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# China Kazakhs' emigration to Kazakhstan from a modernity perspective

Mayinu Shanatibieke<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

During my 10 months of fieldwork in Ili, Xinjiang, China (2011 – 2013), a very interesting phenomenon came to my attention: many Kazakhs I met expressed a strong desire to migrate to Kazakhstan. Cerny also finds this new momentum in her case study on Kazakhs in northern Xinjiang, including Ili (Cerny 2008, 2010). Kazakhs' desire to migrate to Kazakhstan seems to be growing year by year. Even in the small village where I conducted my main fieldwork, several people had already migrated to Kazakhstan and many people were applying for exit visas during the time of my stay. I started to inquire about their reasons to move to Kazakhstan and their imaginations of Kazakhstan. Some of the most common answers were: “Kazakhstan is our *tarixi otan* (historical homeland)”, “our children will have free and higher quality standards of mother tongue education there”, “we could learn more about the Koran in Islamic schools”, “there is no birth control policy”, “Kazakhstan has less population, more land and a clean environment”, “Kazakhstani people are much more modern than us”, etc. Notably, people spoke very enthusiastically of the mother tongue education enabling future generations to assert a profoundly Kazakh identity. These imaginations were to a large degree shaped through the stories told by migrant family members who came back to visit. Once guests from Kazakhstan visited the village, relatives and neighbors sat together and talked about life in Kazakhstan. I learnt about this mouth-to-mouth communication from several family gatherings during my stay. In addition, various media such as TV programs and internet (including social media like Weibo, QQ, and Weixin) also supplemented information on Kazakhstan, particularly for young Kazakhs. People also learnt about Kazakhstan through imported goods such as clothes, food, kitchen utensils, literature works, and music products such as CDs sold on the local bazaars of Ili (much closer geographically to Almaty than Urumqi). These products have a growing reputation for quality and modern fashion with a Kazakh-style.

After I saw so many people's yearning faces for a glimpse of Kazakhstan, I started to think about what Kazakhstan means to Kazakhs in China. For them, Kazakhstan is not only the historical homeland but also an independent state that represents Kazakh modernity; modernity with Kazakh cultural rootedness. They are eager to acquire Kazakh modernity rather than the dominant Chinese modernity that views them as a backward minority that needs to be modernized. Their desires have been fueled by the Oralman immigration program (return migration of Kazakhs from abroad) introduced by Kazakhstan's government in 1992. Since then, numerous people have sold their property and migrated to Kazakhstan to be “Kazaks among Kazaks” (Cerny 2010: 241).

This new momentum provides a new field for studies of Kazakhs' emigration to Kazakhstan. This paper discusses the current situation of China Kazakhs' emigration to Kazakhstan from a modernity perspective. My aim is to rethink modernity in the Chinese context and its impact on Kazakhs in Xinjiang, to discuss the pursuit of modernity as an aspiration and driver for China Kazakhs' cross-border migration, and to contribute to the studies of economic cooperation and regional stability in Central Asia through the example of China Kazakhs.

## 2. Conceptualizations of modernity

Modernity is the core concept to understand the current situation of China Kazakhs' emigration to Kazakhstan and the role of cultural identity in this emigration. There are various definitions of modernity based on different contexts. In a narrow sense, modernity is used to describe particular

forms of economy and society based on the experiences of Western countries (Baum 1972: 23; Eisenstadt 1966: 1). In economic terms, “the emergence of modernity is first of all the creation of a modern economic order, that is, a capitalistic economic order” (Giddens & Pierson 1998: 96). This modernity framed by capitalism encompasses industrialization, urbanization and the increased use of technology within all sectors of the economy (Willis 2011: 3). In social terms, “modernity” means advanced knowledge and technology, a high level of welfare (better health and long life expectancy, well organized secondary associations for individuals, and higher occupational skills and labor rewards), and higher rates of occupational and geographical mobility (Huntington 1971: 287). Again, the growing importance of technology is also reflected in social terms (Sheppard et al. 2009: 54-56). In political terms, modernity reflects itself in the form of autonomous subjects and democratic structures (Berthoud 1990: 23). As when looking at economic modernity, the West is considered the single model for political modernity.

Modernity in its broadest sense means the condition of being modern, new and up-to-date (Willis 2011: 2). In this sense, modernity as a state situates people in time (Ogborn 2005: 339). Additionally, what is “modern” will change geographically because of social, economic, political, and cultural dynamism. Despite the importance of the temporal and spatial context, Western modernity was taken out of its Western context and spread throughout the world (Power 2003: 72-76), aiming to “declare and desire universal applicability for itself” (Appadurai 1996: 1). Giddens describes this process as modernity emerging from the capitalization of Europe and subsequently spreading worldwide (Giddens 1990). In light of this view, scholarly discourses on modernity tend to focus on how capitalism as a hegemonic ideology has schematically ordered and reordered people's activities, hierarchies, identities, and lives at large (Liu 2011: 14).

The wide spread of Western “modernity” soon became associated with the eradication of cultural practices, the destruction of natural environments, and a decline in the quality of life (Willis 2011: 3). Therefore, scholars criticized the superiority of Western modernity and called for a self-defined modernity in non-Western countries. For instance, Watts stresses that every society creates and debates its own modernity, rather than following the universal Western model (Watts 1991: 7). Similarly, some scholars pay significant attention to alternative modernity, which stresses diversity in social, spatial, and temporal terms (Beck 1992; Giddens 1990, 1991, 1994). For them, modernity is an inescapable phenomenon, but at the same time they recognize the importance of tradition in social change (Erdemir 2005: 937). However, in the context of modernization, tradition is frequently used as a negative term, equivalent to backwardness, primitiveness, wildness, or underdevelopment (Crewe & Harrison 1998: 43; Tsing 2005: 28-29). For instance, tribal people, who are associated with a so-called “traditional way of life”, are labeled as primitive (Duncan 2004: 1). Lloyd argues that such notions of the “primitive” rely on underlying evolutionary criteria which locate tribal societies on a simple, unsophisticated level (Lloyd 2004: 82). In order to raise these primitive people's level of civilization, their lifestyles are radically changed through various social engineering projects (Duncan 2004). However, Bodley points out that forced removal of tradition and civilizing projects are hardly acceptable to any society (Bodley 1999: 23). These viewpoints about “own” or “alternative” modernity emphasize the global or non-Western characteristics of being modern and their multiple outcomes (Liu 2011: 14).

In Chinese contexts, the concept of development is equivalent to the modernization pragmatism of Western countries (Kreutzmann 2013: 5). More specifically, China still upholds the modernization model of the earlier era (Cao 2009: 14; Li 2010: 338). This early modernization model is named the

Weberian teleological social transformation, which suggests that industrialization, education, and technology acquisition can facilitate social or national transformation from traditional types of social formation to a modern one (Leys 1996: 9-10). In addition to the Weberian model, centralization represents the main characteristic of Chinese modernization. This centralized planning is clearly reflected in China's large modernization projects targeting minority populations and especially pastoral people like the Kazakhs.

Over the course of half a century, Kazakhs in Xinjiang have taken part in various modernization programs imposed on them by the central government. Sedentarisation is considered the best measure to rescue backward pastoral populations like the Kazakhs (Wang 1997: 278-279). However, the state's sedentarisation efforts had little success in Xinjiang's pastoral areas. As of 2010, there were still 44,280 Kazakh households dependent on pastoralism as a main income source in Xinjiang, making up 49.2 percent of the remaining pastoralists in the region and eighteen percent of pastoralists in China (FZN<sup>2</sup> 2011: 3).<sup>3</sup> Obviously, the state's sedentarisation efforts have not achieved their goals, even though they are still heavily promoted by the central government. The "Twelfth Five-Year Plan" for the Project of Sedentarisation of Nomads within China (Chin: *quanguo youmumin dingju gongcheng jianshe "shi er wu" guihua*) announced by former Prime Minister Wen Jiabao in 2012 is the latest move to date in the efforts undertaken to settle the remaining Kazakh pastoralists in China (Kreutzmann 2013: 5). These long-term efforts result in very complicated and rapid social change in Kazakh society in Xinjiang. Under this driving force and heeding the beckoning call of Kazakhstan's Oralman immigration program, more and more Kazakhs emigrate to Kazakhstan to seek their own modernity in order to assert Kazakh identity and culture.

Building from these insights, this paper examines China Kazakhs' emigration to Kazakhstan from a modernity perspective. Here "modernity" refers to Kazakhs' "own modernity" which is rooted in Kazakh culture and tradition.

### 3. Existing research on Kazakhs' emigration to Kazakhstan

Numerous works have explored the history and nomadic (pastoral) culture of Kazakhs in Kazakhstan and neighboring countries. In addition to these classic topics, Kazakhstan's immigration policy has become the topic of particular interest in recent years. In general, the existing research mostly focuses on Kazakh migrants from Mongolia (Alff 2012, 2013; Barcus & Werner 2010; Diener 2005, 2009; Dubuission & Genina 2011; Finke 2004; Werner & Barcus 2009). These scholars study the migration decision-making process of the Kazakh community in western Mongolia. They also examine the concept of "homeland" and explore obstacles to the integration of Mongolian Kazakh migrants into Kazakhstani society. According to their studies, economic and cultural factors influence migrants' decisions. Particularly, kin-based social networks are a vital factor that influences the

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<sup>2</sup> The information is from the "Twelfth Five-Year-plan for the Project of Sedentarisation of Nomads within China" (Ch. *quanguo youmumin dingju gongcheng jianshe 'shi er wu' guihua*"), which was officially published by the National Development and Reform Commission, the Department of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, and the Department of Agriculture in 2012. Therefore, I use FZN as the short form for the three departments in this paper.

<sup>3</sup> The rest of pastoralists in China are Tibetans (58%), Uyghurs (9%), Kirgiz (7%), Yugurs (4%), and other minorities (4%).

modes of migration and the integration of Kazakh migrants after arrival. In addition to these ethnographic studies, Kazakhstan's discourse and policies surrounding the "ethnic return-migration" policy and ethno-demographic changes in Kazakhstan since 1992 are also discussed by scholars (Bonnenfant 2012; Shugatai 2010).

In western academia, there are only few studies on China Kazakhs' emigration to Kazakhstan. For instance, Benson and Svanberg document the border crossings of Kazakhs in the 1962 incident (Benson & Svanberg 1998). Regarding recent emigration trends, Zukosky and Cerny find that grassland policies in Xinjiang push more and more Kazakh pastoralists to migrate to Kazakhstan (Cerny 2008, 2010; Zukosky 2006). In addition to Xinjiang, Aksai County in Gansu Province is home to the largest Kazakh population in China.<sup>4</sup> Buri examines emigration practices of Kazakhs in Aksai (Buri 2013). Based on her fieldwork, Buri finds the emigration process in Aksai was intensified in the 1990s and has declined after 1998, because the Chinese state has offered appealing options regarding financial safety and a modern lifestyle in Aksai. Therefore, nowadays, most Kazakhs in Aksai would see no reason to leave China anymore.

On the other side of the border, scholars examine the economic condition and social status of Kazakh emigrants from China in Kazakhstan (Laruelle & Peyrouse 2012; Sadovskaya 2007; Sancak & Finke 2005). These studies imply that China Kazakh emigrants have experienced difficulties with integration into Kazakhstan. But with their linguistic advantage in Chinese and Kazakh, some of them have been able to make use of the cross-border trade or have become state employees.

In Chinese academia, there has recently been a rise in research interest towards political and economic relations between China and Kazakhstan, especially after the proposal of the "economic zone of the Silk Road" (Chin: *sichou zhilu jingjidai*) by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013 (Chang 2003; Li 2004; Ma 1995; Ma et al. 2009; Ma & Aimaiti 2004; Ma & Zhang 2009; Wuzhati & Liu 2014) (see Figure 1). Kazakhstan's "ethnic return-migration" policy in particular has stimulated heated discussion among Chinese scholars. For instance, Kazakhstan's discourse and policies surrounding its immigration policy are the focus of several studies (Wang 2006; Wang & Pan 1996). On the one hand, scholars understand Kazakhstan's immigration policy as a way to increase its Kazakh population in order to ensure the dominance of Kazakhs; on the other hand, they also point out the incomplete implementation of the immigration policy Kazakhstan and obstacles to the integration of Chinese Kazakh migrants into Kazakhstani society.

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<sup>4</sup> Aksai Kazakh Autonomous County is located in Jiuquan City of Gansu Province in western China. It is home to 9,100 people including 3,700 Kazakhs ([www.akesai.gov.cn](http://www.akesai.gov.cn), accessed on November 12, 2015, at 17:58).



**Figure 1: Trade center *Zhongya Zhimen* (the gate of Central Asia) is established in Yining City in 2015 after the proposal of the “economic zone of the Silk Road”. The center is a business complex including shopping, dining, entertainment, and hotel services.**

Source: Mayinu Shanatibieke, January 28, 2016

Moreover, Chinese scholars discuss the negative impact of Kazakhstan’s immigration policy on the regional stability of Xinjiang (Ding 2004; Ge 1999; Ma 1995; Ma & Feng 2003; Mao 2006; Ren & Guo 2008; Zhang 2005; Yan 2005; Zhang 2011). They argue that Kazakh nationalism (Chin: *da hasake zhuyi*) and cross-border patriotism (Chin: *kua guojie ai guo zhuyi*) are threatening regional stability in Xinjiang. Especially the expanding Kazakh nationalism is fuelling separatism in Xinjiang and might cause large-scale cross-border migration that puts China’s security at risk. In order to reduce Kazakhstan’s influences on China Kazakhs, many scholars suggest the government should strengthen patriotism through public propaganda and school education, develop science and technology, and improve Kazakhs’ living conditions by speeding up the modernization process in Xinjiang (Chang 1998; He & Fan 2013; Mo 2014; Wu 2003; Wu 2013; Zhang 2005; Zhao & Xu 2004; Zhou 2013). These studies mainly focus on the ethnic identity of Kazakhs and its role in cross-border migration.

Some Chinese scholars mainly focus on the emigration process of Kazakh pastoralists and farmers in Xinjiang (Ayideng 2014; Wu 2012; Xiao 2011; Xiao & Hu 2011; Zhang 2005). These studies find the following results: (1) the emigration process has been intensified in Xinjiang since the 2000s; (2) pastoralists and farmers make up 82.5 per cent of Kazakh emigrants; (3) the majority of migrants are middle aged (below 50 years old); (4) compared to *minkaohan* students (with good Chinese language skills), *minkaomin* students (with good Kazakh language skills) tend to migrate to Kazakhstan more;<sup>5</sup> (5) migrants rely on kin-based social networks for assistance when migrating to Kazakhstan; (6) for migrants, emigration to Kazakhstan is considered as an ideal way to improve their lives; and (7) after emigration, few people return to China. In view of the present situation, scholars provide advice on how to keep Kazakhs in China: (1) further implementing preferential policies to help pastoralists and farmers improve their lives; (2) speeding up the modernization process and the “Great Development

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<sup>5</sup> *Minkaohan* students are those who attend Han Chinese schools from elementary to high-school level and take the university entrance exam using the Chinese language. *Minkaomin* students attend Kazakh schools and take the university entrance exam in the Kazakh language

of West”<sup>6</sup> (Chin: *xibu dakaifa*) strategy in Xinjiang to develop the regional economy; (3) promoting sedentarisation programs to improve production skills of pastoralists and to create multiple income sources for them; (4) further propagandizing minority and religious policies and laws to strengthen minorities’ national identity. Particularly, sedentarisation is emphasized as the best way to help Kazakh pastoralists live in a stable manner and prosper. Thereby, more and more Kazakh pastoralists will stay in China, rather than heading to Kazakhstan (Ayideng 2014: 29).

To sum up, although Western and Chinese scholars have done research on emigration of Kazakhs in Xinjiang, most of these studies analyse the emigration issue from a political viewpoint and often by using official data. However, the experiences and the voices of individuals are neglected. Therefore, attention is drawn to Kazakhs (pastoralists in particular) in order to contribute to an ongoing discussion about China Kazakhs’ emigration practices to Kazakhstan.

#### 4. Research methods

As Burawoy states, “the extended case method applies reflexive science to ethnography in order to extract the general from the unique, to move from the ‘micro’ to the ‘macro,’ and to connect the present to the past in anticipation of the future” (Burawoy 1998: 5). In light of this view, case study methods were applied to seek more detailed insight into China Kazakhs' emigration to Kazakhstan. Xinyuan County (Chin: *xinyuan xian*; Kaz: *künes awdani*) in northwestern Xinjiang is the selected case study area. However, the implications of this study can be extended far beyond Xinyuan County. This area is but one telling example of the current situation of China Kazakhs' emigration to Kazakhstan.

Participant observation and interviews constituted the fundamental methods of my fieldwork. As an experience-near process, participant observation made the collection of the verbal and nonverbal data possible. My participation in herding activities and the daily life of households provided information on local livelihood strategies (including their migration practices). Furthermore, close interactions with the local people through interviews also provided insight regarding their attitudes towards and involvement in emigration to Kazakhstan. In addition to one-on-one interviews, I also used the method of focus group interviews when encountering informal and spontaneous groups sitting together in the field setting. I just entered the group and posed questions about emigration to Kazakhstan. Through the group interviewing method, I identified potential informants and conducted in-depth interviews with them.

I made my own map to provide spatial information about the field site. This article also presents some photos of a newly established trade center and imported Kazakhstani goods sold on the local

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<sup>6</sup> The “Great Development of the West” strategy began in 2000. The strategy aims for economic growth, socio-political stability, and ecological sustainability in the West. Twelve provincial-level jurisdictions were involved in the “Great Development of the West” strategy, including the Tibetan Autonomous Region, Qinghai, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, Gansu, Shanxi, Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan, Chongqing, the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, and the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. In 2001, the Xiangxi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture in Hunan Province, the Enshi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture in Hubei Province, and the Yanbian and Korean Autonomous Prefecture in Jilin Province were also included. All these regions can be characterized by economic underdevelopment, a lack of economic infrastructure, and large numbers of ethnic minorities.



bazaars of Xinyuan County to convey the most direct and visual information on cross-border trades and migration between China and Kazakhstan.

In addition to material from my fieldwork, I also gathered certain specific information on the topic from my informants (over telephone, Weibo, Wexin, QQ, and email), who have recently migrated to Kazakhstan.

## 5. Xinyuan County: geographical location, population, and local economy

The administrative center of Xinyuan County is located in Xinyuan Town (Chin: *xinyuan zhen*) in the foothills of the Tianshan Mountains. The county seat is 192 km from the prefectural capital Yining City and 900 km from Urumqi (see Figure 2). The total county area is 6,446.7 km<sup>2</sup> and includes six towns (Chin: *zhen*), five townships (Chin: *xiang*), one prison farm (Chin: *gong an nongchang*), one sheep breeding ranch (Chin: *zhongyang chang*), and two Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (Chin: *Xinjiang shengchan jianshe bingtuan*). According to the latest statistical data, Xinyuan County is home to 282,718 people (86,257 households) and 74.5 percent of them are registered as *nongcun hukou* (Chin: rural residents) (XUAR OPC 2012: 4, 12, 28)<sup>7</sup>. The majority of people are Kazakhs (130,648 persons), followed by Han (99,935 persons), Uyghur (28,282 persons), Hui (21,316 persons) and other significantly smaller representations of thirty other minority groups (XUAR OPC 2012: 34-103). Among these Kazakhs, over 95 percent are pastoralists and farmers (Xu 2011: 17), and most of them belong to the Kyzai clan (Yuan 1997).<sup>8</sup>

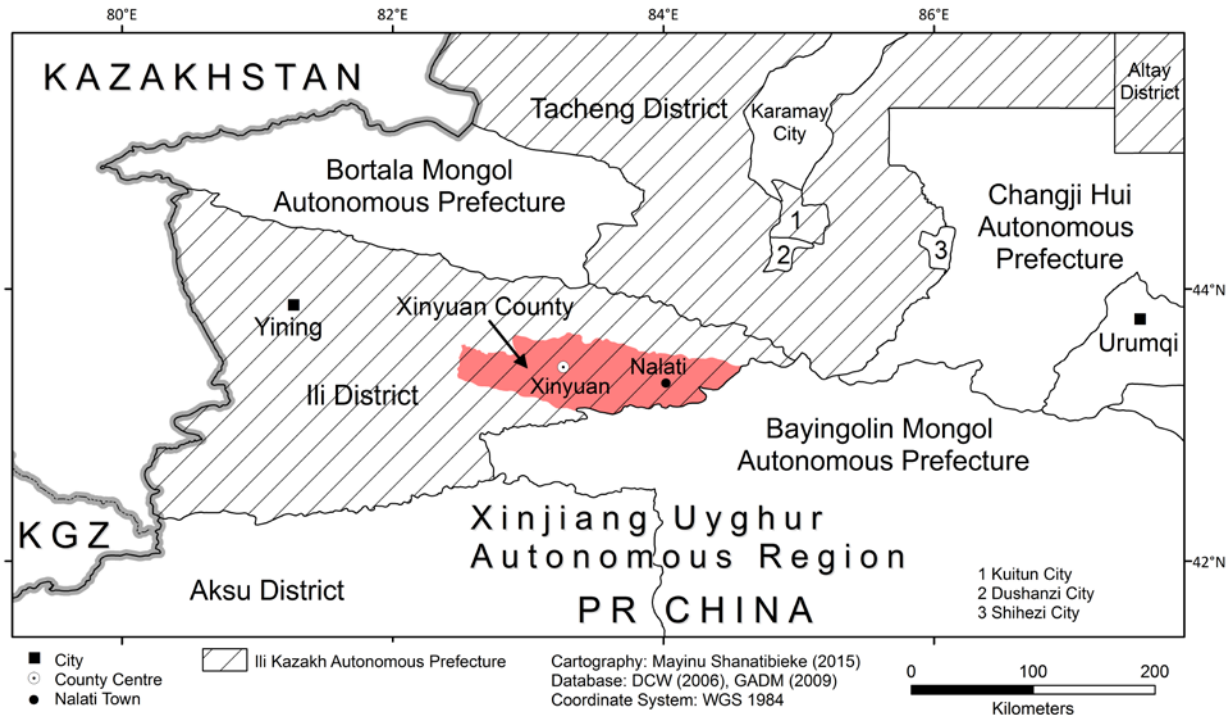
The environmental conditions of Xinyuan County can be characterized as a temperate mountain steppe climate. Surrounded by mountains to the north-east, north, and south, Xinyuan's average temperature lies between 6.1 and 9.3 degrees centigrade (Xinyuan County 2015)<sup>9</sup> and its average annual precipitation is 270 mm to 900 mm (Du & Zhang 2006: 58). The highest point (4,257 m) in the county is located in the Nalati Mountain (Chin: *nalati shan*) and the lowest place (792 m) is a marsh land in the Gongnaisi Sheep Breeding Ranch (Chin: *gongnaisi zhongyang chang*). There are 2,128,000 mu of forest in Xinyuan County, including 100,000 mu of wild apple and apricot forests in the mountain areas (Xinyuan County 2015).

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<sup>7</sup> XUAR OPC is the short form for the Office for the Population Census of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region.

<sup>8</sup> Kyzai was a sub-lineage of the Nayman clan of the Orta Jüz (Kazakh middle horde). It obeyed the Qing court in 1864 after the signing of the Treaty of Tarbagatai. In 1882, Kyzai moved from Bortala to Ili region. Today Kyzai has a large population and become a main Kazakh clan together with Nayman, Alban and Kerey clans in China. (Yuan 1997: 49).

<sup>9</sup> The information is from the official website of Xinyuan County government: [http://www.xinyuan.gov.cn/zjxy\\_xx.jsp?urltype=tree.TreeTempUrl&wbtreeid=7](http://www.xinyuan.gov.cn/zjxy_xx.jsp?urltype=tree.TreeTempUrl&wbtreeid=7).



**Figure 2: The geographical location of Xinyuan County in Xinjiang**

Source: designed by Mayinu Shanatibieke

Benefiting from a favorable climate and fertile soil conditions, Xinyuan County is one of the biggest agricultural counties in Xinjiang. It produces wheat, corn, rice, oil crops, flax, beet, potato, and other crops. There are 800,000 mu of arable land, including 600,000 mu of usable arable land (Xinyuan County 2015).<sup>10</sup> Xinyuan County is also one of the biggest pastoral counties in Xinjiang, famous for Ili Horses, Xinjiang Fine Wool Sheep, and Xinjiang Brown Cattle. The county has 8,384,000 mu of grassland, of which 6,889,200 mu is labeled as usable grassland including 2,295,800 mu of summer pastures, 434,600 mu of spring-autumn pastures, 1,697,900 mu of winter pastures and 2,460,900 mu winter-spring-autumn pastures (Zhang 2008: 63). Kazakhs are the representative pastoral group in the region. In 2012, there were 8,246 households which relied on pastoralism as their main income source in Xinyuan County, of which 6,198 households had been settled or half-settled.<sup>11</sup>

Rich in natural resources and economically diverse, Xinyuan County is increasingly seen as an affluent county in the Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture. Just ten years ago, its economy was based primarily on agricultural and pastoral production. Today, it is shifting towards a more diversified economy. Industrial development is on the rise, including grain and livestock products processing, iron mining, cement production, brick making, sugar refining, liquor brewing and flax industries. Xinyuan is also a county that is popular for tourism, as it is famous for scenic grassland landscapes and its displays of local Kazakh culture.

<sup>10</sup> Usable arable land (Chin: *ke liyong gengdi*) means arable land that is actually in use or can be used for agriculture, meaning that there is a suitable water source in that area.

<sup>11</sup> The data is provided by the Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Bureau of Xinyuan County in 2013.

Xinyuan County is situated along the ancient Silk Road within a region that historically served as an intercultural conduit for goods, information and ideas. Currently, heeding the call of developing the New Silk Road (Chin: *xin silu*) from the central government, Xinyuan County actively joins Sino-Kazakhstan trade. On the one hand, the county government encourages local enterprises' export of industrial goods such as liquors and iron materials to Kazakhstan (Xinyuan County 2015).<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, the county government established several commodity markets selling imported food, handicrafts, clothes, kitchen utensils, and music CDs from Kazakhstan (see Figure 3). Consequently, the multi-directional flow of goods and people across the border is steadily increasing. The open trade has accelerated the cross-border migration of Kazakhs in recent years.



A: Dairy foods imported from Kazakhstan      B: Kitchen utensils imported from Kazakhstan      C: A copied music CD of Kazakhstan singers (Arabic and Cyrillic scripts are written on the CD cover)

**Figure 3: Imported goods sold on the local bazaars of Xinyuan County**

Source: Mayinu Shanatibieke, January 26, 2016

### 6. Reasons for emigration or not: Stories of four families

Kazakhstan started its Oralman immigration program in 1992 and established annual immigration quota for oralmans in 1993. China Kazakhs have been included into the quota since 1994 (Sadovskaya 2007: 158). Heeding the beckoning call of the program, many Kazakhs emigrated to Kazakhstan in the 1990s. Especially in the 2000s, the emigration process has sped up (Ayideng 2014; Li 2009; Zhang 2005). For instance, 4,293 Kazakhs migrated to Kazakhstan in 2002, and the number increased to 13,190 in 2004, and 37,788 in 2006 (Sadovskaya 2007: 159). Until today, this process still continues. Whenever you go to the Kazakhstan Embassy in Urumqi, there is always a long queue waiting for the exit visa even in the night. Many Kazakhs also travel to Beijing to get a visa from the

<sup>12</sup> Official blog of the Commercial Bureau of Xinyuan County ([http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_65dbf7f20100zbio.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_65dbf7f20100zbio.html)), accessed on November 20, 2015 at 19:33.

Kazakhstan Embassy in Beijing. Among them, some people have not even been out of their home villages, but travel thousands of kilometers to Beijing. Their efforts express a strong desire to emigrate to Kazakhstan.

This rapid increase relates to the economic development of China and Kazakhstan in the 21st Century. Although China is rising, the development gap between affluent East China and remote minority regions has been widening (Kreutzmann 2013). Kazakhstan is currently also rapidly developing due to the oil wealth and economic ties to Russia (Pomfret 2014), which makes Kazakhstan a suitable object of identification and a desirable goal for China Kazakhs (Sadovskaya 2007). Therefore, many Kazakhs tend to choose to migrate, especially those who have relatives living in Kazakhstan (Ayideng 2014; Wu 2012; Zhao & Xu 2004). According to Wu, almost half of China Kazakhs have at least one relative already in Kazakhstan (Wu 2012). People were proud of having such connections they would rely on for assistance when migrating to Kazakhstan. They even send young people to travel to Kazakhstan linking up with migration networks. To do so, many young Kazakhs in China learn Russian and apply for a student visa for Kazakhstan. Recently, the increasingly open trade across the Chinese-Kazakh border has further accelerated the cross-border migration (Steenberg 2014). Many young Kazakhs dream of becoming international traders between China and Kazakhstan (Laruelle & Peyrouse 2012; Xiao 2011), but they most importantly want to be Kazakhstani citizens. This is very much connected to the rising ethno-nationalist sentiments among Kazakhs in Central Asia, which is described as “*da hasake zhuyi*” (great Kazakh chauvinism) by Chinese scholars (Ding 2004; Ren & Guo 2008; Zhang 2005; Zhang 2011). Therefore, they suggest to the Chinese government to establish a new identity for Kazakhs based on the sense of citizenship, rather than Kazakh ethnicity. Thereby, Kazakhs will gain a deeper sense of belonging to the Chinese nation and will not emigrate to Kazakhstan.

This paper provides a perspective on Kazakhs’ emigration desires and experiences. In other words, individual voices are important in this paper to understand the current situation of China Kazakhs’ cross-border migration. I include in-depth interviews of four Kazakh families with plans for emigration to Kazakhstan.

### *6.1. Oralbai’s family: Seeking religious schools across the Chinese-Kazakh border*

Oralbai is a pastoralist (born in 1928). He and his wife (born in 1929) live in a mountainous village in the northeastern part of Xinyuan County. They have seven sons and five daughters. Their eldest and second sons died young, leaving behind two orphans brought up by Oralbai. The other children are still doing well, having already married. Apart from the son who has migrated to Kazakhstan, Oralbai’s other children are all living in the village engaging in pastoralism. According to the Kazakhs’ tradition, Oralbai and his wife are living with their youngest son.

In November of 2012, when I was doing my fieldwork in a new pastoralist settlement, the old couple had already moved down from the mountains to accompany their four grandchildren who are going to a pastoral middle school in the village. The youngest son and his wife still herd livestock in the mountains to earn a living for the whole family. To save money, the old couple has rented a fodder shed in the new settlement to stay. The simple and crude shed was absolutely unable to withstand the November wind and snow. They have installed an iron furnace in the shed for heating. Because

the shed does not have a chimney, smoke generated from the firewood can only go out through a small window. It was in such a shed filled with smoke that he told me about his migrating plan.

The son, who migrated to Ozin Agas in Kazakhstan in 2007, is Oralbai's fourth son. Before emigration, he had studied Islamic classics in Urumqi. He is now an Imam in a mosque in Ozin Agas. He goes back to visit his parents every year, and also helps relatives process applications for emigration. With his help, up until now, over ten families amongst his relatives have been able to successfully migrate to Kazakhstan. When I asked Oralbai whether he has a migrating plan, he said:

"We are applying for exit papers now. I heard my son said that it is good over there - there are old-style religious schools. His oldest son turns eight years old this year and is already able to translate The Koran. What a good boy!" (Fieldwork interview, Xinyuan County, November 12, 2012)

From the way Oralbai talks, it is obvious that, for him, the most attractive thing in Kazakhstan are the Islamic religious schools. This has something to do with his educational background. When Oralbai was young, there were no schools in the mountains. He was studying The Koran with an elder. Although he is already 80 years old, he is still fasting during the Ramadan and saying prayers five times a day. He believes that, being a Muslim, one should understand the most basic Islamic classics and religious etiquettes; if the children study Islamic classics and get trained regarding religious etiquettes, they will be able to have better manners. Not only Oralbai thinks like that; in all Kazakh villages that are very rich in a traditional sense, those who have religious common sense and follow religious norms are respected by other people.

However, according to the strict regulation by the Chinese government regarding the prohibition of preaching to minors, Xinjiang does not have religious schools for school children. Despite this, there are still a few elementary religious schools for minors, but they are all illegal ones (Li 2012). Only after finishing nine years of compulsory education and high school can minors enter official religious schools to study. Nowadays, Xinjiang has one advanced religious school in Urumqi (Xinjiang Islamic Religious College) and five intermediate religious schools in Kashgar, Hottan, Aksu, Kezilesu Kirghiz Autonomous Prefecture, and Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture. Students can also take examinations to enter religious schools in inland China, for example, The Islamic Religious College of China in Beijing. These educational units mainly cultivate religious officials and researchers of religious studies. Graduated students will be in charge of dealing with religious affairs in mosques or engaging in related research work in governmental departments all around China.

However, for Oralbai, and for the ordinary large group of Xinjiang religious believers too, these religious schools basically cannot meet their demands. Most importantly, the restriction regarding religious education for minors is not compatible with their religious views. To cope with this problem, they hope to cross the border to go to Kazakhstan, searching for educational resources.

## *6.2. Ulpan and Khanat: "We won't go to Kazakhstan's cities to be poor people"*

Ulpan is a very hardworking woman (born in 1977). In the summer pastures, she milks twenty-one cows and twelve horses everyday. Although she is just over 30 years old now, heavy housework caused her to contract a serious case of rheumatism and chronically swollen legs. In spite of this fact, she still keeps busy from morning until night. Her husband, Khanat, is one year older than her, and he is also a very hardworking pastoralist. Apart from those cows and horses, Khanat also has 125 sheep.

He hires a herdsman to help him with herding. They are considered to be a wealthy household in the village.

The couple has three children. Their two sons are going to a bilingual primary school in the village; their daughter has just entered a newly opened bilingual kindergarten. Khanat's father (born in 1948) and mother (born in 1945) are living with them. Apart from Khanat doing animal husbandry, his ten other brothers and sisters are working in local governmental departments, and often help Khanat support the parents financially.

In August of 2013, when I was doing my fieldwork on summer pasture, I met with Khanat and his wife who then had just come back from Kazakhstan for a visit. They both have relatives in Kazakhstan. Ulpan's sister and her family migrated to Kazakhstan in 2003. They have a shoe-shop in Almaty and do livestock business, making a lot of money. Now they already have two cars and a house of their own, living a wealthy life. They advise Ulpan and Khanat to migrate to Kazakhstan. But Khanat does not really want to migrate now, because he has old parents to take care of. Besides, he is worried that his family would have a hard time after migrating to Kazakhstan, facing similar hardships as his cousin Nurlan.

Nurlan and his wife have two children. They migrated to Taldykorgan in Kazakhstan in 2005. Because of not having skills, the couple has not found suitable jobs. During the first two years, the whole family was living on the savings they made before migrating to Kazakhstan. Later, the couple worked as cleaners in a local hospital, barely earning their living. Because they did not have money to build a house, the whole family has been living in a rented house. In 2011, Nurlan came back to China to borrow money from his relatives to build a house. One year later, Nurlan's wife came again to raise money for house renovation and to see a doctor. Before leaving, she also bought many commodities (even including underwear and socks) in China.

Seeing with his own eyes the wealthy life of Ulpan's sister's family, Khanat once thought of migrating. But, seeing the situation of Nurlan's family as well, consideration of the feasibility of migrating was given up on. He said:

"It is better to be a pastoralist here than going to Kazakhstan's cities to be a poor guy. You cannot even afford going to see the doctor! Although the children can study the Kazakh and Russian languages there, we do not have any foundation of livelihood. How can a pastoralist who neither has any other skills nor understands Russian like me earn a living to support the whole family? We will just wait for a while, if the situation gets better there, then we will go." (Fieldwork interview, Xinyuan County, August 8, 2013)

Obviously, regarding the question of whether or not to migrate to Kazakhstan, Khanat carefully takes into his consideration possible risks and chances, yet does not at all impetuously respond to Kazakhstan's migrating call of return to the "historical homeland" (Bonnenfant 2012: 31).

At my fieldwork site, there are many people similar to Khanat holding a wait-and-see attitude towards the plan for emigration. Although many people are applying for visas, most of them just plan to go there to see the real situation, and then will make the decision. Some people who live well-off lives even go there many times but have not made the final decision yet. Their worries are related to the incomplete implementation of the Oralman policy in Kazakhstan, which has been discussed by many scholars (Alff 2013; Bonnenfant 2012; Diener 2005; Sadovskaya 2007). Moreover, in recent years, Xinjiang's social economy has developed rapidly. People's living standards are continuously

improving. These positive factors also make the Kazakhs want to stay in China (Chang 1998). However, the high tide of migrating desires has not weakened. From their point of view, migrating to Kazakhstan is still an ideal strategy to cope with the challenges possibly occurring in the future.

### 6.3. Aman and Bayan: For having another baby and for learning their mother tongue

Aman (born in 1980) and Bayan (born in 1982) are a young couple. They derive their main income from pastoralism. The couple already has three daughters, but Aman's father still hopes that they can have a son. However, if they have another child, it will be against the family planning policy of the country. Because in autonomous areas, minority women who have an urban registered residence (Chin: *chengshi hukou*) are allowed at most to have two children, and women who have a rural registered residence (Chin: *nongcun hukou*) can have three children. In recent years, this policy has been strictly practiced in pastoral areas in Xinjiang. Every village has a particular birth control cadre in charge of propagandizing and implementing the family planning policy. Women of childbearing age can give birth to babies and have them registered in their households only when they have acquired the Birth Permit (Chin: *zhun sheng zheng*) from the birth control cadre.<sup>13</sup> Although China's family planning policy has been eased since 2013, Aman and Bayan still could not have their fourth child. The relaxed population policy only allows one-child families (Chin: *dusheng zinu jiating*) to have a second child.<sup>14</sup>

However, the family planning policy is not supported by many Kazakhs, who see having large families in a positive light. Kazakhs view large families in a most positive light. For example, the 1989 average birthrate for the Kazakhs was 4.74, which was the highest of any minority group in China (Benson & Svanberg 1998: 188). In other words, up until 1989 when the family planning policy had been in practice for 10 years, one Kazakh family had at least 4 to 5 children. Having many children is needed for family continuity; it is also an important condition for maintaining pastoral production. For example, when boys turn eight or nine years old, they start to be able to help their parents with herding. Girls can also do the housework really early. But girls will get married out, becoming *elding adami* (members of the others' families) after all. Sons will stay with the parents to carry on the family property and take care of the parents. From this point of view, sons ensure one's old age. Therefore, people have the saying "bring up sons to support parents in their old age" (Fei 2002: 45).

For the purpose of having a son, Aman decided to migrate to Kazakhstan. When I met him that year, he had just come back from Urumqi finishing his emigration application. He said:

"I am the only son of my father. He has been wishing to have a grandson. We do not have any solution but for migrating. We will go and seek refuge with my cousin Sayatbek in Almaty. In

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<sup>13</sup> Birth Permit, also called Family-planning Service Permit, is a procedure that a Chinese new married couple needs to get ready before they give birth to babies. Women can apply for the permit before they get pregnant or three months after they are pregnant, normally the permit is expired after one year and a half. The permit is necessary for pregnancy test, delivery, free health care insurance, new-born child residence registration, school and jobs.

<sup>14</sup> According to the policy, families, in which either of the parents is a single child (Chin: *dusheng zinu*), are allowed to have a second child. This policy is pushed forward further in 2016 allowing all one-child families to have a second child.

Kazakhstan, a woman will get awards if she has more babies!” (Fieldwork interview, Xinyuan County, July 29, 2011)

Apart from wanting to have another baby, Aman also hopes that his children will get access to mother tongue education in Kazakhstan. He said,

“Migrating is also for children to be able to study the Kazakh language and culture. You see, nowadays many young people cannot speak a complete sentence in the Kazakh language, they speak Chinese at home.” (Fieldwork interview, Xinyuan County, July 29, 2011)

The young people not speaking the Kazakh language very well that he mentioned are those who are *minkaohan* Kazakh students. They attend Han Chinese schools from elementary to high-school level and take the university entrance exam using the Chinese language. There are also *minkaomin* Kazakh students who attend Kazakh schools and take the university entrance exam in the Kazakh language. Nowadays, not only in urban areas, but also in rural areas, many parents prefer to send their children to Chinese schools (Abudali 2010: 141). On one hand, it is because Chinese schools are more qualified than minority mother-tongue schools; on the other hand, *minkaohan* students will have more job opportunities in the future.

Although proficiency in Chinese brings a better chance for jobs in the future, many Kazakhs are concerned about the survival of their mother tongue. Their cultural anxiety is a direct consequence of the promotion of “bilingual education” (Chin: *shuangyu jiaoyu*,)<sup>15</sup> and “Chinese and minority school mergers” (Chin: *minhan hexiao*) policies beginning in the mid-1990s (Dwyer 2005). This is also a very important reason pushing many Kazakhs to migrate to Kazakhstan.

#### 6.4. Dina and Sartai: “For having another baby”

Facing the same situation of not being able to have more babies, Sartai (born in 1982) and Dina (born in 1983), husband and wife, living in Beijing, chose another kind of solution. In 2000, after graduating from high school, Dina left Xinyuan County for Beijing, studying at a key university. After finishing her master’s degree, she stayed and worked in Beijing. In 2008, Dina got married to Sartai from Altai and they had a daughter. The couple was wishing to have another baby, but minorities who do not live in autonomous areas cannot enjoy the preferential family planning policy. They are similar to the Han people: married couples having *chengshi hukou* (urban residence registration) can only have one child; married couples having *nongcun hukou* (rural residence registration) can have two children. After China started its relaxed family planning policy in 2013, Dina and Sartai still could not have their second baby, because both of them are not from a one-child family.<sup>16</sup>

In order to have another baby, they thought about two solutions: the first one is that the whole family migrates to Kazakhstan; the second solution is Sartai has his *hukou* (residence registration) moved back to Xinjiang. The first solution would not work, because they do not want to give up their jobs in Beijing. Dina said:

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<sup>15</sup> *Shuangyu jiaoyu* (bilingual education) means essentially putonghua-based education.

<sup>16</sup> Please see the explanation of the new policy in the footnote 15.



“Sartai is working for a state-owned enterprise, having a good income. My job is also very good. If we move to Kazakhstan, we might become unemployed. It is too risky to move to Kazakhstan.” (Interview through WeChat, September 20, 2015)

Therefore, they chose the second solution. Having Sartai’s *hukou* moved back to Xinjiang, they had the second baby in 2014. In reality, it is very difficult for outsiders to have Beijing *hukou*. But in order to have another baby, Sartai has given up his Beijing *hukou* that most others want to have. Regarding to schooling choices, Dina said,

“Our children can have a very good education in Beijing too. For example, nowadays, English has been already begun to be taught in kindergartens.” (Interview through WeChat, September 20, 2015)

From the story of Sartai and Dina, we can see that earning a living is the precondition for the couple to decide whether or not to migrate to Kazakhstan. If there is no guarantee of employment, even if their birthing desire cannot be realized, they still want to stay in China. In numerous cities in inland China and Xinjiang there are many Kazakhs similar to Sartai and Dina. They have a high-level education and a relatively high income. Furthermore, they can speak fluent Chinese and are quite deeply integrated into the mainstream society. These urban Kazakhs are satisfied with their living situation and do not have a strong desire to migrate. Only when it is absolutely necessary (for example, to fulfil a pressing birthing desire) will they consider migrating to Kazakhstan as a coping strategy. However, in most cases, they are under the pressure of the possible risks of migrating so they try their best to find another solution.

When considering children’s education, they choose the educational resources available in Chinese cities. This does not mean that they do not care about the survival of their mother tongue. It is because in inland China there are no mother-tongue schools that particularly teach the Kazakh language. Moreover, inland China has advanced educational resources, such as Chinese-English bilingual schools. Through their choice, we can rethink how rural Kazakhs in Xinjiang are really determined to migrate to Kazakhstan with the hope that their children can get access to a better education (Cerny 2008; Wu 2003). Apart from searching for a mother tongue education, these rural Kazakhs also hope to find better educational resources for their children by crossing the border. This also reflects the problems of the lack of schooling resources and qualified education in Xinjiang’s rural areas.

## 7. Conclusion: China Kazakhs’ emigration to Kazakhstan from a modernity perspective

Through the four stories told above, we can see the complexity of the motivation pushing Chinese Kazakhs to decide whether or not to migrate to Kazakhstan. This kind of complexity reveals the fact that the Chinese Kazakhs have subscriptions, hopes, confusions and challenges in relation to Chinese modernization. In many different ways, they have experienced adapting and taking part in Chinese modernization. However, when the challenges exceed the chances, Chinese Kazakhs tend to choose migrating, especially those who have relatives living in Kazakhstan (Ayideng 2014; Wu 2012; Zhao & Xu 2004). For them, migrating to Kazakhstan is a way to lift themselves out of poverty and move upward.

Yet, those Kazakhs who live in the cities possess relatively good economic foundations. They will not easily give up what they have and move to Kazakhstan. But, after all, urban Kazakhs (especially those who live in the cities in inland China) just form a minority within the Kazakh population in China of which 77.9 percent are living in Xinjiang's rural areas (XUAR OPC 2012: 97).<sup>17</sup> In the future, if Kazakhs living in rural areas cannot improve their living standards, then the number of Kazakhs moving from China to Kazakhstan will keep increasing, as other scholars have already predicted (Ayideng 2014; Wu 2012; Xiao 2011; Xiao & Hu 2011; Zhang 2005).

The outline given above may not be sufficient to understand the complexity of the current situation of China Kazakh's emigration practices. However, these points may serve as primary findings showing China Kazakhs' attitudes towards emigration to Kazakhstan. More specifically, the stories of four households present the perspectives of China Kazakhs (pastoralists in particular), primarily focused on the opportunities and risks brought by emigration. Their voices express China Kazakhs' yearning and striving for a better life embedded in their desire to take part in the development going on all around them. Understanding their desires may be helpful both for the Chinese and Kazakh governments to maintain regional stability and to develop economic cooperation between the two countries.

The broader purpose of this paper is to provoke further critical discussions of China's modernization policies in minority areas. From the perspectives of Kazakhs, the overwhelming Chinese modernization efforts do not manage to integrate many of the Kazakhs living in West China. Instead, they push more and more Kazakhs to migrate to Kazakhstan to seek their own modernity, which is rooted in Kazakh culture and tradition. The aim is to emphasize that the concept and understanding of "modernity" changes over time and also spatially because of social, economic, political and cultural dynamisms (Ogborn 2005). Therefore, it is necessary for the Chinese government to promote diversified development paths in minority areas, rather than a unified road to modernization.

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<sup>17</sup> In Xinjiang, 110,721 Kazakhs live in cities (7.8%), 202,247 Kazakhs live in towns (14.3%), and 1,105,310 Kazakhs live in villages (77.9%) (XUAR OPC 2012: 77, 87, 97).

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## Information on the competence network Crossroads Asia

The competence network Crossroads Asia was established in 2011 to generate novel perspectives on interdisciplinary Area Studies research. Comprised of six research institutions with regional expertise covering Afghanistan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, Northern India, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Xinjiang, the network aims to further an understanding of the interactions of individuals with a connection to places from eastern Iran to western China and from the Aral Sea to northern India. In doing so, it intends to contribute to overcoming the neglect of non-‘Western’ epistemologies, insights and forms of knowledge generation, as well as to close certain gaps between systematic disciplines and Area Studies.

The research within the network has centered on figurations, defined as specific causal and functional connections making up constellations (e.g., familial, religious, or economic networks). During the first funding phase of the project (2011-14), micro-level empirical research focused on figurations related to three thematic concepts: conflict, migration and development. Since early 2015, the network has begun a second funding phase in which there is a synthesizing of earlier research. We are beginning in-depth analyses of how spatial realities are constructed by the movement of people, goods and ideas, as well as how these emerging constructions – with their limiting borders and boundaries – enable and constrain mobility. Physical and social mobility, as well as imagined/mental mobility, are all considered in this context. Our overarching research questions include: What, in particular movement, makes borders and boundaries take on significance? In turn, what causes their meaning to be altered or even lost? Within and across limiting components (e.g., geographic, political, socio-cultural and/or ethnic borders and boundaries), which factors contribute to im(mobility)?

Based on this extensive research and diverse analyses thereof, we are aiming to collectively elaborate a Crossroads Perspective for understanding complex webs of ties and their spatial dimensions. This non-prescriptive selection of conceptual and methodological tools for rethinking how to conduct research on fluid, dynamic and complex phenomena will be articulated at our conferences and workshops, in publications including an Area Studies textbook, and in teaching, including at the new ‘Global and Area Studies’ graduate program at the Humboldt Universität Berlin, one of the network institutes. The Crossroads Perspective will consist of a methodological approach (‘Follow the Figuration’), as well as an ethical component, to guide Area Studies researchers in reflecting on their position in relation to their subjects, as well as the tangible impacts of the research they conduct. The Crossroads Perspective will also contain a tool-kit of concepts which have proven resilient in our empirical analysis of, for example, bordering processes in Kashmir; cross-border bazaar trade between Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and China; and Baloch networks rooted in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran.

The competence network understands itself as a mediator between the academic study of Crossroads Asia and efforts to meet the high demand for information on this area in politics and the public. Findings of the project will feed back into academic teaching, research outside the limits of the competence network, and public relations efforts. Further information on Crossroads Asia is available at [www.crossroads-asia.de](http://www.crossroads-asia.de).

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