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978-1-107-12968-9 - The Social Process of Globalization: Return Migration and Cultural Change in Kazakhstan

Douglas W. Blum

Excerpt

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## I Moving beyond hybridity

It has been widely observed that globalization tends to result in “hybridity,” whereby some ideas are absorbed wholesale while others are modified, and still others are rejected so as to preserve key features of national identity.<sup>1</sup> Yet we still know relatively little about the social processes and mechanisms involved, or how sociocultural dynamics contribute to specific forms of hybridity. To be sure, related questions about social transmission have been addressed in the vast literature on migration (including return migration).<sup>2</sup> But such work tends to be largely descriptive, offering a great deal of anecdotal data about the subjective experience of migration, the kinds of ideas and practices that migrants bring home with them, and the social exchanges that ensue. Generally missing from this body of research are empirically rich *and* theoretically cohesive analyses of how and why cultural change occurs – including the structural conditions as well as the personal meanings, strategies, and interactions associated with such change – in the lives of those who introduce and/or confront it.

The need to address these questions has been recognized since Ulf Hannerz’s pioneering study of transnational ties, in which he pointed to “small-scale cultural processes” marked by “fairly

<sup>1</sup> Marwan Kraidy, “Hybridity in Cultural Globalization,” *Communication Theory* 12, no. 3 (2002), 316–339; Jan Nederveen Pieterse, “Globalization as Hybridization,” in Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash, and Roland Robertson (eds.), *Global Modernities* (London: Sage, 1995), pp. 45–68. I discuss these issues in Douglas Blum, *National Identity and Globalization: Youth, State, and Society in Post-Soviet Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). Tsing emphasizes “[t]he awkward, unequal, unstable and creative qualities of interconnection across difference” from the perspective of the actors involved.

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continuous negotiation of meanings, values and symbolic forms.”<sup>3</sup> More recently, a number of scholars working in this area have begun calling for a systematic integration of structural- and individual-level analyses.<sup>4</sup> For example, Bryan Mabee has emphasized the importance of “empirically examining the linkage between actors, microstructures, institutions, and the broader macro-context,” while Georgina Born has underlined the need to explain “the interplay between individual subjectivity and collective processes.”<sup>5</sup> My book represents an effort to respond to these calls. In doing so, I (like the aforementioned authors) reject the tendency to privilege structural explanations *a priori*, or to pit structure against culture (or agency) in a zero-sum contest between artificial extremes.<sup>6</sup> Instead, I try to approach such questions in a theoretically flexible manner, by differentiating between structural and nonstructural factors, and remaining analytically attentive to the possibility of their distinct or conjoint causal effects.

In undertaking this effort, I choose to focus on return migrants – specifically, young Kazakhs who visit the United States and then return home. After all, return migration constitutes a significant vector of globalization, where the latter is defined as the transnational flow of ideas, capital, goods and services, people, and technology. As such, it offers a potentially valuable arena for examining how and

<sup>3</sup> Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places* (London: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> For instance, Mike Featherstone, “Postnational Flows, Identity Formation and Cultural Space,” in Eliezer Ben-Rafael and Yitzhak Sternberg (eds.), *Identity, Culture and Globalization* (Leiden, Boston and Koln: Brill, 2001), pp. 483–526.

<sup>5</sup> Bryan Mabee, “Levels and Agents, States and People: Micro-Historical Sociological Analysis and International Relations,” *International Politics* 44, no. 4 (2007), 431–449; Georgina Born, “The Social and the Aesthetic: For a Post-Bourdieuan Theory of Cultural Production,” *Cultural Sociology* 4, no. 2 (2010), 171–208. A useful review of the conceptual distinctions and their viability is Monika Krause, “Recombining Micro/Macro: The Grammar of Theoretical Innovation,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 16, no. 2 (2013), 139–152.

<sup>6</sup> See Gans’s important criticism of this tendency. Herbert J. Gans, “Against Culture Versus Structure,” *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 19, no. 2 (2012), 125–134.

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why cultural change, mixing, and/or reproduction occur.<sup>7</sup> My general question is what “cultural remittances” various individuals bring back to Kazakhstan, and how they are received. Along the way I investigate the interconnected meanings of such practices on the part of returnees as well as others with whom they interact. What innovations do return migrants try to incorporate into their lives, and why (or why not)? What sort of negotiations does this entail, and what consequences ensue? How can we understand these social processes and their outcomes?

As will be discussed below, some of these short-term visitors are immensely attracted by much of what they encounter in the United States, even to the point of becoming starry-eyed fans of “American values.” Others are unimpressed or even disgusted by the same aspects of American life. I intentionally avoid taking a normative stance on these matters. For my purposes, the central issue is not the validity of such perceptions, but rather their consequences, including how and why they *become* consequential. Thus, while I seek to understand the views of all return migrants, only those who engage in cultural borrowing potentially go on to become agents of social transmission. Members of this group are therefore especially important for my purposes, since their stories offer insights into how and why new practices are either embraced or rejected.

Finally, in order to set the reader’s expectations, I want to clarify what this book is not about. It does not primarily address the experiences of Kazakh returnees in the United States, or how those experiences affect identity formation on an individual level. Such a book would cover very little new ground; at most, it would add empirical detail to the already well-established literatures on migration, transnationalism, and cultural globalization. Therefore, I do not concentrate on individual stories and personal trajectories, but rather I seek

<sup>7</sup> People who live in other countries for some time often report greater openness to ideas of the host, as well as to broader “global” identities. Jane Jackson, “Globalization, Internationalization, and Short-Term Stays Abroad,” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 32, no. 4 (2008), 349–358.

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to identify underlying tendencies with regard to absorption, enactment, and negotiation. Nor do I concentrate on flows of popular or consumer culture. These topics have already drawn a great deal of attention, and, more importantly, the ideas and values associated with them are relatively superficial with respect to social identities, relations, and institutions. Instead, my main concern is with practices that engage fundamental questions of autonomy, equality, propriety, and progress, and which therefore have truly profound implications for society as a whole.

In sum, my goal is to understand the structural conditions in which, and the individual thought processes and social dynamics through which, cultural change and/or (re)production occur in the context of globalization. My hope is that this exploratory case study will encourage further research and progressive theorization.

## ORGANIZATION AND CHAPTER OUTLINES

Chapter 2 grounds the present inquiry by situating Kazakhstan in the context of globalization. To some extent the country is part of a broad historical trend leading to the erosion of traditional value systems, which is associated with increased economic development and changes in social structure (e.g., urbanization, higher education levels, and an increase in working mothers). Yet considerable tension still exists between modern conceptions of individual rights and established expectations based on social obligation, particularly concerning issues of family ties and gender roles. Indeed, young people are in many ways constrained by tradition, class, and gender. Understanding this social, cultural, and institutional context is essential in order to appreciate the issues at stake in enacting various nontraditional practices drawn from abroad.

Chapter 3 lays down a theoretical foundation. I draw in part on the work of Bourdieu (and other practice theorists), which emphasizes the role of structural factors and associated routine knowledge in underpinning social order. Yet I also diverge from these theorists inasmuch as their work has typically focused on social reproduction

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rather than change. In particular, while this literature sheds invaluable light on social and cultural continuity, it suffers from a lack of adequate attention to agency, or the ability of strategic individuals to introduce novelty. For these reasons, I borrow extensively from critical realism (especially the work of Margaret Archer), which stresses precisely the importance of agency and social interaction alongside structural factors. At the same time, I also query and modify Archer's theory, and, in doing so, attempt to offer a more compelling synthesis of critical realism and practice theory. This includes an inquiry into the relationship between identity and "reflexivity": that is, how individuals approach a given problem or identity construct, and whether they are (relatively) receptive to criticality, introspection, and absorption of cultural difference. (Note: As used in this literature, the term "reflexive" simply means *reflective*. It is therefore a marvelous example of needlessly confusing jargon. Unfortunately, it has become so pervasive that I cannot avoid including it in relevant quotes, and so for consistency's sake I use it throughout. I beg the reader's indulgence!) Next, I outline the more proximate factors involved in negotiating cultural difference, including the sociocultural opportunity structure as well as key social mechanisms for adjudicating the legitimacy of change. The chapter concludes with an overview of my methodological orientation, which combines qualitative fieldwork and interpretive analysis together with sensitivity to local conditions.

Chapter 4 comprises the empirical heart of the book, with four sections devoted to the results of my fieldwork. To briefly foreshadow my findings, the return migrants in this study represent a broad continuum of orientations, ranging from highly deliberate to habitual modes of being in the world. That is, some returnees (and even non-migrants) change extensively and overtly, while others change far less, and still others change hardly at all. Each section explores the linkage between general orientations and specific tendencies for cultural borrowing. In particular, the first section concerns "progress": that is, the importation of practical skills as well as the practice of volunteer work. The second section addresses the issue of relationality,

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including the practices of self-sufficiency and being nice to strangers. The third section focuses on the theme of propriety, or practices that transgress accepted notions of propriety: dressing casually, sitting improperly, engaging in personal openness, and postponing marriage. The final section deals with gender equality, which in itself combines elements of progress, relationality, and propriety. In each section, I investigate returnees' reasons for embracing or rejecting various practices. I also examine nonmigrants' perceptions of returnees, particularly with regard to these (or other) practices that they observe. Last, I explore the nature of relevant interactions between returnees and nonmigrants back in Kazakhstan. I seek to explain these negotiations and their outcomes, including the steps taken to challenge or justify the importation of cultural novelty.

Chapter 5 is devoted to drawing broad patterns. To a minor extent, the absorption and enactment of cultural difference is based on the charisma of American popular culture. In general, however, this is a far more calculated and selective process. Returnees may strategically undertake to introduce foreign practices, the prospective legitimacy of which depends partly on the extent of their congruence with prevailing norms, national identity, and social structure, and partly on an individual's skill in presenting them in a favorable light. Success or failure in legitimating cultural novelty is linked to social adjustment, as returnees who cannot safely enact new identities within their previous circles tend to form new ones.

In Chapter 6, I return to the theoretical issues raised at the outset, and suggest that the nature and onset of reflexivity goes a long way toward explaining patterns of social and cultural change, and that it also provides a promising basis for future comparative research. Finally, after raising some specific questions for such research, I conclude with a few speculative thoughts about the impact of globalization.

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## 2 Kazakhstan

### *The local context of globalization*

Understanding the process of change requires understanding the context in which it takes place. In this respect a crucial prerequisite for cultural globalization is economic growth as well as integration into the international economy. Based on these indicators, Kazakhstan has made enormous strides since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and is now categorized as an upper middle-income country. National GDP grew at a rate of 9 percent between 2000 and 2007 before dropping in 2008 and 2009, and quickly rebounded by 2010.<sup>1</sup> As a result there has been a dramatic reduction in official poverty rates, from 39 percent in 1998 to 3.8 percent in 2012, and the rate of unemployment declined to only 5.2 percent by 2013.<sup>2</sup> Over the same period, household consumption roughly tripled.<sup>3</sup> Such growth has also been accompanied by a strong and sustained rise in imports.<sup>4</sup> Finally, although transportation infrastructure lags and the economy remains undiversified (relying heavily on oil and gas), a modern banking system has developed and FDI inflows have risen substantially.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> By 2013, according to the World Bank, GDP growth was 6 percent. Data are taken from <http://data.worldbank.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> On poverty rates see <http://data.worldbank.org/country/kazakhstan>; for unemployment data see IMF, *World Economic Outlook*, October 2014, p. 60, at [www.imf.org](http://www.imf.org).

<sup>3</sup> Based on World Bank data for household final consumption expenditure (in constant 2005 US\$). See <http://data.worldbank.org/>.

<sup>4</sup> The trend has closely paralleled GDP: after strong growth for most of the 2000s, imports of goods and services contracted sharply in 2009 before recovering to modest growth during 2010–2012. Nevertheless, using the period 2000–2005 as a baseline, Kazakhstan's imports of goods and services increased 221 percent by 2011. IMF, *World Economic Report* (October 2012); also IMF, *Regional Economic Outlook: Middle East and Central Asia, 2011*, both available at [www.imf.org](http://www.imf.org).

<sup>5</sup> On transportation infrastructure and banking, see Marlène Laruelle and Sébastien Peyrouse, *Globalizing Central Asia: Geopolitics and the Challenges of Economic Development* (Armonk and London: M.E. Sharpe, 2013). FDI included increases of roughly 25 percent annually between 2004 and 2009, although almost 75 percent went

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## 8 KAZAKHSTAN: THE LOCAL CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZATION

Globalization has thus coincided with a rise of a middle class. As a result, there have been predictable efforts to reproduce the alluring images presented in foreign media and on the Internet. In and around urban centers, shopping malls and big-box stores have sprung up where customers can engage in the conspicuous consumption of cell phones, computers, high-priced cars, and mocha lattes.<sup>6</sup> Fashionable cafés, shops, and icons of popular culture are either explicitly Western or monolithically “global,” in the sense that they exude modernity without any specific geographical character. Indeed, Western and modern are often fused in popular imagination.<sup>7</sup> In the main cities, there are also innumerable other examples of contemporary trends and designs, such as tattoo parlors and yoga studios. In addition, as elsewhere around the world, these trends are especially pronounced among the youth.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to generating wealth to foster trade, investment, and consumerism, economic growth spurs technological advances that serve as vectors of cultural globalization. Needless to say, a pivotal change is Internet penetration. Although fixed subscription rates have

to the energy sector. Margareta Drzeniek Hanouz, Danil Kerimi, and Stephen Kinnock, “How Central Asian Economies Perform: Results from the Global Competitiveness Index”, in *Competitiveness and Private Sector Development: Central Asia 2011 – Competitiveness Outlook* (OECD Publishing, 2011), pp. 44–48. According to World Bank data, net FDI inflows for Kazakhstan in 2010 were \$9.1 billion. See <http://data.worldbank.org>; also Fadi Farra, Claire Burgio, and Marina Cernov, “The Competitiveness Potential of Central Asia”, in OECD, *Competitiveness and Private Sector Development: Central Asia 2011: Competitiveness Outlook* (Paris: OECD, 2011), pp. 17–31.

<sup>6</sup> John C. K. Daly, *Kazakhstan’s Emerging Middle Class* (Washington and Uppsala: CACI and SRSP Silk Road Paper, 2006); G. T. Alimbekova and Zh. Dakenova, *Obshchestvo Potrebleniya v Kazakhstane* (Almaty: Center for the Study of Public Opinion, 2008); Natalie Koch, “Bordering on the Modern: Power, Practice, and Exclusion in Astana,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* (forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup> As one marketing study concluded, educated young Kazakhs wish to travel to and study in Western countries, work for Western companies, and purchase Western products and brands. Jung-Wan Lee and Simon W. Tai, “Young Consumers’ Perceptions of Multinational Firms and their Acculturation Channels Toward Western Products in Transition Economies,” *International Journal of Emerging Markets* 1, no. 3 (2006), 212–224.

<sup>8</sup> Jakob Rigi, “Conditions of Post-Soviet Youth and Work in Almaty, Kazakhstan,” *Critique of Anthropology* 23, no. 1 (2003), 35–49; B. Bradford Brown, Reed Larson, and T. S. Saraswati (eds.), *The World’s Youth: Adolescence in Eight Regions of the Globe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).



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lagged at about 13 percent, the Web is typically accessed in crowded Internet cafés, at the workplace, or via mobile phones, yielding an actual total penetration rate of about 54 percent.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the trend line has been rising dramatically, and Kazakhstan now ranks higher than Russia on the World Economic Forum's "Network Readiness Index."<sup>10</sup> At the same time, it should be noted that, as with practically all the other indicators of progress, the relevant ones in this sphere are subpar compared with those of other more advanced countries. But when assessing conditions for cultural change, comparisons with other countries are far less important than internal comparisons over time. In this respect, despite lingering problems and shortcomings, one finds significant improvements over conditions in the quite recent past. Most importantly, they reflect a situation in which the inflow of ideas is large enough to make a significant difference in cultural context – both directly, by impinging on attitudes, and indirectly, by facilitating still more international contact.

The content of flows via the Internet is typically varied. At the ubiquitous Internet cafés – many of which are open 24/7 – customers partake in war-gaming and gambling (monopolized by young men), use social networking sites like VKontakte, Agent, Odnoklassniki, and Facebook, and access various informational as well as media sites (Wikipedia, YouTube, pornography, etc.).<sup>11</sup> Blogging has also become widespread, with lively discussions and often quite edgy posts on every imaginable topic. The majority are conducted in Kazakh or Russian, although English and mixed-language blogs are also plentiful.<sup>12</sup> Of course, search engines like Google and Yandex are used for everything imaginable.

<sup>9</sup> Data as of December 31, 2013, from Internet World Stats, at [www.internetworldstats.com](http://www.internetworldstats.com). On in-home subscriptions for 2014 see Peter Evans, "Asia Fixed Broadband and Internet Market Forecasts," 2011, at [www.satellitemarkets.com/](http://www.satellitemarkets.com/).

<sup>10</sup> Kazakhstan ranked 38 overall, while Russia was ranked 50. World Economic Forum, *Global Information Technology Report 2014*, at [www.weforum.org](http://www.weforum.org).

<sup>11</sup> Anzhela Injigolyan, "The Influence of the Internet on Changing the Way of Life of the Youth in Kazakhstan," unpublished paper, Karaganda State University (2003).

<sup>12</sup> Irina Shklovski and Bjarki Valtysson, "Secretly Political: Civic Engagement in Online Publics in Kazakhstan," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 56, no. 3 (2012),

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## 10 KAZAKHSTAN: THE LOCAL CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZATION

The situation is much the same with regard to popular entertainment. TV programming includes American shows like *Friends*, *Sex in the City*, and *South Park*, as well as Kazakh shows modeled on American precedents, like *Superstar KZ*, which duplicates the format of *American Idol*. Here again, other foreign content (Turkish, Russian, and Islamic) is also available. To watch such programs, one generally requires cable or satellite access, but this is fairly common. The country is also awash in foreign films. Hollywood releases draw the largest audiences, although it is also possible to view Turkish, Russian, and Indian movies. Likewise the music scene: performers like Kanye West and Lady Gaga are popular in the main cities; karaoke bars and discos abound; and iTunes was launched in 2012. In these ways, young people are increasingly plugged into global (especially Western) culture. Results from fieldwork are mostly reserved for a later section, but one quote makes the point more vividly than any objective indicator. As a young return migrant described the cultural scene in Almaty, "Things are changing here. All the movies are American. Young people are kissing in the streets. Most people haven't been exposed to [Western] culture directly. They get it second-hand through TV channels and interpret it in their own way. It's exaggerated. It's out of control."

Another important vector of globalization is international labor migration, including sustained diasporas as well as temporary migration. Kazakhstan has emerged as one of the world's largest receiving *and* sending countries, thus becoming a transit hub between Central Asia and Russia as well as a significant destination in its own right.<sup>13</sup> It is estimated that the country hosts some three million migrants currently, mainly from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan,

417–433. On the continued influence of Russian-language Internet sites, see Dirk Uffelmann, "Post-Russian Eurasia and the Proto-Eurasian Usage of the Runet in Kazakhstan: A Plea for a Cyberlinguistic Turn in Area Studies," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 2, no. 2 (2011), 172–183.

<sup>13</sup> Erica Marat, *Labor Migration in Central Asia: Implications of the Global Economic Crisis* (Washington and Uppsala: CACI & SRSP Silk Road Paper, 2009); Irina Ivakhnyuk, *The Russian Migration Policy and its Impact on Human Development: The Historical Perspective*, Vol. 14 (New York: UNDP, 2009).