Kazakhstan have to maneuver between the interests of the host state, Kazakh nationalists, and transnational Uyghur Diaspora of the world. Links with the

76 Ablet Kamalov, Risalat Karimova, Nodar Karimi, *Sotsialniy institut ottuz-oghul: istoriya i sovremennost* (Almaty: Mir, 2018); Ablet Kamalov, "O sostoyanii I razvitii muzhskikh sobraniy mashrap i sotsialnogo institute zhighit-beshi v Kazkahstane: resultaty sotsiologicheskogo oprosa," in *Uygurovedeniye v Kazakshtane i Tsentralnoi Azii: aktual'niye voprosy, sovremennoye sostoyaniye* (Almaty: Mir, 2019), 38–64; Rachel Harris and Ablet Kamalov, "Nation, religion and social heat: heritaging Uyghur mäshräp in Kazakhstan," *Central Asian Survey* 40, no. 1 (2021), 9–33.

77 Natsuko Oka, "Transnationalism as a threat."

latter becomes especially significant due to China's policy of mass internment of Uyghurs in concentration camps.[78]

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78 Adrian Zenc, "'Thoroughly reforming them towards a healthy heart attitude': China's special re-education campaign in Xinjiang," *Central Asian Survey* 38, no. 1 (2019): 102–128.