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Universidad del Zulia
Facultad Experimental de Ciencias
Departamento de Ciencias Humanas
Maracaibo - Venezuela

Features and prospects of ethnocultural identity of the Kazakh diaspora in China

Nazgul Baigabatova¹

¹Zhetysu State University named after I.Zhansugurov, Taldykorgan,
Kazakhstan

Email: Baigabatova-N@zsu.ac.kz

Saira Rakhipova²

²Zhetysu State University named after I.Zhansugurov, Taldykorgan,
Kazakhstan

Email: Rakhipova-S@zsu.ac.kz

Amangeldy Tolamissov³

³Zhetysu State University named after I.Zhansugurov, Taldykorgan,
Kazakhstan

Email: Tolamissov-A@zsu.ac.kz

Erzhan Bulanov⁴

⁴Zhetysu State University named after I.Zhansugurov, Taldykorgan,
Kazakhstan

Email: Bulanov-E@zsu.ac.kz

Zabira Myrzatayeva⁵

⁵Kazakh National Pedagogical University named after Abai, Almaty,
Kazakhstan

Email: Myrzatayeva-Z@KNPU.ac.kz

Abstract

This article is devoted to the research of the specifics of the formation of the ethnocultural identity of the Kazakh diaspora of China at present. The authors, based on the analysis of scientific literature and materials of their own field research, have revealed that the structure of the ethnocultural identity of the Kazakhs of China, acquired as part of the diaspora, today acts as a combination of signs of ethnicity. In conclusion, the ethnocultural identity of the diaspora,

the prospects for its preservation and reproduction, are directly dependent on the political and socio-economic situation in the country of residence.

Keywords: Kazakh diaspora, ethnocultural identity, minorities.

Características y perspectivas de la identidad etnocultural de la diáspora kazaja en China

Resumen

Este artículo está dedicado a la investigación de los detalles de la formación de la identidad etnocultural de la diáspora kazaja de China en la actualidad. Los autores, basados en el análisis de la literatura científica y los materiales de su propia investigación de campo, han revelado que la estructura de la identidad etnocultural de los kazajos de China, adquirida como parte de la diáspora, hoy actúa como una combinación de signos de etnicidad. En conclusión, la identidad etnocultural de la diáspora, las perspectivas para su preservación y reproducción, dependen directamente de la situación política y socioeconómica en el país de residencia.

Palabras clave: diáspora kazaja, identidad etnocultural, minorías.

1. INTRODUCTION

In September 2018, the human rights organization Human Rights Watch published a report Eradicating the ideological infection. Repression of the Chinese authorities against Muslims in Xinjian This document presents the facts of mass arbitrary detentions, torture and

ill-treatment, as well as control over the daily life of citizens, which actually grows **into the total**. It is noted that the 13 millionth Muslim population of Turkic origin, in violation of international human rights norms, is consequently to compulsory political and cultural indoctrination, collective punishment, restrictions on freedom of movement and communication in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China (hereinafter - XUAR PRC) increasingly stringent restrictions on religious practice and total electronic surveillance. According to human rights activists, in China, up to a million Uighurs and other Muslims of Turkic origin are forcibly held in re-education camps, engaged in forced labor.

Besides, according to the authors of the report, prisoners in these places are forced to refuse to use their native languages (Uyghur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, etc.) and to **respect their** cultural traditions, and, first of all, to renounce any manifestations of religious (Islamic) affiliation, and also, force them to speak only Chinese and sing songs glorifying the Chinese Communist Party. In response to such allegations, the Chinese government at first denied the existence of such camps, then stated that only vocational education and training centers exist in the XUAR, and later, official Beijing announced the existence of educational centers for the re-socialization of petty criminals, since the region is under the influence of separatists, religious extremists and terrorists.

Over the past ten years, violent attacks attributed to the Uyghurs in Xinjiang and other regions of China, as well as the fact that Uyghur militants are present in the ranks of armed extremist grouping abroad

have been repeatedly reported. There were more stringent restrictions on the Uighurs than on other ethnic minorities.

However, from the beginning of 2017, reports began to arrive that ethnic Kazakhs, who live mainly in the north of the XUAR, are also harassed, monitored, missing, detained. Several thousand ethnic Kazakhs were accused by the Chinese authorities of having dual citizenship and other violations of migration rules, some of them ended up in the so-called re-education centers.

In this regard, Ryan Tum, a senior researcher at the University of Nottingham and an expert on Xinjiang, said he was surprised to see how Kazakhs were captured and sent to camps along with the Uighurs, given that the Kazakhs have long been regarded by the Chinese state as an exemplary Muslim group who accepted the rule of the Chinese Communist Party. R. Tum says that the new hard-line against the Kazakhs **are** motivated by the same mixture of Islamophobia and racism in relation to Muslim minorities, because of which they are considered dangerous.

It is possible to assume that the current situation is associated not so much with the strategic importance of the XUAR and the adoption of appropriate measures to ensure security in the region, but with aggressive attempts of forced cultural assimilation of ethnic minorities living long ago in this territory. **The ethnocultural** identity of Kazakhs, Uyghurs, Tatars, Kyrgyz, and other Muslims is etched from all spheres. This applies to language, education, traditional culture, freedom of religion, etc. In this regard, the research of the experience accumulated by **the Kazakhs** of China in preserving their

ethnocultural identity in a foreign ethnic environment is an urgent and relevant task of social and humanitarian science.

The purpose of this article is to identify the specifics of the formation of the ethnocultural identity of the Kazakh diaspora of China and to determine the prospects for its preservation and functioning in the future, taking into account the cultural, historical, socio-economic, political conditions and characteristics of the country of residence.

2. METHODOLOGY

The problem of researching ethnocultural identity today is one of the relevant areas of scientific research and at the same time has a number of certain difficulties associated primarily with the research methods and methodology.

First of all, this is due to the lack of a clear definition of the very concept of identity, which is associated with its obvious interdisciplinarity. Currently, the term identity as a category of scientific analysis and social practice is widely used by specialists in various fields of socio-humanitarian knowledge - psychologists, sociologists, ethnologists, anthropologists, historians, philosophers, political scientists. Often, understanding the reasons for the surge of interest in ethnic identity, most researchers still cannot always explain the essence of this phenomenon. There is a wide range of views of scientists explaining this phenomenon, but its complexity, versatility,

variety of forms, as well as radically opposite trends in the development of ethnic identity leave wide scope for further research.

In this context, the research of ethnic identification processes through the prism of the theory of ethnic boundaries and significant cultural markers by F. Barth, the concept of the imaginary community of **ANDERSON (2001)**, and the ethnosymbolism of **SMITH (2004)**, introducing yourself to others by **HOFFMAN (2000)** can be fruitful. Western concepts of identity, based on studies of the specific manifestations of cultural (conscious behavior) characteristics of ethnic groups, are the basis of the so-called theories of nationalism.

It should be noted that in the scientific literature the issues of researching the Kazakh diaspora in China have received quite wide coverage and are currently characterized by the accumulation of a significant layer of empirical material in this area of scientific knowledge. Since the 50s of the 20th century, scientific directions have been quite actively developed in their historical, political, cross-cultural, diasporological time, which relate to a fairly wide range of issues of socio-political history and fate, the general cultural life of this large diaspora, its role in the socio-economic life of the region and PRC. In Western historiography, this direction was deliberately developed by political scientists and, in part, by anthropologists - in particular G. Lias and I. Svanberg - whose studies remain relevant and reprinted in Kazakhstan. In the 90s, an American Anthropologist **GLADNEY (2003)** was actively researching the identity of the peoples of China, using the example of changes in the ethnocultural identification of Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Dungan of Xinjiang. In particular,

he considers the identity of the Kazakhs of China from the concept of relative identity, built on the principle of segmental hierarchization of ethnic groups and their identities relative to the dominant group (Han), which is the practice of the Chinese authorities in deconstructing ethnic groups. AMANTAI's (2017) master's thesis is devoted to the problems of preserving Kazakh identity in an urban environment, in which he through numerous interviews tries to hear the voices of the diaspora and their point of view on how a person integrates or adapts his ethnocultural identity to that defined by the state.

In Kazakhstan, the research of Kazakhs abroad after the republic gained independence in 1991 develops into a modern diasporological direction, which considers the Kazakhs of China as an integral, inalienable part of a single ethnic group. The result was the scientific works of G.M. Mendikulova, N. Mukhametkhanuly, collective monographs of research institutes, and works published by the World Association of Kazakhs. A review of foreign and domestic scientific works on the Kazakh diaspora made it possible to conclude that comprehensive research of ethnic Kazakhs living outside their historical homeland remains an important area of scientific knowledge, due to the actualization of the preservation of their culture, their own national code of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

One of the founders of symbolic or interpretive anthropology, Cl. Gierz, noted that only real ethnographic data give rational reality to social scientific theories and concepts (KASYMOVA, 2011). The source base of the article is the ethnographic materials collected by the authors of the article as a result of fieldwork in 2013-2014, 2019 in the

Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China, where the Kazakh diaspora mainly lives. The basis of the article was conversations and interviews with residents of the surveyed territories, as well as ethnographic collections of local museums.

In the course of expeditionary research, we used well-known and approved methods of field ethnography, with a long stay and attempts to get used (often unsuccessful, passive) to the ethnic environment under research. To research the processes of ethnic identification and self-identification, methods of included observation, semi-structured interviews, case studies, and others that required constant interaction with informants on the spot were used (BERNARD, 2006).

The experience of researching the Kazakh diaspora in China showed that even when obtaining official permission to conduct expeditions in 2012-2013, we were always limited in carrying out ethnographic research itself in particular, in visiting certain areas, in access to certain groups of the population (for example, on confessional grounds), in the development of certain topics and areas of interrogations and field surveys. Limiters were the civil servants of this country who were assigned to our research team and accompanied us during the trips, or passed us from hand to hand in each settlement we visited.

In this regard, anthropologist GLADNEY (2003), based on his 20 years of experience in researching ethnic identities of national minorities living in China, noted that The idea that public servants look over their shoulders ... is unpleasant, if not completely

unacceptable, for most anthropologists... At the same time, conducting field research in China without special permission is illegal, and mostly only a few researchers can get it. Those who were allowed to carry out fieldwork were so limited and sympathetic to public policy that their work as a whole lacked the impartial position necessary for ethnographic trust.

It was even more difficult to carry out fieldwork in the summer of 2019, due to the ethnopolitical situation in Xinjiang that had developed by that time. It is no accident that one of the authoritative international journals Central Asia Survey of the Central Eurasian Studies Society (CESS) - devoted one of its issues to this issue, naming the special issue of the journal Securitization, insecurity, and conflict in contemporary Xinjiang.

Indeed, the free ethnic minorities of Turkic origin are subject to all sorts of restrictions, as well as subject to total surveillance. During the stay, we were convinced that in the region there is complete control over the daily lives of people. For this, **most** modern technologies are involved, round-the-clock video surveillance is carried out, at the entrance to public places, including museums, hotels, trading houses, markets, etc. Scanning personal belongings, phones **are** mandatory. The state encourages mutual denunciations of neighbors, settlements are patrolled by police brigades. It is precise because of these reasons that most of the Xinjiang Kazakhs with whom we tried to speak did not come into contact with us, avoiding conversations in every possible way, and those with whom we were able to talk were limited to everyday dialogues and conversations about the customs and rituals

in the past, traditional clothes, and food. And only a few respondents dared to explain to us that the Kazakhs in China are afraid to speak with someone from Kazakhstan because this is fraught with imprisonment in re-education camps. Therefore, in carrying out field studies to collect empirical material, we, adhering to the basic unwritten rule of the anthropologist do not harm, did not allow ourselves to ask unnecessary questions to our informants, so as not to create any problems for them and their relatives. In general, comprehensive and full-scale research of the ethnocultural foundations of the Kazakh diaspora in China in the summer of 2019 turned out to be quite difficult.

3. DISCUSSION

Researchers of foreign Kazakhs are repelled by several basic components in determining their ethnocultural identity, ability to adapt to the external environment, and the specifics of preserving the main markers of identity (derived from ethnic memory), which include language, traditions, religion, cultural practices (everyday life, life cycle rites), mental maps, commitment to tribal identification as a connecting thread with the past and maintaining a stable dynamic balance of the organization of social relations.

However, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that in a foreign ethnic environment, the knowledge and ideas accumulated by foreign Kazakhs have been repeatedly transformed under the pressure

of objective circumstances and subjective factors over the years. According to K. Syroezhkin, in general, the Kazakhs remained one ethnic community, separated only by the state borderline. However, despite belonging to one ethnic group, living in the territory of another country and involvement in specific socio-economic and political processes taking place in it, had a significant impact on the Kazakhs of the PRC, subject to a different logic of historical development.... the formation of their social structure and national identity went differently.

So, for example, according to our informants, already during the years of the cultural revolution, everything was destroyed that indicated ethnic differences: felt and woven products with a national ornament, wooden dishes; mosques were destroyed, etc. Local Kazakhs subsequently sought to revive the destroyed art. True, as they themselves note, many of the original technologies have been lost forever. But until the 80s of the last century, in China, subsistence farming in the form of nomadic cattle breeding actually prevailed, so clothes, dishes, all household accessories were made by hand. Perhaps this was the reason that the traditional Kazakh applied art in China was not lost.

Over the past ten years, the Chinese government's policy to develop the western regions, in particular XUAR, has led to a reduction in nomadic pastures for Kazakhs and a gradual transition to a settled lifestyle and migration to urban areas, where they are forced to engage in other types of economic activity. The change in the way of life of the Kazakhs, according to M. Olcott, should have been reflected

in their ethno-identification, as nomadic cattle herders. The researcher as a key factor in the specificity of the Kazakh identity identifies precisely the occupation (nomadic cattle breeding and forms of social organization derived from it).

Indeed, many scholars tend to view the nomadic lifestyle as the main marker of Kazakh identity. For them, the Kazakhs are the heirs of their nomadic predecessors. Whereas already the majority of the Kazakh diaspora of China for the past 20-30 years has led a settled lifestyle, has stationary dwellings, and in rural areas has private plots, is engaged in agriculture, and does not identify itself with nomads. Then, the question arises, what happens to the identity of settled Kazakhs who live in cities and villages and have nothing to do with traditional nomadic cattle breeding? Moreover, the Chinese government is currently actively solving the problems of changing the cultural, social and mental practices of the Kazakh population of the XUAR, including through the educational system, the practice of settling nomads, imposing them a standard knowledge system of Chinese culture, thereby changing the mental map and traditional system of spiritual and moral values of the Kazakh ethnic group (RAKISHEVA, 2015).

Field observations show that in this case, the Kazakh identity in Xinjiang is formed thanks to their own initiative, mainly as a result of social communication. Xinjiang Kazakhs, both rural and urban, are actively creating and accepting many new traditions, sometimes including elements of Chinese culture (in particular, in the field of **the**

food system, ethnic costume decor, music culture, etc.), but which are often mixed with old existing traditions of the Kazakh ethnos.

At the same time, traditional ways of representing ethnocultural affiliations often cannot interest Kazakhs, especially young people, because they, in their opinion, consist of slightly simpler ethnographic information, such as their traditional clothing or food products, which are already well known to them. In general, the cultural practices of nomads are considered by the younger generation as backward. However, for most, this is interesting, because it is almost the only channel for them to understand the difference between the Kazakhs as other/alien in the space of China.

It is possible to assume that at the present stage, the Kazakh diaspora of China is creating a kind of transitional culture (from nomadic to sedentary), which includes a set of ideas about values, symbols, ideas, etc., related to various cultural formations and for better adaptation, the group will choose the dominant ones. At the same time, culture is what is transmitted through practice, and the processes of self-identification require some reflection and self-identity. In this context, we were interested not so much in the nature and structure of the Kazakh identity, but also in the issues of how it is acquired, how it is preserved and reproduced by members of the Kazakh diaspora.

As a result of the studies, it was found that in the absence of media in their native language and elite support for the imaginary society of the Kazakhs of China, ethnocultural affiliation in Xinjiang is formed due to social communication and the family, and, in particular,

the influence of the family is the primary force that encourages local Kazakhs to realize their identity.

Family education plays an important role in providing a solid ethnocultural foundation for identity, and the parents' reaction to other ethnic groups serves as the initial environment through which Kazakh children discover cultural and ethnic differences. According to our informants, taboos, rituals and ethnic characteristics are the three main aspects of this education, and these three factors are also interacting to some extent.

4. CONCLUSION

The results of the research showed that the characteristics marking the ethnic group of Kazakhs in China are determined by the cultural-historical, socio-economic, political conditions, and processes taking place in the country of residence. Features of farming and the functioning of culture in specific environmental conditions led to the accumulation of special features, properties, and signs, which, ultimately, determined a unique combination of ethnic stereotypes and self-identity of the Kazakh diaspora in China.

In the course of the fieldwork, it was revealed that the external borders of the ethnocultural identity of the Kazakh diaspora in China are the result of interethnic interaction, and the internal ones are determined by the members of the group possessing common cultural knowledge and collective memory. At the same time, it was

established that the ethnic and cultural affiliation of the Kazakhs in Xinjiang is formed due to social communication and the family, and, in particular, the influence of the family is the primary force that encourages local Kazakhs to realize their identity.

In general, the structure of the ethnocultural identity of the Kazakhs of China acquired within the diaspora today acts as a combination of signs of ethnicity (self-identity, ethnonym, language, material artifacts, cultural practices, religious and regional identity) in order to distinguish itself as a representative of one group from representatives of another group (Uyghurs, Han Chinese, etc.).

At the same time, the accumulated cultural and genetic material was repeatedly transformed under the pressure of objective circumstances and subjective factors. The Kazakhs' commitment to the habitat and nomadic way of life, which is a kind of platform for the main markers of ethno-identification, caused concern of the Chinese authorities. One of the consequences of this was the policy of resettlement of Kazakhs from areas of their compact settlement with ethnic names (Ili-Kazakh Autonomous Region) under the pretext of implementing economic and environmental projects. It must be assumed that ultimately, in the future they will not constitute a majority in their autonomous units, and the need for such an administrative-territorial unit disappears by itself.

These processes entailed violations in the compactness of the Kazakh diaspora, which caused its unity and solidarity when they were mainly in the Kazakh cultural context. Besides, at present, there is the likelihood of losing their ethnic culture and identity by the urban

Kazakhs of Xinjiang. Over the past three years, the situation with the state of the Kazakh diaspora and the ability to preserve and reproduce its ethnocultural identity has changed significantly. This is due, first of all, to the complication of the situation of ethnic minorities in the XUAR, including Kazakhs. This is evidenced by our personal observations, the testimony of Kazakhs who returned from China, as well as numerous statements by various human rights organizations, politicians, journalists, and scientists.

Thus, the research showed that the ethnocultural identity of the diaspora, the prospects for its preservation and reproduction in the future, are directly dependent on the political and socio-economic situation in the country of residence. At the same time, it is capable of aggravation and transformation simultaneously, since it has the properties of flexibility and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. In other words, models of ethnocultural identity can take various forms, including crisis ones.

However, in a globalizing world, the situation of the Kazakhs in China, which is characterized not only by modernization but also by strengthening state repressive policies towards Xinjiang's Muslim ethnic minorities, pursuing an open cultural assimilative policy of Sinification in all spheres of life of the local population, despite their aspiration and desire to preserve their ethnocultural identity, all of the above indicates the unlikely preservation of the fullness of traditional culture by the Kazakh diaspora and the possibility of a loss of the basic characteristics by the ethnic group in the near future.

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