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The Homeland as a Moral Horizon: Philosophical Reflections on Return Migration and Identity Among Repatriated Kazakhs

This article explores ethnic return migration to Kazakhstan through a moral-philosophical lens, focusing on the lived experiences of Qandas — ethnic Kazakhs returning from China, Mongolia, and Uzbekistan. While previous research has examined policy frameworks and integration challenges, this study reinterprets return as an ethical and existential process. Drawing on Heidegger's concepts of dwelling and being-at-home, and the notion of moral geography, we argue that repatriation is experienced as a striving toward a moral horizon rather than a mere relocation. Through narrative interviews with returnees, we reveal how ancestral land is imagined not only as a birthplace but as a space of obligation, memory, and identity reconstruction. Yet returnees often face exclusion and dissonance, complicating state narratives of national restoration. By bridging migration studies, moral philosophy, and phenomenology, this paper illuminates how return becomes an ongoing ethical negotiation of belonging, recognition, and self-becoming in post-Soviet Kazakhstan.

Keywords: Ethnic return migration, moral geography, repatriation, Kazakhstan, moral horizon, narrative identity, phenomenology, post-Soviet identity, belonging.

Introduction

In the wake of Kazakhstan's independence, the state entered an ambitious nation-building project that included a targeted policy of ethnic repatriation. In the wake of Kazakhstan's independence, the state entered an ambitious nation-building project that included a targeted policy of ethnic repatriation. Known officially as the Repatriates (Qandas) program, this initiative aimed to restore demographic balance and reconnect the nation with its diasporic communities dispersed across Uzbekistan, Mongolia, China, Russia, and beyond. While much scholarly attention has been devoted to the socio-economic integration of repatriates and the political logic behind co-ethnic migration [1, 2, 3], less explored is the deeper philosophical terrain underlying this return: What does it mean to “come home” after decades — even centuries — of absence? How do returnees reimagine the homeland not merely as a geopolitical space, but as a moral horizon of identity, belonging, and historical justice?

This paper addresses these questions by situating the narratives of return migrants within a philosophical framework that draws on Heidegger's concepts of “dwelling” and “being-at-home” [3], moral philosophy on belonging, and emergent articulations of Kazakh moral geographies. We explore how repatriated Kazakhs experience homeland as more than an administrative category or policy instrument — as a space suffused with existential meanings, ethical obligations, and a yearning for ancestral continuity.

The repatriate narratives collected articulate a powerful emotional orientation toward homeland that echoes what Tsuda [4] describes as “diasporic homecoming” — a return animated not by geographic familiarity alone but by an ethical and symbolic re-rooting. These stories reflect what Cohen terms the “restorationist impulse,” [5] where migrants view return not simply as strategic relocation but as the repair of moral and cultural ruptures inherited from Soviet and post-Soviet history. Bonnenfant [6] further emphasizes the co-production of homeland through discourse and affect, a process evident in returnees' attempts to realign their lives with a meaningful Kazakh identity. For many, the act of return represents a horizon of ethical belonging: a desire not only to live in Kazakhstan, but to live as Kazakhs again, restoring a sense of self in relation to land, history, and future generations.

Theoretically, this paper brings philosophical perspectives into dialogue with grounded migration narratives. It bridges the often-siloed disciplines of moral philosophy, phenomenology, and migration studies to argue that return migration can be read as an act of moral reconstitution — a striving to reclaim both personal and collective coherence after the dislocations of empire, modernity, and exile. In so doing, we build upon

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existing work on the politics of repatriation [7], post-Soviet identity transitions [8], and the ethical dimensions of homeland and citizenship.

Through a close reading of repatriates' life stories, we argue that homeland functions not as a fixed or given category, but as a "moral horizon" — an aspirational space of being where memory, identity, and responsibility are reconfigured. This horizon is not always reached, nor is it free of contradiction. Yet it persists as a guiding structure of feeling that animates the repatriation experience. By centering this moral-philosophical lens, our study contributes new insights to debates on belonging, postcolonial statecraft, and the lived metaphysics of return.

Literature Review: Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives on Return Migration

In recent years, ethnic return migration has gained increasing scholarly attention as a complex process embedded not only in policy and demography, but also in affect, memory, and moral imaginaries. This is especially evident in the post-Soviet context of Kazakhstan, where the return of diasporic Kazakhs is entangled with broader nation-building efforts, historical redress, and the production of cultural belonging [9, 10]. While earlier migration studies emphasized dynamics and economic drivers [11], newer frameworks emphasize the subjective, symbolic, and emotional dimensions of return, including the longing for home and the ethical imperatives attached to ancestral land [4]. These shifts mark a movement away from assimilationist models of integration toward more relational understandings of transnational identity formation and affective citizenship.

Kazakhstan's Qandas repatriation program (formerly Oralman) represents a state-led effort to restore demographic balance and cultural authenticity by inviting ethnic Kazakhs from abroad to return to their historical homeland. Official rhetoric casts this return as both a patriotic duty and a redemptive act that symbolically reverses Soviet-era marginalization [12, 8]. Yet, field-based research and policy critiques show that returnees frequently encounter linguistic exclusion, bureaucratic hurdles, and a perceived cultural gap between themselves and local Kazakhs [13, 14]. While repatriates are welcomed symbolically, their integration often unfolds in contexts of economic precarity and social ambivalence. This tension between ideological inclusion and practical exclusion underscores the disjuncture between the nation's moral discourse and the lived experiences of return migrants.

Scholars have increasingly turned to micro-level ethnographic accounts to uncover the complexity of repatriate experiences. Dalelkhan et al. [14] and Bokayev [15] emphasize the diversity of adaptation strategies among returnees, shaped by variables such as origin country, educational background, and family networks. Xiang, Yeoh, and Toyota [16] introduce the notion of "return as reordering," framing repatriation as an active remaking of social and moral worlds rather than a linear process of reintegration. This resonates with findings from Werner [17], who documents how returnees negotiate belonging and cultural legitimacy in everyday life, often by invoking ancestral memory, religious piety, and national loyalty.

A distinct feature of Kazakhstan's return migration lies in its entanglement with postcolonial identity reconstruction. Scholars such as Cerny [18], Bonnenfant [19], and Kuşçu [20] highlight how returnees from China and Mongolia encounter conflicting narratives of Kazakhness — between the Russified, urban, and bureaucratically institutionalized identity of local Kazakhs, and the more traditionalist, often rural, cultural practices of returnees. These tensions manifest not only in language use and dress but also in divergent moral worldviews. Repatriates are thus caught in a liminal space, recognized as kin yet rendered symbolically foreign. This symbolic exclusion challenges the coherence of the national project and exposes the limits of state-centric integration frameworks [21].

The return process is often animated by what Sanders [22] calls "homeland mythmaking" — a form of affective orientation toward an idealized place of belonging. In the Kazakh context, this is evident in narratives that describe return as a fulfillment of intergenerational promise or as an act of spiritual restoration (Interview data). Many returnees articulate their journey as a moral obligation to ancestors and future descendants, rather than as a response to material incentives. Such expressions align with what Cohen [5] terms the "restorationist impulse" in diaspora studies — the desire to re-anchor the self in ancestral space through return.

Yet these moral aspirations often confront the pragmatic realities of institutional life. Studies by Terlikbayeva [23], Kalshabayeva et al. [24], and Bokayev et al. [15] reveal how returnees struggle with school integration, labor market access, and housing allocation — domains in which their status as Qandas does not always confer tangible advantage. Moreover, repatriates from Mongolia and China often lack the linguistic capital required for full participation in civic and educational life, further exacerbating their mar-

ginalization. These tensions illustrate how the moral grammar of return is not always legible to host institutions, leading to friction between state narratives and lived experience.

Scholars have critiqued the methodological nationalism that undergirds much of migration research, urging more attention to translocal agency, affect, and moral geographies [25, 26]. In response, recent studies emphasize the need to reconceptualize return not as a re-entry into a static homeland, but as a process of ethical self-formation. Returnees do not simply cross borders — they reconfigure moral relationships to land, kin, and nation. Xiang et al. [16] and Bonnenfant [19] suggest that these reconfigurations offer an alternative ontology of home, grounded in affective labor, cultural negotiation, and embodied memory.

Despite these developments, few studies engage deeply with the philosophical stakes of repatriation. Questions about the ethical meaning of homeland, the moral obligations embedded in return, and the existential reconstitution of self-remain under-theorized. Existing frameworks emphasize institutional, economic, and identity-based integration, but tend to neglect how return is experienced as a moral horizon — a striving to fulfill ancestral bonds, cultural authenticity, and self-transcendence. This study contributes to filling this gap by foregrounding return migration as a site of ethical becoming, drawing on phenomenological, moral philosophical, and postcolonial lenses.

The extant literature on ethnic return migration in Kazakhstan reveals a complex interplay between state discourse, individual aspiration, and structural constraint. While state policies frame returns as a form of national consolidation, the lived experience of repatriates points to a deeper ethical and affective process — one that involves memory, struggle, and the search for moral coherence. By situating repatriation within a philosophical framework, this study offers a new lens through which to understand the homeland not merely as a destination, but as a moral and existential horizon. The extant literature on ethnic return migration in Kazakhstan reveals a complex interplay between state discourse, individual aspiration, and structural constraint. While state policies frame returns as a form of national consolidation, the lived experience of repatriates points to a deeper ethical and affective process — one that involves memory, struggle, and the search for moral coherence. By situating repatriation within a philosophical framework, this study offers a new lens through which to understand the homeland not merely as a destination, but as a moral and existential horizon.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in narrative inquiry and philosophical analysis. The primary data consist of life-history interviews with ethnic Kazakh returnees (Qandas) who migrated from Uzbekistan, China, and Mongolia to Kazakhstan. The narratives were collected through semi-structured interviews as part of a broader ethnographic research project on post-Soviet identity reconstruction. The interviews emphasized open-ended storytelling, enabling participants to reflect on their motivations, experiences of return, and evolving sense of identity and belonging. Thematic analysis was used to trace recurring motifs such as ancestral duty, spiritual return, cultural alienation, and the moral framing of the homeland. These themes were then situated within a philosophical framework informed by existential phenomenology, ethics of recognition, and moral geography.

Rather than treating repatriation solely as a socio-political event or policy outcome, this study approaches the return as a moral and existential act. Drawing on interpretive methods inspired by hermeneutic philosophy, the analysis reads returnee narratives not only for their descriptive content but for the meanings they generate about selfhood, homeland, and ethical becoming. Concepts such as Heidegger's dwelling [3], Ricoeur's "narrative identity" [27], and Charles Taylor's theory of recognition [28] serve as analytical lenses through which the lived experiences of Qandas are examined. This layered approach allows for an exploration of how returnees navigate both external challenges (e.g., bureaucracy, integration) and internal tensions (e.g., fragmented identity, longing, ancestral obligation), illuminating the homeland as not just a territorial space but a moral horizon in the making.

Discussion and Results

Homeland as Dwelling: Repatriation Through a Heideggerian Lens

Martin Heidegger's concept of "dwelling" [3] refers not simply to inhabiting a house or territory, but to a way of being-in-the-world rooted in care, meaning, and authenticity. To dwell, for Heidegger, is to be attuned to the rhythms of the world — to build, cultivate, and preserve one's place within a meaningful horizon of existence. In the context of Kazakh repatriation, "dwelling" can be reinterpreted as an act of moral-

spatial recovery — a return to what is felt as an ontologically appropriate environment where one's identity is not merely tolerated but affirmed through landscape, kinship, and memory.

The narratives of Qandas reveal that a return to Kazakhstan is often imagined as a way of restoring dwelling in this philosophical sense. One returnee from western Mongolia said: “We grew up calling Kazakhstan our true homeland, even if we had never seen it. When we arrived, I felt like I had finally put my feet where my grandfather's dreams stood.” This is not just a spatial relocation but an existential affirmation — a step toward what Heidegger calls being-at-home, where one's world and one's self come into alignment. The homeland becomes a site of ontological closure — the place where historical time (ancestry) and lived time (present belonging) converge.

Yet, Heidegger's ideal of dwelling assumes a pre-existing harmony between individual and place — an assumption that is deeply troubled in the case of Kazakh return migration. Many Qandas describe experiences of exclusion, disappointment, and cultural disorientation upon arrival. For example, a returnee from Xinjiang recounted: “We imagined Kazakhstan to be the land of Kazakhs, but when we spoke our Kazakh, people laughed. They said it sounded ancient.” Such moments expose the rupture between idealized belonging and social reality. Heideggerian dwelling, as a grounded harmony between self and world, becomes aspirational rather than descriptive — a goal rather than a given.

This tension reveals the incompleteness of homecoming. Returnees often express a paradoxical sentiment: that they are physically in Kazakhstan, but not yet of it. In Heideggerian terms, they inhabit the “worldhood” of Kazakhstan — its roads, institutions, villages — but not its “lifeworld” of mutual recognition and embeddedness. The failure of immediate dwelling reveals the fragility of ontological security in post-Soviet space, where return does not guarantee belonging, and home must be reassembled through social labor and symbolic negotiation.

Thus, dwelling for Kazakh returnees is a process — a form of moral world-making. It requires not only geographic return but affective reintegration, linguistic alignment, and cultural reconciliation. It also demands recognition by others — what Charles Taylor calls “the politics of recognition” [28] — to render one's identity legible and legitimate. Without such recognition, the homeland remains a spectral promise: close enough to touch, but not yet capable of holding.

Moral Geographies and the Ethics of Return

The concept of ‘moral geography’ [29] invites us to think of space not as a neutral or inert backdrop, but as charged with values, emotions, and ethical obligations. For ethnic Kazakh returnees, the ancestral homeland is not simply a geopolitical entity but a space imbued with deep moral significance — a site where spiritual lineage, historical rectification, and ethical fulfillment intersect. The act of return, then, is not only about claiming citizenship or relocating physically; it is about fulfilling a moral duty to restore connection with land, kin, and cultural memory. This echoes what geographers like Smith [29] and Askins [30] describe as “emotionally inscribed” or “ethically saturated” landscapes — spaces to which people are not merely attached, but feel they ought to belong.

The moral orientation toward homeland emerges clearly in the narratives of Qandas across regions. A returnee from Karakalpakstan noted, “Our elders always told us: the soil that remembers you is the soil where you must die.” This expression of ancestral continuity reframes return not as a logistical decision, but as a culmination of intergenerational fidelity. Others speak of repatriation as “carrying out the will of the ancestors,” suggesting that return is an inherited responsibility rather than a personal migration choice. The landscape of Kazakhstan, in this reading, becomes a moral terrain — not necessarily familiar, but ethically correct. It is less a remembered homeland than a rightful one.

However, this morally charged return often collides with the social and cultural politics of belonging. Many returnees, particularly from China and Mongolia, describe being labeled as “zhat Kazakhtar” — “foreign Kazakhs” — and facing subtle exclusion despite their legal recognition as Qandas. A young returnee from Xinjiang recalled: “Even though we are Kazakhs, they say we are too different — we speak strangely, we pray more, we dress oddly. They think we are backwards.” These accounts underscore how the moral geography of homeland is not universally acknowledged within the receiving society. The homeland is not equally welcoming to all returnees; instead, it functions as a contested space where divergent moral claims compete for legitimacy.

These tensions reveal the disjuncture between official narratives of return — often saturated with nationalist idealism — and the actual terrain of ethical belonging. The Kazakh state's discourse frames returnees as heroes of national restoration, but social hierarchies and linguistic divisions often place them at the

margins of local communities. In this way, return reveals the unstable moral borders of the nation: who is seen as a ‘real Kazakh’ is not simply a matter of ancestry or citizenship but of cultural performance and social legibility. Returnees must continually enact their worthiness through proper speech, dress, and conduct, rendering the ethics of return conditional and performative.

Philosophically, this condition invites us to reconsider the nature of moral obligation in repatriation. Is the moral geography of homeland a two-way street — a place that calls and embraces? Or is it unidirectional — a space that is owed reverence but offers no guarantee of belonging in return? The Kazakh case suggests the latter: returnees often experience the homeland as a space of moral expectation, but not always moral fulfillment. In this context, return becomes an ethical trial — a test of one’s resilience, authenticity, and ability to dwell with dignity in a place that does not automatically recognize you. The homeland, therefore, is not a sanctuary but a crucible — where identity must be re-justified and belonging must be re-earned.

The Ancestral Land as an Ethical Horizon

For many Qandas, the ancestral land is not merely a destination or the endpoint of a migration journey but a powerful horizon of meaning — one that organizes life choices, moral aspirations, and identity work across generations. This orientation echoes Paul Ricoeur’s notion of “narrative identity” [27], where a person or community’s sense of self is shaped by the stories they inherit, tell, and project into the future. Return, in this sense, becomes part of a transgenerational moral arc — a way to reconcile the past with the present by restoring continuity with ancestral roots. A returnee from Uzbekistan described it succinctly: “We came here to close the circle.”

What makes the ancestral land an “ethical horizon” rather than merely a nostalgic or symbolic one is that it carries normative weight. It is not just desired; it is “owed” — to parents, to children, to the ancestors buried elsewhere, and to a vision of wholeness yet to be realized. This was repeatedly evident in the narratives of returnees who described their decision not as personal ambition but as moral duty. One woman from Karakalpakstan explained, “My father always said, ‘Kazakhstan is not just a country — it is our responsibility.’” These statements reveal that the homeland is not simply a space of belonging, but a space of “ethical striving”, where the return itself becomes a redemptive act meant to repair the historical dislocations inflicted by colonization, Sovietization, and displacement.

Yet, in practice, the moral horizon of homeland is often met with disillusionment. While the return may fulfill a promise to one’s ancestors, it often creates new fractures in the lives of returnees. They may find themselves alienated from local Kazakh communities, economically precarious, or forced to suppress aspects of their diasporic heritage in order to “fit in.” A young man who returned from Mongolia shared: “I thought we were coming home. But I didn’t expect to have to prove that I am Kazakh every day.” This sense of being ethically committed to a homeland that remains ambivalent toward one’s presence underscores the complexity of repatriation as more than a material or legal process — it is an ongoing ethical negotiation.

Philosophically, we can interpret this condition as an expression of “becoming at home” rather than “being at home.” Unlike traditional views of the homeland as a place of immediate recognition and belonging, the homeland for many Qandas operates as an aspirational moral horizon — something to work toward, not something one simply arrives in. It functions as what Levinas [31] might call an “infinite task”: not a destination that resolves identity but a field in which ethical selfhood is continually shaped and reshaped in relation to others, to history, and to place.

In this light, return migration among Kazakhs is not the closure of a circle, but the opening of a new ethical chapter — one marked by ambiguity, struggle, and the slow forging of belonging. The homeland, as it emerges in these narratives, is not an unchanging origin but a horizon always just ahead: a place where one’s presence must be justified, one’s roots must be cultivated, and one’s belonging must be built through time, relationship, and recognition. It is this ethical openness — rather than static tradition — that defines the homeland as a living moral terrain.

Conclusion

This study has explored ethnic return migration to Kazakhstan not merely as a demographic or policy phenomenon, but as a deeply ethical and existential process. Drawing on Heidegger’s notion of dwelling, theories of moral geography, and narrative identity, we have shown that the homeland operates for returnees not just as a place of birthright or legal entitlement but as a ‘moral horizon’ — a space charged with ancestral obligation, cultural continuity, and future aspiration. The return to Kazakhstan, as articulated in the voices of

Qandas from Mongolia, China, and Uzbekistan, is not simply a coming home. It is a morally structured journey of becoming — an effort to reinhabit the past while constructing a meaningful place in the present.

Yet this moral orientation toward the homeland is fraught with contradictions. While the Kazakh state frames return as a symbolic and nationalistic gesture of historical justice, returnees often face social ambivalence, institutional barriers, and cultural marginalization. The promise of homeland is frequently disrupted by linguistic hierarchies, exclusionary conceptions of “authentic Kazakhness,” and the emotional labor required to prove belonging. In these fractures between ideological narrative and lived experience, we find the real terrain of return — one that is not easily mapped onto policy documents or celebratory discourse. Instead, it is a terrain marked by ethical trial, negotiation, and the enduring gap between being in Kazakhstan and truly ‘being at home.’

By treating return migration as a moral-philosophical phenomenon, this paper contributes to a growing body of work that seeks to decolonize and humanize migration studies. It calls for greater attention to the affective, spiritual, and ethical dimensions of homecoming — to the unspoken labor of becoming legible within one’s supposed homeland. Ultimately, the homeland, as narrated by returnees, is less a point of origin and more a field of ethical action — a horizon that calls, tests, and transforms.

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Отан рухани таңдау кеңістігі ретінде: репатриация және қандастардың бірегейлігін философиялық пайымдау

Мақалада Қазақстанға этникалық репатриация мәселесі моральдық-философиялық көзқарас тұрғысынан қарастырылған, атап айтқанда Қытайдан, Моңғолиядан және Өзбекстаннан оралған қандастардың күнделікті өмірлік тәжірибесіне баса назар аударылады. Бұған дейінгі зерттеулер негізінен мемлекеттік саясат пен интеграциялық қиындықтарды талдауға бағытталған болса, бұл жұмыс қайтып оралуды этикалық әрі экзистенциалдық үдеріс ретінде қайта пайымдайды. Мартин Хайдеггердің «тұрғын үй» (dwelling) және «болмыс үйі» (being-at-home) ұғымдарына, сондай-ақ моральдық география теориясына сүйене отырып, репатриацияны тек физикалық көшу ғана емес, моральдық көкжиекке ұмтылыс ретінде қарастырған. Репатрианттармен жүргізілген нарративтік сұхбаттар негізінде, ата-баба жері тек туған жер ғана емес, сонымен қатар моральдық жауапкершілік, ұжымдық жад және болмысты қайта құру кеңістігі ретінде қабылданатыны көрсетілген. Алайда, көптеген репатрианттар шеттетілу мен мәдени алшақтықты бастан кешіреді, бұл олардың ресми ұлттық жаңғыру туралы идеологиялық түсініктермен қақтығысуына себеп болады. Миграциялық зерттеулерді, моральдық философияны және феноменологиялық әдістерді ұштастыра отырып, бұл мақала қайтып оралуды үздіксіз этикалық келіссөздер үдерісі ретінде — тиістілік, танылу және өзін қайта қалыптастыру жолы ретінде сипаттайды.

Кілт сөздер: этникалық репатриация, моральдық география, оралу, Қазақстан, моральдық көкжиек, нарративтік бірегейлік, феноменология, посткеңестік бірегейлік, тиістілік.

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Родина как пространство морального выбора: философские размышления о возвращении и идентичности казахов-репатриантов

В данной статье этническая репатриация в Казахстан рассматривается сквозь призму морально-философского анализа, с акцентом на повседневный опыт кандасов — этнических казахов, вернувшихся из Китая, Монголии и Узбекистана. Несмотря на то, что в предыдущих исследованиях основное внимание уделялось вопросам государственной политики и трудностям интеграции, данное исследование переосмысляет возвращение как этический и экзистенциальный процесс. Основываясь на концепциях Мартина Хайдеггера о «жилище» (dwelling) и «дома бытия» (being-at-home), а также на теории моральной географии, мы утверждаем, что репатриация воспринимается не просто как физическое переселение, а как стремление к моральному горизонту. На основе анализа нарративных интервью с репатриантами показывается, что земля предков воспринимается ими не только как место рождения, но и как пространство моральной ответственности, памяти и восстановления идентичности. Вместе с тем, репатрианты нередко сталкиваются с ощущением отчуждения и культурного разлада, что вступает в противоречие с официальными нарративами национального возрождения и идеализации возвращения. Объединяя подходы миграционных исследований, моральной философии и феноменологии, статья демонстрирует, как возвращение превращается в непрерывный этический процесс — переговоры о принадлежности, признании и становлении себя в постсоветском Казахстане.

Ключевые слова: этническая репатриация, моральная география, возвращение, Казахстан, моральный горизонт, нарративная идентичность, феноменология, постсоветская идентичность, принадлежность.

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