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The Kazakhs of Western Mongolia: transnational migration from 1990–2008

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The Kazakhs are the largest minority group in Mongolia, a relatively homogenous country dominated by Khalkh Mongols. Since 1991, Mongolia has transitioned politically and economically and witnessed significant changes in internal and international migration flows. The large-scale movement of ethnic Kazakhs from Western Mongolia to Kazakhstan represents one such emerging international flow. This migration is influenced by economic motivations, historical cultural ties to Kazakhstan, and immigration policies of both countries. This paper assesses the local and national circumstances that shape migration decision-making in Western Mongolia during the transition years and highlights changes in the characteristics and directions of migration flows during this time. We identify three periods of migration with each period characterized by changing economies and national policies in Mongolia and Kazakhstan, as well as changes in communications technologies and extensiveness of social networks among prospective migrants. These periods illustrate how transnational migration flows evolve through time and are affected by national, local, and individual circumstances.

Keywords: Kazakhs; migration; diaspora; repatriation; Mongolia; Kazakhstan

Introduction and background

Through the creation of national borders, individuals identifying strongly with one ethnic group have often been divided into two or more nation-states. Many ethnic groups have been further separated by migration as groups of individuals have left their home country and resettled in a new country for economic or political reasons. Physical separation, however, does not preclude the maintenance of strong ties. Glick Schiller et al. write that ‘... a new kind of migrating population is emerging composed of those whose networks, activities and patterns of life encompass both their host and home societies. Their lives cut across national boundaries and bring two societies into a single social field’.¹ These ‘transnational migrants’ are often characterized as a new variety of migrant who make decisions in a much more globalized economic framework. Transportation and communication technologies facilitate connectedness between home and destination communities both at the individual or household scale as well as at the broader macro level scale. Such

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¹Glick Schiller et al., ‘Transnationalism’, 1.

transnational connections can be equally important to diasporic identities, especially when some members of the group remain behind as others migrate to a territory they define as a homeland.

Scholars of transnational migration argue that this type of migration needs to be approached from multiple scales (household and community, origin and destination) and to incorporate the influence of 'macroeconomic forces and local economic trends and social practices'.² Further, it is important to integrate both traditional models and understandings of migration behavior and the new global migratory realities. For example, the behavioral perspective on migration³ provides a framework in which we can understand the incremental migration decision from an individual perspective, while new global economic systems necessitate the framing of these decisions within broader national and global economic contexts. A key factor in the migration decision-making process is the acquisition and incorporation of new information by potential migrants. Social networks – and more recently in Mongolia, increased national and international television broadcasts, cellular phone coverage and internet access – has broadened awareness of world events and conditions. In a previous paper⁴, we highlight the importance of changes in communication and transportation technologies, and social networks to individual migration decisions focusing specifically on the choice not to migrate. Migration decisions, however, are also influenced by broader structural factors, such as changes in immigration policy in destination countries, economic fluctuations that privilege opportunity in one location over another and, as in the case of the Mongolian Kazakh diaspora, the availability of government-sponsored incentives to move.

Numbering over 100,000, the Kazakhs are the largest ethnic minority in Mongolia. The majority of Mongolian Kazakhs live in the Western *aimaq* (province) of Bayan-Ulgii, a region that is near Kazakhstan yet separated by small strips of territory that belongs to Russia and China (see Figure 1).⁵ Before the fall of the Soviet Union, very few Mongolian Kazakhs had the opportunity to visit what was then the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic due to Soviet practices that controlled population movements and travel. In the post-Soviet context, the creation of new nation-states and national borders, the relaxation of restrictions on movement, and the opening of borders between east and west brought about mass population movements at both the regional and global levels.⁶ One of the striking developments is the post-Soviet movement of groups, such as the Mongolian Kazakhs, who find themselves separated from their re-imagined homelands. Since 1991, the recently independent country of Kazakhstan has become one of three countries in the world (including Israel and Germany) that established programs to repatriate kinsmen living abroad. The largest populations of Kazakhs outside of Kazakhstan can be found in Russia, Uzbekistan, China, Mongolia, Iran, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkey.⁷ While the migration flows have vacillated over

²Cohen, 'Transnational migration in rural Oaxaca', 955. This need for migration models that reflect the multiplicity of scales of analyses and factors is echoed by other scholars as well (e.g. Sirkeci, 'Transnational migration and conflict'; Glick Schiller, 'Transnationalism').

³Golledge and Stimson, *Spatial Behavior*, 451–456.

⁴Werner and Barcus, 'Mobility and Immobility in a Transnational Context', 52–53.

⁵National Statistical Office of Mongolia, *Mongolian Population in the XX Century*, 367, 369.

⁶Flynn, *Migrant Resettlement in the Russian Federation*.

⁷UNDP, *Status of Oralmsans in Kazakhstan*, 4.

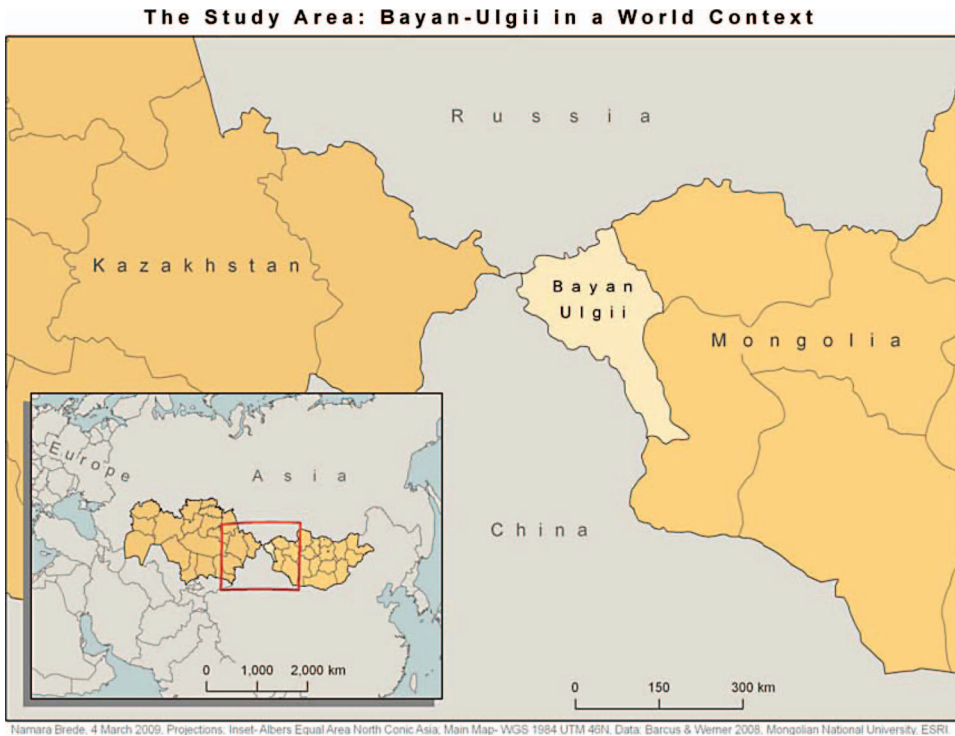


Figure 1. The study area of Bayan-Ulgii, Mongolia.

the years, over 464,000 Kazakhs have migrated to Kazakhstan in the post-Soviet period, including approximately 71,000 Kazakhs from Mongolia.⁸

The scope of this paper is limited to the migration of Mongolian Kazakhs. Previous studies note that following the initial migration to Kazakhstan, as many as one-third of the migrants have returned to Mongolia, disillusioned by their encounters with the homeland, including experiences with co-ethnics who view them as being 'Other' and label them as 'Mongols'.⁹ Rather than assimilating fully into life in Kazakhstan, Mongolian Kazakhs have emerged as a transnational community whose members identify with both Mongolia and Kazakhstan. While earlier studies of this migration process rely on field research through 2002, our

⁸UNDP, *Ibid.*, 13. The figure used in the UNDP report (71,000) was collected from the Kazakhstani Agency of Statistics and refers to oralmandar arriving within and outside the quota from 1991 to 2005. However, it is important to note that the number of Mongolian Kazakh migrants varies from one source to another, in part due to the difficulty of counting non-quota migrants and in part due to the fact that different sources are basing their information on different years. Alexander Diener estimates that 60,000 Mongolian Kazakhs migrated to Kazakhstan in the 1990s. He also notes that the 1999 Kazakhstan census only refers to 42,426, which he and other scholars believe to be an undercount. The figure used in the UNDP report (71,000) was collected from the Kazakhstani Agency of Statistics and refers to oralmandar arriving within and outside the quota from 1991 to 2005. Diener, 'Problematic Integration of Mongolian-Kazakh Return Migrants in Kazakhstan', 469.

⁹Diener, *One Homeland or Two?*, 162, 194, 268; Diener, 'Problematic Integration of Mongolian-Kazakh Return Migrants in Kazakhstan', 473.

research, based on interviews and surveys conducted in 2006¹⁰ and 2008, suggest that migration trends have changed continuously in the post-socialist period. This paper characterizes three distinct phases of Kazakh migration to Mongolia between 1991 and 2008 by addressing two interrelated questions: How have local and national circumstances that shape migration decision-making in Western Mongolia changed during the transition years?; and how have the characteristics and direction of Mongolian Kazakh migration flows changed from the early transition years to the late transition years? Specifically, we propose that broader structural factors influence the ebb and flow of transnational migrants, and that migrants incorporate these changes into their migration decision-making behavior. Following an overview of the Kazakh diaspora in Mongolia, the remaining sections of the paper discuss each of the three distinct migration periods, describing the structural changes occurring in Mongolia and Kazakhstan and the implications of these changes to alterations in the characteristics of migrants and migration flows between the two countries. The final sections provide discussion and concluding thoughts.

The Mongolian Kazakhs

Although they are the largest minority – 4.3% of the total population – the Kazakhs are relatively new to Mongolia. Documented Kazakh migration to Western Mongolia dates from the 1840s, although some sources suggest the migration may not have started until the 1860s.¹¹ Many early migrants arrived from nearby lands in what is now Western China.¹² There were 1,370 Kazakh households counted in the Mongolian census of 1905, and 1,870 Kazakh households were incorporated into the Mongolian People's Republic in 1924.¹³ By 1989, just prior to the transition, the Kazakh population in Mongolia had grown to just over 120,500 individuals.¹⁴ The majority of Mongolian Kazakhs, 78.4%¹⁵, live in Bayan-Ulgii province (*aimaq*) in Western Mongolia. With 88.7% of the population, they are the ethnic majority with both political and cultural autonomy. A significant number of Kazakhs also live in neighboring Khovd province (*aimaq*) and the city of Ulaanbaatar.¹⁶ In Khovd province, the Kazakhs are a minority of the population but there are several sizable settlements in the city of Khovd and in a rural region (*sum*) named Khovd.

Language and religion are the primary criteria that distinguish Kazakhs from Mongolians. Unlike the Buddhist faith that is associated with Mongols, Islam is a key component of the Kazakh ethnic identity. After years of religious repression under communism, the Kazakhs are experiencing a revival of Islam, as witnessed by the emergence of new mosques and increased opportunities for Kazakhs to study Islam both in Mongolia and abroad. Despite these trends, many Kazakhs

¹⁰Barcus and Werner, 'Transnational identities: Mongolian Kazakhs in the Twenty-first Century', 4–10.

¹¹Diener, *One Homeland or Two?*, 98–99.

¹²Finke, 'The Kazakhs of Western Mongolia', 103.

¹³Diener, *One Homeland or Two?*, 99.

¹⁴National Statistical Office of Mongolia (NSOM), *Mongolian Population in XX Century*, 367.

¹⁵NSOM 2003, 367, 369.

¹⁶NSOM, 2003, 375, 377.

(both in Mongolia and in Kazakhstan) do not follow basic Muslim tenets such as reciting prayers five times a day and fasting during Ramadan.¹⁷

In comparison, Mongolian Kazakhs have retained linguistic knowledge of their native tongue, Kazakh, one of several Turkic languages spoken in Central Asia. In fact, Kazakh is the dominant language used in Bayan-Ulgii province. In rural areas populated by Kazakhs in both Bayan-Ulgii and Khovd provinces, Kazakh is the only language of instruction. In the town of Ulgii, which has a mixed population, families have the option of sending their children to public schools where Kazakh or Mongolian is the primary language of instruction.¹⁸ The majority of Mongolian Kazakhs are also proficient, to varying degrees, in Mongolian, while a smaller number are equally comfortable speaking Russian. While Russian was taught as a second language of instruction during the communist period, there are fewer opportunities today for young Mongolian Kazakhs to learn or use Russian in Mongolia. For migrants, however, integration into Kazakhstani society is facilitated with Russian language proficiency.

In traditional Kazakh society, families raised their own herds of sheep, goats, yaks, camels and horses, and household work was generally divided by gender, with men tending animal herds and women maintaining household-based activities such as food preparation, child rearing, and textile production.¹⁹ Agricultural collectivization during the communist period reorganized the production of livestock from subsistence-based production to state-controlled system of production and distribution.²⁰ At the same time, the state also expanded access to state sponsored health care, education, social welfare safety nets and increased public infrastructure, though the provision of these services remained limited for rural Kazakhs who lived outside of the rural centers.

Beginning in the late 1980s, the Mongolian government introduced economic and political reforms that closely resembled the policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost* in the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union was dissolved in 1991, the transition to a market economy and multi-party political system again mirrored transformations taking place in the republics of the former Soviet Union. The agricultural collectives (*negdels*) were dissolved and livestock herds were distributed to *negdel* members. In some areas, rural residents who worked as teachers, doctors and administrators were excluded from the distribution of livestock. Although experiences with privatization vary from one household to the next, almost all families experienced hardship during this period due to increased inflation and unemployment, and the disintegration of the socialist infrastructure.²¹

Accompanying these changes was a relaxing of internal and international migration policies which resulted in rapid urban growth and population redistribution within more rural provinces.²² In Mongolia, one of the most notable migration trends has been the out-migration of Kazakhs to newly independent Kazakhstan. This migration is by no means unique in post-Soviet spaces. When the Soviet Union was dismantled, approximately 70 million people found themselves living outside the

¹⁷Finke, 'The Kazakhs of Western Mongolia', 136–137.

¹⁸Diener, *One Homeland or Two?*, 177; Finke, 'The Kazakhs of Western Mongolia', 118.

¹⁹Bacon, *Central Asians Under Russian Rule*; Werner, 'Household Networks and the Security of Mutual Indebtedness in Rural Kazakhstan', 597–612.

²⁰Finke, 'Does Privatization mean Commoditisation?', 203–205.

²¹Finke, *ibid.*, 206–208; Finke, 'The Kazakhs of Mongolia', 124.

²²Barcus, 'Mongolia in the 21st Century'.

political unit that they viewed as their ethno-national homeland.²³ Members of these ethnic groups, such as Jews, Germans and Greeks, have been leaving the former Soviet territories for homelands abroad.²⁴ Other groups, including the many Russians who lived in non-Russian republics, have been moving from one location to another within the territory of the Former Soviet Union. And, finally, there are groups, like the Mongolian and Chinese Kazakhs, who are migrating to territories that are being reimagined as homelands, crossing political borders that are now penetrable. According to several sources, approximately 50,000–60,000 Mongolian Kazakhs emigrated in the 1990s, and possibly 10,000–20,000 returned to Mongolia by the early 2000s.²⁵ In Kazakhstan, these repatriated Kazakhs are referred to by the Kazakh term '*oralman*' (singular) or '*oralmandar*' (plural). Official statistics indicate that 71,507 Mongolian *oralmandar* and 22,117 Chinese *oralmandar* currently reside in Kazakhstan.²⁶

Although Kazakhstan is physically close to Bayan-Ulgii *aimaq*, those choosing a land route travel approximately 900 kilometers through Russia to northern Kazakhstan because there is no direct road across the Altai Mountains. Alternatively, some migrants have traveled by air, using post-Soviet air routes from Ulgii, Mongolia to Ustkamen, Kazakhstan. Many but not all of the migrants have arrived by invitation of the Kazakhstani government, through an annual quota system for diasporic Kazakhs from outside of the former Soviet Union.²⁷

Previous studies of Mongolian Kazakhs and their migration to Kazakhstan

Previous studies of Mongolian Kazakhs have examined the factors that influence these migration trends and the experiences of Mongolian Kazakhs through the migration process. Much of what has been published on this topic has been written by Alexander Diener, a geographer who examines the ways in which the concept of 'homeland' has been contested and renegotiated by this community of transnational Kazakhs.²⁸ Isik Kuscu's recent dissertation examines public debates in Kazakhstan regarding the *oralmandar*.²⁹ In addition, anthropologists Peter Finke and Meltem Sancak have discussed the economic conditions in post-socialist Mongolia that encouraged early waves of migration and the reception of Mongolian and Chinese

²³Brubaker, 'Political Dimensions of Migration from and among Soviet Successor States'; King and Melvin, *Nations Abroad*, 110.

²⁴Pilkington, *Migration, Displacement and Identity in Post-Soviet Russia*.

²⁵Diener, 'Problematic Integration of Mongolian-Kazakh Return Migrants in Kazakhstan', 469; Finke, 'The Kazakhs of Western Mongolia', 114–115. The Kazakhstan census includes figures for immigration and emigration, but does not break this down by ethnic group (or ethnic group by country of origin). Official figures for the *oralmandar* are cited in the UNDP report. However, from our interviews, we know that some Mongolian Kazakhs migrate to Kazakhstan outside of the quota system and some Mongolian Kazakhs receive quota and then return to Mongolia. Official figures on the number of Mongolian *oralmandar* are unlikely to capture these instances.

²⁶UNDP, *Status of Oralman in Kazakhstan*, 13. Although there are over one million Kazakhs living in Western China, there are fewer migrants, in part because it is more difficult for them to get approval to leave from the Chinese government. Finke, 'Migration and Risk Taking', 135.

²⁷UNDP, 'Status of Oralman in Kazakhstan', 9–10.

²⁸Diener, *One Homeland or Two?*. Two additional scholars should be mentioned: Gulnara Mendikulova who has published several works on the *oralmandar* in Russian language sources, and Anna Genina who is currently working on a dissertation at the University of Michigan on the *oralmandar* in Kazakhstan.

²⁹Kuscu, 'Kazakhstan's *Oralman* Project'.

Kazakhs in Kazakhstan.³⁰ And, political scientist Sally Cummings has examined the demographic distribution of the Kazakh diaspora and the repatriation program.³¹ Additional scholars have studied Mongolian Kazakhs, without focusing on the issue of migration.³²

Diener argues that some of the earliest migrants were Kazakh elites who lived in Ulaanbaatar and who believed it was important to raise their children in the Kazakh homeland.³³ These migrants were followed by those searching for economic opportunities as conditions in Bayan-Ulgii quickly deteriorated in the early 1990s. Families, impoverished by economic crisis, chose to migrate.³⁴ And young people, hoping to abandon the herding lifestyle for a more 'modern' lifestyle, could now choose to migrate to either Kazakhstan or Ulaanbaatar. In the early 1990s, migration to Kazakhstan was idealized in Mongolian and Kazakhstani media for both cultural and economic reasons.³⁵ The Kazakhstani government encouraged migration by promising to help resettle the diasporic Kazakh community. In sum, Diener suggests that Kazakhs are being 'pulled' to Kazakhstan, not 'pushed' out of Mongolia due to cultural or political persecution.³⁶ In fact, in Bayan-Ulgii *aimaq*, the Kazakhs actually strengthened their cultural and political autonomy beginning in the mid-1950s, and continuing in the post-Soviet period with increased religious freedoms.³⁷

There are two main arguments presented in Diener's research. First, he argues that some Kazakhs feel a strong place attachment to Kazakhstan as the imagined homeland of Kazakh ancestors, yet upon migration these Kazakhs have to confront the 'reality of the state's ethnic diversity, Russified cultural landscape, and the government's inability to facilitate a seamless integration of these long isolated kinsmen'.³⁸ Although the Kazakhs make up a majority of the population, there are several dozen nationalities in Kazakhstan, including a significant population of Russians. Ironically, the Mongolian Kazakhs have preserved Kazakh culture and language to a greater extent than many Kazakhstani Kazakhs whose first language is often Russian.³⁹ It is not uncommon for Mongolian Kazakhs to be treated as inferiors because they lack adequate Russian skills and appear to be less 'modern' than the average Kazakhstani Kazakh. Similarly, the Mongolian Kazakhs have been dissatisfied with their historic homeland due to the difficulty of integrating with co-ethnics who view them as 'others'. Mongolian and Chinese Kazakhs, for example, are often referred to as 'Mongolians' or 'Chinese' respectively by Kazakhstani

³⁰Finke, 'The Kazakhs of Western Mongolia', 114–116; Sancak and Finke, 'Migration and Risk-Taking', 127–161.

³¹Cummings, 'The Kazakhs'.

³²Lacaze, "'Run After Time'"; Enwall, 'Minority Policies and Inter-Ethnic Relations in Mongolia and Inner Mongolia'; Portische, 'Kazakh Syrmaq-Production in Western Mongolia'; Post, "'I Take My Dombra and Sing to Remember My Homeland'".

³³Diener, *One Homeland or Two?*, 184.

³⁴Diener, *Ibid.*, 185.

³⁵Diener, *Ibid.*, 186–190.

³⁶Diener, *Ibid.*, 176–177.

³⁷Diener, *Ibid.*, 162; Finke, 'The Kazakhs of Western Mongolia', 118–119. Both Diener and Finke, however, acknowledge that there were some tensions in Kazakh-Mongol relations in the early 1990s, as some Kazakhs pushed for further autonomy and the possibility of secession.

³⁸Diener, *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁹Diener, *Ibid.*, 162.

Kazakhs.⁴⁰ Unequal provision of housing and material support (social pensions, child allowances, free healthcare, and free education for children) and bureaucratic problems with the process of becoming naturalized citizens has fostered disillusionment among some official migrants (*oralmandar*). Both Diener and Finke use these observations to explain why a significant number of the Mongolian Kazakhs chose to return to Mongolia after spending several years in Kazakhstan.⁴¹

Diener's second argument is that the very notion that Kazakhstan is the historic homeland for all Kazakhs, an idea promoted by the Kazakhstani government, is widely contested by many of the Mongolian Kazakhs who are not seeking to migrate. These Kazakhs resist state efforts to re-territorialize the diasporic Kazakh community in Kazakhstan by defining Mongolia as an alternative homeland for Kazakhs. Diener's study, as well as other studies of post-Soviet diasporas, shed light on how concepts of 'homeland' can be contested and renegotiated, as diasporic populations find themselves in locations that feel like 'home'.⁴²

Diener's review provides compelling insight into the mid-transition situation of Mongolian Kazakh migration, however, it is based on 2001 and 2002 field research, and Finke's research among the Mongolian Kazakhs was conducted in 1999. This paper derives from several months of ethnographic fieldwork in Mongolia in 2006 and 2008. The rapidity of change in Western Mongolia render many of the observations about the remote nature of Bayan-Ulgii *aimaq* in the early 2000s less relevant in 2008 due to increased transborder trade and the development of telecommunications technology. Our interview and survey data suggest that the factors that shape migration decision-making have evolved throughout the post-socialist years. In this paper, we consider how the characteristics and directions of Mongolian Kazakh migration flows have altered in response to changing economic conditions in both the sending and receiving countries and changing incentives offered by the Kazakhstani government. We characterize these changes by focusing on the general changes that have occurred during three specific time periods: 1991–1996, 1997–2002, and 2003–2008.

Data and methods

Data for this study come from several months of field work in Bayan-Ulgii, Mongolia. The project began in 2006 with a series of semi-structured interviews of urban and rural households focused generally on migration experiences within the changing economic conditions in Western Mongolia and the parallel Kazakhstan and Mongolian policy changes and the implications of these changes for members of the Kazakh diaspora in Bayan-Ulgii and Khovd provinces. Following this preliminary work, we returned in 2008 and conducted structured interviews based on a survey instrument consisting of more than 200 questions. The survey utilized a quota sample conducting structured interviews with 184 individuals representing households in urban and rural locations. The quota was based on urban/rural location, migrant/non-migrant household status, age and sex of the respondent. We

⁴⁰Diener, *Ibid.*, 280–281.

⁴¹Diener, 'Problematic Integration of Mongolian-Kazakh Return Migrants in Kazakhstan', 465–478; Finke, 'The Kazakhs of Western Mongolia', 115–116.

⁴²Pilkington, *Migration, Displacement and Identity in Post-Soviet Russia*; Uehling, 'The Crimean Tatars in Uzbekistan'.

chose a quota sample because it has the advantage of approximating the results of a probability sample, while reflecting the population parameters of interest.⁴³ We also sought a mix of economic status among respondents although this was not a specific criteria of the quota. Household migrant status was based on the households' immediate experience with migration. Those households from which an immediate family member had migrated to Kazakhstan were considered migrant households while those who did not possess such a family member were considered non-migrant households. In addition to the surveys we conducted 28 life history interviews, seeking similar, age, sex, geographic, economic, and migrant status representation. During the summer of 2009, we returned to Western Mongolia and conducted qualitative interviews with many of the families that we interviewed in 2008.⁴⁴ In this paper, we draw specifically on the semi-structured interviews from 2006, the life history interviews of 2008, participant observation notes and analyses of policy documents and literature that offer insights to changes in policy and economic conditions in Kazakhstan and Mongolia.

Changing migration trends for Mongolian Kazakhs

Economic conditions and migration during the initial transition years (1991–1996)

At an individual or family scale, the decision to migrate represents a complex interplay of individual perceptions, needs, and desires (push factors), coupled with the ability (financial, legal) to move, and real or perceived benefits offered at the destination (pull factors). The process by which potential migrants decide to move or not to move thus is dependent upon economic, cultural, social, familial, and perceptual factors as well as broader national and global contexts in which these decisions are made. During the initial transition years (1991–1996), a combination of factors made the decision to migrate to Kazakhstan very appealing to Mongolian Kazakhs.

In the early 1990s, deteriorating economic conditions in Western Mongolia had a strong influence on migration decision-making. Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the relatively remote region of Western Mongolia received many consumer goods, including basic necessities such as flour, from the Altai region of the Soviet Union. Economic agreements between Mongolia and the Soviet Union subsidized the cost of these goods. Long distances limited the supply of trade goods from Ulaanbaatar (1,645 kilometers), reflecting the lack of paved roads, and the general underdevelopment of Mongolia's consumer goods sector. Supply routes between Western Mongolia and Russia were severely disrupted by economic restructuring in the early 1990s and consequently, all goods that were imported to the region were in short supply, and available goods were no longer sold at subsidized prices.⁴⁵ In addition to facing shortages and inflation, unemployment rose dramatically as agricultural collectives were privatized and individuals and businesses adapted to the rapid and abrupt transition from a command economy to a market economy.⁴⁶ One interviewee explained that the early 1990s was extremely difficult for everybody

⁴³Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology*, 188; Schensul et al., *Essential Ethnographic Methods*, 246.

⁴⁴Funding for the 2008–2009 research comes from a National Science Foundation Grant #BCS-0752411.

⁴⁵Finke, 'The Kazakhs of Western Mongolia', 121.

⁴⁶Finke, 'Does Privatization Mean Commoditisation?', 206.

because there were simply no opportunities to make money. According to this informant, it took several years for people to learn how to make small profits through trade.

In the midst of this economic crisis, the Kazakhstani government offered to assist ethnic Kazakhs living abroad (including Mongolia) with the costs of migrating to Kazakhstan. In 1991 Kazakhstan passed the Resolution 'On the Procedures and Conditions of the Relocation to Kazakh SSR for Persons of Kazakh Ethnicity from Other Republics and Abroad Willing to Work in Rural Areas'. The objective of this legislation was two-fold, first to regulate immigration of Kazakhs to Kazakhstan and second to 'develop the Kazakh *aul* (village) and agricultural industry complex'.⁴⁷ In 1992, the Law on Immigration was passed, creating a quota system for repatriates.⁴⁸ The quota was intended to limit the number of migrants receiving benefits to a number that would not exceed government capacity.⁴⁹ The annual quota is set for a specific number of 'families', not individuals.⁵⁰ From the beginning, ethnic Kazakhs had the option of entering Kazakhstan either within or outside of the quota system.⁵¹

There has never been a limit placed on non-quota migrants, and non-quota migrants of Kazakh descent have the right to migrate to Kazakhstan. In fact, many *oralman* families migrate to Kazakhstan first, and then apply for *oralman* status after getting settled.⁵² Government assistance for all *oralmandar*, regardless of entry procedures, includes social and medical assistance, employment and language assistance, and assistance with education both at the primary and secondary levels.⁵³ Additional benefits for ethnic Kazakhs entering as part of the quota system include housing, transportation of family and goods to permanent residence place and a lump sum allowance for each family member. During the initial phase, Kazakhs coming from 'abroad' (i.e. outside of the former Soviet Union) received greater benefits than Kazakhs returning from CIS countries, such as Uzbekistan.⁵⁴

During the initial years of migration, migrants who went through the quota system were offered work contracts which typically lasted for five years.⁵⁵ At the end of the contract, migrants had the option to apply for Kazakhstani citizenship. However, over 90% of the *oralmandar* had not received citizenship by 2000.⁵⁶ Many migrants were given jobs in rural areas working with livestock, a skill that most Mongolian Kazakhs possessed. In many of our interviews, people related stories of how the Kazakhstani government provided trucks for their relatives to move all of

⁴⁷UNDP, *Status of Oralman in Kazakhstan*, 9.

⁴⁸Ibid., 9. Kuscü, 'Kazakhstan's Oralman Project', 135.

⁴⁹Kuscü, Ibid., 138.

⁵⁰Kuscü, Ibid., 135, 139. According to the Law on Immigration, a 'family' is defined broadly in a way that includes the adult applicant, his/her spouse, children, parents, siblings (if unmarried), grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

⁵¹Diener, *One Homeland or Two?*, 227.

⁵²Kuscü, 'Kazakhstan's Oralman Project', 137.

⁵³UNDP, *Status of Oralman in Kazakhstan*, 10. This report provides a full outline of benefits provided for *oralmandar*.

⁵⁴Diener, *One Homeland or Two?*, 226; Kuscü, 'Kazakhstan's Oralman Project', 135.

⁵⁵The Mongolian government did not object to these labor contracts. The out-migration of Kazakhs was supported by a constitutional right for Mongolian citizens to select their place of residence, and helped reduce pressures on local governments during the difficult early transition years. Diener, *One Homeland or Two?*, 114.

⁵⁶Diener, Ibid., 228.

their household belongings after they had accepted a work contract. There were so many trucks moving people out of Bayan-Ulgii *aimaq* that one of our interviewees said that it ‘was like a war’. In Western Mongolia, local newspapers regularly published invitations from the Kazakhstani government complete with information on how to sign up for repatriation. In addition to the economic incentives, these appeals provided an emotional ‘pull’ to Kazakhstan, by linking migration to Kazakhstan with a return to a newly imagined homeland. Compared to today, the cost of migrating was not an important factor in the decision to migrate. In addition to supplying transportation, Kazakhstan promised to provide employment, housing and other material benefits. The repatriation of Kazakhs living in other states was one of several steps the newly independent state of Kazakhstan took towards the ‘kazakhization’ of a nation-state that included a significant population of non-Kazakhs. Many migrants from Mongolia were sent to regions in northern Kazakhstan where there were higher concentrations of Russian, Ukrainian and Germans. Many *oralmandar* were settled in homes that were abandoned by these groups who were repatriating to their own ethnic homelands.⁵⁷

In some respects, repatriated Kazakhs received more assistance than citizens of Kazakhstan as they were also offered financial assistance, including lump sum payments for housing. A few respondents suggested that free livestock were also provided to some individuals. Economic conditions in Kazakhstan were also difficult in the early 1990s, and in practice, the government was not always able to provide everything promised. For example, one woman told us how her family had to live in an office building for the first six months until the local government found them a more suitable place to live. In addition, some Kazakhs migrated outside of the official channels and thus did not receive work contracts or any of the related benefits.

One of the most striking characteristics of this initial migration phase is the fact that a large proportion of individuals moved as part of a large kin group. In other settings, it is not uncommon for families to migrate together. What is unique about the Kazakh migration is the scale of this family migration. For example, we met one individual in Ulaanhus who remembers how 50 related households moved simultaneously to Kokshetau, Kazakhstan, in the early 1990s. The decision to migrate was strongly influenced by an elder male relative who encouraged this migration after making an initial scouting trip to Kazakhstan. Other people told us similar stories of how some of their relatives migrated with five, 10 or 20 other households, all at the same time to the same place. For many Kazakhs, one of the primary obstacles to migration is leaving behind one’s loved ones and the social support that comes from living near relatives. By migrating in large kin groups, these problems were reduced. Several scholars have noted how *oralmandar* tend to cluster with large kin groups.⁵⁸ Although families migrated together, relatives were often left behind. Several people told us that they did not migrate with their siblings because they were not married yet (and their parents stayed in Mongolia). One man told us that he chose to stay behind to care for his sick brother.

Movement of many families to similar locations allowed for the development of large and extended family and friend networks in Kazakhstan. Naturally, as large-scale multi-household movements declined, these networks, both spatially and

⁵⁷Diener, *Ibid.*, 228.

⁵⁸Diener, *Ibid.*, 302–303; Finke, ‘Migration and Risk-Taking’, 136; Kuscu, ‘Kazakhstan’s Oralman Project’, 187–188.

socially diverse, facilitated, through the process of chain migration, the movement of additional Mongolian Kazakh families and individuals who had initially remained in Mongolia to destination where kin were already settled and established. One woman, for example, told us how some of her relatives had migrated to Almaty and started to sell furniture. Once they were established, they helped other kin migrate to Almaty by providing jobs and a place to live.

Economic conditions and migration during the middle transition years (1997–2002)

In Mongolia, the late 1990s and early 2000s witnessed increasing economic and political stability, albeit with continued hardships. The nation's GDP began expanding in 1994, with continued growth through the late 1990s.⁵⁹ Trade increased as well with Mongolia signing trade agreements with nearly 56 countries, including those in Eastern Europe, Western Europe, and Asia, by 1995, with Germany, the US, UK, Japan and Switzerland prominent among them.⁶⁰ The economic successes of the period however overshadowed social difficulties as unemployment skyrocketed to an estimated 19%.⁶¹ In 1995, 36.3% of the Mongolian population was below the poverty line⁶² with hunger and food shortages widespread. Between 1995 and 1997, the proportion of the population experiencing food deprivation rose markedly with 45% of the population undernourished as compared to 34% at the beginning of the transition (1990–1992). By the early 2000s, reflecting improving economic conditions, this proportion declined to 28% (2001–2003).⁶³

While the majority of Mongolia's population (57%) lived in urban areas in 1989, the balance tipped briefly to favor rural areas beginning in 1996, and by 1998, the majority (50.4%) lived in rural areas.⁶⁴ Griffin contends that economic hardship in the early part of the transition spurred movement towards rural areas as the population sought to sustain itself through herding. This shift was short-lived with internal migration shifting back towards urban areas in 2000 in response to the devastating *dzud* during the 1999 winter.⁶⁵

Paralleling these national-scale changes, Bayan-Ulgii was also changing. The impact of economic uncertainty and outmigration is reflected in the very low level of population growth between 1989 and 2000 as population increased by only 0.17%, compared to 27.4% growth between 1979 and 1989.^{66,67} Unemployment also rose substantially during the transition period reaching 13.1% in Bayan-Ulgii in 2001, as

⁵⁹Goyal, 'A Development Perspective on Mongolia', 645.

⁶⁰Ibid., 646.

⁶¹UNDP Mongolia, 2000, 24.

⁶²Ibid., 23.

⁶³FAOSTAT, *Food Security Statistics*.

⁶⁴Griffin, *Agricultural Involution and Urban-to Rural Migration in Mongolia*, 4–5.

⁶⁵Ibid., 5; *Dzud* refers to harsh winter conditions in which livestock struggle to find adequate fodder, often resulting in high rates of death from starvation.

⁶⁶NSOM, *Mongolian Population in XX Century*, 80.

⁶⁷The 1989 and 2000 census population counts remain fairly stable although there is evidence of both extensive out-migration to Kazakhstan and return migration. Other factors that likely contribute to maintaining the size of the population include the higher than replacement fertility rates among Mongolia Kazakhs, and fluctuating internal net migration rates. The maintenance of a sizable Kazakh population in this province further increases the likelihood that out-migrants will consider returning to Bayan-Ulgii.

compared to 2.7% in Ulaanbaatar, reflecting the magnitude of hardship in this geographically peripheral region of the country.⁶⁸

The economic hardships associated with the transition continued throughout the mid- to late-1990s, and were exacerbated between 2000 and 2002 when the region was hit by particularly harsh dzud. Dzud is a descriptive word reflecting an extremely cold, windy and dry winter in which livestock are unable to find sufficient pasture. These two winters at the dawning of the new century proved devastating to many communities in Mongolia. At the national level, livestock numbers declined from approximately 33.5 million to 23.9 million between 1999 and 2002, a loss of nearly 9.7 million animals⁶⁹, resulting in increasing poverty and hunger in many rural areas. Bayan-Ulgii suffered through the same harsh conditions, losing approximately 128,200 animals (9.4%).

As the early 2000s dawned, Mongolia and Bayan-Ulgii began a slow emergence. Bayan-Ulgii has the unique distinction in Mongolia as the only province sharing two international borders, one with Russia and one with China. These borders, as they became more open, created opportunities for small-scale trade. Inexpensive goods from China could be purchased and sold in Ulgii or transported through to be traded in Russia.⁷⁰ This entrepreneurship became the foundation upon which later, larger businesses would be built.

During the middle years (1997–2002), migration to Kazakhstan was influenced by new legal framework and new annual quotas. In 1997, the Kazakhstani government passed the 1997 Law ‘On Migration of Population’, which provides a legal framework for providing assistance towards integration of *oralmandar* into Kazakhstani society.⁷¹ This law established a new governmental agency, the Agency of Migration and Demography, to assist migrants and eliminated the differential treatment between CIS and non-CIS *oralmandar*.⁷² In addition, the new law streamlined the process by which official migrants (i.e. those within the quota system) became citizens.⁷³ At the same time, during the middle years (1997–2002), the annual quotas were relatively low. In the beginning and the end of this period, the annual quota was around 3,000 per year, but dipped to an all-time low of 500 in 1999 and 2000.⁷⁴ These fluctuations largely reflect the changing economic and demographic situation in Kazakhstan. Diener suggests that lower quota may reflect awareness that Kazakhs had achieved majority status in Kazakhstan and/or a more realistic assessment of the state’s ability to accommodate *oralmandar* in the middle years.⁷⁵ By 2002, the quota jumped from 600 to 2,655, reflecting the continued growth of Kazakhstan’s economy.

For migrants or potential migrants from Mongolia, these new policies made migration more complex by reducing benefits and increasing selectivity. Not surprisingly, fewer families chose to migrate during this period. Diener explains this process from two perspectives: first, the invitations for diasporic communities to

⁶⁸NSOM, *Mongolia in a Market System*, 86.

⁶⁹NSOM, *Statistical Yearbook 2003*, 146.

⁷⁰Lacaze, ‘Run After Time’. This paper is based on an ethnographic study of Kazakh traders based in Ulgii.

⁷¹UNDP, *Status of Oralman in Kazakhstan*, 10.

⁷²Diener, *One Homeland or Two?*, 260–263; Kusc, ‘Kazakhstan’s Oralman Project’, 135.

⁷³Diener, *One Homeland or Two?*, 268–271.

⁷⁴UNDP, *Status of Oralman in Kazakhstan*, 4.

⁷⁵Diener, *One Homeland or Two?*, 227.

return led to greater return than anticipated by the Kazakhstani government leading them to impose more restrictive quotas to limit in-migration, and second, the in-migration of *oralmandar* declined as migrants realized the economic situation of Kazakhstan.⁷⁶ From the perspective of potential migrants, increased competition for inclusion in the quota represents an important shift in the perceived benefits and availability of quota benefits. Since application for the quota can occur in either the country of origin or in Kazakhstan, and legal criteria are ‘not clearly fixed’, ‘the quota system [is] less transparent and predictable and therefore more susceptible to favoritism and corruption’.⁷⁷ Thus, changing economic circumstances in Kazakhstan and Mongolia, combined with policy changes in Kazakhstan and changing perceptions of Mongolian Kazakhs about the benefits of moving to Kazakhstan begin to influence migration decisions during this period.

Many migrants also found that Kazakhstan, despite being originally perceived as the homeland of Kazakh people, was not necessarily the cultural and economic panacea they were expecting. Recent reports from Kazakhstan suggest that *oralmandar*, generally and including Mongolian Kazakhs, have high unemployment rates. Rates of employment during this middle period were exceptionally low at just 32% in 2000.⁷⁸ Factors accounting for low levels of employment include the unique status of *oralman* as neither citizen nor non-citizen (the categories of legal importance in Kazakhstan), language barriers or lack of proficiency in either Kazakh or Russian, and differences in educational attainment and quality of education in host and destination countries.⁷⁹ Each of these factors disadvantage *oralmandar* generally and Mongolian Kazakhs more specifically in the labor market.

Additionally, competition within the quota system has increased, particularly among oralman from Uzbekistan. The arrival of *oralman* from Uzbekistan, however, grew significantly after 2000, with over 60% arriving post-2000.⁸⁰ As of 2006, 62% of *oralmandar* arrived from Uzbekistan, with Mongolian Kazakhs comprising the second largest proportion at 15%. Oralman from other nations include Turkmenistan, China, Russia, Tajikistan, Iran, Kyrgyzstan and Turkey (none of which individually exceed 9%).⁸¹

During this period, the migration flows between Bayan-Ulgii and Kazakhstan reflected these challenges and dissatisfactions and many Mongolian Kazakhs returned to Mongolia. For some, the move back to Mongolia was permanent and the migration to Kazakhstan a temporary strategy to survive economically. Diener reports that during this period nearly 30,000 of the original 60,000 migrants returned to Bayan-Ulgii.⁸² The timing of return to Mongolia parallels increased competition for jobs, housing and resources in Kazakhstan among *oralman* as this was the period in which *oralmandar* populations increased significantly in Kazakhstan, but quota levels were falling, which meant that many new migrants to Kazakhstan during the late 1990s migrated without the additional quota benefits (as described earlier). Based on our survey data collected during the summer of 2008, of the migrant households, 37.5% migrated during the early period compared to 12.5% and 48.9%

⁷⁶Diener, *One Homeland or Two?*, 251, 310–311.

⁷⁷UNDP, *Status of Oralman's in Kazakhstan*, 9.

⁷⁸UNDP, *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷⁹UNDP, *Ibid.*, 17.

⁸⁰UNDP, *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸¹UNDP, *Ibid.*, 13.

⁸²Diener, ‘Negotiating Territorial Belonging’, 466.

for the two latter periods, respectively.⁸³ A much larger proportion of the early migrants went with work contracts (66.7%) as compared to the mid- and late transition years (9%, 0%, respectively). A larger proportion of migrants who moved during the middle period remain in Kazakhstan (36.4%) as compared to the earlier or later periods (15.2% and 23.3% respectively).

By the end of this period, however, it was clear that the return to Mongolia was temporary. During our research, we encountered many families whose relatives returned to Mongolia in the 1990s, only to migrate to Kazakhstan again a few years later. For these circular migrants, social networks were already established in Kazakhstan, and fluctuating economic opportunities in both settings influenced their decisions. Of the full migrant household sample in our survey, 34.1% responded that they had considered or would consider re-migrating to Kazakhstan and 25% would not consider re-migrating. This is offset by the 21.6% still living in Kazakhstan and 19.3% who were unsure.

Economic conditions and migration during the late transition years (2003–2008)

The third identifiable period in Mongolian Kazakh migration to and from Kazakhstan is between 2003 and 2008. This period is characterized by economic growth in Bayan-Ulgii, expanding consumerism, and changing attitudes about migration to Kazakhstan as compared to migration to other destinations.

Between 2003 and 2008, the economy in Ulgii grew steadily. Tourism in Mongolia increased from 159,745 in 1999 to 235,165 in 2002 to 451,788 in 2007.⁸⁴ The number of tour companies increased from 183 in 2004 to 403 in 2007.⁸⁵ While official numbers for tour companies and tourists are not available for Bayan-Ulgii, informal conversations with tour operators suggests that tourism, and in response, the number of tour related companies, have expanded rapidly.

Consumption and consumerism increased as well with the number of private cars in Ulgii increasing from 1,752 in 1997 to 3,213 in 2002; telephone (land lines) decreased by 14.9% between 1990–1995 and rebounding by 32.9% by 2002.⁸⁶ The unemployment rate fluctuated across the time periods increasing from 18.9% in 1992, to 5.2% in 2002.⁸⁷ In 2004, 91.7% of the working age population was employed and by 2007 94.7% were employed.⁸⁸ A visual analysis of the landscape reveals many new and larger homes, new businesses and a greater availability of consumer goods. Cell phones were widely distributed across social and economic groups and cell phone coverage expanded from being very limited in the early 2000s to coverage throughout the town of Ulgii and in a few outlying soum (district) centers by 2008.

During the period entrepreneurs, familiar with the growing opportunities of eco-tourism, began working in Western Mongolia. Attractions such as the Altai Mountains, petroglyphs, and eagle hunting offer opportunities for several different types of tourists including those interested in hiking, climbing, and trekking as well as those more interested in learning more about the daily life of nomadic

⁸³In collecting interviews and survey data, we define migrant households as those in which a current or former household member migrated to Kazakhstan at any time since 1991.

⁸⁴NSOM, Statistical Yearbook 2004, 246; NSOM, Statistical Yearbook, 2008, Table 17.3.

⁸⁵NSOM, Statistical Yearbook 2008, Table 17.7.

⁸⁶NSOM, *Mongolia in a Market System*, 113, 205.

⁸⁷Ibid., 86.

⁸⁸NSOM, *Statistical Yearbook 2007*, Calculated from Tables 4.2 and 4.5.

pastoralists. Other local entrepreneurs emerged during this period as well. In Ulgii, these businesses reflect the growing international flavor of the province, with goods from China, Russia, and Kazakhstan readily available and a growing number of stores selling Western foods, clothing and goods.

This new expansion of economic opportunities is reflected in changing ideas and thoughts about migration. Two important changes occur during this period. First, migration to Kazakhstan becomes much more calculated and strategic. Mongolian Kazakhs now have the advantage of knowing quite a bit about Kazakhstan and living conditions in many areas. Many have visited relatives in Kazakhstan and have both family and friend networks in place in multiple locations. Of the 188 individuals surveyed, 93 (50.5%) have visited Kazakhstan at least once. Many college students from Bayan-Ulgii also study in Kazakhstan, further substantiating social networks. Additionally, by this time, social networks in Kazakhstan have increased and diversified economically and geographically. Families in Mongolia who are considering migrating have much more information about potential destinations are much more likely to have visited at least one city in Kazakhstan, with many of our respondents having made many trips to Kazakhstan and visiting numerous locations during each of those trips. Even for those respondents who had not visited Kazakhstan, none were so isolated as to be unaware of the many and diverse experiences of those who had returned either from visiting or migrating. During three of our surveys, we encountered migrants who were visiting relatives in Bayan-Ulgii and sharing their stories about life in Kazakhstan.

An important component of these exchanges is their timeliness. Unlike during the early transition, when communication between migrants residing in Kazakhstan and friends and family in Mongolia was limited to infrequent and expensive telephone conversations or visits, or letters written and mailed through the postal system, communication between Mongolian Kazakhs living in Kazakhstan and those still in Mongolia is quite frequent. The proliferation of cell phones and cell phone coverage as well as email allow for close and frequent communication between families and friends. Several respondents stated that they text their relations in Kazakhstan daily. This is especially true for young Kazakhs, although it seems all except the oldest family members engage this way. These frequent text, email, and phone conversations complement the wide array of Kazakh, Chinese, Russian and Mongolian television stations that are accessible in Bayan-Ulgii both to urban and rural residents. Even during the summer, when many families live in remote rural pastures, solar energy provides access to television stations which facilitates the flow of information, although it is much less prolific than during periods of residence in soum centers.

Secondly, the importance of migration to Kazakhstan begins to diminish slightly during this period as new destinations emerge as options for Mongolian Kazakhs. Whereas Kazakhstan was the primary destination for Mongolian Kazakhs during the first two periods, during the third period a greater number of Kazakhs are studying in Ulaanbaatar or abroad in places like Turkey and China. It is difficult to quantify how large or extensive these flows are currently and, at least during the current time period they seem limited to students studying abroad. These international connections will become increasingly important as students graduate and choose to either return to Mongolia or reside in the new host countries. While Kazakhstan is still the single largest destination, the importance of the bifurcating migration streams is notable and will likely have far reaching implications for Bayan-Ulgii province as well as for the destination countries.

The end of this period is marked by a new Kazakhstani government program, entitled 'Blessed Migration', which was launched on 1 January 2009. The purpose of this program is to provide incentives for *oralmandar* to settle in target areas, especially in the northern regions of Kazakhstan, which have experienced population decline. In addition to providing subsidies and paid travel costs, the new program will provide low-interest loans to buy land or housing. This was perceived to be one of the most substantive challenges facing new migrants, especially in the current economic climate. This policy is likely to benefit Mongolian Kazakhs, who are already more highly represented in the north than Uzbekistani Kazakhs who have settled in large numbers in southern Kazakhstan.⁸⁹

Conclusions

Changes occurring at the national level in Mongolia are reflected in changing economic strategies, migration choices and decisions for Kazakhs in Bayan-Ulgii. The three periods of migration identified in this paper parallel economic and policy changes in both Mongolia and Kazakhstan. During the first period, the government of Kazakhstan provided strong incentives to migrate at the same time that many Kazakhs were facing a severe economic crisis. As a result, tens of thousands of Mongolian Kazakhs migrated in large kin groups to Kazakhstan. The second period corresponds with increasingly restrictive quota sizes in Kazakhstan and continued economic struggles in both Kazakhstan and Mongolia. Migration during this time is more limited and characterized by a large number of return migrants.⁹⁰ The third period reflects increasing prosperity in both Mongolia and in Kazakhstan as well as increases in the overall quota system. Expanded communications systems infrastructure allows greater communication among families living in Mongolia and Kazakhstan and the corresponding increases in information flows which, as preliminary analysis reveals, provide potential migrants with much more frequent and current information about changing conditions on either side of the border. Finally, the emergence of smaller, but important, migration flows to Turkey and China, particularly for college students, suggests yet another emerging stage in post-transition migration dynamics.

Consistent with new calls for incorporating the macro, mezzo and micro scales of migration⁹¹, this paper contributes to the broader discussion within the transnational literature about the importance of factors such as policy changes, operating at macro scales, on the micro-level household or individual migration decision making behavior. The evolution of migration trajectories and the decision process embarked upon by individuals reflects the complex nature of migration among diasporic communities and the competing economic, educational, and cultural objectives for individuals and families. The changing structure of the migrant flows, in terms of the composition of flows as well as the direction and magnitude of flows reflect the changing social and economic conditions in both origin and destination locations.

⁸⁹Mamashev, "'Nurly Kosh" program reflects all ethnic Kazakhs' positive experience in migration and adaptation'; Lillis, 'Kazakhstan: Astana Lures Ethnic Kazakh Migrants with Financial Incentives'.

⁹⁰Diener, *One Homeland or Two?*

⁹¹Sirkeci, 'Transnational migration and Conflict'.

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