

# Trans-National Identities: Mongolian Kazakhs in the 21st Century

The collapse of the Soviet Union changed the political, economic and social landscape of former Soviet republics and Mongolia. The loosening of internal and international migration restrictions is resulting in a redistribution of certain minority groups across Central Asia. Mongolian Kazakhs are one such group. Who comprises the Kazakhs of Mongolia and why have they made multiple migrations between Mongolia and Kazakhstan since 1990?

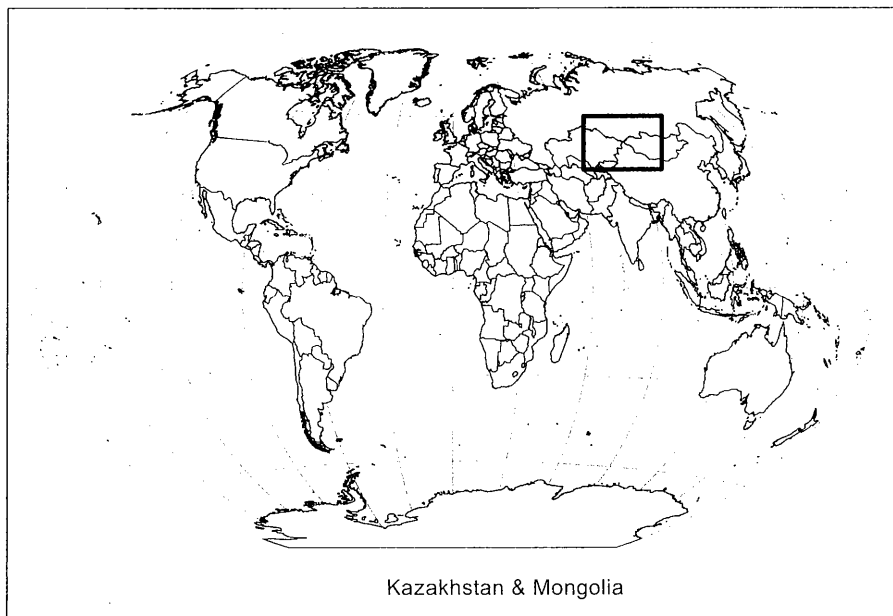
**T**he Kazakhs, a Muslim group with a Turkic language, are the largest ethnic minority in the relatively homogeneous country of Mongolia. In the 1990 census, Kazakhs numbered approximately 120,500 and constituted 5.9% of the Mongolian population. The majority of Kazakhs live in the far western provinces, most notably Bayan-Ulgii province where they are the dominant ethnic group. There are nearly 9 million Kazakhs in the newly independent country of



Photo 1: Young Kazakh child poses on horse.

Kazakhstan. Since the fall of the Soviet Union and the independence of Kazakhstan in 1991, as many as 60,000 Kazakhs have migrated from Mongolia to Kazakhstan. What economic,

political and cultural factors are influencing this migration? Why are some Kazakhs choosing to migrate, while others prefer to stay in Mongolia? How is this migration process transforming cultural and political dynamics in western Mongolia?



Kazakhstan & Mongolia

Figure 1: General study area: Mongolia and Kazakhstan

## Mongolia and Kazakhstan within the broader region of Central Asia

Central Asia is difficult to define as there is no single geographical, cultural, linguistic, or religious characteristic that distinguishes the region from its neighbors. Central Asia is the geographical space in Eurasia that encompasses non-Slavic countries that are not typically classified as the Middle East, South Asia, East Asia, or the Caucasus: Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, Iran, and Mongolia. The two westernmost provinces of China (Xinjiang and Tibet) are also considered to be part of Central Asia.

Mongolia and Kazakhstan share many similarities as two of the more sparsely populated countries within Central Asia. In addition to having similar landscapes that have been used for centuries by nomadic pastoralists, both countries were modernized by socialist governments and contain relatively small populations. The demographic composition of each country, however, is quite distinct.

Situated between China and Russia, Mongolia is a landlocked country with approximately 2.4 million people living in an area that is 1,564,116 km<sup>2</sup>. Kazakhstan also shares borders with Russia and China, in addition to Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. With approximately 15.2 million people and 2,717,300 km<sup>2</sup>, Kazakhstan is about six times larger in terms of population and almost twice as large in area extent (CIA World Fact Book; Figure 1).

A large portion of both Mongolia and Kazakhstan is made up of grassland steppe, though both countries also contain areas with deserts, mountains, and forests. Due to limited precipitation, much of the land in both countries is non-arable, yet contains sufficient pasture and water resources to support domestic livestock. Nomadic pastoralism has been the primary form of human subsistence for centuries. Politically, the Mongolian and Kazakh steppes were controlled by nomadic tribesmen until the late 17th century when they came under the influence of Chinese and Russian empires respectively.

Significant cultural and economic transformations took place shortly after Kazakhstan became incorporated as an autonomous republic of the Soviet Union in 1920 and Mongolia became the world's second communist country in 1924. Viewing nomadic pastoralism as a patriarchal and feudal form of society, socialist leaders sought to organize and intensify livestock production in a way that would support growing urban, industrial populations. Government-led changes to the



Photo 2: Horsemanship is a skill learned in youth by both men and women.

pastoral economy were much more severe in Kazakhstan where the nomads were collectivized and sedentarized in the 1930s. In Mongolia, the government did not successfully collectivize the nomads until the 1950s (Finke 1999, Goldstein and Beall 1994).

Under communist rule, both Kazakhstan and Mongolia were "modernized" through the development of public education, health care, public infrastructure, and social welfare. In both settings, Russian language and culture were given a special status. Especially in Kazakhstan, the Russian language displaced much of the daily usage of local languages. Religious practices were targeted for change by rulers who destroyed religious centers, killed and imprisoned religious leaders, and used socialist propaganda to try to replace Muslim and Buddhist beliefs with atheism. Socialist policies also restricted foreign travel, internal migration, and urban growth. This ensured that only the loyal elite had access to foreign travel, and that the rural masses did not overpopulate new urban cities (Neupert 1992).

While Kazakhstan has a relatively heterogeneous population with dozens of different ethnic groups, Mongolia has a relatively homogenous population dominated by Mongol ethnic groups. In Kazakhstan, the Kazakhs are the dominant group, but they only

make up 53.4% of the population according to the 1999 census data. The Russian population is the second largest at 30%. These numbers have been changing significantly since the late 1980s when the Kazakhs did not make up a majority of the population, and there were nearly as many Russians as Kazakhs. Other sizable minority groups include Ukrainians (3.7%), Uzbeks (2.5%), Germans (2.4%), Tatars (1.7%), and Uygurs (1.4%). Almost 5% of the population is divided among many different ethnic groups, including indigenous and non-indigenous groups (Masanov et al. 2002, Sinnott 2003).

Mongolia is less ethnically diverse. The Khalkha Mongols comprise 81.5% of the population (Figure 2). About 4% of the population consists of several different Mongol minority groups, such as the Durbet and Buryat Mongols. Turkic-speaking ethnic groups, such as the Kazakhs, Tuvans, and Uyghurs constitute approximately 7% of the population. Of the 28 ethnic minority groups, the Kazakhs are the largest with 103,000 people and 4.3% of the population (MNSO 2001a).

### The post-socialist transition

In 1991, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics dissolved, and the 15 socialist republics, including

Table 1: National and Aimaq Kazakh population change, 1979–2000

	1979	1989	2000	% Change 89–00
Bayan-Ulgii, total pop.	71,372	90,911	91,068	0.2 %
Mongolia, total population	1,595,006	2,043,954	2,363,493	15.6 %
Kazakhs, total population	84,305	120,506	102,983	-17.0 %
Kazakhs in Bayan-Ulgii (% of Aimaq pop.)	62,104 (87 %)	n.a.	80,776 (88.7 %)	n.a.
Kazakhs in Khovd (% of Aimaq pop.)	9,425 (15.1 %)	n.a.	10,005 (11.5 %)	n.a.

n.a. = data not available  
Source: MNSO 2001a

Kazakhstan, became independent nation-states. To varying degrees, each of the new republics started to make the “transition” away from a one-party political system and command-administrative economic system. Neighboring Mongolia, once dependent on Soviet subsidies and loyal to the Soviet state, also began a slow but peaceful transition from a communist country with a command economy to an open-market democratic, multi-party government.

In the early 1990s, the populations of both Mongolia and Kazakhstan experienced harsh economic conditions as many people were laid off and state welfare programs were reduced. This economic restructuring coincided with increased inflation rates for local goods as Soviet-era distribution networks were being dismantled. Poverty levels and food insecurity soared. Severe winters and summer droughts of 2000 and 2001 resulted in significant

loss of livestock in rural areas, worsening the living conditions of rural residents. Since the mid-1990s, economic conditions in both Kazakhstan and Mongolia have slowly been improving (Cheng 2003, Pomfrey 2006).

The “transition” from socialism to post-socialism was accompanied by multiple demographic shifts, including declining birth rates and new migration flows. The loosening of both internal and international migration policies in Kazakhstan and Mongolia also resulted in dramatic shifts in population distribution. In Kazakhstan, for example, ethnic minorities such as Germans, Jews and Russians, left the country (Masanov et al. 2002). Some Russian families have been reluctant to leave, having resided in Kazakhstan for several generations. This is not the case in Mongolia, where 51,000 of the 54,700 “Soviet” citizens have migrated back to the Russian Federation (MNSO 2001b). The second largest outward migration flow has been the movement of Kazakhs to Kazakhstan. Both countries have experienced internal migration as well. In Kazakhstan, there have been migration flows to Almaty, Astana and Atyrau cities. In Mongolia, after some flux in the early 1990s, the dominant flow of migrants has been towards urban areas, particularly Ulaanbaatar, where large unplanned settlements, “ger” dis-

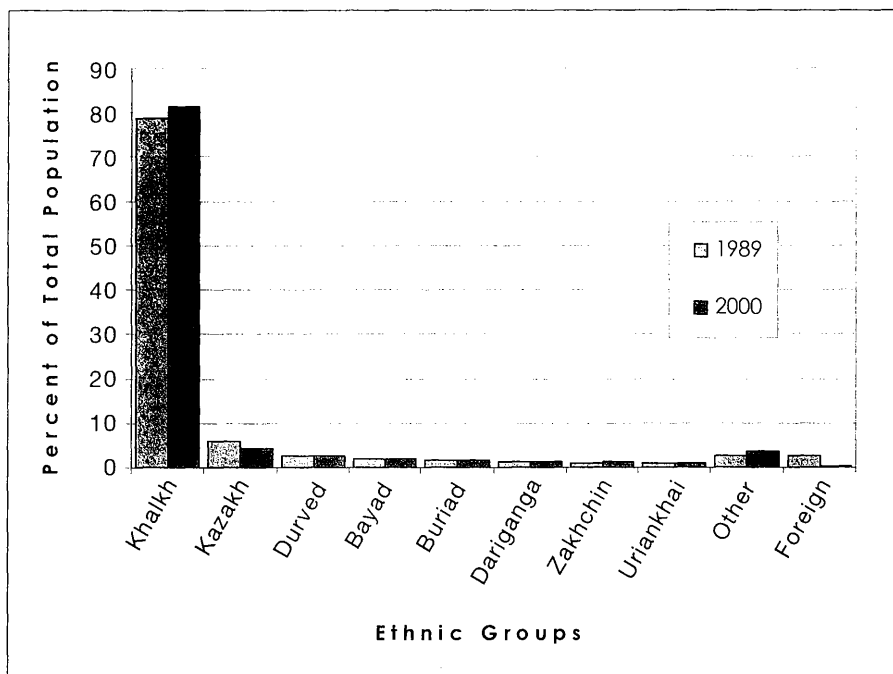


Figure 2: Ethnic groups represented in Mongolia, 1989 and 2000.

Source: MNSO 2001a

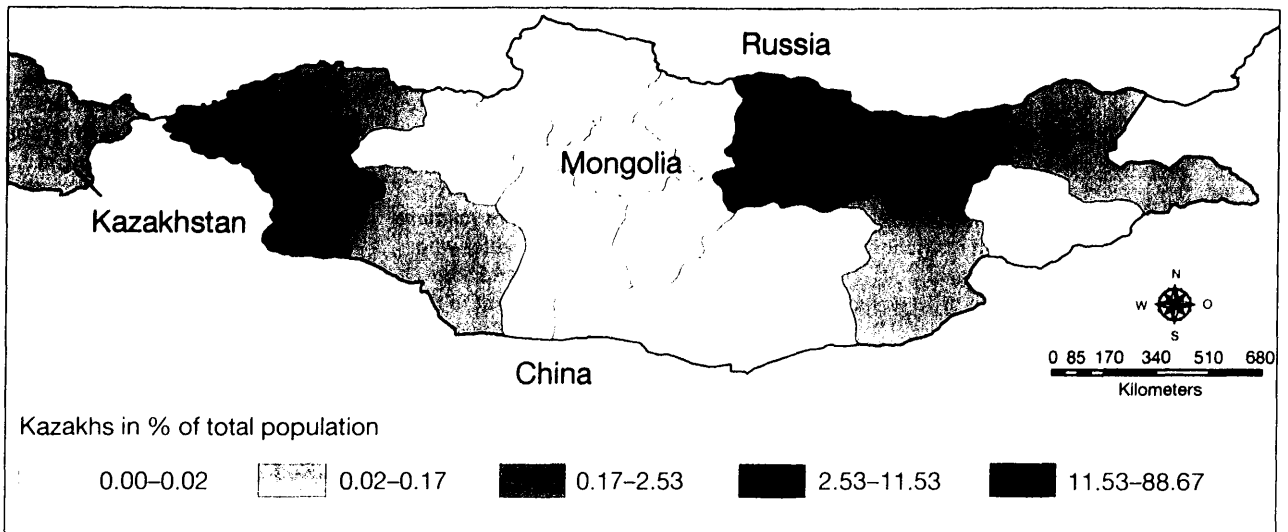


Figure 3: Geographic distribution of Kazakhs in Mongolia, 2001

tricts, have emerged in peri-urban areas. These areas often lack basic infrastructure such as running water and electricity (Janzen et al. 2002).

### The Kazakhs of Mongolia

The Kazakh population comprises a small portion of the total population in Mongolia but as the largest minority group, they have a distinctive presence on the cultural landscape, particularly in western Mongolia. Several scholars point to the presence of the Kazakh population in Mongolia as early as the 1880s, primarily arriving from western China (Finke 1999, p. 103). The Mongolian census documents their presence beginning in 1905, with a population of 1,370 (Diener 2003). By 1989, just prior to the transition, the Kazakh population had grown to 120,506 (5.9 % of the total population; Table 1).

The majority of Mongolian Kazakhs live in Bayan-Ulgii *aimaq* (=province) in western Mongolia (Figure 3). A significant number of Kazakhs also live in Khovd-province as well as the capital city of Ulaanbaatar. In Khovd, Kazakhs are a minority of the population but have several sizable settlements in Khovd soum and Khovd center. In contrast, Bayan-Ulgii is majority Kazakh and was designated by the Mongolian government as a semi-

autonomous region in 1940 (Finke 1999). In Bayan-Ulgii, Kazakhs comprise 88.7 % of the population and control most of the administrative positions in the local government. School children attend either Kazakh or Mongolian language schools, in contrast to all other provinces where Mongolian is the primary language of instruction.

Mongolia and Kazakhstan do not share a border rather a 47–60 km strip of mountainous Chinese territory separates the two countries. Geographically and politically, Bayan-Ulgii and Khovd are remote provinces within a remote country. The Altai Mountains, with an average elevation of 1,300 m above sea level, cut across the western provinces of Mongolia and thus contribute to the region's geographical remoteness. The development of strictly enforced international borders with China (and Russia) in the 1930s made it impossible for Mongolian Kazakhs to maintain ties with relatives on the other side of the Altai Mountains. Although there are air connections today between Ulaanbaatar and Ustkaamen, Kazakhstan, there are no paved roads or railroads connecting western Mongolia and the capital Ulaanbaatar. And, the only land route from Mongolia to Kazakhstan requires a 900 km detour through Russia (Figure 4).

Language and religion are two primary cultural markers that distinguish Kazakhs from Mongolians. The Kazakh language belongs to the Turkic family of languages, and is the dominant language in Bayan-Ulgii. Most Kazakhs in Mongolia also speak Mongolian, which is the language of inter-ethnic communication. Some Kazakhs are equally comfortable speaking Russian, a language which is declining in use among Mongolians yet becoming more important for the Kazakhs as they strengthen their ties to Kazakhstan. The Kazakhs of Mongolia consider themselves to be Muslim, though few adhere to the basic Muslim tenets, such as reciting prayers five times a day, fasting during Ramadan, and giving alms. They do, however, circumcise their sons and bury their relatives according to Islamic practice. There has been a resurgence of Islam in the 1990s after the fall of the Soviet Union. Several new mosques have been constructed, including a mosque in Ulgii which was financed by Saudi Arabia (Finke 1999).

### Kazakh migration from Mongolia to Kazakhstan

In the early 1990s, the Kazakhs of western Mongolia began moving to Kazakhstan in large numbers. Estimates suggest that nearly

60,000 Kazakhs, almost one-half of the population, emigrated during the mid-1990s, significantly altering the social and demographic fabric of western Mongolia. The increasingly dire economic conditions in rural Mongolia in the early 1990s coupled with the loosening of migration restrictions facilitated this migration.

Migration processes are characterized by both "push" and "pull" factors in the origins and destinations of migrants. For the Mongolian Kazakh population, the dominant "push" factor was the grim economic circumstances of Mongolia during the early 1990s. The remote provinces of western Mongolia were particularly devastated by the post-socialist transition, which simultaneously brought a decline in supply routes and employment opportunities. With reduced support from the state, there were few alternatives to herding, and the herding lifestyle became more difficult than before.

Hoping to abandon the herding lifestyle, many migrants left for Kazakhstan, a place they imagined to be "more modern" than the Mongolian capital of Ulaanbaatar. Related to this, many Kazakhs believe that their children will have better opportunities in the future if they are educated in Kazakhstan.

Most migrants are migrating with family and kin members, sometimes in groups as large as twenty families. Some scholars attribute the movement to a desire of Kazakhs to return to their "homeland." *Diener* (2003), however, explains that the earliest migrants tended to be Kazakh elites who lived in Ulaanbaatar and who believed it was important to raise their children in the "Kazakh" homeland, although most Mongolian Kazakhs actually trace their ancestry to lands within Xinjiang province of China, not Kazakhstan.

Unlike other large scale migrations worldwide, Mongolian Kazakhs were not "pushed" out of Mongolia due to cultural or political persecution. Despite some initial fears, the development of Mongol nationalism in the 1990s has not brought intolerance against non-Mongol groups. In Bayan-Ulgii *aimaq*, Kazakhs strengthened their cultural autonomy in the 1990s, establishing Kazakh as an official language in the region and increasing the number of Kazakh-language schools.

The economic "push" factor was accompanied by even stronger "pull" factors including financial, educational and resettlement incentives provided by the Kaza-

khstani government. Kazakhstan, along with Israel and Germany, is one of the few countries to create material incentives for members of diasporic communities to return to their homeland. Beginning in the early 1990s, Kazakh nationalists within the Kazakhstani government have been particularly interested in recruiting Mongolian Kazakhs due to their strong preservation of Kazakh language and cultural practices. Ironically, the Mongolian Kazakhs have preserved Kazakh culture and language to a greater extent than the Kazakhs in Kazakhstan, especially the urban elite.

Beginning in the early 1990s, the government of Kazakhstan provided Kazakh migrants from outside Kazakhstan with multi-year labor contracts. Though official migrants on labor contracts were promised jobs, housing and material support (social pensions, child allowances, free healthcare, and free education for children), there have been problems with the provision of these benefits. In addition, many Kazakh migrants have had problems becoming naturalized citizens before the end of their five-year labor contracts. Between 1991 and 1998, the number of migrants exceeded the annual quotas set by the government, and approximately half of Kazakh migrants (including many from former Soviet republics) have settled in Kazakhstan without any assistance from the state (*Diener*, 2003). In 1997, a new law on migration passed, which ended the labor contract system and established new procedures for migrants to become citizens.

By 2006, it is clear that this was not a one-time, large scale, out-migration of a minority group. Instead, this is a transnational migration process, where Mongolian Kazakhs have moved back and forth between the two countries several times. Based on 50 semi-structured interviews conducted during the summer of 2006, we found a much more varied set of reasons for migrating. We interviewed both return migrants and non-migrants in Bayan-Ulgii and



Photo 3: Summer pastures, where herders take their animals for summer months, are often quite remote from town centers, where herders live for much of the year

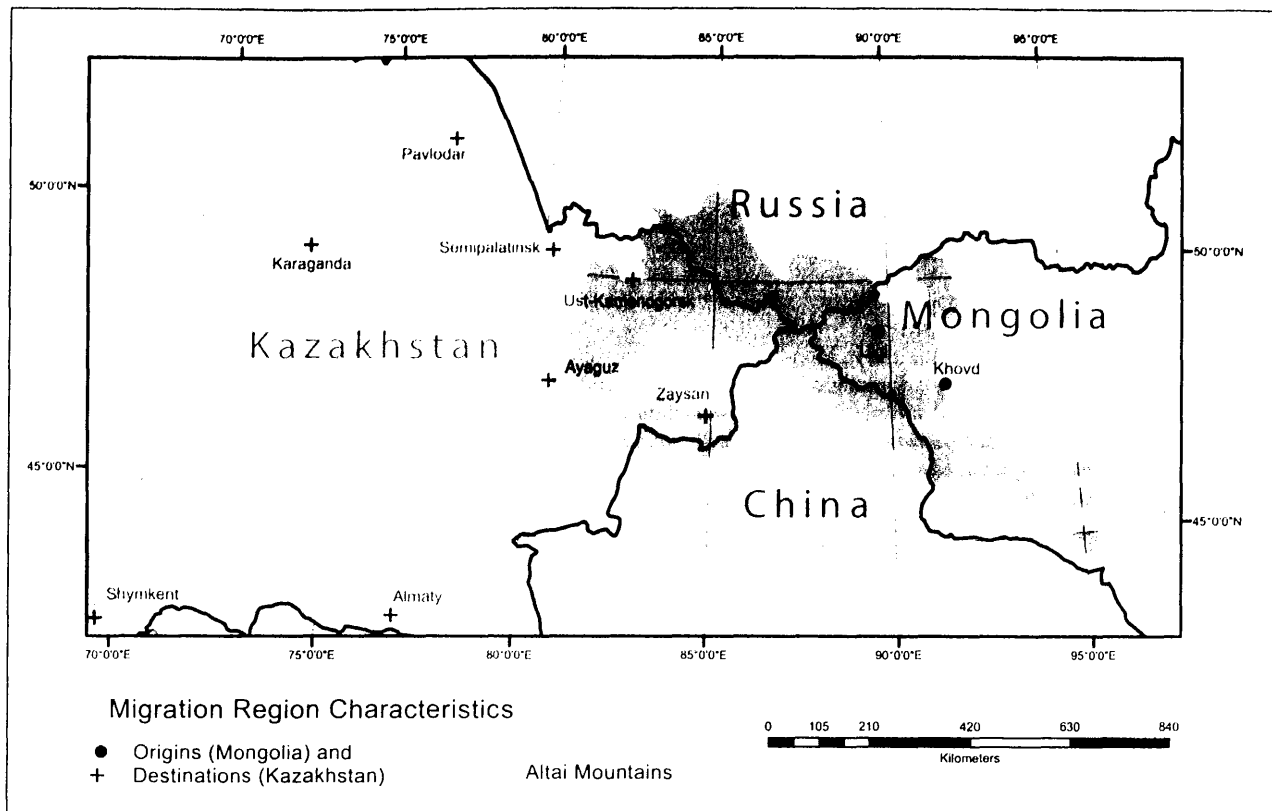


Figure 4: Origins and destinations of Mongolian Kazakh migrants

Khovd *aimaqs* in western Mongolia, focusing specifically on questions pertaining to the decision of whether or not to migrate and the process of migration, including the importance of personal networks and kinship ties. Respondents represented a wide range of social and economic circumstances from both urban and rural environments and included herders, teachers, business owners, young adults, single mothers and pensioners. For all groups we probed their experiences during the transition period as well as their thoughts about migrating or remaining in Mongolia and their thoughts about the future of Kazakhs in Mongolia.

The first wave of migrants left Mongolia in the early 1990s with assistance from the Kazakhstan government. Nearly one-third of the approximately 60,000 original migrants returned to Mongolia during the later part of 1990s and early 2000, despite the cultural ties to Kazakhstan and the stronger economy (Diener 2003, Finke 1999). Some experienced cultur-

al discrimination by "Russified" Kazakhs living in Kazakhstan, being perceived as unsophisticated and uneducated due to rural backgrounds and lack of Russian language skills. Others claim health problems associated with climatic differences, the need to care for sick relatives in Mongolia, or simply being homesick for Mongolia. During this time period, the cities of Usk-Kamenogorsk, Pavlodar, Karaganda, Semipalatinsk, Ayaguz, Zaysan, Shymkent and Almaty were primary destinations (Figure 4). Many Mongolian Kazakhs had never traveled to Kazakhstan so the decision of where to go was sometimes based on the availability of work contracts, and other times based on the decision of a senior family member who went ahead and arranged for work.

For many Kazakhs, the migration to Kazakhstan was successful; and they have not returned to Mongolia. In addition to those who returned to Mongolia and those who stayed in Kazakhstan,

there is a third group of Kazakhs who never left Mongolia. Results from our interviews suggest that individuals and families who are adapting well to Mongolia's new economy are less likely to consider moving to Kazakhstan. This is age dependent, however. While successful middle-aged business owners and herders are relatively satisfied with life in Mongolia, their children consider attending university in Mongolia, especially Ulaanbaatar, or Kazakhstan. A small number of young adults have even studied abroad in Turkey, Russia, Europe and the United States. For these young, educated elite, it is uncertain whether their future lies in Mongolia, Kazakhstan, or elsewhere. For financially successful Kazakhs, the lure of Kazakhstan seems much less significant than for those who struggle economically.

When asked about economic and educational opportunities for their children and grandchildren, parents and grandparents often point to the lower cost of university

education and greater economic opportunities in Kazakhstan. Many non-migrants are contemplating migration in the near future. Post-2000, another wave of Mongolian Kazakhs is migrating to Kazakhstan. Some are remigrating (migrating back to Kazakhstan for a second time), while others are new migrants. New migrants include young families, college students, and those with fewer economic opportunities in Mongolia. For example, this might include individuals without their own livestock herds or no desire to herd livestock as a living. Based on our interviews, this group has completed fewer years of formal education and is less entrepreneurial.

The constant movement of migrants between Kazakhstan and Mongolia, whether for permanent or temporary migration or shorter-term visits, is changing the cultural context of rural western Mongolia. For now, the region is still dominated by Kazakhs, and is considered to be a Kazakh region. The long-term implication of these shifting migration trends for the Kazakh population in Mongolia is unclear. The relative isolation that has preserved Kazakh language and culture no longer exists.

Through travel, tourism, and television, Mongolian Kazakhs are

gradually becoming more and more connected to the global world. Remote "gers" of pastoralists sprout satellite dishes and solar panels making it possible to watch news, soap operas and sporting events from Kazakhstan, Mongolia, China and Russia without leaving the summer pastures. The markets overflow with fruits, vegetables and household goods from China and Russia. International tourism is also growing in the region and with it the associated employment opportunities and encounters with foreigners. Several new tourist "ger camps" opened during the summer of 2006, adding to the existing tourist facilities. Some herding families now host foreign tourists to supplement household income. Tourism, however, can not economically sustain local populations and as a greater number of young people move away from the herding lifestyle, new forms of economic development will have to occur to prevent continued out-migration. ■

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**Photo 4: Preparing a mare to be milked**

Kumis, fermented mare's milk, is a traditional food produced during the summer months when the foals are strong and there is sufficient pasture for the mares. Foals are tied to attract the mares during this time.

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