

# **Mobility and Immobility in a Transnational Context: Changing Views of Migration among the Kazakh Diaspora in Mongolia**

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## **Abstract**

Inquiry into the causes and outcomes of transnational migration spans numerous disciplines, scales and methodological approaches. Fewer studies focus on immobility. Utilizing the Kazakh population of Mongolia as a case study, this paper considers how non-migrants view the economic and cultural costs of migrating. We posit that three factors, including local place attachments specific to Mongolia, access to information about life in Kazakhstan and the importance of maintaining social networks in Mongolia, contribute substantially to their decision to not migrate. Our findings suggest that the decision to not migrate can be very strategic for non-migrants in highly transnational contexts.

**Keywords:** Mongolia; Kazakh diaspora; return migration; cultural costs; non-migrants

## **Introduction**

For the past two decades, the scholarly literature on international migration has become increasingly focused on the economic, cultural, and political impacts of transnational migration (Basch et al., 1994; Brettell, 2000; Glick-Schiller et al., 1995; Kearney, 1995, 2000; Levitt and Waters, 2002). Transnational migration is characterized by migrants who retain strong ties to their homeland and who develop hybridized or “transnational” social identities. Transnational migrants maintain these ties by sending remittances, communicating with relatives at home, visiting home, and sometimes returning home permanently (Basch et al., 1994: 4-8). The extent to which transnational migration is truly “new” and qualitatively different than earlier patterns of migration has been debated by several scholars. Foner (1997) and Brettell (2003), for example, demonstrate that transnational ties did exist in the past, yet they argue that the process of globalization has simultaneously shifted global economic opportunities and improved global communications and

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transportation infrastructures, thereby increasing the volume of international migration flows.

Research on transnational migration include studies of economic issues, such as the impacts of remittances on home countries (Adams, 1998; Connell and Conway, 2000; Conway and Cohen, 1998; Trager, 1988), cultural issues, such as the emergence of hybrid identities and cultural practices (Basch et al., 1994; Glick-Schiller et al., 1995; Small 1997), and political issues, such as the rights and status of migrants within the receiving country (Kivisto, 2003; Ong, 1999; Vora, 2008). Additional perspectives seek to quantify the flow of transnational migrants (Berry, 1993), the experiences of transnational migrants in destination communities (Bailey et al., 2002), and the implications of transnational economic structures, such as mining companies and resort developments on local and international migration patterns (Bury, 2007; Torres and Momsen, 2005).

While the literature on transnational migration is extensive, it includes several notable gaps which we begin to address in this paper. First, social scientists have examined transnational migration in both sending and receiving countries, yet studies within the sending countries, such as Mexico, tend to focus on the impacts of transnational migration on those who stay behind rather than the decision to not migrate. The existing literature also fails to fully explore the choice to remain in place (immobility) and how this choice may change over time in response to changing perceptions of what can be gained from migration. The choice to remain in place differs substantively from the inability to move due to economic, political, financial, or physical reasons, as it is a choice made by individuals who are able to move but choose not to. Finally, in regard to population movements and dislocations among contemporary diasporic communities, the notions of homeland and national identity are often a salient factor influencing migration choices.

This paper considers the migration decision-making process within the context of transnational migration. We utilize the case of the Kazakh population of Mongolia, a diasporic group moving from a country where Kazakhs are an ethnic minority to a country where Kazakhs are the majority group. In this transnational context, Kazakh nationalism is one of several factors that affect migration decisions. This case study focuses on the diverse mobility strategies of those who are currently living in Mongolia, looking specifically at those who have chosen not to migrate to Kazakh-

stan. Given the incentives to repatriate to Kazakhstan, how do these individuals calculate the economic and cultural costs of migrating? In this paper, we argue that studies of migration decision-making should consider both mobility and immobility, and that individual preferences for one over the other do not remain static over time.

This paper is divided into three sections beginning with a discussion of the relevant literature on migration; followed by a description of the case study; and finally, a discussion of the reasons why some Mongolian Kazakhs are choosing to stay in Mongolia. Data are derived from fieldwork in western Mongolia, conducted during the summers of 2006 and 2008.

### **Theoretical background**

Behavioral approaches to migration “stress the importance of noting the mechanisms behind individual acts of migration” (Boyle et al., 1998: 62), focusing on the individual perceptions of the characteristics of origin and destinations, or “place utility,” as defined by Wolpert (1965). Within this perspective, the migration decision-making process has several distinct phases beginning with the decision to leave a location, followed by the search for a better location, and ending with a choice of final destination (Zuiches, 1980). During each phase, the individual migrant evaluates the advantages and disadvantages of each potential choice. The evaluation of the costs and benefits of moving is subjective and dependent upon the migrant’s own knowledge and experiences and those of his/her peers and acquaintances. While much research focuses on this decision-making process and why migrants choose to move, fewer studies tackle the opposite question of why do most people choose NOT to migrate (Hammar and Tomas, 1997).

A growing literature has begun to assess this question (Cohen, 2005; Fischer and Malmberg, 2001; Fischer et al., 1997; Fischer et al., 2000 Fischer et al. (1997) suggest that there are certain generalized reasons why people choose to remain in place including the “value” associated with immobility, such as insider advantages associated with work and leisure. Reasons might also include a migrant’s own risk adversity, potential discrimination in the destination, or the loss of existing advantages afforded a potential migrant by remaining in the origin location. Social capital and local knowledge privilege the insider and create opportunities that might not exist for an outsider, thus creating advantages for choosing not to migrate.

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Sirkeci (2009) argues that the “transnational literature helps us to move away from linear migration models to circular, fluctuating and dynamic ties built by human movements across borders making conceptualizations of multiple ‘heres’ and ‘theres’ possible as opposed to origin and destination” (p4). This perspective broadens the conceptualization of migration to include multiple and diverse mobility strategies and a longer time frame in which to consider migration. While we embrace the behavioral perspective in this paper, we also acknowledge that a migration decision represents one moment in the lifetime of an individual who may renegotiate this decision and pursue different mobility strategies at a later point in time.

This paper discusses three factors that affect the decision-making process, within a context where economic incentives for migration have been changing. These factors include the role of access to information, values related to place attachment, and the role of social networks. First, the availability and quality of information accessible to a potential migrant influences both the decision to move and the choice of destination. In global settings today, information can come from many different sources including television, the internet, newspapers, magazines, friends, and family. The ability to communicate easily over long distances and for relatively low costs reduces the barrier of geographic distances and broadens interaction among individuals, allowing the sharing of ideas and extending an individuals’ experience without necessitating travel or migration (Adams, 1995; Janelle, 1991).

Second, place attachment plays an important role in the decision to either migrate or remain in place. Milligan (1998: 1) defines “place attachment [as] the emotional bond formed by an individual to a physical site due to the meaning given to the site through interactional processes, and suggests that such attachment is comprised of two interwoven components: (1) interactional past, or the memories of interactions associated with a site, and (2) interactional potential, or the future experiences perceived as likely or possible to occur in a site”. Such attachment can be individual or shared by a group and, according to Fielding (1992) we should expect cultures that identify closely with a particular place, or share strong place attachments, to have lower rates of outmigration and higher rates of return migration that would be expected in cultures that place lesser value on place identity. In this paper, we argue that place attachment to Mongolia inhibits migration for many Ka-

zakhs despite the draw, both emotional and historic, to Kazakhstan, a place which many perceive as an ancestral homeland.

Third, social scientists have long recognized that social networks are crucial for understanding the migrant experience. Social network analysis provides a way to understand the dynamic interplay between social structures (which create push-pull forces) and individual agency (Trager, 2005). These networks have been examined as a form of social capital that migrants can draw from (Massey et al., 1994) and often play a key role in determining migration destinations (Adler, 2008; Pessar, 1995). Migrants maintain network ties with sending communities through material and symbolic exchanges (Basch et al., 1994). Particular emphasis has been placed on the economic impacts of remittances on home communities (Stark, 1995; Trager, 1988), although it has been noted that remittances have the potential to create unequal relationships between migrants and non-migrants. Remittances, however, can have non-economic significance for migrants themselves (Cliggett, 2003; Small, 1997). For example, some migrants continue to send remittances because they either intend to return home one day or they maintain “narratives of intended return” because the idea of not returning is morally unacceptable (Lubkemann, 2005: 278).

### **The transnational migration of Mongolian Kazakhs: A case study**

The Kazakhs, a Muslim group with a Turkic language, are the largest ethnic minority in the relatively homogeneous country of Mongolia. In the 1989 census, the Kazakhs numbered 120,506 and constituted 5.9% of the Mongolian population (NSOM, 2003). In the 2000 census, the total number of Kazakhs decreased to 102,983 or 4.3% of the total population (NSOM, 2003). The majority of Kazakhs (78.4%) live in Bayan-Olgii province where they are the dominant ethnic group. Today, 74.9% of the residents in Bayan-Olgii province live in rural settlements and 71.8% of employed persons work in the agricultural sector (NSOM 2001), which is dominated by pastoralism with mixed herds of sheep, goats, cows/yaks, horses, and camels.

Mongolia and Kazakhstan do not share a land border. The Altai mountain range, with an average elevation of 1300 meters above sea level, cuts across the western provinces of Mongolia, contributing to the region’s geographical remoteness. Early Kazakhs settled in this area in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and most Mongolian Kazakhs trace their ancestry to Kazakh territories in western

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China (Diener, 2009; Enwall, 2008). Beginning in the 1930s, the development of international borders with China (and Russia) made it difficult for Mongolian Kazakhs to maintain ties with relatives on the other side of the Altai Mountains. Although air connections to Ulaanbaatar and Ustkamen, Kazakhstan, exist, there are no paved roads or railroads connecting western Mongolia and the capital and the only land route from Mongolia to Kazakhstan requires a 900 kilometer detour through Russia. Air passengers traveling from Bayan-Olgii province to China must fly through Ulaanbaatar, and the border crossing into China is only open in the summer, and involves a full day's drive on unpaved roads.

After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, nearly one half of the Kazakh population in Mongolia migrated to newly independent Kazakhstan.<sup>1</sup> Western Mongolia was particularly devastated by the post-socialist transition, which simultaneously brought a decline in supply routes and employment opportunities. With reduced support from the state, there were few alternatives to herding, and the herding lifestyle became increasingly difficult. Hoping to abandon the herding lifestyle, many migrants left for Kazakhstan, a place they imagine as more modern and sophisticated than Mongolia (Diener 2007: 470). Related to this, we interviewed many Kazakhs who believe that their children will have better opportunities in the future if they receive education in Kazakhstan.

The decision to move away from Mongolia to Kazakhstan reflects both the economic situation in Mongolia during the transition period (push factors) as well as the lure of returning to what many (but not all) Mongolian Kazakhs perceive as their ancestral "homeland" (pull factor). What is interesting about this phenomenon is that most Mongolian Kazakhs trace their ancestry to lands within Xinjiang province of China, not Kazakhstan. Their residence in Mongolia was not problematized until the formation of a nation-state associated with Kazakhs, at which point Kazakh intellectuals in Mongolia started to identify Kazakhstan as their homeland (Diener 2009). Mongolian Kazakhs, however, are not being "pushed" out of Mongolia due to cultural or political persecution as the development of Mongol nationalism in the 1990s has not brought intolerance against non-Mongol groups, and Kazakhs have been

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<sup>1</sup> Due to undocumented movements both to and from Kazakhstan, it is difficult to provide a reliable figure for the number of migrants and the number of return migrants. Diener (2007) notes that the emigrant population from Mongolia was estimated to be 65,000 in 2001, and notes that approximately 10,000 have returned to Mongolia.

able to maintain their cultural autonomy in Bayan-Olgii province (Diener, 2003).

These economic and cultural incentives to migrate have been supported by initiatives from the Kazakhstani government, which have varied over the past eighteen years. In a previous paper (Barcus and Werner 2008), we distinguish three periods of migration from 1991 and 2008. In each period, Mongolian Kazakh migration flows are responding to changing economic conditions in both the sending and receiving countries and changing incentives offered by the Kazakhstani government. During the first phase (1991-1996), Mongolian Kazakhs were struggling with deteriorating economic conditions in Mongolia at the same time that the Kazakhstani government was providing economic and cultural incentives to migrate. From 1991 to 1997, incentives provided by the Kazakhstan government included five-year work contracts, transportation to Kazakhstan, housing and other forms of material support (social pensions, child allowances, free healthcare, and free education for children). Kazakh nationalists within the Kazakhstani government were particularly interested in recruiting Mongolian Kazakhs due to their strong preservation of Kazakh language and cultural practices. Ironically, the Mongolian Kazakhs maintained Kazakh culture and language to a greater extent than the Kazakhs in Kazakhstan, especially the urban elite whose primary language is often Russian (Diener, 2005). Incentives to migrate declined during the second phase of migration (1997-2002). By 1997, economic conditions in Mongolia were slowly starting to improve. And, in 1997, the Kazakhstani government introduced a new legal framework for Kazakh migrants which simultaneously reduced the amount of material assistance and streamlined the process for gaining Kazakhstani citizenship (UNDP 2006). During the third phase of migration (2003-2008), increased development of cross-border trade and tourism are providing lucrative alternatives for some Mongolian Kazakhs. Further, due to new forms of technology and continuing ties with the transnational community of Mongolian Kazakhs in Kazakhstan, potential migrants have more knowledge of the potential opportunities in Kazakhstan, and thus are making more strategic and calculated decisions about whether or not to migrate.

Data for this paper come from an ongoing study in Bayan-Olgii, Mongolia. In 2006, we conducted 50 semi-structured interviews with rural and urban Kazakhs living in Bayan-Olgii and Khovd provinces. Our research questions focused on the impact of post-



socialist economy on daily lives, the incentives and disincentives to migrate to Kazakhstan, the experiences of kin who had migrated, and the impact of migration on social networks and gender relations. In 2008, we completed an additional 28 interviews with individuals living in three rural regions and the urban center of Bayan-Olgii province. We also added quantitative data to our study through a survey of 184 Kazakh households in Bayan-Olgii province. Survey participants were asked questions about their household economy, migration experiences, and attitudes towards migration.

### **The decision to stay in Mongolia**

Given the economic and cultural incentives to migrate to Kazakhstan, the question of why some Kazakhs have chosen to remain in Mongolia is particularly compelling. The remainder of this paper explores how non-migrants calculate the economic and cultural costs of migration. We propose that three factors, increased access to information, place attachment, and social networks, are affecting the initial decision of whether or not to migrate. This discussion will be focused on migration decision-making in the present, after approximately eighteen years of migration to Kazakhstan.

First, it is important to consider how the information that potential migrants have before making a decision to migrate has changed since the beginning of the transition. Unlike in the early 1990s, where migrants had very little information about what life would be like if they chose to migrate to Kazakhstan, migrants today have multiple sources of information and thus are making more informed decisions to migrate or not to migrate. One of the greatest sources of information is their contact with relatives and friends who have already migrated. Many non-migrants have visited relatives in Kazakhstan and have both family and friend networks in place in multiple locations within Kazakhstan. Of the 188 individuals surveyed this past summer, 50.5% have visited Kazakhstan at least one time. In addition, permanent migrants frequently return home to attend weddings and visit relatives. In recent years, people have been able to increase transnational ties through the expansion of cell phone coverage. A number of our interviewees told us that they send text messages daily to relatives in Kazakhstan. In most regions of Bayan-Olgii (including summer pastures outfitted with solar energy), Mongolian Kazakhs are able to watch Kazakhstani television channels. Through all of these



means, non-migrants learn about economic opportunities and daily life in Kazakhstan. This additional information, from an increasingly broad range of sources, provides a more robust picture of daily life in Kazakhstan for Mongolian Kazakhs. For many who chose to remain in Mongolia, barriers such as language proficiency, high housing costs, and subtle discrimination against repatriated Kazakhs, allow potential migrants to assess the advantages and disadvantages of moving or staying much more strategically.

We would argue that this access to information has influenced decisions to not migrate. First, during our interviews this past summer, we commonly heard that salaries were higher in Kazakhstan, but not high enough to offset the much higher cost of living. In addition, those living in Mongolia were very conscious of the high start-up costs associated with migration. Even if they initially lived with kin in Kazakhstan, they lamented the fact that the Kazakhstan government no longer paid transportation costs or free housing for migrants. Similar to Cohen's findings (2005), we encountered some non-migrants who felt that they could not afford to migrate or that their economic prospects were better in Mongolia than in Kazakhstan. But, we also found many non-migrants who had visited relatives in Kazakhstan and had very strong feelings about why they did not want to migrate. Reasons included general ideas that Kazakhstan was more polluted and more dangerous, as well as very specific beliefs that the meat and water tasted different.

Respondent feelings about Mongolia, their place attachments, are also a key decision factor. Despite having cultural ties to Kazakhstan, Mongolian Kazakhs are very emotionally connected to western Mongolia, reflecting both the strong social and familial networks but also identification with specific landscape features. In general, Kazakhs strongly value their birthplace (*tugan zher*) and ancestral burial sites (Werner 1997). Kazakh herders possess an intimate knowledge of their local environment, and identify pastures, valleys, and rivers they use with detailed place names. These place names become themes in songs that link Mongolian Kazakhs to Mongolia (Post 2007). Children are socialized to understand the importance of these places for the history of their family, perpetuating a shared sense of place and connection to a particular local landscape. Many of the non-migrants we interviewed identify strongly with Mongolia, and it is possible that their sense of connection to Mongolia has actually solidified with their decision to stay, and that these values are passed on to their children. It is un-

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clear what the long-term implications of these attachments by adults will have on younger generations. As access to information about Kazakhstan and other potential destinations becomes available through improved transportation networks, communications systems and expanded social networks, this strong place identity may be challenged by the desire for a wider world experience. At least in the present, this sense of place is reinforced through the migration process. Rather than fully assimilating into the “homeland” of Kazakhstan, Mongolian Kazakhs are identified by others and self identify as “Mongolian Kazakhs.” They are also identified by a more general term “*oralman*” which includes repatriated Kazakhs from other countries, such as China. The very notion that Kazakhstan is the historic homeland for all Kazakhs is widely contested by many of the Mongolians who are not seeking to migrate. These Kazakhs define Mongolia as an alternative homeland for Kazakhs (Diener 2009). As it has been traditionally conceptualized, place attachment inhibits migration for many Mongolian Kazakhs but it also helps create a secondary community identity for those who chose to migrate, as they are broadly grouped together by non-Mongolia Kazakhs in Kazakhstan.

Social networks in the origin and destination influence the initial migration decision. Migrants invest time and energy into maintaining social ties with their relatives in Mongolia, and the existence of these transnational networks helps facilitate the migration of kin. However, compared to other cultural settings, there is no evidence that migrants are sending substantial amounts of money (or remittances) home to relatives in Mongolia. Our interview data suggest that economic exchanges tend to flow in both directions in the form of gifts, and there is no sense that the value of these gifts is weighted in one direction, with the possible exception of money that is sent by parents to children who are studying in Kazakhstan. In terms of the cost of migrating, it is important to factor in the cost of return visits to Mongolia. Non-migrants have the option of visiting Kazakhstan, but the burden of return visits is placed on migrants who are expected to visit. The frequency of visits varies depending on one’s financial means. When asked to discuss the cost of a visit to Kazakhstan (or a return visit to Mongolia), interviewees responded that it would cost a minimum of \$500 per person for the cost of transportation and the cost of gifts that would be given to relatives that would host the visitors. Many interviewees were emotionally upset that their families were physically divided and

that they could not afford to visit often, especially during important family events such as weddings and funerals.

Despite overwhelming cultural and economic incentives to move to Kazakhstan, including the many benefits offered by the Kazakhstani government, and economic hardships faced by residing in a remote province of Mongolia, many Mongolian Kazakhs have chosen to remain in Mongolia.

In this essay we have outlined three factors that appear to contribute substantially to the decision not to migrate, including local place attachments specific to Mongolia, increased access to information about life in Kazakhstan and the importance of maintaining social networks in Mongolia. These factors reinforce what Fischer et al. (1997) refer to the values associated with immobility, that is the benefits that long term residents accrue based on their social networks and local place knowledge. The focus of current work on transnational migration neglects the important process by which some potential migrants consider migration but ultimately decide to remain in place or remain immobile. In this case study we have demonstrated that immobility is not the rejection of migration as a viable livelihood strategy but rather it is a decision negotiated over time and in consideration of economic, cultural and social advantages and disadvantages in multiple locations, e.g. Mongolia and Kazakhstan. For Mongolian Kazakhs, national identification with Kazakhstan as the ancestral “homeland” plays a role in the decision process, yet it is just one of many factors that are considered. Non-migrants today are making very calculated decisions about whether or not to migrate, taking into account both the economic costs and benefits of migration, and the cultural tradeoffs of moving to a “homeland” that may not feel like “home” in Mongolia. Numerous additional questions extend from this inquiry including variation in perceived advantages and disadvantages across economic, social and gender groups and the implications for both the individual non-migrants and the community in which they choose to remain.

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