

SCTCMG 2021
International Scientific Conference «Social and Cultural Transformations in the Context of
Modern Globalism»

MEMORY AND HISTORY OF FORCED MIGRATION OF KYRGYZ TO CHINA (1916)

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Abstract

This article examines the issue of forced migration of Kyrgyz to China. This article does not aim to give a detailed analysis of the political situation regarding its history and all its complexity, but it attempts to reconstruct the memory of the forced migration of Kyrgyz refugees to China based on narratives. The article is written based on field research carried out in China, where Kyrgyz settled as a result of forced migration and live in densely populated areas. Today, Kyrgyz refugees occupy 7 Chinese villages with a national status. The bases of the study are the materials of field observations of 2 Kyrgyz national villages of Ili Kazakh Autonomous Region, in Kulzha and Nylky. The main objective of the article is to study how the memory of the uprising formed in Kyrgyz living in China. The study concluded that the textbooks on the history of Kyrgyzstan have not covered forced migration, but the memory of this violence has been preserved with pain and bitterness in the hearts of ordinary people living in China.

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Keywords: Uprising of 1916, PRC, Ili Kazakh Autonomous Region, Urkun, refugee



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1. Introduction

In the summer of 2015, I visited the Kizilsu Kirghiz Autonomous Region (KSKAR) and Ili Kazakh Autonomous Region (IKAR, China) as part of an expedition. During the expedition, I collected field materials, held interviews with residents of the Kyrgyz autonomous national village of Shaty, Kok-Terek, and Ak-Chiyoodan, as well as from residents of the cities of Kulzha and Nylky (Abdalievna, 2015a). We talked about the 1916 Uprising and the exodus of Kyrgyz (Urkun) to China. I had a lot of questions during the field research since the respondents spoke about the three Urkuns (the events of 1916), and I knew only about one of them.

2. Problem Statement

This article does not aim to give a detailed analysis of the political situation regarding its history and all its complexity, but it attempts to reconstruct the memory of the forced migration of Kyrgyz refugees to China based on narratives. There are a lot of questions connected with Urkun which have been only partially investigated. How does the traumatic memory of Urkun work? How does temporal distance affect the formation of the memory of uprising? What are the consequences of Kyrgyz exodus from their native land and their arrival in a foreign country?

3. Research Questions

3.1. Memory and Great Urkun

The uprising of 1916 was a bright page in the history of the liberation movement of the peoples of Central Asia. It was preceded by the socio-economic development of the region and was characterized by the most severe social and national oppression, aggravated by poor living conditions of indigenous people in the conditions of the protracted First World War. The events of 1916 go beyond the borders of the Russian Empire and must be considered an integral part of the liberation movement against the world colonial system. The rebels tried to recreate the traditional political structures of government in the East, abolished by the tsarist administration during the period of colonization. Each region elected its khans, the leaders of the performances (Abdalievna, 2015b). Major armed conflicts were happening in Semirechye, incl. the northern part of Kyrgyzstan. The unequal struggle against well-armed and trained punitive detachments led to tragic consequences. The rebels, having suffered defeat, were forced to flee to China. Kyrgyz ayils were mercilessly destroyed, tens of thousands of innocent people died. About a hundred thousand refugees died from harsh conditions, cold, and hunger on their way to a foreign land (Bedelbaev, 2016).

It was an extremely tragic event. After the suppression of the uprising, lots of people migrated through the snowy, ice passes Bedel (located at an altitude of 4284 m above sea level, Issyk-Kul region), Barskoon (located at an altitude of 3754 meters above sea level, Issyk-Kul region), Sөөk (located at an altitude of 4021 meters above sea level, Issyk-Kul region 4021 m), Dzhuuku (located at an altitude of 3633 meters above sea level, Issyk-Kul region) Torugart (at an altitude of 3752 m above sea level, Naryn region and extends from Naryn to Kashgar), Keltebek (the pass is located in the At-Bashinsky region

(Bashkeltebek), the pass connects the Kara-Koyun and Ak-Sai valleys) to China. Thousands of people died, hundreds of thousands lost their homes and were forced to inhabit foreign countries, many of them died on their way.

4. Purpose of the Study

In the scientific literature, the uprising of 1916 has been studied as a historical event, i.e., as a certain stage in the Kyrgyzstan history of the 20th century. The uprising of 1916 for the Kyrgyz people, primarily the people's memory – Urkun, has a much deeper meaning for the Kyrgyz (Mytev, 2016).

The Kyrgyz called this Urkun tragedy exodus. In a foreign country, the refugees found themselves in a very difficult situation. Thousands of Kyrgyz people were left without a livelihood. Hunger, epidemics, mortality grew to a massive scale. People could not settle in one place, they wandered around the villages and sought refuge. Refugees in China who survived and survived after suffering inhuman suffering were glad to hear the news from distant Russia. At the end of winter, they received reports that on March 2, 1917, Tsar (ak pashaa) Nikolai abdicated the throne, and the Provisional Government came into power (February 27, 1917), which explained the depth and scale of the Kyrgyz tragedy to the Russian public. They started talking about going back as soon as the snow melted, and the passes opened. Refugees began to return, however, some of them remained forever in a foreign country for various reasons.

5. Research Methods

Kyrgyz have lived in China since ancient times, and along with them, there are those who, against their will, were cut off from their usual place of living. They remember that in their real homeland there is a separate line in the form of a state border. There are almost no living witnesses to those terrible days, but there are still many memories of Urkun in the memory of Kyrgyz living in China. The exodus in the memory of Kyrgyz people living on the territory of Kyrgyzstan is preserved as one Urkun, and in the memory of Kyrgyz people of China as three Urkun. Why is this the case? Why three Urkuns?

6. Findings

In an interview with a former teacher at Xinjiang Normal University, who worked there until 1962 (the events of June 29, 1962). After this political event, he comes to Oodan (district) and works as a schoolteacher until his retirement. Asanakun Mukan uulu from the village of Shaty, who is already 80 years old, from the Keldyuk (Kulduk) clan (the Chinese Kyrgyz gave this name to those who arrived in China from Issyk-Kul): “Our ancestors are from Issyk-Kul. On this land (the village of Shaty, Ili Kazakh Autonomous Region, China), the Kyrgyz lived before the Great Urkun. Residents of Ile, when the conversation comes about how long they have been living here, unanimously claim that their ancestors have long mastered this land. They went to the jailoo with their cattle to the shores of Issyk-Kul in the west and Kenus and Zhyldyz in the east. In autumn and winter, we went down to the current place of

residence and Issyk-Kul. The Kyrgyz of the Ili valley claim that the right side of the river. Tekes has always been settled by Kyrgyz, where they kept their livestock, and the left side was settled by Kazakhs.

The great ыркын occurred during the time of the Russian Empire when the Russian tsar ordered to send the Kyrgyz children to the war (for rear work). The Kyrgyz did not want to give their children to the war, and then the “Riot” began, which the Kyrgyz called “the munt”. At that time, the following rumor wandered among the population: “If you go, your son will die, if you don’t go, then the old will die” (“Барса бала өлөт, барбаса чал өлөт”). And the rest of the Urkuns occurred during the years of the Soviet (in Soviet times), they came here from the persecution of the Soviets. “We call them Medium or Small Urkun. The elders said that they had experienced many difficulties in this life. And they said: “Sad blood flows in our veins.”

(“Биздин каныбыз кайгыга жык толгон”), “The soup of the Kyrgyz people will burn the tongue in 40 years”, (“Кыргыздын шорпосу 40 жылдан кийин ооз күйгүзөт”) we did not attach any meaning to these words at that time (Abdalievna, 2015a).

The ancestors of this respondent, who survived the tragedy and experienced mental trauma, tried to convey their grief and pain precisely in folklore form. The oral history of the Kyrgyz is very well developed and is transmitted to the younger generation in the oral form. The role of folklore, undoubtedly, is the pulse, the nerve of time. At the turning points of Kyrgyz society, it takes on a concentrated, holistic form of expression.

The Kyrgyz have created and preserved many kinds of folklore works, legends, songs, sayings, sanzhyra (genealogy), etc. about this psychological and emotional trauma. “Беделдин белин ашканда, белдемчи калды шашканда” (Nurmanbet Osmon uulu), meaning: “When we crossed the Bedel Pass, we did not have time to take our skirt with us.” This proverb conveys the panic and haste in which the Kyrgyz were leaving for China through the Bedel Pass. Only in panic could a Kyrgyz woman leave her main clothing – beldemchi. This pass is located on the border of the Kyrgyz Republic and Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China, at an altitude of 4284 meters above sea level, and naturally, the path was long and unfamiliar to refugees. I had to cross completely unfamiliar, high, and rugged glacial passes. In the Bedel Pass, there was nothing to breathe: because of the height, there were airless holes at every step. Many of these passes and dangerous paths had to be traversed at night. A stop for several hours threatened to be killed – the tsar’s troops followed in the tracks of the refugees from behind. Therefore, the transition to the Chinese territory of Kyrgyz refugees came at an extremely high price – great sacrifices of people. A lot of livestock and many people remained on the roads – on these glacial passes, in the hungry steppes and remote gorges (Nurdin, 2010).

During field expeditions in the Ak-Chiy region of the PRC, I heard one saying: “Kachkyn menen argyn kyin” (Abdalievna, 2015a), which means: “A refugee and a crossbreed yak can do anything and are capable of anything”. It means that refugees are intelligent, quick-witted and have all-round abilities. Apparently, their life experience, the hardships and suffering endured, the loss of loved ones – all this influenced their tendency to quickly adapt to new circumstances, as a condition for preserving life for themselves and their offspring.

They fled to China, abandoning their accumulated material values, to save their lives in a foreign country, in the status of “refugees”. In a foreign land, they found themselves in an extremely difficult

situation. Thousands of Kyrgyz were left homeless. Having survived and arrived in a foreign country, the refugees had to start a new life, and this is always a very long and painful process, especially since they lost their loved ones along with their homeland and everything of value that they had.

The preservation of historical roots has traditionally been supported in Kyrgyz society. Folklore performed this function of memory among the Kyrgyz. Traditional society, based on oral history, created its history following the experience of ancestors. Folklore of Kyrgyz refugees is somewhat what is called evidence of memory. Talking about himself or describing this or that event, a person finds himself in a state of revising his picture of the past. Fleeing is one of those turning points for Kyrgyz. The main advantage of the folklorization of memory is the preservation of information about the tragic life of refugees, which they do not transfer to written sources. Of course, there are no longer any witnesses to those events, and therefore the folklorization and mythologization of events are in this case a natural process.

Another very important painful part of the memory of Kyrgyz refugees is the monstrous torment of parents who, due to poverty, were forced to sell their children to Uighurs, Kalmyks, and Khans. Different voices of Kyrgyz refugees living in China, narratives of this kind are manifested in some cases superficially, in others – they are concentrated and in-depth. The trauma consisted not only of leaving one's place of living and transforming this place into a generic relationship (kelduk).

Junus Jumadyl, a witness of the Great Urkun, lives in the city of Gulja. Since 1959, he began to collect oral histories among Kyrgyz refugees, which were sold during the Great Urkun. Here is one of his narratives:

“... During the exodus, the Kyrgyz sold their children to Uighurs and Dungans, because they believed they were Muslims. Sometimes, without distinguishing between them, they were sold to both Han and Kalmyks. Beautiful girls were forced to marry, they were almost like slaves, there was a special market where mainly people were sold. There were cases when girls were bought and then resold into slavery in big cities. Unable to withstand such violence, they committed suicide”. Such markets also existed in Maraltashy (area is in Kok-Terek), where Kyrgyz refugees sold their children. Junus Jumadil told a tragic story of two little sisters who were sold to Dungans. According to the stories of these girls: “I was 12 years old then, and my sister was 5–6 years old. In Maraltashi we were sold to strangers. My parents called me Sara, and the new family gave a new name and began to call me Mayulo, and my sister's name was Gulbara, but they started calling her Gulyi. When we were given to strangers, we cried for a long time, and then we prayed to remain alive, then we began to travel every 2–3 years to Maraltashi to reminisce our ancestors. We always say that we are from Maraltash, there are many like us in Ila and we call ourselves “We are from Maraltash”. Similar cases of changing the names of sold children are found in the narratives that were sold to Kalmyks. Kalmyks also gave new names to the children of Kyrgyz refugees. The boys were called Badinzhab, Oshurzhab, Molon, Bayyrta, and the girls were called Suua, Soson, etc. (Abdalievna, 2015c). The representatives of the Kelduk clan have lost their historical homeland, Issyk-Kul, and Maraltashi became homeland for the children that were sold. They remember this place as the place where they lost their family, were separated from their parents.

In China, there are descendants of Kyrgyz among Uyghurs. Therefore, when Uyghurs say that their great-grandmother was Kyrgyz, Kyrgyz claim that this relates to the Great Urkun.

The most painful traumatic memory of Kyrgyz refugees living in China is the sale of their daughters to foreign ethnic groups. People wanted to save other family members, therefore Kyrgyz refugees were forced to sell girls for a cup of flour, etc. In the past, Kyrgyz aksakals collected information about the common roots and origins of many Kyrgyz women sold to Uighurs and Kalmyks. As of now, it is no longer possible to track exactly where lived those Kyrgyz women who were sold to other ethnic groups.

Kyrgyz refugees try to forget the fact that they sold their sons in their memory. Narratives about selling their sons are rare among people. Narratives about selling their daughters are common. Kyrgyz refugees were forced to take such a desperate step for two reasons. Firstly, having straggled away from their people, the tired and hungry asked locals to temporarily shelter their children so that they would not die on the way. They hoped that they would come back and take their children back. Second, by selling their teenage children, refugees hoped that this way they could save lives of their children, preventing them from starving to death. It also gave a faint hope to refugees to feed their babies and exhausted children at least for some time with the money raised. This was the last chance to survive for a Kyrgyz family dying of hunger and ordeals. They had no other choice. It was the philosophy of the Great Urkun, filled with deep tragedy. Saving their sons and daughters from starvation, Kyrgyz left them in hands of local people. This act was accompanied by a bitter hope that the children would survive. It is known that there are Kyrgyz who managed to survive in this tragedy. They now live in China.

6.1. Great Urkun as a Loss of Kyrgyz Identity

Another important component of the memories of Kyrgyz refugees living in China is the the adoption of a different way of life, customs and traditions, i.e., loss of their culture, but preserving the memory of it and identifying themselves as Kyrgyz.

For example, Nylky there are Kyrgyz who speak Kazakh and do not remember their native language. A respondent from the city of Nylky Mukanbet Abdykerim uulu (Abdalievna, 2015d) says: “There are about 1000 people living in the city of Nylky, before the Great Urkun, the Kyrgyz did not live in this area. We moved here during the time of the Great Urkun, we are the descendants of the Great Urkun, we speak Kazakh and we have forgotten our native language. Children study in Kazakh or Hanzu (Chinese), and speak Kazakh, so we have lost our language. We became related with Kazakhs, there are a lot of mixed marriages. We observe Kazakh traditions and have some differences. But we do not lose hope; we are thinking of opening special Kyrgyz classes at school. Unfortunately, we do not have teachers. Even if we could find teachers, there are no textbooks in Kyrgyz. Because of such problems, we are losing our native language, we cannot speak and write in our native language, but we are planning to open classes for learning our native language.” Another narrative was written by Bekzatkan Aray, who, unlike the first respondent, did not want to be interviewed because she could not speak Kyrgyz. She said: *My grandmother's father Toktorbai fled to China with his family during the Small Urkun Toktorbai. They should have been sent to Siberia, however, they go to China avoiding prosecution. We were living in Kazakh environment and began to forget our native language. We have relatives in the autonomous Kyrgyz national village of Kok-Terek. I always feel bad there, because in this village Kyrgyz speak their native language well* (Abdalievna, 2015b).

If the first respondent understands that he is losing his native roots but hopes that someday his children and grandchildren will learn their native language, then the second respondent believes that she is completely cut off from their ancestors. They fully adhere to the traditions of Kazakh people. Acquaintance with other Kyrgyz people generates new experiences and traumas. This refers to the difficulties associated with the difference in culture, language, customs, which inevitably come across within the community itself. They do not want to lose their roots and do their best to somehow keep their own.

Kyrgyz refugees, regardless of whether they live compactly with Kyrgyz or other ethnic groups, whether they know their native language or have completely lost it, call Kyrgyzstan their historical homeland. Even if they have never visited their historical homeland, many narratives about it have been preserved in the memory of the Kyrgyz refugees. They can tell emotionally and in detail about what kind they come from, from what area of modern Kyrgyzstan.

At the same time, the theme of Urkun merges with the theme of the loss of their Kyrgyz identity in the process of migration. Exodus turns out to be gradually a departure and loss – not only of a place but also of a genus and a native language.

7. Conclusion

Today the memory of the victims of forced migration is fragmented and scattered. The memory did not extend beyond the various groups and families of the victims of this violence. Until now, textbooks on the history of Kyrgyzstan have not covered forced migration, but the memory of this violence has been preserved with pain and bitterness in the hearts of ordinary people living in China. Fear, fear – these feelings remained in the memory of the Kyrgyz refugees of the Great Urkun.

Summing up, I would like to note that the 20th century is a century of massive plundering, extermination, and expulsion from the native country. As a reaction to such an experience of crime and inhumanity, which until then was considered impossible in scale, a new form of memory arose – a form of historical recollection. It aims to publicly condemn such crimes and keep them in memory for a long time so that they do not repeat themselves.

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