

The policy of the Russian Empire toward cross-border migration from Semirechye to China (1900-1910)

Svetlana ASANOVA

Associate professor

Herzen State Pedagogical

University of Russia in Tashkent (UZ)

asa_svetlana@mail.ru

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Abstract

The article examines the cross-border migration of Russian subjects from the Semirechye region to China during the 1900s'-1910s', as well as the administrative measures taken by the Russian Empire to legally exclude these individuals from its subjecthood. These movements were not merely a matter of economic migration or political escape but also represented a form of implicit political response to imperial policies. Faced with the inability to effectively control movement through its fragmented imperial bureaucracy, the Russian authorities attempted to institutionalize the exclusion of migrants through a legal apparatus of denaturalization and land redistribution. The novelty of this study lies in the use of little-studied Russian bureaucratic and official documentation related to the process of loss of subjecthood by migrants from the Semirechye region. The research utilizes materials from meetings of the Committee of Ministers, opinions of the Ministers of Internal Affairs and War, reports of the Turkestan Governor-General, official reports of military governors, and consular dispatches from Xinjiang.

Keywords: migration, settlers, Russian subjecthood, Russian Empire, Semirechye region, China

Résumé

Cet article examine la migration transfrontalière de citoyen-ne-s russes de la région de Semirechye vers la Chine entre 1900 et 1910, ainsi que les mesures administratives prises par l'Empire russe pour les déchoir légalement de leur citoyenneté. Ces déplacements ne peuvent être réduits à des migrations économiques ou à des tentatives d'exil politique ; ils constituaient une forme de réaction implicite aux politiques impériales. La fragmentation de la bureaucratie impériale a empêché les autorités russes de contrôler efficacement ces migrations. Pour y remédier, elles ont tenté d'institutionnaliser l'exclusion des migrant-e-s par le biais d'un dispositif juridique visant à la dénaturalisation et à la redistribution des terres. L'originalité de cette étude réside dans l'utilisation de matériaux nouveaux, issus d'archives russes encore peu étudiées, liées au processus de perte de la citoyenneté des migrant-e-s de la région de Semirechye. La recherche s'appuie sur des documents issus des réunions du Comité des ministres, des avis du ministre de l'Intérieur et du ministre de la Guerre, des rapports du gouverneur général du Turkestan, des rapports officiels des gouverneurs militaires ainsi que des dépêches consulaires de Xinjiang.

Mots-clés : migration, colons, citoyenneté, Empire russe, oblast de Semirechye, Chine

Introduction

Fortunately for us, and to the credit of the local Russian administration, the entire Taranchi and Dungan population moved from Kuldzha to Semirechye. This weakened the Chinese for a time and strengthened us. As far as I know, the migration of Kuldzha Muslims to our territory did not have any real repercussions in Russia; no one, or almost no one, noticed this significant fact. The entire population, despite the privileges granted to them by the Chinese and even bribes in the form of silver and livestock, left their wonderful country, the graves of their ancestors, and their sacred sites and followed the Russians into the barren desert steppe (Поклевский-Козелл 1885, 17).

The competition between colonial empires in Central Asia was not only a question of territory claims. Displacements of population were a usual response for political and economic issues faced by Central Asian nomads and sedentaries. These movements were not merely a matter of economic migration or political escape but also represented a form of implicit political response to imperial policies. The article examines the cross-border migration of Russian subjects from the Semirechye oblast to China during the 1900s–1910s, as well as the administrative measures taken by the Russian Empire to legally exclude these individuals from its subjecthood.

In the second half of the 19th century, several treaties were concluded between the Russian and Qing Empires, clarifying territorial issues. After the establishment of borders through the Beijing (1860), Chuguchak (1864), Khobdo (1869), Tarbagatai (1870), Livadia (1879), and Saint-Petersburg (1881) treaties (Пещуров 1889), it became possible to regulate migration processes in the border regions. This issue was particularly acute because the borders established by the two powers divided interconnected areas. The territorial division did not consider the opinions of the local populations living in these areas and provoked numerous border crossings (Атантаева 2008, 9–10). It laid the groundwork for the formation of stable pendulum-like migration routes between Xinjiang and Semirechye (Аблажей 2015, 24).

These agreements between China and Russia were discussed at a time when the political situation in Xinjiang was particularly unstable. In the 1860s, China began to lose control over the region and Russia decided in 1871, after a long hesitation, to occupy militarily Kuldzha (modern-day Yining) which was part of the Chinese Empire.

Chinese authority over the region was constantly challenged by the local populations. In 1864, the revolt of the Hui, Chinese Muslims who were called Dungans by the Russians, spread in Xinjiang and took over several cities in Ili region (Northern Sinkiang). The following year with the help of Uyghurs and Kyrgyz, Yakub beg (1820–1877), born in the Kokand Khanate, expelled the Chinese from the Southern part of Sinkiang and created a new State in Kashgar, the Yettishar Emirate which lasted until 1876. Buddhist Kalmyk populations suffered from the Muslims and fled to Russia in 1866.

A special administrative-territorial entity – the Ili Region (or Kuldzha District) – was established in this area in 1871, becoming part of the Turkestan Governor-Generalship. Administration in this region was carried out by the military governor of Semirechye and closely resembled the system previously used by Chinese authorities. This model was selected to facilitate the eventual transfer of the territory back to China, which occurred following the signing of the Saint-Petersburg Treaty in 1881 (Васильев и Асанова 2023, 41). A small part of the Western Ili region was kept by the Russian and included in the Semirechye oblast.¹ Therefore, the Dzharkent uezd was established in 1882, with previous volosts from the Vernyi uezd and newly created volosts.

¹ The territory of Semirechye oblast grew from 321 000 km² to 334 000 km² (Поклевский-Козелл 1885, 1). These new incorporated lands were located between the rivers Khorgos and Borohudzir (Фёдоров 1903, 67).

The intervention of Russia in the conflict opposing Chinese authority and Muslim populations is one of the reasons for intensified migration between the Russian and Chinese empires. This process unfolded within the framework of international legal norms applied during territorial transfers between states. According to established practice, residents of transferred territories were granted the right to choose: either remain under the new administration or voluntarily resettle within the borders of the state that ceded the land. These provisions were enshrined in the text of the 1881 Saint-Petersburg Treaty, providing a legal basis for the voluntary migration of people from the Ili region to the Russian Empire.

To facilitate the adaptation of immigrants from China, the Russian imperial government, following the example of regional authorities, applied legal norms typical for both nomadic and sedentary populations, aiming to align their status with that of the empire's main taxable population. However, by the early 20th century, significant problems emerged with resettling these migrants in Semirechye. Many settlers attempted to return independently to the Qing Empire – mostly to cities in the Ili region, from where they had originally emigrated.

Most settlers were sedentary farmers belonging to two main populations: Uyghurs (sedentary turkic population from the Chinese Turkestan, called Taranchi in Russian sources) and Dungans. All of them had previously lived in territories returned to China in 1881. Their migration took place under the supervision of Russian administrative structures and became the first precedent of a large-scale, organized migration in the Russian-Chinese frontier zone (Камалов 2021, 66-67). But the pendulum-like migration concerned also Kyrgyz and Kazakhs for whom the Semirechye-Xinjiang area formed a continuous space. They lived on both sides of the borders with an important capacity of mobility as nomads.

Degree of research on the problem

Modern historiography includes works that address the movement of subjects from both the Russian and Chinese empires across the border at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Most researchers have focused on the resettlement of migrants into Russian territory from lands transferred to China after the signing of the 1881 Saint-Petersburg Treaty, their settlement within Central Asia, their legal status, and migration from the Semirechye region to the Chinese border during and after the 1916 uprising.

Issues related to the resettlement of people from the Ili region into the Russian Empire after the 1881 treaty, their placement in Semirechye, the specifics of their legal status, as well as their return migration to China in the context of the 1916 uprising, have been covered in the works of various scholars (Сизова 2010; Васильев, Асанова 2023; Karataş 2021). Significant contributions to the topic were made by Gulnara Mendikulova and Bakhyt Atantaeva in their monograph entitled *The history of migration between Kazakhstan and China in the 1860s-1960s* (Мендикулова 1992), which covers a wide range of cross-border movements. Particular attention is given to the legal aspects of these processes, including the issue of exclusion from Russian subjecthood of Kazakhs who migrated from Semirechye to China in the late 19th century, analyzing the official position of the Russian authorities and the response from the Chinese side. This work highlights the complexities of managing subjecthood in a volatile border zone amid imperial rivalry.

Several other studies address episodes of deportation of migrants by Russian authorities and the status of Russian subjects in China in a trade-diplomatic context (Дацышен 2015; Янченко 2023). The role of Russian consulates in Xinjiang in managing illegal migration and mechanisms of repatriation in the late 19th century is also explored in academic literature. These works touch on the legal status of Russian subjects in Kuldzha after their return to China (Почекаев 2018). A major theoretical-legal contribution to the study of cross-border processes was made by Jin Noda (Noda

2016). His work provides a detailed analysis of migrant status, inter-imperial agreements, and the work of mixed judicial commissions that regulated disputes between subjects of both empires. The author emphasizes that legal and administrative practices in frontier areas often diverged from centralized imperial policies.

To understand the long-term effects of migration between Kazakhstan and Xinjiang, the research by Natalya Ablazhei is of great importance. She introduces the concept of a “Kazakh migration pendulum” between the two regions and analyzes the processes of emigration, repatriation, and integration of Kazakhs during various historical stages, including the post-imperial and Soviet periods (Аблажей 2015). Particularly noteworthy is the work of Ablet Kamalov, who examines the early stages of the Soviet Union’s repatriation policy based on the accumulated pre-revolutionary experience (Камалов 2021). Despite the broad coverage of migration issues, the legal procedures for renouncing subjecthood and the imperial mechanisms for responding to voluntary migrations to China in the early 20th century remain underdeveloped. This article seeks to fill that gap.

Methods and methodology of the study

The study of the exclusion of individuals from Russian subjecthood during the first decade of the 20th century is based on an analysis of archival documents. This research utilizes clerical materials, including excerpts from meetings of the Committee of Ministers, opinions of the Ministers of War and Internal Affairs, reports and memoranda from the Turkestan Governor-General and the military governors of the Semirechye and Semipalatinsk regions, consular dispatches, and other records related to the exclusion from Russian subjecthood of migrants from Semirechye.

These archival collections are preserved in the fonds of the Chancellery of the Turkestan Governor-General and the Syr-darya Regional Administration of the National Archive of the Republic of Uzbekistan.² The archival data were analyzed within the broader historical context of interstate migrations between the territories of modern-day Kazakhstan and China. Additional value was provided by publications from public figures and materials from the periodical press. The analysis of archival sources and the generalization of published materials allowed for the formulation of overall conclusions about the policy of the Russian Empire toward migrants leaving Russian territory for China between 1900 and 1910.

The research is grounded in a postcolonial theoretical framework, in which migration is considered not only as a demographic process but also as a form of resistance – at least symbolically – against imperial order. In this context, the deprivation of subjecthood is examined as a tool of exclusion and control over unwanted individuals in a multiethnic borderland – not merely a legal measure, but a practice of symbolic and political boundary-making.

Russian authorities facing migrations in Semirechye from the 1860s’ until 1881-1884

Chinese control over the Xinjiang was constantly challenged by the local populations. In 1864, the revolt of the Dungans spread in Xinjiang and several cities in Ili region and fell under the control of the rebels until the Russian intervention (Мойсеев 2003; Noda 2010). As already mentioned, the Yettishar Emirate was established in the Southern part of Sinkiang (Kim 2004).

If some Kazakhs and Kyrgyz crossed the border to join Muslim revolts in Xinjiang (Noda 2010, 169), Buddhist Kalmyk populations suffered from the Muslims and fled to Russia in 1866. This migration affected 3 000 sedentary Kalmyks and 8 000 nomads, who settled in the Semirechye oblast, mainly Vernyi uezd and Kopal uezd (Васильев и Асанова 2023, 38). They were considered as refugees and Russian authorities refused at first to respond favourably to their request to become

² National Archives of the Republic of Uzbekistan (NA RUz), f. I-1. – “Chancellery of the Turkestan Governor-General”; f. I-17– “Syrdarya Regional Administration.”

Russian subjects. The treatment of the Kalmyks is indicative of the Russian authorities' approach to the challenges posed by these migrations in order to establish control over the region and develop their new colony. After taking into consideration the benefit of their integration, it was decided to grant settlement assistance and finally review applications to become subjects of the Empire. The process was rather chaotic, and China, for its part, endeavored to encourage the Kalmyks to return to Xinjiang.

By 1876-1877, the Dungan revolt was defeated and many of them decided to take refuge in the Russian Empire to avoid the repression by the Chinese. It concerned about 4 000 Dungans who settled mainly in present-day Kyrgyzstan (Rimsky-Korsakoff Dyer 2021, 13). It was the first wave before the second more massive one between 1881 and 1884, when 5 000 Dungans and 45 000 Uyghurs came to Semirechye. The unstable socio-political situation in China's border areas contributed to the growing migration of populations to Russian territory. The main difference was that those arriving in the second wave received the Russian subjecthood as a consequence of the Saint-Petersburg Treaty. Upon entering the empire, they fell under the special legal status of alien people [инородцы] that can be described as "non-Russian subjects of the Russian Empire" like Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and other Central Asian peoples.

The authorities of the Russian Empire were partially interested in the resettlement of Uyghurs and Dungans into Central Asia and sought lands for their settlement within Semirechye. The region required a sedentary and agricultural population capable of developing farming. Uyghurs and Dungans were skilled farmers and craftsmen, adept in irrigation and horticulture, which could have contributed to the region's economic growth. The land plots allocated to the newly arrived Uyghurs and Dungans were poorly suited for full-fledged agriculture: the soil quality was low, and the conditions for irrigation were unfavorable. These factors significantly limited the settlers' economic prospects, impeding their welfare and ability to meet tax and civic obligations to the state. As a result of worsening socio-economic conditions, many new subjects of the Russian Empire began to accumulate tax arrears, while others were left completely without land, contributing to the formation of a substantial landless proletariat. Deprived of means of subsistence, many settlers attempted to return independently to the Qing Empire – mostly to cities in the Ili region, from where they had originally emigrated.

According to the 1897 census for the Semirechye oblast, Uyghurs numbered 55 800 and Dungans 15 300 over a global population of 988 000. If the population of Uyghur and Dungan has grown since the years 1881-1884, the number of Kalmyks officially reduced from more than 10 000 to 1 734 (Тройницкий 1905, IV-VI). This census indicates a migration flow back to China,³ even if part of the nomad Kalmyks has been integrated by Kazakhs, but it doesn't show the pendulum-like migration that sources reveal.

The issue of newly Russian subject returning to China after the Saint-Petersburg Treaty (1881)

Already in the early 1890s', the Asian Department of the Russian Empire's Ministry of Foreign Affairs began active correspondence with Russian consular institutions in Kuldzha and Kashgar regarding the return of Russian subjects – primarily Uyghurs and Dungans – who had previously migrated from the Ili region, mostly to the Semirechye region and partly to the Syr-darya region. Despite having recently acquired Russian subjecthood and being allocated land, a significant number of these settlers voluntarily left the empire and returned to Chinese territory, creating both diplomatic and administrative difficulties. Consular services were instructed to facilitate their repatriation, but these measures often proved ineffective.

³ By 1882, the Semirechye administration estimated the number of Kalmyks to be 3 000 (Поклевский-Козелл 1885, 3).

The situation was particularly complicated in the border zone encompassing the Semipalatinsk and Semirechye regions. The vast expanse and ethnographic characteristics of these regions made it difficult to monitor cross-border movements. The boundary between the Russian and Qing Empires often passed through areas inhabited predominantly by nomadic populations, resulting in members of the same lineage or tribe falling under different jurisdictions. This was especially true for the Kyrgyz and Kazakhs traditionally living in the Tarbagatai and Ili areas, whose best pastures had been returned to China after 1881. This circumstance greatly contributed to mass migrations, including entire lineages, such as the “Chazha” lineage (from the Kazakh lineage group Alban of the Senior Horde) in 1884 (Мәшірепұлы 2025).

The return of Uyghurs and Dungans to Russian territory proved problematic: diplomatic efforts failed to produce consistent results, and those who were repatriated often fled back across the border. Tensions were further heightened by the Russian Empire’s tax system, which held local territorial communities fiscally responsible for unpaid taxes. For sedentary populations, taxation was based on land holdings; for nomads, on the number of *kibitka* (nomadic household), counted every three years. Communities resented being held liable for taxes owed by members who had voluntarily left the empire.

These circumstances posed two interrelated questions for the authorities. First, what were the reasons behind the permanent emigration of Kazakhs, Uyghurs, and Dungans to China? Second, what administrative and diplomatic measures could be taken by the Russian Empire to regulate the legal status of subjects who had left the country and ensure their repatriation?

At the turn of the century, Russian subjects living within the Qing Empire enjoyed extraterritorial rights, meaning they were not subject to local Chinese authorities but instead fell under the jurisdiction of Russian consular institutions. In this environment, Russian consuls coordinated their actions with Chinese officials based on imperial legislation. However, the lack of a clearly defined protocol often forced consuls to go beyond standard diplomatic duties: they conducted investigations, participated in judicial proceedings jointly with Chinese authorities, and organized the repatriation of migrants from Semirechye back to the Ili region.

Nikolai Bogoyavlensky (1867-1945), a graduate of the Lazarev Institute of Oriental Languages in Moscow and Russian consul in Chuguchak (West China), noted in the early 20th century that the very possibility of Russian subjects emigrating across the border to China had been established by the terms of the 1881 Treaty. In his view, the resettlement of Uyghurs and Dungans in Semirechye and their acceptance into Russian subjecthood, sanctioned by the Turkestan administration, had a political dimension – acting as indirect pressure on the Qing Empire. Bogoyavlensky was critical of the consequences of this decision, emphasizing that the desire to quickly populate the newly acquired territory was not supported by adequate resources, particularly in terms of arable land. This led to economic instability among settlers. He also pointed out that the Russian authorities encouraged the separation of settler families, believing that having relatives on both sides of the border would help maintain Russian influence in the Ili region. In practice, however, this only facilitated the return of migrants to China and their reintegration into former communities (Богоявленский 1906, 323-324).

Formation of the mechanism for excluding migrants to China from Russian subjecthood

The mass emigration of settlers into Chinese territory prompted increased activity from Russian border and consular institutions. Local communities began to accumulate tax arrears, and consulates received requests to locate and deport migrants back to their places of registration. Initially, the authorities attempted forced returns: expeditions were organized, and some settlers were successfully repatriated. However, many of them returned to a destitute state, having lost property, land, and livelihoods. Upon returning under guard to Russian territory, they often faced poverty, homelessness, and lack of prospects, prompting repeated attempts to flee. Bogoyavlensky openly stated that forced measures were ineffective and proposed a more pragmatic approach: to allow migrants to remain legally in China – even if they did not formally accept Chinese subjecthood – provided they fulfilled their tax obligations to the Russian Empire (Богоявленский 1906, 325).

The issue of uncontrolled emigration of Russian subjects into Chinese territory became so urgent that it was brought before the highest levels of government in the early 20th century. In January 1903, reports by Minister of War Aleksei Kuropatkin and Minister of Internal Affairs Vyacheslav Plehve were submitted to the Committee of Ministers,⁴ raising the question of whether to permit the exclusion from Russian subjecthood of individuals who had migrated from the Semirechye and Semipalatinsk regions to China.⁵ After reviewing the documents, the Committee of Ministers concluded that a general legal provision should be developed to regulate the process of excluding these “defectors” from Russian subjecthood. The main decision, recorded in the final resolution, was that such exclusion could only occur by the emperor’s highest permission. The regulation governing the exclusion of non-Russians who had migrated to China from Russian subjecthood was officially approved by the Emperor on 17 January 1903.

According to this regulation, exclusion from subjecthood was permitted only upon formal submissions by the governors-general of the Turkestan and Steppe regions to the Ministers of Internal Affairs and War, and only with verified lists of individuals who had permanently left the empire. Each case required an individual investigation to confirm the migrant’s permanent residence in China.⁶ Consideration of previously submitted lists and proposals – including those from the Semirechye regional government – was postponed. A further complication was that the War Ministry was aware of cases in which migrants had returned to Russia five or six years after departure, making it difficult to legally finalize their exclusion from subjecthood.

As a result of the January 1903 meetings, the Committee of Ministers approved a systematic procedure for excluding Kazakhs, Dungans, and Uyghurs who had settled permanently in the Qing Empire. According to the new procedure, the governors-general of the Turkestan and Steppe regions were to compile lists of emigrants – based on official investigations – and submit them to the Ministries of War and Internal Affairs. These ministries would then forward the information to the Committee of Ministers to initiate the process of exclusion from subjecthood. For nomads, this also involved exclusion from tax rolls during the next three-year *kibitka* census. At the same time, there was a push to rationally redistribute the land plots abandoned by migrants. Since the initial cause of emigration was the poor agricultural quality of the allotted land, the governors-general were instructed to create special land commissions⁷ to survey the plots and propose their reassignment. Local authorities were advised to draft instructions for district and volost administrations to govern

⁴ The Committee of Ministers carried out its activities under the emperor as the highest advisory and administrative body of the Russian Empire in the period 1802-1906. It was replaced by the Council of Ministers of the Russian Empire.

⁵ NA RUz, fond. I-1. inventory 13, folder 163, pages 3-5 (reverse).

⁶ *ibid.* p. 3.

⁷ The land commission included: the district chief, the tax inspector, the manager of state property or a forester and a surveyor.

how these abandoned lands would be managed.⁸ Thus, government policy shifted from efforts at repatriation to legally formalizing the loss of subjecthood.⁹ For example, Turkestan Governor-General Nikolai Ivanov informed the governor of Semirechye, Mihail Ionov, that he considered previously submitted materials and migrant lists sufficient to initiate the process of exclusion. Ivanov noted that the approved regulations were too burdensome, risking years of delay in reviewing each individual case.¹⁰

By 1903, local administrations in the Semirechye and Semipalatinsk oblasts had come to a consensus: instead of attempting to bring emigrants back, they would proceed with their official exclusion from Russian subjecthood. This initiative originally came from the General Governorship of the Steppe and was later supported by the Turkestan Governor-General. The shift in state policy resulted from the prolonged failure of Russian consuls to obtain cooperation from Chinese authorities in repatriating migrants.¹¹ Aware of the futility of earlier efforts, Ivanov promptly sent a renewed request to the War Minister Kuropatkin for a review of the previously submitted lists.¹² In his cover letter, Ivanov noted that initiating the exclusion of Uyghurs and Dungans who had left Russian territory would inevitably require revisiting the issue of land redistribution. After the departure of these migrants, the tax burden for unproductive land plots fell on the rural communities where the land was located. This became one of the most pressing issues for local authorities. As early as 1902, steps had been taken to identify unirrigated and infertile lands for potential removal from communal use, thereby reducing the tax burden.¹³ For instance, in February 1903, the military governor of Semirechye, Ionov, sent a report to the Turkestan Governor-General with attached copies of decisions from Uyghur village communities in two settlements of the Karasuy volost (Vernyi uezd), expressing their categorical refusal to retain two land plots totaling 1 200 and 300 desyatinas.¹⁴ These lands were deemed completely unsuitable for agriculture by a land commission.¹⁵ In other regions, such as Vernyi and Dzharkent uezds, many Uyghur communities, on the contrary, expressed interest in retaining the land left behind.¹⁶ In Dzharkent district, the Ministry of Finance had already agreed to reduce land allotments and tax assessments by 1903. Similar correspondence took place concerning Vernyi uezd.¹⁷ As a result, by the end of 1903, the Ministry of Finance officially approved tax reductions for the Uyghur communities of Karasuy and Malybai volosts by excluding 1 500 and 3 699 desyatinas of unsuitable land from taxation, respectively.¹⁸

As for Dungans, land was allocated in Aulie-Ata District (Syr-darya oblast, present-day southern Kazakhstan). Dungan settlements were founded with the emperor's highest approval in 1881, and each family was granted a land allotment of 7 desyatinas. By 1883, these land plots had been officially surveyed and confirmed by the regional administration. Initially, the Dungans were exempt from taxes and levies for the period 1883-1886 due to their recent migration and unstable economic condition. However, even after this grace period, they were not subjected to tax obligations, which sparked administrative disputes (in 1898, for example, 103 Dungan households in Aulie-Ata

⁸ NA RUz, f. I-1. Inv. 13, fol. 163, p. 5 (rev).

⁹ *ibid.* p. 1.

¹⁰ *ibid.* p. 9.

¹¹ *ibid.* p. 56.

¹² *ibid.* p. 10.

¹³ *ibid.* p. 6 (rev.).

¹⁴ A desyatina is approximately 1.09 hectare or 10 925 square metres.

¹⁵ *ibid.* pp. 7-8.

¹⁶ *ibid.* p. 15 (rev.).

¹⁷ *ibid.* p. 11.

¹⁸ *ibid.* p. 21 (rev.).

District were still not paying land taxes). In 1899, the regional administration recognized the need to begin taxing them during the 1899-1901 period, but in subsequent years, actual tax collection was not implemented. By the early 20th century, the taxation of Dungan land holdings remained unresolved. Starting on 8 April 1902, all populations – including the indigenous ones – were subjected to state land tax obligations. Dungan settlements, however, remained an exception.

In 1903, the Land and Tax Commission resolved to submit the matter to the Syr-darya regional administration, noting that the continued tax exemption for these settlements had no political or economic justification. At the same time, questions were raised about the legality of the Dungans' settlement in the region: whether they had properly undergone the procedure of obtaining Russian subjecthood, whether land allocation plans had been legally confirmed, and on what basis benefits had been granted to Dungans arriving from Kashgar rather than from Kuldzha, as originally prescribed. Between 1899 and 1908, the authorities also discussed the use of Dungans as laborers on state lands and experimental farms,¹⁹ as well as the prosecution of those who entered into service in the Chinese military.²⁰ Thus, the Dungans' unstable legal status, unresolved land and tax issues, and increasing administrative pressure without guarantees of equal rights became one of the key sources of discontent among them – and one of the driving factors behind their partial return to China in the early 20th century. As such, the land and legal status of Uyghur and Dungan migrants who had moved to China became an integral part of a broader administrative reform aimed at systematizing the empire's tax registration and rationalizing land use in its frontier regions.

In February 1904, Turkestan Governor-General Ivanov approved the "Instruction on the procedure for the exclusion from Russian subjecthood of persons who emigrated to China,"²¹ developed by the Turkestan Chancellery based on the 17 January 1903 regulation of the Committee of Ministers and the opinions of the military governors of the Semirechye and Semipalatinsk²² regions. By comparing the positions of the two regional governors and the Chancellery of the Turkestan Governor-General,²³ both shared and differing approaches can be identified regarding the exclusion of migrants to China from Russian subjecthood, as well as land and administrative regulation. Both proposed that a preliminary investigation be required to confirm permanent emigration, followed by official removal from the tax rolls. There was consensus that volost administrators [волостной управитель] and heads of district should promptly react to cases of unauthorized migration, verify the facts, and submit the findings to the regional authorities for final decision-making. The investigation was to determine not only the fact of migration but also its nature – temporary or permanent.

However, the governors differed on how the administrative process should be initiated. Semirechye Governor Ionov insisted that a formal resolution from the aul or village community be required to confirm that a member had left imperial territory. Only then, he argued, could an investigation be launched. In contrast, Semipalatinsk Governor Aleksandr Galkin considered this requirement unnecessarily complicated and potentially prone to abuse, given local tensions. He proposed that the initiative rest solely with volost administrators, as official state representatives responsible for monitoring nomadic movements. The two governors also held differing views on the land question. The Semipalatinsk governor advocated for a thorough survey of the lands left behind by emigrant Kazakhs, Dungans, and Uyghurs, with participation from both local and central agencies. This survey would determine whether the lands could be reused – for instance, to

¹⁹ NA RUz, f. I-17. Inv. 1, fol. 15504, 52 p.

²⁰ NA RUz, f. I-1. Inv. 4, fol. 418, 44 p.

²¹ NA RUz, f. I-1. Inv. 13, fol. 163, p. 40 (rev).

²² The Governor-General of the Steppe region assigned the development of instructions to the Military Governor of the Semipalatinsk region.

²³ NA RUz, f. I-1. Inv. 13, fol. 163, pp. 30-35.

establish new Russian settlements. Conversely, the Semirechye governor considered such efforts redundant, as the identification of excess land for colonization was already underway. He believed that the vacated land should remain with the village communities, especially considering future population growth and the need for arable land.

The Chancellery of the Turkestan Governor-General found the Semipalatinsk proposal more comprehensive but also noted that neither plan accounted for all possible scenarios. It criticized the excessive role given to communities in Ionov's proposal and deemed land surveys in his region unnecessary. Regarding land management, the Chancellery concluded that communities could not be compelled to retain vacant plots if doing so exceeded their capacity or violated their right to dispose of land voluntarily.

Thus, in the process of creating a unified instruction on the exclusion of emigrants from Russian subjecthood in the early 20th century, a tension arose between two administrative models: one emphasizing centralized state control and efficiency, and the other relying on community initiative and traditional local governance. The final decision represented a compromise aimed at balancing administrative effectiveness with sensitivity to local conditions and the distinct nature of nomadic and sedentary land use.

Implementation of the instruction and practices from 1904 to 1910

According to the Instruction approved in 1904, the administrative process for excluding persons from Russian subjecthood who had emigrated from Semirechye to China was strictly regulated and consisted of several steps involving multiple levels of local authority.

The main responsibility for detecting cases of migration was placed on the volost administrators, who, by law, were required to monitor the movement of nomadic households. If a volost administrator identified a case of migration, he was obligated to immediately report it to the head of the district, providing detailed information about the migrant, the direction of their movement, their motives, and the intended purpose of the migration. Next, the head of the district – either personally or through an assistant – was to carry out an on-site investigation to determine whether the migration was temporary (e.g., to visit relatives or due to seasonal economic hardships) or permanent. Upon conclusion of this inquiry, the district administration would forward the collected materials to the Regional Administration for review by the General Council.²⁴ Only after confirming the permanent nature of the migration could the Regional Administration authorize the exclusion of the individual from the kikitka tax registry, effective from the next scheduled kikitka census. Corresponding notifications were then sent to the Treasury Chamber, and the lists of individuals to be excluded were forwarded to the Governor-General via the military governor. If the emigrants belonged to the sedentary population, the process included an additional step: the relevant village community was required to issue a formal resolution on the fate of the migrant's land allotment – whether the community wished to retain or relinquish it. This resolution, along with the investigative report, was submitted to the Regional Administration. In cases where the community refused to maintain control over the land, a special land commission was created. This commission, comprising representatives of the district, tax, and land administrations, would formally reduce the community's land holdings.

The next step involved the General Council of the Semirechye Regional Administration reviewing all documents and determining the future use of the vacated land: which portions should be redistributed among existing Russian settlements, and which should be transferred to the

²⁴ General Council was in fact an interdepartmental commission, which the governor assembled to resolve particularly important and extraordinary matters. As a rule, it was a joint meeting of the provincial government, the treasury chamber and the state property administration.

Ministry of Agriculture and State Property. Only after this review would the documents be passed to the Turkestan Governor-General via the military governor. The final decision was made by the Omsk Treasury Chamber, which determined whether the vacated lands would be removed from the tax registry, held in reserve, or reassigned to the central land administration.²⁵ Thus, the approved Instruction formalized a comprehensive, multi-stage administrative response to mass migration out of Russian subjecthood, linking questions of political and legal status to land and fiscal policies – especially relevant in the context of the settlement movement and limited agricultural resources.

According to materials stored in the National Archive of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the General Council of the Semirechye Regional Administration met annually to review cases related to the emigration of Russian subjects to China, beginning in the fall of 1904 and continuing through 1909. Between 1904 and 1908, the council's key concerns were: the reduction and redistribution of land abandoned by emigrants, the formation of land reserves, and the initiation of administrative procedures for removing these individuals from Russian subjecthood. For example, in 1904, the General Council resolved to remove 3 972 desyatinas and 2 300 sazhen²⁶ (approximately 4 330 hectares) of land from the Uyghur communities in the Dzharkent volost. This led to a reduction of 393 rubles in annual land tax obligations. The freed lands were temporarily placed under the management of the local administration as a land reserve in case of population growth.²⁷ As of 1 September 1905, 3 699 desyatinas were officially removed from the land holdings of the Uyghur villages of Malybai volost – Baiseit, Masakpai, Kaynak, and Sarybulak. Of this total, 1 700 desyatinas and 2 000 sazhen were subject to taxation under existing laws, while the remaining 1 998 desyatinas and 400 sazhen were deemed completely unsuitable for agriculture and therefore exempt from fiscal obligations.²⁸ In 1907, a list of 106 Uyghur families from the Malybai volost who had permanently settled in China was compiled and submitted for review by the highest administrative body. This included: 12 families from Malybai, 17 from Baiseit, 41 from Masakpai, 11 from Kaynak, 9 from Sarybulak, and 16 from Oyjaylau. These individuals were subject to exclusion from Russian subjecthood.²⁹

Similar actions were taken in relation to individual nomadic households from other volosts. By 1910, eight yurt-owning families [юртовладельцы] from the Aitovskaya volost (Dzharkent uezd) and Ivanov village (Lepsinsk uezd), who had permanently left the Russian Empire, were removed from the kibitka tax rolls.³⁰ Additionally, nine yurts from Vernyi volost, totaling 35 individuals, were officially excluded from Russian subjecthood.³¹ Thus, the work of the General Council during this period was comprehensive, addressing both the legal and administrative aspects of migration and the fiscal and land management issues related to the redistribution and taxation of vacated lands.

The escalation of Russian-Chinese tensions in 1908 – driven by growing rivalry for influence in East Asia – had a direct impact on the situation in the Central Asian borderlands. One manifestation of this tension was the diplomatic dispute over Kazakhs who were subjects of the Russian Empire but had unlawfully resettled in Chinese territory. In June 1908, in response to materials provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – consisting of correspondence between the Russian consul in

²⁵ NA RUz, f. I-1. Inv. 13, fol. 163, p. 40(rev).

²⁶ A sazhen is approximately 2.13 metres.

²⁷ NA RUz, f. I-1. Inv. 13, fol. 163, pp. 60-61 (rev).

²⁸ *ibid.* pp. 70-71 (rev).

²⁹ *ibid.* p. 84 (rev).

³⁰ *ibid.* p. 118 (rev).

³¹ *ibid.* p. 77 (rev).

Kuldzha and Chinese diplomats³² – the Chancellery of the Turkestan Governor-General³³ concluded that the matter was being mishandled diplomatically.³⁴ This opinion caused dissatisfaction among Foreign Ministry officials. According to the documents, 911 Kazakh kubitka were found within China, composed of individuals who had left Russian territory without official registration and were not listed in the records of the Semirechye Regional Administration. The Chinese side demanded their removal from Qing territory.

As a result, the Chancellery recommended that Russian diplomatic agents in Kuldzha, Chuguchak, and Kashgar investigate to determine the origin of the migrants. If it was confirmed that they came from the Semirechye region or the Steppe General-Governorship, the process of excluding them from Russian subjecthood should be initiated.³⁵ If their origins could not be determined, the military governor was to pressure consuls to seek their deportation back to Russian territory. A diplomatic official at the Turkestan Governor-General's office insisted that all actions to exclude individuals from subjecthood must comply with the norms of the 1860 Beijing Treaty. According to that international agreement, the transfer of subjects had to be carried out formally, with personal lists and the physical handover of individuals to the Chinese side.³⁶

The difference in approach between civil and diplomatic administrations further complicated the situation. By late summer 1908, the movement of Kazakhs across the border into China had become spontaneous and was no longer under Russian control. Chinese authorities, fearing armed clashes, refrained from strict measures, since most migrants were reportedly armed. Amid these developments, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs submitted a formal note suggesting that the emerging conflict be resolved through coordinated action between the Turkestan administration and the Russian Foreign Ministry to avoid border incidents and deterioration of bilateral relations.³⁷ Following this, the Russian envoy in Beijing instructed the consul in Kuldzha to contact the military governor of the Semirechye region and issue directives to Heads of district and border officials to accept returning migrants into the Russian Empire without delay.³⁸ This episode vividly illustrates how localized migration movements at the fringes of empires could become catalysts for international tension against the backdrop of broader geopolitical rivalry.

The Russian Empire's response to mass migrations into the Qing Empire

Given that the migration of Kazakhs, Uyghurs, and Dungans into Qing territory had acquired a mass and uncontrolled character – with no sign of abating – the General Council of the Semirechye Regional Administration, at its August 1909 meeting, raised the question of whether all individuals of these groups who had emigrated to China and remained there without proper documentation should be excluded from Russian subjecthood.

This initiative likely reflected the position of the Asian Department of the General Staff, which had earlier conveyed its view to the Turkestan Governor-General. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the most effective way to stop these uncontrolled migrations was to proceed with the blanket exclusion from Russian subjecthood of all Kazakhs, Uyghurs, and Dungans living in China

³² *ibid.* pp. 99-111.

³³ In May 1908, a change of power took place in the Turkestan General-Governorship. Lieutenant General Pavel Ivanovich Mishchenko was appointed acting Governor-General of Turkestan. It was with his appointment that the issue of resettlers to Chinese territory became more acute.

³⁴ *ibid.* p. 112 (rev).

³⁵ *ibid.* p. 112 (rev).

³⁶ *ibid.* pp. 113-114.

³⁷ *ibid.* pp. 120-121 (rev).

³⁸ *ibid.* pp. 131-132.

without permits and showing no desire to return to Russia.³⁹ These mass exclusions were viewed not only as an administrative necessity but also as a means of foreign policy regulation, driven by the broader strain in Russian-Chinese relations. The presence of a large number of former Russian subjects in China – who recognized neither jurisdiction, paid no taxes to the Russian treasury, and were often involved in criminal activities such as robbery, cattle theft, and evasion of justice – was seen as a threat to regional stability. This situation hindered efforts to maintain good neighborly relations and caused concern among both military and civil authorities in Turkestan and in the diplomatic corps.

During the August 1909 session of the General Council, the root causes of the mass migrations were summarized based on reports from heads of district.⁴⁰ These included: chronic shortages of winter fodder for livestock; internal social conflicts, especially following aul and volost elections, where the losing side was dominated by the winners for three years;⁴¹ strong kinship ties between Kazakhs on both sides of the border; deteriorating economic conditions; rumors of better living conditions and pasture access in the Kuldzha region; and the relative ease of crossing the border due to the lack of effective customs and border control. Additionally, many migrants fled debts or legal prosecution. Widespread rumors about incoming Russian peasant colonists taking over land in the border regions and the lenient treatment of fugitives by Chinese authorities also encouraged further emigration.⁴²

In response to the situation and the recommendations of the General Staff's Asian Department, the General Council decided to instruct heads of district to cross-check volost records against actual resident populations. Individuals who had been absent in China for over a year without permission were to be listed by name, including family composition, age, and other details, supported by testimonies from neighbors, and forwarded to the Regional Administration. Those absent for less than a year were to be reported to Russian consulates in Kuldzha, Chuguchak, and Kashgar, who were to notify the individuals of the need to return to Russia by spring 1910 or risk losing their subjecthood. Village and aul meetings were also tasked with conducting explanatory campaigns to inform residents that those who had left the empire without authorization would be excluded from Russian subjecthood with no right to reinstatement. Simultaneously, district officials were instructed to abandon attempts to forcibly repatriate such individuals, since, as was noted, the migrants were mostly poor or had criminal backgrounds – and their return was deemed undesirable.⁴³

Despite broad support for these measures, the military governor of the Semirechye oblast for the period 1908-1916, Major General Mihail Folbaum, insisted that an official conclusion be obtained from the Turkestan Governor-General before implementing them.⁴⁴ By mid-1910, amid worsening Russian-Chinese relations, the issue of Kazakhs, Uyghurs, and Dungans who had left the Russian Empire remained unresolved. In fact, the situation worsened. In particular, reports from Przhevalsk district highlighted growing social tensions among the Kyrgyz population. The primary cause, according to local authorities, was the confiscation of Kyrgyz land in favor of Russian settlers under the empire's agrarian policy. Administrators were particularly concerned about the active

³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 130.

⁴⁰ *ibid.* p. 154 (rev).

⁴¹ Local administration officials, according to the Steppe Regulations, were confirmed in their positions for three years.

⁴² It is worth noting that two years later, after the issue of exclusion of settlers to China was initiated, by the Emperor's Decree of 7 May 1905, 739 kubitkas of Kazakhs, numbering 1 798 people, 4 053 Uyghurs and 203 Dungans were excluded from Russian citizenship. The total number of people excluded from citizenship then amounted to 6 054 people. (NA RUz, f. I-1. Inv. 13, fol. 163, p. 76). The next exclusion from Russian citizenship of Kazakhs from the Dzarkent district of the Semirechye region who fled at different times to Chinese territory, numbering 45 tents (161 people), was approved by the emperor on 8 July 1909. (NA RUz, f. I-1. Inv. 13, fol. 163, pp. 145-149). These were minor measures against the backdrop of mass displacement.

⁴³ NA RUz, f. I-1. Inv. 13, fol. 163, p. 158.

⁴⁴ *ibid.* p. 152.

role played by the Kyrgyz tribal elite – *manaps* – in spreading “agitational sentiment” and inciting unrest. Despite efforts by the head of district to calm the situation, including messaging that the Chinese government would neither accept new migrants nor retain those who had already arrived, anti-migration measures proved ineffective. Unauthorized border crossings continued and calls for migration persisted.

In these circumstances, both the local administration and Governor Folbaum concluded that the only viable way to stabilize the region was to eliminate those individuals identified as “key agitators” responsible for inciting unrest in the border areas.⁴⁵ The Russian authorities were confronted with the logic of resistance strategies employed by populations under colonial rule. In this case, identifying “key agitators” was a dead end. These individuals were often the same people who acted as liaisons between the Central Asian populations and the Tsarist administrations, serving as mediators for the Russians and protectors of their compatriots (Ohayon 2015).

The 1916 revolt, which was provoked by the unilateral decision to mobilize alienated non-submitted to military obligations for auxiliary work on the European front, was led by those whom some Russian administrators called “key agitators” (Chokobaeva et al. 2019). It was particularly significant in Semirechye and was accompanied by a mass exodus to China of Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, for whom migration across the Russian-Chinese border had for decades been a way out of crisis situations.

Conclusion

The border situation in the Semirechye region by the mid-1910s reflected a complex convergence of factors: deteriorating Russian-Chinese relations, mass and uncontrollable migrations of Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Uyghurs, and Dungans into China, and internal socio-economic tensions stemming from agrarian reform and land distribution. The Russian administration faced a dilemma – either forcibly return migrants or formalize their exclusion from subjecthood. Despite the development of formal institutions such as a passport system, diplomatic protocols, and legal procedures for denaturalization, the Russian Empire failed to effectively control population mobility amid cultural and institutional diversity.

The legal reforms of 1903-1904, which systematized the procedure for excluding migrants from Russian subjecthood and redistributing vacated land, laid the foundation for a universal administrative process based on investigation, legal documentation, and coordination among rural and central authorities. However, the practical implementation of this policy was hindered by local cultural realities, administrative constraints, and the lack of coordination between diplomatic, military, and civilian institutions.

The unrest in the Przhevalsk district and the role of the Kyrgyz tribal elite demonstrated that agrarian policies that ignored traditional kinship structures and nomadic practices could provoke serious resistance. In response, authorities turned to identifying and removing “key agitators” in hopes of preventing further destabilization. Thus, the early 20th century border crisis in Semirechye reveals that beneath the surface of technocratic colonial administration lay significant local resistance – subtle, yet effective. Migration became a form of political expression that rejected the terms imposed by the imperial center. This transforms the case of cross-border migration into more than a regional issue – it becomes a critical lens for rethinking post-imperial legacies. In this light, the 1916 uprising⁴⁶ should not be viewed merely as a reaction to forced conscription but as the culmination of longstanding tension caused by unequal inclusion of indigenous peoples

⁴⁵ *ibid.* pp. 170-171.

⁴⁶ This was a mass anti-colonial uprising of the Indigenous population of Turkestan, Semirechye and the Steppe region against the policies of the Russian Empire during the First World War.

into the imperial framework. Migration, once a “safety valve,” ultimately became a precursor to open political resistance. The experience of Semirechye in the early 20th century thus allows us to understand migration and protest not as isolated phenomena but as interconnected manifestations of postcolonial tension that continued to shape regional identities well into the post-imperial period.

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