What does it take 'to migrate'?
Uyghur perspectives from Kyrgyzstan

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When thinking about the Uyghurs in Kyrgyzstan in terms of migration, one is forced to ask the question of what it takes to migrate. Often this question is undertheorised or not even posed in studies of migration - or it is assumed that in a world of easy separations between sovereign nation states, country and city etc., migration is what takes places when a person moves from one territory to the other. People move between Bishkek and the countryside, between Kyrgyzstan and the rest of the world, and the territories on which the movement takes place are given. 'Migration is the movement of people through geographic space' (Kearney 1986), and geographic space, then, is the territory that people move *on*. Numbers can be produced and statisticians are content; last year 10.000 people moved from x to y. A map of fixed territories, then, becomes the immovable base for the measure of movements.

In this article, however, I will take a different view and ask what migration might look like if such territories are fundamentally shattered, i.e. if (perceived) migration rather happens within an imagined terrain of different possibilities than on a world of existing territories (cf. Gupta & Ferguson 1992). The Uyghurs of Kyrgyzstan will be my case. I aim to show that a number of different Uyghur political geographies co-exist and that migration – real and imagined – is not just migration, but is bound up with different conceptualisations of movements and territories. This, in turn, implies that migration is just as much an effect of on-going 'geographical' imagination, as it is based on quantifiable movements.

The Uyghurs in Kyrgyzstan

It is not a secret that the Uyghur issue[1] is highly politicised and that presenting the Uyghurs and the history of their proclaimed homeland, the Xinjiang region of contemporary China, is simultaneously to propose a specific interpretation of history and geography which – beyond any reasonable doubt

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[1] The Uyghur issue refers to the well-known conflict between the Chinese state and the Uyghur people concerning contemporary Xinjiang, China. The issue revolves around questions of indigeneity, territoriality, history, human rights etc.

– will be contested by some. It is just as expectable that many Kyrgyz Uyghurs[2] will see Xinjiang as their homeland (and name it East Turkestan or Uyghurstan), and hence, that their (ancestor's) emigration from East Turkestan to present-day Kyrgyzstan is a decisive event in their collective history. This migration was the identity-defining exodus, and the event they will need to 'reverse' if they are to fully realise what they believe to be their potential as a nation with an independent state in what is now the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China. Yet, the Uyghur case in Kyrgyzstan might teach us that things are not quite that simple and that migration, geography and Uyghurness emerge from distinct convergences of very different experiential trajectories, even among Kyrgyz Uyghurs, and that 'Uyghurness' is not always explicitly politicised, nor is displacement always at the centre of their self-understanding.

A quick look at the historical background of the Kyrgyz Uyghurs, will help us to initially differentiate between at least three groupings of Uyghurs – identified by many Kyrgyz Uyghurs themselves - in contemporary Kyrgyzstan[3]. The first grouping is the *local Uyghurs* who are descendants of Uyghurs who are believed to have lived in Kyrgyzstan since ancient time (and/or have lost their narrative of immigration) or who moved to contemporary Kyrgyzstan in the 19th century or early 20th century. This grouping would include both the Ferghana Uyghurs in the southern part of Kyrgyzstan (descendants of migrants from the southern part of Xinjiang (Kamalov 2005:149)) and some Uyghurs in the north, who used to be concentrated around Lake Issyk-Köl (mainly Karakol) and in the city of Tokmok, and who are descendant of Uyghurs from both Kazakhstan and China (see also Kamalov 2005:154). The second grouping is the children and grandchildren of Uyghurs who came from present-day Xinjiang to Kyrgyzstan in the 1950s and early 1960s. This migration was caused by the transferral of Xinjiang to the Chinese communists in 1949 and the ensuing economic difficulties and political campaigns against local nationalisms (Roberts 1998:514), as well as by the mass exodus organised by the Soviet Union in 1962 to demonstrate the failure of Chinese national politics at a time when the Sino-Soviet relations were rapidly deteriorating (Kamalov 2005:150-151). Many of these '*migrant Uyghurs*', as I prefer to call them, had already escaped the collectivisation and anti-religious campaign of the Soviet Union in the 1930s, but they now chose to return (Roberts 1998:512). The third grouping consists of *Chinese*

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[2] I use Kyrgyz Uyghurs to refer to all the people in Kyrgyzstan who define themselves as Uyghurs. I am aware that this is complicated by the fact that some people might for example be registered as Uyghur in their passport, but claim that they are Uzbek, or registered as e.g. Uzbek, but somehow 'know' that they are Uyghur.
[3] Sean R. Roberts have made similar studies on the Uyghurs in Kazakhstan (1998, 2005), but to my knowledge there is yet no academic literature in English language purely concerned with the Uyghurs in Kyrgyzstan.

Uyghur[4] sojourners, i.e. Uyghurs who are Chinese citizens and who only come to Bishkek on a temporary visa to trade. While it is obviously possible to differentiate along other lines, and make further differentiations within these groupings, this is not an arbitrary division, but one that would make sense to many Kyrgyz Uyghurs and to an analysis of different perceptions of terrains and migrations. While the groupings do constitute prolonged, yet always emerging, constellations of people - gathering them around certain perceptions, histories and clusters of interaction - they might of course transform into different constellation later on, just as they have done in the past.

The Uyghur migrants: movement as displacement

When I first came to Kyrgyzstan, my rather vague aim was to look at 'the Uyghur issue' and the Uyghurs of Kyrgyzstan[5]. What would the Uyghur issue look like from outside – but still close to – China? Looking for 'Uyghurs' and being concerned with the Uyghur issue as such naturally led me to the second grouping of Uyghurs identified above, as they are the most publicly conspicuous Uyghurs and the ones most profoundly caught up in the Uyghur issue. They are, as it were, the Uyghurs we know through media representations of Xinjiang and the Uyghur problem. As one would expect, they are often concerned with Chinese occupation of their proclaimed homeland and with human rights issues in Xinjiang. Also they fight for the preservation of Uyghur culture in Kyrgyzstan by arranging concerts, supporting the establishment of Uyghur language classes in elementary schools, publishing newspapers and magazines, establishing internet sites etc. Most of this work is organised within the confines of a state sanctioned Uyghur cultural organisation called Ittipak, located in the People's Assembly, alongside other minority organisations, in the building of the Kyrgyz Ministry of Culture at the very centre of Bishkek. While certainly elite-based, businessmen and intellectuals being a major force within the organisation, Ittipak is not simply a cultural and political elite organisation only concerned with the politically sensitive 'Uyghur issue', nor is it completely detached from the life of ordinary Uyghurs in Kyrgyzstan. The organisation is rooted in the Uyghur communities, mainly in and around Bishkek, and the chairman of Ittipak is chosen by elders or other leaders from the different Uyghur neighbourhood communities (*mahalla*). Hence, there is some continuity between Ittipak and the general Uyghur population, and the centrality of the Uyghur issue and the acknowledged intertwinement of politics and culture is not

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[4] Sometimes 'Chinese' is used for the second grouping (see Kamalov 2005:152, 159) who also came from China, but in line with some of my informants – and the current situation – I prefer to use the term Chinese Uyghurs for Uyghur Chinese citizens who are doing trade in Kyrgyzstan.

[5] I only stayed in Kyrgyzstan (mainly Bishkek) for one month, so this article is preliminary observations based on interviewing.

just a feature of Ittipak, but also of the Uyghur population it supports. This cluster of Uyghur migrants has several features.

First, there is an awareness of displacement and separation, especially among the elder segment of the population. Migrants or descendants of the migrants from the 1950s and 1960s, many of these Uyghurs still feel strong about the emigration from Xinjiang. Their life stories give prominence to their own and/or their parent/grandparents migration from Xinjiang (mainly Khuldja) to present-day Kyrgyzstan (mainly Frunze (now Bishkek)), and their separation from relatives in Xinjiang is often described as a big tragedy. Many of the migrants - or refugees[6] - were from economically and/or intellectually high-ranking families who had played a significant role in the anti-Chinese and Soviet-supported Eastern Turkestan Republic in the north-western part of Xinjiang from 1944 to 1949. Being land-owners, politicians and intellectuals, many of these families had both the economic means and the ideological reasons to escape when they were offered to move to the Soviet Union (Roberts 1998:514)(many of the people in the Ili region around Khuldja had Soviet citizenship already). The impression one gets, then, is that there were a high number of politically active 'Turkic patriots', who had previously fought for independence from China, among the people arriving in Frunze. The anti-Chinese sentiments of the migrants had also been nourished by the fact that many of these people had already experienced repressions in China in the 1950s, and by the fact that for the next twenty years many of the migrants were refused contact to close family members remaining in Xinjiang, many of whom they were never to see - or even hear of - again. During my interviews in Bishkek, I heard several stories about the dreadful treatment of Uyghurs, especially from high-ranking families, during the Cultural Revolution in China (1966-76). Thus, the arriving Uyghurs were from the outset bound up with the genealogy of a deeply politicised and emotional 'Uyghur issue', and they were facing the hardship of building up a new life when arriving in the Soviet Union. As such, feelings of displacement, suffering, injustice, patriotism and political activism were central issues right from the beginning. One might indeed say that this group of people was an extension, and an embodiment, of the Eastern Turkestan Republic, and nowadays the Uyghur issue is at the heart of Ittipak and the Uyghur migrant's self-understanding. Their cultural Uyghurness, so to speak, does not just interact with politics, but is inherently political and as several informants told me: 'to be an Uyghur is to be a politician'. While Uyghur political organisations are not allowed to exist in Central Asia (most likely due to Chinese diplomatic pressure), and while Ittipak, then, is only sanctioned as a cultural association, the

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[6] Officially, they moved voluntarily, but as one informant cited his father for having said: 'if they stayed, they would be killed' – and this is indeed what happened to many Uyghurs (Shichor 2002:284).

Uyghur migrant's Uyghurness circumvents the whole distinction between politics and culture and makes it an impossible line to draw.

This is not all there is to say, though, about these 'Mao Tsedungs', as the immigrated Uyghurs were called by some local Uyghurs (the first grouping). During Soviet times the Uyghur issue and the cultural performance and spatial imaginations of the recently immigrated Uyghurs came to converge with Soviet ethnic policies and with the grand imaginations involved in 'geopolitical games'. While stories of discrimination towards minorities, including the Uyghurs, during Soviet times are certainly not unheard of, the Uyghur problem got new impetus from the Sino-Soviet conflict during the 1960s and 1970s. The Uyghurs were brought into play by the Soviet Union against China in several ways. In Kazakhstan, for example, Uyghur studies were established and mobilised to criticize Chinese nationality policy, and Soviet historiography pushed the idea that Xinjiang was the homeland of Uyghurs (Kamalov 2006, 2007:35-36; see also Kamalov 2005:152-153). One informant could relate that – exceptionally - Uyghurs were allowed to create their own informal cultural associations in the 1970s and that rumours had it that Moscow was working out a plan to free the Xinjiang region. He even related that Uyghurs received special military training in this period. In other words, while the nationality question was generally downplayed during the Soviet period and the Uyghurs from Khuldja refused important positions in the Soviet system, the Uyghur nationality was still provided with unique support (Kamalov 2007:42).

The Soviet support of the Uyghur case, however, was also a sovietisation of the Uyghur issue (cf. Roberts 1998, 2005:153-154; Kamalov 2005:160). Nowadays words like 'soviet' is used for the central committee of Ittipak, and there is a distinct Soviet feel to the way in which Uyghur culture has been objectified (in performances, TV shows, the Ittipak organisation), the Russian-mindedness and relatively secular attitudes of most Uyghurs, and the way in which education, urbanism and cultural *development* have come to merge with the idea of Uyghur culture. The people who came in the 1950s and 1960s often regard themselves as more developed as Uyghurs, and hence more Uyghur, than both the local Uyghurs[7] and the Chinese Uyghurs. They are descendants of the Uyghur (cultural) elite from East Turkestan and consider themselves more (Soviet) educated than the Uyghur sojourners from Xinjiang who are sometimes – and in almost one and the same sentence - considered 'not cultured' and 'uneducated'. The elitist conception of the Uyghur migrants, then, have a tendency to merge with their Soviet education; specific culture and general civilisation are fused, so to speak, and the more civilised you are, the more Uyghur you have become.

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[7] This is different from Kazakhstan, where the local Uyghurs used to consider themselves more Uyghur than the ones arriving in the 1950s and 1960s from Xinjiang (Roberts 1998).

Apart from the centrality of displacement in their self-understanding, and the Soviet and geopolitical shaping of this group, I want to raise a final point concerning their wider geographical imagining of the regional and the global. The Uyghurs themselves often frame the Uyghur issue in regional politics, and even occasionally talk about the arbitrary division of the Turkic people - caused by Soviet ethnic policies - into different Turkic nationalities (Kyrgyz, Uyghurs etc.), but they also draw extensively on wider geographical imaginings in at least two other ways, especially at elite level. First of all, they are – and they imagine being - part of a wider community of dispora Uyghurs. They often mention their membership of the World Congress of Uyghurs in Munich, they often cooperate with Uyghurs in Kazakhstan, and they are very much aware of being part of a movement which is not bound to a specific geographical location. Rabiye Kadeer, an exiled Xinjiang Uyghur business woman living in Washington, is considered to be the current leader of this world-wide Uyghur movement. The high number of Uyghur web pages disseminating exactly the same news indicates that this place-independent 'movement' does exist and that it produces similar effects in dissimilar places. Secondly, the Uyghur migrants compare their situation to other (successful) diasporas, the Jewish one being the archetype, and newly established 'independent nations' like Kosovo, South Ossetia and Abkhazia feed into their own imagined future. One informant said the following about the prospects of getting independence:

> "Regional and global forces also play an important role. Look at the example of Kosovo. This problem has existed for a long time, but it was solved only when the United States intervened and when regional forced like the EU intervened - when regional and global support was realised. And today we have a sovereign independent state. Or we can turn to the example of Abkhasia and South-Ossetia. The world has changed."

The question is not so much whether they *are* global, whatever that may mean, but that the Uyghur issue 'happens' in similar ways in different places, and that the Uyghur migrants certainly draw on wider geopolitical imaginations like 'the world has changed' when a few independent states become a symptom of a global trend. The image of 'newly independent nations' is transportable to Uyghur imaginaries, because the world is conceived as a whole inter-connected being effectuating similar outcomes in different geographical locations. In a similar vein, the Uyghur migrants imagination of an independent East Turkestan was obviously boosted when the post-Soviet period saw the emergence of newly independent Central Asian nation states and when cross-border relations between Chinese Uyghurs and post-Soviet Central Asian Uyghurs intensified with the opening of Chinese-Soviet borders in the 1980s and 1990s, and it has even been suggested that newly

independent nations like Kazakhstan initially supported this quest for independence in order to avoid the question of Uyghur autonomy within its own territories (Kamalov 2005:161).

The Chinese Uyghurs: migrating borders

While the Uyghur migrants live outside their proclaimed homeland, they increasingly find themselves - and think of themselves as being - within a Chinese sphere of influence. Their parents and grandparent emigrated from China half a century ago, but they are now feeling what they perceive to be the distribution of the Chinese regime beyond the borders of the Chinese state. The establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2001 signalled increased cooperation between China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan on matters concerning e.g. national security and domestic stability, and there is no doubt that one of the primary aims of the SCO was to prevent separatist movements – potentially an Uyghur one - from operating in SCO countries bordering other SCO countries. While Kyrgyzstan is often described as an 'island of democracy' by Kyrgyz Uyghurs, it is obvious that one of the targets of the SCO was potential Uyghur separatist movements and that the SCO – together with Chinese economic investments in the Kyrgyz military and Kyrgyz dependency on trade with China (Mukhamedov 2004) – have given China greater leverage on Kyrgyzstan. At least, the Kyrgyz Uyghurs claim to have felt the effects of this (perceived) distribution of the Chinese regime (see e.g. Mukhamedov 2004). Ittipak and some individual Uyghurs have been approached by Kyrgyz government officials for criticizing China and an often-made association of Uyghurs with religious extremism, terrorism and crime is disseminated in media (see for example Soltobaev 2000). Other Uyghurs complain about the fact that people no longer speak out openly. People know that the Uyghur issue is a delicate one and are afraid of what might happen if they do speak out - or they might be worried about losing business opportunities in China. The Chinese 'regime', however, is distributed in different ways also, and the relations between Kyrgyz Uyghurs and Chinese Uyghurs are now seriously hampered by the fact that the temporary migration of Uyghur sojourners from China to Kyrgyzstan is also, to a large extent, the migration of a whole regime.

As I hardly spoke to any of them, it is difficult for me to write about the Chinese Uyghurs. What I can do, however, is to draw a few conclusions on the basis of my lack of communication and otherwise rely on second-hand information from Kyrgyz Uyghurs. Visiting the Madina market, where the majority of traders are Chinese Uyghurs, is almost like visiting a market inside China. When I tried to approach the Uyghur traders at Madina - or at the huge Dordoi market at the outskirts of Bishkek - they kept referring me to other people or were straightforwardly refusing to speak. Speaking to me and my Kyrgyz interpreter, it seems, was like asking for trouble.

It is difficult to know whether they involuntarily abstained from speaking, but it seems certain that communicating with a foreigner would be most sensitive. Kyrgyz Uyghurs told me that traders who come to Kyrgyzstan are checked well before being granted permission to leave China, that they have relatives in Xinjiang who will be held responsible if they 'defect', that they will face severe hardship when returning if they speak critically of China, that there are informers among them, and that a personal enemy might use any suspicious behaviour – like speaking to a foreigner - to inform against you. The Chinese Uyghurs live in their own apartments, they do not often communicate with Kyrgyz Uyghurs, and Ittipak does not maintain any relations with them, either because they are not supporting the Uyghur case (as they have been checked well for their political views before leaving China) or because it is too dangerous for the Chinese Uyghurs to be affiliated with Ittipak, which is considered a separatist organisation by China. To a very high degree, then, the Chinese Uyghurs in Kyrgyzstan amount to a closed group where surveillance is an ever-present possibility and, hence, an ever-present disciplinary reality (cf. Foucault 1977). In a sense, they *are* not even in Kyrgyzstan, but constitute a Chinese state domain within Kyrgyzstan. They have moved physically and do engage in economic transactions at the market, but this is in no way a 'total' movement. Obviously the borders between Chinese Uyghurs and other Uyghurs can not be maintained and supervised completely, and apart from the fact that Chinese Uyghurs do experience different things in Kyrgyzstan than in China, they might also have non-Chinese Uyghur friends or attend a party or a local wedding with other Uyghurs. Yet, they are most likely to evade political issues and getting 'too close', and my impression is that - in general - there is little communication between Chinese Uyghurs and Kyrgyz Uyghurs. Roberts reports on extensive links between Chinese Uyghurs and non-Chinese Uyghurs in Kazakhstan (2007), and this might make one speculate that the above observations are recent effects of a tightening of Chinese politics towards Uyghurs, at home and abroad.

The local Uyghurs: being at home in transition

The 'local Uyghurs' is a rather residual grouping, including a variety of different localities and histories, and I only carried out a few interviews with so-called *yerlik* (local) Uyghurs. This grouping should still be mentioned, though, as they are clearly different from both Uyghur migrants and Chinese Uyghurs, and because the ones I spoke to laid bare a whole different terrain, where Uyghurness was almost only an appendix to a different set of concerns, such as managing in a world that was still undergoing transition.

One woman in Karakol, for example, was married to an Uzbek man and her concern – as well as the concern of other people, it seemed – was not so much with questions of nationality.

She described how things had become messy just after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and she saw the problem of nationalities – almost on a par with the problem of electricity cuts – as deplorable and only emerging recently:

> 'During Soviet times, we were like one family and nationality didn't pay any role. Maybe recently this division between nationalities started but I have lots of friends among Russians and even though they left Kyrgyzstan and went to Russia, Novosibirsk and Leningrad, I still try to keep in touch with them. We call each other and try to stay in touch... The division started recently. There was no such thing before. We knew that we belonged to certain nationalities, but it was not important for us.'

Much in line with Soviet ideology, the new nationality divisions were looked down upon and considered of little importance in Karakol. The woman was aware, however, that some Uyghurs in Bishkek are unlike the local Uyghurs and had heard of the existence of 'a diaspora', but she had never heard of either Ittipak or East Turkestan, the Uyghur name of their proclaimed homeland in Western China. Uyghurness was not explicitly politicised or related to the Uyghur issue with China, and when asked about her impression of China - she travelled to Urumchi in Xinjiang in 2006 to trade - she spoke in very general terms and did not once mention the Uyghurs as a separate problem. When asked whether she knew of any Uyghurs coming to Kyrgyzstan from China, she said 'no' and once again elaborated her answer with reference to the transitional turmoil of Kyrgyzstan:

> 'Maybe it is hard here, that might be why they do not want to come to Kyrgyzstan. When I was in Urumchi in 2006, one year after the March events [the Tulip revolution in Kyrgyzstan], people would come and ask: 'Do you have a war in Kyrgyzstan, what kind of events do you have there'. So they fear to come here. After those events the situation is unstable here. That is why those people fear to come to Kyrgyzstan'

Unlike the Uyghur migrants, her geographical reference was Kyrgyzstan and not the 'push and pull factors' in China proper. Her conceptualization of space was structured around a distinction between Kyrgyzstan and the Soviet Union, on the one hand, and China as a whole, on the other, and time was mainly structured around the break between Soviet and post-Soviet times. Her impression of China was positive – things were cheap and everyone had a job, she would say - and the main problem in China was not the Uyghur issue, which was not mentioned at all, but rather that people in general – unlike in the Soviet Union - were uneducated and that now, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, people in China are old-fashioned as compared to the more 'up-dated and western-oriented' post-Soviet citizens of Kyrgyzstan.

As compared to the Uyghur migrants, the location – Karakol – is an identity-defining location framed and experienced through a (Soviet) anti-nationalist ideology. China is praised but also thought to be more closed and backward than Kyrgyzstan, which is conceived as (Soviet) educated and (post-Soviet) up-to-date and open (towards 'the West'), but also as a transitional space - a moving terrain, so to speak - still facing revolutions and electricity cuts. In this terrain, the ground is (constantly) moving and many people have had to migrate to Russia or Bishkek.

Conclusion

In this short article I have tried to outline some preliminary observations on the Uyghurs in Kyrgyzstan and to structure some of my material around three constellations of Uyghurs. The 'Uyghur migrants' can be seen as a post-Soviet rendering of a general and also inherently deterritorialised Uyghur issue. On the one hand, their political objective and cultural understandings are deeply territorialised – and their original displacement is a constituting (and almost mythical) feature of their identity – and on the other hand, issues of territorialisation are 'globalised' and seen in a geographically wider perspective. Migration being their collective beginning, the idea of migration is important, but the migration of ideas is equally important in their quest for moulding the 'international community' and realising their return. The Chinese Uyghurs exemplify, however, that migration might not only be about displacement. Physical movement, i.e. measurable movement through empty space or pre-given territories, needs to be qualified with other kinds of movement such as the possibility for forging new relations, the political and personal ways in which one is anchored in the location of departure, and the way in which physical movement might not be crossing 'regime' boundaries. One step might change the universe and one million steps may change nothing. The local Uyghurs were most of all an illuminating commentary to the deeply political, national and 'cosmopolitan' conceptions of the Uyghur migrants. The local Uyghurs paid little attention to migration, and although you may – as one of my informants stated – ask people about their family's geographical origins when meeting them at a wedding party, it is not considered a significant piece of information. Their own movement in space is less important than the fact that space itself has forced them to move.

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