Abstract

This thesis examines embodied experiences of socialist collectivization and post pastoral reform among Kazakh people in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, People’s Republic of China. Through (auto)ethnography, oral history, material culture and performance, I explore how the structural processes of Chinese development shape ordinary Kazakh lifeworlds, subjectivities, and memory-scapes.

This work traces Kazakh epistemologies pertaining to land, language, and relationships expressed through oral poetry, creative writing, life-cycle rituals, and storytelling. After the introduction and context chapter, five chapters address distinct historical and cultural aspects of Kazakh women’s experiences in Xinjiang. First, I trace the history of family and community through women’s memories about the Altay state ranch during Mao’s China. Secondly, I analyze the 1962 Yi-Ta incident from the perspective of generational displacement. The Yi-Ta incident rendered the Kazakh borderlands a veritable military colony and separated generations of Kazakh families across the Sino-Soviet split. Third, I discuss elderly Kazakh women’s laments and acts of ritualized mourning as a way to make and maintain meaning within the post-socialist secularized landscape. I argue that these practices make otherwise taboo social and political traumas “sayable” in an environment of restricted expression. Fourth, I show how a recent Kazakh author uses notions of traditional knowledge about human-nature relationships and ecology to interpret the changeable politics of Kazakh life and society in twentieth century Xinjiang. Fifth, I analyze a contemporary Kazakh improvisational oral poetry debate to illustrate the interplay of gender, nationalism, and folklore practice in the contemporary trans-national Kazakh community.
Despite being far away from the state center, Kazakh women in China’s northwestern frontier rework the state’s template in telling a gendered history of their lives, their experiences, and their society. Their memories and experiences reveal sensory notions of place and time that challenge the state’s discourse of ecological civilization. They respond to social transformations as well as gendered and generational injustices through “veiled sentiments” of poetry. Showcasing entanglements of agency and affect as well as contentious acts of place-making and history-making in contemporary Xinjiang, this project illustrates complex internal dynamics and subjectivities among Kazakhs.
Lay Summary

In between dual Imperial centers such as China and Russia, ethnic Kazakh history is often written by the ones with power and deemed as unchanging and static. This study not only presents a dynamic history-making process, but also a gendered analysis on how social transformations, representations, and agencies interact in a myriad way.

Focusing on the period from socialist collectivization in the 1950s till today, this study examines embodied practices of Kazakh social remembering in the Northwestern frontier of China. Through (auto)ethnography, oral history, memoir, material culture and oral poetry performance, I explore multiple generations of women’s strategies in maintaining family bonds, kinship ties, and knowledge transmission in the face of nationwide amnesia of Maoist trauma and nowadays development-oriented Chinese capitalism. This study demonstrates a history and lifeworld that is alternate to the state power and narrated from Kazakhs’ own vantage point pertaining to land, language, and interpersonal relationships.
Preface

This dissertation is an original intellectual product of the author, Guldana Salimjan. The fieldwork throughout the dissertation was covered by UBC Ethics Certificate number H15-00208.

Parts of chapter six have been published in:


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<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CCP</td>
<td>Chinese Communist Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>ETR</td>
<td>East Turkestan Republic</td>
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<tr>
<td>GMD</td>
<td>Guomindang (The Nationalist Party of China)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICH</td>
<td>Intangible Cultural Heritage</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kazakh SSR</td>
<td>Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic</td>
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<tr>
<td>OBOR</td>
<td>One Belt One Road</td>
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<tr>
<td>PLA</td>
<td>People’s Liberation Army</td>
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<td>PRC</td>
<td>People’s Republic of China</td>
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<tr>
<td>XPCC</td>
<td>Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps</td>
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<tr>
<td>XUAR</td>
<td>Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region</td>
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Transcription

Most of the non-English terms in this dissertation are in Kazakh and Chinese. I use this transliteration system based on modern Arabic Kazakh script, which is used primarily by Kazakhs in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in China. This system is easy to type on keyboard without adding foreign symbols and it reflects Chinese Kazakh orthography. In Kazakhstan, there are different conventions for transcribing Cyrillic Kazakh to Latin script.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Arabic</th>
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†: optional vowel
†EKG rule of China's Kazakh script: e, k, or g indicate a front vowel environment, and so front vowels are not marked in words containing e, k, or g. In Arabic Kazakh writing, front vowel words without e, k, or g are marked with a dayekshe (۪) at the beginning of the word. I use an apostrophe to symbolize dayekshe (۪), for example ‘biz (we) or ‘omir (life), but not in bizdiki (ours) or omirde (in life). Some words borrowed from other languages do not obey vowel harmony, and if a switch to front vowels happens after the initial vowel it is not marked, for example mughalim - back u and a, but front i - and then any suffixes follow the final vowel, so mughalimdik and not mughalimdiq.

I follow this transcription system for transcribing the Kazakh sayings, poems, and songs, as well as the loan words from Arabic and Persian. For the place names, I choose to use the standard spellings that are already accepted widely, for example, Tarbagatai, Hoboksar, or Ürümchi. Some place names I mainly used their Kazakh names as they appeared in conversations and added their Chinese names in the footnotes.

For Chinese terms, I use both pinyin¹ and its corresponding simplified Chinese characters.

¹ pinyin, or Hányǔ Pīnyīn, is the official romanization system for Standard Chinese in Mainland China.
Glossary

agha: Kz. Older brother.

akem aw: Kz. Endearment term, meaning my dear.

apa: Kz. A respectful term to address to elderly women, it means grandmother, granny.

appay: Kz. A respectful term to address to middle aged or elder women.

apeke: Kz. A respectful term to address older sister.

aqil: Kz. intellect; intelligence; recommendation; reason; wit; intellect; mind; advice; sense.

aqin: Kz. Oral poets, or bards that engage in aytis competition with one another. It also generally refers to poets nowadays, both oral and written.

awil: Kz. Scholars believe that awil is the most basic unit of Kazakh social structure in mobile pastoralism. It is usually composed of several families herding and migrating on relatively fixed patterns, maintaining specific pastures within those migration routes and herding together. Nowadays, awil usually means hometown, rural areas, or countryside.

aytis: Kz. Aytis is a central component of Kazakh oral literature. It is a duelling performance of improvised oral poetry between two aqins accompanying themselves on the dombra, a two-stringed plucked instrument.

bianzhi: Ch.编制 refers to Chinese state’s control on budgetary and personnel allocations for government agencies, an allotment of approved posts at state agencies.

bosagha: Kz. The door post of the yurt, a symbol of home, homeland, and the place of birth. For example, it is used in a blessing to newly married couples: bosaghang berik bolsin, shangiraghing byik bolsin (may your bosagha be steady, and your shangiraq be high). Shangiraq means the skylight of the yurt on the top.
Chinggisid: this term originates from Mongol name Chinggis with an English suffix -id
(indicating a sect, or followers of a person, or cult). Chinggisid can be understood as the
descendants of Chinggis Khan, who were the noble ruling class among Mongols,
Kazakhs, and other people of Inner Asia. It conferred political legitimacy on people in
areas previously under Mongol authority.

danwei: Ch. 单位 refers to a work unit, a place of employment in China. As a socialist legacy,
danwei guarantees life-time employment and security, known as the “iron rice bowl,”
with affiliated services and benefits such as housing, childcare, schools, clinics, and so
on. The danwei system has been put into competition with private enterprises and foreign
invested corporations in the liberalized Chinese economy, but it is still desirable for its
security and welfare benefits.

dombra: Kz. a long-necked, two-stringed plucked instrument. Dombra is the most iconic,
popular Kazakh music instrument, and it often appears on Kazakh TV programs,
publications, webpages, wedding ornaments, invitations, and aytis convention icon.

hukou: Ch. 户口 is the Household Registration System in China. It is a social control
mechanism to prevent free flow of the population with a stress on preserving resources in
urban areas. China’s central planning sets jobs and services contingent on a residency
limit for individuals living in the area. The hukou system has perpetuated rural urban
segregation, unequal development, and regional discrimination (Cheng and Selden 1994).

japakesh: Kz. and Uy. japakesh means “victim of hardship, hardworking” in Turkic languages,
with Arabic root jafa and Persian root kesh.

jelek: Kz. jelek is a piece of clothing covering the whole body of the young bride for modesty.
It’s usually tight in the neck and wrists and wide in the bottom. This piece of clothing is
not worn by brides nowadays, and it can only be found in museums exhibiting Kazakh material culture.

**jenge:** Kz. Older brother’s wife, sister-in-law.

**joqtaw:** Kz. Elegy for the dead, usually performed by women family members of the deceased at the funeral and the subsequent lament rituals when visitors come give condolences.

**jut:** Kz. Severe winter storm disaster, heavy snow can cover the grass and cause large sum of livestock starve or freeze to death.

**jurt:** Kz. Hometown, the base of the yurt, heritage house, people, mass, or compatriots in one’s ancestral place.

**jwsan:** Kz. A type of Artemisia, specifically *A. absinthium*, also known as wormwood.

**koris:** Kz. A farewell ritual, or the embodied performance of songs and poems. *kor* means to see, and the farewell ritual in action is called *koris aytw, korisw* (sing koris), or *dawistap korisw* (sing *koris* in loud wailing). *Koris* can be sung at the bride's farewell to her natal home on the wedding day. The lament at the funerals is also called *koris*. Elders say that *koris* can be performed when family members reunite after a long time. In summary, *koris* expresses the sentiments of seeing or not seeing others before or after an unlimited time, and it is always related to a long journey before or afterwards.

**mangdaysha:** Kz. lintel, door header

**madenyet:** Ar. originated from Arabic: *madeny*. It means culture, civilization, or cultural heritage.

**mehnat:** Kz. This is a Persian loan word in Kazakh, meaning labor, or toil. In Persian this word means trial, test, or tribulation. In Turkic languages, it is a bit closer to “toil.”
minkaohan: Ch. 民考汉 is a Chinese term refers to ethnic minorities students take courses and exams in Mandarin Chinese, while minkaomin (Ch. 民考民) refers to ethnic minorities who take courses and exams in their own native languages. Minkaohan students have better education and employment opportunities than minkaomin students for their skilled mastery of Mandarin Chinese. They are stereotyped as having alienated from their mother tongues and cultures, yet still seen as the ethnic ‘other’ by Han people. Minkaohan are thus at an in-between position and often touted as “the fourteenth ethnic minority in Xinjiang” besides the thirteen officially categorized ethnic minority groups.

neke: Kz. neke is the Kazakh word for Arabic term nikah, which means marriage in Islamic law. For Kazakhs in China, Islamic wedding contract nikah hosted by an Imam is observed as a prerequisite ritual to the celebratory wedding feast (toy).

otaw: Kz. young couple’s residence, traditionally a yurt next to the groom’s parents’ residence, ulken uy.

oybay: Kz. exclamation remark used when being shocked.

oyboy: Kz. exclamation remark used when being frustrated and impatient.

qos: Kz. A tent structured with dozens of wooden poles and covered with felt rug. It is shaped like a cone, with a skylight at the top. It is convenient to set up and take down for temporary encampment.

qaraghim: Kz. endearment term, meaning “the pupil of my eyes.”

qudayim: Kz. exclamation remark, meaning “oh my god.”

shangiraq: Kz. shangiraq is the skylight part of the yurt and can symbolize family and household, as expressed in a blessing, “shangiraghing byik bolsin!” (May your skylight
be tall and majestic). When migrating between pastures, *shangiraq* is fastened well on a camel to secure its elevated position, because if a *shangiraq* falls on the ground, it is considered ominous. The youngest son’s household inherit the family’s lineage and property is called *qara shangiraq*, and it will represent their parents and ancestors in the community and be the site for family reunion and kinship solidarity.

‘shy: Kz. needle grass. It is an important life material for nomadic Kazakhs, it can be fodder for livestock, it also can be weaved with wool and made into the screens as the yurt wall.

*suzhi*: Ch. 素质 is a Chinese word that can be roughly translated as quality.

taypa: Kz. tribal organization or clan, self-identified through descent from a common ancestor and geographic location.

‘tor: Kz. A distinguished guest seat, usually located opposite to and furthest from the door.

‘torkin: Kz. A woman's natal home, where she was born as well as her family, relative, and neighbors. When she returns to her *torkin* from her patrilocal residence after marriage, she is welcomed and treated as a guest to her natal home and people.

toy: Kz. *toy* is the umbrella term for feasts amongst Turkic speaking peoples in the Central Asian region, and it is an important part of their social and economic life embodied in various communal gatherings and celebrations. For Kazakh society in Xinjiang, it is an important rite of passage that positions a person accordingly in the social community. According to Clauson, *toy* is originally ‘a camp’ in the physical sense of an aggregate of tents; thence the people living in such a camp, ‘a community’; thence any ‘large gathering’; and finally, ‘a feast,’ and esp. ‘a wedding feast’. See Sir Gerard Clauson. *An Etymological Dictionary of Pre-Thirteenth-Century Turkish*. Oxford. Clarendon Press. pg. 566.
**tundik:** Kz. The felt cover of the yurt skylight. The daughter-in-law of the household’s first task every morning is to open the *tundik*. *Tundik basi* can also symbolize every household.

**ulken uy:** Kz. The elder’s household in an *awil*, also called *qara shangiraq*.

**wiq:** Kz. *wiq* is the wooden poles that form the yurt’s roof structure.

**zanggi:** Kz. *zanggi* was a Qing official title still applied in Kazakh official administration prior to 1950s.

**Zhonghua minzu:** Ch. 中华民族. Chinese nationality. It forms the Chinese national identity through the political discourse of “plurality and unity in the configuration of the Chinese Nationality (中华民族多元一体格局).”
Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not be possible without my parents’ understanding and support of my pursuit for PhD in a foreign country far away from them. I feel guilty for not fulfilling my obligation as a daughter to them. During my fieldwork time in Xinjiang, they tried their best to help me contact people they know. As part of the generation that first settled in Ürümchi after college, they taught me what it means being a Kazakh in China through their everyday actions. They have always been generous and hospitable, accommodating their rural relatives and acquaintances, and helping them navigate urban life in Ürümchi. When they visit their home villages, their passion ignited in them as well as their connections to the surroundings and peoples constantly remind me of my origin, language, and roots.

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At this point I feel so privileged to have befriended so many great minds in my PhD years, and they have not only supported me along the way but also enriched my life significantly. Last but not least, this research is made possible by generous support from UBC Faculty of Arts Graduate Award, Graduate Student Research Award, Charlotte Douglas Fee Graduate Award, Pan Tianshou Scholarship, GRSJ Graduate Scholarship, as well as multiple Travel Funds and Stipends from UBC Institute for Asian Research, Association of Feminist Anthropology, Central Eurasian Studies Society, National Women’s Studies Association, and a Dissertation Workshop organized by the Association of Asian Studies. I hereby also thank Central Asian Survey for allowing me to reuse part of my published article “Debating Gender and Kazakhness: Memory and Voice in Poetic Duel Aytis between China and Kazakhstan” in this dissertation.
This work is dedicated to Ardak Islam, my dear *naghashim* (maternal uncle) who passed away in 2015. He was a great singer and dombra player and loving husband and father to his family.
Introduction

This study examines embodied practices of Kazakh social memory through socialist collectivization to post-Mao decollectivization and into the present period of rapid capitalist development in Xinjiang. Using Kazakh language sources such as oral history, memoirs, and oral literature, as well as Chinese gazetteers, ethnological documents, and archives of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), my work traces Kazakh epistemologies of land, language, and interpersonal relationships against the backdrop of Chinese development. Showcasing entanglements of agency and affect as well as contentious acts of place-making and history-making, this project illustrates complex subjectivities, internal dynamisms, and communal strategies among Kazakhs that are absent in current studies of Chinese frontiers and borderlands.

Scholars tend to use state-centered historical frames to study China’s internal colonial expansion; for example, the impact of collectivization and then capitalism on peripheral pastoral areas in Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and Tibet. There is, however, little research about how these processes interact with people’s own meaning-making, local knowledge, and sentiments for place. The Chinese state views grasslands as battlefields, national borders, and resource extraction sites but seldom as places bound up in the social lives of pastoralists with a spiritual belonging. Borrowing anthropologist Audra Simpson’s (2007) words, pastoralists’ ownership of territory became “unknowable, unimportant, and sieved through analytics” (70).

Using feminist (auto)ethnography and decolonizing methodologies, this study decenters the state’s linear, static definition of Kazakh history and identity in China by telling a multi-dimensional history of place-making through practices of remembering and forgetting.
Concomitant with the tightening of political censorship and surveillance of everyday life in Xinjiang, family and communal events have become the last unaltering platforms for active reconstruction of the past. Kazakh elders engage in intergenerational education within their community through embodied practices of storytelling, revisiting ancestral burial places, and participating in life-cycle events to reinforce generational bonds. Utilizing the state’s “speaking bitterness” template, they tell their own stories of survival of man-made disasters and political rectifications. Oral poets also reinvigorate collective memories of the past by naming places and heroes. These actions and narratives travel in time by dialoguing with ancestors, and in doing so participate and construct history themselves.

Taking an intersectional perspective on ethnicity, gender, generation, and locale from a historical and transnational viewpoint, this study examines power relations and representations in China and neighboring Kazakhstan, the countries in which most Chinese Kazakhs reside. By examining multiple generations of Kazakh women’s life stories and oral traditions, this research addresses familial, communal, and environmental aspects of social history. They are shaped by socialist state violence and respond to the dispossession of pastoral lands happening under development projects in the post-Mao era. When pastoral space is dramatically reorganized for production, urban planning, and political administration, memories become a fertile ground to produce a sense of place and community in the face of wealth disparities, generational gaps, weakening native language abilities, and the loss of ancestral sites and pastures. Elders who have gone through both collectivization and the reform era remember and rework the social community (awil) as a symbol of solidarity and interdependency prior to 1950s, notably by forgetting its inherent class hierarchies. Memory is a field of intertwining sentiments. The elders condemned the harsh commune labor, but also celebrated their own resilience and contribution.
However, this sense of validation is more attributed to their positions within the social community instead of in relation to the state. Simultaneously, their memories are also interwoven with narratives of morality as Muslim Kazakh women cope with gendered and generational injustices within the broader scope of China. In the end, this research shows how in Xinjiang, a police state embedded in “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” Kazakhs are in a constant struggle for control over the pastoral-nomadic past but at the same time demonstrate their enduring cultural resilience in the face of overwhelming odds.

A Historical Overview

The three regimes of the Manchu Qing empire, Republican China, and the modern PRC consecutively situated Xinjiang as a frontier and its indigenous populations as subjects (Jacobs 2016; Millward 2007; Perdue 2005; Schluessell 2016). In Peter Perdue’s (2016) words, “Imperial formations survived into the era of the nation-state, and both imperial and modern states maintained an ethnic hierarchy” (154). Colonial terminologies are deeply ingrained in language. Xinjiang is a Chinese word literally meaning new dominion or new frontier. It was coined by the Qing imperial rulers after Dzungaria, the northern part of Xinjiang, and the southern Tarim Basin merged and became part of Qing Empire in the 1880s. The power interplay between Soviet forces as well as Han and Dungan—Chinese Muslim, now known as Hui—warlords in the early twentieth century took a heavy toll on Turkic Muslim peoples in Xinjiang (Brophy 2016; Jacobs 2016; Wang 2013). Warlord Sheng Shicai in Xinjiang actively worked with the Soviet Union to reinforce his domination in the region, which the Soviet Union had in mind for the future annexation. The multiple dimensions of Sheng’s suppression led to several local resistance and uprisings which broke out in Ili, Tarbagatai, and the Altay regions. However, these resistance
movements and the foundations of East Turkestan Republic (ETR)\textsuperscript{2} were later thwarted and absorbed as part of the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) revolution against the Nationalist party of China.

The modern Chinese state inherited its imperial legacy and invented a comprehensive concept of \textit{zhonghua minzu} (Chinese nation) adapted from Stalin’s mode of ethnicity.\textsuperscript{3} From 1954 to 1987, the Chinese state carried out an ethnic classification project (Ch: mínzú shìbié 民族识别) and officially classified fifty-six ethnic groups, with 91.9% of the population classified as ethnic Han while the remaining fifty-five were and continue to be called “ethnic minorities” (Ch: shǎoshǔ mínzú 少数民族). Mao’s New China was characterized by a series of political and economic reforms that remodeled national, ethnic, and gender identities for the common national goals of constructing socialist modernity. Under the guidance of Marxist material stage theory, the state determined developmental stages of ethnic groups, labeling the majority agricultural Han as more civilized in culture and technology while it labeled pastoral peoples at the periphery as pre-agricultural and in need of technological aid. The first Five Year Plan emphasized industrial development, especially heavy industry and capital-intensive technology, and set the tone for the hierarchical economic planning that designated western peripheral regions for resource extraction. Socialist remodeling of pastoral areas in Northern Xinjiang commenced before the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) was founded in 1955.

\textsuperscript{2} There were two ETRs, one founded in 1933 and another in 1946. Both had ambitions of national sovereignty for Turkic Muslim peoples.

\textsuperscript{3} State ethnologist Fei Xiaotong is credited with raising the ideas of \textit{zhonghua minzu} (Chinese nationality, zhōnghuá mínzú 中华民族) and the discourse of “plurality and unity in the configuration of the Chinese Nationality” (1989, 1-19). In recent years, China abandoned the previous English translation “nationality” to depoliticize the national consciousness entailed in the term.
The Kazakhs are a Turkic Muslim people who traditionally led a mobile pastoral life and lived in the Central Asian steppe. Positioned between two powerful empires—Tsarist Russia and the Qing Empire—as well as the succeeding Soviet Union and People’s Republic of China (PRC), Kazakhs underwent several waves of migration due to fluctuating border demarcations and imperial expansions. From the Treaty of Tarbagatai in 1864 that claimed Kazakh land and people from the Qing to become Tsarist Russian subjects, to the Soviet Union’s human made famine in the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) in the 1930s, Kazakhs became refugees in flight between two colonial powers. Under the tension of the Sino-Soviet split, a large number of Kazakhs fled westward to the Soviet Union in 1962 under the pressure of Mao’s Great Leap Forward and influx of Han settlers. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the Kazakh SSR became the independent nation-state of Kazakhstan, and resumed diplomatic relations with China. At present, there are more than a million Kazakhs living in China’s Northern part of Xinjiang, as well as a smaller number in Gansu and Qinghai provinces. All of them are classified as one of fifty-five ethnic minorities in China, hasake zu (Ch: 哈萨克族 ethnic Kazakh).
Figure 1 Northern Xinjiang and its position in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and China

The place names marked in Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture are my field sites. Some of the place names are marked in Kazakh pronunciation with Chinese names in brackets (Map prepared by UBC Geography Department).
Literature Review

Scholars have conducted intensive research exploring the colonial processes of imperial regimes in Chinese Central Asia (Jacobs 2016; Millward 2007; Perdue 2005; Schluessell 2016), examining how imperial powers subjugated this frontier region as a resource reserve for developmental projects since the late nineteenth century (Cliff 2009, 2016; Kinzley, forthcoming). Eric Schluessell (2016, 21) argues that this process could be characterized with what Stevan Harrell (1995) has conceptualized as a “Confucian civilizing project,” with a hierarchal relation of the center dominating the peripheral others. Justin Jacobs (2016) argues that, after the Qing collapsed in 1912, Han rulers shifted from “strategies of difference” (8) that manipulated Muslim begs (Uy and Kz: aristocratic elites) and Mongol princes during Governor Yang Zengxin’s times (1863-1928) to warlord Sheng Shicai’s “strategies of ethnopolulism” adapted from Soviet rule in cultivating ETR leaders (1933-1944) (89). Jacobs concludes that modern China is an empire, as “[t]he strategies used by Han officials ruling Xinjiang were neither especially Manchu nor Nationalist nor Communist, but were techniques drawn from the imperial repertoire of finance, defense, administration, and ideology to maintain the hierarchal relationship of center and periphery” (231).

Recent decades saw increasingly violent ethnic conflicts in Xinjiang resulting from a complex constellation of religious restrictions, systemic economic dispossessions, and cultural assimilation that threatens the native ethnic minorities in the region, especially Uyghurs who are the biggest Turkic Muslim group in Xinjiang. Scholars have paid close attention to Chinese policies and Muslim resistance from sociological and political science studies perspectives (Bovingdon 2010; Gladney 2004; Starr 2004). A growing body of anthropological research using qualitative methods focuses on how state power shapes interethnic relations, artistic expression,
and subjectivity in the region (Bellér-Hann and Smith Finley 2007; Byler 2018; Harris 2008; Smith Finley 2013), but this is mainly limited to Uyghur experience in the contemporary era.

There is limited work that deploys a feminist intersectional perspective. Cindy Huang (2009) opened the issue beyond ethnic tension and explored how gender interplays with ethnicity, class, and religion. Employing oral history methods and ethnography, her work is one of the first works examining lived experience and subjectivities of Uyghur women in different generations in Ürümchi during different periods of China's development (socialist, reform and post-reform). Presenting vividly the ambivalences of generational narratives and “middle class” dreams, her work tells the life as experienced by Muslim Uyghur women in contemporary Xinjiang. Jay Dautcher (2009) captures complexities of the construction of Uyghur masculinity through social practices such as nicknaming, social gatherings, and jokes, and demonstrates in depth the mundane but still vibrant everyday life of forming oneself within the community.

Ildikó Bellér-Hann (2008) provides a historical reconstruction of Uyghur life prior to the Chinese revolution, using textual sources written by locals and European travelers, oral history, and Chinese materials. She brings into focus the importance of community and reciprocity, life-cycle events, and religion for Uyghur communities, and shows us how women’s domestic responsibilities such as control over food granted them an important source of power (199); her work challenges Chinese and Russian representations of women as passive victims of Islamic culture.

Alfred Emmons Hudson’s (1938) work in Soviet Kazakhstan examines the origin of Kazakh social groupings and their relation to economic life, family, marriage, and political structure, using Russian ethnological documents and local informants. George Moseley (1966) explores the under-researched Kazakh experience of regime changes from the ETR to PRC
collectivization and the purge of local nationalism. He argues it was these widespread hostilities that led to large exodus of Kazaks and Uyghurs across border into Soviet Union in 1962 (107-115). Linda Benson and Ingvar Svanberg (1998) wrote the first general survey of China Kazakh history in English using newspapers, government reports, and yearbooks. The book focuses on the twentieth century and discusses the Kazakh position in Xinjiang and Central Asia as well as the geopolitical implications of the newly established Kazakhstan. Benson and Svanberg documented the high tide of collectivization and religious persecution as well as the political and economic transformations in the reform era—a Kazakh life under PRC rule. Scholars focus more on Soviet and post-Soviet Kazakhstan since Xinjiang was and remains less accessible to outside researchers. Nathan Light (1994) sheds light on Kazakh history as it was experienced by analyzing a historical novel *The Last Encampment* by Qabdesh Zhumadilov, an exodus writer from Tacheng, Xinjiang (26). Light argues that Zhumadilov’s novel helps us better understand Kazakh cultural principles on a local level that is often left out in the writing of large scale histories (27).

Working with diaspora Kazakhs in Turkey, Dru Gladney (2004) interprets their identification to genealogies as a “nomadic nostalgia,” even relating it to the problem of overgrazing in pastoral regions in Xinjiang (195-200). This seemingly objective, modernistic, and overgeneralized term begs for deconstruction and decolonization. Caroline Humphrey and David Sneath (1999) have already criticized “nomadism” as a romanticized colonial misconception, and they point out that the term “mobile pastoralism” acknowledges a flexible system of local knowledge as involved in a technologically advanced and profit-oriented economic activity. As their multi-sited fieldwork in post socialist Russia, China, and Mongolia demonstrates, studies on pastoralism must be located in particular historical contexts.
Meanwhile, who has the right to decide who is nostalgic? What are Kazakhs nostalgic for? Who among them are nostalgic? For what period? Under what circumstances? To answer these questions, a serious examination of the power relations and representations from a historical and transnational perspectives is required.

Pastoralists like Mongols and Kazakhs are perpetually represented as groups that are “in pursuit of water and grass” (Ch: zhú shuǐcǎo ér jū 逐水草而居) in Chinese textbooks and brief ethnic history publications, as if they are aimless wanderers and without social structures. Since 1950, they became subjects of the textual and epistemological conquest of central economic planning from Inner China, “a land and people in the way” of Chinese development (William 2002, 1). Scholars acknowledge that collectivization played a key role in Chinese colonization and subjugation of Northern Xinjiang (McMillen 1979; Moseley 1966), and decollectivization led to the scientific management of grassland and profit-driven, environmentally detrimental policies (Cerny 2008; Zukosky 2006). There is still little understanding of how these processes interact with people’s concepts of and sentiments concerning place. The Chinese state views grasslands as battlefields, national borders, and resource extraction sites but seldom as places bound up in the social lives of pastoralists with a spiritual belonging. This parallels the colonial management of indigenous societies in North America; as Audra Simpson (2007) argues, colonial history and law-making has rendered indigenous ownership of territory irrelevant, and disrupted Indians’ means for defining kinship and determining community (70-73).

Rian Thum’s (2014) work Sacred Routes of Uyghur History demonstrates how Uyghurs are the agents of history-making instead of solely focusing on their counter relationship with the Chinese state. By linking geographical destinations of shrines, tazkirah (an orally recited and written practice), and the social practice of pilgrimage, he argues that Uyghur identity and
history is embedded within and constructed by these pilgrimages and oral practices. With the seeing, hearing, and reciting of tazkirah at the shrines, Uyghurs created their community of the “Six Cities” (Uy: Altishahr) of the Tarim Basin. Eva-Marie Dubuisson (2017a) focuses on individual and family strategies in Kazakhstan. She explores the Kazakh ancestral worldview conveyed through bata blessings, family genealogies, and oral poetic duels known as aytis. She argues that “language and ancestry become a means of coping and solving – as well as criticizing and changing – ongoing social and political problem in Kazakhstan today” (4). Both scholars stress the communal alternatives to identifying with the state or state defined identities, as well as imagining communities across time and space. Manduhai Buyandelger (2013) complicates the divide between socialism and post socialism as well as history and memory. She demonstrates that memories are (re)produced under anxiety from both the tragic socialist past and current neoliberal capitalism in Mongolia. The economy of shamanism enabled Buryat shamans to become cultural producers and history makers by “dispersing, diversifying, and personalizing the past that has been flattened and generalized by state socialism” (16). Moreover, this process is done through memory as an activity of respect, “a culturally mediated and emotionally entangled relationship between spirits and people” (17). The way memory and social relations entangle echoes the Kazakh ancestral worldview, which is also a “mobile history” different from the state’s linear model (20).

Buyandelger, Thum, and Dubuisson’s approaches demonstrate communities’ agency to interpret past, present, and future, as well as their resilience and creativity in sustaining their culture, identities, and livelihoods. My research emphasizes Chinese Kazakh people’s own interpretation and meaning-making processes through reminiscence and revisiting ancestral places as well as conversing with the past and present through poetry and life-cycle rituals. These
actions and narratives decenter the state’s definition of Kazakh history in China, but travel in
time, “dialogue with the ancestors” (Dubuisson 2017a), and “participate in history” themselves
(Thum 2014). While Buyandelger and Dubuisson have both argued for the continuities of
socialism in post socialist everyday life, the constructed past is more or less parallel with or
alternative to the state’s cultural nationalism. My work presents Chinese Kazakhs’ predicament
in a police-state and “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” which makes exerting control
over the past difficult, and accommodating to Chinese norms a necessity. Social dynamism and
strategies of Chinese Kazakhs must be contextualized within the power and representation
politics in Xinjiang and Sino-Kazakhstan history. It has become crucial and urgent to study
Kazakhs’ changing perspectives and experiences regarding land, knowledge, and social relations
from a gendered and multigenerational perspective.

Inspired by Ildikó Bellér-Hann’s (2008) feminist perspective on Uyghur women’s
religious practices at life-cycle events, my research investigates how multi-generational Kazakh
women negotiate Islamic and pastoral nomadic practices that are integral to their gender and
cultural performances. The way that Islam is integrated in Kazakh identity is well demonstrated
in extensive ethnographic and historical researches (DeWeese 1994; Frank 2001; Privatsky 2001;
Rorlich 2003). However, gender politics in relations to these religious duties and performances
through the realm of memory remain underexplored.

By focusing on a Muslim population who is outside of the traditional academic
discussion of Islamic world, this research informs diversity of gender relations and Islamic

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4 Socialism with Chinese Characteristics is an official ideology of the Communist Party of China. It is based on
Marxism-Leninism and scientific Socialism. Deng Xiaoping adopted market reform and private ownership into
China’s planned economy while also maintaining Socialist ideological control and control over the relations of
production.
identities. As Turkic peoples in Central Asia, Kazakhs and Uyghurs converge in their Islamic practices through household rites include Quran recitals, sacred meals, rites of passage (circumcision, marriage, and funeral), and Islamic holiday Ramadan (*Qurban Ayt* in Kazakh). Bruce Privratsky (2001) approaches Kazakh religion from the angle of social and embodied memory to demonstrate how it is best understood as pastoral contextualization of Islam, not as survival of preIslam (15). In his words, Kazakh Islam is manifested in “culinary events and ceremonial meals where food and a Quran recital are dedicated to the ancestor-spirits” (18), as he quotes Devin Deweese’s idea that these indigenous elements such as the offering of food to ancestors in the hearth ritual were long ago “encountered and overcome or assimilated” by Islam (1996, 113). Bellér-Hann (2015) also follows Deweese in arguing that the focus of Inner Asian religious life is communiality, which is expressed in the domestic cult of ancestors (199-200). In Central Asian Islamic practices, in contrast with male mullahs or religious clerics, women have important positions within the communities dealing with supernatural beings as healers, practitioner of domestic cult of the ancestors, or fortune-tellers (Bellér-Hann 2001, 2015; Privratsky 2001; Sultanova 2011). However, how are these gender variations manifested and shifting in a secular Chinese context plagued with ethnic tensions and economic inequality? How has religious piety embodied differently across the schism of eras and respatialization? My work fills this lacuna in current scholarship.

**Theoretical Orientations**
Making Self and Other in China

Modern nation-states naturalize sovereignty, essentialize timeless national identities, and efficiently organize biopolitics. China's pursuit of modernity since the beginning of twentieth century has been a process of negotiating its position in a global order of nation-states, with the price being that various populations are incorporated, classified, and mobilized under its state power and capitalist accumulations. In China, the essentialized Self is Han, as a masculine symbol of a “five-thousand-year-old civilization,” while the manageable and marketable Other are women, peripheral peoples, and peasant bodies. This process is implemented through the technopolitics of: 1) place making and identity; 2) politics of subjection and subject making; 3) scientific management and biopolitics.

Chinese nation builders have adopted a linear evolutionary historical narrative to claim sovereign authority over national bodies, lands, and cultures; and construct a “regime of authenticity” to officially forget the bloody origins of the nation (Duara 1998, 290). Chinese researchers actively participated in the state’s projects of history-making and place-making, documenting folklore, surveying lands, transcribing languages, and categorizing traditions (Linke 1990). Ethnic minorities were objectified and orientalized to legitimize the state’s authority to rule over a homogenous, constructed majority of Han subjects (Gladney 1994, 117). While time becomes linear, place is hierarchically spatialized. The political and economic center maintains hegemonic control over the peripheral ethnic “autonomous regions” and vast sprawling rural areas through the application of sexual, educational, and historical metaphors (Harrell 1995, 10-15). While China was going through profound economic and social transformation to participate in the global economy, it examined itself internally to orient itself toward Western modernity. The state mobilized a national discourse of suzhi (Ch: sùzhì 素质,
meaning “quality”). As a neo-Confucianist term, it was revived by the government in 2005 to push for self-governance and the moral indoctrination of national subjects, especially rural populations, as people the state perceived as needing to elevate their “quality” and “civility” (Ch: wénmíng 文明) (Anagnost 1997; Wu and Devine 2017). The center and periphery dichotomy is layered with notions of reterritorialized national space between “the developed, wealthy, civilized regions and backward, poverty-ridden regions of the periphery” (Anagnost 1997, 77).

The politics of subjection in China are crucial for the regulation and management of biopower that is endlessly fueled by national subjects. Lisa Rofel (1999) notes, “[m]odernity persists as a powerful order that leads government leaders, development agents, intellectual elites, subaltern workers and peasants, and women—those who represent political power as well those who are the objects of its operations—to act in the name of the desire it engenders” (17-8). Several nation-wide campaigns rejecting tradition were carried out to create subjects such as Maoist women fùnǚ for socialist revolution; peasants and proletariats for land reform and for the overthrow of local social systems and hierarchies woven by family, kinship, and social relations.

Tani Barlow (1994) traces the constructs and destinies of several Chinese gender concepts in different historical and political contexts. She thinks the indigenous Chinese gender concepts were anchored in beliefs about family structure and social roles (253), for example, there are daughters (nǚ 女), wives (fù 妻), mothers (mǔ 母), but no generic category of woman. The binary gender concepts woman (nǚxing 女性) and man (nánxing 男性) emerged as elemental categories of colonial modernity in China. Nǚxing (woman) was a post May 4th movement concept to name the new category of woman to be mobilized in the new nation-state (267). Chinese philologist Liu Bannong invented the character of “she” (tā 她) during this period, which marked the time when the nationalist reformers and intellectuals started to see themselves as modern subjects through Western eyes. After the Communist takeover in 1949, nǚxing was rejected as “bourgeois,” “Europeanist,” or “a sign of Westernization,” and the term fùnǚ (female family members) was used to label women as a social category in the Maoist-communist state, to fit Mao’s campaigns of anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism (269). Thus, whether it is the Republic of China or Communist China, the essentialization and authentication of woman into generalized categories such as nǚxing and fùnǚ reflects the state’s neglect of the internal diversity and complexity of women and the its attempt to break down the social familial structures of “old China,” which culminated in the targeting of the entire population of women as national subjects in political mobilizations.
Nation-states adopt visions and methods for creating efficient and productive social orders in the system of transnational capital flows. In China, the “regime of authenticity” is not only for nation-building, but also for the scientific management of vast cultural resources to be categorized, researched, and studied as economic resources, markets, and wealth. However, this also led to complicated reactions in the form of ethnic identity assertions through both resistance and accommodation (Harrell 2002, 23-24). Eventually, most minority groups more or less identified themselves in accordance with the minzu designations. Thomas Mullaney (2011) argues that the continuity of the minzu paradigm requires “perpetual management by the state and continued participation by the people” (134-5). Since the launch of market reform (1978) and Western Development project (2000), the value of cultural resources is more and more structured by market ideology and the promotion of ethnic cultural heritage has become more crucial (Chao 2012, 184). Under the Chinese neoliberal regime and suzhi discourse, “human life becomes a new frontier for capital accumulation” (Anagnost 2004, 189). Ethnic tourism consumes bodies and authenticity quickly developed to become a “second phase of the creation of ethnic categories” (Chao 2012, 11). On certain occasions, minorities acknowledge and preserve certain aspects of their tradition and authenticity to empower themselves, to gain a voice and dignity within the dominant social order, and to resist the assigned marginality under the sign of “backwardness.” In 2006, China’s National Intangible Cultural Heritage project (ICH)\(^6\) became a vehicle for the economic development and international competition of soft power. Also, it functions as a new institution monitoring the development of state approved

cultural practices as well as which stories are to be told about the past and present: in particular, it tells the story of a harmonious, multiethnic, multicultural nation-state (Blumenfield and Silverman 2013, 4).

Anthropologist Dorothy Hodgson (2001) reminds us that “however totalizing the production and effects of development discourse may seem at a global level, development is always mediated, reshaped, and even resisted at local levels when policies are translated into practices” (9). The picture of Chinese modernity is thus only complete when non-state actors’ subjectivities, strategies, and narratives are included, as they provide the most inclusive viewing of systemic power on a local level.

The Soviet Paradox of Gender in Central Asia

Unlike the ethnic classification project in Southwest China studied by Mullaney, the crystallization of ethnic categories in Xinjiang happened much earlier during the Republican era, when Stalin's nationality policies were actively put into practice in Chinese Central Asia (Brophy 2016, 5). Turkic Muslim communities in Central Asia and Xinjiang share ethno-national and religious ties, also the common past of socialist prohibitions of their life-cycle events.

Deniz Kandiyoti (2007) describes the “Soviet paradox of gender” in currently independent Central Asian states. After the Soviet Union collapsed, former Central Asian republics each launched nation-building projects while carrying their Soviet legacy of crystalized nationhood and nationality. In reviving what they called their unique traditional cultural authenticity, referring to historical practices from pre-Soviet times determined to define a group’s culture, the newly independent Central Asian states burdened women with the pivotal role as guardians of traditions and national boundaries, instead of fully granting rights and
citizenship in public spheres. For example, compared to Soviet times, post-independent Uzbekistan’s “traditionalism,” Islamic revival, and regional instability are greater threats to local communal life and women’s social positions (Kandiyoti and Azimova 2004, 343-344). In Soviet times, Uzbek women were stuck between Soviet ideals and Uzbek virtues of being a woman, however, they still exercised agency and decision making (Kamp 2006, 2007), as their rituals carried out in the privacy of homes escaped Soviet scrutiny (Kandiyoti and Azimova 2004, 343). In Tajikistan, the making of identity is an ongoing process on national and local levels. Weddings have become a platform for people to produce and maintain cultural and Islamic identity in the context of drastic socio-economic changes and eroding social welfare protection (Roche and Hohmann 2011, 122). Nevertheless, women also maintain the power to supervise the events as well as ties with relatives (Werner 2000), their worlds of custom and ritual are still vibrant and resilient in expressing notions of community, memory, and honor (Kandiyoti and Azimova 2004, 344; Roche and Hohmann, 2011; Dubuisson 2017a).

The trajectories sought after modernity for China and Central Asian states diverge in important historical moments but overlap in their construction of self through “regimes of authenticity” and the politics of gender. Cynthia Werner (2000) and Dubuisson (2017a) have demonstrated that in Kazakhstan, people’s cultural strategies more or less coincide with (if not oppose) the state’s interest and pride in creating a unitary nation state. This is hardly the case for Xinjiang, where Uyghur Islamic identity and Kazakh pastoralism are considered to be in the way of China’s continuing expansion. Just as collectivization and sedentarization were means for social control of the pastoralists in the borderland, the discourse of stability in Xinjiang has been utilized as unending “promissory notes of transformation” that defer real transformation and well-being of the peoples (Stoler, McGranahan, and Perdue 2007, 8). As a new “zoning
technology” (Ong 2006), China’s “One Belt One Road” (OBOR)⁷ project launched in 2013 maps a neocolonial agenda into Central Asia, mirroring the Qing Empire’s center to periphery expansion model. Through proliferating Confucius Institutes and increasing Chinese investment in Central Asia nowadays, modern China is replicating its “imperial repertoire” via Xinjiang as a crucial gateway (Jacobs 2016, 124).

Methodology

Positionality

Growing up in Xinjiang, I was immersed in family histories and local discourses in everyday life. I also have firsthand experiences of encountering and making sense of state power in my own Chinese education and employment. My positionality informs my research and writing choices to employ an autoethnographic exploration of my own predicaments and experience as an ethnic minority woman in a colonized frontier. Following Leila Voloder (2008), I use “self-experience and interpretation to understand the experience of others and their intersection with wider social and cultural processes” (38). Throughout this dissertation, I also became a character in the bigger story of Kazakhs in Xinjiang. As much as I might enjoy certain “intimate affinities” with those among whom I conducted research because of my ethnicity and nationality (Narayan 1993, 671-72), there is also a vast generational rift, class difference, and

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⁷ In 2013, Chinese government proposed One Belt One Road Initiative (also known as Belt and Road Initiative BRI). It is a development strategy and China-centered trading network connecting Eurasian countries through Silk Road Economic Belt and Maritime Silk Road connecting China to Southeast Asia, Arabian Peninsula, Egypt and all the way to Europe. So far, the Initiative focused on infrastructure construction, investment, and transportation network development.
even a cultural gap among my participants and me. During my fieldwork from April 2015 to February 2016, these differences have challenged me to be self-reflexive about my own values and attitudes that I bring into the research process.

Many times, I felt quite frustrated and awkward doing research in my own community. In Xinjiang, one of the most important ICH projects is known as the Three Collections (Ch: sān tào jíchéng 三套集成), which are three enormous anthologies of folk music, stories, and proverbs with metadata that extends no further than the place and time of the collection. My self-introduction to local academic institutions and personnel always garnered a response such as, “have you read the Three Collections? It has everything you need.” The almost Biblical status of Three Collections points to the hegemony and unshakable authority of state institutions in defining ethnicity, culture, and folklore. Peoples’ histories, indigenous knowledge, experiences, and sentiments are depoliticized and reduced to tangible forms stacked in dust-collecting libraries, buried cassette tapes, or corrupted data on hard drives. Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s (1999) “research as a dirty word” also applies in China but a bit differently. For decades, elder, rural, and ethnic minorities have been exposed to the Chinese state’s positivisitic and “center to periphery” “research” projects such as Three Collections, and now they firmly believe that “research” is all about collections and documentation of their “ethnic cultures.”

My perceived identity as “a doctor” studying in Canada initiated conversations, and elicited admiration, but also created distance and power hierarchies in my interactions with people. I was even called a “foreigner” (Kz: sheteldik) sometimes, to the extent that the Public Security Bureau officers in Altay took it seriously and came to interrogate me when I was

8 see Aynur Kadir’s forthcoming dissertation at Simon Fraser University.
visiting a local folklorist. I was amused to find that my excluded position as a *minkaohan* (Ch: 民考汉 ethnic minority educated in Chinese-language schools)\(^9\) in my youth had changed to a *kanadaliq* (Kz: Canadian). At the same time, I had to face various judgements as a so-called “leftover woman” in China – a derogatory term for women who are not married. Unmarried, highly educated “female PhDs” (Ch: nǚ bóshì 女博士) are even mocked as “the third gender” (Ch: di sān lèi rén 第三类人) in popular discourse in China. It is still generally accepted that in China women are supposed to return to the domestic realm and give way to men in marriage and employment (Hong Fincher 2014). While in Xinjiang, political and economic uncertainty and anxiety have created an environment stressing stable state employment. Self-employment or business ownership are considered risky and unreliable. When such expectations intersect with gender differences, I was judged to be an unmarried woman “wandering around from place to place” in people’s gossip. I was lucky to be born in a family with a good background and reputation, a cultural value system that also functions under patriarchal social values in Xinjiang Kazakh society.

Through later research and writing, I have reflected more on my positionality and analyzed the social context of the above judgments and assumptions. I had to constantly adjust my parameters of feminist or anthropological analysis in different contexts: in rural or urban areas, in China or Canada depending on which audience I was speaking to. As a young woman I

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\(^9\) *Minkaohan* (Ch: 民考汉) is a Chinese term referring to ethnic minority students who take courses and exams in Mandarin Chinese, while *minkaomin* (Ch: 民考民) refers to ethnic minorities who take courses and exams in their own native languages. In China, *Minkaohan* students have better education and employment opportunities than *minkaomin* students due to their fluency in Mandarin Chinese. They are also stereotyped as having been alienated from their mother tongues and cultures, and still seen as the ethnic Other by Han people. *Minkaohan* are thus at an in-between position and often taunted as “the fourteenth ethnic minority in Xinjiang” besides the thirteen officially categorized ethnic minority groups.
admit I could not truly comprehend what my elderly research participants had experienced in the socialist era. The huge contrast between rural and urban quality of life and economic condition struck me hard, and I became painfully aware of my privileges as an urban middle-class, *minkaohan* Kazakh with much more mobility and discursive power in mainstream Chinese society than many of my interlocutors.

I had ethical dilemmas and struggles about what to include (or not) to protect my research participants, what and how to represent, and word choices writing in English. Emotions influenced my observation, interpretation and representation of women’s life stories (Wolf 1996). I feel indebted to the elders who generously shared their life stories with someone like me, who is so distant from their daily life and till this day trying to fully comprehend the immensity and depth of their history. My mother’s reminiscences of her natal hometown are carved into my memory and left me with a transgenerational trauma of displacement to which I have only found solace by researching deep into the buried stories of the Sino-Soviet split. I was more than once moved to tears when I was transcribing elders’ laments, translating and contextualizing them. Before fieldwork, during fieldwork, and during the writing process, I often feared for my safety and potentially indefinite life of self-exile in the future. Yet, I cannot restrain myself from researching and understanding more about the embodied traumatic histories of the people I had the honor to meet and know, as well as my family and extended families, my friends and relatives’ related stories. These personal emotions and bodily knowledge (Uotinen 2011) have contributed through my research process and writing up this dissertation.
Feminist Life Story Interview

In this research, I used a life story interview method as my feminist methodology training has provided me with a lens with which to value the subjectivities of oral sources. Western feminist scholars argue that women’s stories create a subtle yet powerful resistance against patriarchy and social injustices within and outside of their cultural communities. Life stories are gendered and shaped by the changing configurations of state power. Women’s lived experiences of hardship and traumas speak to the multiple layers of subjugation in which they lived: in communal, household, political, and sexual power relations. Their experiences and memories are often silenced in nationalistic discourse and deemed irrelevant and disposable (Behar 1990; Cruikshank 1990; Hershatter 2011). This is indeed the case for Kazakh women in China, whose experience in the changing regimes are utterly ignored in both Chinese and Kazakh discourses, and their history is still being manipulated in state discourses touting the “liberation of Xinjiang” or “ethnic and gender equality.”

The narrated events give us the meanings in narrators’ minds rather than a description of the events themselves – as the narrators’ subjectivities are also part of the historical ‘fact’ (Portelli 1991, 36). Oral histories trace social change by looking at the diffuse ways in which marginalized populations narrate history with themselves at the center, as people make “connections between ‘public’ historical events, structures of feelings, family dramas, relations of class, national identity, and gender, and personal memories” through telling (Kuhn 2002, 5). Yet, this research is not simply for the sake of salvaging missing voices of the unprivileged or to rediscover history from below. Scholars have warned against objectifying oral history as timeless data (Cruikshank 1992, 6; Portelli 1991, 34; Rosaldo 1980, 91), and misinterpreting and misrepresenting emotions. As Katie Holmes (2017) points out, it is important to understand the
process of remembering as the “emotional vocabularies” change between the time of the event and the time of the telling. The complex intersubjectivities between interviewee and interviewer also shape oral history (75).

As an oral historian, my presence and positionality played a role in the co-construction of the knowledge generated in this dissertation (Holmes 2017; Robertson 2005). I had unstructured interviews with fifteen elderly women in their 70~80s, some were hours long, multiple times; some were under an hour, depending on their health and schedules. All of them lived mobile pastoral lives in their early years and later their ways changed to “semi-agricultural semi-pastoral work” and settled down. Many rural elderly people understood “research” as a task they must comply with, as it usually comes from the top, i.e., the central government (Ch: zhōngyāng 中央, Kz: orta okimet). An elder mentioned that she heard farewell ritual songs (Kz: singsma koris) when she was little, but she did not pay much attention to them, she said, “because I was uneducated (Kz: sanamizding joqtighi).” She even apologized to me for not knowing “Kazakh customs” that well. When I visited the elders at first, I always had to tell them I was not collecting “tradition” or “customs” (Kz: ‘dastur or saltsana), and it did not matter if they did not know about them, and they had the choice not to talk to me. In a way, I tried to undo the damage that earlier state ethnologists, journalists, and some Kazakh elites have done. “Honesty is the best policy,” and humbleness and humility in front of elders are moral codes in Kazakh society. I introduced myself as a student writing a dissertation focusing on Kazakh women’s lived experiences. Kazakh society also follows a strict gender code and age hierarchy. For a young unmarried woman like me, it was more culturally appropriate to work closely with women of various generations. Compared with the constant harassment and gossip I encountered as a young woman during fieldwork, I felt most safe with the middle-aged women and elderly
women. For them, I was a quiet, polite, and minkaohan young woman who needed guidance and advice. As time went on, they engaged in my research and guided our dialogues, told me to talk to their friends, and wrote down certain phrases or proverbs.

Power is experienced differently, not only by men and women but also by different generations in different locations and political contexts. It is important to discern the localized fashion of how power, memory, and oral narratives are entangled. Caroline Humphrey (1994) suggests that instead of “hidden transcripts,” there were “evocative transcripts” under socialism. Certain texts and phrases were ubiquitous and ambiguous, and oppositions could be recovered and denied easily (22). In China, “speaking bitterness” (Ch: sùkù 诉苦) was a state initiated political ritual during Mao’s land reform and class struggle sessions. Uradyn Bulag (2010a) points out that unlike oral history writing in US and Western Europe, which attempts to critically engage with the past, China has developed its own oral history tradition in which people’s life histories are processed “from raw materials to products useful to the Party” (109). Simultaneously, official history also attempts to mould people through shaping their subaltern subjectivities. He contends that “the real question is perhaps whether the subalterns have the freedom not to speak” (109-110). However, feminist scholars working on post-Mao China contend that the “speaking bitterness” narrative can be utilized by women to challenge state power (Jacka 2006, 266-270; Rofel 1999, 279). As Gail Hershatter (2011) precisely puts it, “forgetting and misremembering… are themselves interpretation” (263). Narratives are also outcomes of interactions between the interviewer, audience, and environment. Feminist scholars use alternative storytelling and the “dual interview” methods (Huang 2010), or work with different types of sources that “talk back to, ignore, or interrupt one another” to critically position women’s narration of “speaking bitterness” (Hershatter 2011, 15).
In Tibet, elders have appropriated the “speaking bitterness” narrative by “recasting the agents, spaces, and times” to depict the Chinese state as the exploiter that caused their suffering, instead of the Tibetan “class enemies” (Makley 2005, 61). These retellings reflect a consciousness in the face of “increasing socioeconomic inequality and a generational gap [which the elders] feared would erase their memories among the young” (73). Non-Han agencies and practices give us a glimpse of local processes of state projects in the peripheries. Women’s stories not only provide us with a complete picture of policy implementation, but also reveal how they have incorporated themselves in the narrative of state body politic as a practical choice.

Working with different generations of Uyghur women in Xinjiang, Cindy Huang (2009) noticed that Uyghur women spoke of life difficulties with a particular term japakesh, which means “hardship, sorrows, painstaking toil” in Turkic languages, with the Arabic root jafa and Persian root kesh. Japakesh has an Islamic connotation that refers to one who “perseveres through difficulty and suffers with a moral purpose” in life, will be retributed in heaven or the afterlife (Huang 2009, 1). Huang notes that different generations of Uyghur women have their own japa in their own era. These examples demonstrate localized, fluid relations of power and resistance under state socialism and in post-socialist contexts, as anthropologist Alexia Bloch (2005) points out, “life-history narratives provide a fresh perspective on nuances of state-periphery relationships and can foster discussion about the nature of indigenous people’s relationships to state power without homogenizing their experience” (552). At China’s periphery, in the most politically precarious places such as Xinjiang and Tibet, local actors emphasize generational bonds and the continuity of cultural moralities, accompanied by a critique of neoliberal logic.
Memory and Silence

When middle-aged and elderly Kazakh people learned that I was studying in Canada, many immediately recalled “ah! It’s the country of Bethune!” Their familiarity with the Canadian physician and communist Henry Norman Bethune epitomizes how political power shapes memories. Mao Zedong’s article “In Memory of Norman Bethune” along with two others, “Serve the People” and “The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains,” were the “three constantly read articles” (Ch: lǎo sān piān 老三篇) that represented the essence of Mao’s ideology and thought. These articles were compulsory at political study sessions during the Cultural Revolution all over China.

Although “the colonization of public and private space is one of the hallmarks of state socialism,” Rubie Watson notes (1994), “the contestation between ‘correct’ history and ordinary people’s alternative remembrance was never fully eradicated… Agents of the state were never able to stifle all forms of oppression – especially those enshrined in memory” (19). Middle-aged and elderly people liked to ask, “are there Kazakhs in Canada?” At first, I misunderstood their concern as an assumption that I was incapable of taking care of myself. After years spent working on my project, I gradually began to think from their point of view and understood their caring question. Memories recalled, forgotten, or suppressed are of profound political significance. For them, traumatic memories of migration and displacement are passed down to them from previous generations. They are formed and reproduced historical narratives about survival as a community. It always shocked them a little bit when I replied, “not many, I might be the only Chinese Kazakh in Vancouver.” Their disappointment told me a lot about them, myself, and how we came to position ourselves in the world. Rather than the nationalistic myth of 500 years of the Kazakh Khanate, Sufi saints, legendary genesis and clan genealogies, Kazakh
identity is shaped by shifting national borders, a history of separation and migration, and their own place-making as the Other in China.

![Image](image-url)

**Figure 2** Kazakh commune members studying Mao’s articles in Kunes county

This picture depicts Kazakh people of Dongfeng commune 6th brigade in Kunes County\(^\text{10}\) at a meeting to discuss Mao’s “Three Constantly Read Articles.” The title in red at the top says, *"The people of Xinjiang of every ethnicity have boundless love for Mao Zedong thought."* On the left is the notation and lyrics of the song extolling Mao Zedong “Sailing the Seas Depends on the Helmsman.” (Source: poster and translation obtained permission to use from SGM Herb Friedman (Ret.) Psywarrior.com on October 15, 2017.) According to SGM Herb Friedman, retired military officer and expert on psychological warfare, this picture was from a Communist Chinese leaflet, among one of thousands of parcels air-dropped into Taiwan via propaganda balloons from mainland China in the 1970s.

Working with elders, it was impossible to distinguish the beginning and end of the interview and also to know what genres of social memory would be consciously or unconsciously included. Our conversations were patched together with mundane details and “the

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\(^{10}\) Kunes is the Kazakh name of a county in the Ili district. It is called Xinyuan xian (Ch: 新源县) in Chinese.
stuff of daily life” (Fine and Weiss 2000), a multiplicity of voices, and even silence (Yang 2008). We would start from lengthy greetings, sprinkled with proverbs, passing onto hearsay, sometimes nostalgic remembering and descriptions of a piece of material culture in the past, or moving on to a moral lecture on filiality, and all the while urging me to eat and drink more at the tea table… At some trivial moments, memories could flood in, or just trickle in, or sometimes appear out of nowhere like a phantom, or in fragments while smelling an herb or commenting on the sensation of feeling the texture of a felt rug. Memories are corporeal, affective, and embodied in these everyday discourses. Nancy Abelmann (2003) argues, “speech is forever suspended in its past, present, and future, in the lines of communication – real and metaphorical – that comprise it…” (13). When elders speak, oral traditions such as proverbs and witty aytis poetry are cited to express strong opinions and reaffirm their value system. As Julie Cruikshank (1990) points out, social meanings of oral traditions are closely related to ongoing discussions of contemporary events (346), they also refuse the “cancellation of history” (Passerini 1992, 8). The seemingly puzzling mixture of fragmented memories indicates the state’s silencing of socialist lived experience, but also the elders’ selective remembering for intergenerational knowledge transmission.

Embodied practices are crucial in passing down collective memory for generations, reproducing social bonds and intimacy. Paul Connerton (1989) points out that social memory has its foundation in two distinct areas of social activity—commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices—and memories inform decisions citizens take as a form of resistance, which in turn changes part of their social world (7-14). Bruce Privratsky (2001) shows how Islam survived the Soviet period because it was deeply contextualized in Kazakh nomadic contexts through collective memory and embodied practices. Kaysar Kaderhan (2014) notes that Kazakh social
memory in Agash-oobo of Qinghe,\(^\text{11}\) Altay ingrains interpersonal relations intimately with the natural environment. When elders pass down local knowledge, it is carried and reinforced through signs and symbols such as major historical events, geological terms, tombs, social structures and ancestor names (132-133).

However, memory is also constantly in the making. As Buyandelger (2013) points out, forgetting gives space for imagination and the boundary between history and memory becomes blurry. Remembering and forgetting simultaneously changes an individual’s relationship to the past and to an imagined community as evidenced in the use of genealogies, tragic stories, and conversations about the spirits (18-19). Unlike Kaderhan’s emphasis on masculine narratives of clan genesis and pasture inheritance, my work focuses more on women’s rituals, space, and strategies where memories are constructed, how women’s remembering and bodily performances construct the past and cement affective social bonds, eventually how these also contribute to the persistence of Kazakh Islam. As anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (1986) has shown us, poetry can also be a performative agency in the face of silencing power. For Kazakh women, gendered sentiments and bodily experiences are “veiled” (Abu-Lughod 1986) and transmitted through these vehicles of oral literature: bridal and funeral lament (koris and joqtaw), oral poetic duel (aytis), and proverbs (maqal-matel). It is in mundane everyday talks and oral traditions at life-cycle events that generational tensions arose and manifested themselves. These moments also become sites of intergenerational knowledge transmission that are still striving to counteract the epistemological oppression of colonialization (Robertson and Kwagu’l Gixsam Clan 2012).

\(^{11}\) Qinghe (Ch: 青河县) is the Chinese name of a town Shinggil in the Altay region of north-eastern Xinjiang, bordering Mongolia. It is also spelled as Qingil in some sources. Kazakh people pronounce it as Shinggil. For consistency, I use Qinghe throughout this dissertation.
Photography and Genealogy

Many elders’ rural residences have family portraits in obvious places. Female elders embody their late husbands’ patrilineage and play a key role in gathering all the descendants of the male ancestor in the household through life-cycle events. Family members who cannot make it to the gathering, or people who passed away are sometimes photoshopped into the portrait in the back (many photography studios have this service). There are often so many people in the pictures that family members and relatives recognize each other roughly from the contour of their face, hairstyle, or other features. The photoshopped traces are recognizable from the slight disproportion or uneven pixels between the figure and the background. These photos are more for people within the family and kinship circles, quite unlike urban middle-class Kazakhs’ nuclear family portraits shot at professional studios.

Figure 3 “The descendants of our great grandfather Qusayin”
(Source: Picture Taken by Guldana in Koktogay county, Altay, January 12, 2016)
Photography is one of the “family’s primary instrument of self-knowledge and representation – the means by which family memory [is] continued and perpetuated, by which the family story [is] henceforth … told” (Hirsch 1997, 6-7). Annette Kuhn (1995) argues that “far from renderings of a pre-existing reality, photographic images embody coded references to, and also help construct realities” (153). Personal memories of the past, shared memories transmitted via photographs, and narratives of genealogy are intertwined, each shaping one another. To put family photographic practice in the socio-historical perspective of encountering Chinese development, rural Kazakh family and extended family members could maintain a sense of grounded-ness despite decades of displacement and social upheavals that pulled them apart and silenced their stories.

Besides photographs, material culture and oral tradition embedded in social relations also facilitate remembering. The Kazakh writing on this photo reads, “The descendants of our great grandfather Qusayin, October 3, 2013” (Kz: Qusayin atamizding urpaqtari). In the middle of the picture, the elderly woman wearing a large white headscarf (Kz: kymeshek) is Qusayin’s youngest son’s wife. After her husband passed away, she became the symbol of her husband’s lineage. Traditionally, the youngest son’s household inherited the family’s lineage and property, called qara shangiraq, which represents their ancestor lineage. This elder embroidered her own kymeshek. She faintly mentioned that they were banned in the Socialist era, then she stressed several times, “kymeshek is a symbol of adaldiq (Kz: sacred, purity, loyalty, justice), as the saying goes, samayimdi jasirghan, mereyimdi asirghan (Kz: May my flaws be concealed, and my life be overflown with joy).” Literally the first part of this saying means “cover the hair on my temple,” as kymeshek is used by elderly women to cover their grey hair gracefully. For her,
*kymeshek* represents a woman’s social protocol of modesty to be respected and honored in the family, both as a Muslim and as a Kazakh.

For Kazakhs in post-Mao Xinjiang, it is a common social and ritualistic practice to get to know each other through genealogy. For example, when I visited my friend’s parents in Koktogay county in Altay, her father asked my parents’ names and my seven forefathers’ names. I was prepared because since a young age we were sometimes quizzed by elders or guests on this as part of family education. As dictated in a Kazakh proverb, “a person who is unaware of his/her seven ancestors is considered an orphan” (*jeti atasin bilmegen ol jetim*). I recited them. He looked rather pleased and immediately informed his son-in-law, who belongs to the same *uru* as me – *Shibarayghir of Orta juz Kerey*. His son-in-law very joyously and warmly greeted me, inviting me to his home for dinner in a couple of days.

This orally transmitted narrative of genealogical knowledge is called *shejire*, and it is ritualistically consulted, for example marriage alliances should be made outside of the lineage of seven ancestors. Parallel to the state’s folklore publication surge, there is a trend among Kazakhs in Xinjiang to independently publish each *uru’s* *shejire*, which is comprised of each *uru’s* historical figures, heroes, ancestral sites, pastures, tombs, well-respected writers and poets; some *shejire* books are enormous, including each members’ biographies and photos. In daily encounters, people lighten up instantly when discovering they belong to the same *uru*, then they follow up with questions inquiring into the sub-groups or the sub-sub-groups of the *uru* to figure out how close they actually are; they even trace back to ancestors’ migration histories in a particular historical era; sometimes they inform each other about the history of their common ancestors. Exploring the historical narratives utilized in Kazakhstan’s nation building, Saulesh Esenova (2002) has argued that *shejire* has marked Kazakh ethnic identity and boundaries in
multicultural environments (28). Dubuission (2017a) also notes the increasing importance of *shejire* for family networks and mutual support, since socialist infrastructure and securities disintegrated and individuals were left vulnerable (11). Xinjiang Kazakhs applied similar techniques of remembering for several reasons: the Chinese state’s othering and ahistorical representation, Kazakhstan as an imagined ethno-national homeland to reconnect to, as well as insecurity and anxiety in a more and more individualized society and midst sprawling urbanization. Working collaboratively with the Kwagu’l Gixsam Clan, anthropologist Leslie Robertson (2012) notes that Gixsam naming practice draws from an “intergenerational we” (409), and “…each lineage holds the memory of multiple histories that, over time, have woven themselves into the experiences and thoughts of individuals” (9). The way modern Kazakh *shejire* evokes names and places echoes with Kwagu’l Gixsam’s naming practices; family photographs and genealogical knowledge embody a close-knit structure and history that existed prior to the Chinese state, simultaneously also informing one’s position in the past and present and with one another.

**Multi-sited Fieldwork**

After studying in Canada for two years, I went back to Ürümchi in April 2015. I immediately noticed the transformation of the cityscape; now it virtually resembled a prison. There was an intense atmosphere underneath hypernormalized everyday life. The public space was like a warzone filled with highly militant, volatile language on red banners that read “Strike down the Three Evil Forces! Terrorism, Ethnic Separatism, and Religious Extremism” and
“Stability overrides everything!” Since the 7.5 riot in 2009, the city has become more and more ethnically segregated, with the south side mostly inhabited by ethnic minorities such as Uyghurs and Kazakhs, and the north side by Han residents. Party officials introduced “grid-style social management” to segment urban communities into geometric zones, so security and police can systematically observe all activities with the aid of modern technologies (Wu 2014; Zenz and Leibold 2017a). There were fences and barbed wire around gated communities with only one entrance and exit. All the open, public spaces were demarcated by security checkpoints, militarized police kiosks, and metal detectors. Markets were closed off to stop people from forming “large congregations.” Every gated community was fenced in with looped barbed wire and spiked road barricades. Every university campus, hospital, and school was behind iron gates.

12 “Strike down the Three Evil Forces! Terrorism, Ethnic Separatism, and Religious Extremism” (打倒恐怖势力,分裂势力和极端势力) was first initiated by China with Central Asian state members at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, as an interstate cooperation in counter-terrorism. Human Rights Watch criticized the organization’s use of counterterrorism as violence against human rights. “Stability overrides everything” (稳定压倒一切) first appeared in 1994. China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) CEO Zhou Yongkang, Karamay Communist Party Secretary Xie Zhiqiang, and Secretary of Xinjiang Petroleum Administration Bureau Tang Jian, gave this speech after one of the worst civilian fires in the history of People’s Republic of China. On December 8, 1994, a fire broke out in a theatre hosting 1,000 children and teachers in Karamay, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. During the fire, the students and teachers were ordered to remain seated to allow the Communist Party officials to walk out first. The fire killed 325 people, including 288 schoolchildren. When the parents of the children questioned the authorities, CNPC CEO and Party officials held a meeting among the Party members in Karamay, which is highlighted by the slogan “Stability overrides everything.” Zhou declared “Whatever undermines the national unity, we absolutely should not do it. Because of stability, we were able to build this oasis on the Gobi desert, and we can have the development of today. I do not think a dialogue is good for stability. The 300 children in heaven also hope for stability.” This infamous speech is a vivid example that demonstrates the Party state conducting a human atrocity in the name of “development” and “stability.” Both these slogans have been highlighted by long-term, everyday use in social media discourse and in tangible forms such as red banners, pamphlets, and propaganda posters in Xinjiang till this day.

13 “7.5 riot” is one of the deadliest violent riots in post-reform Xinjiang. It happened in Ürümchi on July 5, 2009. It began as a peaceful protest of the police’s negligence when Uyghur workers died in a Guangdong factory. The protest quickly escalated into a series of violent riots by Uyghurs over several days targeting mostly Han people. On July 10, hundreds of Han clashed with Uyghurs and police in a counter-riot. The incidents caused hundreds of deaths and thousands of casualties. A large number of Uyghur and Kazakh men were detained as suspects without investigation and legal procedures after large scale police sweeps. The state’s security surveillance and suppression of Muslim minorities were significantly intensified after the 7.5 riot.
and high walls. Wherever you go, you must go through security checks where a watchperson will check inside your bags. If you have bottled water, you either toss it in the bin or must take a sip to prove it is not a dangerous substance. Each bus stop has a police kiosk with one or two police personnel on duty. Surveillance cameras and red banners propagandizing counter-terrorism and anti-extremism are ubiquitous. As Xinjiang’s “War on Terror” has intensified, Uyghur residents have been particularly targeted for their migration from rural areas to urban Ürümchi. Those who were without a Ürümchi household registration (hukou) must carry a passbook euphemistically called a “resident convenience card” (Ch: biàn mín kǎ 便民卡) at all times to get around, otherwise they could be immediately sent back to their towns of origin. And once they returned, they would either be under close supervision or detained under the suspicion that they practiced forms of “extremist” Islam somewhere else (Byler 2017).

I was less scrutinized than ethnic Uyghurs or a Western researcher because I am Kazakh with an Ürümchi urban hukou. Nevertheless, I was constantly anxious working in this political climate and never really felt safe. After all, I am an ethnic minority Chinese citizen, and my affiliation with a Western institution could have caused trouble. I had to stay under the radar, maintain politically correct conversations in public, and conduct my fieldwork in a low-profile, unofficial, grassroots way. I was not affiliated with any local research institutions, nor did I rely on their official introduction or guanxi (Ch: 关系, the Chinese term for social connection).

I wrote this paragraph in past tense as it was 2015 but all these situations described are still ongoing in today’s Xinjiang as of 2018.

Hukou (Ch: hùkǒu 户口) is the Household Registration System in China. It is a social control mechanism to prevent free flow of the population with a stress on preserving resources in urban areas. China’s central planning sets jobs and services contingent on a residency limit for individuals living in the area. The hukou system has perpetuated rural urban segregation and hierarchy, unequal development, and regional discrimination (Cheng and Selden 1994).
Many times during my fieldwork urbanized Kazakhs told me that the “essence of Kazakh culture is in the awil qistaq” (Kz: rural areas) in Ili, Altay, and Tarbagatai, and “Kazakh culture” (Kz: Qazaq madenyet) there is “like unbroken cream” (Kz: buzilmaghan qaymaqtay). As I discussed earlier, the discourse of (in)authenticity is prevalent among people after decades of state knowledge production and modernization. This discourse indicates an internalized stereotype and sense of shame among urbanized Kazakhs, and it has at least two intended implications for the listener: first, urbanization has assimilated and contaminated the Kazakhs; second, I should go to awil qistaq to be educated and cleanse my “Chinese-ness.” At a meeting with professor Tsui Yenhu, a well-respected Xinjiang anthropologist, he also recommended that I work more with Kazakhs in non-urban areas. This advice came from his decades long research experience on grassland degradation and Kazakh livelihood in Northern Xinjiang. These remarks and advice have merit under the increasing urbanization and development projects in Xinjiang, instead of simply emphasizing cultural authenticity.

Following this advice, I travelled to several county-level cities, counties, and county villages (as shown in the map on page 6) in Altay and Tarbagatai. Compared to Southern Xinjiang, which is mostly inhabited by Uyghurs, the Kazakh population in Northern Xinjiang is much smaller and has been diluted for decades by incoming Han migrants and XPCC laborers. The atmosphere was less intense in Northern Xinjiang when I was there. Compared to Ürümchi, there were significantly fewer street patrols, military tanks, and trucks. However, due to the close distance to the Sino-Kazakhstan borders, the entrance and exit of each town and county had heavy security checks, where the passengers’ ID cards are scanned and registered by armed police officers.
My fieldwork was made possible via my personal networks, friends, family connections, and snowball sampling once people could locate me in their social web of clan affiliations, kinship, or social relations. Thanks to these connections, I attended and helped at life-cycle events such as wedding celebration toy. As an important rite of passage that positions a person accordingly in the social community, toy is a central stage for communal recognition in producing and supervising a sense of Kazakhness, an institution ensures the priority of ethnicity and religion in choosing a marriage partner. The social discourse of “marrying appropriately” among Kazakhs means that one should first and foremost marry a Kazakh, who is by default a Muslim. Nowadays, a toy is divided into two parts: ulenw toy hosted by the groom’s family and uzatu toy hosted by the bride’s family. Children’s coming of age events are also celebrated as toy: sundet toy for boys’ circumcision, and sirgha toy when girls first wear earrings.

I also paid attention to texts and symbols in images and soundscapes to study (self)representations, for example, printed wedding invitations or funeral notices, posters of Kazakh Khans and heroes in event venues, old photographs from the socialist era, modern Kazakh wedding costumes and decorations, popular songs and music videos. I was able to observe the dynamism of various forms of oral traditions at these events, some were proliferated and commercialized (betashar), and some were fading (koris). The formerly densely Kazakh

\[16\] toy is the umbrella term for feasts amongst Turkic speaking peoples in the Central Asian region, and it is an important part of their social and economic life embodied in various communal gatherings and celebrations. According to Clauson, toy is originally “a camp” in the physical sense of an aggregate of tents; thence the people living in such a camp, “a community” thence any “large gathering”; and finally, “a feast,” and especially “a wedding feast.” See Sir Gerard Clauson. An Etymological Dictionary of Pre-Thirteenth-Century Turkish. Oxford. Clarendon Press. pg. 566.

\[17\] I have heard folklorists and people who are keen on the notion of traditional culture tell me more than once that ulenw toy and sundet toy are the most important, while uzatu toy and sirgha toy are modern additions so that brides’ family and parents who do not have sons can also host toy. This division of toy reflects changing social contexts, gender dynamism, and importance for each family to utilize toy for accumulating social capital and resources.
populated regions such as Tarbagatai and Altay are becoming more and more multiethnic and urbanized. Young generations of Kazakhs are increasingly drawn to county-level cities in Tacheng or Altay city, or cities such as Changji, Karamay, and Kuitun that are closer to municipal Ürümchi. Life-cycle events have become increasingly important in the context of urbanization. For example, a lot of young couples held wedding feasts in each of their hometowns to treat their relatives and friends there, then held another one in the cities where they would settle down to strengthen their social networks. Rural Kazakhs also travel to cities to participate in their relatives’ life-cycle events. The proliferation of toy events has demonstrated the centrality of kinship as an important support network in a gradually neoliberalizing environment, while also accommodating the mainstream trend of nuclear families and individualism. I followed a few of these multi-sited wedding expeditions and met many of my research participants this way.

Political sensitivity and ethics in fieldwork has been one of the biggest concerns for my research. I framed my interview questions to be general enough to allow the free flow of the conversations. I never suggested discussing politically sensitive issues. When anything was mentioned, it was almost common knowledge among us not to pursue. My research participants were aware that I was writing a doctoral dissertation, and some bravely volunteered to make public their identities. I respect their urge to be heard and acknowledged but I could not concur. Some specifically told me not to write certain part of their narration, and I kept that promise. For safety reasons, I have altered the names and locations of some research participants to protect them, except for the already well-known writers and poets, and my family members. As research developed, it became almost impossible to avoid or understate the political context within which this topic is situated. As I have discussed above, I tried to balance ethics, emotional
responsibility, and honest historical writing. Eventually I decided to present the stories as they naturally were in the entanglement of personal and historical trajectories.

In accordance with the state’s project of cultural preservation, almost every county has a cultural department, an affiliated museum, and an Intangible Cultural Heritage preservation office. People I met along the way kindly introduced me to their acquaintances working in these offices, so I had chances to interview gatekeepers, aytis experts, folk publication editors, and aqins. Stevan Harrell (2013) points out that pride and profit – national, ethnic, regional – are entangled in the work of “cultural preservation with Chinese characteristics,” with policy makers, entrepreneurs, bureaucrats, and scholars all having something at stake (293). In Xinjiang, some of these museums also played a patriotic educational role, displaying propaganda of ethnic unity, “heroic mother” figures who adopted multi-ethnic children, along with eerie colonial style exhibits of ethnic minority mannequins, material cultures, artifacts, or animal taxidermies. It was in one such place that I was introduced to Nuryla Qiziqan in early 2016. She has shown me not only professionalism as a folklorist and writer, but also enormous resilience and creativity working among bureaucrats and male chauvinist literati. Over the past one year or so, she has been a great source of knowledge for me, and I translated two of her short stories into English to be published in a collection of works on environmental writing in China.

Archival Sources

For the archival work in Chinese, I consulted Altay and Tarbagatai prefectural, city, and county gazetteers, as well as XPCC gazetteers for information such as dates, places, and events. I used official publications to study the state representations on Xinjiang, Kazakhs, pastoral development, and women’s movement. For example, newspapers such as People’s Daily and
Xinjiang Daily, XUAR Party history propaganda pictorial Xinjiang Liberation (1999), History of Xinjiang Women's Movement (1999), Agricultural Expo material Xinjiang Animal Husbandry in Great Leap Forward (1959), regional Party history publication Brief History of Chinese Communist Party in Altay (2012), state journalists’ reportage literature such as New Xinjiang (1957) and New Altay (1991). I was also informed by a published collection of state ethnological reports: Xinjiang Pastoral Area Society (Xinjiang muqu shehui 1988), and other official publications resulting from ethnological fieldworks in the 1950s, such as Brief History of Kazakhs (Hasake jianshi 2008), and Social Historical Investigation of Kazakhs (Hasake shehui lishi diaocha 2009). These materials gave me a sense of local process of Party’s pastoral work, cadres’ attitudes, and Kazakh participation since 1950s.

For Kazakh language sources, I examined thematic patterns, sources, and editorial policies of folklore magazines such as Mura (1982-2012) and Shalghin (1980-1987). I paid close attention to the surge of official ethnic folk publications in Xinjiang since 2000, to understand the process of depoliticizing Kazakh culture, also to contextualize this publishing phenomenon in the broader national agendas such as Western development (2000) and the National Intangible Cultural Heritage project (2006). Some of these Kazakh publication titles are: Aghash besikten jer besikke deyin [From the Cradle to the Grave] (2002); Qazaq dasturli madenytetning ensinklopediaiq sozdikgi [Kazakh Tradition Encyclopedia] (2003); Qazaqting beyzattiq madeny muralari turali zerttewler [China Kazakh Intangible Cultural Heritage Research] (2009); Qazaqting etnografialiq madenyeti [lit: Kazakh Ethnographic Culture] (2009); and Turmis salt jirlari [Life-cycle Traditions] (2002).
Chapter Summary

This dissertation consists of six chapters. Chapter one “Encountering Chinese development” includes a more specific, chronical historical overview of Kazakhs being incorporated into the socialist economy of China through a systemic reorganization of their social relations and gendered division of labor. Then it introduces important demographic shifts in the aftermath of Great Leap Forward, i.e., Han influx and Kazakh exodus of the Ili and Tarbagatai region. In the end, it discusses the implications of post-Mao pastoral reform for Kazakh livelihood and grassland environment.

Chapter two “Mao’s Xinjiang remembered” examines how elderly women living in the Altay state ranch narrate a gendered history of the Mao era through reworking the state’s historical template. Their narrative of awil reinstates their connections to ancestral places and engages an intimate intergenerational knowledge transmission within the familial and communal space. Women’s narratives present complex subjectivities shaped by both state validation and abandonment, and embodied trauma while experiencing collective labor and hardship.

Chapter three, “The Politics of Returning and Emplacement” uses family histories depicting displacement after the “Yi-Ta incident” to investigate the state’s settler colonial process through border reinforcement. This chapter details the place-making processes of the XPCC through the establishment of border farms, ranches, and townships, as well as the displacement and relocation of Kazakhs away from the Sino-Kazakhstan border. Urbanized Kazakhs’ acts of returning to ancestral sites are subtle but political; their sensorial experiences, botanical knowledge, and idiomatic phrases affectively display the interconnections of land, kinship ties, ancestor worldview, and a communal sense of belonging.
Chapter four “Lamenting in an Affluent Era” continues to explore embodied practices regarding space. It focuses on the intergenerational mechanism of lament and its relations to patriarchy transforming in a localized fashion. The elders’ narratives and practices of lament not only engage Muslim spiritual landscapes and symbols, but also respond to the spatial and kinship transformations that led to gendered and generational injustices. Maoist trauma of secularization is veiled in poetry and bodily practices of ritual, and memories are reproduced within the soundscape where sentiments of loss becomes intersubjective.

Chapter five “The Stories of a Hunter’s Daughter” delineates the historical process of the state’s appropriation and abandonment of Kazakh indigenous knowledge through a multigenerational example. This process has not only transformed the landscape and environment with Kazakh participation, but also subjected them in their own timeless representation in Chinese multiculturalism. The hunter’s daughter-turned-writer works within the paradigm of folklore but takes control in the construction of a nomadic ecology that is different from the state agenda of pastoral efficiency and productivity.

Chapter six “Debating Gender and Kazakhness” showcases how the transformation of oral poetic duels, aytis, and poets’ life stories inform changes in space, language, and identity. I use a contemporary Kazakh improvisational oral poetry debate and ethnography of an aytis convention to illustrate the interplay of gender, nationalism, and folklore practice in the contemporary trans-national Kazakh community.
Chapter 1: Encountering Chinese Development

Imperial formations are polities of dislocation, processes of dispersion, appropriation, and displacement. They are dependent both on moving categories and populations. Not least, they are dependent on material and discursive postponements and deferrals: the “civilizing mission,” imperial guardianship, and manifest destiny are all promissory notes of transformation... Imperial formations thrive on deferred autonomy, meted out to particular populations incrementally, promised to those in whose lives they intervene. They create new subjects that must be relocated to be productive and exploitable, dispossessed to be modern, disciplined to be independent, converted to be human, stripped of old cultural bearings to be citizens, coerced to be free.

— Ann Laura Stoler, Carole McGranahan, and Peter Perdue (2007, 8)

Socialist Ordering of Space and Time

The second half of twentieth century in Xinjiang saw the “modernization” of Kazakhs with a socialist remodeling of their subjectivities, socio-economic structure, and knowledge of grassland management. This process gradually reduced Kazakhs to a position of dependence on the Chinese state (McMillen 1979; Mosley 1966; Sabirbay 2010). The state as the rational, scientific, patriarchal caretaker operates to order and “codify” pastoral space into knowable, measurable production bases and a national border (Scott 1998). This process parallels the Western colonization of the indigenous world and settler logic toward “territoriality” (Wolfe 2006). In Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s (1999) words, “not only has the indigenous world been represented in particular ways back to the West… but the indigenous world view, the land and the people, have been radically transformed....” (51).
However, this process also differs from Western colonialism and racial regime as it rules through the discourse of “developing a unified, multi-ethnic nation,” a teleological form of progress adapted from a Marxist idea. Chinese state control in Xinjiang in the early 1950s did not operate through the Western settler logic of elimination, official encouraged miscegenation, or religious conversion as Patrick Wolfe (2006, 388) points out. In fact, the Chinese central government warned against Han Chauvinism and forbade inter-ethnic marriage to secure the border stability and unity, as Mark Elliot (2011) points out:

Empires [like the Qing] are fine with being uneven, asymmetrical, hierarchical, but nation-states [like PRC] are supposed to be regular, symmetrical, and smooth. Additionally, the demands upon the modern state to tell a consistent story are far greater than they were upon the pre-modern state. If there was a slippage between different conceptions of ‘China’ and ‘the Chinese’ in Qing-style grand unity, no one was much bothered by it. But because modernity presupposes precision, transparency, and finite boundaries… the notion of unity in China today is understood much more literally than in the Qing. (411)

In early 1950s, the Communist Party’s work in Xinjiang emphasized maintaining border stability as a transition, while purging remaining resistant forces of the ETR—the so-called “counter-revolutionary bandits” such as Kazakh resistance figures Osman Batur and Janimhan who led Koktogay Uprising (Jacob 2010). Out of fear of resurgence and ethnic discontent, the Party adopted a policy of “no struggle, no division, no classification of classes, and mutual benefit to both herdsmen and herdowners” (Zhang Bangying on December 14, 1951, Xinjiang Daily, quoted by McMillen 1979, 152; Zukosky 2006, 66). The Chinese Communist Party promised Kazakhs that they would not conduct class division and would implement policies of ethnic unity and religious freedom.

With the launch of the first Five Year Plan of the Chinese economy in 1953, pastoral cooperatives were established, in the same year as the foundation of Ili Kazakh Autonomous
Prefecture in Northern Xinjiang. Two years later, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region was founded. On the other side of the border in 1954, Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev launched the “virgin lands” campaign by which stretches of northern Kazakhstan were to be settled by 350,000 people drafted from the Russian, Belorussian, and Ukrainian peasantry (Shayakhmetov 2007, xi). Kazakh space on the margins of the superpowers is thus demarcated by national borders, land reclamation, and a huge influx of non-Kazakh populations. To solidify authority, both the USSR and the PRC implemented transformation of local demography, landscape, and economic modes for the development of the nations.

As Patrick Wolfe (2006) points out, land is an insatiable need of Western settler colonialism and agriculture provides permanency, reproduction of capital, and immigrants for indigenous lands (395). In China, Han agricultural epistemology and Marxist stage theory about agriculture as superior to pastoralism all played an important role in establishing the hierarchical relations in developing peripheries such as Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang (Williams 2002). In 1954, the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (Ch: Xīnjiāng shēngchǎn jiànshè bīngtuán 新疆生产建设兵团, hereafter referred to as XPCC) was founded by Communist Commander Wang Zhen under Mao’s orders to develop frontier regions, promote economic development, ensure social stability and ethnic harmony, and consolidate border defense. From October 1949 to October 1954, XPCC has already established five mechanized state farms, twenty-six horse drawn farms, and eight state ranches all over Xinjiang (Chen 1999, 210), following a production order for the center according to ethnic and geographical economic modes in the periphery.¹⁸

¹⁸ See the PLA map on the last page in Chen, Tongwei, ed. 1999. Xinjiang Liberation. Xinjiang Liberation Pictorial Committee. Chinese Communist Party Committee Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Party History Research Office. This map is an exemplary demonstration of how frontier land was demarcated and fragmentalized under military establishment and construction of road networks. Due to copyright restrictions, I couldn’t reproduce here.
Donald McMillen (1979) points out, the development of XPCC with its dual function of production and militarization of the border was a process of consolidation of power for the Party among Kazakhs (159).

As anthropologist of Inner Asia David Sneath (2007) explains, following Western intellectual traditions of social evolutionism ethnologists misrepresented terms for political groupings in Inner Asia nomadic pastoral society (*ulus, uru, juz*) into concepts of tribe, clan, and primitive kinship society. These early anthropological misrepresentations justified colonialism, and also bled into historical representations and formed the dichotomies of state and non-state (tribe), tradition and modernity, kinship and class. He contends, “it was not ‘kinship society’ but aristocratic power and statelike processes of administration that emerged as the more significant features of the wider organization of life on the steppe” (1). Most Kazakh ethnographies were composed during chaotic, crisis times, when Kazakh society and social structure was in flux while settler ethnologists were observing. This especially holds true for the observers belonging to the groups directly responsible for many of the problems facing Kazakh society (Russians and Chinese) during those times. Following the Soviet model, Chinese ethnologists translated clan and tribe as bùluò 部落 or shìzú 氏族, flattened the hierarchical structures, and also negated Kazakh leaders’ power as “aristocratic houses,” as Sneath calls them. Colonial ethnographies and Communist regimes have led to a surge of Kazakh nationalism which strongly identifies with certain clans with common genealogical ancestors. In this dissertation, I use “clan” in two
circumstances: people’s own identification with a certain uru, and a direct quotation or reference to certain archival documents.

At a more local level, awil is the most basic Kazakh social unit. It is a migration group, herding unit, or pastoral community that comes in varied sizes: some up to hundreds of households, others only several families. The awil herds and migrates in relatively fixed patterns, maintaining specific pastures within those migration routes. For Kazakh scholar Janar Sabirbay (2010), an awil is traditionally led by an elders’ household (Kz: ulken uy, qara shangiraq) and the sons’ affiliated households (Kz: otaws). When the sons get married and have their otaws, they are given some property such as livestock, or a yurt (Kz: yenshi), but they share the same pasture with the ulken uy. Years later, the oldest ulken uy and its following otaws as well as younger otaws will constitute an ata (a group comprised of the male ancestor’s descendants). There are exceptions sometimes when people who are not blood related to the ulken uy also become members of the awil, and they are marked as kirme (Kz: outsiders) (46). Alfred Hudson (1938) argues that the awil is a pastoral unit led by elders called awil bas (Kz: awil head), or aqsagal (Kz: white beard, respected elder). Moseley (1966) notes that the uru was composed of a number of aul (awil) and extended families, and customarily included all the blood relatives who could trace their descent to a common male ancestor seven generations removed (18). In summary, awil is comprised of several families but can form larger groups. Awil is written as 阿吾勒 (Ch: āwúle) in Chinese documents, but sometimes ethnologists or cadres use bùluò 部落 (tribe) and awil 阿吾勒 interchangeably to refer to a pastoral unit as they see fit.

In Northern Xinjiang, state ethnologists conducted intensive fieldwork and documented that the head of an awil oversaw taxation, diplomacy, migrations, settling disputes, weddings and
funerals (Xinjiang muqu shehui 1988). They concluded that Kazakhs were victims of “patriarchal feudalistic clan” authority and “natural economy of pastoralism” (Xinjiang muqu shehui 1988, 28; 54). After 1951, Kazakh landlords and rich herders received Socialist propaganda and were encouraged to surrender to Party authority with no punitive consequences (McMillen 1979, 152-3). Meanwhile, Han ethnologists surveyed Tore and Qazbek clans in details and evaluated their productivity (Xinjiang muqu shehui 1988, 34, 58). Zukosky (2006) notes that larger clans were organized into production brigades as a form of state “socialist primitive accumulation” (204).

Similar to the Soviet Union’s amalgamation of Central Asian indigenous political groupings into narodnosti (Ru: nationalities) (Hirsch 2005), the Chinese state shifted the local power structures through omnipresent Party institutional presence. Sabirbay (2010) refers the shift as a vertical state and herder relationship. For peripheral regions such as Inner Mongolia, Mao’s nationwide land reforms and class struggle justified redistribution and the appropriation of landlords’ pastoral lands into agricultural lands (Bulag 2000, 2010a). When the cooperatives were established in 1953 in Northern Xinjiang, cadres and ethnologists saw awil economic relations as “feudalistic and capitalist,” since the rich herd owners’ livestock was considered to be accumulated capital that reproduced oppressive class relations. Meanwhile, rich herd owners (Ch: 牧主) were indignant at the establishment of cooperatives and planting crops, and called

19 According to a document in 1950, Kazakh herders told Chinese ethnologists that the Tore clan are descendants of Chinggis Khan and they were sent to rule Kazakh clans after Chingghis Khan has conquered Central Asia. The Tore clan in Xinjiang mostly inhabit Jimunay in Altay and Toli in Tarbagatai. The Qing Emperor Qianlong gave Tore leader Kukudai the title equivalent to Duke in 1789. The Beiyang Government in early Republic of China titled the descendant of Kukudai Ailin Wang the royal title of county king. Kukudai’s family thus became a noble clan among the Kazakhs in Xinjiang, known as aq suyek (Kz: white bone), different from the commoners as qara suyek (Kz: black bone). In order to protect their lineage, women from the Tore clan did not marry lower qara suyek, but men from the Tore clan could marry women from qara suyek (Liu et al 1950, 34).
20 Also see ethnologists’ descriptions of rich herd owner and awil leaders as exploiters before the Gaochao commune was established in Burshin (Xinjiang muqu shehui, 243-260).
kapiratsya (Kz: cooperatives) as kafir, which means infidels and non-Muslim (Ji, Wang, and Ma 1972, 243).

After 1955, the pace of collectivization and reforms in the pastoral areas of Xinjiang increased (McMillen 1979, 154). The state’s power began to appear in institutions such as the “pastoral office,” “pastoral production cooperative,”21 while “feudal” clan leaders (Kz: juz bas; Ch: 百户长 and Kz: ming bas; Ch: 千户长) were eradicated (Hasake shehui lishi diaocha 2009, 64; 233). State ethnologists deemed the diminishing authority of the mullah and aqsaqal (Kz: white beard, respected awil leaders) as social progress, because “people no longer had to give away livestock to them for hosting funerals” (Gu 1957, 381-82). According to journalist Chu Anping’s report in 1957, a Han cadre reflected on their lack of understanding of Kazakh social structure. He made an example:

Pastoral society is basically a feudal clan society. Pastoral economic life and kinship relations decide that there are bùluò (Ch: 部落, En: tribe) in various sizes. The head of the awil and their political representatives juz bas and ming bas are actually old-time rulers in pastoral area, and they have a lot of influence. At the same time, the main economic power is also in the hands of the leaders. We didn’t fully understand this. In 1951, we tried to make reforms in some districts in Ghulja and encountered difficulties. For example, it was hard to mobilize a struggle session over a clan leader. We arrested a bad leader, but the mass was sympathetic to him and even sent him food and tea secretly. We disobeyed their basic life-style and tried to settle them down and their livestock once and for all. This caused a chaotic decline in and damage to livestock. (20)

21 Han journalist from Beijing Chu Anping (1957) wrote about how locals could not accept the arrival of the CCP after the ETR was over, because they could not distinguish the differences between GMD, CCP members and regular Han people. Kazakh sentiments and confusion about Han people can also be found in exodus writer Qabdess Zhumadilov’s (1998) historical novel The Last Encampment [Songghy kosh], Almaty: Zhazhushy. When Chu Anping described the vast area of districts in Xinjiang, it indicates that administrative positions were usually held by Han leaders, even though they were in small numbers. He writes, "In frontier region, a district is sometimes bigger than a county in Inner China, from the east to west, one needs to ride a horse for two days. However, on this vast land, there is only one Party secretary who is ethnic Han, there are no other Han. This one Han cadre is responsible for promoting all related works following the Party policies" (12).
He concluded that they have learned from mistakes, and they should “educate and unify with the rich awil leaders to get rid of their concerns, and ask them to propagandize policy for the government, so that they make an effort to develop pastoralism and promote stability” (21). This documentation indicates state actors’ agendas to incorporate Kazakhs as well as resistance on a local level.

Collectivization was contributive to the transformation of the Kazakh social hierarchy and basic community. Sabirbay (2010) argues that it led to the disintegration of awil system, as it deprived herd owners and awil authorities of their transportation (horses and camels) and production material (sheep and cattle), while communes established state authority (60).

Common herders were organized as laborers in the cooperatives and state ranches for rational development and scientific, planned management, to which ethnologist Gu Bao (1957) zealously reported, “through class struggle, middle herders and poor herders were united” (378-79) … “…twenty-seven herders in the agricultural team used to belong to different awils, now they work together. Another ten herders also moved to other awils under the command of their commune production. Nowadays when a herder speaks, he will no longer say he is from such and such awil but is happy to say he is from such and such brigade of Qianjin Commune” (381-82).

Working with newspaper reports such as the People’s Daily during the Great Leap Forward, George Moseley (1966) found that the XPCC was heavily concentrated in Northern Xinjiang. The year 1958, he notes, “marks the beginning of a rapid expansion of the state-farm system in Sinkiang” (36). Over 140 agricultural and pastoral communes, as well as eighty-five

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22 Sinkiang is an old spelling of Xinjiang.
joint state-private livestock ranches were established (McMillen 1979, 156-58), with new technologies like imported breeds, large ranches, and veterinary medicine (Zukosky 2006, 46). Permanent stalls on the grassland were built, large-scale herders’ settlements were established, along with schools, hospitals, post offices, credit unions, veterinary stations, workshops and office buildings, warehouses, and other public facilities. The construction of roads, trails, bridges all “facilitated Kazakh nomads to settle down,” (Hasake jianshi 2008, 267) and “slowly led Kazakhs to recognize the advantages of socialist transformation” (McMillen 1979, 153). Many Kazakhs became cadres, workers, and clerks and moved into the cities by joining the army, as demobilized soldiers, or being recruited as employees. Others settled down through owning production materials, as some herders who used to work for landlords were given land property. All levels of new pastoral administrative units such as animal husbandry cooperatives, communes, animal husbandry production brigades, animal husbandry teams, agriculture teams, and logistics teams (grassland construction such as repairing stalls) were organized in the vicinity of the reclaimed farmlands and brigades and formed a large number of settlements. Some herdsmen turned to farming, ironwork, carpentry, machine repair, processing, and logistics. Other grassland care personnel as well as local cadres and their families were sedentarized during these years (Hasake jianshi 2008, 266-68).

Collectivization in China was a means for the Party to build power (Pickowicz 1994, 138). Throughout the nation, high quotas for compulsory grain deliveries to the state at low prices were established, and markets and commerce were under absolute state control. Followed by the Great Leap Forward in 1958, a disastrous trial of true communism commenced. Mao felt the urgency to take control in the tension of the Cold War, resulting in terrible man-made famines that swept the country in the early 1960s (Dikötter 2010; Yang 1996). In Northern
Xinjiang, the cooperative started to transform to “People’s Communes” under Mao’s directives \textit{(Hasake jianshi 2008, 246)}. The Party broke their early 1950s promise of “no struggle, no division, no classification of classes, and mutual benefit to both herdsmen and herdowners.” The communes and pastoral offices took collective possession of livestock, collective management and distribution of the profit through work points \textit{(Hasake jianshi 2008, 247)}. The commencement of the Great Leap Forward is thus clearly remembered as \textit{gongshelesu} by Kazakh elders, a combined word of both Chinese term \textit{gōngshè} (Ch: 公社 meaning commune), and Kazakh suffix -\textit{lesu} referring to the act of becoming, so “communalizing” or a time of “eating from \textit{tay qazan}” (meaning big pot or public canteen, in Kazakh, \textit{tay} is a two-year-old horse, \textit{qazan} means pot, \textit{tay qazan} meaning a pot big enough to cook a two-year-old horse).

**Han Influx and the Yi-Ta Incident**

Land reclamation in Xinjiang first expanded from 1950, with the economic activities in this region mainly to increase the area of farmland \textit{(Fan, et al. 2013, 715)}. XPCC’s development needs justified its grip on grasslands and waterways, as well as a huge influx of ethnic Han migrant laborers into the region. During the nationwide Great Leap famine, a huge Han population fled into Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia from the provinces where the famine was the most severe, such as Hebei, Shandong, Jiangsu, Henan, Hubei, and Hunan, etc. According to the statistics, about 269,000 people fled to Inner Mongolia from January to March in 1960, and 200,000 people fled to Xinjiang, entering from Hami.\(^{23}\) Party historian Zhu Peimin (1995)

writes, “After 1959, Xinjiang received 300,000 sent-down youths, about 890,000 people migrated to Xinjiang from Inner China” (44).

Just in Altay alone, in 1957 and 1958, more than 4,000 workers from inner China were recruited for infrastructural construction such as water conservation and land reclamation. In 1959, Altay accepted sent-down youths from inner China, 835 from Anhui, 133 from Hubei, 195 from Jiangsu, and they were sent to different sectors such as state ranches, fish farms in Burultoghay, livestock breeding ranches, and so on. From 1960, more sent-down youths from Xuzhou, Nanjing, and Shandong were accepted to work in the mining industries. In 1965, 552 workers from Shandong state farms were allocated in the No. 1 state farm in Burultoghay Altay. Per Altay Regional Gazetteer, in 1949, the Kazakh population took up 89% of the total population. In 1995, they only took up 50.35% of the total. The Han population rose from 321 in 1949 to 233,562 people in 1995, about 42.47% of the total, and became the fastest increasing ethnic group among all the ethnic groups in Altay including Uyghurs, Mongols, Hui, Uzbek, Tatar, Russian, and so on. A lot of Kazakhs had never seen Han people until the late 1950s. An elder told me she remembered seeing Han people arriving in truck after truck and being unloaded onto the grassland. These famine refugees were also victims of Mao’s mass social movement. In

红灯亮在求生之路——“大跃进”时期流民的收容遣送 [Red Light on the Road of Survival: State Management of the Great Famine Refugees]. Modern China Studies, issue 1.

Sent-down youth (Ch: zhīshì qīngnián 知识青年, also short for zhīqīng 知青) is a group of young people who left urban districts of China to live and work in rural areas beginning in the 1950s until the end of the Cultural Revolution. In order to solve employment problems in the cities, Mao asserted that the countryside was a vast place for youths to learn and flourish, and youths either willingly or under coercion left for the countryside. This campaign encouraged more youths to go “up to the mountains and down to the countryside” during the Cultural Revolution until it came to an end in 1980.

Burultoghay is one of the seven counties in Altay prefecture. In 1942, the name was changed to Fuhai county (from Bù lún tuō hǎi 布伦托海 to Fúhǎi 福海) in Chinese. However, Kazakh people today still refer to the place as Burultoghay.


In 1949, the Kazakh population was 50,042 people. Aletai diqu zhi 2004, Vol 3, Chapter 2, Section 1.
the most difficult time of Great Leap Forward, Kazakhs and Han learned from each other in planting crops or making dairy products, survived the famine together by picking up leftover grain when the crop fields was reaped away by Combine Harvesters.28

Both Zhu and Moseley point out these Han laborers greatly facilitated the expansion of peasant farming into the grasslands and “led in the tasks of socialist construction and socialist transformation in the Ili chou” (Moseley 1966, 37).29 By 1960, virtually all land was state and collectively owned, and private ownership was completely abolished. After 1960, the XPCC started to submit agricultural and pastoral production to the national reserve (Zhu 1995, 45). By 1967, arable lands in Xinjiang reached a historically high level, and excessive land reclamation began damaging many of the spring and winter pastures. Up until 1980, the cultivated areas increased to 420,000 mu (28,000 hectares), and population engaged in agriculture reached 40% compared to 1% in 1949 (Hasake jianshi 2008, 267).

At the height of ideological conflict between China and Soviet Union, the establishment of People’s Communes, Han influx, and subsequent food shortage built up significant grievances among minoritized Muslims, and eventually triggered an exodus of 60,000 (mostly Kazakh) people from Ili and Tarbagatai into the Soviet Union. This was designated the Yi-Ta Incident (Ch: yī tǎ shìjiàn 伊塔事件) in China. Instead of self-reflection on local policies, the state further used the Yi-Ta incident to justify central control and de-Sovietization in Xinjiang (Benson and Svanberg 1997, 104; McMillen 1979, 160-62). Authorities condemned the exodus of Kazakhs as well as Kazakhs living along the border as Soviet Revisionists and commenced a “directive for

28 Fieldwork interviews in January 2016.
29 By Ili chou he means Ili prefecture (Ch: Yili zhou 伊犁州).
opposing revisionism” in 1963 (Clarke 2011, 63). Chinese historians ignored Kazakh agency in the exodus and simply dismissed the people who left as “border people” (Ch: biānmín 边民) or as a “mob” who conducted an “illegal flight” (Shen and Li 2011, 191-193). After the Yi-Ta Incident, many Kazakh families were separated by the Sino-Soviet border that was closed for the next three decades. Immediately after the exodus, XPCC regiments were deployed to establish border farms and ranches to fill the void and labor shortage. On these ranches, an important source of livestock was from the people who fled to the Soviet Union. According to the instructions of the CCP Central Committee Xinjiang Branch, the Provincial People's Government decided to acquire all livestock and transfer the female and young livestock to the livestock sector for management and then gradually build state-owned ranches.30

Coping with Pastoral Reform

Pastoral reform (1984) continues to constitute a process of systemic dispossession of land and resources in the name of development. In the early 1980s, the Chinese state commenced with the decollectivization of agricultural and pastoral sectors nationwide. The Household Responsibility System that had been implemented in inner China’s agricultural regions was now also applied in pastoral regions. The ownership of grassland use rights, livestock, and agricultural lands was transferred to individual households. Supposedly herders should have autonomy and motivation to increase productivity, but they were still attached to certain production materials and responsible for production quotas. With the aid of Grassland Law and

30 Aletai diqu zhi 2004, Vol 5, Chapter 1, Section 5.
grassland science institutions, the state continues its scientific paternalism in scrutinizing and measuring Kazakh land use, productivity, and poverty.

In Northern Xinjiang, science and market ideology became the only “truths” and “forms of knowledge” in Arturo Escobar’s (1995) sense, constructing both herders’ and cadres’ subjectivities within the parameters of development (8). The traditional method of seasonal rotation of pastures was denounced as “free herding” and “unplanned use of land” by grassland bureau and scientists (Zukosky 2006, 79, 157). In order to maximize profit and efficiency, herders were enticed to stay in settlements, so pasture could be preserved within fences that keep livestock out (Cerny 2008; Ptackova 2012; Williams 2002). The fencing method was widely promoted in Northern Xinjiang to control mobile pastoralism as a way of life. “The traditional concept of production is stubborn,” journalist Zhang Jiayin wrote in 1988. XUAR pastoral bureau scientists had to persuade people to slaughter livestock as soon as they became mature instead of keeping and feeding them in the corrals. In order to boost production and save grass, cold storage warehouses were built to accommodate the developing meat industry (Cerny 2008; Zhang 1991, 39). Herders joined the regional mixed economy of growing crops, transportation, and infrastructure. To develop the dairy industry, it also became necessary to persuade people to sell milk and other dairy products (Zhang 1991, 49). The 3rd Plenary Session of the 11th CCP meeting set the goals to construct “Three Million Acres,” which were agricultural fields, alfalfa crops, and natural grass conservation (each one million acres, about 404,685.6 hectares) with five grass fodder bases and invest in waterway construction (42).

Pastoral reform as the “modernization of pastoralism” was another step for Kazakhs’ incorporation into national and global market economy. Zukosky (2006) argues that the complex interactions of state laws and grassland scientists stigmatized mobile pastoralism within the
discourse of traditionalism (157). For the state, pastoralism was regarded as a significant obstacle for development, which was only assessed by market production of meat, dairy, and cashmere (Cerny 2008; Zukosky 2006). According to case studies carried out by a research group organized by Caroline Humphery and David Sneath (1999), the accumulation of herds on the allocation of fixed pastures caused pasture degradation in many places (130). Privatized allocation of pastures not only led to “fragmentalization of grassland” (Tsui and Chen 2015; Chen 2015b), but also tensions among the pastoralists as well as between generations (Chen 2014; 2015a). In 2001, the state launched sedentarization campaign targeting pastoral nomadic peoples including Mongols, Tibetans, Kazakhs, and Evenkis, and others as a solution for grassland degradation. However, it was privatization accompanied by reduction of movement that was the main cause for the decline in pasture quality (Chen 2015b; Humphery and Sneath 1999, 292; Ptackova 2012; Williams 2002). A vicious cycle was created to blame pastoralists as the cause for grassland degradation. Up to 2008, 85~90% of Kazakh herders were sedentarized (Tsui and Chen 2015).
In the past three decades, the fast development of roads and transportation coincided with the dramatic transformation of pastoral areas. According to Tsui Yenhu and Chen Xiangjun’s research (2015), before the 1980s, most of the herders still followed their traditional pastoral routes, which were important spaces for knowledge transmission such as sustainable resource management of grass, livestock, manure, and water. Since the pastoral reform, state regional administration planning and road construction restructured space and fragmented pastures, thereby increasing tensions over resources between herding and farming, the latter also invested in by state corporations XPCC. Pastoral routes were gradually covered by the county level roads and state highways. XPCC agricultural areas also made use of water resources that once went along the pastoral routes. At the same time, mining, oil development, and military resources were
extracted from the pastures and administered under central state jurisdiction. Since 2000, increasing numbers of herders use motorcycles and pickup trucks in migration. It is common to see the pastures badly and randomly trampled by the traces of these vehicles. The elders said that this would not have happened in the past, as the herders followed migration routes to protect the pastures according to customary laws (Chen 2015a, 46).

The tourism industry further erased the remaining existence of the pastoralists, including their ancestral sites, summer pastures, and burial sites. When I travelled from Bortala to Shaghantoghay county, I spent a few days in a relative’s home and visited his family’s summer pasture near Sayram lake. On the way back, we drove past a large construction site for a tourist attraction. Locals told me that there was some contention about the jurisdiction of Sayram lake between the Ghulja and Bortala Sayram administrative committees; both hoped to gain more profit from tourism development so currently it was under a joint committee. About fifty meters from the lakeshore, a fence was installed to stop livestock from drinking from the lake. A middle-aged man told me fondly how he used to drink his horse there and take a dip in the cool water in the summer. Now he lives with his wife in the outskirts of Bortala county and grows soybeans in the field. His younger brother is taking care of all their family members’ livestock together. This is common among the remaining herders who had to accommodate to the shrinking pastoral space and the pressure of sedentarization by shifting their family structure and source of income. Some families are even split in two, with the elders, women, and children settled in a village, while the young and strong males still herd their livestock up in the

31 Shaghantoghay is Kazakh name of the county in Tarbagatai district. It is called Yumin xian (Ch: 裕民县) in Chinese.
mountains. When we drove past the valley near Sayram, it was dead quiet and empty. Many herders were given 50,000 RMB (about 7,540 USD) compensation from the tourism bureau for giving up their summer pastures. They were coping by herding on leased pastures or sharing pastures with other herders farther from the tourist sites.

Figure 5 Tourist site in Tasti summer pasture

The propaganda sign on the yurt reads “Maintain Ethnic Unity and National Solidarity.”

(Source: Picture Taken by Guldana in Toli, Tarbagatai, August 19, 2015)

Mao era legacies such as *hukou* and *bianzhi* (state employment quotas)\(^{32}\) are still powerful in Xinjiang and work in tandem with the policies of sedentarization and urbanization. State urban resources are limited and inaccessible under the tokenistic “develop ethnic regions”

\(^{32}\) *bianzhi* (Ch: biānzhi) refers to state’s control on budgetary and personnel allocations for government agencies, an allotment of approved posts at state agencies.
discourse, with most positions demanding Chinese Mandarin skills, a college degree, and urban hukou. Non-urban young generations around marriageable ages desire to settle down in urban areas with better social security instead of inheriting family property of livestock and pastures (Sabirbay 2010, 74). Their parents’ generation are frustrated with socio-economic disadvantages of pastoral work after decollectivization and worry that their children will lag behind in the shrinking education resources of rural regions. Many middle-aged urbanized Kazakhs have sold their pastures and bought apartments for children’s education, employment, and marriage. In summer 2015 in rural Haba of Altay, I attended a family celebration for a young woman’s entrance for the second round of XUAR civil servant examination. If she passed the interview, she would start her job at a danwei33 (work unit) in suburban Ürümchi. Her father-in-law slaughtered a sheep for the coming guests, and her mother-in-law cleaned up after him and prepared dishes. While cleaning up the sheep intestines, she said, “I want my children to keep learning. I don’t want them to suffer hardship like me (Kz: japa shekesin).” Aspirations for modernity and future were infused in her speech, but much more is unspoken. For the future generations, happiness seems to be promised only through institutionalized education and employment.

33 danwei (Ch: dānwèi 单位) refers to a work unit, a place of employment in China. As a socialist legacy, danwei guarantees life-time employment and security, known as the “iron rice bowl,” with affiliated services and benefits such as housing, childcare, schools, clinics, and so on. The danwei system has been put into competition with private enterprises and foreign invested corporations in the liberalized Chinese economy, but it is still desirable for its security and welfare benefits.
Chapter 2: Mao’s Xinjiang Remembered

Memory begins in the present, hauling the past through time and place, through what we know, what we have lived, and what we imagine. It is a solitary process made social through selectively chosen utterances crafted to fit a particular moment.

— Leslie Robertson (2005, xix)

Finding Kazakh Women in the State

Women did not fare well in China’s Communist Revolution. The stories told by the state are not only rose-tinted and one-sided, but they also alarmingly overgeneralize women all over China as one mistreated servant being liberated and becoming socialist worker and soldier. Socialism strived to cultivate national subjects that were secular, proletarian, and selfless builders of a new China, obliterating cultural, religious, and social differences altogether. This narrative also has a similar triumphant Northern Xinjiang version with so-called new Kazakh women figures like Jamila, a fighter for marriage freedom against Kazakh clan patriarchy as well as a fighter against the army of the Republic of China; Aygul, a socialist cadre who worked side by side with Han colleagues and led her commune in pastoral production; and numerous real-life figures reported by Liu Yun and Xu Xia (1999) writing the Party history of the Xinjiang Women’s Movement and state ethnologists who did fieldwork in 1950s. While state historians argue that socialist cadres worked hard to guide Muslim women to their empowerment, what is not mentioned is that most of these women’s husbands, brothers, fathers, their local leaders, and

34 Hasen and Jamila. 1955. Shanghai Film Studio. Directed by Wu Yonggang.
36 Xinjiang muqu shehui 1988, 273, 382.
religious clerics were being delegitimized and denounced as “local nationalists” and “bandits” in the early history of PRC Xinjiang. While many have followed up on Margery Wolf’s (1985) argument about Chinese women’s continued oppression as a “revolution postponed,” only a limited number of works have reflected on the violent consequences of women’s liberation in China’s peripheries (Friedman 2005; Makley 2008; Yeh 2013).

Kazakh women are silent in the historiographies of Mao’s China. They are either helplessly manipulated by state and urban elites, or they are completely imagined to be in the timeless past. Atrocities inflicted by Mao’s policies and the concomitant suffering have kept many researches prioritizing morbid statistics of famines and disasters, relegating Xinjiang to a region of little significance from a statistical and policy studies lens. They are heavily Mao and Inner China focused, archival-based researches also have made only limited acknowledgement of other dimensions of destruction besides famine and death tolls (Dikötter 2010; Shen and Li 2011; Yang 2012). Researching the history of Shannxi rural women’s collective past in China, Gail Hershatter (2011) points out that “women… were both objects and agents of revolutionary change” (4). Hershatter’s focus on women’s stories urges us to reflect on the gender insensitive histories we tell about the early years of rural socialism in China. In her new work Finding Women in the State, Wang Zheng (2016) traces the history of socialist feminists’ struggles in the early PRC under dominant male leaders. She argues that male leaders’ redirection of the socialist feminist revolution left an institutional legacy, for example the Women’s Federation is a Party organ that remains uncritical of the capitalist exploitation of Chinese women to this day. Wang’s work puts a spotlight on socialist feminists’ agencies and subjectivities negotiating with male leadership of PRC.
After 2015, a group of young activists called “Feminist Five” has received global attention for their dedicated petitions and performance art relate to women and LGBTQ rights. Wang Zheng has a high hope for these young feminists who operate outside the official system in accordance with global mainstream feminism and activism. However, both Wang and Feminist Five’s approach has little reflection on their Chinese sisterhood in solidarity approach, nor is it critical of the participation of socialist feminism in colonizing Xinjiang and Tibet. The history of Chinese socialist revolution is not just gendered as Wang argues, or simply “left an institutional legacy.” It is an ongoing process, producing Han privilege and superiority, and state violence in China’s peripheries against ethnic minority peoples. “Finding women in the state” is not enough, Chinese feminists also need to reflect on their Han privileges derived from socialist revolution and the women’s liberation movement. In this chapter, I intend to challenge feminist intersectional approaches by looking at how the experiences of Muslim minority women challenge taken-for-granted narratives of communist China. What is this history from their perspective? How has gender, ethnic, class, or political identity worked and shaped their life trajectories and subjectivities, and even made an impact on their next generations?
Performing History as an Intergenerational Pedagogy

In the winter of 2015, I conducted oral history interviews with elderly Kazakh women who were former workers on Altay state ranches and farms. During these interviews, I hardly provided any timeline or scheme but only asked open-ended questions about their childhood, youth, hometown, marriage, and family. Most of the time I was a listener, and only asked questions when clarification was needed or on topics that they seemed to be invested in telling
me about. Every woman I talked to left me with a deep impression in her own way. I always feel uneasy when distilling a theme and narrative out of so many distinct life stories. Every time I sit down to work with the recorded interviews, I am overwhelmed by their stories during listening, transcribing, and writing, and I always gain new understandings and reflections. The elders not only had their own narrative schemes and historical periodizations, but were also vivid storytellers of their past situating themselves in the center. They cited proverbs, performed the dialogues in the stories, remembered songs of collective life, and most importantly described the harsh labor they had to do. Many times, our interviews were accompanied by the elders’ daughter-in-law, a visiting female guest, or other members of the younger generations. The elders’ performativity of gender roles and self-making thus became pedagogical, educating the young generations including myself about patience, endurance, and solidarity (Kz: intimaq and bereke in their words). This is particularly meaningful when taking into consideration how Maoist trauma is silenced in public spheres and the elders are situated at a diminishing position in family hierarchy.

In Altay, I was lucky to have Kulash apeke (Kz: sister) as my gatekeeper. Kulash apeke is my childhood friend’s aunt. She is in her late 40s and living in a village on X state ranch. X state ranch was founded in 1956, and it is one of dozens of large livestock breeding farms of XUAR. Before I arrived, Kulash apeke was busy renovating a new apartment prepared for her son's wedding in the city. When I visited, the Chinese lunar New Year or Spring Festival was around the corner, so the workers had all left for home. Kulash apeke and her husband were staying in their old house back on the ranch. After she listened to my ideas for collecting Kazakh women's life histories, she decided for us that we should start with her elderly neighbors. “Let me take you to Nurish apa (Kz: granny),” she said, “she knows a lot, and she’s the first-generation laborer of
the state ranch. There’s only a few older people here, not many left... Now is a perfect time. They are usually home.”

The next day after the morning tea, Kulash apeke and I walked on the muddy road that was covered by snow and ice. The village was quiet in the winter sun. Some cattle were idling around and chewing something at the trash site. We walked past the monument engraved with Mao's image and quotations in the center of the village, where some small shops and stalls were scattered along the road. When we arrived at Nurish apa’s home, she was looking after her grandchildren. Our visit was a pleasant surprise for her, as she was happy to have Kulash apeke visiting her. Kulash apeke warmly greeted her and introduced me, and I awkwardly handed her a tuyinshik (Kz: a gift bundle including scarf, towel, and some sweets upon visiting) that I had prepared beforehand. Kulash apeke said “This is my jiyen’s (Kz: niece) friend from Ürümchi, she’s doing some research. I brought her here to hear your teachings!” Nurish apa said “Ye...come, come inside, come to the table” and called her daughter to make tea for us.

The milk tea for the guests is the first and foremost important ritual of hospitality for Kazakh people, and it always starts with a prolonged period of greetings. Nurish apa and Kulash apeke exchanged warm greetings with each other, asked about each other’s wellbeing, health, children, and talked a lot about Kulash apeke’s son’s wedding preparation. Nurish apa is eighty-one years old, and she talks in a very curt, decisive manner. She was wearing a grey dotted headscarf, a thick black corduroy vest and a green sweater underneath, and a pair of heavy silver earrings had stretched her earlobes. Her hands were rough and wrinkled, with strong fingers that could crack open a walnut easily. She sipped milk tea and occasionally spoiled her grandson with her loving kisses and embraces. She was living in her youngest son's otaw (Kz: young couple's residence). Her son is a small-business owner. Her kelin (Kz: daughter-in-law) is a kindergarten
teacher who works in a nearby town on weekdays, and only comes home on weekends. The otaw in which she was staying is a single storey house that was built under a government aided settlement project. Another kelin of hers also works in Altay city, and her grandchildren go to bilingual schools\(^\text{37}\) in the city as well. I quietly listened to them talk until the greetings slowly came close to an end, then I introduced myself to Nurish apa again, “Apa, I grew up in Ürümchi, I was educated in a Han Chinese school, now I’m studying in Canada… I’m here because I hope to write Kazakh women’s history, like your life experience and stories in the past…” She heard me but went ahead to ask questions that mattered to her more, “I see… Whose child are you? Where are your parents from? Where do they work?” I answered her in detail.

Such a triple introduction was necessary: the gatekeeper’s introduction first, my self-introduction second, and then answering genealogical and biographical questions. Although my appearance was abrupt and awkward, Nurish apa forgave it and accepted me generously, based on our common Kazakh language and cultural understanding toward family, genealogy, and collective memories that were carried by names. Answering her questions with family and place names I began to “occupy a standing in [her] mobilized genealogical knowledge” (Robertson and Kwagu’l Gixsam 2012, 410). Kulash apeke also digested my topic and explained along with me, “Women's stories were not written down in books, you must have a lot of stories to tell.” Nurish apa listened amiably, her daughter poured us tea from time to time. Kazakh people treat their

\(^{37}\) Before 1980s, courses were taught in the ethnic minorities’ native tongue. In 1992, XUAR education bureau experimented with partly Mandarin partly native tongue educational mode at elementary and middle schools in Ürümchi, Tacheng, and Turfan. This was a transitional period titled “Bilingual education mode.” From 2001, the XUAR Party Committee encouraged educational administrators to hasten the steps for ethnic minority schools and Han Chinese schools to merge. In 2004, the Party Committee started to promote a full implementation of this “bilingual education mode” in all of Xinjiang. This policy requires all “ethnic elementary schools” to hold Mandarin class from grade one, and conduct “bilingual experimental classes” in “ethnic middle schools.” Under this policy, courses that were taught in Uyghur or Kazakh languages had to be taught in Mandarin Chinese (Dong 2009).
guests seriously, to an extent that it is part of cultural identity and performance and involves intricate etiquette and manner. Though I am young in terms of age hierarchy, I am given a lot of respect for my educational background. I speculate that this has much to do with the long-term stigmatization of Kazakhs as “backward.” I dislike this prevalent hierarchy as it did create a power imbalance between me and the elders.

However, my perceived identity as an institutional, modern, western figure also gave them a sense of importance in front of the younger generations in the interviewing space. With me, Kulash apeke, her daughter and grandchildren around, the interviews became a pedagogical process of show and tell, an interactive, performative storytelling event in which the audience matters. Most of my interviews with elderly women happened like this. Our conversations were always accompanied by milk tea and food shared with the elders’ kelins, daughters, a visiting female guest, or other younger generations who may have listened half-heartedly or curiously. The elders were never idle at home, as they always say, “We have worked all our lives.” They were either taking care of grandchildren or making handicrafts such as felt rugs and embroideries. During their telling, sometimes we laughed and sometimes we fell into deep silence and sighs, wiping tears away together. These transmissions of traumatic memory, experience, and local knowledge become possible and more meaningful within home as a safe space for interaction, appreciation, and a certain mutual understanding.

The rural female elders are situated at a liminal status. In Kazakh customs, the youngest son (Kz: kenje bala) is obligated to take care of his parents, and his household will inherit and carry on the family genealogy. The elders are constrained to their current circumstance due to age, health, and family duties, while their children are more and more pressured by the massive urbanization and sedentarization that have taken place. The third generation—the elders’
grandchildren—have actively made their choices to be close to urban areas for better education and employment opportunities. On the one hand, Kazakh elders are well-respected in the familial and communal space; on the other hand, they have to depend on their offspring and daughters or sons-in-law, and only play a symbolic, ritualistic role in deciding family matters. Nevertheless, they are still important in bonding several generations of relatives in common patrilineage together “under one shangiraq.”38 utilizing their memories and knowledge of family genealogies.

My interviews with the elders at the tea tables became a cathartic site for them to let out long suppressed distresses and silences, some even within their family space. The elders’ children were not interested in their mothers’ “old talk” (Kz: kone ‘soz) and even see the post-liberation events as “old society” (Kz: kone zaman). “They are not interested in this,” the elders say, “now children tell us ‘may those bad days be gone, not pass down to us!’ (Kz: ol jamandiq qalsin). They dismissed us.”

It is this generational gap and state’s forced-forgetting that have triggered the elders’ performativity of their gender roles and meaning-making through telling. In a way, their telling unsettles colonial production of knowledge, which holds that Kazakhs are backward, lazy, feudal, and sexist, and instead presents themselves as hardworking with decent gendered moralities. In our intergenerational interview space, I was seen as both a recipient and a channel of such education that can reach a broader audience. As a result, despite my young age and strangeness, the elders gradually accepted me, observing my attentiveness and notetaking

38 Shangiraq is the skylight part of the yurt and can symbolize family and household, as expressed in a blessing, “shangiraghin biyik bolsin!” (May your skylight be tall and majestic). When migrating between pastures, shangiraq is fastened well on a camel to secure its elevated position, because if a shangiraq falls on the ground and breaks, it is considered ominous. The youngest son’s household inherit the family’s lineage and property is called qara shangiraq, and it will represent their parents and ancestors in the awil and be the site for family reunion and kinship solidarity.
dedication. Occasionally, their eyes would lose focus in thoughts then slowly return to me making a summary: “Yeah, my child, that is our history. Women's life is a life of japakesh (hardship).”

In her dissertation “Muslim Women at a Crossroads: Gender and Development in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, China,” Cindy Huang (2009) notes that Uyghur women use japakesh narrative as “both praise for one’s hard work and empathic recognition of one’s troubles… [it] entails different sacrifices and challenges for each generation” (vi). Due to their commonalities as Turkic Muslim minorities in China, Kazakh elderly women’s japakesh narratives overlap with Uyghur women’s, sharing similar gendered and religious moralities as mother, worker, and wife. Abu-Lughod (1990) sees resistance as a “diagnostic of power” to decipher the changing configuration of power, instead of romanticizing or homogenizing it. Following Abu-Lughod, the japakesh narrative not only demonstrates that the power structure within which Turkic Muslim women are positioned is different from Han women, but also that their everyday resistance through this narrative is achieved by creating a women’s space for mutual understanding, support, and empathy. Unlike Huang’s experience as an American researcher in Xinjiang, as a young Kazakh woman, I was sometimes given teachings on marriage and life by the elders. They told me, “once you go to a faraway place and marry into a family, you need to put up with the difficulties; no matter what, you need to take up the burden (Kz: jat jurtiqqa bir jerge barghannan keyin, qanday qyinshiliq bolsada shidaw kerek).” Jat jurt in Kazakh means a foreign, faraway place, and it symbolizes patrilocal residence in Kazakh marriage. Their habitual phrases relating marriage, distance, and hardship are profound in meaning. These phrases specifically speak of Kazakh rural elders’ subjectivities, spatial
perceptions, and morality through a gendered past that is viscerally embodied and remembered differently from Han or Uyghur women.

**Awil as a Decolonizing Narrative**

Elders’ life narratives shimmer with an affective remembering of the image and atmosphere of *awil*, kinship protocols, and cultural knowledge around it. *Awil* becomes a narrative as a way of calling for morality and social cohesion among Kazakhs. They stressed to me repeatedly: rich herders were not exploitative, but they supported and lead the entire *awil*; women were respected in *awil*, instead of being discriminated against; or the strict gender taboos and moral protocols in *awil* were necessary for *awil* as a community. There is a desire to reconstruct an era when things were ‘intact.’ The affect of nostalgia and melancholia permeates their narrations, which transcend the remembering of the past and make powerful comments on the present—a time of spatial, cultural, and kinship alienation that not even collectivization is perceived to have given rise to. Memory of the past is subject being shaped by more urgent necessities of present reality. What is forgotten and remembered under such powerful tides is what Leslie Robertson (2012) has called “colonial memory,” that is, “a more or less shared – or at least understood – universe of narrated (and silenced) stories about colonial incursion” (51).

The place of birth is often where the elders begin to tell their life stories. After introducing their clan affiliations, they would tell me the place where their *awil* was located, followed by an idiomatic phrase *kindik qanim togilgen* (Kz: that’s where my umbilical cord blood was shed). For them, *awil* is not only a geographical notion, but also very much a communal, moral, and spiritual belonging.
When telling me about her childhood, an elder in her late 70s from Qinghe county of Altay said: *I lived in awil, there were five to ten families with kinship relations in an awil. There wasn’t industry, no factories, nor was there agriculture. Our family was rich, a lot of poor people relied on us. Kazakh people are special because of this, poor people won’t suffer, they work for the rich, so no one is left alone. The Kazakhs are also special for respecting women. There weren’t roads, we went everywhere riding horses, no matter how rich or powerful one person is, he gets off the horse when seeing a woman walking, they will send them to their destination. When one family slaughters a livestock, all families share it. Poor people do whatever they can to help.*

*Let me tell you this, “ortaq dan” means food shared by all, even if only one qazi (Kz: horse sausage) is cooked, it will be shared in the whole awil. Each person gets a small bowl of soup and a tiny piece of meat. When sharing, an apa said to her kelin in a humorous and teaching way:*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Казахский</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>asqanimiz qazi</em></td>
<td>We cooked a little horse sausage,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Eti mayi az,</em></td>
<td>with only a bit of oil and meat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Munani tisine qistir,</em></td>
<td>Bite this between your teeth,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Okpelemy tishtur.</em></td>
<td>Stop whining and be quiet.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Her narrative is full of comparison of past and present, mixed with genres of storytelling and myth of an egalitarian awil, just as Alexander Portelli (1991) has pointed out, in oral history, historical, poetical, and legendary narratives are often mixed up, and personal “truth” coincides with shared “imagination” (35). Modernity has partly constructed her subjectivity that identifies with the concept of development, but she is first and foremost mostly identified with the awil in
memory. Moreover, she felt compelled to right the wrong, and rid our conversation of the stigmas that she was related to personally and as a Kazakh, such as the exploitative rich herders and landlords, or women who were discriminated against in society. For elders, the shared memory of *awil* identifies them as a social group, and they actively use it “as a source of knowledge in the present” or “ontological narratives” to make sense of a social world that has become incomprehensible to them (Lee and Yang 2007, 9-10).

*Awil* also became important in the communal and moral supervision of young women in these narratives. In *awil*, a young girl is watched over by elderly women (Kz: *aje*) and her older sisters-in-law (Kz: *jenge*). A new bride (Kz: *kelin*) is scrutinized by her in-laws and everyone in the *awil*. They would ensure the virtue and modesty of young women. An elder explained to me, “Young people should report to the elders about their whereabouts at the morning breakfast tea, and not to be secretive. Otherwise, they would say ‘Her heart is elsewhere’ (Kz: *juregi bolek*), ‘she is making moves by herself’ (Kz: *bolek areket jasap jatir*).” Several elders stressed these gendered moral protocols by explaining to me the custom of *at tergew*, then they would admiringly compliment women who could do that for being so creative and modest at the same time. *At tergew* is a custom in which a bride avoids calling her male in-laws directly by their names out of respect, and she needs to create substitute names for them according to their individual characteristics. In these memory-laden narratives, *awil* is a site where gender etiquette is observed, through material culture, oral poetry duel *aytis*, as well as communal activities such as life-cycle events. This echoes Ildikó Bellér-Hann’s (2015) findings among Uyghur elders’ as they reminisce about the greyish home-spun cotton cloth made by women. This romantic image is conjured up in contrast to the socialist times when a traditional division of labor and Islamic moral code was violated.
After the wedding, kelin would wear jelek for at least a year. When a respected elder in the awil passes away, the kelin can stop wearing jelek. The wrist parts of jelek are tight, so that nothing is exposed. Some girls can’t stand it, but it is a symbol of adeby ybali (modesty and elegance).

A new kelin opens the tundik (the felt cover of the skylight) every morning, and she is the one who brings light to the family (janga tusken kelin jariq akeldi). She will greet the elders first thing in the morning, and make fire for her parents-in-law (otimizdi tamizadi).

For girls, forty families can give her guidance and advice, as a saying goes “qızgha qırıq uyden tiyim” (literally “a girl receives the teaching of taboos from forty families”). For men too, when the father is around, the son shouldn't speak arrogantly. Children, girls, and women are representatives of an awil, if they catch on some bad habit, people will ask if they learned it from other awils.

Women used to feel shy for being pregnant, and they would hide it as much as possible.

Female aqins (oral poet, or bard) at that time will not banter with their opponents on topics such as marriage or sex, unlike today.

Elderly Kazakh women’s narratives revolve around interpersonal relations, genealogies and a sense of landscape and environment (See Cruikshank 1990, 3; Privratsky 2001, 22). As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) points out, indigenous ways of knowing are different from Western philosophy’s separation of self and society, and the concept of individualism – and so it is for Kazakh women. This set of narratives broadly establishes the notion of self in time and place, defining for her where her life began and specifying the ties binding clans rather than individuals (see Cruikshank 1990, 29). When telling, the Kazakh elders were perfectly aware that it is
impossible and unreasonable to reestablish these gender protocols now. Their narrations in fact reveal more of a nostalgia for the intimate relations among people and families within the same *awil*. When I asked about the proverb about the “forty taboos,” they explained that it means forty families can give a girl advice because they all see her as their own daughter. An elderly woman once proudly told me, “I'm from the *awil* of Aqit Ulumji.” That she fondly related herself to a famous historical figure also demonstrates how *awil* is such a central stage for them in self-identification, interpersonal relation and communication. Bellér-Hann (2015) believes a similar Uyghur discourse of “locality becomes a symbolic space … and it can become the locus of strategies of passive resistance to unpopular state policies” (162).

In North American contexts, anthropologists Audra Simpson (2014) and Carol McGranahan (2016) have elaborated on refusal as an alternative to resistance. Refusal does not follow the symbols and frameworks of state authority and jurisdiction, but resorts to alternative knowledge and histories. For indigenous people, to enunciate their past as “home-grown, and dignified by local history and knowledge is to move away from statist forms of recognition” (Simpson 2007, 78). In this sense, the discourse of *awil* also subtly refuses the *minzu* classification that simplifies and flattens Kazakh identity as a national body, refusing a *minzu* category that grants them no history with standing equal to Zhonghua history. Audra Simpson (2007) calls for a “historical sensibility” to understand the issues of “indigenous membership, political recognition, sovereignty, and autonomy within communities” (76). The elders’ memories of *awil* should not be simply dismissed as nostalgic reconstructions, but be seen as a

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39 Aqit Ulumji uli (1868-1940) was a famous *aqin*, activist, educator and imam from Koktogay, Altay. He was one of the pioneers of modern education among Kazakhs. Aqit was strongly influenced by Arabic and Islamic literature and wrote several long poems that were published in Kazan, including *Batur Janibek*, *Qajibayan*, and *Jihanshah* (Aytola 2007, 5-9).
way to affectively resonate with a social order and kinship affiliation before state intervention, at least on a discursive level at present. When elders talk about awil, it is a politics of laying claim to the sociality that underlies interrelations of kinship, gender relations, and respectability. Though awil in a traditional sense has fundamentally diminished, the elders nowadays mostly reside in the state-administered counties, county-level cities, or villages, and they articulate their prior system of knowledge within the autonomy of their memoriescape.

**Gendered Hardship: Collective Labor and Childbirth**

Mao’s nationwide project of gender equality manifested in the reform of Marriage Law and Women’s Work removed the authority of senior generations and reproductive ties between powerful groups of male relatives (lineage) within the communities (Wolf 1985, 145). For frontier regions, socialist collectivization processes consolidated indigenous peoples as a labor force. In Tibet, women’s subjectivities were especially constructed through labor and naturalized PRC’s rule (Yeh 2013, 91). Cooperatives and communes disrupted Kazakh means for defining and determining community of awil, and structured people through class struggle and socialist production. McMillen (1979) quotes XPCC leader and PLA lieutenant General Wang Enmao’s statement in February 1960, “the communes are of great significance to the minorities of Xinjiang in that they are yet another step which will eventually lead to the blending of all nationalities” (159). The expansion of XPCC farms and state ranches is thus deeply interrelated to bring about the consolidation of Party authority and cultural assimilation in the vast rural areas in Northern Xinjiang.

Under this regime, ethnic minority women's “breaking away from the patriarchal families and participating in collective labor” is not only dismantling local authority, but is also a process
of assimilation into Chinese society. Charlene Makley (2008) calls this a “national secularization via gendered desecration,” manifested “in the display of a kind of socialist androgyny, supposedly represented by a truly ‘modern’ PRC subject, one who was liberated from the obligations of local kin ties and thus empowered to publicly accuse [feudal] superiors of exploitation on behalf of the state” (117-8). The state ethnologists and cadres portrayed a triumphant picture of Kazakh women all participating in work, with their previous domesticated family roles reversed. For example, “there are eighty-four female laborers in Gaochao commune. They make up 40% of the commune labor, and produced 34,600 yuan of worth, which is 34% of entire commune. They work like men, breeding sheep, herding, cutting wool, making wool, cutting grass, sowing seeds, harvesting, processing livestock product, and so on. This solved the lack of labor problem.”

This following documentation also indicates that there was discontent on the local level regarding women working in public sphere. “…Women are empowered while the authority of awil bas and religious clerks were delegitimized… However, the elders complained about women's working outside being inappropriate” (Gu 1957, 382).

Women's narratives include interpretations of their gendered past. For Han women in rural Shaanxi, Hershatter (2011) found “[w]hat was remembered—or forgotten—was determined not by reference to national development goals, but by the changes wrought in domestic arrangements and gendered apportioning of tasks…” or by “concrete elements that affected their daily lives” (26). For peripheral, non-agricultural regions, the cultivation of land is also a process of state incorporation and control. As Emily Yeh (2013) points out, in Tibet, it is done through “establishing consent, cooperation, and participation among subaltern groups—especially

40 Dayuejin zhong de xinjiang xunuye 1959, 3.
women laborers—and the creation of new subjectivities” (60-91). Kazakh elders remembered the beginning of collectivization as it greatly reorganized the gender division of labor for the purpose of maximizing productivity. Families were separated to do different types of work. Men were sent to herd commune livestock up in the mountain pastures, or work in the construction of spillways, and digging of channels and dams. Women were paid differently although they worked equally hard, while doing house duties and child rearing. Men earned ten work points per day, while women made eight points, children old enough to work were counted as half labor and were given five points.41

Nurish apa told me this when I asked her what it was like in the commune: When husbands grazed the sheep, we grazed the lambs; when they went up the mountains, we left to tend the cattle. I used an old scarf to herd lambs until it was all worn out... When our men came back from herding, we stayed up all night and watched over the sheep (Kz: qoy kuzetw). If we fell asleep, the cadres would come knock on the door. County magistrate Zhang and another Kazakh cadre would criticize those families who were asleep the next day at the meeting. We were afraid of anything that could happen to the livestock. We had to watch the sheep, in case the sheep got scattered, or attacked by the wolves. I was nothing special, you should have seen Qaysar’s wife, she could carry four buckets of water at one time. Two buckets on the shoulder pole, and two buckets in her hands, and they don’t fall off? Such a strong woman! We also prepared wool blankets for the sent-down youths (Kz: shekara jastar) all night. During the day, we made quilts and felt rugs.

41 Aletai diqu zhi, Vol 5, Chapter 1, Section 3.
After grazing the lambs, we milked the government's cows. Hanipa and I reunited there, we were happy to get together again. We didn't know what we were doing! We just worked and worked. The government took care of us. We never knew to ask about salary. We milked twenty to twenty-five cows a day. We didn't know about money, income, that kind of thing. We were given flour to eat, nothing else. Fourteen to fifteen women milked the whole commune's cows, it was affluent! The butter was stacked as high as the ceiling, then we submitted the butter to the government; we didn't dare to take any of it, and didn't know that we could eat even a little bit.

For Kazakh women, the demanding commune labor intersected with the taboos related to pregnancy. An Altay regional gazetteer documents, “women’s cadres promoted new midwifery and arranged work according to gender differences in 1958.” This contradicts with the elders’ narration, as giving birth was one of the most painful markers of their lives. Kazakh women in the countryside hid pregnancy as it was taboo for female modesty as well as to avoid the “evil eye” (Kz: koz tyw) that may cause miscarriage. Meanwhile, commune work was so demanding that they always had to work until the last minute before they went in labor. As a result, they gave birth during migration, working in the field, and even went back to work soon after giving birth. An elder told me she was still digging ditches and pushing carts in the field one day before she went into labor. Female neighbors or women in the same brigade would rush to help to be each other's midwives and cut the baby’s umbilical cords. When they were not around sometimes, husbands helped as well.

42 Aletai diqu zhi 2004, Vol 31, Chapter 4, Section 1.
Nurish apa described how she gave birth in the middle of working. *I made qurt* (Kz: cheese curds), *fetched two buckets of water, prepared dough for bawirsaq* (Kz: fried dough). *I was trying to finish the work at hand. Before a neighbor came to help, the baby had already come out. I was holding it back, thinking I should finish cooking the bawirsaq first.* [she let out a long sigh for a few seconds]. *My neighbor came and stopped me from working. She wrapped up the baby, sterilized the scissor in the fire, and cut the cord. I had prepared beforehand the needle and thread to tie up the knot. I didn't know when I would go in labor, so I always had them in my pocket.* While telling this story, she gestured to us how to cut the cord and make the knot so that the blood won't come out and get infected. She clearly remembers the date when her neighbor Hanipa gave birth; they went through a lot together. *May 1965, that was when I gave birth to my daughter. On October 19th that year, Hanipa also gave birth. When Nurjan told me, I ran over there. She had also been struggling to hold it, as soon as she let loose the belt, the baby fell out.*

The elders’ narrations were also imbued with a visceral remembering of how harsh labor has made childrearing difficult. Most women who gave birth in the 1950s and 60s I have talked to have lost half of their children in their lives. In the early 1950s, smallpox, measles, diphtheria, pertussis, scarlet fever, polio, and other children's infectious disease were rampant.43 Childrearing fell entirely on women’s shoulders when the *awil* as a communal structure and support system was no longer available. Nurish apa does not remember her own age during the Great Leap Forward, but she told me clearly that her son was a year and a half old when he passed away. When telling me her days working as a herder on the state ranch. She said, *I raised sheep for fifteen years in Sawir mountain on this state ranch. I put my son in the cradle and tied*  

43 *Aletai diqu zhi* 2004, Vol 31, Chapter 4, Section 4.
him onto cattle and migrated. He passed away (Kz: shetinip ketti).\textsuperscript{44} Nurbahit apa was the luckiest, she could leave her children to her mother-in-law. Dariha apa locked her children at home. One day when she came home from a day’s work, her neighbor told her, “Your kids got out of the house, now they are playing in the creek where Han people raised their pigs!” She raised her voice, “What could I do? We did all kinds of work! We couldn’t stay at home. I had three boys and five girls. Four died of scarlet fever.”

Nurish apa told me her mehnat (Kz: labor, toil)\textsuperscript{45} being a woman: We herded livestock in the mountains all the way to Jimunay. The snow was deep. We migrated with cattle at that time, as the horses were herded altogether somewhere else, and even migrated immediately one night after we gave birth! We fed our babies on the way, tied them up in the cradles and go. See? One person will herd the sheep up to the Sawir mountain, and we would arrive when he has already set up the qos (tent). We had to clear up the snow while going up and setting up a tent. We suffered like that. Thank the Party for our good lives like today. We didn’t have clothes, no sanitary products during our period, we used qurim kyiz (Kz: felt rugs).

\textsuperscript{44} Expressions for children’s death is different from adults’, so are the death rites.

\textsuperscript{45} This is a Persian loan word in Kazakh, meaning labor, or toil. In Persian this word means trial, test, or tribulation. In Turkic language, it is a bit closer to “toil.”
Figure 7 Qos – temporary encampment for herders in migration

The upper drawing caption in Kazakh reads “qos, usually it has its own tailor-made shangiraq.” The lower drawing’s caption reads “the structure of qos, the wiq are strong and straight.” (Source: These pictures were sketched by writer Nuryla Qiziqan, and she gave me permission to use them in my dissertation on December 15, 2017)
Stories of Survival: Disaster and Rectification

When the mass socialist movement against rightists and rich herders started in 1957, Nurish apa was twenty-three years old. To this day, she remembers vividly how she led a migration with two other women, their children, and a herd of cattle after a *jut* (Kz: heavy snow storm) killed most of their production team’s livestock. She mentioned that the women were from three households and belonged to different clans—Jadik, Sherushi, and Tore. They were organized as a unit working on X state ranch. In order to find grass for the rest of the herd, the husbands went up in the mountains and disappeared for seven days. This *jut* was documented in the Altay Regional Gazetteer as having happened during April 18-28, 1957, when a “massive snow storm hit Altay and killed 4,094 head of livestock.”

However, *jut* is more than just the death toll of livestock in the official papers. Nurish apa went into detail telling me how she and other women set up tents in the freezing cold, survived on only a little bit of food, and eventually decided to go find their husbands. She performed dialogues, gestures, and conveyed the devastating sentiments conjured in the chaos of their great efforts. Her story of survival impressed me with a sense of self as a strong woman with dignity, a Kazakh wife and mother firmly grounded in her community.

Hershatter (2011) points out, “state language had given people a powerful new vocabulary with which to narrate their pasts… women refashioned that vocabulary” (26). Nurish apa's telling centers around the time when she was officially recruited by a state ranch and ended her life as a “vagabond” herder (Kz: *qangghimaytin boldiq*, literally “not wandering around any more”). It is hard to know if it was her own words, or it was an ethnic slur referring to Kazakhs.

46 *Aletai diqu zhi* 2004, Vol 2, Chapter 6, Section 1.
However, she also referred to her hard days working on the ranch as “wandering in the mountains for fifteen years.” These ambivalent remarks are the products of speaking from the present and making comparisons with her current retired, sedentary life. Though she was telling of hardships, Nurish apa did not speak from a subjectivity of victimhood, but rather as a survivor. She also articulated her gender virtues and subjectivity from refashioned state discourses by defining her whole life as a “contributor” (Kz: ‘los qosw) to the construction of X state ranch’ since it was first founded in 1956.

_May the days we have been through be fed to dogs! I raised sheep for fifteen years in Sawir on this ranch, I put my son in the cradle and tied it onto cattle and migrated. He passed away (shetinip ketti). I led three families to move, Nurjan’s family, Qaysar’s family and mine. When we arrived late at Aqdala, qizil attacked us. About forty sheep died! [gasp of shock]. Oybay, we are gonna kill all the sheep like this! The government will not leave us alone! We need to go up the Sayir! After a little breakfast, the men left for Sayir with the sheep. We only had one horse, Nurjan had a horse, they left together. We were left there, with our children. They were gone for eight days. Hanipa took care of kids, I went to cut ‘shy (Kz: needlegrass). Gulshat took care of the cattle. Three children, Nurjan’s child, Qaysar’s child Jumabek, and my child. Hanipa took care of the children and gave them milk. It was hard to cut the bottom of ‘shy. We were dying! The children were dying! We didn’t know where our husbands were! There wasn’t a phone at that time._

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47 _qizil soqti:_ this is a local term referring to a type of weather when the wind is particularly strong, sharp, and cold.
48 ‘shy’ is an important life material in pastoral life, it can be fodder for livestock, also can be woven with wool to make screens around the yurt.
We decided that we shouldn't stay there. We decided to move. Nurjan’s wife worried how we could move with our babies. I said I would tie the cradle onto the cattle. She exclaimed that it would be dangerous! But I was determined. “jutamaghan jurti maqtaydi” (Proverb: One only praises his hometown when he survives the snow storm). Let’s not die from disaster. we can't just wait here and die! Who knows what happened to our husbands! Maybe they have died. We gathered our things, tents, and utensils. I tied up the cradle onto cattle, and we moved.

On our way to Sayir, we came across someone we knew. It was Talgat, Marat’s brother. He was herding alone there. We asked him if he had seen our husbands, he said he hadn’t. He said to Hanipa, “I’m dying. There’s no food. I can't raise these livestock anymore…” Hanipa said to him, “Akem aw (my dear), a man can take up a lot of hardship. A man can support a whole taypa. Why are you saying you can’t live? What are you talking about?” Gulshat and I kept walking as the cattle wouldn’t stop. We only learned what Talgat said later, after teasing Hanipa for talking to other men so closely.

Nurish apa expressed disbelief that they were still joking around given the kind of difficulty they were having. Then she resumed her telling. When Hanipa caught up with us, her eyes were filled with tears. Suddenly Nurish apa’s voice changed when she remembered what Hanipa said about Talgat, “He said he was dying. I'm worried he may really die.”

We kept going and settled in a place, I left to look for my husband by myself, riding on a cow. I took a little bit of naan and some barley flour with me. Hanipa prepared a little bit of milk

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49 taypa is a term referring to a tribal confederation.
for me. Just a little bit. She was so considerate. I left. On my way, I saw a qos. I was so happy to see that. It was Amina, we greeted. I asked her, and she said “Qaraghim!” A few days ago, I saw them. They are not coming back today to the place where they stayed earlier, I think they will stay somewhere else.” She only saw them two days ago. She pointed to a mound faraway in the hill that was where they stayed for the night. [a long pause]. I kept walking; finally I saw there were a few livestock scattered around. I didn’t know where to go, until I saw more sheep here and there. I kept walking to where more sheep gathered. It was Nurjan!

[She performed the conversation between her and Nurjan]:

- Oy qaraghim, how did you get here, Nurish?
- I looked here and there. We got our stuff and came to Sayir. I came to look for you all. What should we do, agha?  
- How are the children?
- They are fine. Bawi berik boldi (Kz: their belts are tight and living strong). I tied the cradle onto a cow. Now Gulshat is taking care of him, Hanipa is looking after Jumabek. We set up a tent there and I left to look for you.
- Awelhan is over there. He’s making a fire, you go ahead. I will be there later.

50 qaraghim is an endearment term meaning “pupil of my eyes.”
51 agha means older brother in Kazakh, it can also be used as a respectful term to refer to older male.
52 This is a common expression or blessing for children’s health, for example, bawi berik bolsin! (May your child have great health).
And there he was. My husband, trying to light a fire under a worn-out pot with a few stems of jwsan\(^53\) (Kz: wormwood) underneath. He didn’t greet me, nothing! Qudayim! (Kz: my God) [dramatic gasp] He was trying to light the fire to melt the snow in the pot. I brought naan, barley flour, and milk to him. He didn’t even greet me!

- What’s wrong with you?
- Oyboy [complaining noise] ... our brain is hurting. The government’s livestock are all dead, see? We don’t know what to do! Not to mention looking after you all, I’m screwed here. Now the government will get me. We didn’t eat anything since this morning. I am trying to make tea, but there’s nothing to put in it.

Till this day, her narration is imbued with the deep anxiety and psychological stress of losing the collective livestock at that time. Her husband was so devastated that he did not even lift his head when his wife came to find him in the snow after eight days. When the pastoral production cooperative converted private livestock into shares, the cooperative members took dividends through contributing their labor.\(^54\) However, “if there is loss of livestock in the commune sector, the loss must be made up in the total income in the animal husbandry before the distribution; livestock loss under irresistible disaster is no exception, and is borne by the herd owners” (Kunes Communist Party Committee 1956, 372). The elders had a wry comment for

\(^{53}\) jwsan is a type of Artemisia, specifically A. absinthium, also known as wormwood.

\(^{54}\) See this photo from China News Service photo database depicting Dongfeng commune members patiently waiting to get milk. Since I couldn’t obtain copyright from China, I will not reproduce here. This picture illustrates the rationed redistribution of the herders’ own work product in the commune. The photo caption reads, “Dongfeng People’s Commune is a combination of agricultural and pastoral production. Besides milk powder, each commune household can also receive one kilogram of milk per day. These are commune members getting their milk.”. January 1, 1959. CNSphoto.com. Photo ID: 3015111720521795. Accessed November 3, 2017.
this, “iron livestock does not die” (Kz: temir mal olmeydi). Iron means collective, the same as how “iron rice bowl” refers to guaranteed job security in a state socialist system. The comment means that no matter what happens, even when livestock died from jut or wolf attack, the loss is deducted from the herders’ work points and income. This is also why women had to stay up all night to watch over the sheep. Nurish and several elders repeatedly told me, “All livestock belongs to okimet (Kz: government), and iron livestock doesn't die.”

Nurish apa’s story speaks of the poignant experiences of Kazakhs being reorganized into the regime of state ranches and losing their agency to manage the foundation of their everyday life—their livestock. Altay state ranch was founded on such a premise. There were two main sources of livestock: one was from local financial revenue, as well as livestock confiscated from land tenure reform, socialist remodeling, and livestock donated to the campaign “Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea” were transferred to local pastoral sectors as investments for establishing state ranches. Another source was the acquisition of people’s livestock who left for the Soviet Union. As per the instructions of the CCP Central Committee Xinjiang Branch, the Provincial People’s Government decided to acquire all livestock and transfer the female and young livestock to the livestock sector for management and gradually build state-owned ranches. The prosperity of collectivism is only manifested in productivity on official records,

55 “Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea” is a term used by China to describe its involvement in the Korean War from 1950 to 1953. China and the Soviet Union supported North Korea’s invasion of South Korea, the latter being backed by the United States. The division of North and South Korea was a product of the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States. In October 1950, China sent troops across the Yalu river bordering Korea justifying its entry into the war as national defense against American aggression. Within China, the government ran large donation campaigns and propaganda about China’s role in the war to call for people to donate weapons and increase production to support “Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea.” According to People’s Daily on April 7, 1951, in Xinjiang, the provincial government organized parades of propaganda and signed a patriotic convention. In August 1951, CCP Xinjiang decided to donate thirty planes to the PLA, and called for people to donate valuables, livestock, and increase production.

56 Aletai diqu zhi 2004, Vol 5, Chapter 1, Section 5.
but the burden of deduction was borne by the herders, who were especially vulnerable in smaller units when coping with natural disasters like jut. Nurish apa came back to their tent after finding her husband, and she learned from Hanipa and Gulshat that Talgat had hanged himself with a rope in the qos. She did not speak of this further, probably because committing suicide is a great sin for Muslims. The historical archives of Xinjiang pastoral collectivization meticulously document the profit and production of livestock and dairy products, but women’s oral histories show us a different dimension of this process.

On April 27, 1957, the Central Committee of the CCP issued the “Directive on the Rectification Movement,” calling for a rectification campaign for the whole party to oppose bureaucracy, resist sectarianism, and opposing subjectivism to “correctly handle the contradictions among the people.” In Xinjiang, this political rectification targeted “rightists” and “local nationalists.” Moseley (1966) argues the re-emergence of local nationalism coincided with the cooperative movement which began in 1956 (60), and all opposition, such as local “revisionism” and anti-Hanism were defined as counter-revolutionary, an enemy of socialism (61). Rectification campaigns were carried out in Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture widely, including government offices, factories, mines, and agricultural and herding cooperatives (70). Moseley believes the number of people involved was substantial and they were disciplined through labor. The purpose was to carry out transformation of prefecture with or without Kazakh cooperation. Rectification and communization worked hand in hand not only exerted control over Kazakhs but also robbed them economically (72).

On June 5, 1957, the Altay prefectural committee held a meeting to formally deploy the rectification work. In April 1958, the Altay Party committee carried out the struggle against local nationalism among ethnic minority cadres, criticized local nationalists and local nationalist
sentiment. In order to carry out the instructions of the Central Committee of the CCP in the rectification movement, on June 24 the same year, the prefectural Party committee held a meeting for two and a half months focusing on exposing and criticizing people who had local nationalist sentiments. This movement quickly escalated in various Altay counties, and a total of 111 people were given the title “local nationalists.” When mostly men were persecuted at these meetings, again women and children took up the duty of pastoral production.

In 1958, Nurjan was persecuted. Hojanías was persecuted because his father was a mullah. My husband used to work as a shabarman (Kz: servant) for bays (Kz: rich herd owner) before, so he was also persecuted in the struggle sessions. On May 29, that was the day. I didn’t realize people were tortured in the meetings. After fifteen days or a month, our husbands would come back in tattered clothes. Hanipa pitied them and asked what happened, my husband told us that the clothes got tattered when they were collecting firewood. I believed him too! We all thought their clothes were tattered during labor. That’s the life we have had! If you ask us to talk about the hardship on the state ranch, there’s no end, my child! We are simply happy we didn’t make any mistakes, not being persecuted those days.

We used to migrate to Sawir, it took a month! Twenty days! At that time, there was no horse, we had to walk. The horses were raised collectively elsewhere. During migration, I was left with two children. It was so windy, I couldn’t set up the qos, I told one child to hold onto the wiq, and we tried to set up the qos together, some wiq broke in the wind, I couldn’t cover up the

57 Aletai diqu zhi 2004, Vol 21, Chapter 4, Section 9.
58 wiq are the wooden poles that form the yurt’s roof structure.
tundik (the felt cover of the qos). [She described this process at length.] One child died at that time... another time we went to Alaqaq, it was snowing heavily, the wind was strong. My husband and Qabkesh went off herding. Baurjan and his daughter were around. Thank goodness, we came across with a nice family on our way! They helped us a lot! We were going to take down our stuff from the cattle, but the ropes were frozen stiff like nails. Baurjan’s wife tried to untie the knot in the wind, then her fingers got severe frostbite [She let out a long sigh]. She also didn’t know her child’s whereabouts. Later we found out that her baby girl sat on the snow and peed. Her bottom was frozen to the ground and turned all pale. My God we went through all that. Aziza’s feet were frozen too. We cried for the baby. We felt so guilty we didn't notice when this happened. We rubbed the sheep fat onto the frostbite wounds. We really thought her bottom would fall off. We rubbed horse oil onto the woman’s frostbite. Her hands healed later eventually. We finally got through all that. [Another very long sigh and silence.]

In these narrations, Nurish apa was an active, strong character, taking courage in moving, locating the missing, and providing food and relief. Even when the food was scarcest, women gave naan (made with wheat flour) to their husbands, and they themselves only ate talqan (Kz: made with barley flour) and even bare corn cobs. “Memory is situated in the present yet looks toward the future, and it is the encounter between the ‘self’ of the portrait and the space that resonates with history” (Hirsch 2002, 2). Through telling, Nurish apa interpreted herself as a hard worker, contributor, survivor, a devoted wife and friend. Gulshat and Hanipa were so close and important to her as they shared every sweetness and bitterness together. When she thought of them, the sorrow was embodied in her words, qabirgha qolim sogiledi (Kz: like my ribs and
hands are torn apart). She repeatedly said: *It was intimaq and bereke* (Kz: solidarity and unity) *that made us survive.*

*Even in those hard times, we never called out names but always used “siz”* (Kz: a respective term for “you”). *Three women, three men, we survived together. If there were two of us, we would help each other out first. We would make qos together, eat together. We didn’t separate. We four or five women stayed in one qos, shared only a little bit of food, picked up cow patties for fuel. Now young people can’t put up with anything! Even though everything is ready-made! There are only four or five women like us left now on this ranch. Hanipa passed away, Gulshat is around, she is the same age as me. Some people couldn’t endure it and died. People like us put up with it and are sitting here like me. This is our history. I don’t know other histories.*

Nurish apa’s emphasis on unity and solidarity in her life stories is profound. Through the channel of speaking to me, she was hoping to teach the young generations about interdependency that helped her survive. She referred to young people as the most spoiled ones, like “liver wrapped in fat” (*Kz: mayding ishindegi buyrek*). She reminded a few young men in the village to help an elderly neighbor clear up the snow and fix his roof. The elders’ own children live in Beitun (XPCC headquarter city in Altay), where they “live in an apartment building” (*Kz: qabat uy*) in her words. She was angered by the young people who were reluctant to fix the roof. After they finally finished the work, she prepared food for them and told them to reach out to help the elders sometimes. She said she had to give her grandson some money for clearing up the snow around the house. She worried about these young people’s offspring: “What will they grow up to be? Nowadays you need to pay people to deliver *baghaq* (Kz: wedding invitation) to people,
otherwise, they wouldn’t do it right. Young people used to send messages for free riding horses, now they don't even do it right riding motorcycles.”

As a retired worker from X state ranch, Nurish apa receives a pension of 1,400 RMB every month (about 211.22 USD), which was better than some of her children who did not have a stable income. She praised the Party and concluded that her life is now good thanks to the Party and her own hard work. But she also stressed that she has fulfilled her familial and communal duties as a Muslim woman.

*Now we are living a good, abundant life. Thanks to the Party! My husband has gone for thirty years, he passed away on November 6, on November 7 his bones returned to the earth (Kz: janbasi jerge tydi). I did qatim (Islamic prayer for the dead) for him... That's how we spent our lives. God bless my children not to suffer like us! I hope God doesn't make me wait in pain and takes me away in time. Take me before them. That's all I wish for the rest of my life.*

With this ritualistic “speaking bitterness” phrase “thanks to the Party,” she seemed to have transferred all credit for a hard-earned good life to the Party. At the moment, it was not surprising to me as it was common understanding to us that the omnipresent state is always listening. A life experience living in the Mao era must have taught Nurish apa good lessons on how even families can turn against each other, and these lessons are still relevant in the ever more precarious context of Xinjiang right now. Relating to her earlier criticism of the young peoples’ materialism and negligent treatment of the elders in the village, her strategy also reflects a Maoist nostalgia. This is similar to the case of Chinese rural migrant women’s use of “speaking bitterness” to denounce capitalist exploitation and rural/urban divides (Jacka 2006, 266-270).
More importantly, for ethnic minorities in post-Mao Xinjiang, “thanks to the Party” continues to constitute a political ritual of self-alignment that is still essential in public and semi-public settings. As Uradyn Bulag (2010a) has pointed out, within regimes of oral history in China, “[the subalterns’] voices were channeled to serve the Party… people have learned the art of resistance, not by maintaining silence, but by speaking louder” (109).

Conclusion

Nurish apa’s life story, when put in its historical and social context, is crucial to understanding the underlying forms of state violence as a whole: political persecution, economic dispossession, and structural transition. In this process, women’s bodies were the cultural, gendered, exploitable, and disposable other. Didier Fassin, Frédéric Le Marcis, and Todd Lethata (2008) show us that story and history become “part of each other,” and how “biography may be reconstructed on the obliteration of history,” especially for women, “whose relationship to the public dimension of history often remains invisible and unspoken” (228-35). Engaging the elders’ life narratives and the continuous injustices around Kazakh pastoralism and their children’s current coping with sedentarization campaign, it is not hard to discern the transgenerational transmission of Mao era dispossession as a reproduction of poverty. These elements are not just in the background, but are ubiquitous and omnipresent, as “social inequality inscribed in local and national history, is embodied in the materiality of lives” (230).

Maoist women’s narratives overlap in their collective experiences. Kazakh elders’ narrations are interwoven with state and local discourses, the personal experience of hardship and survival, social myths, and gendered moralities, with little attention to political campaigns and calendrical years. Hershatter (2011) argues that both oral and written sources are incomplete
yet important, each of them “bear different traces of circumstances under which it was
generated” (15). However, oral narratives deserve special attention because very often “they slip
under moorings of [broad historical] meaning and interpretation;” most importantly, they “keep
track of what accounts for changing meanings and interpretations” (23). Unlike official
narratives of Kazakh women being liberated or equalized since the founding of New China, for
most elders I’ve talked to, their narrated life began where their umbilical blood was shed. Often
it included fleeing from the turmoil and conflict between warlords, being incorporated into
cooperatives and working with people who may or may not necessarily be in their own
communal network. They survived various disasters and strenuous labor, sustained by scarce
food and materials through giving birth and raising children, preparing wedding celebrations, and
so on. Unlike Han elderly women who speak to condemn socialist exploitation and state
abandonment, Kazakh elders address lifeworlds prior to the state, a “refusal” of state categories
of both gender and ethnicity (Simpson 2007, 2014).59

This chapter has revealed Kazakh women's own interpretations of the past through their
liminal positions in the present. Their performative storytelling was part of a process of engaging
with the changes happening around them and affecting their younger generations, while also
foreseeing a future. Active remembering of their interpersonal and gendered etiquette, as well as
the narratives of awil and endless hardship are inseparable from their alienated positions as
silenced seniors of Maoist traumas. Collectivization paved the way for twenty-first century
urbanization and sedentarization projects, which work in tandem with the socialist legacies such

59 This is similar to Yukon women’s narratives described by Julie Cruikshank (1990), who argues that the elders
mobilized local idioms and a shared body of knowledge—myths, genealogies, songs, names of places and people—
in response to their contemporary experience, to pass on to future generations, or to empower themselves, to
maintain communal interdependency and solidarity.
as *hukou* and *bianzhi*. The elders’ children and grandchildren are more and more distant from their parent generations’ epistemologies and worldviews, as they have increasingly embraced market ideologies that commodify one’s time and labor. These tensions have suffused the elders’ memories with a sentiment of gendered melancholia.
Chapter 3: The Politics of Returning and Emplacement

When from the distant past nothing remains, after the beings have died, after the things are destroyed and scattered, still, alone, more fragile, yet more vital, more insubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls, ready to remind us, waiting and hoping for their moment, amid the ruins of everything else; and bear unfaltering, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the immense architecture of memory.

Yet again I had recalled the taste of a bit of madeleine dunked in a linden-flower tea which my aunt used to give me (although I did not yet know and must long await the discovery of why this memory made me so happy), immediately the old gray house on the street where her room was found, arose like a theatrical tableau...

― Marcel Proust (1913, 47)

When I Smell Jwsan, I Remember My Awil

On a summer evening in July, my mother came back from Altay where she had attended a wedding with her friends. Along with her luggage, she had a bundle of herb wrapped in a plastic bag with her. She took out these herbs and placed them next to the flower pot in our living room. They gave off a strong, refreshing scent. I recognize this smell from my childhood memory of playing around in her home village in Hoboksar, where I spent a few summer vacations before I was about ten years old. The herb is wormwood, in Kazakh it’s called jwsan. The smell of jwsan is very common in the open air of rural areas, as well as the burning of firewood and tezek (cow patties). It is a common type of feed for the livestock, and has a versatile range of applications such as expelling parasites, curing skin and stomach diseases of the livestock.
“When I smell it, I remember my *awil*.” She said, “It smells particularly nice on rainy days, you can smell it from far away. The other herbs that also smell good are *jwa* (wild scallion), *yizen* (broom cypress), and *ermen* (mugwort)\(^60\). As for *ermen*, there is also a proverb that goes like ‘*ermendi jerde el olmeydi.*’ (Where there is *ermen*, people will not die), as *ermen* is an herb can be used in medicine.”

The way she relates to her hometown through these herbs bewildered me, and this was simply a beginning. To make me understand, she started to sing a popular song called *Awilim* that mentions the herb *jwsan* and *jwa*. Apparently, she is not alone in making such sensorial connections to the emotion of longing for home. Famous Kazakhstan composer Temirjan Bazarbayev (1935-2006) and poet Jabrayil Beysenov (1935-) wrote this song *Awilim* (my *awil*). Jabrayil is originally from Toli county of Tarbagatai in Xinjiang, he was among thousands of Kazakhs who fled to the Soviet Union in 1962.

*Awilim*

*Kindigmning jas qani,*  
My young umbilical blood

*tamghan jerim awilim.*  
dripped to the ground of my *awil*.

*Shabitimning asqari,*  
My spirit inspired by you,

*smaghawshi edi awilim.*  
is soaring high, my *awil*.

*Jastighimning kwasi,*  
Witness of my youth,

---

\(^{60}\) *ermen* is specifically Artemisia vulgaris, also mugwort.
shurqiraghan awilim. you are beautiful, my awil.

Jwsani men jwasi, Jwsan and jwa herbs,

burqiraghan awilim. I can smell them in my awil.

Byik - byik shing, quzgha, The high peaks of your mountains,
qumar qilghan awilim. make me long for you, my awil.

Buldirshingdey 'bir qizgha, The lovely girl I pined for,
singar qilghan awilim. I was joined to her by my awil.

Oymen qirdi qidirip, When I walked your ridges and valleys,
'an saldirghan awilim. songs of praise rose within me, my awil.
Sari qimiz sapirip, Mixing the horse milk so pure,
tamsandirghan awilim. you lend it taste, my awil.

Kok 'tutindi shubatip, Blue smoke rises from the yurt chimney,
jelek sozghan awilim. a ribbon flowing to the clouds in my awil.
Ay kormesem qumartip, If I don't see you for a month,
jurek qozghan awilim. my heart heaves with yearning, my awil.

Kok torghinday koktemde, The spring spreads down like blue silk,
saghim qwghan awilim. awakening my love for you, my awil.
Alis sapar shekkende, When I set off for a faraway place,
saghindingghan awilim. it is you I long for, my awil.
The bundle of *jwsan* stayed in our living room for a couple of months, until it dried up and its smell slowly faded away. The memory of place conjured up by *jwsan* lingered in my mind, just like the fragrance itself, “entangling” people, landscapes, and emotions (Ingold 2008, Pink 2008). A bit more precisely, it is also a “botanical memory” that is multisensorial and place-specific (Ryan 2012, 36). For Nadia Seremetakis (1993), “Sensory memory is a form of storage. Storage is always the embodiment and conservation of experiences, persons and matter in vessels of alterity. The awakening of the senses is awakening the capacity for memory, of tangible memory; to be awake is to remember, and one remembers through the senses, via substance” (4). The smell of *jwsan* created a chain effect of remembering and emotions that are well captured by popular songs like *Awilim*. Researching people’s place-making practices under multi-layered violence in Medellín, Columbia, Pilar Riaño-Alcalá (2002) points out, “songs… have a cycle of social life that gives them representational and documentary capacities; Furthermore, they can provide guidance to the ways that places are sensed and constructed” (284). The song *Awilim* resonates in Kazakh worlds as the idiomatic phrases “umbilical blood” or “the smell of *jwsan*” are emotionally related to the sense of place such as hometown and ancestral place, in which kinship relations, personal and social activities within the specific time and space are inseparable.

When nostalgic symbols and memories circulate, the concept and location of *awil* is not static anymore, but becomes fluid. Following philosopher Edward Casey (1996), *awil* may be seen as an “event” (26); a continuous process that has “gathering power” (44). Another Kazakh word for *awil* or hometown is *jurt*, which has multiple meanings that far surpass the geographical idea of a place, it not only means hometown, the base of the yurt, heritage house, but also means
people, mass, or compatriots in that place. Casey notes that “places gather experiences and
histories, even languages and thoughts” (24). Place has an agentive voice, on a syntactic level—
several verses in the song Awilim stress the subject position of the place, for example qilghan in
Kazakh is a verb meaning “make do,” “(my awil) makes me long for them,” “makes me
homesick,” “makes me praise them in songs,” and so on. Place entangles people, landscape, and
non-human entities in a “throwntogetherness” (Massey 2005, 140).

In this chapter I combine an autoethnography of family history with socio-historical
research methods to engage Kazakh knowledge and accommodate subjectivity and emotionality,
rather than dismiss them in history making and writing. Through autoethnography, I intend to
show the historical process more intimately and “bring the readers into the scene” – particularly
into thoughts, emotions, and actions (Ellis 2004, 142). As Kristin M. Langellier and Eric E.
Peterson (2004) point out, family identity is never “just personal,” nor even “just family”
because it emerges in interactions with difference rather than in isolation (150). Family
storytelling is an ongoing performance, “an outcome of ordering of information” over personal,
communal, network identities (148). Through autoethnographic family storytelling, I allow
memories to weave a “network of meanings that bring together the personal with the familial, the
cultural, the economic, the social, the historical” (Kuhn 1995, 5). For me, this autoethnographic
approach is powerful in demonstrating the sensuous experience of returning to ancestral place
and the intimate aspects of belonging.

I’m Back, Awizshy

My mother was born in a place called Awizshy, which was her awil’s winter encampment
sharing a fifty-eight-kilometer borderline with Kazakhstan. Currently it is under the
administration of Hoboksar Mongol Autonomous County in Northern Xinjiang, and its name is rendered in Chinese pinyin as Āwúsīqí (Ch: 阿吾斯奇).

In 1864, a border protocol titled Treaty of Tarbagatai between Qing Empire and Tsarist Russia defined the border, and Russia gained territory at the expense of Qing’s Xinjiang. Many Kazakhs in the Tarbagatai region thus became Russian subjects. In 1886, three Kazakh Naiman clans migrated to Awizshy and settled down, where they were granted rights to herd in the territorial pastures of the Mongol princes in Hoboksar. From 1926 to 1928, more Kazakhs immigrated to Hoboksar from the Soviet Union. In 1944, the Kazakh population in Hoboksar reached 1,817 people.61

My mother spent her early childhood in Awizshy. According to her, my grandfather Islam and great grandfather Alibek lived together as one awil with a couple of other families that were all descendants of Qusayin. My great grandfather Alibek migrated to Awizshy from today’s Zaysang lake region of Kazakhstan in 1935, and he made his fortune trading fox furs and hunting with hounds along the Sino-Soviet border. During the turmoil caused by warlords occupying Xinjiang in the 1930s, the Republic of China army looted the treasures Alibek had prepared as dowries for his two daughters Lazat and Shayzat. The two girls later passed away in a typhoid outbreak that also killed most of Alibek’s family members. Only my grandfather Islam and his two younger brothers survived.

When Alibek stumbled onto the Soviet side of the border, he was captured by Soviet militia and later died in prison. When the Sino-Kazakhstan border was reopened in 1991, Alibek’s youngest son, my mother’s uncle went to the state archive in Almaty and found Alibek’s

death record. For Kazakhstan, these prison records became proof of Soviet suppression of Kazakhs, and Alibek was marked as one of the national martyrs who was sacrificed for the historical struggle of Kazakhstan’s independence.

![Figure 8 An old family photo of my grandfather with his family](image)

An old photograph of my grandfather Islam (second from the right in the back) with his brothers, sisters-in-law, and their children. Photo year unknown.

On the Chinese side of the border, Mao's Great Leap Forward, Han influx, and People’s Communes intensified the conflicts which already existed across Xinjiang. These huge social and demographic transformations confirmed widespread rumors about socialist land reform and secularization, which were spread by Kazakh refugees from the Soviet Union. Uncertainty was made worse by the demand for intensive labor and production in the communes.
When the Sino-Soviet split reached its climax in 1962, my mother was seven years old. The regions bordering the Soviet Union—Ilı and Tarbagatai became tense. Soviet consulates in these areas distributed large numbers of Soviet passports to local residents as well as propaganda about better life conditions in the Soviet Union. While the border inconsistently opened and closed, thousands of Kazakhs, Uyghurs, former Soviet citizens and their families in the area rushed to cross at Horgas and Baktu. In April 1962, 6,985 households comprised of 28,984 people left for the Soviet Union, and this was the largest exodus in Tacheng history.\(^\text{62}\) Over a number of months, around 60,000 people in these regions fled to the Soviet Union despite the armed border patrol and increased security (Moseley 1966; Shen and Li 2011). This is known as “Yi-Ta incident” in modern Xinjiang history, which made the Party state see the urgent need to fortify its border areas against its ideological enemies—the Soviet Union's revisionist politics represented by Nikita Khrushchev. The central government immediately closed Horgas and Baktu, and deployed some regiments of XPCC along the border regions that had been blurred by connected pastures and ancestral burial sites of the herders between China and the Soviet Union. These places became “contested zones” of the border negotiation, which China claimed to be its own territories through the evidences of herders’ pastures and their burial sites for generations (Gao 2002, 245, 250).

My mother’s village in Awizshy was close to the border as well but it was rather mountainous. Under the intense political climate, Awizshy was titled “Revisionist brigade” and the villagers became potential “traitors” just because they were close to the border or they had families who left. Overnight, soldiers arrived in trucks to evacuate the villagers and their

livestock. “Everybody whispered to each other, nobody spoke loudly,” she said, “It felt like something terrible was going on.” People were only allowed to take life essentials with them. Some people and livestock were loaded on the trucks, some had to mount their horses and follow the trucks. Under the troops’ close supervision, people were evacuated from Awizshy and relocated to Bayinova village (Ch: Bāyīnáobāo xiāng 巴音敖包乡) to the east of Hoboksar Mongol Autonomous County. After the evacuation was over, XPCC agricultural 7th division 137 pastoral battalion (Ch: 137 tuán mù yè yíng 137 团牧业营) was positioned in Awizshy.\(^\text{63}\)

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure9.pdf}
\caption{From Awizshy to Bayinova}
\end{figure}

My mother’s village was relocated from Awizshy to Bayinova village. On official maps, Awizshy is registered as 137 Regiment pastoral settlement (Ch: 137 Tuanmuye Ying 牧业营), and Bayinova village is spelled in Chinese pinyin as Bayin’aobao xiang (Ch: 巴音敖包乡). The distance in between is approximately 81 kilometers (Map prepared by UBC Geography Department).

\(^{63}\) Hebukesai'er menggu zizhixian zhi 1998, Vol. 1, Chapter 4, Section 4.
My mother came of age in Bayinova village. Many times, I heard her talking about how she used to help her father build adobe bricks like a boy, carry her brother on her shoulders and walk all day to catch a movie in the nearby county; how her mother was never satisfied by her housekeeping skills, how she and her sister would surprise their parents by cleaning and rearranging the furniture in the house … When she turned twenty in 1976, the Cultural Revolution was coming to an end. As a poor herder-turned-farmer's-daughter, she became one of the Worker-Farmer-Soldier college students⁶⁴ and was enrolled in Xinjiang Technical Institute in Ürümchi.

My mother is the first one in her family to get a college degree and become an employee of a state institution. Even today, rural Kazakhs still admire such state status and call it kadier (Kz: cadre), a socialist term frozen in Kazakh vocabulary describing someone with an institutional background. She would be invited to host or attend her relatives’ important rite of passage rituals. Because she is a well-respected woman in the community, she has been invited to be kindik ana for several children (kindik means umbilical or navel, and ana means mother). Kindik ana is invited to cut the baby's umbilical cord and be a moral example for him or her in the future. She names babies; she participates in their tusaw kesw ceremony (a rite of passage ritual marking a toddler taking the first step, at this ritual kindik ana cuts the felt rope binding the toddler’s feet); as well as many brides’ dowry preparations and display events. Though living in Ürümchi for most of her life, she carries the values and cultural knowledge of Kazakh life-cycle events and gains respectability.

⁶⁴ Worker-Farmer-Soldier students were enrolled in college in the later part of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). They were accepted for their “class background” of their parents, rather than for their academic performances. Since workers, farmers, and soldiers belonged to the “Five Red Categories” (the other two categories being revolutionary cadres and martyrs), their children enjoyed the privilege of education and employment.
In my mother’s memoryscape, Awizshy seems to be more dear to her than Bayinova, even though she spent most of her youth in Bayinova. She reminisces about Awizshy much more often and calls it her jurt. In her words, Awizshy was the most beautiful, most lush grassland she has ever seen. She quotes her father’s words, “the grass was so tall that a baby camel could get lost in it and its owner wouldn’t be able be find it” or “the horse hooves were always dyed red by the strawberry pulp after galloping on the pasture …” Marianne Hirsch (2008) emphasizes the familial transfer of embodied experience to the next generation. She argues that intergenerational transmission is more intimate than national/political and cultural/archival transmission that is transgenerational (110). The regrets and the trauma of displacement of her father were relayed to her, and his memories of being within the natural environment were fused in his daughter’s perceptions of Awizshy. For a place that was taken abruptly for the state’s border reinforcement, remembering seems to be the only way to give it some legitimacy and history of inhabitance.

In August 2015, I visited my uncle’s family in Hoboksar county with my parents. I had not seen them since I left for Canada two years previously, so we decided that since I was back, we should all go visit Awizshy together. It had been seventeen years since we visited last time as a big family group, when I was a high school student. We packed water and lunch for a picnic, and drove to the small town of 137 battalion settlements. My grand aunt’s son works there, and he introduced us to Serjan, a driver who has much experience in the surrounding area and knows people there. We switched to his AWD jeep, reloaded everything, and shared some qimiz (Kz: fermented horse milk) before hitting the road.

The weather was hot, but my mother was so happy and cheerful to go back to her home winter camp. She never stopped singing in the jeep, bragging admiringly “how beautiful my Hoboksar is!” Occasionally, she shared an anecdote or two with her brother along the way. After
getting off the main road, we arrived at a vast area of pasture that was fenced with barbed wire. Serjan drove along the fence, found the gate and opened it. My cousin and I stayed behind to close the gate after the jeep passed through.

After driving for a few miles, the road signs disappeared. We were in the middle of endless green pastures without any signs of direction from GPS, maps, not even a bar of a cellphone signal. Above our heads, there was scorching sun, but fortunately the summer breeze from the mountains was cool and comforting. I started wondering how we were supposed to find the place. My uncle had visited the place a couple of times, while my mother had more memories of her own and her father’s description of the landscape. They collaborated in mapping the place from their memories. My mother kept talking about how the place was marked by mountain tops that look like giant wooden cases called sandiq tas (sandiq is a common furniture in the yurt, and tas means rock), or the mountain ridges of Awizshy look like the wooden frames of the yurt, in her words, kerege tas (kerege is the criss-cross wooden frame surrounding the yurt). When I heard these, I was astonished by their ways of comprehending the space and ways of orientation, which seemed very elusive to me at that moment. I even started to suspect that we would never find the place, and we were just driving around in circles. Serjan calmly and actively followed what my mother and uncle were describing to him and contributed to navigation with his local knowledge and experience in the area.

After driving for about twenty minutes, he stopped at a spot that he speculated was right. We started hiking. After about twenty minutes, suddenly the sandiq tas showed up in front of us! My cousin saw it first. Finally! Here we are! My mother's place of birth, where her umbilical blood was shed—the winter camp of Awizshy! It was so tranquil and undisturbed, as if it had been waiting for us for a long time.
The *jurt* (Kz: heritage house or homeland) may seem like nothing at first glance. But with a closer look, one can see the evenly sized rocks were piled next to each other forming a structure. They served as the bases of the adobe walls. My mother gave me a tour around these stone remains, she showed us around as if the house were still there. “This used to be the gate, and this area used to be the kitchen, and this was the corridor…” She motioned with her arms in the air. I tried to imagine the way the *jurt* looked but it was hard from the way it looks now: there were only ruins, wild grass was growing everywhere, not a single household item was left. After all, it was abandoned more than five decades ago.

Figure 10 Mother's ancestral site

My mother’s *jurt*, where only stone bases of the house were left.

(Source: Picture Taken by Guldana in Awizshy, Tarbagatai, August 27, 2015)
We walked around in the vicinity of the jurt. The sky and the mountains connected as far as one’s eyes could reach. Summer breezes were touching my face and hair when I walked up and down the meadows and along a flowing creek. Nobody was there except us. I could barely imagine that this used to be a village where my mother was born and grew up. I felt an uneasy emptiness inside me and a simultaneous amazement for the landscape that was indeed as beautiful as I had been hearing. I got lost in thought, until I was called over to look at a giant rock on which my grandfather and great grandfather had both carved their names: “Alibek” and “Islam.” Their carvings were much fresher compared to the glyphs carved by much older ancestors, centuries ago. Beside their names, a carving that said “1932” was also there. We read their names and years out loud. My mother laid her body over the rock and murmured emotionally, “I'm back, I'm back, may you rest in peace…” then she cried. She asked me to take pictures of her in front of the rock. We all took a lot of pictures together. My cousin and I were told to remember this day, especially my cousin; at the time he was only a high school student, but he was expected to bring his children back here one day.

My mother could not stop admiring the four giant stone pillars near the jurt, and claimed that they were such masterpieces of God. Like a know-it-all, I foolishly told her that they were just a product of natural geological changes. At that time, I did not understand how symbolic and significant this place was to her, instead of simply a geological contingency. I only realized later how distant I had become from her, her past, and way of knowing. Even though I am her daughter, I was taught knowledge and science at school and should have known better.

Nevertheless, my mother could not have been happier after visiting her jurt. We left in total satisfaction. My uncle was relieved that we could find the place in his memory, and that he had confirmed with himself the right path to take at the fork in the road. Serjan was happy he had
completed the task. For me, I understood Awizshy and its meaning much better than last time, when I was the same age as my cousin.

We drove back to Bayinova. My mother’s first younger brother has inherited the family house there. While drinking milk tea, my mother and her three younger brothers discussed the possibility of erecting a monument to commemorate their family ancestral site in Awizshy, but they were worried that it would be taken down as an “illegal installation” on the “state’s land.” They reminisced regretfully that when the Kazakh Communist Party official Janabil\(^65\) was in office, people from Awizshy were allowed to move back, and the 137 battalion would retreat from the place. “But some young people complained that the wind was too strong in Awizshy and too far away from the Hoboksar county seat. As people became more used to Bayinova, the option of returning to Awizshy finally expired.” This narrative is meaningful. According to them, the young people were to blame for the eternal loss of Awizshy, and this demonstrates that a generational rift already occurred in the early stage of decollectivization. Moreover, the closeness to the town center as an important decision-making factor indicates that people organized their lives in the re-spatialized Hoboksar. The former residents of Awizshy did not have the option to return, contrary to what they had believed. The regional gazetteer elusively documents that herders tried to return to Awizshy on their own initiative in 1986, but were persuaded to move back to Bayinova again.\(^66\)

After tea, my mother and I took a walk around Bayinova. The village was also changing quickly. We walked past a place I thought was a dry river bed, but in fact this used to be a large

\(^{65}\) Janabil (1934-) became the Vice Chairman of XUAR government in 1978, and the Chairman of the XUAR People's Political Consultative Conference in 1993.

\(^{66}\) Hebakesaier menggu zizhixian zhi 1998, chronicles.
area of *sazi* (Kz: marsh), but now the water was turned into a tiny creek, and bit by bit the crack in the ground became wider, and started to look a lot like a river bed. I looked closer and saw the edges of the marsh were still breaking apart. “Look at these lumps of ‘shy, they used to be as tall as a man.” She pointed to the ground. I saw clumps and clumps of needlegrass as tall as my knees sticking out from the dry land. We walked around, and she pointed to some neighboring farm houses and told me the names of the neighbors, their distant kinship relationships to her family, and I soon got lost in her narration of the complex kinship network.

![Figure 11 The marsh cracked open and started to dry up.](source: Picture Taken by Guldana in Bayinova village, Tarbagatai, August 28, 2015)
Emplacement and Generational Disruption

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, “No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it’s not the same river and he’s not the same man.” The temporality of space is ever-shifting and changing in appearance, in all the possible interactions and transformations that occur within it. However, it does not necessarily mean that we can never understand it. Almost two years after visiting Awizshy, when I reflect on this experience, I begin to realize how it has come to mean something very personal and specific for me. My own experience of emplacement within it, as well as writing about it, has become my way of connecting with the land and understanding its agency. I apply Sarah Pink’s (2015) term of “emplacement” not only for my positionality as “emplaced ethnographer,” but also to stress the relationships between bodies, minds, and the material and sensorial aspects of the environment (9-10). Pink has argued that “the experiencing, knowing and emplaced body is central to the idea of a sensory ethnography. Ethnographic practice entails our multisensorial embodied engagements with others (perhaps through participation in activities, or exploring their understandings in part verbally) and with their social, material, discursive and sensory environments” (4). The Awizshy experience became a setting that allowed me to experience my elder generations' history of displacement, which is not anywhere treated in the state-centered histories of the region. Awizshy is no longer just a physical, static, state territory thousands of miles away from me, but it is an “event” that gathers and amalgamates several generations’ histories of migration and trauma of displacement, as well as their embodied experiences and knowledge through emplacement, for example, the analogy of mountain ridges to yurt items. It is also through such emplacement that I came to understand the power of symbols and names of the place.
Indigenous scholars Leanne Simpson (2014, 10) and Kathleen Absolon (2011, 50) have each shown that indigenous education is grounded in the land and the environment. Embodied senses of emplacement such as seeing, hearing, and tactile feeling establish memories and practices of place. On the way to Awizshy, when I felt it would be impossible to find the place without modern technologies and topographical maps, I did not realize that those were not going to help me understand my relationships with the surroundings. They were products of viewing a place objectively and scientifically, or a territory with exploitable political and economic resources. On the contrary, my mother’s method of orientation reflected her experience of the phenomenological life world: a world in which she and her ancestors made a living, a world where she developed a way to understand her environment, and a world within which she inhabits a complex web of kinship and social networks.

In Leanne Simpson’s (2014) words, “land, is after all, learner-led and profoundly spiritual in nature,” and she argues that it is through “land as pedagogy” that indigenous people can have generations of a loving, caring community inherited from the knowledge holders (7). My failure to follow my mother, my uncle, and Serjan’s way of orientation indicates a transmission gap between us, a generational disruption between mutually comprehended ways and actions of communicating landscape. Their corporeal connection to the land through metaphoric idioms reassures them spiritually even when they are in urban space; even their sense of loss and regret still conveys an intimate tie to the grassland that they have lived in, admired, and communicated with. After going through the space with them, I was struck by their relationality to other beings in place, whether it was rocks, grass, marsh, or traces of ancestors that were not palpable to me. “Knowledge sits in places,” and the memories and stories of ancestors exist here (Basso 1996, 53). Place is powerful in holding memory (Basso 1988). From
the moment my mother and uncle started navigating on the road, they were already reliving the
place in their bodies and conjuring up their bodily memory.

This visit emplaced me, a young urban Kazakh woman, into a setting of intergenerational
knowledge transmission. How remote I have become from my elder generations; how detached
from and confused I was about their familiarity, intimacy, and passion for this place! If “space is
to be understood in an active sense as an intricate web of relationships that is continuously
produced and reproduced,” in Henri Lefebvre's words, they have “produced” this space in much
more complex processes than me (Schmid 2008, 41). In their minds, Awizshy is entangled
within relationships and memories attached to the land, a place where they had a past unlike the
one authorized or told by the state; a place where they had a community and common linguistic
space, unlike disappearing into an urban space ordered by Chinese language conventions. For
them, the production of Awizshy space contains a profound affective exchange of senses and
memories, as well as mutually understood transgenerational traumas of displacement together
(Nadia Seremetakis 1993; Sutton 2001).

Changing Places, Remembering Names

On the way back from Bayinova to Hoboksar county, Sawir mountain ridges stretched
the whole way out of the car window. As a part of the entire Tianshan system, Sawir mountain
connects with Tarbagatai mountains along the Sino-Kazakhstan border. Above the endless
horizon far away, its snowy peaks stand out like a silver palace against the background of blue
sky. I could not help but be amazed by its majesty and dignity. My mother told me the mountains
were named by Asan Qaygi, a famous wandering poet and philosopher in the fifteenth century.
“The mountain ridges are high and straight just like the croup of the horse, that’s why it’s called Sawir.”

Within a Kazakh language environment, place names are passed on through the imaginative vantage points of pastoral life and the oral traditions of myths, tales, and epics. “Place names connect people with their past, and bring forward a repertoire of local knowledge and stories that connect individuals with a sensuous landscape and geography,” as Pilar Riaño-Alcalá has summarized (2002, 289). Moreover, they “acquire a capacity to evoke stories and images for the people who knew the places first” (Basso 1988, 112). For example, the place Baytobe literally means “the horseracing hilltop,” because local herdsmen had annual horseraces here. Sarqoshqar means “yellow ram,” because a Kazakh herder built a water channel in 1814 and sacrificed a yellow ram to celebrate when the project was finished. Koktal means “revived willow tree,” as it is said that in this place a willow tree died due to drought but came back to life in the next year. The place name Sarhaji originated from a Uyghur businessman, Abdurahman, who returned from his pilgrimage to Mecca. As his face was yellow, and pilgrims back from Mecca are called Haji, this place was nicknamed Sarhaji meaning “yellow pilgrim” (Pan 1998, 37-38). Alongside Sayram Lake, new tourist sites and facilities were under construction by the joint administration of Bortala or Ili Sayram Lake Conservation Committee, but Kazakh elders will make sure you know that the mountains afar are named after the heroes Qalyan batir and Tumaqbay batir; and the name of Sayram lake originated from the legendary love epic (Kz: dastan) “Bysara and Saghatbek.” It is through the tenacity of the elders in their speech and knowledge that such education about one’s origin and perspective viewing the land is made possible. By utilizing and circulating these names, people locate themselves in the cultural topographies and mental pictures created by these myths and local knowledges. The names
maintain a sense of place and cultural identities in the massive deterritorialization and reterritorialization processes of the XPCC.

In Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson’s (1997) sense of place-making, XPCC ties their “pioneer” identity to the place. Practicing power through spatial management, they legitimized Chinese national identity by opposing to both Soviet Union and other groups indigenous to the border areas (17). After the large exodus of the “Yi-Ta incident,” some of XPCC’s regiments were quickly deployed in the border regions for the mission of the “Three Takeovers” (Ch: dài gēng, dài mù, dài guǎn 代耕, 代牧, 代管), which meant taking over the agricultural, pastoral, and administrative work in the region. The state farms and ranches that were established became a natural buffer zone over ten kilometers wide along the border. The 186 Regiment’s political commissar Guo Wenjun wrote in the preface of the Regimental gazetteer (Pan 1998):

Jimunay farm was established per international political situation after the ‘Yi-Ta incident’ in 1962. The soldiers held guns in one hand and pickaxes in the other, opened the land, and constructed this place. They dug channels to irrigate the land and built reservoirs. From small harvest to mass production, from having no grain processing machines to exporting quality flour abroad, from taking water from wells to providing tap water…. All these rely on our predecessors’ hard work and perseverance to overcome natural disasters like hails, droughts, storms, and to build a modernized border regiment town from a farm that was ‘remote, dry, insecure, shabby, and lacking transportation.’ Our regiment soldiers are a group of soldiers who don’t wear uniforms, don’t take royalties, and will never be demobilized. They are steel-made national border and boundary markers that will never move!

Pieces like Guo’s preface are the usual openings for XPCC Gazetteers (Ch: tuán zhì 团志), which document the XPCC histories, development, and most importantly, their “pioneering spirits” and “contributions.” They include the early work of regiment soldiers and labors, such as landscape surveillance for settlement, resource extraction, infrastructure construction, and mobility options in strategic descriptions. In these documents, PLA soldiers and their families
“selflessly” came to the “remote, uncultivated gobi” to “defend frontier regions” (Liu 1998, 92-93); the place was a “virgin land that was waiting to be opened” (Chen 1999, 147), or a “gobi desert without any human inhabitant” (Tao and Zhang 1999, 2). In these narratives, settlers frame themselves as “pioneers” and “contributors” as they have “opened the land” from the “gobi desert” (Ch: gēbì tān戈壁滩), “wasteland” (Ch: huāngdi荒地), or “wilderness, desolate land” (Ch: huāngyuán荒原, huāngyě荒野, huāngliáng zhī dì荒凉之地), and the farms and ranches are products of their heroic work and sacrifice (Gao 2002; Liu 1998; Pan 1998; Tao and Zhang 1999). When the 33 Regiment party commissar Gu Kejin led fifteen people to the border area of Burultoghay in Altay with three tents, two pots, guns and agricultural tools in 1959, they stopped at an empty place and announced, “Comrades, let’s settle our regiment here. This place is embraced by the water and mountain, it’s not Jiāngnán (Ch: 江南) but it’s better than

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67 Dee Mack Williams (2002) also compared different attitudes toward land use and resource utilization between Mongols and Chinese through language. He notes that Han looked upon cultivation as “opening up wasteland,” while Mongol herders traditionally viewed the same activity in strongly negative terms. They called it gajar qagalaqu, “shattering the land” (71).

68 Owen Lattimore (1973) in his article “Return to China’s Northern Frontier” wrote: “The structure here is that of the mighty T’ien Shan, or Heavenly Mountains, running from west to east. It divides the northern one-third of Sinkiang from the southern two-thirds. On the northern side, rivers formed from the snow and glaciers of the high mountains break through barren foothill ranges and flow out into an immense, hollow plain. Here the rivers begin to straggle and fan out, and form great marshes with dense reed-beds. Westerners call this terrain the Dzungarian desert. The Chinese also call it a desert, but the Mongols call it a ‘gobi’—that is, a land of thin herbage, more suitable for camels than for cows, but capable also, if herds are kept small and moved frequently, of sustaining horses, sheep, and goats. The herbage comprises a high proportion of woody, fragrant plants. Gobi mutton is the most aromatic in the world.” Abbé Huc, a French missionary who travelled through in Inner Mongolia in 1842 wrote in his book Travels in Tartary, Thibet and China: “In Tartary, there are no towns, no edifices, no arts, no industry, no cultivation, no forests; everywhere it is prairie, sometimes interrupted by immense lakes, by majestic rivers, by rugged and imposing mountains; sometimes spreading out into vast limitless plains. There in these verdant solitudes, you must imagine yourself gently rocking on the calm waves of some broad ocean” (1928, 48). Tartary or Great Tartary was a name used until the twentieth century to designate northern and central Asia stretching from the Caspian Sea and the Ural Mountains. Huc’s description demonstrates European perspective viewing gobi as a deficient and unwelcoming environment, without any culture, which he only defines through rennaisance artwork, theatre or poetry.

69 Jiāngnán江南 literally means “south of the river,” and it refers to a geographical area of China that is to the south of the lower reach of Yangtze River, including Shanghai and part of Jiangsu, Anhui, and Jiangxi provinces. The area

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Jiāngnán. We can mine in the mountains, get fish in the river, and cultivate the land on the gobi.”

By the end of 1959, the population rose to 1,852 people, and they had built houses totalling 9,200 square meters (Tao and Zhang 1999, 2-3).

The term “gobi desert” is abused to overgeneralize various geographical features in Northern Xinjiang, which was always portrayed as remote and inhospitable in XPCC’s representations, as a way to glorify the painstaking settlement and land reclamation projects. Han journalist Chu Anping (1957) travelled in Xinjiang and reported in detail on the rich resources, beautiful landscapes, wonderful people, plentiful produces, and promising agricultural development. He tried hard to correct Inner Chinese people's stereotypical impression of Xinjiang as a barren and dry place. In his description, Xinjiang was full of opportunities and resources waiting to be excavated. Even I was intrigued by his description of Altay that was full of vast forests and grasslands, a scene that I never have had a chance to see but can only imagine. This is utterly different from XPCC gazetteers’ representation of the steppe. George Moseley (1966) also wrote about the physical establishment of XPCC on some of the Kazakhs’ pasturage: “by and large, it was prairie, not desert, that the corps ‘reclaimed’” (37). Gobi itself is a neutral word referring to a specific type of ecology or an area that stretches from south eastern Mongolia through northern Inner Mongolia through Alashan and into northern Qumul. Parts of Northern Xinjiang can be described as gobi-like, marked by extreme aridity on the surface and drastic seasonal and temperature changes. Despite the aridity, there are underground water systems and sufficient vegetation for mammals to thrive. The abuse of “gobi” in these gazetteers deem locals was and is regarded as prosperous for its natural resources, literary history, and well-developed commercial networks.
and their way of resource management as irrelevant and standing in the way of the XPCC’s goals. Nevertheless, the land survey literature still gives us a glimpse of the landscape at that time, even though it is from the perspective of the “pioneers.” The editors of the 137 Regiment Gazetteer wrote:

The Urho area near Karamay only has scarce cultivated land... Baiyang river was teeming with various fish, and the river banks were full of poplars and willow trees. The south and north banks were so covered with parasol woods, red willow, needlegrass, reeds, licorice, and camel thorns that it was hard to walk through. Along the mountain ridges there were endless mounds, sand dunes, marshes, and swamps. (Liu 1998, 6)

Tao and Zhang’s documentation mistranslated place names, demonstrating conflicting views toward landscape between Kazakhs and settlers. In Kazakh, dala simply means outside, open air, or steppe, but here Aqdala is misunderstood as “white gobi.” This misunderstanding reflects an agricultural settler mentality of seeing steppe as gobi, a ‘no one’s land’ that should be cultivated. This echoes state ethnologists’ tone when they described rich herd owners’ pastures that were not occupied as “idling” (Yang and Yang 1953, 62).

The 183 Regiment is located on the south bank of Irtysh river... when the regiment arrived, the ground was covered by bushes of camel thorns, red willows, and haloxylon shrubs. Gazelles roamed the land, and eagles circled in the sky. The east of the gobi is called Aqdala in Kazakh, which means white gobi. The land is hilly and covered in shrubs. (Tao and Zhang 1999, 2-3)

Under this mindset of viewing steppe as “nothing but gobi” as well as “borders to defend,” XPCC’s expansion gradually absorbed or rendered the indigenous discourses of the landscape into Chinese characters or military establishment and construction. The Chinese Pinyin transcription of the place names does not translate the meanings, so the renditions are stripped of the history of the place and became empty sounds of the syllables. For example,
Baytobe is pronounced bái yī tuō bié (Ch: 白依托别) and became the station for the 3rd platoon of 186 regiment in 1969; Koktal became kuò kè tǎ lè (Ch: 阔克塔勒), and it is now the agricultural field of the 2nd platoon of 186 regiment; and Sarhaji (Ch: sà ěr hā jí 萨尔哈吉) became a water distribution station for 186 regiment. On a typical XPCC Gazetteer town map, names of towns and reservoirs have Chinese or military names, for example, Longzhu village (Ch: lóngzhū 龙珠村, literally means dragon ball village) is the name of the residential area of the 186 regiment of the 10th division in Jimunay county; the reservoirs were given names such as the 2nd platoon reservoir or 3rd platoon reservoir (Pan 1998, 37).

In December 2016, about a year after I first did my fieldwork, I visited Altay again to meet with the elders there. The airport was closed due to the heavy snow. I had to take the train from the XPCC town Beitun instead. Beitun is a hub for state highway 216 and 217, and a railway station that connects Koktogay, Burshin, Qinghe, Haba, and Burultoghay counties. In October 1959, XPCC general Zhang Zhonghan divested this place of local histories by changing its original Mongolian name “Dörbeljin” (meaning square wall) to Běi tún—a Chinese term literally meaning the “Northern Reclamation.” The place became a land reclamation site (Ch: tún 屯) that is in the North (Ch: běi 北) of PRC re-territorialization. As one of the fourteen settlements of XPCC agricultural expansion, more and more Han people arrived and started to settle down over the years. In 2010, Beitun town was upgraded to Beitun city by the State Council and became “the youngest city in China” in 2011.

Addressing colonial processes, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) points out that, “renaming the land was probably as powerful an ideology as changing the land… these newly named lands became increasingly disconnected from the songs and chants used by indigenous peoples to trace
their histories, to bring forth spiritual elements, or to carry out the simplest of ceremonies” (51). For Kazakhs, losing agency to wield place names is akin to losing agency over land and resource management, which has led, for example, to the environmental impact that we saw in the drying marsh in Bayinova village. XPCC’s farms and industries have an insatiable need for water for farm irrigation and factories, and this need frequently comes into tension with the neighboring counties and villages. In Altay, the Orkhon river is the only water source for the 186 Regiment along the Sino-Kazakhstan borders. After negotiations, China can take 70~80% (Pan 1998, 56) or 17,200,000 cubic meters from the entire 22,200,000 cubic meters flowing in the river annually. Up until 1994, the Regiment built four reservoirs of 6,460,000 cubic meters (1977-1989), and channels for 66.33 kilometers, irrigated land for 2,290,000 acres (about 926,730 hectares) (61-62). This is simply one regiment of the 10th division, which is among fourteen divisions of the entire XPCC. The settlement of water disputes recorded in the 186 Regiment gazetteers reflects that the tension is not only between the XPCC and surrounding areas but also an ethnic one. In September 1982, forty-three people from Jimunay county went up to Mustaw glacier to block water that was channeled to the 186 Regiment farms. In July the following year, 300 people from the regiment went up to Mustaw with weapons, which they claimed were for self-defense, and destroyed the water blockage. In October, XUAR governor Ismayil Emet settled the dispute emphasizing “ethnic unity, mutual tolerance, collective construction, and reasonable division of water resource” (Pan 1998, 16, 192).

Despite decades of military displacement, urbanization, and organization of their communal structure, the visceral connections that Kazakh elders have for the places from which they originate are vibrant and still evoked through mnemonic practices. The articulation of place names evokes memories of the places elder generations of Kazakhs relate to through envisioning
their grand landscapes, symbols of pastoral life such as yurts and horseback riding, and their specific vantage points of picturing them and comparing them. As Keith Basso (1988) points out, when names are spoken, their “inseparable connections to localities summon forth an enormous range of mental and emotional associations – associations of time and space, of history and events, of persons and social activities, of oneself and stages in one's life” (103). Through articulating names of the landscape, as well as idiomatic phrases such as *jwsan* as a symbol of *awil* and “where one’s umbilical blood was shed,” elders pass on the knowledge of and reinforce their spiritual connections to places and ancestors, family genealogies, and kinship relations.

**Township-Making and Social Ruination**

XPCC developed towns and residences to populate their regimental settlements. A large number of female soldiers were recruited from Hunan and Shandong province to solve the gender ratio problem in the settlements (Zhang 2014), and family members of the soldiers were welcomed to settle down in these towns. On these lands that became XPCC laborers’ new homes, the laborers built water channels and reservoirs, cultivated the land, and bred animals on the ranches. They built transportation networks, started commercial activities, and constructed other infrastructure such as hospitals, schools, office buildings, theatres, hostels, and other cultural and public service facilities (Liu 1998, 3). In these new towns, the majority of the settlers were Han. In 1998, for example, the 137 Regiment had 7,327 people, of which Han people comprised 95.6%, while Kazakh, Hui, Mongol, Russian, Manchu, Zhuang and Tu people took up only 4.4%. Most of the workers originated from PLA army settled in Xinjiang, some were Republic of China army men, demobilized soldiers, sent-down youth, and released prisoners and their family members from Inner China (Liu 1998; Pan 1998).
When the 137 Regiment arrived in Awizshy, it was covered by Siberian larch, mountain grapes, golden pheasant, and wormwoods. The forest coverage rate was over 75% (Liu 1998, 37). It was so lush that Oirat Mongols called this place Amantungge, *aman* meaning mouth or clearing and *tümge* meaning needlegrass according to an Oirat Mongolian dictionary (Choijunjab and Na Gereltü 1998, 206). Kazakhs inhabited this place later and called it Awizshy (*awiz* means mouth and ‘*shy* means needlegrass), maintaining the original meaning of the place name, as the type of needlegrass is a common feed for livestock. The 137 Regiment started fresh in their history writing, with no mention of the people who used to live here, except when they started living in the houses Kazakh herders had left behind after their forced evacuation. “In spring 1963, when the battalion settled in Awizshy, they stayed in ‘Hasa’ houses” (Ch: 哈萨 is a derogatory term for Kazakhs). “…The feature of these houses were thick walls, small windows, low door frames and a low ceiling. They were good for keeping warm and blocking wind. But they were dim” (Liu 1998, 99). Later, they took over the animal husbandry work, built barbed wire, watch towers, and border walls to watch over the contentious area of Chagan obo (91-92).

In 1964 and 1965, more armed forces were dispatched from Wuhan and Nanjing. In 1966, Shenyang PLA district sent demobilized soldiers, and an armed platoon was established in 137 Regiment to fulfill the task of defense, armed construction, militia training, and communication (251). The slogan at that time was “combine labor and military training, guard the border and reclaim the land” (254).

The township-making process went along with the border defense and construction work. From 1964 to 1975, the 137 Regiment enhanced infrastructure and built more animal stalls, dormitories, offices, theatres, garages, and hotels with materials all from the surrounding forests and mountains (Liu 1998, 99). The population kept rising, starting from a few platoons of PLA
soldiers, three more batches from Guangdong, Wuhan, Nanjing, Lanzhou, Shenyang, and some prisoners from Sichuan, Henan, and Shanghai (1959-1965). During the Great Leap Forward, 462 people came as famine refugees (45-46). A survey in 1991 showed how people came from a variety of places, with about 170 different surnames of the Han residents in Awizshy (58).

These labor-intensive landscape transformation and township-making projects accord with Tracey Banivanua Mar and Penelope Edmonds’ (2010) description of settler colonialism’s landscape production: “the symmetrically surveyed division of land; fences, roads, powerlines, dams and mines; the vast mono-cultural expanses of single cropped fields; carved and preserved national forest, and marine and wilderness parks; the expansive and gridded cities; and the socially coded areas of human habitation and trespasses that are bordered, policed, and defended” (2). XPCC’s place-making practices intertwine with China’s state-owned enterprise investment in resource extraction in Xinjiang. Fences, roads, fields, and conservation projects are intrusive and prevalent in pastoral spaces today, dividing the already fragmented pastures into even smaller pieces. Ann Stoler (2008) sees “imperial formation” as the “ongoing quality of processes of decimation, displacement, and reclamation” (193). XPCC’s township-making is also a process of intensifying relations of power, excluding pastoralists, and constructing ethnicized relations of resource allocation. Moreover, it leads to an active process of “ruination,” which “persists [not only] in material debris, in ruined landscape, and through the social ruination of people’s lives” (194). Ann Stoler points out that social ruination is “intangible,” citing Franz Fanon’s studies of mental disorders after French rule in Algeria. The effect of social ruination is hardest to erase and hardest to locate in mental spheres, as it is “the indelible smack of degraded personhood, occupied spaces, and limited possibilities” (195). As XPCC gazetteers glorify the pioneering spirit in township-making and building, such development is also a ruin-
making process that has made these occupied places unrecognizable and inaccessible for Kazakhs, disrupting their means for defining kinship and determining community within space and connections to the space. The new XPCC towns have established themselves as both ethnic and spatial boundaries, and these have put the elders into a constant struggle through embodied remembering. The life story of an elder in Toli Tarbagatai offers a visceral account of how this process shaped her trajectories from the disbandment of awil throughout collectivization and the post pastoral reform era. The coercive power and violence in the name of development and sedentarization set a heavy and melancholic undertone in her narration.

In 1954, we settled in Toli, and didn't go anywhere anymore... When we were little we used to migrate. Takilgen is our qistaw (winter camp), you don't know this. Four families were together in one place. Then we would migrate to... Mayli Jayir, which is our jaylaw (summer pasture), and in autumn we would come to 'Tos, our autumn pasture. We would harvest the crops there, and some millet. In September or October, we would go back to Takilgen.

Usen, his close kin Qasen, our father Tilewbay, our grandfather Shaymardan, these four families stay together in Takilgen. Qasen only had a son Jahipjan; he raised goats. Usen's children like Erlan, Zeynep, Maken, and so on were all there. In winter, we would slaughter the animals for soghum (Kz: winter feast meat), and eat at each other's house. We were close to each other like that. When the snow melts, and grass turns green, we move again to Mayli pasture, because it is Shibarayghir Clan's summer pasture.

1954 was chaotic... Erlan was sent to work at the kapiratsya (Kz: cooperative) in 'Tos, Jahipjan was sent to do pastoral labor. We were just a group of people getting worn out like that. At first, we lived close to each other and migrated together. [Then] we were told to "settle
down, do kapiratsya.” Houses and animal stalls were built in No. 5 brigade already, and people were all sent to settle there. From 1958 we were settled, same as Eraln’s family. We settled in Toli.

“What's Takilgen like nowadays?”

Takilgen was a nice place, our winter pasture. In 2009 or so, I don't remember ... we went there, we went to put up tombstones for my grandfather Shaymardan and great grandfather Samat. We got the tombstone made and got it engraved. My sister's husband Kayrat went with us, as well as Shaymardan's granddaughter Nazipa; we drove two or three cars and went there.... My father's younger brother was nearby, and his son slaughtered a tay, we set up the tombstones together. Jahipjan's mother's tomb was also there. We paid our respects to them.

At that time, I wanted to see Takilgen, my qistaw, one more time, I left as a child. I told my younger brother that. He said, the place is all fenced up now. We can’t get in there, it’s a conserved pasture. It takes a long time to detour, it will be really late at night when we get there. I said alright then. I couldn’t see my qistaw like that. We just went to read Quran at the tombstones for our ancestors. We only did that.

What a pity! I really wanted to see my qistaw, but I left without seeing it... I don't think I will have another chance again. I really just wanted to see the qistaw where we lived. That was our awil. My childhood was left there. I laughed and played there. The road is dangerous, there is a sharp turn at the valley, I know that. But when we go there, it was all fenced up. We turned around from there, couldn’t see the place where we were born and raised.

Since 1954, we didn’t go anywhere, we stayed in Toli county. It was just like that.
Figure 12 Tourist site in Bogda Lake

Bogda kol (Bogda lake) is called Tianchi (Ch: Heavenly lake) in Chinese. The sign at the gate reads “Kazakh Folk Garden.” (Source: Picture Taken by Guldana in Ürümchi, June 1, 2015).

Conclusion

Chinese colonialism in Northern Xinjiang is constituted under multiple historical contingencies in the Cold War period. XPCC’s deployment and occupation of the border regions was prompted under the Sino-Soviet tension for border defense against the Soviet Union. On a local level, the Kazakhs along both sides of the border were separated and targeted as ideological enemies and suspects. XPCC’s construction work on border farms and ranches justified more Han influx into the region, especially the recruitment of female soldiers from Inner China for future settlement and township-making. XPCC Gazetteers’ historiography are exemplar in showcasing the narratives of frontier, border defense, pioneering spirit and contribution. It is
through these logics and narratives that colonialism is normalized and becomes part of Chinese nationalism. Besides XPCC Gazetteers, the reproduced colonial narratives in Xinjiang are ubiquitous, disguised by manipulated symbols and representations of unity, stability, and development. It is through this structural process that XPCC as a state’s tool nationalized the border space, asserted domination over land and water, eliminated Kazakhs’ pastoral existence and severed connections with Kazakhs—including family members—across the border. After a three decades long blockade of the Sino-Soviet border from 1962 to the collapse of Soviet Union in 1991, the Kazakhs in Xinjiang were separated from their near and extended families in the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) for generations. This resulted in identity politics and tension between China and Kazakhstani Kazakhs under two sets of settler colonial powers—China and Russia.

Despite the place being imbued with the violence of military occupation, displacement, and ethnic conflicts, memories of lived experience, collective encounters, and being on the land also dwell there. The embodied practices of remembering and sensorial experience of being in the place constitute what Pilar Riaño-Alcalá (2002) calls a “sense of place;” memory is a way to “make sense of the living environment as a vivid social and relational milieu.” People’s practices of memory enable them to “restore a sense of place to the experience of displacement, discontinuity, and fragmentation that violence inflicts in everyday lives” (278). Up to today, the “Yi-Ta incident” in 1962 is silenced in social discourse in Xinjiang, with most younger generations unaware that it ever happened, while for elders it is an unspeakable scar. They remember how Tacheng city became empty overnight, how some people’s relatives and friends left in a hurry, and how some came back from college in Ürümqi and found their families were long gone. The people left behind in China were suspected as “spies” and sent to labor camps for
decades, while their children were not allowed to study at school. Many families were separated and lost touch for three decades (Chen 2010). Some remember how people left in such a hurry that even naan and food on the table were left the way they were, or they speak of the poems and songs written by exiled *aqins* and writers only in safe space.

However, this trauma of separation and displacement has now supposedly been replaced by robust and promising Sino-Kazakhstan economic trade. Chinese development-oriented colonialism is ongoing and manipulates at the level of consciousness and people’s subjectivities, aiming to erase intergenerational transmission of knowledge and even the acknowledgement of their ancestral place. In recent years, China’s ambitious mega political and economic campaign “One Belt One Road” (OBOR) launched as early as 2013 further situates Xinjiang’s crucial position as a corridor and hub for strengthening the trade networks that stretches throughout Central Asia and Europe. Powerful nationalistic and development discourses are deeply embedded and permeate every corner of the space, manifested in endless infrastructural construction and projects, red banners with president Xi Jinping’s propaganda slogans, tourist sites, and conservation.

The practice of returning to one’s ancestral place is personal yet profoundly political. When they are able, sedentarized Kazakh people return to their ancestral *awil* site to pay respect to their ancestors and late family members at their burial sites, establish physical markers, and immerse themselves and their offspring in that environment. The botanical or embodied memories that relate one to homeplace reflect an existential reconstruction of the relationship between human and the other-than-human agents in the places they have lost. The pilgrimages of home-returning demonstrate Tim Ingold’s (2008) idea of place as produced through movement, as he argues, “Life itself, far from being an interior property of animate objects, is an unfolding
of the entire meshwork of paths in which beings are entangled” (1808). Experiences of tracing people’s movements and memories in turn, shape their perception of the place, so that for their children and grandchildren, it is also a process of living, learning, and remembering. These embodied practices speak to family histories and constitute one voice to recapture history and reclaim, “We were here once, and we are still here.”
Chapter 4: Lamenting in an Affluent Era

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile’s life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind for ever.

— Edward Said (2000, 137)

We Didn't Say Goodbye Properly

On a hot summer day in urban Ürümchi in 2015, I attended an Islamic wedding ritual (Kz: neke oqw) held at the bride’s home. The bride, Gulnaz was told to cover her bare arms before neke, so she put on a long sleeve shirt and tied her hair up in the back. After some tea and rest, the mullah commenced the ceremony. All the women hurried to fetch their headscarves from their purses and covered their hair properly. The mullah made sure the couple had already obtained a marriage certificate, asked if anybody had a different iqtyar (Ar: opinion), then he did the Islamic prayer and announced the couple man and wife. After neke, the bride and groom would leave for their major wedding celebration in a local hotel plaza. People slowly gathered at the door. Gulnaz cried and hugged her family and relatives emotionally for a long time. When she finally stepped through the doors in tears, a female relative circled a bundle of towel filled with sweets above her head several times blessing her with well-being and happiness.

For Kazaks in China, Islamic wedding contract nikah (neke in Kazakh) hosted by an Imam is observed as a prerequisite ritual to the celebratory wedding feast (toy).

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After she left, as I sat with several of Gulnaz’s elderly female relatives from rural Altay for tea, the tears began to dry on their faces. They chatted over tea, expressing a lot of opinions, for example, “men should cup their hands lower when praying, not in front of their faces like women do.” They laughed while commenting how nowadays “the elders make tea for their young daughter-in-law,” exactly the opposite from their times. The bride’s mother, an urban civil servant in her late 50s, cheerfully said Gulnaz would come home to pick up some of her stuff tomorrow. All the elders roared in laughter. Later I was told by them that it is inappropriate for a kelin to come back to her natal home after the wedding, as she is supposed to stay at her in-laws’ household—ulken uy—for at least a year before she is invited to visit by her natal family.

Gulnaz’s elderly aunt in her 70s, Sayra apa, gave me a lecture on the spot: “In the past, the girl's parents would advise their daughter about her roles before they give her to the in-laws. These [koris] are all aqil ‘soz (Kz: words of wisdom). Everyone in the family, old or young, the entire awil will do koris. We didn't do koris just now! We didn't say goodbye properly. It's an affluent, developed era now. Now people say, ‘let's not have her leave in tears.’ I was ready to, as soon as tears ran out of my eyes! … so, we just stood there.”

Other female relatives heard us and urged Sayra apa to sing a few lines, she laughed and kept on speaking, “A bride will do koris to her father, mother, and brother. According to the real custom, the bride’s jezde (brother-in-law) will help her get on the horse, and he will personally see her off till her awil people can't see them anymore. Her jenge will walk behind and catch up
with them, and do one more *koris* there. Then they will let her go. After a year, her *torkin* can invite her to visit home. For example, the bride sings:

\[\begin{align*}
qizdida \text{ balam demender,} & \quad \text{Don’t call a girl your child,} \\
satwgha \text{ shiqqan bul eken.} & \quad \text{if you sell her for a piece of cloth.} \\
Tughar \text{ toqim bul eken,} & \quad \text{Though a girl is the beauty of a household,} \\
uyding \text{ bir korki qiz eken.} & \quad \text{her worth is no more than a piece of cloth.}
\end{align*}\]

Sayra *apa* kept on talking, “The girl sings *koris* to her *jenge*, her younger brother, her mother, and her father, it's all different… For example, a girl will sing this to her mother:

\[\begin{align*}
tur \text{ degende turmaw shem,} & \quad \text{I didn’t have to get up early,} \\
kosilgen \text{ ayaq jymaw shem;} & \quad \text{I didn’t have to put away my feet;} \\
anashim \text{ sening arqangda,} & \quad \text{Mother, with you by my side,} \\
qaynaghan \text{ shaydi quymaw shem.} & \quad \text{I didn’t have to pour tea for people.}
\end{align*}\]

“To her father, she will sing:

\[\begin{align*}
aynalayim \text{ kar akem,} & \quad \text{My dear father, my old father,} \\
qadiring \text{ jurtqa bar akem;} & \quad \text{you have respect from people,}
\end{align*}\]

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71 *‘torkin’ is a woman’s natal home, where she was born as well as her family, relatives, and neighbors. When she returns to her *torkin* from her patrilocal residence after marriage, she is welcomed and treated as a guest to her natal home and people.
aldinga jilap men keldim,
I cry and come to you,
iqlas bata ber akem.
Please give me your best wishes.

“In the past, girls would even sing koris to their uy (yurt)… they would hold onto the yurt’s bosagha (Kz: door post) and mangdaysha (Kz: yurt door header) when they sing this:

'Bosanghang byik boz uyim,
My dear yurt with steady door posts,
bozdamay qaytim shighayin;
how can I leave without crying?
engsesi biyik 'oz uyim,
My dear yurt with a high skylight,
engiremey qaytim shighayin.
how can I leave without tears?

“Because she will go live in another yurt in the future, do you understand? That’s how Kazakh girls do koris to their own home. It was hard for them to leave. The final koris is for her people and hometown:

esikting aldi sar bel,
Hill tops in front of my yurt,
aldimnan shighar qaling el;
all my people came to see me off.
qaling eldi qayteyin,
What can I do about them?
artimda qaldi twghan el.
Except leave them behind.

“That's how she sang farewell to her people. Our Kazakh girls at that time were amazing! She sang different things to her brother and sister, brother and sister-in-law, mother and father…etc, and they would sing to her. So, these are all wise words, nothing else! A girl leaves
her hometown like that, and the whole *awil* cried for her as well. For example, they said this to the girl:

*aman bol balam aman bol,*  
*Please take care my child, take care,*

*aman jur degen jaqi jol.*  
*Wellbeing is a good path in life.*

*Jat jurttiqqa kettip barasing,*  
*You are going to a foreign place,*

*aqilgha suyep adam bol.*’  
*Be a good person and use your wisdom. ”*

During my ten months of fieldwork in Northern Xinjiang, this is one of the many moments when I encountered a rural and urban divide and a generational rift in Kazakh society. The rural elders’ nostalgic reminiscence of *koris* (Kz: bridal lament) parallels their feelings of alienation and abandonment in this “affluent, developed era.” Sayra apa dictated the bride’s *koris* to me because I was interested, but she did not get the chance to connect them to the very person she spoke about in the way she had hoped—Gulnaz. She sees *koris* as a farewell that should be done properly. Other elders around her also resonated in their narratives with her while sitting in a high-rise apartment building in urban Ürümchi. They revelled in the sentiments lodged in between the lines, the deeply intimate words embodying the painful separation, and commented that young people would not understand as they are unskilled in Kazakh. When they heard Gulnaz would come home the next day, they were again confronted with the social norm that has already made an impact on their retired life—the gradual alienation from *ulken uy* and *otaw,* and the reversed hierarchy between mother and daughter-in-law. They had no choice but to accept and laugh about it. This *koris* ritual that never happened triggered a feeling of dislocation and alienation even when they were participating their own relative’s wedding celebration.
The Political Life of Lament and Beyond

Scholars emphasize the political role of lament in the intersecting field of studies about the socio-politics of globalization or nation-building. Rubie Watson (1994) argues that mourning is politicized to defy the state and demonstrate that alternative histories not found in written texts are commemorated through ritual. Judith Butler (2004) proposes that mourning questions the state's definition of “grievability.” In China, anthropologists expand this by arguing that for ethnic minorities ritual serves as a space in which to express “unauthorized sentiments” under state secularization and violence (Gillette 2008), or as a collective strategy to work out a process of justice and reconciliation with the state (Mueggler 2001). Post-Mao cultural productions have led to communal contentions over “failed rituals” (Chao 1999, 506). While the state tries to define authentic culture as a colonial justification, local communities often push back beyond the tangible and intangible bounds of the state. In China, contention over authenticity offers a glimpse of the ways people understand and (mis)remember historical traumas in Maoist times as well as contemporary, ongoing disposessions, especially those to which Muslim minorities in Xinjiang are vulnerable.

Of course, lament or mourning rituals are political, but to what extent? To what extent are they political in the context of Xinjiang where engaging in public ritualistic demonstration against authority is currently unthinkable (Rajagopalan 2017; Zenz and Leibold 2017b). Is it simply people versus state? How meaningful is it to the community itself? What are they lamenting specifically? Do all forms of lament work in the same way? What is the role of memory in its functionality? Moreover, is it simply interpersonal or intersubjective? Or is there any non-human, inanimate agent also playing a role in this process?
In Kazakh language, *kor* means to see, and the farewell ritual in action is called *koris aytw, korisw* (sing *koris*), or *dawistap korisw* (sing *koris* with loud wailing). *Koris* can be sung at the bride's farewell to her natal home on the wedding day. I also hear people call the lament at the funerals *koris*. Sayra *apa* and many elders I talked to in Altay also told me that *when a bride returns to her natal home and sees her family once again after a long time, both parties sing koris*. In summary, *koris* expresses the sentiments of seeing or not seeing others before or after an indefinite time, and it seems to be related to a long journey before or afterwards. For the elders, *koris* symbolizes a rite of passage in a life journey that is still important in pastoral epistemology. When a person leaves, whether it is to another place or another world, family and relatives must see him or her off, in their words *attandirw*, which literally means “to help one get on the horse.”

In this chapter, I discuss multiple layers of meanings that surround lament ritual and oral tradition and shed light on Kazakh women’s lived experiences of socio-spatial changes and transforming patriarchy in the Chinese state. The bridal and funeral lament *koris* and *joqtaw* as highly embodied practices not only indicate local processes of legitimation and authentication, but also highlight the conflict and contingency where new identities or marginal ones are produced (Chao 1999, 506). Moreover, as gendered rituals they are better understood while situated within the everyday life discourses around shifting morality and gender dynamism. I also look into elders’ subjectivities negotiating historical traumas and ongoing dispossession that are implied in the poetics and soundscape of lament ritual (Briggs 2014; Feld 1996). I hope to address the intergenerational role of lament that is absent in previous studies, as well as how lament indicates a spatial (re)arrangement, regarding kinship or landscape.
Feminist Decolonizing Intervention

In this chapter, I focus on different generational experiences of Kazakh women within spatial transformations and their eroding kinship ties. Instead of using a corporate model in studying socio-economic change of a community, I look into individual experience and family dynamics to delineate how state power inflicts discontinuity and disruption from an emic perspective. Stevan Harrell and Gonçalo D. Santos’ (2016) edited volume Transforming Patriarchy points out that Chinese families are undergoing transformations with heightened, intersecting structures of inequality, such as gender and generation. Situated in the frontier region of China, the Kazakh community roughly falls into this trend but also manifests regional and class differences. Compared to life before the pastoral reforms in the 1980s, the transition to large scale industrialization, urbanization, and globalization has been very dramatic for the Kazakhs. This transition involves a spatial transformation rural elders have personally experienced throughout their lives, from the pastoral unit organized around consanguineous community, reorganized pastoral brigades and communes during collectivization, sedentarized to half-sedentarized life-style after decollectivization, and to contemporary urbanization and displacement under the township making process of the XPCC. For the elder generations, this process involves major challenges involving language and culture in adapting to a Han-dominated environment.

We should not simply dismiss life-cycle rituals such as bridal and funeral lament as post-Mao re-traditionalizations. Both the presence and absence of farewell laments indicate a strong sense of cultural expectations, bonding efforts, and strategies for coping with the alienating power of modernity, epistemic violence, and rural-urban class divisions. Lament provides a lens for looking at these post-Mao symptoms and discerning structural transitions and injustices.
within. From a feminist perspective, lament conveys subjectivities through storytelling and life narrative (Ram 2007). I argue that lament as a mnemonic device together with its poetics and soundscape constitute an intergenerational bonding mechanism responding to spatial transformations such as land dispossession and kinship alienation.

**Spatial Change and Transforming Kazakh Patriarchy**

The pastoral reform and institution of the Household Responsibility System in 1980 fragmented grassland into private pastures, along with fences, roads, railways, conservation and tourism projects under the administration of each county-level villages and cities. “The road is an omnipresent symbol of state power,” as Tsui Yenhu and Chen Xiangjun (2015) point out: it is like knives that cut through pastures and replace pastoral routes, hindering once freely mobile pastoralists and turning summer pastures, forests, and transitional pastures into tourist sites (207). Moreover, XPCC’s agricultural and resource extraction projects make use of water resources that once fed these pastoral routes. Under the pressure of environmental changes such as diminishing pastures and water, most Kazakhs relocated to urban areas and towns with better access to education and employment opportunities for their young generations. The OBOR project in 2013 and the “Thirteenth Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development of China” in 2016 aim to make Xinjiang an international transportation and commercial hub connecting OBOR participating nations. Northern Xinjiang is thus on the fast track for related infrastructure construction projects.

In relation to the above spatial changes, a change in the patriarchal order is also happening in Kazakh society. Like other Chinese senior citizens, rural elders lost power and prestige even though they are traditional knowledge holders. They face alienation and
devaluation in the *suzhi* hierarchy in China. Most rural elderly women I worked with are widowed matriarchs of their families; their power and prestige in the family are primarily symbolic and ritualistic because young generations have taken over important economic, decision-making processes. The rural-urban disparity and migration in the neoliberal era has further marginalized them. Meanwhile, nationalistic, male chauvinistic discourses about women’s family obligations and filiality are presented as a panacea to cope with pressures from the multiethnic, urbanized environment. With the heightened gendered and generational tensions, the proper conduct of life-cycle rituals has become more and more crucial to the Kazakh community as people identify the need for acknowledgment within these drastic social changes.

![A young couple’s wedding portrait hung in their parents’ house in the village.](image)

The young couple left to look for work in Karamay city. This room has their bedding for their return. The couple wore traditional Kazakh costumes in the picture, and the groom is holding a dombra (two-stringed Kazakh lute).

(Source: Picture Taken by Guldana in an anonymous village in Tarbagatai. August 19, 2015)
Operating Affect in the “Triumph of Conjugality over Patriarchy”

It was a hot summer day in the seventh brigade of Jimunay county in Altay. Aray’s courtyard was full of relatives and neighbors who had been helping up for days. Men helped slaughter a sheep and chop the firewood, women were cleaning up the sheep intestines and lungs, making milk tea, washing dishes and preparing food for the coming guests. I helped collect money and itemize gifts from the guests. I was amazed that felt rugs and cloths still have currency as wedding gifts in rural areas. This is so unlike urban weddings where mostly only money circulated. In the early afternoon, it was time for Aray to leave. People slowly gathered inside to witness the farewell. I entered the room and found that her parents and grandmother were already waiting, and their faces looked gloomy to me. Her father sat at ‘tor,’ Aray’s grandmother sat in the middle on the kang bed, and Aray’s mother sat closest to the door. The seating arrangement followed the norms of family and the gender hierarchy. In a few minutes, Aray walked in accompanied by her jenge. Her head hung low. She first hugged her father and they started crying. People around them comforted them and told them not to cry many times, “It's enough… (boldi boldi…)” Some middle-aged women disagreed and said “Why? She should cry!” Aray hugged her grandmother in tears, and the grandmother sang about seven or eight lines of koris. It was difficult to hear her words clearly, as her voice was muffled by crying. When

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72 ‘tor’ is Kazakh term referring to the distinguished guest seat, usually located opposite to and furthest from the door.
73 kang is a type of bed platform most often seen in rural area of Northern China where it is cold in the winter. It is made from bricks or clay with its interior connected to hot exhaust from cooking stove or fireplace. Usually kang takes one third of a bedroom, it is used for sleeping at night and other activities during the day. Sedentarized Kazakhs usually have kang in bedrooms. It can be used as a guest room, and is convenient to spread a dastarhan (table cloth) on it for treating guests for tea and meals in rural Northern Xinjiang.
Aray hugged her mother at last, people continued to persuade them not to cry. I heard some men's voices persistently urging “It's time to go! Come on! The cars are waiting.” It was quite intense, as if she could not stay there a minute longer. With the escort of her jenge and another woman, Aray awkwardly walked backwards facing her courtyard. As soon as she stepped out of the gate, she was turned around and was told repeatedly “Don't look back, don't look back!” She followed all these instructions. She looked down while sobbing and wiping tears away. Everyone's eyes were on her.

Outside the gate, there were already several cars waiting, with boisterous Kazakh pop songs blasting from the stereos. One car was covered with ribbons on the side and two hearts in the middle with Kazakh embroidery, a pair of miniature dombras crossing inside a wooden miniature yurt skylight shangiraq, indicating the nomadic identity of Kazakhs. They were going to drive to Haba county, the groom's hometown, for the major wedding celebration there. Several young men hurried to arrange some of Aray’s relatives into different cars. All the relatives and neighbors in the house came out to see Aray off. Children looked on curiously and ran around. At this moment, the sad farewell was replaced by joy, laughter, and loud music. Aray and the groom sat in the most decorated wedding car, and her friends sat in other cars. Aray’s parents came to say goodbye to her again, they hugged through the car windows and all of them cried. The elders told the young drivers again and again to drive safely and not to race cars, as recently there was a car accident involving a just-married Kazakh couple. I stood and watched with the onlooking crowd. A couple of elderly women next to me commented on how nice it was that the bride and groom could sit together in the car like that, and how they have never seen such a thing. “I have sent off so many of my sisters, but I have never seen this. It is a good era (Kz: zaman jaqsi)! She is going to a good family.” Saying this repeatedly, they comforted each other
wiping tears away. In their perspective, marriage for a woman means farewell to her natal home because after this rite of passage she will “belong to another household for good.”

Figure 14 After the bridal farewell, the motorcade was ready to pick up Aray and the groom.
(Source: Picture Taken by Guldana in a county village in Jimunay, Altay, August 9, 2015)

For Muslim minorities in Xinjiang, life-cycle events are imbued with the meaning of repatriation for communal sovereignty. Setting aside social class stratification exacerbated by competitive ostentatious consumption, weddings are undoubtedly a platform of intergenerational, cultural, and gender education and socialization, highlighted by rituals that emphasize female modesty and filiality. For example, the bride being told repeatedly to “not look back,” is symbolically marking her future devotion to her in-law’s family instead of her natal family.

Notions of free love, intimacy, and individualization have become symbols of modernity and globalization, producing changes in gender relations, female agencies, and transborder mobility in various social economic contexts (Ahearn 2001; Bloch 2011; Constable 2005). In
China, institutional changes after the Reform and Opening Up in 1978 led to a disbandment of rural collectives, the introduction of a welfare system, and urban working units positioned in market-oriented economies (Yan 2016). The accompanying individualization drastically changed the norms of patrilocal residence and filiality in rural areas (Yan 2003). This also applies to Xinjiang Kazakhs but is complicated by regional and class differences. The urban and township hukou, jobs with stable incomes at state danwei, better facilities and resources, and modern lifestyles with privacy and intimacy are affecting rural Kazakh younger generations’ choices to live apart from elder generations. Compared to their urban counterparts, the rural middle-aged and elderly women are situated in a more socially alienated and vulnerable position.

Having experienced various modes of socialist secularization in their lives while still fulfilling their gender roles, rural elderly women are now faced with a reversed hierarchy between themselves and their daughters-in-law. Gradually, their guaranteed respect is leaning toward the trend in Han society in which “filial piety has evolved into a relationship elders must earn” (Santos and Harrell 2016, 21), from caring for grandchildren or expending their labor at other life-cycle celebrations. They try to believe that “it's a good era” evidenced by economic development and female agency, but they are also the most affected by the social stratification even within their community. Ostentatious wedding consumption and competition in urban places have become a standard in rural areas as well. I often heard rural elders complain about the rising standard of gift money for going to weddings, or they said they stopped attending because of declining health. They quote a Kazakh proverb as a moral statement about this situation, “Everyone wants to keep up with the rich, and the rich want to keep up with God” (Kz: Bari bayghajetem, bay qadaygha jetem deydi). When looking out of her windows seeing a long wedding motorcade of expensive cars, an elderly woman exclaimed next to me, “Who are these
people? What a shame! What a flaunting of money!” The skyrocketing bride price, extravagant gift-giving, and ever more complicated new “customs” (Kz: saltsana, or jol) contrast sharply with the elders’ youth in socialist times. Moreover, these expenditures do not necessarily bring a devoted daughter-in-law back to them. Young brides today desire to live separately from their mothers-in-law to maintain their privacy and freedom.

The elders’ narratives and remembrance thus revolve around awil social protocols to comment on the “declining morals” of the market ideology. One time, I asked an elder aqin, “Why do you think there is less koris now?” She replied, “As the society develops… intimacy (Kz: suyispenshilik) has reduced between people, people will not devote (Kz: kuyinw) themselves to each other anymore. In the past, when a girl in the neighborhood is getting married, we feel pity for her and go sing koris for her. Now we won’t do it.” The sense of loss for the communal intimacy is related to the physical re-spatialization and alienation of Kazakh families, neighborhoods, and interpersonal relations. Koris cannot be simply treated as an “invented tradition” in E. J. Hobsbawm’s (1983) sense but an embodied way to hold onto that intimacy that was once tangible and accessible to them.

Bridal lament in this context is thus in a liminal state under the “triumph of conjugal over patriarchy,” in Yan Yunxiang’s (1997) words. For Kazakhs it still provides a “platform within which individuals are expected and motivated to operate” despite the individualization of Chinese society (Santos and Harrell 2016, 6). Among all wedding rituals, bridal lament is the most effective in operating intergenerational intimacy as a highly embodied practice.

When I asked a young woman what it was like at the farewell ritual on her wedding day, she replied:
I never had any particular feelings when I was single and participating in other girls’ weddings. When they cried, I didn’t feel anything, I just thought it was funny. However, it was totally different when my turn came! On my wedding day, when I was leaving... people were around me, I saw my mom and dad’s faces, then tears just suddenly ran down my face. It was really strange...

During bridal farewell, the elders are often interrupted or impeded from lamenting. Nevertheless, the affective and embodied practices of farewell such as crying, singing, hugging, and kissing are similar to what Gilles Deleuze has described as “a vital and modulating field of myriad becomings,” as the emotive energies are discharged through and from bodies to bodies (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, 6). Tears are triggered by relating to others’ experiences, by the transition of marital status through a combination of gender expectations and ritual mechanisms. Even though the younger generation in their marriageable age seldom acknowledges an emotional investment in bridal farewell like the elders, they are nevertheless affected in the effervescence of ritual and eventually also cry and bring tears to every farewell participant. An affective atmosphere or resonance of intense bodily, spatial, ritual and cultural feelings are materialized in tears, and call for mutual understanding through the multigenerational gendered experiences and life trajectories of being a daughter, a daughter-in-law, a wife and a mother. The connections and convergences of these experiences are conveyed through embodied practices, even before verbal utterances.
Generational Mourning and Emplaced Bodies in Lament

Death rituals are another platform for gender performance as well as generational tension in terms of family and religious piety. Privratsky notes, funeral rites are one of the most important spaces which sustains Kazak spirituality, as “it coheres with their native valuation of the ancestor-spirits in social life” (2001, 19). As Muslims, Kazakhs sustain their Islamic spirituality through household rites that include Quranic recitals, sacred meals, and rites of passage. Many times, these rites of passage events are conducted by the elders on behalf of their children in the household (2-3). Death is probably one of the most frequently mentioned topics among elders. They have seen many deaths, and are expecting their own in the near future. One time at the tea table, I heard the elders chatting among themselves about how people know so little about the funeral rites procedures and the singing of koris and joqtaw. They stated that they felt bad for their peers whose bodies were mistreated or buried improperly. One elderly woman exclaimed, “She left with her golden teeth, we are supposed to leave this world the same way as we came! They didn't even wash her body correctly, why didn't they find anyone who knew how to do it? It is not bad luck!”74 The other gasped and shook her head.

For most settled Kazakhs, mourning and funeral rites are simplified to accommodate the scattered kinship networks across different townships and cities across great distances. As part of funeral rites, elderly women in the family of the deceased lament if they are able, young and middle-aged female family members simply cry, and male family members usually sit solemnly. Relatives and close friends of the family come to arrange funeral details, burial rites, and any

74 Kazakh original is ol jamandiq emes, literally means “it is not bad,” but jaman here has implications of evil and ominous in this context, thus I translated it as “it is not a bad luck,” as she meant it will not bring bad luck to anyone to simply wash dead bodies properly.
related work around the funeral. If they live in another city or county, they make every effort to come. Friends, colleagues, neighbors, and social acquaintances in the community come and give their condolences to the mourning household. Within a month after the burial, people who could not make it to the funerals visit the mourning family. Elderly women await at home and perform the lamentation and are consoled. Married women in mourning wear black or dark colored clothes and head scarves for at least a year, and refrain from going to social events such as weddings and other life-cycle celebrations. The widow of the household also hosts the Islamic ritual of *qatim tusirw* (Kz: prayer for the dead) with close family and kin, before commencing other life-cycle celebrations.

Many untimely deaths of men in both rural and urban Kazakh communities reveal the structural violence and tensions of sedentarization and development. Alcoholism has become a marker of masculinity among both urban and rural Kazakhs. While urban men submit to the excessive drinking culture prevalent in bureaucratic networking occasions, rural men resort to alcohol out of a sense of demoralization resulting from the loss of confidence and prestige that came from supporting the household and applying pastoral knowledge. Young women are double-burdened with family caretaking and work under the gradually eroding Chinese welfare system. In both rural and urban settings, if widowed women cannot uphold a year of black veiling and mourning, they are especially positioned in the storm’s eye of gender obligations and protocols of performing piety, and easily stigmatized for being “an immoral, undevoted, apathetic wife.”

A few weeks before I participated in Gulnaz's *neke ogw*, I was with my parents visiting their hometowns in Tarbagatai. We arrived at my father's relative's home in Almali village of Toli county. After the tea, my parents quickly got ready to go visit a neighbor family in the
village who had lost their son a couple of months ago. The elders of that family saw my father grow up in this village. My mother put on a headscarf she prepared earlier in her purse. I tagged along. We walked along the dry and dusty trail, and passed the neighbors’ mud-brick house and their livestock corrals. Occasionally, my father commented on several deserted houses that he used to play around as a kid, or he pointed at a tree and said such-and-such person “used to live there with this tree in the middle of their courtyard.” My mother nodded and could relate to the complex web of relations he was talking about. Memories flooded in for him as they were walking through the place, but I could only imagine what this place looked like with bits and pieces of clues from his descriptions. The village is called Almali because the valley was full of apple trees with red apples hanging heavy from the top (alma means apple in Kazakh, almali means apple-rich). But when I looked at the mountain ridges, they were rugged and zigzagged. Chromium was found there so the mountain has been dynamited since. Decades later, all the Chromium was dug out, factories were closed, workers laid off, water dried up, and there was nothing left in the mountains.
Figure 15 The tree that used to be in my father’s neighbor’s courtyard.

My father’s neighbor moved away many years ago, and the village road took over the space. The tree was left where it is. (Source: Picture Taken by Guldana in Almali village, Toli county, August 18, 2015)

When we entered the neighbor's home, several middle-aged and elderly women of the household were already lamenting together. They wore dark colored headscarves and held towels against their crying faces, the sound of wailing and sobbing rose and fell and filled the air with deep sorrow. My father hugged them one by one, and my mother followed, her eyes filled with tears already. My father kept telling the lamenting women, “be calm, be patient (Kz: sabir bol) … Life is just like this… it's all decided by Allah…” My mother sobbed while comforting them, “it's all Allah's arrangement… what can we do?” I also hugged each one of them, and felt their hot tears and bodies trembling in grief. Gradually, the lament and weeping weakened. They whispered faintly, slowly recovering from the painstaking mourning. We were then invited to sit
on the guest seats. It was only after the ritual of lament that they started to greet each other properly. They echoed each other’s comments on fate and a treacherous world, their sighing converged and fell into silence. The daughter-in-law of the family passed bowls of milk tea to us one by one. In between the silence and talking, they sighed and whispered again and again, “He was so young… leaving like this…”

From their conversation, I slowly learned that the young man died from a motorcycle accident. Motorcycles are a more popular and convenient mode of transportation than horses among young, rural, Kazakh men since 2000. They are faster and easier for young people who occasionally go to town to run errands. It is more compatible for both urban and rural environments. Herders also prefer riding motorcycles to herd their sheep on the bumpy mountain paths. The motorcycle is also replacing horses in the culture of gift giving. It was a custom for the groom’s family to give the bride's youngest brother a horse as a gift, now they give him a motorcycle instead. At the lament ritual, my parents were in tears, for they knew this young man since he was a little boy. The elders were in tears, but they were pleased that my father came back to comfort them at this heartbreaking moment. Like Sayra apa sitting in her urban relative’s highrise building apartment in the beginning of this chapter, this time, I was the one who felt distant and dislocated although I was absolutely sympathetic. It was at that moment I realized that koris is indeed a crucial way of bonding among kin. The singer and the listeners are connected not only through the poetics and melody within the koris soundscape, but also through common experience, memories, and values they share and cherish.

“Memory is both spatial and visual in its technologies of transmission, via cultural products such as images, myths, symbols, oral histories, rituals, foods, bodily practices, and even silence” (Hirsch and Smith 2002, 6-7). Returning to his community, my father perceived and
interacted with the surrounding space through his bodily memories of childhood and youth in the village. Unlike me who seldom visits, he knows and feels the place through the rustling sounds of the tree leaves, the smells of the burning firewood and cow patties he helped to collect, apples that fed him until his belly ached, or cheese curds his neighbor stuffed into his pockets, and so on. These all constitute the place and what it meant for him.

Lament as an embodied practice locates both performer and listeners within the same affective scape, and bonds bodies and subjectivities internally and externally. As Muslim women, Kazakh elders embody Islamic attitudes as “modesty” in wearing the veil and intense devotion to family. As Saba Mahmood (2005) argues that women practice Islam not under Muslim men’s demand, but to embody Islamic modesty as virtuous Muslims on their own. Through bodily practice of veiling, the model of ethical behavior is cultivated. For Kazakh elders, lament is not only women’s cultural and religious duty, but it also indicates a strong sense of place and community, mobilizing memories of landscape and people as collective memory. Through the embodied practice of singing and listening, crying and comforting each other, a collective past in that environment is conjured, kinship intimacy is interpellated and their connection to the place is reinforced.

The elders who lamented in Almali village established the sense of community along with my father through emplacement in the same landscape and environment. This is different from Privratsky’s (2001) idea of how collective memory is evoked by Muslim shrines and cemeteries in Turkistan (22), but how people embody and produce a religious space themselves. Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern (2003) refer to this as “embodiment of the landscape” (5). Lament in the space created a soundscape that “recruits a set of bodily practices” through which space is transformed and forms community (Eisenberg 2013). For a daughter-turned-
ethnographer at that moment, I related to what Sarah Pink (2015) has theorized as being “entangled in this place and participat[ing] in the production of place and co-presen[ce] of the place” (14). However, the gap between my father’s and my generation is still pervasive. Memory is contained within the material environment that is experienced through our senses, which in turn shape our memories and perceptions of space (Sutton 2001; Nadia Seremetakis 1993). For my father, memory is layered through lived experience within the space and thickened by continuous revisiting and reproduction of the intricate web of relationships involved in returning. For me, Almali now means something I did not know before. I originated from here, a once apple-rich Kazakh awil now a scarcely populated, poor village where young people are either dying or leaving…

**Remembering in the Technologies of Forgetting**

*In the Cultural Revolution, there wasn’t any toy. People only knew about who married whom from hearsay. Girls left their hometown taking a headscarf as well as their “nopos” (Kz: hukou) to another awil. Who knows when I got married! There wasn’t qudalasu (Kz: match-making process), no toy, no neke, not even a pot of tea… My father saw us off, kissed me on my forehead, wished us well and left. It was just like that in that era. I had a “qizil qaghz” (Kz: red paper, meaning marriage certificate), that’s all. Many young people got married that way.*

— Nurish apa, age 81

Situated in this “affluent era,” the elders reflected on their distressed collective past and marked their life-cycle events as either trauma or trivia not worthy of mentioning. Memories of
labor and suffering overwhelmed other communal and social memories. Buyandelger (2013) theorized three processes involving “technologies of forgetting” used in Mongolia by the state to maintain control of the past: the destruction and killing of the Buryats from late 1920s to 1940; the socialist state suppression of memories of its own violence; and, the post-socialist states’ creation of new memories to substitute for the ones it had destroyed (70). These processes “altered the dynamic between individual and social memories and created certain gaps and omissions” (68). Forced forgetting creates anxiety about the loss, which weakened individuals’ confidence in their own memories (67), but at the same time it multiplied and proliferated remembering in ways that are enduring and creative.

Similar technologies of forgetting were applied by the Chinese state to incorporate Xinjiang into its national order in roughly three stages. Firstly, Socialist collectivization in the 1950s was not only transformative socio-economically, but it also re-engineered communal life-cycle events that helped maintain social relations. Secondly, the Socialist Education Movement (1963) and Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) further replaced the unwanted, potentially threatening class categories with newly established hierarchies of political naming and identity. Lastly, the comtemporary institutionalization of ethnic cultures attempted to obliterate Maoist trauma and religious sentiments.

In the first stage, political rectification and collective labor took priority over people’s own organization of wealth and honor in their communities. In the wake of Great Leap Forward and People’s Communes, any private or familial consumption and ceremonial sacrifice of animals was disallowed. China’s marriage reform in the 1950s was applied as a form of “intimate politics” aimed at dismantling local feudal authorities through class struggle (Friedman 2005). In Northern Xinjiang, along with the establishment of communes, class struggles imposed
by the Communist regime disrupted cohesion between *awils* that was sustained through marriage alliances. For instance, Light (1994) finds examples from Zhumadilov’s novel that present Kazakh kinship alliance, social capital, and wealth as being mostly created through marriage:

… a wid[e] network of kin alliances serves as a political base for controlling group decisions and for negotiating conflicts. This tended to be a traumatic separation for women torn away from their families and hometowns, particularly when the *awils* were quite distant from each other. It nonetheless offered a strong bond of kinship between the two groups from which political and economic gains could be derived. (25-27)

The class struggle process was also accompanied by a secularization of Muslim populations achieved by denouncing religious authorities, and restricting *Janazah* (Islamic funeral rites) and *qatim* (prayer for the dead), which are essential for religious observation. An elder in Burultoghay of Altay said: *We followed Janazah procedures until the people's communes were established. After that, when my father-in-law passed away, we were told not to cry. We didn't sing joqtaw. Same for my mother-in-law. People just passed on news to one another. At that time, mullahs were sent to labor camps, even crescents on the tombstones were knocked down*….

Though class struggle attempted to eliminate wealth hierarchies, new hierarchies were established in China during the Cultural Revolution. As Li Xun (2014) summarizes, one kind of hierarchy involves political naming, specifically, institutional identities based on *hukou, bianzhi* at *danwei*; another involves political identities based on family background, political status (Ch: zhèngzhì miànmào 政治面貌), and political performance (Ch: zhèngzhì biǎoxiàn 政治表现). The former reflects economic distribution, the latter the distribution of political rights. These politics of naming largely determine the distribution of interests and rights. The two hierarchies isolated people into different categories and stratifications, and worked efficiently as a tool of
social governing. Family background or origin (Ch: jiātìng chūshēn 家庭出身) is an inborn fate that becomes linked to political identity, derived from the composition of one's father's class. Li argues that these political hierarchies are institutions used by the ruling party to screen the society for political loyalties that then determine each individual's position within a strict political order.

After class struggle in Northern Xinjiang, “poor herder” and “peasant” became desirable political identities with better political rights for getting education and employment. At the same time landlords, rich herders, and those with aristocratic family backgrounds were denounced as enemies of the people. These new hierarchical political categories established by the state further contributed to the dissolution of kinship and awil bonds. Many girls from backgrounds such as rich herder families or the hereditary nobility were forced to get married to poor, middle-aged or even old bachelors. In Altay, an elder of a Tore clan of Chinggisid lineage\(^5\) told me that when Socialist Education Movement started, even girls’ long hair was cut, like Han people, short on both sides, earrings were taken away. When she was only sixteen, she was pushed “from behind” by the Red Guards into a poor household. There was no wedding, and her family property had been looted by the Red Guards because they were “Four Olds.”\(^6\) Her aunt secretly visited her in the middle of night and gave her a wedding gift in tears. “It was 1968,” she said, “there were a few other women who were also forced into marriage like me.”

\(^5\) Chinggisid originates from Mongol name Chinggis with an English suffix -id (indicating a sect, or followers of a person, or cult). Chinggisid can be understood as the descendants of Chinggis Khan, who were the noble ruling class among Mongols, Kazakhs, and other people of Inner Asia. It conferred political legitimacy on people in areas previously under Mongol authority.

\(^6\) “Four Olds” refer to Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits, and Old Ideas. “Destroying the Four Olds” was one of the stated goals of the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution in China starting from 1966 to 1976.
In the elders’ narrations, lament began to take on new meanings. The social life of koris demonstrates a variety of occasions, subjectivities, even defiances that were indifferent to state power and designation of koris as “feudal custom.” This counteracts with state-imposed forgetting involved in institutionalizing folklore, which often represents koris as a symbol of women's passivity and vulnerability within patriarchal structures. Memory thus opposes against state-imposed amnesia, as well as being used to forge a sense of solidarity to “denaturalize and historicize the unjust social orders” of both the Maoist past and the capitalist present (Lee and Yang 2007, 7). In the elders’ storytelling, koris is absolutely not a song with set lyrics and narratives, but a unique story and performance with manifold subjectivities. When elders shared these stories with me, they highlighted sentiments of kinship intimacy and belonging. A woman in her 60s told me, “Girls do koris for a variety of reasons, it depends on the situation. Even if it’s a free love marriage, she still does koris. It’s not necessarily because she was arranged into a marriage. For example, in 1971, I was young. I saw a girl in my awil who dedicated koris to her only brother upon leaving, she sang about how close they were and how they have survived the hard times together. We all cried."

As studies on violence during the Cultural Revolution become clichéd in scholarship, Sandrine Catris (2015) goes beyond physical violence to focus on the “immaterial and emotional violence of being forced to speak, dress, and act differently” in Xinjiang (146). As she argues, and I concur, it is a violence that did not end after 1976, but still exists in the elders' recollections of events that made a more direct and personal impact on them. During politically precarious times, when the state considered some people as “nonpersons” and their deaths as “non-events” without any records, reason, or proper mourning (Watson 1994, 83), koris and joqtaw persisted as vehicles for questioning untimely, abnormal death. In Judith Butler’s (2004) words, these
rememberings challenge the state’s allocation of “grievability” and ask, “What counts as a liveable life and a grievable death?” (xii-xv). Some heroic stories of people singing joqtaw against all odds are passed down, with fragmented and incomplete details about why and how, what happened before and afterwards. Nevertheless, the poems are remembered in a clear manner, becoming what Maris Gillette (2008) calls a space to express “unauthorized” sentiments (1032).

A local folklorist in his 60s shared with me this story at the dinner table in Ürümchi in the autumn of 2015. When he was young, during the Cultural Revolution, he witnessed how his classmate's older sister was forced to marry a poor herder, even though she already loved someone else. She had always been a big sister to him, and he felt really bad that this was happening to her. Upon her leaving, he heard in her voice indignation and anguish in the poetry. Everyone listened and cried. She hugged everyone and sang:

*Ana bir tawda qar jatir,* The mountain top is covered by snow,
*Botasi olgen nar jatir,* There is a camel who lost its calf,
*Jiladi dep sokpe jur,* Please don't mock me for crying,
*Ishimdi arman jep jatir.* My yearning is eating me inside out.

As a folklorist and writer, his passion for Kazakh oral literature and history must have positioned him well for contextualizing the folk art and recovering the sentiment in the poetry through memory. The dynamism in the story struck me at that moment, specifically the singer’s contempt for state-imposed marriage, the listeners' empathy and helplessness, and the communal intimacy reinforced through the singing and listening process.
A woman in her 60s told me her mother lamented for her brother-in-law, after he was persecuted as a “counterrevolutionary” and battered to death by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. Since it is inappropriate to perform a lament outside of the funeral context, she simply recited the words verbally to me. When laments were banned as part of the “Four Olds,” her mother sang it anyway, lamenting her family while also implying how people have turned against each other. Some onlookers reported her for alluding to the people as “enemies” (Kz: *dushman*). She told me there are more lines, but this is what she could best remember:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{shemuner boyin qistadim,} & \quad \text{Shemuner is our winter pasture,} \\
\text{qayghingning shoghing ustadim,} & \quad \text{sorrow and grief have got me.} \\
\text{dos kuyiner is boldi,} & \quad \text{Your friends who care will cry for you,} \\
\text{suysindi meken dushmaning.} & \quad \text{yet your enemies are laughing.}
\end{align*}
\]

The folklorist also told me another episode of *joqtaw*. During the Cultural Revolution, a woman's father-in-law and husband were taken away to a labor camp in Aksu of Southern Xinjiang. Later she heard her husband died. In this lament, the reasons they were taken to the labor camp, where this woman was from, and how her husband died remain a mystery very likely due to the sensitivity of this incident and its time period. However, collective memories of suppression and injustice are passed down through the vehicle of poetry since it is hardly traceable to the performer.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Sumpayi jer aqsu ay,} & \quad \text{Alas, what a terrible place Aqsu is!} \\
\text{Suwin qongbas aqqu ay,} & \quad \text{Alas, in its lake a swan won’t stay.}
\end{align*}
\]
Akenmen balani ayirghan, When a father is separated from his son,
Muna zaman etken taqu ay! What a volatile era we live in!
Atadan bala ayirghan, When a father loses his son,
Bul nedegen zang boldi aw? What kind of rule and order are we under?

Lament as Poetic Healing

Joqtaw is... the more you sing, the more it comes to you. When my husband passed away, we rented a van and got him home from the hospital. I sang a joqtaw...

Olshemdi allah baq berding. Allah has given us a limited life and happiness,
Joqtawdi til men jaq berding. My tongue and jaw have given me this joqtaw.
Jazilip qalar dep edim, I thought you would heal from treatment,
Suyegin suyrep alip keldim. But here I am dragging your body back home.

One day, my little granddaughter asked me, “Apa, didn't we take my grandpa back in a van? Why did you say we dragged him back?” I laughed. She listened to my joqtaw carefully, but she didn't understand the deeper meaning of the word “suyrep,” which expressed the hardship in losing one's dear one in life.

— Gulbaran apa, age 68

An elderly aqin in Burshin of Altay told me this story. In the poetry, the way joqtaw befell her parallels the way Allah has blessed her life and happiness. Not only does suyrep express the hardship of losing a loved one, it also rhymes alliteratively with suyek (bone, here
translated as body). Anthropologist Charles Briggs (2014) calls for more attention to be paid to the poetics of lament, as it suggests “how mourners repeatedly took images from a shattered external world and imbued them with wholeness, immediacy, and a sense of the real” (319). The Central Asian oral epic poetic device usually sets the first two lines to build up the poetic images and temporality in the everyday world for the listeners. Then, the latter two lines break and test that reality, build the contrast, and shock listeners with equal parts sorrow and distress. *Joqtaw* puts a high demand on the linguistic and poetic appreciation of the listener to be able to fully interpellate and engage in the sensory, affective, and bodily resonance in the lament.

For the elders who have experienced socialist upheavals and contemporary generational inequality, lament is reproduced as a repertoire of historical traumas as well as an embodiment of personal history. When funeral practices were no longer regulated in the same way as they were during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, the social life of lament resurfaced and became a way to address loss and anxiety for the past, which in turn also shaped their understanding of the present. People gave new meanings to their interpretation as new forms of state violence came to dictate whether their lives were worth living or were disposable in the neoliberal era. When the elders reveled in the exquisite poetics of lament and shared the songs with me, we appreciated the kinship intimacy and devotion embedded in the poetry together. Through telling and listening, interpersonal and intergenerational intimacy in and out of the stories are at once acknowledged and reinforced.

I can never forget my meetings with Zeynep *apa*. She shared with me this lament when I visited her in early and late 2016. She depends on her daughter and lives in state-supported housing and was recovering from an illness. Altay was undergoing a major construction project named “*Tiégongjì*” (Ch: 铁公机), which means railway, highway, and airport. She received
compensation when the railway project took a tract of land in the middle of her inherited property, because the land cut by the railroad tracks is of little use to her as an elder in her 70s. With the money, she hosted weddings for her grandchildren and spent some on her medical bills. In the middle of our life story interview, she weaved in the lament she had dedicated to her sister-in-law.

_In 2014, she passed away. I went back to Burultoghay, my hometown, and attended her funeral. It has been seven years and I haven't been back. The relatives all came from various places, they were singing koris for her. When they were done, I started:_

_Jurmising aman juraghat, How are you my dear relatives?_

_Allahgha janing amanat. May Allah protect your spirits._

_Jiladi dep sokpender, Please don’t mock me for crying,_

_Otirmin mine saw salamat. I am here to say my greetings._

_They all listened carefully, I did koris for a long time. Not many elders are left in this family._

_Altayding sawi qulama, The Altay mountains are high in the sky,_

_Qulaqqa salghan burama. I wear my coiled earrings on my ears._

_Jiladi dep sokpender, Please don’t mock me for crying,_

_Ulkennen ishkim qalmadi, There's no one left in the elder generation,_

_Qayghimdi aytip sura ma. Don't ask me about my sorrow._
[sniffing, voice changed] then I sing:

Altay men Sawir mekenim,  
Altay and Sawir mountain are my hometown,

Jel menen jangbir jetegim.  
The wind and rain gently stroke my dress.

Ulkender den ayirlip,  
I have lost the elder generation,

Arman dap 'olip otirmin.  
I am here struggling and longing.

Jaylawding joli asw bar,  
The mountain paths lead to our summer pasture,

Jel detip tuman basilday.  
The fog is cleared away by the blowing wind.

Ayel bolsada aydager,  
Though a woman, she is the most outstanding,

Jengem-ay topiraq jasirday.  
Now grass has grown on top of her grave.

Bazargha barsam manat joq,  
There is no cloth when I go to the bazaar,

Ushayin desem qanat joq.  
I don't have wings when I want to fly.

Jiladi dep sokpender,  
Please don't mock me for crying,

Ay, mening jengeme qabat joq.  
Alas, my jenge, no one can blame her.

[sniffing…]

Jilqi ishinde seterim,  
I was a champion stallion among the horses,

Jalghan bildim bekering.  
Now I see the falseness of this world.

Agha jengeden ayirlip,  
I have lost my agha and jenge,

Ulkening aldi boldi, kishning arti boldi,  
In between the elders and youngsters,

Armandap jalghiz otermin.  
Now I am alone with my wishes.
There was an old couple from Tasbastaw of Koktogay who also came to the funeral. Their son recently fell ill and passed away alone at home. Their daughter-in-law was a policewoman, a cadre who works in the government. She was in Altay city for some business. She came back home and found that her husband had died. Her parents-in-law scolded her for her absence. Two children were left behind. I didn’t know the old couple were mourning for their son. They were old people who have retired. Hearing my joqtaw, the old couple cried so sadly. I didn’t know that. Their son passed away before my jenge. They have already buried their son and hosted his funeral, but hearing my koris, they were moved and cried so much that they couldn’t get up from their chairs. In Burultoghay, all my relatives from my natal home came for my jenge, so I sang this joqtaw. They cried so much. I sang koris for a long time! I kept on singing. Jenge’s children also did koris, but after they finished, I sang alone. Because I was in my ‘torkin, I sang my past here.

At the funeral, Zeynep apa’s singing was triggered by her childhood experiences and memories when being physically emplaced in her hometown and kinship relations. In psychoanalyst Melanie Klein’s (1948) words, through joqtaw, she struggles to “rebuild her inner world” with familiar, everyday images and contrasts them with a “precarious and collapsing external world” (321). Her joqtaw is both formulaic and individual. It is formulaic for praising Allah, acknowledging the falseness of this mortal world, while also condemning fate (Abu-Lughod 1993); Islamic and Kazakh cultural belief is that one’s death “number” is decided by God, even “already written on one’s forehead” in Kazakh language. The intense wailing and bereavement within joqtaw is like a defiance to Allah’s plan, thus the joqtaw singers are often told “it’s enough,” “be patient” (Kz: sabir bol), because “it’s all decided by Allah.”
The old couple resonated with Zeynep apa as their predicament was not too distant from hers, the loss of the loved ones, the sorrow of feeling abandoned, family torn apart by the irresistible force of Chinese modernity. Lament as an embodied practice locates both performer and listeners within the same affective scape, and bonds bodies and subjectivities internally and externally. The soundscape recruits a set of bodily practices through which a communal familial space is formed. In this process, kinship is interpellated through the listening experience, wiping of tears, and responding with ritualistic utterances. Lament is affective in the way that it triggers listeners within the soundscape with common experiences, memories, Islamic beliefs, and the condemnation of fate. The intersubjective process of sharing internal anguish and condemning the external world is thus accomplished through the poetic scheme. In these lines, her love for the people parallels her attachment to home place. The images of natural landscape in the poem also strongly contrast with the epistemic violence in the space.

Anne Anlin Cheng (2000) has suggested that racialized inequalities complicate melancholia, because it “conditions life for the disenfranchised and, indeed, constitutes their identity and shapes their subjectivity” (24). Zeynep apa’s life is a story of exclusion within inclusion during China's socialist nation-building in the 1950s. Being incorporated as ethnic minority, a subject of new China, while also abject-ed for her family background as a problematic political identity. Zeynep apa is a granddaughter of a zanggi, which was a Qing official title still applied in Kazakh political administration prior to 1950s. In socialist times, it became a symbol of local feudal authority. Zeynep apa’s family background put her under immense turmoil. She was deprived of the right to various socio-political participations, as Li Xun (2014) summarized, “the right to speak, the right to join the party, league, or work union, the right to education, and so on.” All her life, she remembers that her father-in-law told her to
be low profile: I could only begin to say that I’m from a rich family these two years! In 1958, I was in the fifth grade. I was kicked out of school because I was from a rich family. I cried for three days. My uncle gave me a book to read. I was always driven to the field to work alongside with the adults. If I were educated, I wouldn’t be here today. Everything we owned was taken away... I wasn’t allowed to go to school, now I have become a peasant.

Despite the state’s technologies of getting, Zeynep apa has interpreted her life from her own perspectives and means: she is the last one in her generation of the extended family carrying this trauma, not daring to speak of her family background till two years ago; a generation with the collective memories of disgrace, harsh labor, and survival through the Great Leap Famine; also, a generation that is now irrelevant and disposable in front of the enormous monstrosity of development and individualization of Chinese neoliberalism.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I build on Santos and Harrell’s work on gendered and generational inequalities in China with a more intersectional approach attending to ethnic, cultural, religious, and class differences and investigating sentiments and affect surrounding these inequalities. In China, rural elderly women in their 60~80s are taking the brunt of both Chinese socialism and capitalism, first with a suppressed collective past, and then with their reproductive female labor capitalized and devalued in a marketized economy (Hershatter 2011; Yang 1997). For ethnic Kazakhs, this process has disrupted social remembering through life-cycle events, reorganized gendered labor and respectability, and secularized them into the national economic bodies of China. The elderly women’s holding on to the lament ritual sheds light onto the socio-economic analysis of this process from an intersectional and subjective perspective.
Memory is a valuable tool for investigating generational axes. In the context of Kazakh disfranchisement, memory carries Maoist trauma, spatial perception, ecological knowledge, and cultural myths that are embodied through ritual gestures wherein even the silence of not performing is profound in meaning. The emplacement when performance happens indicates the strength of place in holding memories (Basso 1988). Memory is also powerful in conjuring the past and intersubjective commentaries toward the present through poetic and temporal images of non-human agents such as mountains and pastures. The sentimental depth of the lament indicates the elders’ continuous reproduction of space and social networks through interacting with others and their environment.

Despite the structural gender and generational inequalities, lament brings people together, at least temporarily, in the affective soundscape of an effervescence of gendered emotions, obligations, and hardship in personal and collective memories. Young brides unexpectedly cry, regardless of whether or not it is performative, while the elders grieve a passing way of life—one that has been systematically dismantled by the Chinese state via infrastructural development and urbanization. Therefore, understanding the way lament functions in families and communities helps us to understand why and how people are responding to life changes (wedding and funeral) and spatial changes in a cultural way. The sharing and resonating soundscape of lament also connects modern families to the histories that came before them. Lament shows us that people are grieving not only for one another, but also for something greater. This mourning allows the “death” of Kazakh Islamic and pastoral lifeways to be said out loud among themselves.
Chapter 5: The Stories of a Hunter’s Daughter

The hunting societies of the world have been sentenced to death. They have been condemned, not in any one verdict, but by a process, an accumulation, of judgements. Among simple societies, the hunters’ has seemed the simplest; among flexible and nonindustrial economies, theirs has seemed the most flexible, the ultimately nonindustrial. When adventurers, missionaries, traders, or administrators encountered man-the-hunter, they were sure that here were people whose lives were bare of all comfort, without security, and below morality; people whose prospects for truly human achievement and well-being were minimal. Would-be civilizers concluded that hunters never had, or had lost, the means to achieve a decent way of life; should welcome the benefits of trade, wage employment, and proper religion; should allow their lands to be differently used; and must accept whatever changes are brought to them, however the changes are brought. That is the death sentence.

— Hugh Brody (1981, xi-xii)

On the Fringe of Permitted Difference

As I mentioned in my introduction, a folklore project such as China’s Intangible Cultural Heritage Project (hereafter referred to as ICH) has become an institution to prescribe state approved cultural practices and interpretations of the past, and thus to attempt to monopolize that past. Chinese multiculturalism is achieved through depoliticizing and decontextualizing ethnic minority cultural customs, as well as minorities’ own participation in commodifying and reifying their cultural practices. As Louisa Schein (2000) precisely puts it, “… limitless raw material of heterogeneity comes to be socially marked, or politically charged, creating the conditions for the stabilization of particular difference—of ethnicity, gender, class, status—in the constitution of the social order” (3). Certain differences, or Otherness, become permitted and “hypervisible” (145).
In Xinjiang, after 1980, Kazakh elites and intellectuals actively responded to China’s policy of “developing ethnic culture.” First issued in 1982, the Kazakh folk literature magazines *Mura* (Kz: heritage) and *Shalghin* (Kz: meadow) became important platforms for Kazakh ethnologists, folklorists, and literature lovers to collect, preserve, and introduce Kazakh cultures and tradition to readers. The column “Kazakh ethnography” in *Mura* started in 1987 by introducing traditional medicine, falconry, horse saddle making, yurt making, shamanist healing, and so on. After oral poetry duel *aytis* was included in the first batch of China’s ICH Project in 2006, a high tide of Kazakh folklore publications and events began an upswing in Xinjiang. Under the state’s close supervision, these sanitized versions of oral traditions and folk cultures were documented, textualized, and celebrated, leaving the experience of state violence unspeakable and unaddressed.

This post-Mao era ICH craze worked in tandem with global mass culture consumption. As Schein (2000) argues, “China’s representation of internal others is a complex mimesis of being both the Orient to Europe’s modernity and in turn echoed Europe’s othering modalities in its own colonizing discourse” (102). The environmental crisis in recent decades has led to another trend of cultural productions that lament the degradation of ecosystem, using ethnic minority peoples’ local knowledge regarding nature, animals, and environment as raw materials. Ethnic films, docu-dramas, festivals, and performances keep stereotyping ethnic subjects as the preservers of ecological balance with their *innate* connection to the nature. The Chinese bestseller novel *Wolf Totem* by Han writer Jiang Rong (2004) and its film adaption (2015)
romanticized Mongolian herders as animistic Tengerists, burying the historical facts of mass Han influx, appropriation of pastoral land, and bloody atrocities during the Cultural Revolution in Inner Mongolia (Yang 2014, 2017). Folk songs in Southwest China filtered through selective publication and representation, and are becoming known as “original ecological folksongs” (Ch: yuán shēngtài mín gē 原生态民歌), soothing public anxiety about the environmental crisis (Rees 2016). The degradation of grasslands in Northern Xinjiang has led some scholars into a sense of settler nostalgia, wherein they blame young Kazakhs for their disinterest in and loss of pastoral knowledge (Chen 2014; 2015a). Meanwhile, the public enjoys hip rock bands that incorporate nomadic Kazakh music elements into their songs. Ethnic minorities in China are again trapped by authentic images of performing traditions, and are left with limited options except to participate in the ecological tourism-driven economy that prospers off the environmental dystopia experienced by Inner China urbanites.

It is in such a temporality that Nuryla Qiziqan’s Hunters’ Stories (Kz: Angshiliq Hykayalari) came into being. Mura magazine published her first of several short stories, which she later compiled with other new ones and published as a book in 2009. Nuryla’s vocabulary in

77 Jiang Rong published his novel Wolf Totem (Ch: láng túténg 狼图腾) in 2004 by Changjiang literary press in China, and it won many prizes such as Man Asian Literary Prize. It is a collection of stories about a sent-down youth student Chen Zhen from Shanghai who went to Inner Mongolia during the Cultural Revolution. During the time, he became fascinated by wolves and their hunting techniques. At the time, the Mongols and sent-down youths were directed by the commune leaders to eradicate the wolves, but Chen Zhen disobeyed and tried to raise a wolf on his own to study its wild nature. The book depicts human greed and the deterioration of grassland environment in Inner Mongolia, but in the end turned to a nationalistic reflection on the essence of the Chinese nation. Jiang adores the wild and violent spirit of wolves and advocates that the Chinese nation have more wolf spirit. Mongol writers and intellectuals criticized Jiang Rong’s misrepresentation of Mongols as animistic and nature-worshipping, they argue that Mongols are Buddhists rather than shamanistic, and wolves have always been enemies for Mongol herders. They believe that Jiang’s advocacy of wolf spirit is Facistic and cruel. In 2015, the book was adapted into a film by French director Jean-Jacques Annaud in 2015 and earned 122 million USD in box office. The film continues the book’s romanticization of Mongols as wolf-worshipping, and made a factual error claiming that the sent-down youths went to countryside to “teach” the peasants, on the contrary, Mao’s directive was that the students go to countryside and re-educate themselves learning from the rural and grassroots masses.
terms of preservation is unavoidably bounded by the climate of the salvage mission of ICH, and her memories and subjectivities were inevitably shaped by the state’s version of public historical events. Nevertheless, Nuryla’s work is delicately situated on the fringe of permitted difference. The storytelling genre allows her to better contextualize her stories than other folklorists and play on poetic justice. Despite the provided environment, her personal narratives and family stories of love and loss have become an “act of witness” and “public mourning” (Hirsch 1997, 246-7).

Nuryla’s writing vividly presents a lived experience during collectivization that was easily threatened by both nature and political culture, whether it was dangerous wild animals, man-made disasters caused by commune leaders’ arbitrary tampering with the timing of seasonal migration, or political prosecutions simply because of an improvised oral poem ridiculing Communism. Moreover, her storytelling embeds a “hidden transcript” such as a timeline of the declining diversity of wildlife after collectivization, along with the increasing human activities of farming and mining in the region (Scott 1990). While public and critical discussions of Maoist tragedies are still actively being censored in China, what do a minority writer’s ambivalence and performative gestures tell us about state power and representation? What is the process of average Kazakh herders’ being incorporated into the socialist economy on a familial level? What is the destiny of Kazakh pastoral knowledge in different historical turning points of China?

The Politics of Love and Rescue

In the mid-twentieth century, the Chinese Communist Party and People’s Liberation Army (PLA) won the civil war against the Nationalist Party, and gradually seized the periphery regions such as Xinjiang and Tibet. After resisting and fleeing from PLA attacks for several years, Kazakh rebel leader Osman Batur was captured and later executed on the People’s Square.
in Ürümchi in 1951. In the same year in a small village in Altay, Nuryla Qiziqan was born. A new chapter began when the central government in Beijing tightened its control in Xinjiang.

Since she was a little girl, Nuryla followed her father around during herding and hunting. She was all eyes and ears to the stories told by her father and fellow hunters in the *awil*. Nuryla’s father Qiziqan Ahman was born in 1921 in Altay, in the heat of constant military conflicts of Xinjiang warlord Yang Zengxin and the Red and White Russians. Qiziqan’s family’s pasture was divided by the border between the Republic of China and the Soviet Union. When the border was demarcated, Qiziqan’s family was in China, and lost their winter pasture on the Soviet side. In 1959, Qiziqan Ahman began to work for his commune as a designated hunter. His father Ahman and grandfather Ozenbayev were also hunters. When it came to Nuryla’s generation, collectivization came to an end. Hunting was banned under the Wild Animal Protection Law of China in 1988. She is the first one in her family to start working at a state institution. Initially, she worked as a clerk at the Altay Women’s Federation when she was sixteen, then later in life she worked as a hospital accountant, became a wife and mother, and began writing poems in any spare time squeezed out of her tight schedule. Her first anthology was published in 1979. After that, she wrote stories and literary criticism, and never quit studying and researching in her spare time. In the earlier years of her writing career, she published several anthologies, *Ana jiri* (Mother’s Songs), *Soltustik uyek jarqili* (The Light of the Northern Star), *Awil awenderi* (The Sound of Awil), *Qyal qyindilar* (The Fragments of Aspiration), *Baqitting ysi* (The Fragrance of Happiness), etc.

Nuryla’s writing career further developed after she retired and had more personal time. When she was visiting Almaty in 2004, Kazakhstani writer Ahyedil Toyshan reminded her that she has a fantastic position from which to write about hunting as the daughter of a former hunter.
This conversation greatly inspired her, and she quickly wrote the first twenty stories in Almaty. She came back to Xinjiang later and invited her father and fellow former hunters to talk about their experiences in the past. While writing, she realized that her memories about hunting and her family stories were becoming blurry. The more she wrote, the more she realized her knowledge in this area was limited. That was the moment she sensed the urgency to capture the “truthful hunting experiences” (Qiziqan 2009, 7). After that, she started to focus on researching and documenting hunting culture. After traveling in Ili and Altay in search of more materials, she also published Kazakh Hunting Cultures (Kz: Qazaqting sayashiliq madenyeti) in 2014. Her writing career gained her respectability in Kazakhstan as well, as some of her works were published there. In China, she served as the Vice President of the Writer’s Federation in Altay district of Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture.

Nuryla’s work is thus jointly supported by both China and Kazakhstan’s state interests in cultural heritage, as part of China’s cultural diversity and part of Kazakhstan’s lost knowledge or heritage not destroyed by the Soviet regime. In post-Soviet Siberia, museums shifted from their former task of being a state pedagogical tool to local peoples’ revitalization of native identity and cultural sovereignty. For the local museum workers, performers, and scholars, the static display and representation, although built on the legacy of Soviet times, are also their dynamic expression of identity and a vision for the future (Bloch and Kendall 2004, xvi). Similarly, ethnic officials and elites in Xinjiang and even ordinary people welcome the preservation and museumification of traditional art, material culture, and oral traditions. The chaotic wars and political turmoil in the past have caused anxiety about the loss of culture today, as an elder commented when discussing the Qinghe county museum, “Lots of war happened in Shinggil, many customs disappeared. There are not many nice exhibited items in the museum here.”
Another elder said, “even the dombra disappeared, all these items in the museums are recreated according to people's memories.” Nuryla’s works became a source for Kazakh pride on both sides of the border, and state institutions such as museums and the Cultural Department are important platforms for validating and preserving what are seen as disappearing cultures.

Ruth Behar (1990) argues, “the terrain of women’s autobiography and the complex discussions of women’s memory, politics of home, and language use are keys for alternative forms of representation and text-making that combine personal experience with poetic, political and cultural critique” (232). On an individual level, Nuryla writes to give acknowledgment to people like her father and their labor in the pastoral commune, an era that was hastily abandoned by the fast-paced social changes after decollectivization. Her father’s generation contributed their lives to the construction of socialist modernity and in return, privatization and reform policies exacerbated environmental degradation and displaced Kazakhs into the settlements. Compared with the sedentary, alienating, and constraining social environment of the present, the free spirited and romanticized hunting life was fondly remembered, as were people’s qualities of bravery, generosity, resilience, and rich knowledge of the world surrounding them. In Nuryla’s opinion, these are all things that Kazakh people should be proud of. “Memory is a tool we have in order to give meaning to our lives, if we understood it in the sense of an inter-subjective world that connects different generations, times, and places” (Passerini 1992, 3). From witnessing to writing, it is a transition of her subjectivity and taking on the responsibility for the community. This is different from the salvage projects that were driven by nationalistic agenda, but is based on affection and respect for the hunters who she had worked and interacted with, in anthropologist Virginia R. Domínguez’s (2000) words, it is a “politics of love and rescue.”
In the past, it was a custom among people to ask a share of the plunder from the warriors, or a piece of prey from the hunters. This is not begging, but a request out of mutual respect. On the vast grassland, when a passer-by encounters a triumphant hunter, the passer-by will ask for *siralhi* from the hunter, and the hunter will proudly share with him. It would be a great honor for the hunter. If the passer-by does not ask for *siralhi*, he would be considered someone who lacks common sense. A hunter will not be upset by sharing with a stranger. On the contrary, he will see this as a most auspicious sign and be proud that a stranger from far away receives a share of his findings. If this is true, in a way my book is like *siralhi* I collected from so many respected and experienced hunters. It is this happiness of sharing that made me want to write this book. (Qiziqan 2009, 6)

…Hunting culture should be written down and preserved. In modern society, economic changes have made an impact on pastoral life, and original hunting needs are now replaced by the concept of ecological protection. We write about hunting not to encourage contemporary people to go out and hunt, but to remember the ancient hunting life that has not been inherited. We write to better prepare for its preservation in the museums. (7)

As a member of the first generation who grew up in Mao’s Xinjiang, Nuryla’s subjectivity is unavoidably shaped by socialist stage development theory. Nevertheless, her writing captures environmental changes in Northern Xinjiang from a multi-generational perspective. Between the lines, there is anxiety for the disappearing mobile pastoral knowledge that is comprised of hunting taboos, herbal medicine knowledge, and other pastoral skills, and frustration with the inaccurate representations of hunting related cultural production. Nuryla documents an array of traditional knowledge she has learned while growing up on the steppe and everyday observations of her father. In her writing, poetry flows in between the pages, proverbs are cited reassuringly, folktales of herbs and hunting taboos are embedded in stories, and the original Mongolian or Kazakh names of the pastures and places are referred to instead of the modified Chinese names. Besides texts, she also used detailed, hand-drawn illustrations to explain the mechanisms of hunting traps and tools. She takes every opportunity to use hunting or herding related phrases and expressions in her writing, and explains the contexts for their usage.
By doing this she tries to at least document these expressions that have lost currency due to younger generations’ gradual alienation from the pastoral life. During our interview, several times she expressed to me that she does not have much time left in her life; now her only hope is to be able to finish her projects as she planned out.

Memories of life and death, disaster, labor, and survival are mediated through the idioms of poetry, through images, and even objects that mark the networks of communal indebtedness through gifting and bartering. A hand-made fox fur hat or a wolf fur jacket are not just lifeless objects in the sense of mass-produced goods, they embody metaphors of desire and subjectivities within interpersonal relations (Rethmann 2000). Kazakh traditional garments are painstakingly made by women in their spare time so that their men can survive hours on expeditions in the snow. Objects can be politicized in different social contexts. A fine fox fur hat can be a status symbol in a peaceful time, or a glorious trophy to show off after fighting the “bandits” during the Three District Revolution. It could also be deserted out of fear for potential trouble during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), as traditional handicrafts were considered one of the “Four Olds.”

The link between material culture and memory is also connected to gendered education, interpersonal relations, and people’s connections to land and materials around them. However, this is gradually limited to elder generations, while rural younger women actively participate in the mass-production of Kazakh handicrafts for tourism industry mainly targeting Inner China tourists. In Haba of Altay, Nurjawar apa showed me how as a young bride she was tested by

78 See Humphrey and Sneath’s work on moneless economy in mobile pastoralism (1999).
79 The story “The hunter’s marksmanship” (p60).
80 This cultural commodification trend is not simply an example of neoliberal capitalist transformation, but is also under state’s close management of Xinjiang women as biopower, also its re-engineering ethnic minority women’s
her parents-in-law by their watching her make felt thread. In order to make me understand, she found a piece of wool and rubbed it between her fingers. It takes great patience and skills to make a solid thread from rough wool. Nurjawar apa was proud to be selected as a “Cultural inheritor” (Kz: murager) by the local ICH office, and told me her daughter-in-law has inherited her knowledge and skills of making all the embroidery work inside the yurt. When I asked her what the difference is between making handicrafts then and now, she answered by complaining about how sheep wool today is not as good because the brown sheep wool has replaced the white sheep wool they used before. The brown sheep produce more wool and meat, so they have replaced white sheep in the herd. However, brown sheep wool is harder to dye into different colors, so the felt rug made from it is not as beautiful as one made from white sheep wool. She also regretfully talked about the industrialization and commodification of Kazakh handicrafts that is replacing the traditional knowledge involved in making felt rugs. “Now it's all computerized, they don't know how to make it by hand, the patterns are pre-designed. But I know the patterns in my head, they are all in my memory,” she said.

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religious piety. In 2011, Xinjiang governor Zhang Chunxian, XUAR Party Committee, and People’s Government promoted the campaign of “Beautifying Project,” focusing on modernizing ethnic minority women and industrialization of women’s handicraft, cosmetics, and accessory products to realize the “Leap Forward Development” of Xinjiang (跨越式发展). One aspect of the campaign is to help rural women develop handicraft industry and marketization. Another is to “promote women’s suzhi” by un-veiling Muslim women echoing the mass crack down on “religious extremism.” The state promoted Beautifying Project with the slogan “Let your beautiful hair flow and beautiful face show” (让美丽的头发飘起来，漂亮的脸蛋露出来) all over Xinjiang, aiming to cultivate modernity, patriotism, and devotion to the Party state among ethnic minority women, help them “establish healthy, civilized lifestyles.” “Xinjiang Women’s Beautifying Project and Modern Culture.” Tianshan.net. http://www.ts.cn/special/jinrixinjiang/2012/jrxj/2012-08/07/content_7108360.htm (Accessed April 21, 2018).
Folklore as a Post-Mao Abjection

When *Hunters’ Stories* was translated to Chinese and published by Xinjiang Youth Press in 2011, the title was changed to *The Last Hunter* (Ch: zuihòu de lièrén 最后的猎人). Nuryla was upset about the unfaithful translation and appealed to the publishing house, but was told that the title was changed for the purpose of “protecting the environment and ecological balance” (Personal communication, January 19, 2016). Regardless of Nuryla’s point in the book that Kazakh hunting strictly follows its own taboos and principles, the publishing house kept the mistranslated yet dramatic title. In the original Kazakh title *Angshiliq hikayalari, angshiliq* means hunting practice and it is a group identity for hunters; *hikaya* means story. A loan word from Arabic language, *hikaya* originally meant mimicry, as storytellers perform by “imitating different people’s accents, the sounds of animals, and even natural disasters” (Hamilton 2011, 4). Storytelling is an important form of education for the Kazakhs, who share a rich oral literature tradition that varied in genres such as the oral epic storytelling performances of *dastan*, philosophic prose treatises of *terme*, and the oral poetry battles of *aytis*. The translation “The Last Hunter” not only made *angshiliq* become singular, but also took out the element of storytelling. “The last” in the title finally announced the termination of this form of knowledge in an authoritative manner.

The politics of translation here align with the national law and discourse of “ecological protection,” which completely misunderstands hunting and equates it with poaching. Hunting becomes a cultural difference that the state cannot permit, which must accordingly work with ICH project’s mandate and allocations. Over the past few years, falconry as a Central Asian and especially Kazakh cultural heritage has gained international fame, creating mass productions ranging from stereotypical Kazakh falconer images and reports in *National Geographic* or other
tourism media, to a fairytale-like docu-drama titled *The Eagle Huntress* (2016)\textsuperscript{81} narrating a Western “girl power” story in Kazakh populated Bayan-Ölgii Province in Mongolia. Today, both Kazakhstan and Mongolia regularly hold falconry festivals as a tourist attraction. When Qinghe county in China’s Altay also hosted a falconry festival in 2014 and 2015, it encountered obstructions from the local forestry bureau. Kazakh falconers in Qinghe formed a society in hopes of negotiating with the local government about the continuation of this cultural tradition and the issue of hunting certificates. In 2016, the festival was eventually canceled after the local forestry bureau claimed that the festival had encouraged illegal catching and raising of golden eagles for falconry (the golden eagle is a first-class national protected animal). In China, hunting certificates are issued by the National Forestry Bureau only for purposes such as scientific research, breeding, exhibition, or other special circumstances. According to the Altay forestry bureau, none of the Kazakh hunters met the standard for holding the certificate.\textsuperscript{82} The cancellation of the Qinghe falconry festival could also be related to that fact that State Council of China has already enlisted falconry as an intangible cultural heritage of ethnic Kirghiz people in Akqi county of Kizilsu Kirghiz Autonomous Prefecture in 2011. This is only one of many occasions when ICH project intensified the ethnic and regional competitions for political and economic resources. Moreover, while the Kazakh hunters and hunting practices fell under public criticism, little about the history and traditional hunting knowledge was brought into the formal

\textsuperscript{81} *The Eagle Huntress* directed by Otto Bell (2016) documents a thirteen-year-old girl, Aisholpan, as she trains to become the first huntress in twelve generations of her Kazakh family. This film is controversial in presenting Mongolian Kazakhs as being old-fashioned and sexist and hindering Aisholpan’s dream of becoming an eagle huntress. Critics and anthropologists pointed out that there was no such taboo against women, and this film is a fairy tale and staged instead of a serious documentary. The film romanticizes this Kazakh cultural heritage but fails to acknowledge the tourism-driven economy in Mongolia that traps minority Kazakhs in their authenticity.

discussion, which is a topic ICH personnel should have investigated closely. Kazakh hunters’ rich knowledge and intimate relations with golden eagles actually make them excellent protectors of golden eagles. Hunters do not keep eagles for life but release them when the time is right. It is a bad omen to have an eagle die at hand, as Nuryla Qiziqan notes in her own article on falconry.  

In the first few pages of *Hunters’ Stories*, a collage of photographs of her father, her own family, and natal family were included. At the very top of this page, Nuryla’s father Qiziqan took the most prominent position, with the rim of his portrait merged into the background of other pictures. He posed riding a horse with a hunting eagle spreading its giant wings on his arm, some processed fox or wolf pelts hang around the saddle to stage an iconic and authenticated image of a Kazakh hunter. Marianne Hirsch (1997) notes that “photographs in their enduring umbilical connection to life are precisely the medium connecting first and second-generation remembrance, memory and postmemory… They affirm the past’s existence, but also signal the unbridgeable distance due to their two-dimensionality” (23-28). This photo is silently presenting the many tragedies embodied in an individual who has survived twentieth century Xinjiang, simultaneously also desensitizing readers to the horror and traumas after repeatedly presenting him as a heroic hunter. The two photos underneath are portraits of her own family and natal family. Family portraits play a key role in self-representation of kinship network and family morality. Kazakh authors very often include their portraits shot in Beijing, Astana, or in their hometowns manifesting their social positioning and regional identities. For female authors,

family portraits also demonstrate their fulfilled and primary gender roles as wives and mothers. In these photos, except Nuryla’s mother who was wearing a kymeshek (Kz: a type of head scarf worn by elderly woman), the younger generations were all dressed in plain, everyday clothes instead of “ethnic costumes” that are prevalent in state representations of minorities. Nuryla smiles along with her husband, daughters, son-in-law, and a grandchild. They looked just like any other average family in China. Her natal family portrait seems to be taken much earlier, when not smiling was the norm in Socialist era. She stood with her husband and sister-in-law foregrounding her parents, who both looked into the camera as if it were a stranger to watch out for.
Private family photos document images of subjects who are mostly invisible and anonymous in public historical archives. They “speak silence, absence, and contradiction as much as and indeed more than, presence” (Kuhn 2002, 154). Photographs always evoke memories beyond what is actually in the picture; a photo is “a prop, a prompt, a pre-text: it sets the scene for recollection” (13). Marianne Hirsch (2008) also argues that photographic images not only bring close a lost past world and create an intimacy with the subjects in the images, but
they also “become screens – spaces of projection” in between the viewer and the viewed, which “minimize the disaster they depict and screen their viewers from it.” Therefore, they are an interactive device of evoking memories and forgetting at the same time (117). The bodies, gestures, and temperament in Nuryla’s family photographs materialize intense feelings of familial and gender politics, which are hard to convey in language completely. However, when the Chinese version of the book The Last Hunter was published, the publishing house deleted these family photo collages for unknown reasons. In a way, the publishing house’s “abjection” (Kristeva 1982) of Nuryla’s photographic self-representation exposes the core of the state’s folklore project and marketization: ethnic minority cultures are raw materials for editing and rewriting, to be politically censored, to be logistically administered, to meet mainstream consumers, or to be more folk looking, with less individuality but more timeless “ethnic characteristics” (Ch: mǐnzú tèse 民族特色) without tangible traces of Socialist past. Anne McClintock (1995) also takes up the concept of “abject” and relates it to colonial states. What a colonial state has abjected and cast out of the body continues to haunt the colonial nation (71-72). The folklorization of ethnic minorities’ pasts, even personal family histories, is a post-Mao “abjection” excluding its problematic elements that can threaten the Party state’s authority and legitimacy.

Hunting to Build Socialism

In the summer of 1958, everything was collectivized. Everybody went to a communal canteen and ate from the daguofan.84 My family also submitted our yurt along with its sixty-three wiq and felt rugs, pickaxe, rickshaw, other tools, as

84 daguofan (Ch: dàguōfàn 大锅饭) literally means big pot meal, referring to public canteen.
well as my father’s horses, two milking cows, and ten large livestock.85 We only had two hunting hounds and a mountain eagle left. My father set the eagle free… it was extremely difficult to find food for the hounds at that time, so father set them free as well. After they fed themselves outside, they would still come back home… (Qiziqan 2009, 186)

Contrary to claims made in “speaking bitterness” narratives that the ordinary masses were the primary subjects of the revolution and the owners of communal property, unofficial narratives recognize the sense of otherness and the primary agency of the Chinese state during collectivization (Hershatter 2011; Makley 2008, 125). Nuryla’s writing captures what collectivization meant for common herders, and demonstrates the fact that state agency was the primary subject of the revolution and not the common masses. Cooperatives and communes structured pastoralists as socialist laborers, including children and young adolescents. As the oldest daughter of the family, Nuryla had to come back to help at home after finishing the fourth grade. At the tender age of ten, she was already a tireless laborer at home and in the commune. She and her younger sister together herded forty foals of the commune livestock.

During our interview, she told me, I worked since I was very little, we were herders. I can say I was very busy even as a child. I started working when I was ten. As a second-degree worker, I got eight points. Ten points for full labor. We didn't have a salary; the best was twenty yuan a month. I learned to do all kinds of work in the awil, I herded, and when my father raised horses I raised the foals, fed them grass, took them to drink water, cleaned up their corrals... We raised cattle, in summer, we made pishen (Kz: fermented fodder for livestock). We worked as

85 Large livestock refers to horse, cow, and camel.
hard as the grown-ups. There wasn’t an eight-hour work system. We worked from dawn to dusk, sometimes we even fell asleep with spoons in our hands at the dinner table...

During collectivization, increasing pastoral production was a political task, so hunting had to serve its purpose of protecting the commune’s livestock and increasing sideline production. Furs and pelts had to be submitted to the commune collectively and private trading was not permitted (Hasake jianshi 2008, 250). The 1956-1967 National Programme for Agricultural Development Article XVII writes: “starting from 1956, within 12 years, […] substantially eliminate the most serious hazards to animals that can damage production in all possible places… Protect and develop wildlife with economic value” (the sentence has no subject position in the Chinese original).86 Writing about collectivization in Mongolia, J. Damdin (1962) and Luwsan (1984) have also described how hunting was a socialist labor, along with methods of wolf hunting and exterminating wolves.87 The Chinese newspaper People’s Daily between 1958 and 1979 frequently reported the productive rate and economic benefit from state-mobilized mass hunting all over China, in some places hunters were given 40~70% interest from the surplus hunting production.88 It is reported that in provinces such as Heilongjiang, Jilin,

87 J. Damdin’s Notes of a Grizzled Hunter (1962) and Luwsan’s Mongolian Hunter’s Notes (1984) (Personal communication with Kenneth Linden, who researches environmental history and collectivization in Mongolia).
88 People’s Daily 1958.1.3. p2, in the article “Good News of Hunting Keeps Arriving from the Snowy Forests of the North” (在千里冰封万里雪飘的北国森林里 狩猎喜讯频传), journalist Kang Weizhong wrote that in Heilongjiang province hunters planned to hunt beyond quota and hoped to finish the task of hunting 320,000 wild animals. On 1966.2.2. p2, it is reported that hunters in Heilongjiang province hunted 250,000 wild animals for fur from November 1965 to the Eve of Spring Festival in 1966 for the domestic and international market. Hunters were provided food, clothes, rifles, and supplies, and their incomes were increased. On 1961.1.8. 1 sheet, in Hubei province 90,000 animals were hunted. On 1960.12.20. 2 sheet, it is reported that hunters hunted elk, boars, and wild fowl in Xinjiang. In Hami, 270 wolves were hunted by the end of November that year. In Nilqi “Rocket commune,” skilled hunters hunted 3,359 wild animals within a month.
Hubei, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia, mass hunting was mobilized for meat and fur production to be exported to the international market. Hunting was encouraged, for it “not only eliminates damage caused by animals, but also improves people’s livelihood, and increases income to support national construction. Hunting costs less labor but yields more gains.”

In Xinjiang, People’s Communes launched wolf eradication campaigns and hunters were mobilized in teams to eradicate the “wolf pest” (Ch: láng hài 狼害) to protect the livestock. Each hunter had to meet the quota to make work points. The hunters used various techniques in wolf eradication, for example chasing the wolves along the trails, setting traps and encirclement, killing the whole brood, and so on. “Productive” hunters were awarded prizes and titled “labor model representatives.”

In short, during collectivization, hunters were politically mobilized to hunt more than they needed to sustain lives, and hunting was defined as a form of labor to increase pastoral and sideline production to build socialism.

In the day time, people had to do heavy labor. In the evening, they had to go through criticisms in the meeting rooms that reeked of blue cigarette smoke, like foxes stuck in their caves. (Qiziquan 2009, 189)

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89 On 1961.1.8. p1, it reported that [Jilin province] 8,200 animals were hunted in the article “Preparing for Winter Hunting,” and it listed the economic benefit of exporting animal furs. “Our nation’s animal fur occupies a prominent position in the world market. forty pelts equal one ton of steel, 378 grams of egret hair equals thirty-eight grams of gold. All the yellow weasel furs that were exported in 1959 brought back 1,633 tractors with twenty-six horse power. This shows that hunting wild animals is very important for our national economic development.”

90 See the photo from People’s Daily, p3, December 14, 1959, “Hunting team from the Third Red Flag People’s Commune in Xinjiang Ili Kazak Autonomous Prefecture.” (Picture taken by Wu Chunzhan).

91 1952.9.21 p2, Xinjiang Daily: “in Toli county 124 wolves were killed within the winter and the following spring, and only one sheep was eaten by wolves. In May, Qidirhan was awarded at the celebration assembly. Among the many awards, his favorite one is the pictures of Chairman Mao and General Zhu. Hunter Jahiya also responded to the campaign actively: within two months, he hunted eighteen wolves, one leopard, and four foxes. This has protected livestock in the region, and he was selected as the First-class labor model and the representative Pastoral labor model in the first assembly of labor models.”
Ann Anagnost (1997) demonstrates that in socialist China, “ politicizing the body is not merely a manipulative project of the state to ensure social control and ideological domination, but is essential for the party-state’s own self-identity, its creation of a self-referential reality that is in itself an ideological effect” (98). The state realizes its power through euphemistic violence—giving titles such as “law abiding family” (Ch: zūn jì shǒufǎ jiātíng 遵纪守法家庭), “Five Black Categories” (Ch: hēi wǔ lèi 黑五类), “Five Red Categories,” (Ch: hóng wǔ lèi 红五类), “class enemies” (Ch: jiējí dírén 阶级敌人), “labor model” (Ch: láodòng módàn 劳动模范) “to sort people into the hierarchically arranged categories of a moral order” as opposed to traditional social structures such as family, kinship, social relations, or ritual hierarchies (100). The power of euphemistic violence works with the raw materials from the people to create rituals of subjection. Through such subject making, the state “produces docile bodies and transforms these bodies into signifiers that figure in a master narrative of progress toward a socialist modernity…” Euphemistic violence “makes visible the politicized bodies, and aligns them with model behavior” (139). The year 1963 saw the beginning of the nationwide Socialist Education Movement initiated by Mao, who sought to cleanse national politics, economy, organization, and ideology. In the second stage of the Socialist Education Movement, class division was added to the agenda along with the “Four Clean-ups” and production. The CCP betrayed their promises of the early 1950s that they would not conduct class division in Xinjiang and started to clearly divide landlords, rich herders, rich farmers, and their family members. The state is absolutely a powerful agent just as in Nuryla’s metaphor of fellow herders as foxes passively falling prey to the state power that was anthropomorphized as a hunter.
Unlike hunters in other parts of China, in Xinjiang, Kazakh herders’ guns for hunting and self-protection were confiscated by the government immediately when the campaign of “eradicating counter-revolutionary bandits” and resistant forces was implemented in 1950. Gun confiscation had been an important measure to suppress the possibility of Kazakh resistance as early as 1939, when warlord Sheng Shicai was in power (Jacobs 2016, 120). Nuryla’s father Qiziqan had to fulfill his political role as a hunter under the commune leader’s command. Every year, he had to submit a hunting quota of two bears, sixty foxes, and twenty wolves to the commune. Being suspected as a descendent of a “rich herd owner” class category, Qiziqan’s hunting gun was confiscated and never given back. As a result, he had to risk his life by hunting wild dangerous animals to meet the quota without the aid of a firearm. He managed by applying a variety of traditional techniques and his well-trained hunting dogs, eagles, and peregrines. In 1970, after he almost died when attacked by a bear, Qiziqan’s suspended salary was finally paid in full by the commune. Traditional hunting knowledge saved him from political persecutions twice. Nuryla wrote about them in the stories “The most rewarding two weeks” and “The Quran prayer is only recited when you have a full stomach.” After a productive hunting trip in 1959, her father’s title “counter-revolutionary” was removed, “shaking off a heavy political baggage, my father returned home happily” (2009, 82). The second time was after successfully hunting two bears in a single trip in 1965, he earned the politically favored title “Poor and lower-middle peasant.” Fear is infused in Nuryla’s writing: “if my father had not hunted two bears at that time, God knows what his political destiny would have become” (101). Many times, through hunting, Qiziqan was able to maintain his dignity in front of the demanding commune leaders who pushed him to submit more quotas or otherwise perform heavy labor.
Every time when Father reminisced about the past, he used to say, “I was almost denounced as a “rightist,” it was wolves and bears that protected me and helped me stand on my feet and not fall. These fellas [commune cadres] received a lot of goodies from me!” (Qiziqan 2009, 191)

Storytelling not only serves as an important medium for knowledge and memory transmission, but also for dealing with transgenerational traumas. Many times, Nuryla’s autobiographical “I” became her father, grandfather, other fellow hunters, or elderly people who lived in the village before. The intersubjectivity of storytelling forms a polyphony portraying the everyday life of the common herders that were not recorded in public history. Hunters’ Stories is a testimony of hardship embedded in stories of starvation, hard labor, mourning, and black humor, a history that Kazakh readers can relate to and resonate with, a cultural memory that is shared and disseminated in their own language and from their own perspective. It was mutual support within the community and storytelling that kept them alive and enabled them to heal.

Family feasts are important occasions for storytelling. Nuryla wrote this story she heard at a family feast: a cunning wolf convincingly acted like a dog and lowered the nightshift herder’s vigilance. When it approached a herd of horses, the wolf suddenly attacked and slaughtered a horse. As a result, the herder on the night shift had to take responsibility for losing livestock under his watch. Not only was he criticized in the political meeting, but one month of his salary was also deducted. The herder talked about that incident to many people, about how the wolf had tricked him (Qiziqan 2009, 21). If the repeated telling of the nightshift herder was an effort to excuse his “mistake” and save face, Nuryla’s retelling relayed such trauma of persecution and merged it into her own terrain of memories across generations and subjectivities.

Some of her stories were told humorously, carefully avoiding demonstration of any political views and instead focusing on individual cadres and soldiers’ ridiculous mistakes. A
guest told a story at a dinner at Qiziqan’s house: when he was young, it was during the time when the “Three-anti” (1951) and “Five-anti” Campaigns (1952) were spread to Xinjiang in 1952-1953, and a commune leader (ethnicity unknown) took him poaching. Ignorant of proper hunting knowledge, the leader almost killed the young Kazakh man and an ox while trying to shoot a goose. When hunters like Qiziqan did not even have a gun, communist cadres equipped with guns constantly poached and slaughtered animals using poor and inhumane techniques. The ideology of “eradicating counterrevolutionaries and nationalists” (Ch: jiǎo fěi 剿匪 and zhènfǎn 镇反) in the early 1950s turned Turkic Muslim minorities in Xinjiang into prey (Wu 2015). Nuryla writes that during this campaign a group of PLA soldiers mistook a caved bear for a hiding bandit and shot it dead in a panic. These stories were told with an expectation that readers already understand the historical context, and the intense political climate and social anxiety were only conveyed through psychological depiction. The young cadre was anxious when he was called, and thought to himself, “Are we going to arrest people again?” but he did not dare to ask and just followed his leader. In short, people’s stories convey a fuller account of the inherent injustice of state socialism on a social, emotional, and environmental dimension.

92 Both “Three-anti” (Ch: sān fǎn 三反) “Five-anti” (Ch: wǔ fǎn 五反) campaigns were launched by Mao Zedong to rid of the enemies of the state and consolidate Mao’s power within the Party. The “Three-anti” campaign targeted members within the CCP, GMD members (Guomindang or Nationalist Party), and corrupted bureaucratic officials. It included “anti-corruption, waste, and bureaucracy.” The “Five-anti” campaign targeted the capitalist class and bourgeoisie, and included “anti-bribery, theft of state property, tax evasion, cheating on government contracts, and stealing state economic information.”

93 The stories “How a squint aim” (63), and “The ‘hunter’ who shot the ox” (65).

94 The story “‘Bandits’ in the stone fortress” (169).
Remembering in China’s Ecological Civilization

If Kazakh traditional knowledge such as hunting and herding were incorporated and exploited in pastoral production during collectivization, post-Mao pastoral reform has largely marginalized them to the point of oblivion. The pastoral reform in 1984 led to a deteriorated relationship between people, animals, and the environment, and deprived the herders of agency over grassland management. Caroline Humphrey and David Sneath (1999) concluded that in Inner Asia, “both grassland environment and the indigenous cultures are under threat in these margins, and the areas of pasture degradation broadly coincide with the regions where the culture of mobile pastoralism has been overwhelmed and native languages are weakened” (10). In 1973 and 1983 respectively, the State Council convened the first and second national environmental protection assemblies in China, and established environmental protection as a national policy. It was the severe environmental crisis at the end of collectivization that sounded the alarm for national policy makers (Zhao et al. 2014). In 2012, the state launched a campaign to construct an “ecological civilization” that ties grassland degradation to pastoralists’ overgrazing. Grassland is seen by the state from a “strategic, developmental, and ecological security perspective” (Yu 2014). Under this new campaign, construction projects such as mining must pay for grassland restoration, and pastoralists are compensated for conserving pasture and halting herding. The animal husbandry industry must increase its productivity and efficiency, and get rid of extensive production modes (Ch: cūfàng xíng 粗放型增长), which refers to overgrazing in each unit of pasture. The state’s environmental discourse did not change its economic agenda of development and productivity, nor did the Open Reform guideline of the Household Responsibility System. This allowed herders to maximize the productivity of their pastures at will, or transfer and sell their pastures as property rights to larger stock holders in the animal husbandry industry. When
these policies were translated into reality, the herders were faced with an unfavorable animal husbandry market and climate change, logistical difficulties for children’s education due to urbanization, and attractive compensation for their sedentarization. For elders, the hard times they went through in the collectivization era were followed by detachment from their knowledge systems and relocation from ancestral places while painfully adapting to urban life. Environmental degradation and social alienation have thus triggered a politically safer route of nostalgia for pastoral nomadism and collective morals.

Pastoral reform converts the relationship between people, land, and animals into monetary and economic relations, and this relationship is constantly exacerbated by the market demand for meat, dairy, and cashmere (Cerny 2008; Zukosky 2006). At the same time, Kazakhs are blamed for over-grazing and grassland degradation. In terms of intergenerational knowledge transmission, the elders’ authority is declining, and so is the knowledge system they hold. The young generation does not know how much livestock a pasture can sustain, nor would many of them like to pursue this career. As Chen (2014) points out, now elder Kazakh men have to take the reins and do it themselves again. One elder said, “now we are just herding for the banks. Get a loan in spring and pay it back in the fall” (65).
Figure 17 The settlements in Almali village, Toli county, Tarbagatai.
(Source: Picture Taken by Guldana, Almali village, Toli county, August 17, 2015)

_ Hunters’ Stories_ presents a close-knit mutually supportive community that experienced collectivization through bodily and emotive agonies. Nuryla represents her father as one of the central figures of the _awil_, a brave and generous hunter who is always happy to share his quarry with fellow herders, even during the Great Leap Forward when food was scarce. The portrait of Qiziqan as a proud, brave, and resilient hunter on the steppe not only contrasts strongly with the state representation of Kazakhs being victimized by clan patriarchy, but also stands out as a masculine symbol of Kazakhness and its accompanying qualities such as freedom and generosity. She proudly reminisced about how she once chased a wolf down riding a horse in imitation of her father, and felt utterly excited that such an experience is unique to her as a
hunter’s daughter. Such romanticization and masculinization of pastoral life as well as her infrequent mentions of her mother echo what Charlene Makley (2008) noticed while studying social memories in Tibet, “Gender … is a contested process of people recognizing bodies to be intrinsically linked to hierarchical personas and types of agency, discourse genres, and social contexts. [It is] both a crucial frame for contemporary subject positions and an *unavoidable index* of past traumatic ruptures in experiences…” (116).

The elders in Altay did not mark the years with calendrical dates, but with major events that happened in those years. If you want to ask someone’s age or for some information, the elders will answer you starting like this, “the year when White Russians came,” “the year when people migrated from Upper Altay,” or “the year when General Dalelkhan*95* retreated.” These events are used as markers when people talk about time before or after them. We are a generation of people growing up hearing about these historical events. (Qiziqan 2009, 89)

Collective memory of the elderly Kazakhs in Altay was marked by events of the Russian invasion, forced migration, and ETR retreat with an entirely different focus than the Party’s Xinjiang officially sanctioned history. Memories transmitted within family space also immersed younger generations like Nuryla’s with the experience of these upheavals prior to 1949. Through listening, retelling, and writing, she has transformed from a subjective “I” to an intersubjective “we,” even though she never experienced any of those events. According to Marianne Hirsch (2008), postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connections. Postmemory is a powerful and a particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its source is mediated not through recollection but through an

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*95* Dalelkhan Sugirbayev (1906-1949) was one of the important Kazakh leaders along with Osman Batur rebelling against warlord Sheng Shicai in Xinjiang in 1944. In 1946 he broke with Osman and joined the leadership of Coalition government with Nationalist Party of China in Xinjiang. He was one of the East Turkestan Republic leaders killed in an air crash enroute to a consultative conference with Mao Zedong in Beiping (now Beijing).
“imaginative investment, projection, and creation.” Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up “dominated by narratives that preceded their birth,” whose own belated stories are “evacuated by the stories of the previous generation” (107). “Postmemory is often obsessive and relentless… it is as full and as empty, certainly as constructed, as memory itself” (Hirsch 1997, 22). Compared to the historical events that marked the elders’ collective memory, Nuryla’s family trauma is more intimate and powerful. She was haunted not only by her father’s suffering, but also more broadly by the state’s amnesia about people’s toil in the socialist past. Qiziqan had two brothers, Qazna died in Osman Batur’s guerilla army during the Ili Rebellion in the 1940s, and Abil died in a work camp during the Great Leap Forward in 1958.

Abil joined the People’s Liberation Army and was awarded medals several times. He did not get married until he was thirty-five years old. In 1958, he had a daughter. His wife was sent to Qiziljar to work in the fields with other women. Their new born baby was left with her grandmother. Abil was sent to a work camp to build the dam called Yihongdao. He left as a healthy man, and in winter that year he passed away and his body was sent home. He starved to death. Since Sarqamis commune did not send anyone, my father had to dig the grave for his young brother himself. The commune leader gave the widow only three days for her husband’s funeral. After three days, she was sent to the field to work again. At that time, there were not grand memorial feasts like today, and very few people attended funerals. Still, relatives mourned at home and lamented, then they had to leave after sipping some black tea… (Qiziqan 2009, 188)

In this written form of public mourning, the expression of emotion is constrained, with minimal political and historical details. Millions of dead during Mao’s Great Leap Forward remain faceless subjects without a record, a reason, or a mourning. The political discourse and policies of death and mourning during “the Great Famine of China,” as historians Yang Jisheng (2012) and Frank Dikötter (2010) call it, neglected and denied peasants’ deaths. Yang (2012) writes that in some localities in Anhui province, there were “Four No’s” to be observed in relation to the dead: 1) no shallow graves; all corpses had to be buried one meter deep and have
crops grown over them; 2) no crying; 3) no burials along the roadside; and 4) no mourning rites. Even survivors were forbidden to wear white mourning garb, and were required to wear red clothes of celebration (278). It is unclear whether Xinjiang also had this ban, but Kazakh elder women’s oral histories confirmed the ban of Islamic funeral rites. Yang speculates that famine was generally less devastating in Xinjiang purely from a statistical viewpoint (50,700 unnatural deaths over three years) (414), without considering the huge Han influx into the region and its consequences for local Turkic Muslim peoples. The Great Famine in Xinjiang is even more blurry in Chinese history. At least Nuryla brings faces to the people who perished during this atrocity, in a way that questions the state’s sentence passed on their lives as “ungrievable” (Butler 2004).

Father finished listening to my reading of Hunters’ Stories, and offered some corrections to some parts. He looked at me with surprise again, “My child, how did you remember all these? When did you start to pay attention to hunting? Even all my brothers’ sons don’t care about it, and never listened to stories of hunting.”

“Father, but you always talked about hunting.”

“Alas, I don’t even remember telling you hunting stories, nor teaching you. I only remember I taught you poems, riddles, and tongue twisters.”

“Yes, but you often tell humourous stories about hunting to guests. I have ears too! They remained in my memory after listening to them so many times; we also see your actions at home every day.” (Qiziqan 2009, 10)

Qiziqan’s amazement at his daughter’s interest in hunting is significant. For a generation whose livelihood was officially deemed a “backward natural economy” that should have been abandoned for decades, it is quite surprising to him that someone, especially a woman, would care about hunting and research it now. The violent ritual of subjection Ann Anagnost has described has lingered across generations, internalizing stigmas of “backwardedness” that can
only be redeemed by participating in environmental exploitation. Historian J.R. McNeill (2001) points out that the main ideology of the twentieth century is not capitalism or socialism, but development. No matter the political regime, development or modernization sets in place a colonial relationship whereby the center extends its political control to the wilderness in the natural border of the nation. Environmental historian Jonathan Schlesinger (2017) writes, “national histories continue to structure the environmental ones,” as he argues that an “antidevelopmentalist scholarship has repackaged Mongol and minority folk traditions as a type of historical environmentalism” (6). Though Qiziqan must have actively tried to meet the commune leaders’ hunting quota, Nuryla stresses in her writing that mass hunting was never a Kazakh practice, and sets up an ethical boundary with the socialist practices promulgated by the Han cadres. She mentioned to me that hunting is a part of dala madenyet (Kz: steppe civilization) that originated from a long mobile pastoral history, and Kazakhs have their ecological principles on how to manage their environment. Nuryla certainly neglects the fact that Inner Asian pastoral-nomadic hunting decimated the animal populations, partially accounting for the lack of biodiversity on the steppe, and that these hunting taboos could be indigenous reactions to historical ecological abuses. Her boundary-setting with the Han commune cadres with reference to traditional pastoral knowledge interestingly exemplifies the production of local knowledge in its encounter with Chinese colonial expansion into Xinjiang. This narrative also resonates with the contemporary environmental discourse of tughan jer (Kz: the birth place) in Kazakhstan, where nationalism and environmentalism entangle in the face of Chinese corporations’ investment in Kazakhstan’s natural gas industry (Dubuisson 2017b).

Nuryla’s concept of “steppe civilization” has its own merit in reclamation and repatriation of a Kazakh knowledge system that has been abused and appropriated by socialist
economy. She presents this through a detailed depiction of tragedies resulting from such abuses. More than once she wrote about her father’s deep anguish over losing his fine horses to the commune, after they were made to carry manure carts and then slaughtered. When commune cadres forced her *avil* to migrate against the natural seasonal timing, Nuryla pictured the saddening scene of livestock fallen on a wet and slippery slope, and dead bodies of livestock scattered everywhere. Some livestock lost their calves in this tragic incident and their calls were deafening and heartbreaking, even some *shangiraq* of the yurts were shattered and abandoned on the trail (Qiziqan 2009, 28). Nuryla’s writing strives to demonstrate how Kazakh resource management knowledge is grounded in a spiritual and reciprocal relationship between people, animals, and their environment; for example, the natural world is infused with spirits that should be respected and not abused. This is different from socialist production for profit and conquest which one can find in the Maoist discourse of a “war against nature” (Shapiro 2001). She reminisces that when she was young, she chased a red fox out of excitement and curiosity. Qiziqan saw his daughter doing this and ordered her to stop. He told her that the fox was pregnant and should be left alone. He said, “It is the season for foxes to shed hair and give birth to its kits now. You can’t hunt at this time! Poor fox, it has suffered!” She also took an entire section of the book to explain various hunting taboos:

People do not hunt in early spring, as this is usually the season when animals mate and give birth to their offspring. Hunting season usually starts at the end of July, when herbivore animals have gained enough fat. Usually, hunters will not harm wolf and bear cubs, as they believe they will be damned if they do so. Kazakh people also believe gazelles, deer, and swans are sacred and spiritual. Hunters will never destroy birds’ hatchlings in the nest, as they believe that would harm their own offspring. From Kazakh folktales we know that people will not even hurt a sparrow, out of the fear that they would be cursed by such a spell:

Torghay torghay atim bar,  Sparrow, sparrow is my name,
Bir japiraq etim bar,    a teeny tiny body is all I have.
Nuryla also uses multigenerational stories as a way to illustrate traditional knowledge. Her depictions demonstrate that such knowledge is land-based and rooted in an intimate and long-term involvement in local ecosystems. This knowledge is based on experiences accumulated, learned, and passed down from generation to generation. Nuryla’s father Qiziqan reminisced that “my father Ahman knows which birds are flying in the sky while sitting at home. I know so little even though I am often by his side. How do you know birds’ whereabouts at home?” Qiziqan eventually acquired the secrets of the birds, and told his daughter,

An experienced falconer not only listens to the language of the eagles, but also other birds’. He should be able to distinguish diverse types of callings from different birds. For example, crows, magpies, and sparrows would gather and chirp “the eagle is gone, the eagle is gone.” When we walk out of the house and look around, we would see the eagle flying over the mountain ridges faraway… (Qiziqan 2009, 111)

Conclusion

If Maoist collectivization turned Kazakhs into mere laborers and exploited their indigenous knowledge for productivity, the post-reform era has reduced them to performers of authenticity and folklore agencies. Since the 1950s, Kazakhs have lost much of their agency over grassland and ecological management to the state’s economy and political control, and are continuing to be the scapegoats for grassland degradation under the state’s hegemonic discourse of “ecological civilization.” Environmental themed cultural production in China keeps framing ethnic minority life into a timeless tradition, with the institutional power of the state monitoring its scale, media, language, and representation. This has resulted in a complex process of
remembering and forgetting as well as performance and resilience under state violence and capitalist exploitation.

Memories do not yield easily, and are transmitted via everyday idioms, jokes, stories, and even objects. They penetrate bad translations, generational gaps, and spatial distance. With imperfect focus, they make absences present, and make the dead speak. *Hunters’ Stories* is one such example, a common herder turned writer validates her personal memories, family history, and ethnic Kazakhs’ lived experience of political turmoil and harsh labor during collectivization. Multiple layers of memories speak of the traditional knowledge that was exploited, brushed aside, and eventually abandoned throughout China’s development of the Northwestern frontier. They give witness and testify to these transformations, and they constitute a history that Kazakh readers can acknowledge and to which they can relate. Unlike many testimonial narratives that were written after the political tensions were lifted or the economy was liberalized, counternarratives in Xinjiang are more shadowed than ever before. The state continues to consolidate its power through prohibiting the conversion from folklore back to traditional knowledge in practice.
Chapter 6: Debating Gender and Kazakhness

All societies have them; all venerate them. Not all members of a society are similarly faithful to them, nor are all societies monolithic in their identification and replication to them ... but tradition is neither a monolith, nor is it axiomatically good, and the notion of what practices were and are essential, how they should be practiced, who may be involved and who is an authority are all open to interpretation... unless we can have conversations about what traditions are, how they affect men and women in their gendered roles and what the implications of this are, we are moving a powerful socio-political critique off the table.

— Joyce Green (2007, 26-27)

On a summer evening in 2015, when I was attending a friend’s wedding after-party in a small village in Mori in Northern Xinjiang, a professional aqin sat next to me playing his dombra. He was singing a song with the refrain: ahaw sar qiz, pisqan darbız, darbizingning qizilin maghan jarghiz (Kz: Hey, fair-haired girl, you are like a ripe melon, let me cut your red ripe melon). It was clear he was directing the song at me. I felt my face begin to turn red. I was tongue-tied. I did not know what to say or do. How do you respond to lyrics like that from a poet? A Kazakh woman around the same age as me sitting nearby tried to soothe my discomfort by making excuses for him. She said he was just joking around and that the lyrics were supposed to be funny. That is just the manner of aqin, and this is just a “folk song” (Kz: qaliq ‘an, meaning people’s songs). A while later, the aqin received a phone call from his danwei leader to go entertain some visiting officials who would attend an aytis festival the next day.

The way I felt baffled and embarrassed by the situation contrasted sharply with stories that I heard from the elders. “When I was little,” a Kazakh woman in her 70s in Koktogay Altay,
reminisced, “I would follow older girls in my village to the weddings. One time they had *aytis* with the other guests. One girl noticed her rival (a male poet) had a big nose, so she sang,

*Kozingnen aynalayin tostaghanday,*
Your eyes are as big as wooden bowls,

*Murningnan sasqan adam ustaghanday,*
your nose is as big as a boulder that one can grasp;

*Ustinen eginning otin artip,*
we can gather firewood on the top of it,

*Astina bir taypa el qistaghanday*
underneath a whole *taypa* can stay in a winter camp.

“In the next round, she saw that the man pushed his cap a bit and exposed his balding scalp. So, she kept on singing:

*Qongghan awilimning irghanaqti,*
My hometown is in Irghanaq,

*Aqqan sw irghanaqtan qulda baqti,*
the river flows down from upstream;

*Qoy desemde qoymading ghoy,*
I told you to stop but you won’t listen,

*basing’a teberim’e sirghanaqti.*
look how slippery the top of your head is!

“In hearing this, that man got angry and left, losing the *aytis* miserably.” The other women and I laughed, amazed by the girl’s sharp witty words.

This entirely different scenario made me wonder. What does the transformation of *aytis* mean? How has it changed in the way gender relations are performed, and the way language is used? My encounter was not just a random case of sexism. As previous chapters have discussed, facing the shrinking pastoral cultural space and drastic social changes, the position of mother
tongue, knowledge, and morality is increasingly threatened in Kazakh society. In gradually
urbanized spaces, aytis now plays a significant role in sustaining the oral tradition and
improvisation in the Kazakh world. The poet at the wedding was putting me, an urban Kazakh
woman who has lived in the city my whole life, in my place by embarrassing me in (what in his
mind was) a playful way. This experience is symptomatic of the way gender has become
contested ground in the production of Kazakhness in the face of Chinese modernity,
urbanization, and globalization.

**A Feminist Performative Approach to Aytis Research**

In this chapter, I relate feminist performance studies to an ethnography of aytis to study
how the performers produce gendered subjectivities, and in turn re-produce (trans)national
identities under the power regimes of nationalism and national projects. I argue that cultural
authenticity and gender norms maintain some of the crucial factors in identity (re)construction
for the Kazakh communities in both China and Kazakhstan. While both states promote and
preserve aytis as part of their ethnonational projects, they give lip service to gender equality and
reiterate subordinated female domesticity in their post-Socialist or post-Mao contexts. I employ a
feminist approach to investigate how performance such as oral tradition enables women to
elevate their position and sometimes even challenge the dominant social order.

Aytis is a central component of Kazakh oral literature.96 It is a duelling performance of
improvised oral poetry between two aqins (poets, or bards) accompanying themselves on the

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96 I have transcribed the spelling aytis from Arabic Kazakh script used primarily by Kazakhs in Xinjiang. It is also
spelled as aytis by some Xinjiang Kazakh scholars, while aqin (aytis performers) is sometimes rendered aken. In
Kazakhstan, where there are different conventions for transcription of Cyrillic Kazakh to Latin script, the
performance genre is rendered aitys and the performers aqyn or akyn.
**dombra**, a two-stringed plucked instrument. *Aytis* is interactive not only between the *aqins* themselves but also between the *aqins* and the audience. When performing, *aqins* tease, insult, or praise one another, saluting and greeting the audience. The dynamism of *aytis* is very much influenced by the multiple social identifications—regional (hometown), familial (kinship relations), and historical (genealogical knowledge)—of *aqins*. Kazakh people aptly describe *aytis* as “a sport of red tongues” (Kz: *qizil tilding sportsi*).⁹⁷ In Valentina Pagliai’s (2009) terms, *aytis* is a “verbal duel,” as “there is stress on the performance, the display, and the search for a public witnessing” (63). In order to win competitions, *aqins* need not only to be well versed in literary classics and in historical and cultural knowledge, but also to be familiar with their own and their rivals’ clan affiliations. The oral transmission of *aytis* narrative is a process of forming a “community of people” through naming and claiming (Dubuisson 2010, 105-6). Kazakh people are very proud of the spirit of freedom of speech embodied in *aytis*, where even the most harsh criticism is tolerated, indexed by the proverb that goes, “the head can be cut, but not the tongue” (Kz: *bas kspek bolsada, ‘til kspek joq*). Traditionally, an *aqin*’s success is ultimately determined by the applause or approval of the audience; thus, *aqins* need to have “an ability to adapt to the audience’s tastes… It is by pleasing the audience that the duellers obtain their authority or renown” (Pagliai 2009, 80).

As the “face of Kazakh culture,” *aytis* is often understood in the context of powerful state and national—and thus masculine—literary canons. With a high requirement for language identification as a precondition, it is effective in calling for national sentiment, solidarity, and

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⁹⁷ This saying was first spoken by the famous aqin Erkin Ilyas, who is from Burultoghay County in Altay. *Qizil til* (red tongue) or *til* (tongue), which refers to the power of oral speech, is common in Kazakh popular sayings and proverbs, such as *qizil til tas jaradi, tas jarmasa, bas jaradi* (A red tongue can break a stone; if not a stone, a head).
ethnic pride through the iteration of a history of genealogy, kinship, and cultural protocols. Particularly, *aytis* in Xinjiang, in its avoidance of political critique (on the loss of pastoral lands to state agricultural and industrial corporations) has to retreat to a safer realm that focuses on cultural preservation. The gendered lives and performances of *aqins* should thus be contextualized in the multiple power relations of ethnicity, nation-state, and nationalism that frame their social positions.

When performing on the public stage in front of the entire Kazakh community in Xinjiang, the poets’ performance of gender and cultural authenticity of Kazakhness is an important part of winning the hearts of the judge and audience. Kazakhness in *aytis* discourse is thus a co-construction between the three parties. In many cases, an anxiety related to poetic authenticity is related to the performance of Kazakh masculinity and what it means to be a “real” Kazakh in contemporary China. Gender becomes closely tied to ethnic identity. Male poets often refer to historical heroes, remember their ancestors, and swear to carry on their spirit and heritage. Female poets get bonus points by demonstrating their femininity, purity, and virtues. Anxiety regarding “women gone bad” or the way “modern life deteriorates people’s minds” is a more and more frequent refrain in the *aytis* discourse. Male poets celebrate their Kazakhness and in doing so gain a measure of cultural capital by stressing the importance of sticking to “tradition” in this volatile era, while female poets are forced to walk a tight rope of balancing playful bantering and female modesty.

In both Xinjiang and Kazakhstan, women mark the boundary of ethno-national difference, by “visibly embodying the iconography of race and gender purity” (McClintock 1997, 104). In the *aytis* performance of ethnic/national pride, female *aqins* often find themselves having to work with the symbols of language, cultural customs, and gender authenticity by
maintaining their identity as child bearers, chaste wives, and family labourers—while male aqins easily and joyfully participate in the development of national/ethnic traditions. For example, one can frequently hear male aqins criticizing gender-reversed fashion symbols or gender roles in families. As Prasenjit Duara (2000) notes, however, authenticity constrains but also inspires subjectivity. In order to thrive in the cultural production of aytis, Xinjiang female aqins adopt strategies such as quoting the cliché of Mao Zedong’s “women hold up half the sky” (Kz: jarti alem) while also actively establishing the self-image of an authentic Kazakh woman—a pure girl, a devoted daughter-in-law, and/or a loving wife and mother.

Theories and concepts from the anthropology of performance enable us to examine the complex relations between society and the artistic and dramatic representations it produces, as well as to understand the collective experiences of social members embodied in myth, rituals, and celebrations. Victor Turner (2004) points out the ways in which cultural performance emerges from social dramas and, in turn, “subtly stylize[s] the contours of social interaction in everyday life” (48). As aytis performance derives from the metatheatre of social drama in building a common Kazakhness, it also inspires a dynamism of gender performativity that exploits or assists individual participants in aytis—a collective ritual in which conventions and ideologies are repeatedly iterated. A feminist performative analysis of aytis, moreover, enables us to explore how the performative act of speaking enacts gendered existence and reality (Butler 1990). Kirin Narayan (1997) argues that we should pay more attention to the subjectivity and agency of individual performers than to ethnographic generalization, since it is individuals who

98 A large number of Kazakh proverbs with the “good wife, bad wife” theme stress the important role of the wife in the household. For example: “a good wife brings happiness, a bad wife brings argument” (jaqsi qatin – iris, jaman qatin – uris) and “if your wife is good, you will have a clear mind; if your wife is bad, you will have a gloomy mood” (qatining jaqsi bolsa, qongling oyaw, qatining jaman bolsa, qongling qayaw) (Nurkaz 2005, 153–6).
carry on and transform an oral tradition. She argues, songs can be viewed as “an artefact of an individual's memory and aesthetic pleasure” (27). As women are often compelled to convey their gender interests within the paradigm of cultural nationalism (Kandiyoti 2007; Yuval-Davis et. al. 1989), the feminist method of “active listening” acknowledging positionality and subjectivity becomes a necessary element of analysis (DeVault 2011, 209). Aytís, with an inherent and dramatic nature of improvisation, is entangled in the collective and individual memories and subjectivities that are shaped in the power dynamics of the performance environment. This chapter illustrates how performer agency is not only gendered, bounded by the state’s interest, but is also utilized by the performers to challenge the dominant social order in a legitimate, public way granted by its genre and nature of performance.

**The Carnivalization of Oral Poetic Duel Aytís**

Contemporary aytís, the subject of an ongoing process of cultural production, is under the Chinese state’s monitor of its form and content. Prior to the 1950s, aytís competitions were primarily local and spontaneous events occurring at weddings and other festive ceremonies (Balikun 2009, 95; Kasi 2005, 140-1; Winner 1958, 29-30). Since the second half of twentieth century, aytís has been officially incorporated into China’s broader nationalizing project under the state’s administrative system and guidelines. The socialist revolution brought aytís onto the official stage of political performance, and aqins were assigned the role of “people’s singer” in promoting socialist values and denouncing class enemies.99

99 See Shao 1964, 3; also Jarilhasen 2009.
Over the past sixty years, the history of ayitis reflects a re-spatialization of Kazakh sociocultural life from the disintegration of awil to communities organized around modern administrative divisions such as village, county, and city. The occasions where ayitis used to occur – life-cycle celebrations such as weddings and circumcisions – have become less awil-based. They now center around the host’s personal, kin-based, and professional networks fostered through work and school. In the post-Mao era, ayitis has gradually undergone processes of formalization and canonization with the collaboration of the XUAR government, Kazakh elites, intellectuals, aqins, and everyday people (Bass 2012). In 2006, ayitis was included on China’s first list of National Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) and has become one of the most important forms of cultural capital for ethnic Kazakhs. In fact, the elements of improvisation can be found within many Kazakh oral traditions and epic poem genres such as oral storytelling (dastan), laments (joqtaw), and wedding songs (aw-jar). Yet despite their interrelatedness, they are each set apart as standalone traditions listed on the forms of ICH projects.

Since 2006, officially organized ayitis “festivals” have taken place at different administrative levels of Kazakh-populated regions in Northern Xinjiang, from village to county and from prefecture to autonomous region. These festivals are closely tied to ethnic tourism, held in the name of developing minority culture and the local economy.100 Often such competitions begin at the village and county level with the winners moving on to the prefecture level, and then finally on to the level of the autonomous region itself. If the poet wins in Ürümchi he or she will

100 See Tacheng Daily, 2006: p1-2. June 12, 2006. Fan Chunhai’s article “Multiple Corporations in and out of Autonomous Region Participated Aqin Aytis Cultural Tourism Festival” has proposed a new model for ayitis festivals, combining ayitis with tourism and commerce. The author also writes that investors and businessmen from Shanghai and Zhejiang were invited to participate in the ayitis festival, as well as visiting other tourist sites in the Tarbagatay region to look for investment opportunities.
be honored as the best poet in the Kazakh community and given highest-level state recognition. The government support has contributed to the elevation of aytis and instigated a surge in aytis cultural production. In almost every Kazakh populated area, aytis now plays a significant role in promoting local tourism, attracting foreign investment, and propagandizing ethnic unity. Victor Turner (1982) calls attention to celebratory symbols in action, in movement – for example, what attitudes group members publicly display when they use them and what kinds of people compose the group. Besides rituals that develop individual and collective identity, it is celebration that brings people together in a limited time and space, and “brings about a temporary reconciliation among conflicting members of a single community” (20-21). Most important of all, for Kazakh people themselves, aytis boosts their sense of ethnic pride, and re-establishes a cultural-linguistic space of their own.

The Chinese government has also funded projects to publish aytis collections, and opened aytis training programmes and research centers, where students can earn state-recognized associate degrees (Department of Culture 2010, 183-9; Jarilhasen 2009, 123). It is also under such state support that Kazakh elites and intellectuals can engage in the pursuit of authentic Kazakhness in promoting aytis, which has gradually become a “public celebrative act of Kazakh cultural memory” (Sabirbay 2015, 245-7). In 2015, an aytis talent show titled Jez Tangday (Kz: bronze pallate) appeared on Xinjiang Television’s Kazakh language-channel. In the show, Kazakh judges and audience members collaborate in evaluating and ranking the best aqins. A staff member in the Qinghe County Cultural Museum told me this anecdote: the famous poet Qurmanbek Zeytinhasy (1941-2011) protested the growing list of poets being labeled as aytis preservers by a local ICH office. “How can there be so many poets these days?” he said. “You gotta stop making people poets!” Then he began crossing out names when no one was looking.
Qurmanbek’s vision that “real” poets should be like the articulate, outspoken poets of Kazakh legend is probably too lofty an ideal today. Many poets have been given government jobs in local cultural departments. Those who can’t gain access to state jobs take freelance jobs as wedding hosts and perform betashar (the veil-lifting ritual in Kazakh weddings performed only by men). A wedding economy has boomed in recent decades, and with it a fully developed free flow of human capital and services. Due to the more and more extravagant Kazakh toy consumption, many traditional positions become quite lucrative, and betashar singers especially have been criticized for their “hustling” with “cunning, beautiful words” at the weddings. Often these aqin/betashar singers earn between 300~500 RMB at one event in rural areas. At an upscale Kazakh wedding I attended, the toy host invited a famous local intellectual and writer to give the bata blessing, and a famous Kazakh singer who often appears on Xinjiang Kazakh TV to perform his hit song. For the veil-lifting ritual betashar, a famous young aqin was invited. He has won several awards at regional aytis festivals and performed betashar sometimes at toys. Before betashar, the host summoned the elders, the groom’s parents, relatives, and friends to sit on the chairs lined up in front of the bride and groom, bridesmaid and the best man. As soon as the aqin plucked his dombra and cleared his throat, the crowds started to cheer and whistle excitedly. He performed for about twenty minutes, lifted the bride’s veil, and made the bride bow for the in-laws and relatives a couple of times. In the end, he received his gift of money from the groom’s relatives and friends for about 3,000 RMB (440 USD).

Recent decades have also seen more and more urgent demands for aqins to actively reiterate and extol various policies and political slogans in Xinjiang, including ethnic harmony.
and the importance of promoting social stability and “positive energy” in their performance. A young Kazakh man told me that he was frustrated and had stopped listening to ayitis these days, because “it has lost its flavor. It's all about kissing ass now.” Outside of his job at a danwei, he occasionally sings at toys to make some extra money: “It is 300 yuan (50 USD) for a song, quite a good deal, and you don't have to stay, you can finish performing and leave.”

Figure 18 Aytis convention with Party officials’ seats reserved for photoshoot
(Source: Picture Taken by Guldana in Ürümchi, August 12, 2015)

101 It has been observed that immediately after each violent incident in Xinjiang, there is a mobilization of positive vibes in the media. The term “positive energy” became a buzzword on social media in China after the terrorist attack at a Kunming train station in 2014. After it was reported that the terrorists were “from Xinjiang,” people from Xinjiang spontaneously organised online petitions against such provincial discrimination in the national media, and started to pass on more positive self-representation through personal stories of struggle, and positive narratives about the experience of living in Xinjiang, food culture, art, and performance. Representative figures include Perhat Khaliq on the popular televised competition show The Voice of China and photographer Qurbanjan Samat, who published I am from Xinjiang, a collection of the life stories of everyday people. “Positive energy” is utilised more and more by officials in talks, newsletters, and cultural events, and has entered everyday, popular discourse, combining psychologically positive messages with self-help guidance about how to live more positively.
Grass is Greener on the Other Side

As shared cultural memory and heritage for the Kazakhs as a transnational community, *aytis* has become one of the most representative folk arts invested in and developed for national and/or ethnic pride among Kazakhs residing in both China and Kazakhstan. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Xinjiang has become economically and politically strategic as a trading hub with neighboring Central Asian countries. Kazakhstan’s nation-building aimed at claiming legitimate ownership of various traditional Kazakh cultures, and positioned itself as an ethno-cultural homeland to diasporic Kazakh communities in its neighboring countries. These projects include institutional implementation of the Kazakh language in the public sphere, and a repatriation policy for ethnic Kazakhs living outside its borders, with an aim of making Kazakhs, a minority at the time of independence, into a majority of the national population. The return migration policy reflects a Soviet legacy that Central Asian statists have inherited: the boundedness of ethnicity and territory (Brubaker 1996). National policy makers believe that returning diaspora Kazakh migrants from other states, especially those from China and Mongolia, have preserved the cultural traditions of nomadic pastoralism, and that they speak Kazakh as their primary language.

*Aytis* is undergoing a similar process of folklorization and re-traditionalization in Kazakhstan (Dubuisson 2010, 2014). However, it does not carry the same meaning of the minority’s struggle for identity assertion that it does for Kazakhs in China and Mongolia (Post 2007, 2014). Unlike *aqins* in China, *aqins* in Kazakhstan are not sponsored by the government but by powerful corporate patrons, and they form a mutually beneficial alliance in engaging political debate in public spheres (Adams 2011, 45; Dubuisson 2010, 2014). Contrary to *aytis* in Xinjiang, *aytis* in Kazakhstan is more overtly confrontational, containing criticism of the
government and social phenomena. Xinjiang ayitis usually avoids political critique, remaining closer to more traditional literary expressions such as jokes, riddles, and epic poetry (Bass 2012, 42-3; Dubuisson 2014).

Sino-Kazakhstani ayitis interaction increased after Kazakhstan gained independence. The statuses of ayitis as shared national memory and intangible cultural heritage have made it a safe and neutral ground for Kazakhs on both sides of the border to imagine and practice a collective identity in the poetic discourse of Kazakh nationalistic sentiment (Park 2011). Since the early 1990s, Xinjiang Kazakhs have been able to purchase pirated or imported VCDs of Kazakhstan-produced movies, music videos, and recordings of Nauryz102 celebration galas from small business vendors, opening a new “mediascape” for Xinjiang Kazakhs to imagine different lifestyles and self-representations than those at home (Appadurai 1996). Xinjiang aqins came into contact with a different reservoir of ayitis forms and possibilities, and were particularly impressed by the perceived atmosphere of free speech in Kazakhstan. Kazakh intellectuals and researchers in China admired the systematic education in language, culture, and history in Kazakhstan. They believe that aqins in Xinjiang, who receive less institutional education, are less cultured than aqins in Kazakhstan.103 On the contrary, aqins and ayitis enthusiasts in Kazakhstan believe that ayitis in their country has turned into a form of pseudo-political rally and that aqins have sold out. They believe that the situation in Xinjiang is different and that ayitis is

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102 Nauryz, or Nowruz, marks the first day of spring or Equinox, usually occurs on March 21. It originated in Persia but is now celebrated by people from diverse ethnic communities and religious backgrounds throughout broader Central Asia.
103 Personal communication with researchers at the Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences and an editor of a Kazakh literature magazine, September 2015.
both closer to what historical texts have described and richer in its expression of local and nomadic knowledge (Bass 2012, 42-3; Dubuisson 2014).

Transnational aytis exchanges are organized, in Anne McClintock’s (1997) term, as “mass, national commodity spectacle” in celebrating a common Kazakhness (102). In the process of nation-building, performing tradition and authenticity is not only utilized to shape and reshape an essentialized self as national identity, but also to guide the manageable and marketable Other towards modernity (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 33-35). Both China and Kazakhstan participate in the global economy with the “dual tendency” of aspiring to join global capitalist nations while also stressing their distinctive traditions (Chatterjee 1993). In their post-Soviet and post-Mao contexts, both states enthusiastically embrace economic development and political stability, paying only lip service to gender equality in the Socialist sense.

Sino-Kazakhstan aytis communication rides the tides of both countries’ broader national and cultural projects, political and economic agendas of Sino-Kazakhstan friendship, and collaborative endeavors in fighting terrorism and extremism since the early 2000s. In 1991, aqins from Xinjiang and Kazakhstan performed an aytis for “friendship” in both Ghulja, China, and Taldykorgan, Kazakhstan, an event that marked the beginning of Xinjiang Kazakh’s aytis performance on the international stage (Jarilhasen 2009, 123). According to Serik Oqabay, Kazakh aqins from China participated in aytis contests in Kazakhstan in 1992, and in Turkey in 1993 (Department of Culture 2010, 74). In the past decade, more such events have been held in the name of Sino-Kazakhstani friendship and cultural exchange by means of art exhibitions and song-and-dance troupe performances. In 2006, the government of the Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture invited Kazakhstani aqins to participate in the Second Aqin Aytis convention; in 2011,
Xinjiang Kazakh *aqins* were invited to an *aytis* competition for celebrating the twentieth anniversary of Kazakhstan’s independence.

**Debating Gender and Kazakhness**

This chapter now turns to ethnographic and discursive analysis of a well-broadcasted transnational *aytis* between a female *aqin* from China and a male *aqin* from Kazakhstan. I maintain the chronological order of the original, improvised *aytis* excerpts moving back and forth between various themes, in order to show the complex interplay—in both figurative and literal senses—of various dynamics of gender, language, and nation as both *aqins* compete with one another in verse. In 2009, Balghinbek Imashev, a well-known *aqin* from Kazakhstan, was invited to Ürümchi to compete in an *aytis* on the stage of Xinjiang Television’s Kazakh-language service. His rival was Jamigha Dawlet from Qinghe county, a small town in Altay. At a young age, her talent has already impressed many older and more experienced *aqins* and *aytis* researchers.

**Language and Memory**

After the TV host’s warm, welcoming speech, Balghinbek strikes his dombra and begins singing first. His poetry aims to utilize genealogies as a “prop” of nationalism to celebrate the imagined “common origin” shared by the Kazakhs across the border (Alonso 1994, 387):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{korsetip onerimning qutti darin,} & \quad \text{Let me show all my talent,} \\
\text{aytayin olengimning miqtilarin,} & \quad \text{let me sing my best songs.} \\
\text{saghinisqan twistar armisingdar?} & \quad \text{My dear relatives! How are you?}
\end{align*}
\]
jirimming arnap keldim rwqtilarin. I will dedicate these epics with full spirit.

‘mangi dostiq bolghan song aramizda, May our friendship last forever!

aghayin sender dese tik turamin. My dear uncles, I am here all because of your support.

......

mineky ‘ozim sindi domalanip Here comes someone as plump as me,

kep qaldi jamighaday jup singarin... Jamigha, my match and my soulmate.

qaraghim nege maghan untilasing? My dear why are you being so aggressive to me?

kuresetin adamday ‘guangchang’ daghi. Like a wrestler on the guangchang. (Ch: square)

Balghinbek begins by establishing an intimate and respectful fictive kinship with fellow audience members through greetings them as his twis (Kz: relatives) and aghalar (Kz: uncles), and the audience nods to his sincere words in this aytis reunion. As discussed earlier, kinship relation and genealogical identification play an important role in the everyday life interactions and self-perceptions of Kazakh people.

After the formality of greetings, he goes on to praise himself and tease his opponent. Throughout this aytis, he inserts Mandarin Chinese words into his singing eight different times, imitating Chinese Kazakhs’ code switching to poke fun. However, he justifies this as a better way to introduce and transmit aytis culture to the globe, and says that he can even perform aytis in Russian when in Kazakhstan. Balghinbek is known for being an internationalist. In another aytis, he once altered the lyrics of a Kazakh folk song to Russian to entertain the audience, only

104 In this aytis, Balghinbek uses the following Mandarin Chinese words: 广场 square, 姐姐 sister, 谢谢 thank you, 计算机 computer, 汉族 Han Chinese, 什么时候 when, 美丽 beautiful, and 真 real.
to end up defeated by his rival, Rinat Zayitov, who sang a nationalist criticism of poorly implemented language policies in Kazakhstan (Dubuisson 2010, 110-1). Balghinbek’s light-hearted code-switching joke reflects that he positions himself differently from Kazakhs from other countries: as a Kazakhstani he can be a sophisticated cosmopolitan and a Kazakh national at the same time. Such hybridity is commonly found among individuals and official institutions in Kazakhstan, where, for example, the nationalist Nauryz celebration and its countercurrent in popular discourse reflect the state’s twin pursuit of nationalism and globalism (Adams 2011, 112). Multilingualism becomes a sign of cosmopolitanism and modernity when speaking English or Russian in Kazakhstan. Likewise, for Kazakhs in China, a competence in Mandarin Chinese is considered more modern and adapted to social changes than is simply speaking one’s native tongue. However, when they migrate to Kazakhstan, they often find themselves Othered for their cultural hybridity due to their residence in former host societies (Diener 2005, 341).

As soon as Jamigha strums her dombra, the Xinjiang Kazakh audience begins to clap, whistle, and cheer loudly and rhythmically for her. They are excited to hear what she has to say. Jamigha is quite powerful and intimidating at ayits. Representing Xinjiang Kazakhs, Jamigha’s air of aggression, itself an otherwise grave violation of gender norms, is what the audience expects to see. Ayits becomes as a safe space for her to make such gender transgressions. She admits herself that “all Xinjiang aqins joke that [she is] a special girl with a boy’s character” (Kz: ul minez qizdarding darasi). This indicates that her sharp tongue and quick wit with discursive power is more or less considered a “boy’s character” (Kz: ul minez) in the eyes of fellow aqins, and furthermore that Jamigha is an alternative type of Kazakh woman far removed from the constructed stereotypes of contemporary womanhood, including those of women as obedient and domestic. She sings:
The Kazakhs are a great people with a long history, I am their blessed daughter revelling in their wisdom.

How are you? My majesty, my honored people!

I was born in the land that has given birth to the great aqin Aqit,

I was more than ready when I performed aytis for the first time.

Those who are knowledgeable reside in this holy region,

thanks to them I can spread my wings widely in this sky!

I hold tight in my hand the key to honor and dignity,

I inherited the spirit of the Saka people like a golden heritage.

My forefathers inhabited this region long ago, their horse-binding posts are still deeply nailed in here.

Don’t we have great heroes like Iriskhan and Sulubay,

who never surrender in front of the enemies?
In her response, Jamigha first acknowledges Balghinbek as a great aqin from Astana. Then, she expresses her appreciation toward the blessing of her people and land through personal, historical, and social memories embedded in her poems. Clearly, she does not position herself as a subject of Kazakhstan’s repatriation project, and she strongly expresses a sense of origin and pride for her hometown Altay. In her poems, she recollects her own memories of childhood and youth, expressing appreciation for her people, ancestral sites, and the landscapes. With a narrative of place-making, Jamigha naturalizes her local/ethnic nationalism and indigeneity to the land, creating a positive interaction with the kindred audience.

Moreover, she relates herself to the regional historical figures from her hometown: aqin, educator and imam Aqit Ulumji uli, and General Sulubay Sapi who fought in “Three District Revolution” (1940-44), a politically correct term used in China to refer to the Ili Rebellion. Aqit Haji was a highly respected aqin, activist, educator, and religious leader. In 1939, when Aqit was arrested by warlord Sheng Shicai, he was in his 70s and was giving a sermon at the mosque. Several clan leaders in Qinghe were also arrested along with him. Hundreds of volumes

\[105\] Aqit Ulumji uli (1868-1940) was a famous aqin, activist, educator, and imam from Koptogay, Altay. He was one of the pioneers of modern education among Kazakhs. Aqit was strongly influenced by Arabic and Islamic literature, and wrote several long poems that were published in Kazan, including *Batur Janibek, Qajibayan*, and *Jihanshah* (Aytola 2007, 5-9). The study and publication of Aqit Haji’s work did not begin in China until the 1980s due to political restrictions on its religious contents. However, compared to Kazakhstan, where the first Aqit publication came out only in 2002, Mongolian and Chinese Kazakhs have given more attention to Aqit’s work and contributions. Sulubay Sapi (1907-44) was from Aqaral, Altay. According to Kaisar Kaderhan’s (2014) research on social memory of the Kazakhs in Shinggil, the elders remember Sulubay in local tales. The peak at which Sulubay fought near the southeast of Agash-oobo in Shinggil, Altay, was named after him in commemoration (54-55). The “three districts” refer to Altay, Ili (Ghulja), and Tarbagatay.
of the Quran and Aqit’s poetry collections were also taken out and burnt (Bai and Liyuan 1992, 350). Aqit himself died in Sheng’s prison (Hasake jianshi 2008, 306). General Sulubay Sapi followed Iriskhan—the leader of the Koktogay Uprising in 1940 during the Ili Rebellion—until Iriskhan was arrested. He later joined Osman Batur and bravely fought in dozens of battles against Sheng Shicai’s army (Kaderhan 2014, 54-55). Jamigha’s poem makes visible a social memory that is unique to Xinjiang Kazakhs, a rebellious history that is only legitimate and sayable through the metanarratives of national martyrs who sacrificed themselves for China’s socialist revolution, avoiding directly and publicly naming controversial figures like Osman Batur who was remembered as a “national hero” by the Kazakhs but denounced as an “bandit” and “anti-revolutionary” in China’s official discourse (Jacobs 2010, 1309).

Jamigha then sings:

‘guangchang’ da kureskendey deyme ‘ozi, Are you talking about wrestling in the
guangchang?

jamigha aytqansayin ebtep uder, Yes, the more I fight, the braver I become!

ayawli ata jurtan kelip tursin, From dear fatherland, you came here,

bilikti ‘soz soylegin betke birer, could have spoken some knowledgeable words.

aqin bolsang ‘oz tilingmen tuniq soyle! If you are an aqin, you should speak your own
language clearly!

mundaghi el milqaw qazaq dep bedingder? Do you think Kazakh people here don’t understand?

Deeply rooted in the land where she was born by active remembrance of the heroes and ancestors in the region, Jamigha then targets Balghinbek’s cosmopolitanism as lacking linguistic
authenticity, part of a strategy to trigger the audiences’ national sentiments. For transnational Kazakh people, language is a focal point in their pursuit of authentic Kazakhness. Jamigha’s strategy utilizes language’s “symbolic meaning” as a potential boundary that makes a community. She is “hardening this boundary” with the Kazakhs who do not speak their own language properly (Duara 1996). Jamigha stresses that Balghinbek is an aqin from ayawli ata jurt (Kz: dear fatherland) of Kazakhstan. Paradoxically, she implies that his Kazakhness is disappointing while also acknowledging Kazakhstan as being the ethno-national homeland. The audience enthusiastically supports this argument through applause and cheering. Jamigha’s performance strategy is successful as it raises the urgent awareness that the language is an important principle of national integrity, especially in regard to the fading position of Kazakh-language education in contemporary Xinjiang.

**Kinship and Honor**

After hearing Jamigha’s powerful comeback, Balghinbek is deeply impressed but has to keep his cool and humor on the stage. He plays dombra for a long time, searching for words, and eventually sings:

\[
\begin{align*}
toringe qonaq bolip kep jatqanda, & \quad \text{When there are guests sitting at the respected ‘tor,} \\
sylay ‘bil jezdengdide aghanida, & \quad \text{you should know to respect your jezde and agha.} \\
ozinge baqit tilep men otirmin, & \quad \text{I am here blessing your happiness,} \\
tamsanip baldizinning jamalina, & \quad \text{I am amazed by my baldiz’s beauty.} \\
jastabaning ‘bir qizin jar ghip edim, & \quad \text{I married a girl from Jastaban,} \\
on jil bolip nurjawin talabima, & \quad \text{for ten years I have been under her command.}
\end{align*}
\]
My precious life is passing day by day,
under the feet of Jastaban...ay ay ay.

Balghinbek jokingly deprecates himself as a man who has now been whipped by women from Jastaban—referring to his wife’s and Jamigha’s clan affiliation. This reversed sexist joke makes the audience laugh, as the images and symbols of masculinity in Central Asia are exactly the opposite of a whipped man. Jamigha and Balghinbek’s wife’s fictive kinship as “sisters” within the same clan makes Balghinbek a jezde (Kz: older brother-in-law), while Jamigha becomes his baldiz (Kz: sister- or brother-in-law). Later he also teases Jamigha about when he will be able to meet her husband, i.e., his baja (a term for men who marry women from the same clan). In aytis, it is common for aqins to get acquainted with one another through developing mutual understandings of their genealogies before they delve into their improvisatory topics and strategies. The multi-layered social markers such as kinship relations, marital status, age, and gender differences may all contribute to the topics they bring up in the performance, as well as to the level of intimacy and (dis)respect between the two aqins.

Kinship relation also constitutes a part of social hierarchy. Ana Maria Alonso (1994) relates the kinship trope to nationalism, as “[it] substantialises hierarchical social relations and imbues them with sentiment and morality. Kinship tropes can also sacralise the state and the imagined relations among state, nation, and people” (385). The construction of gender and sexuality is substantialized in the acquisition and transmission of this sociocultural knowledge of kinship social relations. Kazakh patrilineal social hierarchy is maintained through protocols and taboos in everyday social interactions: for example, a woman must avoid calling her father-in-law directly by his name out of respect. As an older male kin, a jezde has much parental authority.
and responsibility for his baldiz. A proverb even tells us that “a good brother-in-law is like a father” (Kz: jezdening jaqisi akedey). A baldiz is loved and spoiled by his or her jezde, and they can joke freely and intimately. When a woman gets married and leaves home on her wedding day, she is accompanied by her jezde at the beginning of the long journey to her future patrilocal residence. Balghinbek’s request for more respect and intimacy from his transnational compatriot as a jezde is softening the confrontational aytis with kinship protocols. Further, the baja joke reaffirms the role of women in making marriage alliances.

Jamigha then sings in response:

\[
\begin{align*}
Shinjianggha \text{ kelip apaydi osoktemey}, & \quad \text{Don’t gossip about my sister all the way here to Xinjiang,} \\
jigit \text{ qusap jiringdi tokpeysing be?!} & \quad \text{recite your poems like a “jigit”!} \\
obaldi \text{ bop semirip kettim dey me?} & \quad \text{Are you whining about you getting fat?} \\
semirwing \text{ appayding baptawi ghoy,} & \quad \text{You are well-fed thanks to my nice sister.} \\
‘ar \text{ kimning ’oji ishinde shin esebi.} & \quad \text{Every one of us knows this by our heart.} \\
jaqsiraq \text{ qarasada jaman deydi,} & \quad \text{You gossip about her even though she takes care of you,} \\
belgili \text{ boldi mineky kim ekeni.} & \quad \text{now we all know what kind of person you are,} \\
jibekti \text{ tute almaghan jun etedi;} & \quad \text{If one can’t handle silk well, the silk becomes messy like wool;} \\
ayeldi \text{ kute almaghan kung etedi.} & \quad \text{If a man can’t take care of his wife well, she will live like a slave.}
\end{align*}
\]
Hearing Balghinbek’s complaint about Jastaban women, including herself and her “sister,” Jamigha warns him not to gossip (Kz:osek) about his wife all the way to Xinjiang and reminds him that he should be thankful to the women who have helped him prosper to this day. Balghinbek’s gossipiness is targeted by Jamigha as a lack of masculinity, and he is told to be more like a jigit—meaning a strong, dashing young man, a concept which has a very positive connotation in Kazakh masculinity. Jamigha shames Balghinbek by saying that that he does not deserve to be her jezde—this respected male kin—based on his inappropriate behaviour alone. She concludes by quoting a proverb to criticize his failure in honoring his wife: “If one can’t handle silk well, the silk becomes messy like wool; if a man can’t take care of his wife well, she is like a slave” (Kz:jibekti tute almaghan jun etedi, ayeldi kute almaghan kung etedi).

In Kazakh society, honor and shame comprise a gendered moral system, which functions through an everyday communal supervision and evaluation of the gender and cultural performance of individuals. This debate in the aytis directly relates to the social reality that women are more vulnerable to social stigmatization and lose respectability through gossip. The social norms for femininity do not favor Jamigha and her “sister” if they have a reputation for being man-whipping women. However, the strict gender norm also puts a high demand on masculinity, in terms of the expectation that men will maintain the positive image of jigit. Hence gender norms became one of Jamigha’s greatest weapons.

Jamigha:
Tomyris\textsuperscript{106} casts the light of bravery on her Saka people, her name is well-known among Six Alash Turkic people.

Qizay mother\textsuperscript{107} dispelled enemies with her bare hands, when people were harassed by the outlaws and bandits.

Abaq mother\textsuperscript{108} bravely lead her people in the migrations, as a widow she held on to the rein till the last minute.

\textsuperscript{106} Tomyris was a leader of the Massagetae, a Scythian pastoral-nomadic confederation of Central Asia east of the Caspian Sea, in parts of modern-day Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, western Uzbekistan, and southern Kazakhstan. In the sixth century BC, Tomyris led her armies to defend her nation against attack by Cyrus the Great of the Achaemenid Empire.

\textsuperscript{107} Qizay is part of the Middle Horde of Kazakh Khanate. In the land disputes between Tsarist Russia and Qing Empire around 1869-1882, Qizay people migrated along the changing borders for decades, and gradually settled down in the pastures along the Ili river. Nowadays, the Qizay clan mainly lives in Tekes, Kunes, and Nilqa in Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture in Xinjiang. Qizay ana is mostly a legendary figure in Kazakh literature without historical records. She was considered to have lived around the fourteenth-fifteenth century. In the description of the legends, she was not only a woman with good virtues, but also a brave warrior fought in wars. She earned the respect of her people by upholding the harmony of the family and dealing with clan politics as a matriarchal leader (Albatir 2012; Qurmanbek 2006, 92-98).

\textsuperscript{108} It is believed that the Abaq Kerey clan of the Middle Horde inherited their name from Abaq – their mother. The Abaq Kerey clan includes the following: Jantekey, Jadik, Jastaban, Shubarayghir, Sherushi, Iteli, Itemgen, Molqi, Merkit, Sarbas, Qaraqas, and Konsadak. Abaq Kerey clan currently reside in Xinjiang’s Altay, Tarbagatay, and Changji district, also Gansu and Qinghai province.
domalaq anamizding sarqitimin,
I'm a descendant who inherited Domalaq mother's spirit,\textsuperscript{109}

bilimning unaghan bilikti elge,
for people who love and respect knowledge.

‘ozining suttin berip basydergen,
She used the food made with her own milk,

jolshibay jilqi qughan jigiterge,
to get back the stolen horses from the horse thieves.

aliyamen men manshuktey erlik qilam,
I am a warrior admiring heroines like Aliya and Manshuk,\textsuperscript{110}

o jarliq korseterde kudik ten be!
so don’t hesitate to give orders, as I will not flinch.

tentek qiz tekti adam bola almay ma?
Why can’t headstrong girls be noble people as well,

aqili men aybari birikkenge.
combining their wisdom and majesty?

Not only does Jamigha speak for women, but she also begins to tell of a history of women that is largely drawn from oral traditions, folk tales, and legends of the nomads in Central Asia. She lists Tomyris, a Massagetae empress, several legendary mother figures as clan leaders on the steppe, and even Kazakh Soviet heroines who fought in World War II to demonstrate a glorious history of brave women as leaders who fought for their people. Through naming and claiming these historical figures, Jamigha portrays a Kazakh history of which she is also part, and that is not restricted by the changes of borders and political regimes. Her metanarrative of

\textsuperscript{109} Dolamaq ana (lit: Domalaq mother) is believed to be Qizay ana’s mother. The characteristics extolled in the folktales of Domalaq ana are her generosity, peacekeeping between clans, avoiding clashes, loving and protecting her people (Qurmanbek 2006, 84-9).

\textsuperscript{110} Aliya Nurmuhambetqyzy Moldagulova (1925-1944) is a Soviet Hero of the Soviet Union recipient. She was born in Bulak, Kazakhstan. As a trained sniper, she joined the 54th shooting brigade and fought German army to death in 1944. She was awarded Hero of the Soviet Union badge. Manshuk Mametova (1922-1943) was a distinguished Soviet soldier in the Second World War. She was awarded the Order of the Hero of the Soviet Union posthumously.
women’s history not only allows her to resist a male-dominated Kazakh historiography, but also legitimizes her subjectivity as she compares herself to these historic heroines. In the end, she asks, “Why can’t headstrong girls be honorable people as well, combining their wisdom and majesty?” On the one hand, she implies that she herself, a girl with a “boy’s character,” deserves victory. On the other hand, it seems that this rhetorical question is not only for Balghinbek, but also for the audience, aiming to resonate with their ethnonational sentiments. What is not being said is that drastic socio-economic changes in Xinjiang, such as sedentarization and urbanization, have long been restructuring Kazakh social structures and constructing new types of femininity and masculinity. Modern, mainstream education and global popular media have also marginalized Kazakh epistemologies, and the relevance of such brave and heroic women figures has become diminished in daily discourse.

Jamigha is not the only female aqin who has used a mother trope for self-defense in aytis competition. According to an article in Mura magazine in 2001, Magawya Orisbay (1898-1949) defended her choice for marriage freedom through aytis at a time when divorce was unimaginable for women. When she left her husband Qunanbay, who had treated her poorly, she was chased and beaten up by young men from Qunanbay’s awil, and even her daughter was taken away. Out of indignation, she wrote letters to clan leader Qizir Mamirbek for a legal solution. Qizir sent an aqin and imam nicknamed “Taqir” (Kz: bald) to compete in an aytis with Magawya. This aytis was remembered by her people and later preserved in manuscripts. Taqir imam used Magawya’s divorce to condemn her for being immoral in breaking her neke (Kz:

111 According to Askar Yigen’s (2001) article on Mura, Magawya Orisbay is a famous aqin from Aqtayinsha, Qaratobe of Toli County in Tarbagatay, and died in the prison in Tacheng in the heat of Ili Rebellion (53).
Islamic marriage contract), and said she was “a woman with long hair but short wisdom,” a discriminatory idiomatic expression used in several Turkic languages. Magawya criticized his discrimination against women, and related women to mothers using terms that are well-accepted in Kazakh literary motifs, such as jer ana (mother earth). She further claimed that Qizay ana and Abaq ana are famous women clan leaders that everyone respects, and asked if Taqir Imam was worth the same respect and fame as they were. After several rounds of aytis, Magawya justified herself and her divorce with her poems, and Taqir Imam also admitted his defeat (Yigen 2001, 49-57). Whether this material is affected by socialist propaganda of marriage freedom or not, Magawya’s usage of the mother trope did not simply valorize and worship mother figures, but legitimized her subjectivity, as well as her request for respectability and gender equality.

When asked what it is like to be a female aqin in this era, Jamigha tells of the double burden that she and her fellow female aqins experience in today’s Xinjiang. During the intermission of the Fourth XUAR Aytis Convention, she explained to me: It’s not easy to be a female aqin. The Kazakhstan aqin Lyrawshan mentioned before that ‘a woman can make a good singer or dancer, but hardly an aqin.’ He is not saying that a woman shouldn’t be an aqin, but he is suggesting that life itself is hard enough for women. Performing aytis on the stage for hours is very demanding for women. For example, I am a wife, a mother of two children. I have guests in my house. I have a job and a big family. I don’t have much time. There is a huge difference between male and female aqins. How much have I negotiated to be able to make it here? Only I know. I put one child in my mother’s house, and another in my mother-in-law’s house. My husband brought his work over here to support me. Three families have sacrificed just so that I can perform aytis today. A lot of female aqins gave up. It is not that they can’t sing anymore, but
they have submitted to life and family. The difficulties of life take control. Aytis has to be compromised when it comes to family obligations.\textsuperscript{112}

It is through the poetics of aytis that female aqins voice a resistance that is otherwise inappropriate for women to express in everyday life. In her seminal work *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*, Lila Abu-Lughod (1986) shows that sentiments can actually symbolize values and, moreover, that the individual expression of these sentiments contributes to representations of the self, representations that are tied to morality, which in turn is ultimately tied to politics in its broadest sense (34). Aytis becomes a “discourse of defiance” for female aqins’ self-empowerment, counterbalancing the dominant discourse of masculine nationalist sentiment in China and Kazakhstan (185).

**Aytis as a Ritualized Space for Sino-Kazakhstan Friendship**

Aytis has been a relatively neutral field upon which Chinese Kazakhs experiment with alternative ethnonational identities. Official aytis events between the two states in the twenty-first century have begun to serve a function of promoting both states’ goals in national cultural projects, national security, and international relations. Victor Turner (1977) describes a liminal stage that temporarily dissolves hierarchy, during which, the status of liminal individuals is socially and structurally ambiguous, until the postliminal rites re-establish the order. In the last few rounds of this aytis, both aqins gradually leave their contentions behind, frequently stressing the importance of promoting Sino-Kazakhstani friendship and that they will keep contributing to what they both refer to as the “development of the aytis culture.” At this moment, the

\textsuperscript{112} Personal communication, August 12, 2015.
contending, boundary-transgressive part of the aytis has ended, eventually submitting to the
greater power structure of the two states’ political agendas. This also happened when Xinjiang
aqins were sent to Kazakhstan. According to an interview Jamigha gave to Xinjiang Television,
prior to the aqins’ trip to participate in the International Aytis Competition in Astana celebrating
Kazakhstan’s twentieth anniversary of independence, they were told at a meeting that the main
theme of their songs should be “promoting the friendship and cultural exchange between the two
countries.”113 After Jamigha won the highest prize in the competition, XUAR officials sent her a
congratulatory message on behalf of the Party Committee, saying that they hoped aqins from
China would continue to promote Xinjiang cultures, social harmony, and national unity.114

Kazakhs in China find themselves situated between two nationalizing states that add fuel
to their imagination of an external cultural and national homeland, which also continues to
strengthen and reaffirm their Otherness in both states. As an internal Other, the Kazakhs in China
have been forced to come to terms with who they are through the state’s institutionalization of
minority language, education, and publication after the ethnic classification project (Mullaney
2011). However, loss of traditional livelihood and language further perpetuated Xinjiang
Kazakhs’ dilemma in Rogers Brubaker’s (1996) “triadic nexus” of national minority,
“nationalizing” nationalisms of the states, and the “homeland” states to which they belong, or
can be construed as belonging, by ethno-cultural affinity though not (ordinarily) by legal
citizenship (56).

114 “Xinjiang female singer won the highest prize at Kazakhstan aytis convention.” ChinaNews.com. n.p. 6
October 10, 2015.
In the early years after the XUAR was founded, minority nationalism was denounced as a class enemy and anti-revolutionary (Moseley 1966, 57–76). Under the ICH climate, it is allowed to be embodied as a self-representation and pursuit of authenticity in the saturated context of ethnic cultural development of China’s soft power. Minority voices are permitted in the joint celebration of Chinese civilization—Zhonghua wenming—in which the majority national bodies of the civilization are a constructed community of ethnic Han. Unlike Balghinbek, who makes jokes by playing with Chinese words, throughout this aytis Jamigha only uses a single Chinese word, making sure to be politically correct as she does so:

\[ 
\text{juldizmin zhonghua gha setermin,} \quad \text{I’m a beloved star of Zhonghua,} \\
\text{namisindi bayraqilip koterdim,} \quad \text{I protect your honor and carry your flag.} \\
\text{serilerin serwengge shaqirghan,} \quad \text{A seri is invited over here to show his talents,} \\
\text{dostighining arqasi ghoy eki ekewning.} \quad \text{thanks to the friendship of the two nations.} \\
\]

In the liminal stage of aytis as ritualized space for Sino-Kazakhstan friendship, Jamigha’s transgression through the performance of authenticity is of profound significance. She subtly plays between various gender, local/regional, Chinese national, and transnational Kazakh identities, composing her poetry of defiance all the while. She implies that Kazakhstan is the ethno-national homeland for traditional arts, but also argues for Chinese Kazakhs’ cultural legitimacy as preservers of authentic language and culture. She abides by gender and kinship

\[ \]

\[ ^{115} \text{Seri means an articulated, dashing, and well-dressed young man. On the Kazakh steppe, a seri wanders and performs at weddings and other festive occasions.} \]
norms, but also ridicules her opponent with them. In the postliminal stage, she acknowledges the state boundaries through extolling “friendship.” Her final victory of this aytis also symbolizes that a diaspora minority community can claim the ownership of aytis art, challenging Kazakhstan’s “cultural territorialization” as a nation-state (Chun 1994; Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 4). Jamigha’s strategy turns out to be effective in her performing environment, as the audience applauds most for her passionate poems of identity assertion of Xinjiang Kazakhs. The narratives of language (in)authenticity of the Other are thus (re)told between transnational Kazakhs, who are confronted with the exact same challenge: how to deal with the weakened position of their mother tongue in the multi-ethnic states. For Xinjiang Kazakhs, when the fantasy of Kazakhstan as ethno-national homeland clashes with the social reality of alienation and marginalization due to language issue, they have to find a middle ground for their nationalism and their Chinese national identity, and re-envision themselves in relation to groups around them (Bulag 2010b).

Losing Land, Losing Language

In August 2015, the fourth Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Aytis Convention was held in a Chinese Communist Party concert hall in Ürümchi. The front rows were reserved for party officials, intellectuals, journalists, judges, and poets. The audience was composed largely of people who resided in or were visiting Ürümchi. The majority of them were middle-aged or elderly Kazakhs. After sitting through long, tedious official speeches, the poets walked onto the stage wearing beautiful Kazakh costumes replete with elaborate embroidery. They held signs indicating their places of origin, as if it was the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games. Altay, Tarbagatay, Shawan, Ghulja, Mori, Barkol – nearly every Kazakh community in Xinjiang was
represented. During the contests, each pair of poets was given twenty minutes for their aytis
before the judges showed their scores.

After the preliminary rounds of fourteen pairs, four poets were selected for the finals, and
would continue the competition the next day. During the intermission, I overheard two elders
talking about how nice it would be if this would have been held on the jaylaw (Kz: summer
pasture) like these competitions used to be, as more people would have come, enjoyed the
breeze, drank fermented horse milk, and listened to aytis against the backdrop of snow-capped
mountains. This reminded me of how, the week prior, as I was leaving a village in Haba Altay, I
had mentioned that I was going back to Ürümchi to attend the provincial-level aytis convention.
People there listened with a bit of jealousy and admiration. I immediately realized that they could
not often travel to enjoy this sort of cultural event. Provincial-level aytis events that host the best
poets are held mainly in urban areas and broadcast via TV networks for common herders and
farmers living in the countryside.

An elderly aqin in her late 60s, Bulbul apa, calls official aytis events the “okimeting
aytisi” (Kz: the government’s aytis), and she clearly distinguishes them from the aytis in which
she was involved in her youth. Bulbul apa at first worked as a chef at a school for fourteen years,
only occasionally performing aytis at toys. One day in 1984, when she was having an aytis,
someone from the audience was impressed with her performance and asked her what she did for
a living. She knew the man was a county magistrate, so she came up with a witty poem:

Ongimnan kun songimnan ay ketpengen,    With the moon on my left and sun on my right,
kesh kezigip kunderim jay koktegem.     my days passing like arrows as I work until night.
Jilinan 'tort juz bala siragham,     Every year I feed four hundred children,
ashpaz min qolimnan may ketpegen. I am a chef whose hands are never dry.

The county magistrate laughed and asked her to repeat the lines, so he could write them down in his notebook. Then he told his subordinate to transfer her to the Cultural Department of the county. “That was how I got transferred to the department,” she laughed.

Bulbul apa’s story of social upward mobility demonstrates her agency via aytis as a free, improvisational performance, although eventually she was incorporated into a state organ exactly due to her improvisational talents. After working for the Cultural Department, she became familiar with the Party’s slogans: “We were given topics and told what to sing. For example, during the Third Plenary Session, we had to put these contents here and there in our performance:

_Ushinshi jalpi jiycin ashilghali,_  Ever since the Third Plenary Session started,

_olengning otqizilu’i basil madi._  The flames of the poems never went extinct.

Nevertheless, for her generation, aytis is still a living dynamic oral art. She is a productive poet and critic who regularly contributes her work to Kazakh literature magazines. As an aqin her whole life, she commented, “aytis nowadays are not aytis, really. Now poets prepare beforehand for the twenty minutes of time when they are on the stage. Back in the day, we were not restricted in time. One only goes down when he or she is defeated and has nothing more to say. A talent for poetry is a gift from God, you cannot learn it from school.” Bulbul apa is clearly

116 Here she means the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of Communist Party held in 1978.
comparing her contemporary observations with her past experience; however, are time limits and official institutionalization the only reasons for the death of aytis?

Leaving aside the gender tension discussed earlier, aytis is still an important platform from which poets can converge in voicing social criticism despite harsh surveillance and censorship in Xinjiang. While including formulaic slogans praising “ethnic unity” and promoting “positive energy” in their performance, aqins also subtly speak of the grim issues that Kazakh herders are facing at present, such as dropping livestock prices, decreasing Kazakh schools, fewer and fewer young people in aytis audiences, and so on.

In Altay and Tarbagatai, many middle-aged or elderly women helped take care of the grandchildren, whose parents either work in the cities or herd livestock in the mountains. Many were considering giving up herding and moving to the cities for better education and employment opportunities for their children. However, in the bilingual schools in the cities, Mandarin Chinese is the major language of instruction, the lingua franca among the multiethnic student and faculty body. Kazakh elders often express concern for their grandchildren’s Kazakh language. A lot of times, the intergenerational dialogue is in two languages, with the elders speaking in Kazakh and the young answering in Chinese. The elders are taken aback by how fast their grandchildren learn Chinese through TV and the internet, even though they speak to them in Kazakh every day. Some children’s parents share Kazakhstan-produced cartoons and make their children watch and learn Kazakh language at home.

From Jamigha and Bulbul apa’s examples, we know that aytis improvisation is what anthropologist Richard Bauman (1975) calls a “situated behavior.” It is also grassland-based knowledge, learned and comprehended within the family, the community, and in relation to all aspects of the environment. Even in today’s systemic land dispossession, aqins’ poems still make
references to mountains, rivers, and lakes; they still make metaphors out of livestock, wildlife, and the changing climate; and they still commemorate the heroes and sages who fought for the land and named Kazakh space. The speech act of *aytis* animates emotional associations of ancestors, history, and social memory along with the audience. It produces mental images of particular geographical locations and affirms the values and validity of traditional moral percepts (Basso 1988). However, for a community going through drastic socio-cultural and educational shifts, generational gaps become an undertone in various aspects of the family and cultural life of Kazakhs. In Leanne Simpson’s (2014) words, the intimate relationship between bodies and land that is crucial for indigenous ways of teaching, learning, and understanding is severed. The intense, fast-paced live performances place a high demand on the audience’s Kazakh language skills. Certain idiomatic words and phrases in *aytis* are deeply grounded in cultural beliefs with rich pastoral connotations, carrying a form of currency that is most appreciated within a Kazakh language environment. Performing at a theatre hall facing an aging audience, *aqins* bemoan on the stage, “Dear elders, where are your grandchildren? How can we develop *aytis* under these conditions?”

**Conclusion**

*Aytis* is a notable example of the interrelatedness of people, land, poetics, and language. For Kazakhs in Xinjiang today, *aytis* is becoming overburdened with the role of carrying fading nomadic values and knowledge through the use of a pastoral lexicon. It must also carry the feeling of ethnic pride and memories of freely roaming the steppe, as well as gender and kinship protocols. Due to the increasing threats of environmental change, shifts in grassland ownership, and resource-extracting development projects, Kazakhs not only imagine their community
through the past and present that *aytis* portrays, but also through their dynamic relations with Kazakhstan and Han Chinese world.

Jamigha’s positionality as a woman representing Xinjiang Kazakhs allows her to temporarily and symbolically transgress gender and state boundaries through the performance of *aytis* as a state-supported oral tradition. Utilizing strategies such as performing various forms of gender, cultural, and linguistic authenticity, Jamigha voices visions of Kazakhness that do not necessarily resonate with the national projects of either China or Kazakhstan. However, such transgression is only limited to her public persona on the liminal stage of *aytis* and through the saturated discourses of “Sino-Kazakhstan friendship and development.” The dominant gender and nationalist discourses in Kazakh society on both sides of the border continue to emphasize women’s primary responsibilities to family and their ethnonational community. It is hard to say whether *aytis* can inspire any actual positive changes in women’s lives. However successful female *aqins* like Jamigha may be in authorizing new subjectivities, they are still yoked to the demands of both states’ larger nationalist projects.

Contextualizing *aytis* in the national, ethnic, gender, and identity politics of China and Kazakhstan, we can decipher social and cultural memories that are shaped, merged, and silenced in between the lines of poetic narration. The sentiments of hope, fear, and indignation come to the surface when *aqins* are triggered in the modes of performative interaction with each other, and with their audience as fellow compatriots. *Aytis* itself becomes a ritualized space and a technology of transmitting images, myths, symbols, and political mobilization for transnational Kazakhs, via their remembering of a common traumatic past of colonization, displacement, and suppression, as a means for identity solidification (Roberts 1998). Despite their common myths of kinship, genealogy, and cultural ancestors, the identity of Kazakhs is obfuscated by their
complex relations with their transnational kinsmen, and by dynamic socio-economic changes in both societies. Traditional gender norms become one of the focal points in safeguarding the fragile balance of Xinjiang Kazakh society. As a Kazakh saying goes, “aqins die, but their words last” (Kz: aqining ‘ozi olsede, ‘sozi olmeydi). Female aqins might have been lost, appropriated, or given up in the history and politics of aytis, but their words are remembered, their personalities transcending time and space. This last chapter also salutes the female aqins who are both excellent poets and fighters in their lives, with the song Kokozen\(^\text{117}\) composed by aqin Appaq Maytaban (1904-1961),\(^\text{118}\) whose bravery and passion for poetry are vividly demonstrated:

\text{qiz edim maytabanan atim appaq, } \quad \text{I’m Maytaban’s daughter, Appaq is my name,}
\text{olengge on jasimnan boldim taqtaq, } \quad \text{I recited poems since I was ten years old.}

\(^{117}\) According to Kazakh scholar Jahip Mirzahan (2015), Kokozen was only popular in Ghulja by 1962, then it became popular among Kazakhs in China in 1970. The song became internationally known as a Kazakh folk song after it was performed at the gala celebrating Hong Kong’s return in 1997 and The Asian Games (7).

\(^{118}\) According to Jahip Mirzahan’s (2015) article commemorating Appaq Maytaban’s 110\(^{\text{th}}\) birthday, Appaq is a famous aqin, composer, and singer from Qorgas county in Ghulja. She belongs to the Torgay of Qizay clan, and grew up in Kertas summer pasture near Kok (lit: blue) river. Kokozen is one of her most well-known songs. Appaq was born in a family of music lovers. She mostly learned singing songs from her mother Almajan by following her at wedding feasts (toy). She also learned about dombra music (quy) from her older brother Nuraqin. When she was fourteen, she listened to famous aqin Aset Naymanbay’s performance and was deeply impressed by aytis art. When she composed Kokozen, she was only nineteen years old, and on her way to participate in an aytis event. Over the following two years, she had aytis with aqin Rahimjan at three different toys. It is said that their aytis were so fantastic that the huge crowd attracted accidentally pushed down the yurt they were performing in. Appaq and Rahimjan fell in love with each other while having aytis, making one of the most famous aqin couples in history (7). Xinjiang Aytis researcher Beksultan Kasi (2015) wrote in his article that Appaq was originally arranged into a marriage, but her fiancé passed away before their wedding. According to common law of levirate, a widowed woman is supposed to marry her deceased husband’s brother or within his clan. An elderly man wanted to take her as his concubine and offered an expensive bride price. Appaq determined to fight for her freedom through legal means but was turned down by the local country magistrate with the clauses of levirate and the fact that bride price had been paid. Appaq never stopped expressing her indignation and kept appealing through aytis. This helped her gain support from people till she could finally return the bride price to be free (28). These folk tales of famous aqins are usually orally transmitted without specific source of information. However, it cannot be excluded that aqins gain fair respectability and discursive power through aytis.
When there were guests who came to listen to me,
I recited poems as beautiful as pearls.

My hometown is by the beautiful blue river,
every day, a celebration goes on the pasture.
The fineness can’t be expressed in words,
not to drop behind – I will fly up as a red horse.

I took poetry as my friend since I was young,
I am not afraid, as a red horse I soar high in the sky,
The songs and poems are surging in my heart,
like the water freely flows in the blue river.
Conclusion

By presenting peripheral voices, experiences, and agencies in history-making, my work challenges conventional Chinese studies paradigms that normalize the hegemony of Han centered (Sinocentric) history in China. It contributes to current scholarship in contemporary China studies from a feminist decolonizing perspective. The memory practices I have described in this dissertation show that the Chinese imposition of socialist modernity and scientific development is comparable to Western colonial strategies toward indigenous peoples and territories. Chinese Communist rule incorporates frontier regions into the national body, with the collateral damage of erasing and disrupting local knowledge transmission and social reproductions that function through rituals and ceremonies, and through everyday subsistence practices. For mobile pastoral societies, this process resulted in an intense transformation of pastoral landscape and of the way people organize social relations, cultural assimilation, identity production, and erasure and constructions of historical narratives.

Unlike statistical studies that may flatten atrocity and social ruination, studies working from storytelling, poetic remembrance, and ritual performance demonstrate transformations in people’s perspectives regarding land, knowledge, language, and interpersonal relations. Statistical and archival studies on the tangible violence of the Great Leap Forward or the Cultural Revolution’s history may bury embodied truths about how these traumas and injustices cause transgenerational impacts. They also do little to acknowledge the fact of Han influx into borderlands such as Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang. In contrast, life narratives cast light on how Mao era legacies such as danwei and bianzhi worked in tandem with the sedentarization and urbanization of Kazakhs in the twenty-first century.
In post-Mao Xinjiang, cultural erasure in the chaotic socialist era followed a similar path as the “technologies of forgetting” in Mongolia that Buyandelger (2013) describes. The trauma caused by disruption of Kazakh life was at first ameliorated by state policies that aimed to “develop ethnic language and culture.” In recent decades, China increasingly censures public discussions that include alternate national histories that question the legitimacy of the ruling party; those that narrate Maoist atrocities, the Tiananmen Massacre and the violent territorial appropriations of Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and Tibet. These political shifts cannot be separated from the state’s scientific management and neoliberal model of monitoring and classifying “Cultural Heritage”—a term which brought about a new era for officials, ethnic elites, intellectuals, and ordinary people in which they work with “tradition” in their own best interests. On the one hand, ethnic minorities welcome the preservation of traditions and traditional arts and they publish ‘sanitized’ booklets and encyclopedias of folk songs and customs that follow central guidelines. On the other hand, the reconstruction of Kazakh folk tradition dovetails with the full-blown revival of life-cycle celebrations after decades of dormancy from the mid-1950s to the 1980s. Through oral histories, people recalled the ways they once lived within a chaotic past, to reconcile it with the internal anxiety and horror for a time in which “not even a dombra can be found.”

Most of the elders in their 70~80s came of age and got married after the 1950s, and their life trajectories were not marked by the kind of life-cycle events that are elaborately described by the state and Kazakh ethnologists. Instead, they marked their life-cycle events as trivia not worth mentioning or japa they went through as Muslim women. The elders’ rendition of Chinese revolutionary campaigns through Kazakh vocabularies and pronunciations indicates a mixture of familiarity and a sense of foreignness. Memory is indeed gendered. For the Kazakh elders with
whom I spoke, collectivization was marked by stories about harsh labor, child birth, family tragedies, political persecution, and the untimely deaths of family members. Bodily agonies of collective labor as well as the hardships of childbearing and childrearing within a disintegrating awil system were also vivid in the memories of elders. Mutual support became a matter of life and death for them. When Nurish apa reminisced about the late Hanipa apa, memories of labor and interdependency were evident in her embodied expression of sorrow: “like my ribs and hands are torn apart” (Kz: qabirgha qolim sogiledi).

Women who came of age through the Maoist era expressed similar concerns when talking about their collective experiences. However, local socialist processes in Xinjiang have produced different intersections in forms of structural violence affecting Kazakh women because of the dismantling of their awil structure and the chain effect of other subjugations. From their perspectives, the 1950s onward involved an imposition of alien administration conducted in an alien language. It was not simply a division of industrial and agricultural work for men and women respectively, as has been described (Hershatter 2011). For Kazakhs, the purge of local nationalism, landlords, rich herders, awil leaders, mullahs (and other social positions that the state deemed “feudal” and “counterrevolutionary”), mainly targeted men and left women doing extra work. Socialist processes in Northern Xinjiang reorganized gendered labor and values about respectability; justified the cultivation and transformation of pastoral lands; and, eventually incorporated Kazakhs into the national body of China.

Memory is spoken from the present. Kazakh elders’ narrations intertwine state discourses and vocabularies with Kazakh cultural and religious moralities, as well as the mundane, and gendered experiences in life. Quoting Mao’s words or utilizing “speaking bitterness” narratives, they still situate themselves firmly within the Kazakh social world and networks to which they
belong. In a context of current efforts to decolonize political histories in Canada, Leslie Robertson and Kwakwakawakw collaborators (2012) ask, “What is forgotten? What slips into oblivion in the face of such focused remembering?” (51) Elders remember and rework *awil* as a symbol of solidarity and interdependency prior to the 1950s in part, by selectively forgetting its inherent class hierarchies. Selective remembering and forgetting comes from their present everyday experience with reversed hierarchy at home, skyrocketing bride prices in the wedding economy, and capitalist land grabs at present. Unlike Han women in Shaanxi who condemn socialist exploitation and state abandonment (Hershatter 2011), Kazakh elders circumvent those issues to address the lifeworlds of *awil* prior to the state. In doing so, they refuse, rather than refute, the state’s definition of gender and ethnicity, such as Maoist *fùnǚ*, minzu, or Kazakhs being part of a “backward, natural economy.”

Chinese feminists, Western feminists researching China, and scholars of borderland studies must find solidarity when addressing the structural processes of Chinese settler colonial expansion into peripheral regions and the impact of this on ethnic minority women. Socialist feminism is also a tool of the state in carrying out colonization. Socialist feminism in Xinjiang has contributed to the Party’s work with the ETR, the XPCC’s recruitment of Han women from Inner China, and the political mobilization of Muslim women encouraged to break away from local patriarchies and religious authorities. Thomas Mullaney (2012) and Tom Cliff (2016) both argue that Han privilege is an overgeneralized category which must be deconstructed but still, it has not been critically compared to white privilege in the West. For China, the national discourses of “Harmonious Multiethnic Family” and “Plurality and Unity in the Configuration of the Chinese Nationality” have become convenient counter-arguments against accusations of racism and colonialism. These critiques are important in the deconstruction of Han supremacy.
and privilege in China where ethnic minorities, who are Han cadres’ fictive “young brothers and sisters,” are seen to live in one big socialist family.

“Social memory is embedded in political processes shaped by variable tides of power and by the more urgent necessities of present reality” (Robertson and Kwagu’l Gixsam 2012, 51). With the tightening of political censorship and the surveillance of everyday life in Xinjiang, family and communal events are fertile ground for the dynamic reconstruction of the past as well as the restoration of a “sense of place” and community now (Riaño-Alcalá 2002). The elders take on their roles in intergenerational education within their communities, passing on traditional knowledge and gender education along with traumatic memories. Oral traditions are thus essential to identifying Kazakh memory practices that connect kin and grassland environments. Traditional knowledge is continuously shaped by and responding to the ongoing fragmentation of pastoral lands due to development projects in the post-Mao era.

In the face of generational gaps, wealth disparities, and weakening native language abilities, Kazakh life-cycle events and poetic performances bring people together temporarily and ritualistically. Not unlike potlatching rituals described among coastal indigenous peoples in Canada, life-cycle events among contemporary Kazakhs are occasions that open “realms of memory practice in which knowledge is transformed into ritual that sanctions certain kinds of information, creates new social networks, and modifies existing narratives” (Robertson and Kwagu’l Gixsam 2012, 21). Aytis is also a space for reproducing images, myths, and symbols of pastoral nomadism. The effervescence of ethno-national sentiments and personal and collective memory enables gendered education, promotes self-empowerment and self-representation, and builds communal solidarity.
Anthropologist Ralph Litzinger (2000) calls on the study of gender in China to cleanse itself of post-structuralism and he argues that there is more to gender and sexuality than the production of structural inequality. In his words, “gender and ethnicity point to a never-ending cultural politics always informed by complex histories of production and negotiation by social actors in a wide range of different positions of power and authority” (11). Using an ethnic Yao female ethnologist’s work and life story, he illustrates how the issues of gender in minority regions “must be interpreted in the context of particular histories, agendas, experiences, and desires of social actors as they operate and maneuver in differing contexts” (12). My contribution to this academic discussion is through a deep description of gender within its complex entanglement with contesting histories and narratives, especially by examining memory as a field of intertwining sentiments. This is particularly true for the peoples in relationships with a state that the CCP has built through their endless broken promises, for example, not to conduct class division, or to show respect for religious freedom and administrative autonomy. Kazakh elders in Northern Xinjiang condemn the harsh commune labor of the past, while also stressing they themselves were contributors to the Party’s work. Situated at the most marginalized social positions, these paradoxical narratives constitute a request for validation from family and state, both of whom have abandoned them as part of an irretrievable past. Ironically, state and ethnic elites continue to instrumentalize them as markers of ethnic unity and cultural heritage preservation. The silencing power of Maoist trauma lingers and shapes their narrative patterns as evidenced for example in the ritualistic claim of “thanks to the Party.” Through such a tight frame they also tell stories as survivors of natural and human-made disasters and political rectifications, as strong Kazakh women, wives, and grandmothers who have fulfilled their moral duties; as Muslims; and, as those who have earned respect and honor in their large families.
In a sense, both in China and in Kazakhstan, Kazakh social memory combines with the state’s interests in cultural nationalism built on unity and heritage. However, unlike Kazakhstan where “ancestors are dialogically invoked on a national level” (Dubuisson 2017a, 15), in Xinjiang, Kazakhs’ quest for self is mostly channeled implicitly through embodiment within the state’s ongoing, silencing power of the Maoist past in order to achieve social stability.

In the memory practices that include storytelling, revisiting ancestral burial places, participating in life-cycle events, speaking proverbs, performing aytis or koris, and kin-making through genealogies, people circuit and map the places to which they have lived and belonged. Place becomes an event of remembering—through emplacement in the landscape embedded in social relations; through sensorial experiences of grassland herbs and making material culture; or transmitting land-based knowledge to younger generations. As the state obsesses over folklore and abject Islamic piety, Kazakh people invoke place names and clan names as a part of the “affective landscape of spirituality” in everyday life (Dubuisson 2017a, 58-60). As elsewhere in clan-based, indigenous worlds, “names are infused with an emotional and existential charge…” (Robertson and Kwaguł Gixsam 2012, 410). Through names, Kazakhs convey intimate, corporeal connections to place and people; through names, networks are activated and histories of migration routes and political affiliations are enlivened. As Robertson and members of the Kwaguł Gixsam note, “Names carry an understanding that one’s place in history exists” (410).

Memory carries important vocabularies that demonstrate subjectivities from one’s vantage point in history. Elderly women’s narrations speak to different dimensions of social history—familial, communal, and environmental, all of which are closely related to their gendered experience and knowledge. From patrilocal residence after marriage, to pastoral migration, to sedentarization in later ages, women measure and sense place and time differently.
They have been through various types of storms (Kz: qizil, qara boran, aq totek, etc) literally and figuratively. They understand the versatile functions of grassland herbs, and they are still adept at felt rug making and embroidery techniques.

Despite tumultuous changes in life, their embodied idiom “where my umbilical blood is shed,” links them to their natal places. Studying Muslim diaspora women’s writing, Susan Friedman (2009) notes, “women’s narratives suggest that the displacement of diaspora begins before the journey from home to elsewhere, begins indeed within the home and homeland and travels with the women as they face the difficulties of negotiating between new ways and old ways of living” (23). On the one hand, female elders embody family histories and their husbands’ patriarchal genealogy as the qara shangiraq of their ancestors. On the other hand, while male elites construct the genealogical traditions of shejire, female elders stress awil as their natal ancestral home and the center of their network of relations.

Elderly Kazakh women’s agency is embedded in knowledge derived from their kinship network and mobilized through marriage alliances. This knowledge constitutes the moral and spiritual compass for her own and her husband’s families. This is not merely “bargaining with patriarchy,” with particular gendered strategies in a fixed temporality Deniz Kantiyoti (1988) may argue, but rather has proven to be essential for survival when pastoral space is reterritorialized and awil relations reorganized through time by XPCC. Women’s roles in families and communities are the linchpins maintaining social networks and Islamic identity through life-cycle events, providing food and labor, and utilizing available resources, whether in an unforgiving natural or social environment.

Another silencing power is from within. Lived experiences of traumatic hardships become distant and incomprehensible solely through speech. Generational gaps and tensions are
evident in elders’ narratives as is a sentiment of melancholy. Both aging elders and youth are immersed in the “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011) and “happy objects” (Ahmed 2010) that the neoliberal market ideology provides. When speaking of collective labor, the elders were amazed by how devoted and naïve they were in Socialist times, especially as they reflect on how much they must now go through to painstakingly navigate the Chinese capitalist economy in everyday life. The younger generations are accustomed to the commodification of one’s time and labor.

In Xinjiang, propaganda that warns people against speech that would harm ethnic unity permeates social space. Stability and a harmonious society are “happy objects” (Ahmed 2010) that everyone should safeguard, as they are the premise for economic development. While propaganda promises an optimistic illusion of a good life, for the younger generations the attachment to an urban private life and the materialistic “Chinese dream” gives them hope. However, suppression and surveillance targeting Muslims daily not only silence a violent past of state and people relationship, but also are the real causes for difficulties involving education, transgenerational poverty, and continued dispossession faced by the young generations. Under such a multiplex of powers, elders’ narratives interweave Islamic morality to speak to gendered and generational injustices experienced as Muslim women. The narrative of japakesh is not simply a venting of grievances, but also creates women’s space for mutual understanding, support, and empathy.

Kazakh remembering is thus not “nomadic nostalgia” or holding onto a past, because the past is not static and unchanging, it perpetually co-exists in the present. As Buyandelger argues (2013), “postsocialism and neoliberal capitalism—both having their constitutive components—are intertwined parts of everyday life” (9). Through aytis, aqins reinvigorate collective memories of the past by naming places and heroes, in a comparable way that Buryat Shamans or
Kwakwaka’wakw potlatch hosts become history-makers tying together the loose ends and omissions in what is made public as history. Kazakhs participate in what Dubuisson’s (2017a) calls “dialogues with ancestors” and they construct history themselves through performing and listening to ayitis, storytelling, and sharing genealogical knowledge at dinner tables. This is not to say that Kazakhs justify a historical construction of ethnonationalism. Quite the opposite, from Jamigha and Nuryla’s examples, the historical narratives they validate and legitimize do not resonate with Kazakhstan’s national vision. Instead, they tell very specific stories that are grounded in where they have a sense of belonging and are independent of state definitions of Kazakhness and official folklore.

Ayitis facilitates transnational Kazakhs in their remembering of a common traumatic past for identity solidification, but authenticated gender norms become one of the focal points in constructing a masculine Kazakhness in the interplay of geopolitics between China and Russia. Similar to female Buryat Shamans who are marginalized in post socialist Mongolia described by Buyandelger (2013), male aqins monopolize the capital of folk and tradition, while female aqins strive to find their space through performing gender authenticity. Both genders carry on the production of ethnic pride and history-making in their dynamic relations with Kazakhstan and the Han world. Meanwhile, within family and communal space, legendary ayitis history-making co-exists with visceral, embodied experiences of the collective past. In these interwoven genres of memory, Kazakh people participate in history-making and find their positions, using symbols and signs that have been long stifled by state representations.

Kazakh experiences in the mid-twentieth century are crucial sites from which to understand nation-building processes of China. Chinese development came at the expense of transforming landscapes and lifeworlds of peoples on the frontiers, in order to prioritize the
settler order of the center over the periphery. Through Socialist collectivization, the Northwestern frontier of China became seeable and exploitable for the transition from “socialist primitive accumulation” to the corporatized resource extraction we see in Xinjiang today.

Instead of envisioning post 1949 China with a clear, distinct border, it is important to understand that for its Northwestern frontier, border-making is a messy process that has lasted for three decades and caused thousands of families to forcibly separate and relocate. The Sino-Soviet split and border disputes further naturalized Chinese settler colonialism and the militarization of Northern Xinjiang under multiple historical contingencies in the Cold War period. The XPCC’s construction work on border farms and ranches justified more Han influx into the region and Chinese nationalism with the XPCC’s “pioneering spirit.” It is through this structural process that the XPCC as a state tool nationalized border space, asserted domination over land and water, eliminated Kazakhs’ pastoral existence, and severed connections with Kazakhs across the border.

The Kazakh example helps us better understand the Chinese state’s expansion through defensive nationalism and cultural chauvinism. This case also sets a historical precedent for today’s militarized surveillance and mass detention of Uyghur people. The state’s rectification of people they identified as counterrevolutionaries, rich herder owners, mullahs, awil leaders, rightists, nationalists, bandits, and revisionists in socialist times is repeating itself with the present day “striking down hard on terrorists and religious extremists” campaign, which targets ethnic Uyghurs (and now Kazakhs as well). The state amnesia continues to manipulate people’s subjectivities by erasing violent histories and fetishizing state authority as the premise for development and prosperity. OBOR as a “zoning technology” (Ong 2006) is also a “technology
of forgetting” (Buyandelger 2013) with spatial and epistemic violence carried out through endless infrastructural construction projects and transportation networks all over Xinjiang.

If Han influx into Xinjiang after the 1950s has contributed to the nationalization of the border, then urbanization in Xinjiang attracting more Han in-migration is a twenty-first century normalization of settler colonialism (Byler 2018; Cliff 2013). The XPCC has moved on from “opening wasteland” to “building cities” (Cliff 2016, 213). The goal of “maintaining stability” (Ch: wéihù wěndìng 维护稳定) has always been to “expand the imperial order,” which is to say to make Xinjiang more like Inner China and make people in Xinjiang more like people in Inner China (214).

Looking back to the year 2015, the window that opened to conduct research was almost miraculous timing. I cannot imagine myself doing research in Xinjiang now. When Lila Abu-Lughod (2011) returned to a half-ruined Palestine under a heavy presence of Israeli military and checkpoints, she was confronted with double-layered trauma: the loss of the past alongside its continuation as a brutal present (12). This is also the reality in Xinjiang today, for me, a destroyed home that is hard to go back to. When the new Party Secretary Chen Quanguo was transferred to Xinjiang in August 2016 from his former position in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), he upgraded the security and control measurements he had utilized in Tibet and applied them in Xinjiang.

When I visited home at the end of 2016, the grid management system had already been enhanced. In every neighborhood and traffic hub there was an ugly concrete block police station with the euphemism “convenience service station” (Ch: biànmín fúwù zhàn 便民服务站), which actually serves the purpose of more efficient police surveillance and mobilization. On the eve of the 19th National Congress of Communist Party in October 2017, Xinjiang was engulfed in
unprecedented, comprehensive and ubiquitous surveillance and suppression, the most comprehensive and ubiquitous since the state’s War on Terror started. Chen applied high technology to build a provincial police state, including a DNA database, big data analytics, phone scanning software, face-recognition technologies, and much more. Since he took office, thousands of Uyghurs have been detained in so-called “reeducation camps” to study “political doctrines, Chinese language, Chinese laws on Islam and socialist core values”—but no one really knows what is happening inside those facilities. In the Spring of 2017, authorities told Uyghur students studying abroad in such places as Turkey, Egypt, and Central Asian countries to return to Xinjiang. They threatened to hold their families in custody or send them to “reeducation camps” if the students failed to comply. Compared to Uyghurs, ethnic Kazakhs previously enjoyed relatively free mobility and less scrutiny from the state, but now that situation is changing. Xinjiang Kazakhs’ transnational identity and cultural ties to Kazakhstan are becoming criminalized and considered to be suspicious as well.
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Appendices

Appendix A  Northern Xinjiang Historical Timeline

1863-1928  Yang Zengxin in power as governor of Xinjiang

1864  Treaty of Tarbagatai border protocol signed by China and Russia, and Russia gained a large territory of Xinjiang from east of Lake Balkhash and South of Lake Zaysan

1881  Treaty of Ili signed between Russian and Qing Empire to return eastern part of Ili Basin region to China

1884  The founding of Xinjiang under Qing Empire, capital city Dihua (current Ürümqi)

1916  Kazakh Anti-Tsar uprisings were suppressed, and large population fled to China's Xinjiang

1917  October Revolution in Russia

1920  White Russians invaded Altay from Baktu border (*Hasake jianshi* 2008, 211)

1921  Warfare among Yang Zengxin’s army, Red Russians and White Russians Kazakh leaders Dalelkhan Sugurbayev and Durbuthan Sugurbayev fought with the rest of White Russian army that had raided Kazakh awils. Altay was under assault from White Russians, and it was called a “Disaster of White Russians” (*Hasake jianshi* 2008, 213)

1928-1941  Jin Shuren in power in Xinjiang;
Soviet collectivization started in Kazakh SSR\textsuperscript{119}

1912-1937  Gansu Dungan warlord Ma Zhongying purged Kazakhs

1932-1933  Man-made famine in Kazakh SSR caused large population of Kazakhs’ to emigrate to Xinjiang

1933  Sheng Shicai seized military power in Xinjiang

1936-1939  Large population of Kazakhs fled to Gansu and Qinghai from Sheng’s suppression;

“Approximately 11,680 Kazakh herders fled to Gansu from Barkol in Eastern Xinjiang (Wang 2013, 213)

1939  Sheng confiscated guns from Kazakh herders (Hasake jianshi 218);

Kazakh educator and mullah Aqit Ulumji was arrested and died in Sheng’s prison;

second wave of Kazakh migration to Gansu resulting from Sheng’s suppression and gun confiscation; gun confiscation led to Koktogay uprising in 1940 and 1941 (Wang 2013, 213)

1940  First Koktogay and Qinghe uprising against Sheng

1941  Second Koktogay and Qinghe uprising against Sheng

1943  The founding of Guomingdang Party of Republican China Xinjiang province branch

\textsuperscript{119} “The Communist regime in the Kazakh SSR was instructed to implement 'collectivisation' and enforced the settlement of the entire population of the steppes, exclusively ethnic Kazakhs. This destruction of an ancient way of life and a subtle and successful economy was accompanied by the liquidation of all social distinctions (except in so far as it applied to the new Party hierarchy), the enforced introduction of monetary exchange over against traditional barter, and the confiscation of all 'kulak' lands or flocks and their 'redistribution'. The winter of 1926-27 experienced a peculiarly evil jut, the climatic phenomenon where a freeze follows a spring-time thaw and the animals' pasturage, while visible, is frozen under an impenetrable film of ice. Herds and flocks were catastrophically diminished when, the next year, collectivisation was promulgated” (Shayakhmetov 2007, x).
1944 Uprisings led by General Dalelkhan Sugurbayev spread to Burultoghay, Jimunay, and Haba counties; the Ili Rebellion forces overthrew Guomindang government

1944 The leader of Koktogay uprising and early Ili Rebellion Osman Batur was branded as “hooliganism” and “bourgeois nationalist”

1945 Ili, Tarbagatay, and Altay representatives met in Ghulja and founded East Turkestan Republic (ETR)

1946 The founding of the Xinjiang coalition government; ETR and Guomindang reached a peace accord; Osman Batur seized Burultoghay and Altay city, and his position was replaced by General Dalelkhan Sugurbayev (Hasake jianshi 2008, 224)

1948 Osman Batur and Janimhan fought against the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) march into Xinjiang, and planned an uprising of Kazakhs in Ürümchi and Mori

1949 The founding of People’s Republic of China (PRC); XPCC General Wang Zhen arrived in Xinjiang; the leaders of ETR died in an air crash; “Xinjiang was peacefully liberated” (Hasake jianshi 2008, 233)

1950 Marriage reform and land reform in China; PLA purged Osman and remaining resistance

1951 The climax of “Strike hard on counterrevolutionaries” campaign; Osman was captured in Gansu and executed in Ürümchi; Communist party adopted policies of “No struggle, no division, develop animal husbandry, ethnic equality, religious freedom, pardon the past mistakes and grant meritorious prizes for correction”
1952  Party’s work in the pastoral regions emphasized the slogan “eliminate banditry, stabilize social order, protect animal husbandry centered around herder owners, develop patriotic education and medical work, train local ethnic cadres, establish democratic regimes and unite all those who can be united to improve the lives of pastoral labors and poor herders” (Hasake jianshi 2008, 230).

1953  The first Five Year Plan passed the establishment of agricultural production cooperatives; the founding of Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture

1954  Socialist remodeling of pastoral production commenced the eradication of awil leaders such as juz bas and ming bas (Hasake shehui lishi diaocha 2009, 64; 233)

1954  Nikita Khrushchev launched the ‘virgin lands’ scheme “by which vast stretches of northern Kazakhstan were to be settled by 350,000 drafted-in Russian, Belorussian and Ukrainian peasantry” (Shayakhmetov 2007, xi)

1955  The founding of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region

1957  Hundred Flower Movement in China; the struggle of Rectification and Anti-Rightists

1958  Mao’s Great Leap Forward started

1959  Pastoral cooperatives were converted to communes (Hasake jianshi 2008, 246).

1957-1960  Increased agricultural production: 300,000 sent-down youths arrived in Xinjiang since 1959, as well as 890,000 migrants from Inner China” (Zhu 1995, 43-44); mass hydraulic construction commenced (ibid 45).

1958  PLA in Xinjiang transferred to XPCC
1960 XPCC started to submit agricultural production to national reserve (Zhu 1995, 45).

1959-1980 In Altay region, pastoral communes commenced collective ownership, accounting, and unified distribution management system; animal husbandry office calculated and redistributed the work points in the end of the year (Hasake jianshi 2008, 247).

1959-1960 Great Leap famine
wolf eradication campaign in pastoral regions

1960 Sino-Soviet split

1962 Yi-Ta incident

1963 First stage of Socialist Education Movement in rural China;
Premier Zhou Enlai called for professionals to realize The Four Modernizations that included agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology.

1965 Second stage of Socialist Education Movement with the focus on “clarifying class division between landlords, herd owners, rich herd owners, and their family members” (Hasake jianshi 2008, 250)

1966 Cultural Revolution started

1966 Mass construction of permanent stalls were built in pastoral areas, as well as large-scale herder settlements, schools, hospitals, post office, credit unions, veterinary stations, workshops, office buildings, warehouses, and transportation networks such as roads, trails and bridges; arable land in Xinjiang reached 50,652,500 mu (3,376,833 hectares)—a historical high level (Hasake jianshi 2008, 267)
1976 Cultural Revolution ended
1978 The Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party—the beginning of “Reform and Opening Up” policy
1979 On April 1, Xinjiang Daily published an article entitled “Shift work focus to modernization construction,” emphasizing Xinjiang’s primary task in agricultural and pastoral production;
Xinjiang became one of the most important bases of agricultural and pastoral production in China
1980-1985 Xinjiang sped up the pace of sedentarization;
the settlement and semi-settlement of pastoral households reached an amount of 49,200 households, and 28.8% of the herdsman in Xinjiang in the same year
1981 Household Responsibility System of Inner China introduced in Xinjiang
1982 The Campaign of “Construct Socialism with Chinese Characteristics”
1983 Abolishment of People’s Commune system in XUAR, and livestock and pastures distributed to individuals (Hasake jianshi 2008, 256)
1986 The XUAR held a meeting “Step up Northern Xinjiang Pastoral Economy Development,” and called for “Five Transitions” which included “From mobile pastoralism to settlement and semi-settlement, from natural and extensive production mode to scientific animal husbandry management, from single economy to mixed economy, from self-sustaining and semi self sustaining natural economy to large-scale commercial production, from traditional animal husbandry to modernized animal husbandry (Hasake jianshi 2008, 258).
The implementation of settlements and semi-settlements became fundamental in transforming traditional livestock production and lifestyle; meetings pointed out a development guideline of “unified planning, rational distribution, facilitating production and life.” It focused on water conservancy construction, and other supporting facilities such as stalls, artificial fodder to facilities, with the construction of settlements, and gradually develop the “three networks” (electricity, postal, and trade), and “ten basics” (land, water, livestock, stall, housing, roads, schools, health stations, veterinary station, cultural station) standards; settlement issue formally included in the agenda of the government at all levels of the autonomous region, and the pace of settlement accelerated noticeably.

The 7th National People’s Congress passed the “Wildlife Protection Law.”

Large construction of reservoirs, conserved pastures, and animal stalls along with mice and locust eradication movement.

In Ghulja, herdsmen who settled down take up about 89% of the population; at present, there are still over 800,000 Kazakhs working in animal husbandry, and 70% of them have achieved settlement or half-settlement; Fukang is the first city in Xinjiang to achieve 100% sedentarization (Hasake jianshi 2008, 266-268).
Appendix B  “Un-Ending Remembrance” – A Joqtaw Translation

This *joqtaw* was published in *Mura* (Kz: heritage) magazine in 2007[4]: 71-2. Former women’s liberation cadre Shaden Nawken commemorates her son who passed away in a traffic accident through this written *joqtaw*. Since its inaugural issue in 1982, *Mura* magazine has been regularly publishing historically significant *joqtaw* and well-composed *joqtaw* created by ordinary people to commemorate the loss of family members. As a local participation in the state’s folklore project, *Mura* magazine has provided a platform for people to imagine and interact with a collective past through canonized literary genres and heroic epics, blurring the boundaries between oral and written practices.

*Aqins* play a significant role incorporating and processing both written and orally disseminated literary epics. Young *aqins* graduated from *aqin* schools became *betashar* singers or *toy* hosts would nourish themselves with excerpts from folklore publications such as *Mura*. In Altay, several elder female *aqins* mentioned that occasionally they would be invited to write several lines of *joqtaw* for others who need them at funerals. A young woman in Qinghe county told me that a friend of hers asked an *aqin* to write a few lines of *koris*, so she could memorize them and do a proper *koris* when she leaves her natal home on wedding day. These evidences support Rian Thum’s (2014) argument about *tazkirah* circulation and his criticism of Walter Ong’s dichotomy of orality and textuality (76). Moreover, they demonstrate that poetic sentiments and ritual through oral tradition continue to enable social actors to negotiate their world-views and strategies to cope with the inequalities and uncertainties in everyday life. Shaden *apa’s joqtaw* is permeated with intergenerational intimacy and unspeakable, veiled sentiments for hardship in life, as well as her emplacement in hometown Hoboksr’s landscape.
include this *joqtaw* translation as it epitomizes my main arguments in this dissertation, and it interestingly juxtaposes with the linear, chronological historical outline in Appendix A. Considerable publications of such written *joqtaw* in Xinjiang give us a glimpse of Kazakh women’s endeavor for self-empowerment and acknowledgement via a legitimized state medium and against multiple layers of adversity.

*Sargilmaydi saghinish*  
*Un-Ending Remembrance*

By Shaden Nawken

Translated by Guldana Salimjan

*Tawgha 'bir shiqtim abaylap,*  
*I take a walk up to the mountain slowly,*

*qu-nilim qargham seni oylap.*  
*I think of you, my foal, my baby crow.*

*Shakirtering jurwshi ed,*  
*Your students used to follow you around,*

*artingnan erip aghaylap.*  
*calling you their big brother.*

*Sarghayip sarsang sholdedim,*  
*I pined and suffered,*

*k oz jasim boldi sel mening.*  
*my tears forming a flood.*

*Ordani buzor qayteyin,*  
*A thirty-years-old man is Orda buzor,*

*otiz jasqa kelmeding!*  
*you haven't even reached that age!*

*Sawirdan tasip tasbulaq,*  
*Spring water is flowing in Sawir mountain,*

*taptalip qaldi jasquraq.*  
*young green grass is trampled on.*
Shyittey uling shirqirap, Your son is still wee like needlegrass,  
jaring da qaldi-aw; zari jilap. and your wife is crying and mourning.

Tosinnan bolip shirghalang, The accident suddenly happened,  
'umiting 'sondi-aw burmadan. with a twist the hope of life extinguished.

Opasiz jalghan dunye-ay, Alas, this treacherous world,  
akeng men meni qynaghan! put your father and I under so much burden!

Tarildi bizge bul ghalam, Now this world suffocates and depresses us,  
sol 'ushin qatti qynalam. for I have suffered tremendously.

'Bir awiz lebiz ayta almay, I cannot speak a single word,  
toqtadi jurek twlaghan. as my heart races and stops.

Maqala jazip, jir jazip, You used to write articles and poems,  
'juruwshi eng qargham nurlanip. you were full of inspirations and dreams.

Haliqtan alding alghisti, You have gained recognition from people,  
sahnada san sylanip. you have been honored on the stage.

Sawirding basin bult shalghan, Clouds shrouded the top of Sawir mountain.  
qaraghay, taldan shiq tamghan. the dews on the pine trees keep dropping.

Ozingdey mangghaz bozdaqt, Even a fine young man like you cannot escape,  
qoymadi Ajal suqtanghan. once Death sets his greedy eyes upon you.
Kokshinar eding burlegen,  
Like a young poplar tree started sprouting,
jetilip ay, kun, jilmenen.  
you grew stronger day by day, year by year.
Ul, qizim shwlap sawirda,  
Sawir mountain hears the wailing of my son and daughter,
jaziqsiz janim kuyregen.  
and destiny has crashed our faith.

Aghayin, twis, jani ashir,  
Brothers, relatives, and caring people,
Bolatjan edi-aw jani asil.  
Bolatjan was my treasured soul.
Aqilgha aytqan toqtar em,  
People told me to stop mourning,
jazilmas janda jara tur.  
the wound on my heart will never heal.

Bawir etim edi Bolatjan,  
Bolatjan, you were my liver,
sabaz qip Alla jaratqan.  
my brave knight sent by Allah.
Alisqa sapar shegem dep,  
You were embarking a long trip,
jurwshi ed kundi sanap san.  
you couldn’t wait, counting days.

Jetkizbey ketti-aw sol arman,  
You left behind unfulfilled wishes,
shiqpaghan kun, ’un sanangnan.  
on a day that one never foresees.
Ayirdi taghdir ayel, balangnan,  
Fate tore you apart from your wife and son,
akengnen jani ananan.  
from your father and mother.
Seysenbi kunning keshinde,  
It was on a Tuesday evening,
joliqi pale esilge,  
when the bad omen afflicted you;
attandi solay bazygha,  
you set forth for the eternal world,
Qobiq sawirding tosinde.  
all of a sudden in Sawir mountain.
Qir kuyek ayi surlanip, The month of September turned grey, surengsiz turdi kun janip. the gloomy weather lingered.
Sol kuni qayran qirshindi. It beat us down on that day,
jerledik jilap 'biz gharip! when we buried you in tears!

Sawirding tawin muz qursap, Ice and frost besieged Sawir mountain,
sayinda tuman, bw burqap. fog and haze shrouded the valley,
Sorlaghan jandar barma ken?! Are there other grieving souls,
Bozdaghanan ayirilghan 'biz qusap. losing their young boy like us?!

Sirtim muzda, 'ishim jalin, My body is cold, but my heart is burning,
korgen song taghdir qispaghin. fate has put me through pain and suffocation.
Tarqatw 'ushin sherimdi, In hope of relieving this sorrow,
qolima qalam ustadim. I took a pen in my hand.

Aq qaghaz, qalam sawitim, With my white paper, ink, and pen,
mungliqting shaqir shabitin. my inspiration is my sorrow.
Opasiz jalghan dunye-ay, This treacherous world,
ozgerdi qalay baghting?! has ruthlessly altered your path!

Saygha da 'tustim sarilip, I walk down the valley in distress,
qarghashim seni saghnip. missing you, my baby crow.
Ketken song tagdir tarilip, As my path became narrowed by destiny,
otirmin dertke tangilip! I am still crushed by the news that day!

Tunghim 'ari tungghishim, My clear crystal, my first child,
'tanti etken qurdas-qurbisin. you are admired by your peers and friends.
Koktem de qirdan gul terip, They brought flowers blooming in spring,
qarsi aluwshi eng jil qusin. they welcomed you every year.

Soqsam da qayghi soqpaghan, My sorrow will never be consoled,
sabir qip 'biraq toqtagh. but I calmed down once for all.
Artinda qalidi jalghiz ul, You left a son behind you,
jaratqan soni saqtaghin. may Allah protect his soul.

Alsa da ajal qilip qas, If this world is doomed to slay you after all,
el-jurting seni umitpas. people in your hometown will never forget you.
Bolatjan qargham joqtawim, Bolatjan my precious, my joqtaw is with you,
basinga qoyghan quliptas! like this tombstone on the top of your grave!