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**Making sense of change:**

An urban ethnography of middle-class narratives of uncertainty  
in Almaty, Kazakhstan

Alexander James Parkyn-Smith

Department of Anthropology

University of Durham

2020

## Abstract

### **Making sense of change:**

#### **An urban ethnography of middle-class narratives of uncertainty in Almaty, Kazakhstan**

Alexander James Parkyn-Smith

This urban ethnography focuses on the new generation of young urban middle-class people in Almaty, Kazakhstan, who have grown up after the Soviet Union. It examines how they respond to the dramatic social, economic, political, and environmental changes their country has undergone since 1991. A close analysis of their distinct way of life, in comparison to both their parents' generation and the wider public, provides an insight into the social strategies they employ to make sense of change in the context of their everyday lives. This research, based on fieldwork carried out between 2014 and 2017, is an original study, addressing the question: How do Almaty's urban middle-class population make sense of change?

I argue that young urban middle-class people in Almaty, Kazakhstan perform a public narrative of their lives, providing their everyday existence with a sense of structure, stability, and coherence in the face of past societal change and the risk of further change in the future. However, ruptures in everyday life—such as a flood, earthquake, currency devaluation, or even a marriage—expose vulnerabilities of this young generation that are only discussed in private contexts. To overcome their growing uncertainty about the reliability of public narratives, my informants increasingly rely on their trusted social relations of kinship and friendship networks. When these channels are exhausted, my informants turn to alternative discursive techniques, such as rumour, to discuss private concerns in public contexts without undermining their own public narratives.

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Alexander James Parkyn-Smith

Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Anthropology  
University of Durham  
2020

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## Abbreviations

IMF: International Monetary Fund

MoES: Ministry of Emergency Situations

UNISDR: United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction

## Language and Transliterations

When quoting Russian and Kazakh words in this thesis, I have used the Library of Congress standard of transliteration to ensure consistency. I have taken exceptions when there is a common transliteration that is better known to an English-speaking audience.

## Naming, Anonymity, and Pseudonyms

To preserve the anonymity of my informants, the names used in this text are pseudonyms. These names are randomly chosen, but correspond to the ethnicity of the informant: for example, an ethnic Kazakh informant has been given a random Kazakh name. Real names are only used when I am discussing public figures. I made it clear that it would not be possible to ensure anonymity when interviewing these individuals, and our research discussions followed on this basis. The names of places are real and this is important to help orientate the reader, especially for those who may be familiar with the local context. I have used the English names for places when they are available and otherwise use official names used locally.

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## Preface:

### Narratives, rupture, and uncertainty

Nuriya was 23 years old when we first met. Born in 1992 after the collapse of the Soviet Union, she had grown up in an independent Republic of Kazakhstan and had attended university in Almaty. She is an ethnic Kazakh, tall with a slim build and shoulder-length brown hair. I met her at her workplace, where she was greeting guests at an international business networking event that my host was running at a restaurant in downtown Almaty. We chatted and found that we shared an interest in photography. A few days later I joined a group of her friends on a photoshoot in the frozen snow of Gorky Park, also in downtown Almaty. Over the course of my 18 months of fieldwork we became good friends, and Nuriya also became one of the young urban middle-class informants I will focus on in my thesis. We would often go on long afternoon walks, traversing the city while discussing the news, topics that had emerged in my interviews, or her thoughts and feelings about Kazakhstan, the city of Almaty, her neighbourhood, and her family.

A few weeks into my fieldwork, Nuriya and I met for tea at the apartment where she lived in the southwest of Almaty, a few blocks' walk from where I was staying. Her mother, Nurbakyt, had set aside a few hours to sit with us and take part in an informal interview. Nurbakyt is an ethnic Kazakh and was in her mid-60s at the time. She has three daughters and was living in this one-bedroom apartment with Nuriya, the youngest; Nurbakyt slept in the living room on a foldout sofa. Nurbakyt spoke in both Russian and Kazakh about her life as Nuriya helped to translate, creating a picture of her upbringing, education, work, the birth of her daughter, and her thoughts about the present.

Nurbakyt presented a coherent story of her life as a response to my interest as a researcher, but this was also something she wanted to do; she told me that 'it needs to be shared'. She began, 'I was born in the Karagandy region, near the small town of Satpaev in the village of Jishchi. I am one of seven children and I have a twin sister. My parents worked at a mail point [a stop on the train or road network where post would be sorted for onward travel, delivery, or collection] and that is where I grew up'. Nurbakyt went to school in Tashkent in 1963, then attended the National Women's Teacher Training University in Almaty. She told me, 'I felt afraid when I first came to Almaty. I

was afraid to get lost, as the city was big and I didn't have local friends here'. Nurbakyt made a point of saying that the city had changed, commenting, 'Almaty has got much bigger. I think it got a little more dangerous as people came to the city: there are more cars and a bigger population'. Nurbakyt also compared her experience as a student with present-day student life, remarking that 'there were no entertainment centres as there are now'. She recalled that students entertained themselves at one another's homes rather than at 'restaurants and bars in the city'. When Nurbakyt had finished her training at university, she was sent to a small village in the steppe to work as a teacher. She met her future husband Rinat there; he was also working in the village. Despite the difficult living conditions, 'there were no hard times, actually; no sad memories, it was all fun and lovely and nice'.

However, Nurbakyt then described that she faced significant change in her life during 'a hard time when the Soviet Union was destroyed'. The family was forced to find new employment: Nurbakyt went to work in a kindergarten, and because he couldn't find a job as a teacher, Rinat went to work in a mine, then at the factory that produced explosives for the mine. Nurbakyt described the difficulties Kazakhstan faced in the 1990s, many of which were experienced in everyday life in the form of rationing via coupons for goods such as bread and milk. 'These were the most difficult years, from 1992 to 1996', she told me.

Nurbakyt's narrative ties together significant life events: her birth and early life at the mail point with her parents; her move to Almaty, where she trained as a teacher before being deployed by the state; and her life in a small village, where she met the man who would become her husband and Nuriya's father. The end of the Soviet Union is marked as a significant point in her life during which she and her husband were forced to find new employment, compounded by the great difficulties she faced between 1992 and 1996. This was also the time when Nuriya was born.

Commenting on the present, Nurbakyt laughed away the threat of a major earthquake, externalising it from the narrative of her life by telling me, 'People are always talking about a really strong earthquake, but it never happens while we are living'. A more pressing concern for her was the end of Nazarbayev's period as the leader of the nation, a problem for which she had no solution. The literature up until the mid-2010s has focused on this generation, who grew up with one way of life and were then forced to

adapt to a significantly different way of life. However, that generation is not the focus of this thesis.

For the narrative of my thesis, the significant event in Nurbakyt's story is the birth of Nuriya. It marks a new life story: that of a post-Soviet generation. I explore the lives of this generation, who have grown up in independence-era Kazakhstan after the end of the Soviet Union and who, as a result of their recent coming of age, have not yet been the focus of anthropological enquiry. I argue that an anthropological analysis is able to offer insight into this society through the eyes of a distinct group who are approaching life in a new and dynamic way. This new way of living has its own issues, which I uncover in my analysis throughout the main chapters of this dissertation. In my conclusion, I detail some of the ways in which the young urban middle class are tackling the issues that their new way of life has forced them to confront. Nuriya's story, which she told me just after we first met, gives us an example of the lives of this distinct group.

Nuriya grew up in the village of Satpaev and has 'memories of the family going together to the public baths during the summer months'. The family moved to Almaty when Nuriya was a teenager, and she enrolled at a private university, one of a host of new institutions sponsored by international businesses and set up in the city to offer an alternative to state-run universities. Nuriya 'majored in marketing' and had spent time 'on a live-and-work scheme in Chicago' in the United States. Her friends I met at the photoshoot also went to Chicago, and this is how they knew each other. Nuriya graduated from university and has worked in marketing and sales for a popular restaurant chain as well as a large coffee firm in Almaty. She said that she works at the international networking event in order to meet people and make connections. When I asked about her about memories of change in the country, she told me, 'As I remember, it has always been the same in Kazakhstan. It is an international country and many nationalities live here. They all live together in peace. They are all friendly to each other'.

In many ways, Nuriya's story appears underwhelming. While Nurbakyt told me about the difficulties she faced—being afraid when she first arrived in Almaty, the increasing danger she felt in the city since then, the difficulties of life in a small village, and the hard times experienced between 1992 and 1996—Nuriya only recounted the memories of the good times she spent together with her family. The aspects of her life Nuriya

shared with me are markers of a particular type of middle-class success: reaching the goals of a career in business marketing. Nuriya told a simple story of her life, of success and stability. When asked about the country, she repeated a mantra I heard repeated on many occasions throughout my time in Kazakhstan: a narrative of ethnic harmony reproduced in the present by the state as part of a multi-ethnic nation-building agenda, but rooted in Soviet social policies introduced in the 1930s (see Chapter 5). There appears to be nothing remarkable, or of much interest to the anthropologist, in Nuriya's story—at least that is what I thought until one hot summer evening, six months after we first met, as she and I were walking through a park bordering the president's former residence in downtown Almaty.

We looked high above us to the corniced façade of a monumental white-marble-clad neoclassical building. Towering 20 metres above us were thin metal frames: two scaffolding towers joined by long planks stacked atop one another, spanning a wide gap. Precariously supported at each end, the towers held the weight of two construction workers who moved with one foot in front of the other, a brush and tin of paint in hand. I commented on my mother's job as a health and safety inspector in the UK civil service and said that she would have a heart attack if she saw how they were working, adding that it must be so dangerous working in construction here in Almaty.

Nuriya was quiet for a moment. 'My dad died at work. There was an accident in the factory. It was years ago, but we are only now coming to an agreement with the company for a settlement. After he died we moved to Almaty and that's why I live with my mom, as I am the youngest daughter'.

This fact came as a revelation to me as a researcher. It was a missing piece in both Nurbakyt and Nuriya's stories. It was absent from the public narratives that had been shared with me up until then, and its presence marked a difference between public and private life stories. It was only after building our friendship and trust that Nuriya felt that she was in a position to share this painful personal trauma with me. The death of her father has different consequences when placed into either Nurbakyt or Nuriya's stories. Nurbakyt's narrative connects and makes sense of a life progression through a series of challenges and changes; the death of her husband explains the reason behind her current circumstances, including a move to Almaty and away from the place where her husband had worked. The traumatic experience of her husband's death was left out

of her narrative, which instead concentrated on how difficulties were overcome. Conversely, Nuriya's story of her life, as she had presented it to me up until this point, was devoid of significant change, difficulties, or uncertainty. This piece of private information revealed the presence of two distinct narratives: the first public and the second private. The death of Nuriya's father was an aspect of her personal life narrative that she did not share in public. Her disclosure to me marked a turning point in our friendship when I moved from recording a public-facing narrative of Nuriya's life to opening up a discussion of her private uncertainties and concerns—the content of which I will discuss further in Chapter 6.

This disclosure also marked a turning point in my research. It upended my thinking, exposing a tangle of questions which I could apply to many of the other narratives and stories I was being told. From this point on, this thesis began to unpick these strands. The story of Nuriya's narrative itself is the premise on which I build my argument, asking: What can this difference tell us about the public and private narratives of the young urban middle class? How do these narratives differ from those of an older generation? Does this public-versus-private narrative apply to other instances? Why was this information not included in the public narrative, and what are the consequences of this?

## Introduction

### **Making Sense of Change:**

#### **An urban ethnography of middle-class narratives of uncertainty in Almaty, Kazakhstan**

In this dissertation, I seek to understand how Almaty's young urban middle-class population make sense of change. This covers the enduring influence of different periods of change on my informants, including the historical changes faced by their ancestors and relatives as narrated to me, and the experience of living during the Soviet era under different Soviet leaders. My young informants experienced the dramatic change that came with the collapse of the Soviet Union; the difficulties and hardships faced in the 1990s; and, finally, the uncertainty of a fragile present. This period of relative stability and security is talked about in private as being precarious and uncertain as the accuracy of public narratives—both officially disseminated narratives and those of my informants—is called into question. As a result, my informants perceive an increase in risk and uncertainty in the present and near-future. My analysis contextualises and contrasts my informants' experience in relation to others they interact with, including their friends, family, and other members of the urban population.

My argument is that the young urban middle class in Almaty, Kazakhstan is a distinct and understudied demographic group, occupying a unique position in society. The way in which they narrate their lives in public reinforces a performative middle-class identity that promotes a sense of security, stability, and coherence in opposition to the dramatic changes of the past and the risk of further upheaval in the near future. In the preface, I described how, after months of building a trusted relationship with Nuriya, it was only then that she revealed that her father had died, evidencing a private narrative that was at odds with her public presentation of self. I detail further examples throughout the dissertation, going further to argue that when events threaten to expose the superficiality of public narratives and reveal uncertainties discussed in private contexts, my informants turn to novel discursive techniques, such as rumour, to be able to discuss these private uncertainties in public contexts without undermining their own public narratives or openly challenging official government narratives. I therefore focus on my informants' narratives of uncertainty and how they are used to make sense of change.



## *Almaty: Background*

Kazakhstan is the ninth largest country in the world, yet it is still relatively unknown and understood in the West. This vast country covers many ecological zones, including mountains, steppe, and desert. There is a severe continental climate with extreme lows of  $-45^{\circ}$  Celsius in the winter and high temperatures of up to  $50^{\circ}$  Celsius in the summer months. My research was carried out in and around the city of Almaty, in the southeastern corner of Kazakhstan, close to the mountainous border with Kyrgyzstan and 300 kilometres from a border crossing into Northwest China (Image 1.1). In Chapter 3, I include a detailed map of the city of Almaty and locate my research activities in the context of the city districts (Image 3.1). Almaty is built in a seismically active area, and there are multiple faults running under the city which have the potential to cause significant earthquakes. The city has suffered in the past from major earthquakes in 1867 and 1911. The city is also vulnerable to flooding from the multiple river channels that cross the city, as well as to landslides and mudflows from the steep slopes in the southern edge of the city that rise up into the Tian Shan mountain range.



Image 1.1: Map of Kazakhstan showing the location of Almaty and the names of countries that share a land border. The base map is copyright OpenStreetMap contributors used under Creative Commons License 2.0.

I originally set out to undertake research into local perceptions of seismic risk in Almaty, but the threat of an inevitable, unpredictable, and devastating earthquake turned out to be just one of many risks which threatened my informants living there. The former capital of Kazakhstan from 1927 to 1997, Almaty has experienced rapid and dramatic changes since its inception. In 1867 the Russian *krepost* (fort) of Verny was built as part of the Orenburg line of military fortifications to protect the farthest frontiers of the Russian empire (Alexander, Buchli, and Humphrey, 2007, p. 76). Following the Bolshevik Revolution, Almaty (then named Alma-Ata) became one of the main urban centres of Central Asia. With that role in the region came flows of people, goods, and industries. This included the migration of a large ethnic Russian population to the city: soldiers' families moved to live with them, and others came to supply the fort with goods and services and to benefit from the trade opportunities offered on this stop on a branch of the Silk Road to China. This led to the expansion of the town built adjacent to the fort.

Following the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, political influence shifted. In the 1930s, large-scale policies such as collectivisation and sedentarisation were enacted, which had a devastating impact on rural populations in the region and led to rapid urbanisation and chronic housing shortages in the city. The demographic composition of the city further changed as a result of Stalin's forced movement of ethnic groups, including Volga Germans and Koreans, to Central Asia, explored further in Chapter 6. During the Great Patriotic War (World War II), major industries were moved away from the fighting front to places such as Almaty to protect them from being destroyed or seized by the enemy. This led to an expansion of the industrial areas of the city and the migration of a skilled management class to the city in order to run and manage these industries; I will return to this group below in a discussion of the origins of a Soviet middle class. Following the end of the war, there were further significant population movements, resulting in increasing diversity in the ethnic makeup of the city.

During the 1960s, many Uighurs came over the border from China to escape Mao's Cultural Revolution (see Chapter 6), exacerbating an ongoing housing crisis. In order to deal with these housing issues, Khrushchev began a large-scale *Khrushchevka* construction programme (see Chapter 3). *Khrushchevka* are large housing blocks made of prefabricated concrete panels that are built in factories and shipped to sites for

construction. Normally between three and five storeys high, *Khrushchevka* were built to similar specifications across the Soviet Union and have become a well-known marker of Soviet urban development from Crimea to Vladivostok. Under this programme, a significant proportion of the city was built, particularly the *mikro-raion* (housing districts made up of clusters of *Khrushchevka*) in which many of my young urban middle-class informants lived.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Kazakhstan became independent, and economic and political influence shifted away from Moscow to the newly independent republics. In common with much of the rest of the Soviet Union, there was a fairly wholesale privatisation of state assets such as housing and industry (see Chapter 2). The 1990s were a difficult time in Almaty, with skyrocketing crime, high unemployment, and a shortage of goods as state-run supply-and-demand networks collapsed. The everyday realities of this time of dramatic change have been discussed in Nazpary's 2002 ethnography *Post-Soviet Chaos*, in which he describes his informants' experiences of *bardak* (chaos) and *diki-kapitalism* ('wild capitalism'), which he argues characterised the city during this time.

As a result of Russian imperial and then Soviet influence in Almaty, it remains a predominantly Russophone city today. The Kazakh language is gaining increasing importance, as the promotion of Kazakh culture is a central part of the Kazakh state's nation-building agenda. Many other languages can be heard spoken across the city, including Uighur, Tatar, Uzbek, Dungan, and Kyrgyz, as well as English in some business contexts. I will indicate when different languages were spoken in relation to my research; for example, there are separate Uighur- and Kazakh-language mosques (Chapter 6), and some of my informants chose to speak in English during the focus groups discussed in Chapter 5. There are many different ethnicities living in Almaty; the reasons for and consequences of this diversity in the context of my thesis are explored in more detail in Chapter 6.

With significant oil, gas, and raw-mineral reserves, Kazakhstan has weathered much of the tumultuous change seen over the last 30 years to emerge as a middle-income economy in the 21st century. Nursultan Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan's president from 1992 to 2019, heralded these economic gains as the greatest achievement of his presidency, so much so that in his January 2014 address to the nation, he declared, 'Kazakhstan of

the 21st century is a country created from scratch in just two decades by talented, hardworking, and tolerant people' (Nazarbayev, 2014). In public media narratives on television, radio, and the internet, the government emphasises the security and stability offered to those living in Kazakhstan by the Kazakh state and frames it within a context of regional political and economic instability. The beneficiaries of the government's efforts are to be an urban middle class. In the same address to the nation, Nazarbayev cited a growing middle class and increased urbanisation—from 55 per cent to 70 per cent of the population during his presidency—as concrete indicators of social-sector development as outlined in the government's Kazakhstan 2050 development agenda (Nazarbayev, 2014). Without definition, however, it remains unclear who exactly the middle class are in Kazakhstan.

### *A middle class*

In this thesis, I focus on Almaty's urban middle class, in particular the younger generation who have grown up after the Soviet Union. An urban middle class is not simply a post-Soviet invention, and their origins have been theorised as developing during the Soviet era.

Vera Dunham coined the term 'Big Deal' to refer to a 'tacit concordat [...] formed by the Soviet leadership with the resilient middle class' who had emerged in the 1930s and established themselves by the end of World War II (Dunham, 1990 [1977], p. 5).

Dunham argues that following the war, there was a burgeoning need for a technical and managerial workforce; as a result, the Soviet leadership tolerated the presence of a middle class in society where 'material incentives increasingly displaced moral incentives' (ibid., p. 5; Millar, 1985, p. 694). Dunham argues that there are three possible definitions of the middle class. First, they can be considered a 'statistical entity in the stratification of the society by income, wealth, or occupation'—that is, those between the extremes of a working class and a ruling elite. Second, they may have 'an attachment to specific values, a way of life which partly crosscuts differences in position, of occupation and of income' (Dunham, 1990, p. 4). Dunham considers the third definition of a Soviet middle class along the lines of the concept of *meshchantsvo*, which she describes as commonly used in two ways: either to refer to the 'climbing careerism of the newly rich' or the 'complacent vegetation' of those with money (ibid.,

p. 19). Perhaps most importantly for this thesis, both of these groups are predominantly associated with urban contexts.

Millar (1985) argues that following the Big Deal came the Little Deal, an agreement between Leonid Brezhnev (General Secretary of the Communist Party between 1964 and 1982) and the Soviet people. Millar argues that ‘the rhetoric of Bolshevism continued, of course, to glorify self-sacrifice, collectivism, and egalitarianism, but these goals, like a particular kind of optical illusion, retreated farther and farther into the future with each new official pronouncement’ (Millar 1985, p. 694). Instead, Millar explains, these values were gradually replaced as ‘Brezhnev struck up a new but tacit bargain with the urban population: to tolerate the expansion of a range of petty private economic activities’ (ibid., p. 697). A middle class had taken root, but its form was ill defined and it was maintained through unofficial and private flows of goods, favours, and assistance. Millar suggests that ‘kinship and friendship reciprocity networks were one of the ways that the private goods started to move’ (ibid.). This is a key point, as these flows are echoed throughout this thesis in the private lives of my young urban middle-class informants. In the conclusion, I discuss how their utility is again drawn upon in the present as a vehicle not for goods and services, but for trusted information.

By the late 1980s, it was clear that Soviet ideology was being followed in very different ways from the early days of the Soviet Union under Lenin and then Stalin. Yurchak (2003) describes how as early as the 1950s and 1960s, the Soviet public took a pragmatic approach to socialism: an appearance of socialism was maintained while everyday practices continued to change out of sight of the public gaze. He argues that these changes became visible with Gorbachev and the policies of *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness). Alongside the collapse of the Soviet Union came the upheaval of society and a shift towards neoliberal economic policies and greater consumerism. This occurred due to the influence of a complex array of parties, including Western governments and companies, the governments of the newly independent republics, and non-state actors—such as local criminals and politicians—who used the privatisation of state assets as an opportunity to consolidate and formalise their influence through securing monopolies in key industries. These individuals emerged as a new class of super-rich oligarchs, one aspect of an increasing inequality and the expansion of a hierarchical structure in post-Soviet societies including Kazakhstan.

The discussion of the middle class diversifies after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Jennifer Patico (2008) argues that there was no single post-Soviet middle class that could be studied as a coherent entity; she titles her ethnography ‘Consumption and Social Change among *a* Post-Soviet Middle-Class’ [emphasis added] to indicate that divergent practices emerged in different former Soviet places. Told through the lens of a cohort of teachers, Patico’s description of the middle class in St Petersburg is focused on a group who are the age of my informants’ parents’ generation; Patico’s fieldwork was carried out between 1993 and 1999. Patico argues that for this generation, ‘what it meant to be “middle-class” was extremely uncertain’ and therefore for this group, ‘coming of age under conditions of Soviet modernity led them to expect a certain kind of “middle-class” identity’. However, what they actually found was that it was ‘increasingly difficult to conceive of themselves that way given their positions in a new market in commodities and labor’ (Patico, 2008, p. 13). It is important to note here that this generation grew up in the Soviet era. In this thesis, I show how the younger generation—those who have grown up after the Soviet Union—have overcome this uncertainty in public to appear confident in their public middle-class identity, although I argue that uncertainty is all too present in their private lives. What is most relevant to this dissertation is Patico’s definition of the middle class. She cites Liechty to support the assertion that being middle class is ‘an essentially performative and narrative phenomenon’, adding that ‘it refers not to a demographically locatable category of people but to a set of moral and material aspirations and orientations’ (ibid., p. 13 [Liechty, 2003]). The definition of ‘middle class’ I use in this thesis focuses on these key elements: performance, narrative, and moral and material aspirations. This definition is explored and augmented throughout the thesis, specifically in relation to my theoretical approach to the performance of narrative in the literature review (Chapter 2) and more generally in conjunction with my analysis in Chapters 3, 5, 6, and 7.

### *Growing up after the Soviet Union*

I use the term ‘young’ to indicate a specific cohort who have grown up after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but I have avoided using the collapse of the Soviet Union as a marker of belonging to this group. Many of my informants were born in the five or so

years before the collapse, but share the particular narrative performances and moral and material aspirations as those born in the early 1990s. This generation, some of whom may have been young children when Kazakhstan became independent, have spent their formative years growing up after the Soviet Union. Therefore, in the thesis I focus on those informants between the ages of 18 and 35 as a young-adult cohort. In Chapter 3, I contrast their perspective with that of their parents' generation; in Chapter 4, I consider their perspectives in the context of the wider urban population; and in Chapters 5, 6, and 7, I focus on how this generation lives and the consequences of their way of life.

### *Moral and material aspirations*

According to Patico's (2008) definition above, the middle class are defined not only by their performance and narrative (which I will discuss in more detail), but also their moral and material aspirations. This can be seen in what they are performing in public surroundings and narratives. My young informants strive for a set of moral aspirations: democratic representation in society, freedom of expression, and a correlation between hard work and personal reward. My young informants associate these moral aspirations with the system of governance and way of life in international contexts, including Europe and the United States; as such, they often take their understanding of life in these other places as a model for their behaviour. Presenting these qualities becomes an important aspect to be performed in their public-facing personas and narratives.

The material aspirations of the young generation include outward symbols of consumerism such as branded clothing, accessories, and expensive cars (see Chapter 5). The other side to these material aspirations is the public presentation of success through social-media apps such as Instagram, Facebook, and VKontakt, a Russian-language alternative to Facebook with greater emphasis on streaming and sharing music and films. To meet these ends, the young generation, like many of their contemporaries around the world, are using their smartphones to snap pictures that are then shared to create the impression of material success and wealth. International travel, going to clubs, and even buying a branded coffee have become moments where pictures can be shared to reinforce a public perception of a certain way of life; see Chapter 5 for a more detailed analysis and further examples from my informants.

Following Patico's (2008) definition of the middle class, which includes the key elements of performance and narrative, I have adopted theoretical tools from the literature which have helped me to understand how these elements of middle-class identity play out in everyday life. In the literature review (Chapter 2), I consider the anthropological study of narrative in context and in greater detail. Here, however, I will clarify how and why I use the particular terms 'onstage' and 'offstage' when referring to public and private contexts. These terms are integral to my argument and are frequently used throughout this thesis.

My definition of these terms is grounded in Erving Goffman's (1959) work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Goffman lays out a dramaturgical theory of social interaction which uses the language of the theatre and performance, including terms related to both verbal and non-verbal communication, to analyse social behaviour (Goffman, 1959, p. 16). The basis of his argument is that in social situations, individuals are performing roles as part of a wider performance, where social expectations set the boundaries of different roles in a given context. Goffman defines 'front' as being the context in which performances are occurring; his example of a stage highlights the material qualities of the environment—the set—which help inform individuals of the type of performance that may be expected in this context (ibid., p. 33). Individual fronts are the performances expected in a particular social environment or set of circumstances. According to Goffman, 'we often find a division into back region, where the performance of a routine is prepared, and front region, where the performance is presented' (ibid., p. 231).

Goffman's ideas have proven useful tools for anthropologists thinking about social interaction. For example, James Scott (1985) extends the metaphor of a dramaturgical performance to understand the ways that different 'transcripts', or shared narratives, are formed in the context of his field site, the Malaysian village of Sadakah. In particular, he considers how an awareness of whether transcripts are 'onstage' and public, or 'offstage' and hidden, can be used by those who are dominated within an unequal social power structure as a way to coordinate and organise resistance against their oppressors. Scott's argument is that there is a distinction between 'public, power-laden situations' and 'the comparative safety of offstage privacy'; this is a closer description of the



situation in Almaty than the examples Goffman uses, which discuss the combination of roles within a social establishment such as a school, prison, or workplace (Scott, 1985, p. 25).

In order to explore the concepts of onstage and offstage in the context of my field site in Almaty, it is important to discuss the various meanings of the terms ‘public’ and ‘private’, which I will also use throughout this thesis, and provide some examples to illustrate how these terms differ from ‘onstage’ and ‘offstage’. When I use the term ‘public’ in this thesis, I am referring to places and spaces shared with others who may not be directly known or trusted by an individual. In the context of my thesis, ‘public’ includes Almaty’s streets, shopping centres (Chapter 4), markets, coffee shops (Chapter 5), restaurants, bars, clubs, public transport, parks, and more broadly online spaces such as message boards and comment sections on news articles (Chapter 4).

An important distinction is the alternative meaning of the term ‘public’ to indicate ownership. As Catherine Alexander notes, during the Soviet era everything was publicly owned, and therefore using ‘public’ and ‘private’ to distinguish different spaces or places may be problematic (Alexander, 2009a, p. 12). Instead, Alexander distinguishes between ‘public’ and ‘domestic space’, a description which is more akin to ‘onstage’ and ‘offstage’ as it distinguishes places and spaces according to the different narratives, similar to what Scott terms ‘transcripts’, that are used in those contexts (ibid., p. 12). Scott explains how different transcripts are produced in different social situations, giving the examples of how ‘the transcript of the factory manager speaking with his workers is different from the transcript when he is in the safety of his own club; the transcript of the slave owner dealing with his slaves is different from his unguarded remarks to other slaveholders over dinner’ (Scott, 1985, p. 288). In this thesis, I discuss not only what is said, but also where and when it is said—this context is key to understanding how my informants make sense of change in everyday life.

In Kazakhstan, most public contexts are subject to the controls of the state, but there are many subtleties to how, when, and where the state enforces its control. Protest in public places is severely punished and indicates a wider restriction on freedom of expression (Chapter 7). As my informants explain in Chapter 5 while discussing which sources of information they trust, they view the media as heavily censored by the state; newspapers, TV, and radio cannot be considered places of public debate and are instead

sources for the production and dissemination of state-controlled information for public consumption. As a lecturer at a private university told me, ‘The repertoires of contention in Kazakhstan are very limited’. Referring to Charles Tilly’s (1993) theory concerning the forms of public collective action available to a population, this lecturer was commenting on the options available to the Kazakh public if they wish to challenge the state in public. What can be said in public is strictly controlled, and onstage narratives are open to the state’s gaze—criticism can therefore expose individuals to potential retribution such as arrest and imprisonment (see Darya’s discussion in Chapter 5 for an example of this).

I would like to distinguish between two definitions of the word ‘private’ used in this thesis: the first denotes private ownership, while the second refers to the production and sharing of narratives between trusted social relations. Private places and spaces are limited in Almaty and continue, in a post-Soviet context, to be mainly domestic settings. However, using the term ‘offstage’, I engage with a wider set of narratives which could be considered private but are spoken about in public places and spaces. Examples could include a discussion between close friends in a public park or between family members on public transport. A central thread that runs through this thesis involves the different ways that my informants communicate in contexts where there is a distrust of official public narratives produced by the government and, simultaneously, of individuals’ public narratives. This has important implications for my methodological approach, as I found that discussions and interviews with strangers, particularly those who were not friends or connections of other people I had already met, would often elicit public onstage narratives; it was only once I knew them better, as seen with Nuriya in the preface, that I was able to hear private offstage narratives.

Individuals and groups manage the intricacies of these two realms of interaction in everyday life. For example, an informant could be actively displaying symbolic markers of dress and behaviour which support an onstage narrative of wealth and success in a public place such as a bar, but they could be simultaneously engaging in an offstage discussion with a close friend. This thesis uses ethnographic examples to tease apart the different narrative threads woven by my informants in their everyday lives and explain how these are used to make sense of change.

My informants living in Almaty have experienced many changes during their lifetimes. The older generations have experienced the replacement of their Soviet-era way of life with a shifting and still-changing set of moral and ideological principles that are driving changes in the organisation of society and everyday life. These changes include the privatisation of property; greater access to goods and services with the proliferation of street markets in the early 1990s; and the disappearance of jobs and consequent need to retrain, adapt, or find work in whatever form was available. In Chapter 3, for example, I describe how with the loss of her job in the early 1990s, a university-educated chemist was forced to work transporting cigarettes and goods from China, selling them in street markets before finding work in a cash-machine business and then setting up her own business as an accountant.

There have also been dramatic changes to the cityscape of Almaty and everyday life in the city. The most significant change following the rapid building phases of the 1960s government schemes, in which entire areas of the city were built, has been the late-1990s housing development boom: the relaxation of building restrictions has seen further development of large areas of the city moving out along the natural barrier of the mountains to the west and east of the city centre.

For my young informants growing up in the 1990s and 2000s, other changes have affected their everyday lives. While young people across the world today have lived through periods of change and face a range of similar risks and uncertainties, such as difficulty in getting on the property ladder or securing long-term employment contracts, the social, cultural, and political context of Central Asia means that my young informants also face a host of changes unique to this context and historical situation. For example, a transition from the *ruble* to a new national currency, the *tenge*, has been followed by successive waves of devaluation and periods of economic insecurity (see Chapter 5). Almaty was plagued by rising crime levels and employment shortages in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Jakob Rigi argues that in Kazakhstan ‘the privatization of state property and the abolition of the welfare state have vastly widened the cleavages that existed among youth in the Soviet era’, an assertion which supports my argument that the young middle class are a distinct group in society (Rigi, 2003, p. 48). Demographic change through migration, including the emigration of many ethnic

Russians, has changed the ethnic makeup of Almaty, although Matthew Blackburn (2019) argues that young Russians self-identify as having a strong continuity with Soviet identity in post-Soviet Kazakhstan despite having no lived experience of that period (see Chapter 2). There has also been rural-to-urban migration of ethnic Kazakhs, which has led to the young generation using many different stereotypes and phrases to distinguish between urban Kazakhs and Kazakhs from rural backgrounds (see Chapter 5). Many of the changes explained above are still ongoing and while, to my informants, the present takes on the appearance of a secure and stable time, that is not to say that it is static. Perhaps most pressingly, it is the anticipation of further change that weighs heavy on my informants in the present.

We cannot consider social, cultural, political, and economic change in Kazakhstan, and how they have affected my informants' lives, without also considering the risk of further change. In this thesis, I define the concept of risk as the likelihood of a person or object coming into contact with a hazard, and uncertainty as an emotional response to the likelihood of a risk. The various risks faced by my informants are outlined in the paragraph below.

The risks my informants reported to me included the following: earthquakes, floods, landslides, and mudflows; the erosion of traditional Kazakh culture; an increase in Chinese influence in the region due to the acquisition of local land; the cultural genocide of Uighurs living in China's Xinjiang province just a few hours' drive away; the erosion of ethnic Korean identities through out-marriage; the detrimental effect of endemic corruption, violent crime, and burglary; air pollution from city traffic; the availability, trustworthiness, and quality of health care; the threat of political collapse, potential for revolution as seen in neighbouring countries, and a lack of democratic representation; and the suppression of religious freedoms. Many of the risks faced in Almaty are also experienced by different people in other places across the world. However, Almaty offers the opportunity to consider how a combination of these risks plays out in an urban post-socialist context. Often, the threat of these risks—and how they are understood—is based on past experiences of change.

In order to make sense of change, as outlined in the above section, my informants turn to narrative. While discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2, I outline the important points for my argument here and indicate the key literature I draw upon. Narrative is a powerful tool for both understanding and sculpting social situations and is used in many different ways from making ‘meaningful connections’ and providing ‘order and continuity’ through the telling of oral histories (Cruikshank, 2000, p. xii), to the structuring of biographies that retrospectively re-evaluate past decisions (Crapanzano, 1984, p. 959). Stories can also be used as ‘defences against danger and hurt’ or to ‘escape from terror’ (Jackson, 2013, p.15, p.14). There are also specificities to a Soviet and post-Soviet situation where particular biographical genres are common and come with their own conventions and purposes, for example the importance of sculpting the impression of a good socialist citizen in Soviet-era *avtobiografia* (autobiographical texts) (Hellbeck, 2001). See also Kamp’s (2001) discussion in Chapter 2 of the way that biographies can change over time in response to the social and political climate in which they are told.

I follow Hannah Arendt’s (1958) theorisation, picked up by Michael Jackson (2013), of a ‘subjective-in-between’, where narratives structure sociality and the formation of meaning in the space between individual experience and collective understanding. In this subjective-in-between, narratives as diverse as life stories, biography, and rumour operate. This thesis focuses on narratives of uncertainty, particularly the role of gossip and rumour, which I found to have an important role in the context of my field site. Rumour provides an opportunity to discuss, challenge, verify, interrogate, and reflect upon official narratives, personal concerns, and the various risks faced in everyday life; moreover, it was used by my urban informants to explore alternatives to official narratives. Rumour therefore helped my informants to negotiate the subjective-in-between, making sense of their own experiences, thoughts, and feelings in relation to public narratives. Rumours, as discussed in my concluding chapter, are therefore an example of narratives of uncertainty used by my informants to make sense of change—both the change they have experienced and the risk of further change in the future.

## *Methodology*

I spent a total of 18 months in Kazakhstan between 2014 and 2017, broken up into multiple trips. The majority of my time was spent in Almaty. I undertook brief visits to Astana (now Nur-Sultan) to visit the university there, as well as for short stays linked with connecting flights to the UK. In carrying out this research, I have used an ethnographic toolkit of research methods that include participant observation, informal, structured, and semi-structured interviews, focus groups, narrative life histories, participatory drawing methods, and photographic documentation.

I recorded 139 interviews and held five focus groups as well as numerous discussions and interactions in the course of everyday life with a wide range of informants. My initial focus on seismic risk led me to include informants in my sample with specific technical and scientific specialisations, in addition to members of the public whom I met through my research assistants, contacts, and friends or in everyday encounters.

Although I started with one aim in mind—researching how people living in Almaty perceived seismic risk—I found something quite different emerging from my research material. Returning to my data and looking again at the issues that my informants considered important, I discovered that my informants offered interesting insights into how they made sense of many different changes and risks, both small- and large-scale, which affected them in their everyday lives; seismic risk was just one example. As a result, I shifted my focus to how my informants live, understand risks, and make sense of change.

This thesis focuses on the middle class more broadly in Chapters 3 and 4, using primarily semi-structured longform interviews and recorded life histories, while also contextualising their narratives in relation to other members of the public in response to a flood in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5, I narrow the scope of my discussion to focus primarily on the young middle-class informants whose narratives appear to contrast with those of an older generation. To understand the discursive production of young urban middle-class identity, I used focus groups as a research method—this encouraged discussion and debate with a select group of informants from similar backgrounds, such as the focus group participants in Chapter 5 who attended the same university. As I argue in Chapter 5, the young urban middle class is a heterogeneous group; this is

reflected in the sample of informants whose interviews are included. My sample consists of informants of different ethnicities, genders, family backgrounds, religious adherences, places of birth, and employment backgrounds. In Chapter 3, I discuss the jobs, social roles, and backgrounds of those I interviewed.

My research assistants played a key role in my research, helping me to negotiate the challenges of researching a heterogeneous middle class in Almaty. My research assistants were distinguished from other informants in that they were paid, with the support of a fieldwork grant, to assist me in the organisation of meetings, translation of discussions, and identifying relevant individuals to interview. As I describe in the transect of my field site detailed in Chapter 3, a key aspect of this fieldwork is that my research assistants acted as gatekeepers to specific communities in different geographical areas of my field site. The specificities of their role as gatekeepers—for example, due to their own ethnicity, educational background, friendship group and language abilities—is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

As a consequence of the heterogeneity of the young urban middle-class people who became my informants, language use was an issue in the context of my fieldwork. Specifically, I encountered problems working across multiple languages, challenges in the use of research assistants as translators, the politicised use of language in a local context, and the impact of these factors on the reliability of the data I was able to collect.

It was common for me to encounter three or more languages in the course of any one day of fieldwork, including English, Russian, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uighur, and Uzbek, among others. My language skills were limited to English, Russian, and some basic Kazakh; over my 18 months of fieldwork it was not possible for me to master all of the languages spoken, so I relied on my research assistants to help navigate local language usage.

Working with research assistants as translators was beneficial, as they built up an understanding of the topics and terms that I was asking about. They could also offer brief explanations to informants if they were to call when I was not present. All my research assistants spoke both English and Russian alongside another language such as Kazakh or Uighur, depending on their ethnicity. Amongst my informants, there were

exceptions to this pattern, with some ethnic Russians also speaking some Kazakh. During fieldwork, introductions would often be made in Russian, and during interviews, it was not uncommon for multiple languages to be used. For example, it was more likely that specific terminology, such as technical terms which came up in discussions about earthquake risk and emergency management, would be in Russian. Before an interview, I would always ask which language an informant would prefer to speak in, and I would try and carry out the interviews with a research assistant who spoke that language well. Many younger informants were keen to speak to me in English and would revert to Russian when there was a specific phrase that they did not know the translation for. This also allowed me to record more information during participant observation and when my research assistants were not present.

Language use is politicised in Almaty. Russian is associated with the Soviet past and is also the dominant language used in the city for inter-ethnic communication. Other languages, such as Kazakh, Uighur, or Uzbek, are more likely to be spoken between members of the same ethnicity. However, it is important to note that not all Kazakhs can speak Kazakh; there are societal divisions along this issue, which I discuss further in Chapters 5 and 6. Kazakh is increasingly being promoted as the language used in interactions with the state, from public signs to official documents, although at the time of fieldwork a bilingual Russian/Kazakh option was most common.

Using translators introduces issues with the reliability of the information recorded. To navigate these difficulties, I recorded the audio of interviews when possible, and with the permission of informants, this allowed me to work from direct transcripts when writing out the text. In other instances, I worked with my research assistants to write up notes and summarise interviews to ensure that what was said was established in the best way possible. Although there is always a degree of subjective interpretation in the meaning of specific comments, one benefit of long-term participant observation is the ability to build an understanding of local customs and practices that can contribute to the interpretation of data.

In Chapter 2, I offer a theoretical rationale for my research. This rationale is based on anthropologists' use of a diverse range of methodological tools to understand the specificities of urban contexts; risk and uncertainty; narratives including gossip and rumour; and carrying out research in a Central Asian context. Chapter 3 connects my



research methodology with the places in which research was carried out and where my informants lived. My methodological choices in relation to my chosen field site are explained in more detail in Chapter 3.

In writing up my research, I have chosen to structure my data in a way that supports a clear explanation of my thesis narrative and allows me to analyse the data in conjunction with the literature. For example, in Chapter 3 I use a transect to help explain my urban field site. The term ‘transect’ has seen historical use in the biological sciences. However, it has been taken up in urban studies as part of the New Urbanist agenda—a way to categorise and understand the changes that take place on a continuum between urban centres and rural areas (Duany, 2010). It has been used to study the increasing fragmentation of living as one moves from the centre to the periphery, as well as the phenomenon of urban sprawl (Yu & Ng, 2007). Anthropologists have used a similar analytical model of analysis. Matei Candea (2010) asks important questions about how an ethnographer, in the context of a field site, can understand where one place ends and another begins. Explaining the ways in which people, ideas, and goods flow easily between his field site and a local town, Candea argues that making distinctions based on political borders may artificially impose restrictions which are at odds with how informants conceptualise of places (see Chapter 3 for further discussion of urban field sites and Candea’s work). I describe three locations along a transect in Almaty that runs from the west of the city through the centre and out to the east. These three transect locations link the characteristics of the built environment, the time I lived in each area, and the development of personal relationships that allowed for the collection of different types of data. Other examples of methodological choices made in the writing stage include moving from a broad discussion of the middle class (Chapters 3 and 4) to a focus on the young generation (Chapter 5, 6, and 7), and focusing on Uighur and Korean ethnicity alongside Kazakh identity in Chapter 6.

### *Participant observation*

Participant observation is an important aspect of my research methodology. It grounds the study firmly in an established canon of anthropological research carried out over an extended period of time in the field (Howell et al., 2018, p. 3). Participant observation binds together the insights offered by other research methods I use, including interviews

and focus groups, to help build a ‘more holistic’ perspective of life in Almaty that can assist in discerning local characteristics of informants’ particular ‘world view’ (ibid.). In the context of this research, participant observation included travelling on local forms of transport; socialising with informants; taking part in household activities, including shopping in local markets and supermarkets and hanging out in shopping centres; and walking in parks, in the foothills of the mountains, and across the city. I also attended cultural celebrations such as *Nauryz* (Kazakh New Year) festivities, weddings, and birthday celebrations, and I visited informants at their homes to drink tea and chat. In these situations, the researcher seeks to achieve a paradoxical point of view, both ‘participating fully in people’s lives, while simultaneously observing them from a distance’ (ibid.).

Participant observation must also include reflection on the ethnographer’s own culture, background, and position—an idea that has become central to anthropological research since the reflexive turn, when anthropologists encouraged a more evaluative research methodology that recognised the fieldworker’s own cultural baggage which they carried with them in the field, influencing their presentation of research subjects (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). In my own case, as a British male in Kazakhstan, there was little mention of British influence on Kazakh history by my informants, which may have been a central concern if I had been carrying out fieldwork in an area which had been part of the British Empire. What should be noted is that for my young informants, a Western way of life was associated with aspects of their moral and material aspirations. I was often seen as a representative of Western values and culture—however, some informants, including my research assistants, commented that in many ways I did not fit with their idea of Western values, as I bought clothes from charity shops and didn’t have desirable markers of Western culture such as new smart trainers or a smartphone. As one young informant commented, ‘It is funny to see you with this Nokia’. For my informants, and my research assistants in particular, the learning process worked both ways as we shared our thoughts and opinions about the world, each acknowledging the cultural background from which these perspectives emerged.

Nigel Rapport argues that interviews should be seen as a ‘special, productive site of ethnographic encounter’ that allows access to information and topics that may not be ‘open for discussion [...] in “ordinary”, everyday, social interaction’ (Rapport, 2015, p. 175). Rapport suggests that interviews offer a complementary source of data, providing a fuller picture when used in combination with participant observation. In my research I used informal interviews where conversations were allowed to flow freely, and I recorded notes on a wide range of topics. In these instances I would often ask open-ended questions such as, ‘Tell me about the place where you live?’. I also conducted semi-structured interviews on occasions when I needed to steer conversation in the direction of particular topics I wanted to find out more about. Finally, I used structured interviews, in which I started with a set of pre-determined questions. Structured interviews were helpful as an efficient way of collecting data when I had encountered other restrictions. For example, when I interviewed local and national government officials, it had to be done in scheduled time slots; I needed to make use of the time available, and the structure helped me to retain control of the conversation and ensure that key topics were covered. For example, I asked the head of emergency situations specific questions such as, ‘Can you give me your account of the events surrounding the *sel* in Nauryzbai district [the subject of discussion in Chapter 3]?’ Knowing when to choose which type of interview structure is one aspect of using interviews as a form of data collection. The reliability of different interview data can also be better understood when the data is brought together with insights from participant observation and vice versa.

The second aspect of interviews involves how the information gathered from them is collated and presented. In Chapter 2, I discuss how biography and life histories can be built up through interviews and explore how anthropologists have analysed informants’ presentation of self in these contexts. Van Maanen emphasises the role of ‘literary and rhetorical devices used to represent the results of fieldwork’, an important recognition of the ethnographer’s ethnographer in interpreting and re-presenting the world through their own literary and analytical framework (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 125).

### *Focus groups*

Agar and MacDonald argue that a toolkit of different ethnographic methods, including participant observation and interviews, offer a 'broader frame of interpretation in which focus group details take on added significance' (Agar & MacDonald, 1995, p. 78). The ability for focus groups to provide greater detail is a result of opportunities the researcher has to introduce and guide group discussions with selected individuals. David Morgan argues that what defines focus groups in comparison to group discussion is the researcher's ability to collect data on 'a topic determined by the researcher' (Morgan, 1996, p. 130). Russell Bernard argues that this benefit of additional detail marks focus groups as a valuable research method over other methods such as surveys (Bernard, 2006, p. 236). At key stages in my fieldwork, I used focus groups to bring together informants and discuss important topics that had emerged in interviews or that I had encountered using participant observation. These focus groups were used primarily with young informants.

Focus-group discussions feature prominently in Chapter 5. In this instance, I brought together groups of five or six informants (including my research assistants) who attended either private or state-funded universities. I chaired the discussion, following a planned list of topics including descriptions of the university; the idea of community; life in Almaty; and both perceptions of risk and responsibility for risk. I encouraged conversation to flow naturally as best I could, and I let my informants speak freely on different topics if that was where the conversation led, bringing it back if we got too far off topic. It is interesting to note that my young informants quickly felt comfortable sharing private concerns, discussing rumours, and interrogating one another's arguments. The feeling of a safe space in which to share private concerns was made possible because many of the participants knew of each other already, the focus groups took place in the familiar environment of a group-study room at a university, and all participants were of a similar age and studying at university in Almaty.

Because I worked with my research assistants, I acknowledge that they had their own ideas and potential biases, having attended the private university themselves. However, with explicit permission I recorded audio and made transcripts of these focus groups so I could work directly from my informants' words. In this way, I didn't need to rely on the on-the-day translations of my research assistants, although these were very useful in

helping the conversation flow at the time. Agar and MacDonald (1995) see the ability to look back at transcripts as a particular benefit of using focus groups; subtleties in conversation, meaning, and intention can be analysed later, as conversation flows naturally and often at a quick pace. The relative degree of control the researcher has in introducing topics and chairing conversations allows for later re-evaluation and follow-up interviews to supplement focus-group discussions.

Most of the discussions in these focus groups were in Russian, although at times some respondents would speak in English. I noticed that when my informants spoke in Russian, their responses were generally more detailed. Only one informant, from a publicly funded university, spoke in Kazakh, although they also switched to speaking Russian when all the others in the room started speaking in Russian. I opened each focus group by reiterating that participants could speak whichever language they preferred, and their use of Russian is representative of everyday discussions between informants of different ethnicities in these contexts. Further discussion of these focus-group participants is found in Chapter 5.

### *Narrative life histories/biography*

In the literature review (Chapter 2), I discuss how anthropologists have used narrative life histories as a way of understanding environmental and social change over time. I situate this discussion in the context of wider anthropological debate on stories and narrative in general before concentrating on different types of discursive techniques used in everyday interactions, including gossip and rumour.

### *Participatory drawing methods*

In one visualisation and research technique I used during the focus groups, I asked participants to visualise their social connections. As these were complex networks, creating drawings allowed me to complete further analysis later without taking the overly long-winded approach of having each informant explain their social networks in detail. This technique has been used in Social Network Analysis and is suggested as part of a mixed-method research methodology as a way of visualising data (Edwards, 2010).

Sociologists have shown that drawing diagrams as a technique for data elicitation can be good to visualise networks and social connections in urban contexts (Hogan, Carrasco, & Wellman, 2016).

To produce these drawings and diagrams, I gave pens and paper to the research participants and asked them to draw their trusted social networks. Using diagrams allowed my research participants to describe hierarchies of trust, non-linear relationships, and groupings with ease. The diagrams my informants created included spider diagrams, in which people or groups were connected with lines; concentric rings showing groupings of social connections based on hierarchies of trust; and even a drawing of a *Khrushchevka*, with each room a different unit or group in society. Hogan et al. found that visualising closeness through nested concentric rings was an ‘intuitive and intelligible’ way for their informants to group their social connections (Hogan et al., 2016, p. 119). There is more discussion of my findings from this research technique in Chapter 5.

### *Photographic documentation*

With the ease of taking digital photographs at little cost, photographic documentation, collection, and presentation is becoming an integral part of fieldwork. I used photography as a form of note-taking, recording the places, people, and objects that I encountered. This was made easier in many ways due to the enthusiasm of some of my informants; for example, my long walks with Nuriya, whom I discussed in the preface, were an activity in themselves which we did together. I present photographs in the body of the dissertation to illustrate points more clearly and to help visualise elements I have described in the text.

### *Additional ethical considerations of methodology*

My methodology includes a responsive approach to ethical research considerations specific to my research topic. I often spoke to my informants about sensitive topics such as damage to homes during floods, uncertainties around the risk of death in an earthquake, or their traumatic experiences of high crime during the 1990s. I was careful

with my questions when discussing traumatic events or turbulent periods of change in my informants' lives, giving time to hear their stories in full and make the aims of my research as clear as possible. When speaking to informants, I reiterated that participation in my research was voluntary and they had the ability to withdraw their comments from the research at any point. This happened on one occasion where I was told an intimate account of trauma in relation to a flood years before. The informant later decided that they had shared more than they wished at the time and no longer wanted their story included. There is no further mention of their account in this thesis. I was open about my intentions as well as my own life and experiences, answering my informants' questions truthfully and honestly. This was most important when talking with those whom I lived with, such as the Korean family I discuss later on in the thesis. Our open two-way dialogue built a strong friendship underpinned by high levels of trust; this was evidenced in the way that they gave me responsibilities when they went on trips while I stayed behind at their smallholding, as well as in our continuing friendship and communication since my extended period of fieldwork.

My focus on narrative and stories meant that aside from times when I listened in on discussions in group situations, my presence as a researcher was often what elicited the telling of these particular narratives. As a result, my personal relationships with my informants were very important, influencing the type, content, and form of the stories I was told. For instance, my own personal journey through my fieldwork and my friendship and rapport with Nuriya was key to the revelation that there were two distinct narratives in her life story. Often, as a visiting international researcher, I was presented with public narratives. It was only through long-term immersion, interaction, and time spent with my informants that I was able to hear both onstage and offstage discourse. I was also able to hear offstage narratives with informants with whom I did not have long-term relationships when we were in places where they were comfortable, such as in their own homes, or when we were with trusted people who vouched for me. One example of this was when, at a wedding in the centre of Almaty, I was introduced to good friends of the host family with whom I lived in my third transect location. My hosts and their friends proceeded to gossip about other friends and continued their conversation, apparently unencumbered by my presence.

### *Research assistants*

I worked with research assistants throughout my fieldwork, and after I returned from the field, they also assisted me in producing transcripts, translating Kazakh and Russian into English. My research assistants performed multiple roles and were invaluable to my data collection. They helped me with activities, including arranging interviews, researching local contacts, using their own social networks to establish contact with specific individuals, reflecting on data together, and providing translation and transcription in multiple languages. When my informants agreed for me to record conversations, my research assistants were able to complete detailed transcripts that would supplement my data collected in field notes. When it was not possible to record interviews or discussions—for example, when research participants were worried about their offstage comments being shared—I would work with my research assistants to help verify and improve field notes taken during interviews. This helped to ensure that key points from conversations were recorded accurately. In most structured and semi-structured interviews, I worked with research assistants to assist in accurate translation, with only a few exceptions when they were not available to help due to other commitments.

In addition to the issue of translation, as discussed at the beginning of this section, there were specific instances when my research assistants' language skills were influential in the progress of research. The majority of my interviews and interactions were carried out with my informants speaking in Russian; a few spoke in Kazakh. the instances when Kazakh was spoken, such as with the families living near the smallholding in my third transect location, I was limited in the research assistants I could work with: although they all spoke fluent Russian and some English, not all of them spoke fluent Kazakh. In these instances, I worked with my Kazakh friends and part-time research assistants; for example, when I interviewed Nurbakyt, Nuriya's mother, Nuriya translated when her mother used Kazakh phrases.

My research assistants became important informants in their own right. We built strong working relationships with a high degree of trust, and they would often share their thoughts with me. I worked predominantly with four main research assistants: Alma, Anna, Boris, and Nuriya. In Chapter 3, I discuss the background of my research assistants and how they acted as gatekeepers in different areas of my field site. Alma as



a gatekeeper to the Uighur community; Boris's ethnicity was important for my introduction to an ethnic Korean host family; and Anna was able to use both her network of contacts and her well-known status in her university to help find informants and arrange interviews. Their local knowledge was extremely valuable.

In an urban context, there are a large number of potential informants, but it is difficult to build personal relationships due to the types of interactions that strangers in an urban context are likely to have. My research assistants therefore played a key role in helping me use a 'snow-balling' approach to identifying potential informants. Just as a snowball picks up snow as it rolls down a hill, a 'snow-balling' approach gains momentum and size as it progresses. Thanks to this approach, each informant was then able to suggest other people who could take part in the research and connect me with them. Research assistants were already part of local social networks and were able to facilitate introductions within them. I was able to ask them questions about informants who might be good to discuss a particular topic with, and they would be able to investigate within their own personal networks in a culturally appropriate way. For example, when discussing community support in the Uighur community, Alma was able to speak with her parents to find out who in the community was responsible for organising community groups called *meshrep*, which I discuss in greater detail in Chapter 6. Her parents were then able to speak to their friends, who would in turn suggest others who might be knowledgeable about a topic, have insight due to their role in the community, or simply have some time and be willing to speak to me. In this way, my research networks were linked through the social networks of my research assistants.

Using research assistants as a basis for identifying potential informants has some drawbacks and limitations. For example, it is likely that groups of friends or those who know each other may share similar views, so a range of perspectives might be missed in certain situations. Using multiple research assistants, each with their own specific networks, reduced the risk of being limited to a snapshot impression of one group of friends, family, and acquaintances. To further address this limitation, I employed a range of sampling techniques depending on the specific topics that I was investigating. For example, in Chapter 4 I used a transect as a sampling methodology. This transect, which followed the destructive path of a flood, used a more random approach to selecting informants based on interviewing people in specific locations along the river. This involved knocking on doors, speaking to people in the street, and visiting local shops to

gain introductions to those living nearby. Being aware of the benefits and limitations of using research assistants as gatekeepers, I tried to strike a balance between using their networks and identifying individuals such as public figures and those in particular jobs—for example, government officials dealing with emergency situations—to approach independently by email, phone, or personal introduction.

Important insights came from my research assistants when reflecting upon interviews and events between arranged meetings, at social events, and at mealtimes. On these occasions, my research assistants would act as a sounding board for ideas and give me their opinions on different subjects; as most of my research assistants could also be considered members of the young urban middle class, many of these insights are drawn upon in this thesis. However, there were also occasions—for example, when going about everyday business or joining in social events and activities—when I was less likely to be working with a research assistant.

### *Thesis Overview*

This thesis develops my argument through its own narrative structure. Chapter 2 reviews and analyses the relevant background literature, demonstrating the anthropological debates to which this thesis contributes. In Chapter 3, I use a transect to geographically situate my field site in relation to my informants, research assistants, and my own research experiences. Chapter 3 also lays out different generational narratives and distinguishes differences in how the young urban middle class narrate their everyday lives. In Chapter 4, I introduce the argument that a flood caused a citywide rupture in everyday narratives, exposing offstage uncertainty for informants from all walks of life. Through a discussion of how the transects in Chapters 3 and 4 articulate with each other, I argue that there is widespread distrust in public narratives and a polarisation of everyday narratives into onstage and offstage contexts. In light of my revelation that there is a strong divide between onstage and offstage narratives in Almaty, Chapter 5 focuses on my young middle-class informants to understand how they make sense of change. I explain how the young urban middle class differentiate themselves, discuss what their values, hopes and aspirations are, and find that they are a heterogeneous group united by a common onstage narrative. Chapter 6 analyses how the differences between middle-class informants can influence their lives. In this instance, I

choose ethnicity as a result of my strong set of data on different ethnicities, which encapsulates other differences in approaches to topics including religion, gender, and language. In the face of widespread societal uncertainty, my informants' onstage narratives often clash with the way of life experienced by their parents' generation. This is at odds with my young middle-class informants' increased reliance on trusted social relations to help them negotiate offstage uncertainty—an uncertainty that comes as a result of a state-controlled shortage of information. This brings us to the conclusion, Chapter 7, where I comment on the thread of rumour that runs through all of the chapters. I argue that rumour is an alternative discursive technique that allows my informants, in particular the younger generation, to discuss private offstage concerns in public onstage contexts in order to help make sense of the change—and risk of further change—that they face in everyday life.

### *Chapter narrative*

My literature review (Chapter 2) considers four areas of anthropological study: urban ethnography, narrative, risk and uncertainty, and Central Asia. These areas of topical focus provide the background for my thesis. As an urban ethnography, this thesis tackles the difficulties in carrying out research in an urban environment, including the issues of scale and complexity. This thesis contributes an additional perspective from a Central Asian urban context with a focus on the understudied and under-theorised urban middle class. I also contribute to ongoing debates in urban anthropology on the arbitrary delineations of an anthropological field site, as well as to discussions about the 'unboundedness' of a city (Candea, 2010).

Understanding how narratives are formed, communicated, and understood is central to showing how my informants make sense of change. I explore how anthropologists have discussed oral histories and biographies/life histories of ways of understanding informant-centric perspectives on local contexts. One such example is Cruickshank's (2000) analysis of oral storytelling in the Yukon, where attention to the different contexts in which stories are told helps us understand how storytelling can be used to reflect on social situations at different points in time. I draw upon this literature for both methodological tools in the collection of life stories through interviews and theoretical tools for understanding how informants tie together events in order to make sense of

change. For example, a discussion of Hannah Arendt's (1958) theorisation of the existence of a 'subjective in-between', where individuals use narrative to form their social selves, is particularly helpful in understanding the formation of my informants' onstage and offstage narratives. In my section on narrative, I also delve into different examples and definitions of rumour and gossip, which I explore in relation to my data and which also offer an alternative perspective on narrative in the conclusion in Chapter 7.

Understanding change in the context of my field site requires an analysis of past, ongoing, and future change. Risk and uncertainty, which Alaszewski argues have not been 'central themes' in anthropological study over the last hundred years, are an under-theorised set of concepts which are important in this thesis (Alaszewski, 2015, p. 223). I distinguish between risk as a measure of likelihood and uncertainty as an emotional response to a risk, using the literature to inform these definitions. I draw upon the wider literature of disasters, climate change, and living with war as sources of contextualised discussions of risk. This thesis contributes a further example of how risk and uncertainty can be understood through a situated discussion of social, political, and economic circumstances, providing evidence that narrative is an important factor to be studied in conjunction with risk and uncertainty.

The anthropological study of Central Asia is a burgeoning field, containing important debates I have drawn upon to inform and develop my discussion and analysis. This includes the study of the ongoing effects of mass privatisation following independence (Alexander, 2009); the impact of Soviet 'internationalism' (Schatz, 2000); the experiences of different ethnicities (Chang, 2016; Davé, 2004; Davenel, 2012; Laurelle, 2004; Oka, 2006; Peyrouse, 2008); the difficulties of life in urban Almaty in the 1990s (Nazpary, 2002); ethnic nationalism and Kazakh identity (Yessenova, 2005); aspects of gender in re-traditionalisation (Werner & Barcus, 2015); politics of language use (Aksholakova, 2013); religion (Dragadze, 1993; Dubuisson & Genina, 2011; Féaux de la Croix, 2016; Louw, 2007; Omelicheva, 2011; Rasanayagam, 2011); and modernity (Bissenova, 2013; Laszczkowski, 2016; Mostowlansky, 2017). I analyse the literature in two clusters, first considering wider changes in Soviet and post-Soviet contexts that impacted Central Asia and then those changes which had unique consequences in Central Asia.

Chapter 3 details a transect of my urban field site in three locations. This transect provides a coherent framework from which to understand the people, places, and contexts of my urban field site, as well as my own journey as an anthropologist through the research. In each location I introduce the physical context of the built environment, my research networks accessed through my research assistants, and the informants with whom I interacted. The chapter considers the stories of middle-class informants of all ages before investigating the differences between the young generation and their parents' generation.

I lived in the first transect location when I first arrived in Kazakhstan for an extended period of fieldwork. I explain the urban context of *Khrushchevka* (prefabricated housing) districts in this area in the west of Almaty. It was here that Nuriya, introduced in the preface, lived with her mother Nurbakyt. Through an additional example from my informant Aizhan and her mother Sholpan, I emphasise the generational differences in the way individuals narrate the story of their lives in response to past change and the risk of future change. In the second transect location, I introduce the downtown area of Almaty, where the bulk of my interactions with my young urban middle-class informants took place. Through a narrative account of my research assistant Anna's family story, I explore complexities that I found were typical of my young urban middle-class informants' backgrounds. I demonstrate how, by taking control of her own family narrative history and telling a specific story of her life, Anna was able to make sense of change and provide herself with the best possible opportunities available by obtaining a Russian passport that allowed her greater access to travel and work opportunities.

In the final transect location, I consider the definitional limits of my field site. I emphasise the connection to particular flows of labour, goods, and utilities in a former *kolkhoz* (collective farm) that I argue mark the transect location's inclusion in my urban field site. I analyse my informant Mikhail's story of an urban middle-class narrative of escape from the detrimental health influences of inner-city life. In conclusion, I show how he and his family—my hosts when I lived in this location—are themselves part of the changes which have engendered the encroachment and influence of urban life in the area. Family events form the basis of my argument in the third part of Chapter 6 and warrant the inclusion of the family's story at this stage in the thesis. In later chapters, I concentrate primarily on the young urban middle class.

Chapter 3 establishes the context and content of informants' onstage narratives in which they explain a stable and coherent story of everyday life. In Chapter 4, I show how these narratives were challenged when a disruptive mudflow, or *sel*, intersected my west-to-east transect, flowing from the mountains to the south of Almaty across the city, out onto the steppe, and into Lake Balkash. Using narrative accounts of this particular event, I include a diverse range of perspectives to show how the rupture of everyday narratives and routine can expose vulnerabilities and a feeling of uncertainty for informants across the city. In the final part of the chapter, I show how my younger informants—the majority of whom live in the centre of the city—were affected by this *sel* on 23 July 2015. The *sel* undermined their onstage narratives, which they told to support the impression of a stable and secure everyday life. I contextualise this in relation to a widespread societal distrust of public narratives, including those produced by the state, which led my informants to experience growing offstage uncertainty.

At this point in my thesis (Chapter 5), I shift my focus from considering the urban middle classes in general to concentrating on the young generation: a distinct group in society which I argue in Chapter 5 is bound by a common onstage narrative. Chapter 5 begins by analysing how my informants differentiate themselves as members of the young urban middle class, in the process piecing together the key tropes of their shared onstage narrative. This narrative sees the young urban middle class, according to Patico's (2008) definition of the middle class as sharing a 'set of moral and material aspirations and orientations', as internationally oriented, business-focused, individualistic, materialistic, and consumerist. Following this, I analyse how the young urban middle class consider close friends and family as trusted social relations while voicing their distrust for state-controlled public narratives—the result is a limited range of trusted sources of information.

The final part of Chapter 5 explores how the young urban middle class live with different risks. I demonstrate how my informants have adopted a hybrid approach to risk, one that brings together the influence of Soviet-state paternalism and post-Soviet neoliberal attitudes to risk. I discuss what characterises these distinct approaches, examining their impact on my informants' lives. I discuss neoliberal policies and attitudes to risk, foregrounded by organisations such as the IMF and the World Bank in the 1990s, that focus on economic growth, and highlight the emergence of a middle-income group in society as evidence of the success of these policies. As a result of adopting outwardly

consumerist lifestyles as an important aspect of their onstage performances, my young urban middle-class informants are particularly affected by the unpredictable and ongoing devaluation of the *tenge*. Devaluation has also undermined the government's public onstage narrative, increasing the disparity between these informants' onstage performances and the offstage realisation of increasing vulnerability and uncertainty in everyday life. Through the example of corruption in academic establishments in Almaty, I show how this uncertainty begins to undermine everyday encounters: money is used to minimise uncertainty via corrupt practices such as buying favourable exam results. In a discussion of the topic of seismic risk, I illustrate how a society-wide positive attitude to risk-taking is causing a dramatic increase in offstage uncertainty. When my young urban middle-class informants have exhausted their networks of close friends and family in search of information, they turn to offstage discursive techniques such as rumour to find answers in the face of increasing uncertainty.

The young urban middle class are a heterogeneous group; although their lives are grounded in a common onstage narrative, in Chapter 6 I explore how the differences between them—in this instance, their ethnicity—impact their experience. Although there are many other differences within this group, including gender, religion, and family background, I chose to focus on ethnicity as this area is where I had the strongest data available, allowing me to comment more authoritatively on how this one variable impacts my young urban middle-class informants.

Chapter 6 provides an overview of the historical events leading to ethnic diversity in Almaty's population, including the Soviet nationalities policy and successive mass-migration movements over the 20th century. The tripartite structure of this chapter considers in turn what it means to be middle-class and Kazakh, Uighur, or Korean. Again, I chose these ethnicities as a result of the strong data that I had collected. It would also have been possible to discuss my Russian, Tatar, Dungan, Volga German, or Uzbek informants, among other ethnicities, but I was limited by the data I had collected. In this chapter, I argue that a shared middle-class onstage narrative has had a detrimental impact on members of the young generation who find that aspects of their ethnic identities, such as some traditional practices, often come into conflict with the young urban middle-class values described in the first part of the chapter. Consequently, my informants are not able to take advantage of the support and assistance offered within these communities and are increasingly isolated and vulnerable to the risk of future change in society.

In Chapter 7, I bring together the arguments from previous chapters to build on my initial observation in the preface: that there were distinct public and private narratives. Through providing further examples of this difference between public and private narratives, I explain how they have exposed the vulnerability of the young urban middle class and the private uncertainties therein. Reviewing the arguments of each of the body chapters, I show how, in response to this uncertainty, my informants turned to trusted social relations for information and support to help them deal with change.

Chapter 7 then develops upon the topic of rumour as an alternative discursive technique that is used by my informants to voice private offstage concerns in public onstage contexts. I pull together the threads of rumour that are woven through each chapter in the thesis, discussing how my young informants perceive rumours to ‘have more power here in Almaty and in our post-Soviet Union countries than they have in the West’, in the words of my informant Arman. I discuss how existing ethnographies have shown that rumours are a feature of informants’ lives in Kazakhstan, as well as how rumours have been used to express concern about uncertainties faced in everyday life (Alexander, 2009a; 2009b; Wheeler, 2016). I conclude that rumours are understood in culturally distinct ways: in Almaty, they are an important source of information and a discursive technique through which my informants can discuss offstage concerns in public onstage contexts.

In a short afterword, I discuss the changes that have taken place in Almaty since my last fieldwork trip in 2017. These changes include Nursultan Nazarbayev stepping down as president and the renaming of Astana to Nur-Sultan in his honour. Does this new leadership signal a change in the state’s authoritarian rule, allowing for the public expression of offstage uncertainties? I give an example of the government’s stance towards protest, which my young urban middle-class informants spoke about while discussing a rumour during my fieldwork in 2016. I then contrast this with a news article about a public protest on 30 August 2019—in a rare occurrence, the government chose to allow a protest to take place. As this protest was by a youth organisation, I therefore pose another question: What role may this young generation have going forwards into the future?



## Chapter 2

### Literature Review:

#### Urban ethnography, narratives, risk, and Central Asia

There are four key areas of literature that I need to address in order to explain my thesis: urban anthropology, how humans narrate their lives, the anthropology of risk, and the anthropology of Central Asia.

The first thing to address is the form of this thesis: an urban ethnography. I will review the development of this branch of anthropology and position my thesis in relation to the existing literature, which offers valuable insights into methodological challenges of fieldwork in an urban environment (Candea, 2010b; Kemper, 1991), as well as theoretical tools for thinking about the challenges of urban ethnography, including scale, anonymity, the heterogeneity of urban populations, class, ethnicity, and the urban built environment, among other topics (Low, 2014). Urban anthropology has interrogated definitions of class and explored how these broad theoretical concepts manifest themselves in different places and times (Kalb, 2014). Here, I will focus on the particular phenomenon of the post-Soviet urban middle class. I will explore the background of the first generation who have grown up after the Soviet Union and explain how their view of the world has been formed while living through a period of social, cultural, and economic change which has exposed them to new risks in the urban environment.

Second, I will address how people narrate the stories of their lives. My thesis argument is that these strategies are used to make sense of both ongoing societal change and the uncertainty surrounding various risks to which those living in and around Almaty are exposed. I will consider anthropologists' analyses of how informants narrate stories about their lives, including life histories and everyday conversations, focusing on a particular area of interest: the discussion of rumour and gossip. Using the insights offered in existing literature on the subject, I will contribute an analysis of the examples in my data in the final concluding chapter of the thesis.

The third area of topical interest is risk and uncertainty. I define risk as the probabilistic measure of exposure to a hazard, and uncertainty as the emotional response to a risk

(Slovic & Peters, 2006). I will start by discussing my own journey as a fieldworker exploring the topic of seismic risk; this opened up myriad new avenues of research when I discovered that this was just one of numerous risks that Almatineans face on an everyday basis. While anthropologists and sociologists have grappled with the navigation of risk in everyday modern life, the social, political, and economic conditions of Central Asia present some unique circumstances (Boholm, 2015). This thesis contributes to a better understanding of these circumstances.

The final section of the literature review contextualises the field of the anthropology of Central Asia. Just a decade ago, there was only a handful of academic scholars working on the region (Reeves, 2014a). Today, there are important threads of research including, but not limited to, the topics of water resource management; religious reconfigurations in post-socialist republics; the navigation of authoritarian and problematic democracy; and the challenges presented in negotiating ethnicity and identity across heterogeneous populations living within geopolitical borders inherited from Soviet administrative dicta.

### *Urban Anthropology*

What is the ‘traditional home’ of anthropology? The tent,<sup>1</sup> the rural village, the encampment of the forgotten tribe? It has been argued that the shift in anthropological study towards increasingly urban environments is a reflection of global trends in population movement over the 20th century and into the 21st. Foster and Kemper’s view is representative of a traditional view in anthropology that ‘to a large extent the transformation of traditional peasant societies and the mass exodus to the city explain new interest of anthropologists in urban research’ (Foster & Kemper, 2002 [1979], p. 137). However, my research suggests that this one-way move from peasantry to modernity is an oversimplification which hides a multiplicity of other relevant factors

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<sup>1</sup> In the introduction to *Writing Culture*, James Clifford draws our attention to a photograph of Malinowski’s tent in the Trobriand Islands (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). The ‘curious rite’ of writing in the tent places a particularly anthropological undertaking in the context of the other. Does the ethnographer still look out of place writing at a desk when they are surrounded by office blocks with similarly dressed office workers? What is exceptional about the work of anthropologists?

that contribute to population movement and change. Analysing the different types of movement that take place in Kazakhstan is important because the focus of this thesis is on change—physical, doctrinal, and personal. In particular, I concentrate on understanding the changes that have led to the emergence of a new middle class in a post-socialist urban context.

Urban field sites present a whole host of challenges to a social anthropologist, and I encountered many of them during my fieldwork. Foster and Kemper, writing in the late 1970s, comment that ‘accustomed as we are to working in small, “bounded” rural communities, anthropologists are often disconcerted by the amorphous and heterogeneous populations of large cities’ (ibid., p. 138). To the anthropologist, cities present a daunting challenge. We need to understand a variety of ethnicities, a range of class distinctions, and differing gender roles in crosscutting social and cultural groupings and communities. Key to the situation in Almaty is that urban environments present new manifestations of inequality that may be more difficult to discern amongst a complex framework of influence and power dynamics. Members of Almaty’s middle class, after facing significant societal change, are vulnerable to a range of threats, including natural hazards, economic collapse, and endemic corruption.

How has anthropology made sense of these challenging research contexts, and what can be learned to help answer my research questions? In order to overcome the seemingly infinite complexity of urban environments, anthropologists have been challenged to redefine the field site and delineate the people, places, and topics under consideration in ethnographic fieldwork. Matei Candea reflects on the methodology of anthropological research through his ethnography of life in Corsica, questioning and analysing the arbitrary distinctions that anthropologists often make in the delineation of a field site (Candea, 2010a; 2013). As mentioned in the introduction, Candea uses the example of a drive from the village of Crucetta to a larger urban municipal area to question what he terms the ‘arbitrary locations’ which might be considered part of his ethnographic field site. He concludes that while it may be false to impose distinctions regarding where one place ends and another begins, understanding difference and similarity is a particularly worthwhile anthropological endeavour. This issue is underscored by a recent focus on marginality and how it should be investigated and represented (Thieme, Lancione, & Rosa, 2017). Anthropologists must be clear about the implications of the choices they make and discuss the impacts these choices have on the representation of the subject. In

chapters 3 and 4, I will follow similar journeys, describing in detail the boundaries of my field site and the decisions that led me to make these distinctions.

Urban anthropology draws influence from across the social sciences. Setha Low stresses the influence of the Chicago school of sociology, the community-studies programme of slums in London and Nigeria, and the discussions at the University of Manchester—including those with Gluckman, which I will touch upon later in my discussion of rumour (Low, 2005b). Aside from these theoretical schools, a few specific ethnographies are directly relevant to the discussions in this thesis.

### *Power, religion, and economy*

There are three key areas in which urban anthropology has contributed to our understanding and study of cities, and which have helped me in my analysis of my data from Almaty. State power, manifested in the architecture of cities, is often a way for the state to intervene in the everyday lives of its citizens. Laszczkowski's (2016) Central Asian urban ethnography considers how state power comes to take form in the everyday lives of the city's inhabitants through the influence of monumental building projects in Astana (now Nur-Sultan), the capital of Kazakhstan. His work is complemented by that of Bissenova (2013), which analyses how the power of the Kazakh state is visualised through these ostentatious building projects. These ethnographies build upon the work of James Scott (1998), as well as Holston's (1989) discussion of the role of construction in Brazil's new capital, Brasília. Opening with the description of a journey across the Central Plateau of Brazil, Holston comments on the separation of Brasília from the rest of the country. Its concrete construction marks it out as a place of difference, a physical modernist endeavour that reflects upon the political intentions of the government (Holston, 1989, pp. 3–4). Low comments on how Rabinow (1989) 'links the growth of modern forms of political power to the evolution of aesthetic theories and shows how French colonists sought to use architecture and city planning to demonstrate cultural superiority' (Low, 2005a, p. 113). The city emerges as a readable text, indexing the strategic power moves of the state on the local populations.

Religion influences the everyday perceptions of an urban population and affects the construction and negotiation of urban built environments. Examples of this include

Privratsky's (2001) study of Turkistan, which focuses on the role of Muslim pilgrimage and religion in the Kazakh city. Paradise (2005), in an ethnography of perceptions of risk in Agadir, Morocco, discusses how perceptions of earthquake risk are influenced by religious teachings in which those who were more religious attributed earthquakes to divine will and took a more fatalistic approach to risk. Paradise further argues that Islamic teachings in the 99<sup>th</sup> Surah link earthquakes to the day of judgement, and therefore earthquakes are perceived as distinct from other hazards (ibid., p. 168). In a study of earthquake risk in the city of Baluchistan, Ainuddin found that fatalistic attitudes to risk do not equate to a lack of knowledge about a hazard; how one perceives risk, rather than one's knowledge, is what influences their preparation for disasters (Ainuddin, 2014, p. 165). As different religious perspectives often coexist within the same urban field sites, urban anthropology sets a precedent in understanding the similarities and differences both within and between communities and how this can affect perceptions, including those of risk and dramatic change.

Through urban ethnographies focusing on economy, we learn about the networks of trade, industry, and commercial development, in which cities often play the role of nodes in local, regional, and international networks. A key example here is Bestor's study of Tokyo's Tsukiji fish market. Starting with the early-morning fish auction, Bestor traces the connections to local, national, and international industries and businesses connected with the fish sold in the market (Bestor, 2005). The network of diverse markets is integral to the everyday practice of the market traders, demonstrating how local ethnography can investigate and comment upon much wider phenomena. This is just one example of how ethnographers have written about the city as a focal point for trade (Turner, 1995); industry (Willis, 2017 [1977]); and work (Rigi, 2003). Those living in Almaty have experienced dramatic changes in these areas, including the effect of devaluation and the privatisation of public industries. Like Bestor, I trace the local manifestations of wider networks to understand the influence of ongoing societal change on those living in Almaty.

### *Methodological considerations addressed in the urban anthropology literature*

Urban anthropology presents the ethnographer with a unique set of methodological challenges. Foster and Kemper (2002 [1979]), first writing in 1979 and looking back at

existing ideas of the idealised anthropological field site, have commented that ‘under ideal circumstances we were able to live with village families, to sleep and work in a spare room, and to share meals with them’. Foster’s career focused on understanding the transformations Mexican peasants were undergoing in the 20th century; combined with Kemper’s attention to the development of urban anthropology, this perspective—ethnography’s necessity to follow changes as peasants move from rural to urban environments—is still relevant today (Kemper, 1979; 1991). The tendency for anthropologists to live and work in small communities with a defined group of people has been an important tool in order for them to obtain rich data through close observation and participation; as these authors show, however, this is much harder to do in urban contexts.

In urban environments, anthropologists face methodological challenges with serious epistemological ramifications. These challenges include difficulties in building networks of informants; difficulties in meeting and interacting with locals; the increased isolation of the fieldworker; and coming to terms with the incredible complexity of urban environments undergoing rapid change. These issues have the potential to become overwhelming due to the sheer number of potential research participants and divergent perspectives that the ethnographer comes across in the field. Thieme suggests that urban ethnographies can offer ‘granular’ portraits of urban life that counteract this overwhelming complexity by offering a ‘grounded’ basis from which to understand aspects of everyday life that may go unnoticed (Thieme et al., 2017, p. 130). A range of novel methodologies have been trialled in urban research contexts, including De Certeau’s (1984) focus on walking as a way to make connections between people and place, an idea echoed in Ingold’s (2007) focus on the paths and lines that form connections; Nazpary’s (2002) methodological focus on an urban housing block in Almaty; Ringel’s (2016) investigation into how a post-socialist urban housing block can be a way to understand how informants conceptualise of both the past and the future; Laszczkowski’s (2016) analysis of Astana’s architecture as a way of understanding urban dynamics; and Low’s (2014) emphasis on the study of urban space. The range of these approaches demonstrates that urban fieldwork must be responsive to the challenges particular to the chosen field site.

For anthropologists today, priority is placed on establishing a network of welcoming informants, forming an achievable research methodology, and scoping out the field site. It is often difficult to know precisely how representative data collected may be for large populations; where possible, I draw upon local census data and statistics to help me frame my discussion. However, statistics—for instance, the proportions of different ethnicities living in a particular area—are a highly political topic, and it is difficult to know how reliable the statistics are in Kazakhstan. For example, Catherine Alexander found that a large number of people living in and around Almaty, particularly those who are recent rural migrants to the city, are not documented or represented in official statistics (Alexander, 2018a). In Chapter 3, I will address some of these challenges and pay particular attention to the selection of my field site, reflecting on the sampling of informants and the limitations and difficulties in representing their views. I acknowledge the fragmentary and partial nature of the data I have collected, explaining how my focus on the young urban middle class and on particular topics helps me to comment more authoritatively on the potential insights that emerge from my data.

Setha Low acknowledges that anthropologists have benefited from borrowing methodological tools from researchers in other disciplines, many of whom have experience working in urban contexts (Low, 2005b, p. 21). This includes political economy, architectural and planning theory, urban sociology, and cultural geography (*ibid.*). However, ethnography provides us with a different type of data, rich in nuanced detail and contextualised within networks of kin and community relations.

Despite the challenges, Low argues, anthropology still has a lot to offer studies of urban contexts: ‘The contributions of anthropological fieldwork still retain the power to demonstrate the how, why, and when of urban processes, but are even more effective when linked to theoretical frameworks that provide a grounding for further study and discussion’ (Low, 2005b). She demonstrates how this can be put into practice with her ethnography of public space in Costa Rica. Through a detailed comparison of two public squares, encompassing the buildings which surround them, the people who frequent them, and the political, social, and celebratory events which play out in them, she documents their changing uses, public perceptions, and local history. Despite the seeming impenetrability of the urban milieu, Low’s insights emerge from an analysis of everyday encounters, contextualised in a specified and well-explained manner. As Low comments, ‘There is no unified experience of being in Park Central [one of the squares],

but fragments of its social production are reproduced in the everyday practices and feelings of users' (Low, 2005a). Low's ethnography highlights a key distinction which recurs throughout my thesis: the dynamic between public and private, state and population, visible and invisible, onstage and offstage. In the following section on narrative, a theoretical analysis of these dichotomies will be developed further in relation to rumour.

### *Section summary*

I draw upon the anthropology of urban contexts when establishing my field site in Chapter 3 and when discussing the limitations and difficulties that I have encountered while carrying out fieldwork. Societal change is writ large in the city. Economic change can be seen in the construction of new developments and the deterioration of old buildings. As the state attempts to exert its influence in the urban landscape, political power is monumentalised in the architecture of new capitals. Social change can be seen in the transformation of neighbourhoods through processes of gentrification and deterioration following deindustrialisation. Cities offer a rich research context in which to investigate the delineation and conceptualisation of both public and private space. As anthropologists, the key value of the information, knowledge, and understanding that we gain is drawn from the voices of those living and working in the city on an everyday basis in their places of work, at their local cafés, houses, and apartments, on public transport, in shopping centres, and at workplaces and schools.

## *Narrative*

### *Stories, narratives, life histories, and biography*

I argue that stories—in particular the narratives which my informants formed to explain their lives—are essential to understanding how the post-Soviet young urban middle class try to make sense of change by producing a stable and secure narrative to provide structure and meaning in everyday life. To do this, I need to question what is unique to these stories and what aspects have been documented elsewhere.

Are stories, structured by narrative, a human universal to be found in cultures across the world? In *The Golden Bough*, James Frazer (2009 [1894]) compares and contrasts



different stories from across the world, including explanations of origins, stories of misfortune, creation tales, and religious parables. He comes to the conclusion that while there is an ‘essential similarity of man’s chief wants everywhere and at all times’, there is also a ‘wide difference between the means he has adopted to satisfy them in different ages’ (ibid., 804). Frazer makes wide-ranging conclusions, but through the analysis of stories and how they were articulated and structured by narrative, he acknowledges the diversity among local strategies of satisfying universal human needs. Frazer suggests that stories and narrative are therefore a human universal, a strategy for explaining and giving meaning to lives, a cross-cultural phenomenon through which anthropologists are able to compare and contrast dramatically different human societies.

Can we go further and say that narrative defines us as humans? Michael Carrithers has argued ‘that our capacity to participate in a uniquely human form of complex social life is founded in the ability to find and follow a thread of narrative through a skein of events’ (Carrithers, 2005, p. 443). To qualify his statement, Carrithers outlines what he sees as the constituent parts of narrative: ‘(1) characters, with their feelings, memories, intentions and attitudes, (2) their actions, (3) effects of those actions on others’ feelings, memories, intentions and attitudes, (4) so on, as those others may respond to the actions of the first, making up an unfolding plot’ (ibid.). Building upon Carrithers’ argument, this thesis seeks to establish how my informants described the characters, places, and objects in their lives, and—crucially—how both actions and the effects of these actions bring about change on an everyday basis. Carrithers’ argument is that narrative is about making sense of change, understanding which actors brought about that change, what their motivations may have been, and the ongoing significance of change to everyday life. He quotes Evans-Pritchard to make the point that ‘it is through stories that we have come to understand “the moral significance of a situation”’ (Carrithers, 2005, p. 443; Evans-Pritchard, 1969, p. 53). Narratives therefore form a guide as to what is morally acceptable within a society. In this thesis, the narratives of my informants are often challenged by the risk of changes in the future, thereby causing them to question their moral map and unsettling the basis on which they give meaning to everyday interactions.

Narratives also make sense of many different ‘scapes’ other than a moral landscape, as Appadurai (2016) has elucidated.<sup>2</sup> Tim Ingold (2007) stresses the importance of stories in making sense of space, arguing that storytelling and mapping are not just a way of describing, but a way of knowing. The important thing to consider, therefore, is the significance of stories and narrative to my informants. First and foremost, it is through the telling of stories—whether to each other or to the anthropologist in the field—that thoughts, feelings, and events come to be known. Ingold says that ‘to tell a story, then, is *to relate*, and narrate, the occurrences of the past, retrace a path through the world that others, recursively picking up the threads of past lives, can follow in the process of spinning out their own’ (Ingold, 2007, p. 30). This anthropological literature establishes the potential function and methodology by which things come to be known and can help us learn about how stories are told. I begin with a discussion of oral histories, from which we can begin to link the telling of informants’ stories to the anthropological fieldworker’s process of recording and analysis.

Oral histories provide a strong example of the insights that anthropologists can gain from documenting and analysing narrative. Julie Cruickshank has argued that ‘in

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<sup>2</sup> Appadurai’s theoretical idea of understanding a ‘global disjuncture’ through a consideration of different scapes has been influential in anthropological discussions of urbanism, globalization, and cosmopolitanism:

‘I propose that an elementary framework for exploring such disjunctures is to look at the relationship among five dimensions of global cultural flows that can be termed (a) ethnoscares, (b) mediascares, (c) technoscares, (d) financescares, and (e) ideoscares. 2 The suffix -scape allows us to point to the fluid, irregular shapes of these landscapes, shapes that characterise international capital as deeply as they do international clothing styles. These terms with the common suffix -scape also indicate that these are not objectively given relations that look the same from every angle of vision but, rather, that they are deeply perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors: nation-states, multinationals, diasporic communities, as well as subnational groupings and movements (whether religious, political, or economic), and even intimate face-to-face groups, such as villages, neighborhoods, and families. Indeed, the individual actor is the last locus of this perspectival set of landscapes, for these landscapes are eventually navigated by agents who both experience and constitute larger formations, in part from their own sense of what these landscapes offer’. (Appadurai, 2016, pp. 296–97)

northern Canada storytellers of Yukon First Nations ancestry continue to tell stories that make meaningful connections and provide order and continuity in a rapidly changing world' (Cruikshank, 2000, p. xii). Her analysis of stories builds on the work of Walter Benjamin, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Harold Innis, who 'deplored the consequences when oral storytelling becomes marginalised by more powerful knowledge systems' (ibid.). Tonkin (1992) argues that oral storytelling is one way that a balanced and insightful account of the past can be placed together through multiple subjective perspectives.

The anthropological study of oral history emphasises the importance of the context—as well as content—of stories. Writing down an oral history 'petrifies it'; therefore, the subjectivities of storytelling as a performative human action are an important consideration when documenting both how stories are told and how they are received (Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer, 1995, p. 102). Lwin (2017) pays attention to narrativity, the quality of the interaction between the storyteller and the audience, a focus which introduces additional meanings that may be missed if looking at the text alone. Duranti (2003) discusses narrativity as part of a third paradigm of linguistic anthropology in the 20th century, which has extended the study of language 'at first confined to interview situations' to a point where it has 'entered the more spontaneous domains of speakers' lives' (ibid., p. 332). The study of narrative and oral history must therefore cover the social context in which stories are told.

Looking again at Cruikshank's example and following the story of one of her informants, Angela Sidney, whom she worked with over a period of 17 years, we learn how 'meanings do not inhere in a story but are created in the everyday situations in which they are told' (Cruikshank, 2000, p. xv). A dramaturgical lens helps us to consider the wider contextual influences associated with a performance, including the audience, set, actors, timing, plot, social references, dramatic conventions and more, which come together to reinforce certain meanings that the performance or performer wishes to convey. For example, Hoffman (2005, p. 321) discusses how a 'dramaturgy of warsapes' was drawn upon by insurgent groups in Liberia and included 'a global currency of imagery and upon narratives that circulate internationally'. Referencing Moran's comments, Hoffman notes the impact that the insurgents' narratives had on a global Liberian diaspora that then, in turn, affected homeland politics (in Lubkemann, 2004). The insurgents' performance had a global reach because of the tropes that it drew

upon, influencing local politics through the particular audiences that responded to those narratives.

In the context of my fieldwork, attention to situational context is important for a reflexive ethnographic methodology: '[e]thnographies always begin as conversations between anthropologists and our hosts' (Cruickshank, 2000, p. 25). When the informant tells us a story, there is a reason; often it is a response to the anthropologist's question. In Chapter 4, discussions of a mudflow in Almaty evoke particular responses, but these have only emerged in a post-flood context in dialogue with an inquisitive anthropologist, and they should be evaluated in this context.

As a methodological technique, life histories are a good way to build up the timeline of a person's life in relation to the context in which they live. Like Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer, Crapanzano emphasises the transformation involved in the anthropologist's recording of informants' stories: 'The life history is usually constituted through transformation—the transformation from an oral production to a written product' (Crapanzano, 1984, p. 957). Crapanzano asks us to question the role of biography, reflecting on how the intentions of the fieldworker influence the data collected. In a review of five examples of life histories, he criticises the authors<sup>2</sup> for their incomplete presentation of a life, but also states that completeness may well be unachievable. Faced with a research methodology that only documents fragments of lives, how appropriate is this life-history approach to understanding change in Kazakhstan? In Crapanzano's words, 'Indeed, given its retrospective nature, are we analysing "real"- options—the options at the time—or selected options that justify choices already made?' (ibid., p. 959). In understanding the potential for retrospective re-evaluation, biographies can be analysed as means of dealing with dramatic changes—specifically, how these fragments of life are retold.

Chanfrault-Duchet (1991) has highlighted the value of what she describes as a 'life-story approach', which is able to provide a fuller picture by bringing fragments of life together through the inclusion of underrepresented voices. Chanfrault-Duchet eschews the gendered term 'life histories' in order to deal specifically with the representation of

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<sup>2</sup> The authors include Langness and Gelya, 1948; McKinley, 1982; Sexton, 1981; Buechler & Buechler, 1981; and Shostak, 1981.

women's voices. Her argument is that 'the life-story approach has, in recent years, come to be seen as a successful medium for collecting women's words, that is, for reaching a social "group:" that does not often speak on the social stage' (ibid., p.77). Rather than the fragmentary elements that Crapanzano suggests are a limitation of taking a narrative approach, Chanfrault-Duchet shows how they are a tool to accessing and representing underrepresented voices and points of view: 'the life story approach has to be considered a methodological tool providing access to a body of information that is more detailed, more discerning, but also far more complex to analyze than that collected through other approaches' (ibid., p. 89). In addition to this approach as a methodological tool, Chanfrault-Duchet also emphasises the literary forms which these stories can assume, many of which are informed by diverse sources including 'oral tradition, written literature and television series' (ibid., p.80). Particular forms are relevant to a Soviet and post-Soviet context, and a discussion of these helps to situate the theoretical discussion in the historical context in which my fieldwork is based.

Since 1917 and the Bolshevik revolution, the stories of ordinary people have played an important role in the development of a new Soviet society. Although there may have been a public emphasis on the importance of a collective identity and struggle, Hellbeck (2001) argues that this was not to the detriment of individual self-expression. The writing of personal biographies was one way that individuals were encouraged to re-cast their own stories as part of a wider societal process grounded in revolutionary politics, which 'centred on creating revolutionary selves, on making Soviet citizens think of themselves and act as conscious historical subjects' (ibid., p. 341).

Soviet-era *avtobiografiia* (autobiographical texts) were central to this process and are the focus of Hellbeck's (2001) research. Soviet citizens were required to submit memoirs to the authorities at regular intervals in their lives, and Hellbeck's research theorises the potential role that these recently uncovered NKVD (secret police) texts might play in revealing potential 'hidden transcripts'—a term which references James Scott (1985) and forms part of a discussion which I develop in more detail in the following section on p. 67).

The aspect of Hellbeck's research most relevant to this thesis is the discussion of an important nexus between private and public, self and society—described through different forms of autobiographical life story. He describes the apparent difference

between memoir, which ‘had the educational advantage of presenting a cohesive, unified narrative of self-development’, and the diary narrative, which was ‘choppy and resonated with competing voices in the process of self-constitution’ (ibid., p. 344). Arguing that neither is closer to experience, both forms of self-expression are different ways in which the individual makes sense of themselves and their place in society. In this thesis, I tease apart different threads of narrative offered by my informants in different times and places; Hellbeck’s research highlights the importance of looking at the form, context, and content of these narratives. It is difficult to know if these autobiographical forms of self-expression, originating in the 1930s, still resonate in post-Soviet Kazakhstan today. However, a further example of the changing personal biography of one Uzbek woman underscores how autobiographical representations can change over time and gives an insight into the ways that current circumstances can be reflected in individuals’ biographies and life stories, just as Cruickshank’s informant Angela Sidney adapted her storytelling to the contexts in which it was taking place.

‘Communist, Uzbek, Survivor’ is how one woman, Saodat Shamiseva, is described in the title of Kamp’s (2001) paper, which discusses ‘three versions of her life history at three historical moments’ (p. 21). Kamp argues that ‘her agency is seen in her ability to interpret her experience and to re-cast her identity as new politics and new narratives enable and constrain her choices’ (ibid.). In an example from a 1961 autobiography, Saodat reflects on the public narratives of Soviet socialist society in her account of her own actions: “[W]e carried out a great deal of work together to educate liberated women, and to liquidate illiteracy among housewives, directing them to clubs and workplaces” (p. 28). Here, her personal experiences are cast within the ideological framework of Soviet socialism. In a side note, relevant to my own thesis, Kamp indicates that ‘nothing in this autobiography suggests difficulty or uncertainty’ (p. 31). I found that in my own informants’ narratives, they often avoided discussing uncertainties, instead presenting a coherent public-facing persona. The strength of a narrative is related to the coherence of the message it sends; in this case, Saodat is emphasising her contribution to Soviet society and chooses to highlight events which support that message.

However, the message that she chooses to emphasise changes over time. In each of the three versions of Saodat’s life story, the accounts are different: ‘[M]any details of her first memoir conformed to normative Communist images, but were made into a more

“patriotic” story in the 1988 version. In [the] post-Soviet version, there is no heroic story’ (ibid., p. 56). These changes in the message of Saodat’s life story reflect both her personal journey through life and the zeitgeist of the time. The argument that is emerging from the literature is that individuals’ stories, collected through autobiography, oral history interviews, or police reports, are heavily influenced by wider societal narratives and in turn form part of a social discourse of the times in which they are produced. This thesis’s task is to uncover and analyse contemporary influences on both life stories and narratives of everyday life. Understanding how my informants form and present these narratives can therefore give us an insight into much wider societal influences on the lives of individuals.

The above examples discuss the important role of narrative in Soviet and post-Soviet contexts. An additional point to be developed is concerned with theorising the use of narratives by individuals as a relational tool—a key to sociality. Drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt, Michael Jackson (2013) explores the various uses of storytelling; this discussion provides a theoretical basis for the next section of the literature review.

Jackson (2013) draws upon Arendt’s (1958) idea that there is a ‘subjective-in-between’, a gap between direct experience and the way in which that experience can be rendered comprehensible to others (ibid., p. 15). Storytelling and the use of narrative are hypothesised as one way in which individuals bridge this divide: ‘When one tells stories, therefore, one is never simply giving voice to what is on one’s own mind or in one’s own interests; one is realizing, or objectifying, one’s own experience in ways that others can relate through experiences of their own’ (p. 15). Navigating this subjective-in-between is an everyday challenge for my informants, made all the more difficult in the context of state influence of public narratives through the monopolisation and control of media and the censorship of public protest and debate.

Jackson (2013) argues that there are many uses for storytelling; in his fieldwork with refugees, he explains that stories and narratives act as ‘cover stories, defences against danger and hurt’ (p. 15), ‘to escape from terror, to cross a border to be selected for emigration [...] and persuade officials to look kindly on one’s petition for family reunions’ (p. 14). Storytelling, as Jackson frames it, is a way that individuals are able to act in the world by bringing about a response in others. Jackson cites Arendt’s two theses: the first that ‘storytelling is a strategy for transforming private into public

meanings', and the second, which 'is existential, seeing storytelling as a vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances' (ibid., p. 34). These two theses are very important to the context of my own thesis as I explore how narratives are used by my informants in the face of uncertainty on an everyday basis. As I discuss in the conclusion, my informants' narratives hold the key to understanding how private uncertainties are discussed in public.

My informants, the young urban middle class, are undergoing a constant process of sculpting, moulding, and justifying what it is to be middle class, especially when there is not a local historic model from which they are borrowing. Oral histories, biography, and life history have been important anthropological tools for research and analysis, helping to understand people's lives and the subjectivities involved in ethnographic data collection. Not all narratives behave in the same way; while there are numerous strands of anthropological research into narrative, in the following discussion I focus on rumour and gossip, two forms of narrative that I found to be of critical importance in my field site.

### *Gossip and rumour*

As I had originally set out to discuss an earthquake risk, my informants often saw me as an alternative source of information and a carrier of timely rumours, insights, or stories. I was clear in explaining that I could only talk about what I had heard, and in acknowledging the sources of that information. However, for both my informants and me, an important part of everyday conversation often involved putting forward information, then openly discussing its credibility. I will engage with this in relation to specific examples: a flood in Chapter 2, and the middle class in Chapter 4. This raises some important methodological considerations: To what extent can the anthropologist be party to rumour and gossip? Was I part of these groups because I was privy to certain information? How did my role as an outsider influence the topics that I discussed? The literature on both gossip and rumour provides some unique insights which are relevant in helping to understand this situation.

The distinguishing factors of gossip are their function, as a marker of group demarcation; their form, as a text shared between members of a group about a non-partisan other; and their context, as they are shared in intimate and everyday places. The



distinguishing factors of rumour, on the other hand, also involve an intimate and everyday context and a concern with unofficial, unverified, and potentially interesting information. Crucially, with rumour, the source of the information is anonymous. As I will show throughout this thesis, the anonymity of rumours is used to provide unofficial narratives that counter state hegemony.

Rumour and gossip emerged from my data as important themes across all the topics I researched for this thesis. The context in Kazakhstan is such that there is little to no opposition media; few contrary public opinions to official narratives; and a desire—shared by all parties—not to upset a precarious status quo. The literature on rumour and gossip provides important insights which can help with research in this context. For example, Bruckermann has commented on rumours' function as an important tool for Shanxi citizens in China, where, faced with an earthquake scare and a lack of official information, they turned to fireworks, car horns and sirens to express these rumours in public action 'as people took crisis prevention into their own hands letting those around them to the threat of catastrophe' (Bruckermann, 2018, p. 189). Bruckermann (2018, 198) also writes that 'in order to secure safe, adequate and affordable housing as part of long-term livelihood strategies, Shanxi residents turned towards each other, rather than official media and government outlets, for trustworthy information and reliable support'. The situation in Kazakhstan, much like the case in Shanxi before a rumoured earthquake, can be summarised as a public presentation of civil obedience alongside a private search for information. The search for information through rumour also emerges as an important theme discussed in Chapter 7.

An important distinction has been made in the literature between gossip and rumour. In an influential paper that has informed the study of gossip, Gluckman (1963) argues that its primary function is group demarcation. This includes indicating who belongs, marking others as outsiders and delineating the boundaries of a group. Gluckman cites an example of Colson's discussion of the Makah: 'In this analysis Colson clearly establishes the important point that specific and restricted gossip within a group marks it off from other groups, both like and unlike. The gossip and scandal which are so biting in Makah life unite them into a group outside of general American society' (Gluckman, 1963, p. 311). The point which Gluckman stresses is that 'gossip is not idle: it has social functions and it has rules which are rigidly controlled' (ibid.).

Rather than focus on function, Paz emphasises context, explaining that we can recognise gossip as ‘any text transmitted between ratified participants about a discursively non-present group other’ (Paz, 2009, p. 119). Gossip can take the form of both oral and written communication. Paz also sees context as a key distinguishing factor between gossip and rumour. He differentiates studies of rumour from those of gossip, commenting that the former are often based on texts that ‘seem to have a wider circulation, and go beyond the interests of any one small group’ (ibid.). In defining gossip, Besnier emphasises locations in which gossip can be found in order to distinguish it from other types of information, opinion, or comment (Besnier, 2009, p. 2). Specifically, Besnier argues, gossip exists within intimate and everyday contexts.

I follow these definitions with a more detailed discussion of the analysis of gossip and rumour in an ethnographic context. In his ethnography of a Latino community in Israel, Paz argues that gossip addresses the issue that ‘a highly marginalised group does not have a voice in the Hebrew press’ (Paz, 2009, p. 133). His study looks at *chisme*, a form of gossip. He analyses *chisme* in both the context of a local football game, with its associated social gathering, and in written form in the local Spanish-language newsletter *Alcachofa* (*Artichoke*). Paz demonstrates how gossip is gendered, localised, and culturally specific, arguing that *chisme* is a culturally specific way to reflect on the goings-on within a community. Gossip, in particular *Alcachofa*’s *chisme* page, gives the community a public voice and the opportunity to reflect as a group when the mainstream press may not represent or give voice to their views.

Paz’s discussion connects us to a wider debate in the literature of gossip as a tool for the marginalised or oppressed. James Scott’s discussion of ‘everyday forms of resistance’ is cited by both Paz and Besnier as an important discussion which broadens the scope of academic attention to gossip, specifically the consideration of gossip as a ‘weapon of the weak’ (Besnier, 2009, p. 2; Paz, 2009, p. 118). Scott discusses how a local village elite can monopolise onstage power; ‘only “backstage,” where gossip, tales, slander, and anonymous sabotage mocks and negates the public ritual order, does elite control fall away’ (Scott, 1985, p. 27). Scott makes the crucial point that, ‘as a form of resistance, then, gossip is a kind of democratic “voice” in conditions where power and possible repression make open acts of disrespect dangerous’ (Scott, 1985, p. 282). As in Paz’s example, gossip gives a voice to those who may be oppressed, but does so in a way that protects the villagers through anonymity. In the context of present-day Almaty,

my informants are forced to negotiate these different public and private narratives in order to make sense of ongoing change, define their identity, and deal with uncertainty about the future.

Besnier takes up and develops Scott's distinction between "'public transcripts': social action that takes place in the open, particularly when interacting with the oppressor[, and] 'hidden transcripts,' forms of speech and behaviour that occur when the subordinated congregate 'offstage'", arguing that 'through expressions of stories, songs, rituals, or gossip, the subordinate reflect on their subordination, defy its agents, and forge solidarity' (Besnier, 2009, p. 8). This theoretical analysis is based on the influential work of Goffman, who first proposed a dramaturgical analysis of social interaction (Goffman, 1959). In Kazakhstan, public onstage criticism of the state is a rare, difficult, and dangerous undertaking. The state has clamped down on peaceful protest in recent years, most notably in the response to protests by oil workers in Zhanaozen in western Kazakhstan and recent protests in Almaty regarding the lack of transparency in the process of appointing a new president (NEWS, 2011; TCA, 2017). I therefore look to the 'hidden' and 'offstage' interactions that my informants used in everyday life, culminating in an analysis of the role of rumour in Chapter 7.

In response to an authoritarian state, as currently seen in Kazakhstan, rumour comes into its own, mediating a potentially harmful and traceable flow of information with unofficial narratives. However, rumour also played a role in the 'implosion of state authority' following revolutionary protests in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan in 2010 (Reeves, 2014b, p. 73). Reeves (2014b) details how the public responded to a lack of official information through the proliferation of 'densely circulating rumors', asking questions such as, 'Had the water system been poisoned? [...] Had looters attacked TsUM, the Central Department Store and the prime landmark of modern, commercial, peaceful Bishkek?' (Reeves, 2014b, p. 73). These rumours are concerned with the effect of the revolutionary protests on everyday life as the public try to establish the extent to which their way of life is threatened, has been forced to change, or is beset by new risks. These apprehensions are similar to those that motivate the rumours circulated by my informants in Almaty.

Rumour is often attributed to an anonymous source, divorcing the individual from bearing the burden of responsibility for what is said. Bruckermann suggests that

*minjian*—a term with a similar meaning to ‘rumours’ that directly translates as ‘between the people’—were used for exactly this purpose, allowing local Shanxi residents to discuss alternative narratives and sidestep ‘local government assurances’ to come to their own conclusions about potential risks (Bruckermann, 2018, p. 190). As indicated in the introduction, and developed in further detail here as it corresponds to relevant discussions in the literature, I argue that rumour is a narrative form that provides an opportunity to discuss, challenge, verify, interrogate, and reflect upon official narratives, personal concerns, and the various risks and uncertainties faced in everyday life.

### *Risk and Uncertainty*

Risk and uncertainty are both central themes through which we can understand how my informants conceptualise and deal with the consequences of past and future change. Both concepts are discussed using the term ‘risk’ in the majority of the literature; I will acknowledge when the literature differentiates between the two concepts.

Alaszewski argues that over the last hundred years, ‘risk and uncertainty have not been central themes’ in anthropological study (Alaszewski, 2015, p. 223). However, this misses the importance of risk perception in everyday decision-making, a central focus of anthropological research. Everyone lives with risk, but many among Almaty’s urban middle class are learning to live with a combination of risks for the first time, few of which were experienced by their parents’ generation. The challenge for the anthropologist is to understand which risks are prioritised and how others are dealt with in a local context. In the words of Mary Douglas, ‘Since no one can attend to everything, some sort of priority must be established among dangers; otherwise, merely counting risky objects would make us defenceless’ (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982, p. 3). Through the lens of Cultural Theory, which Boholm (2015, p. 10) considers a ‘major theoretical contribution’ to the anthropological study of risk, Douglas seeks to understand how ‘each social arrangement elevates some risks to a high peak and depresses others below sight’ (ibid., p. 8). She argues that there is a strong tie between the way we live and how we assess risk: ‘the choice of risks and the choice of how to live are taken together’ (ibid.). In the context of Almaty, looking at different communities (middle-class students at the university, ethnic Uighurs, ethnic Koreans,

ethnic Kazakhs, and ethnic Russians) shows how they prioritise risks in different ways despite living in close proximity to each other.

Douglas's Cultural Theory tackles the difficult problem of distinguishing between perceptions of risk and feelings of uncertainty: 'How can we know whether [...] dangers are actually increasing or whether we are more afraid?' (ibid., p. 188). Boholm summarises the findings of cognitive psychologists' research into this distinction, referencing the work of Paul Slovic (Boholm, 2015; Slovic, 1987, 2012): 'When laypersons make estimates of risk they do not merely calculate the bad outcome in accordance with statistical (probabilistic) information[...] they resort to heuristic cognitive devices—mental guidelines that make knowledge about risk readily accessible' (Boholm, 2015, pp. 32–33). A result of these 'heuristic cognitive devices' is that cultural differences are equally, if not more, important than probabilistic measures of risk in determining how risks are perceived, since judgements are often made quickly without logical and rational analysis (Slovic & Peters, 2006).

Major theoretical studies of risk within the social sciences, such as the work of Beck<sup>4</sup> (1992 [1986]) and Giddens (1991), emerged from a perceived need within Western academia to understand the accelerated globalisation of Western ideas. These authors asked a crucial question: What does it mean to be modern? This question has also been the focus of recent scholarly work in the anthropology of Central Asia, focusing on how ideas of modernity travel along the Pamir Highway (Mostowlansky, 2017), and how Kazakhstan's new capital can be understood as a manifestation of Kazakh ideas of modernity (Laszczkowski, 2016). Originally, Beck and Giddens were addressing the problem of how to understand a fundamental change emerging in Western societies. How applicable is their discussion to understanding post-socialist contexts such as Almaty? Both writers' work focuses on the idea of risk in relation to individualisation, secularisation (a move away from fatalistic ideas), and neoliberalism—the dominant social paradigm of the West, which at that time marked it as fundamentally distinct from the East. It is no coincidence that this work coincides with the collapse of the

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<sup>4</sup> As summarised by Brian Wynne in the preface to the 1992 edition of *Risk Society*, Beck's central argument is that industrial society, structured by class, is being replaced by an individualised risk society. As a result, it is not the 'goods' of an industrial society that are important, but the attribution of 'bads'—the responsibility for unavoidable risks (Beck, 1992 [1986], p. 3).

Soviet Union. It follows the fervent belief at the time—at least in the West—that there would be an inevitable ‘transition’ from socialism to capitalism. Authors including Burawoy and Verdery have taken issue with this teleological outlook, instead arguing for a view of ‘evolution rather than revolution, that see[s] hybrid societies rather than polar extremes’ (Burawoy & Verdery, 1999, p. 1). Returning to the question posed by Beck and Giddens regarding what it means to be modern, the answer is not found in a global theory of cultural homogeneity, but in the multiplicity of differences found in rapidly changing everyday lives in different cultural contexts. For Burawoy and Verdery, these places of rapid change, of which Almaty is a prime example, are ‘social spaces in which the ethnographic eye might be most fruitfully trained’ (ibid., p. 3).

In her edited volume of risk, Caplan (2000) outlines a third approach to risk which focuses on the benefits of an ethnographic methodology. Boholm describes how 15 years on, the contextualised methodological approach used by the contributors to Caplan’s reader remains relevant. In comparison to broader theoretical approaches, it is ‘both more ethnographic and more diverse, with a focus on how events and phenomena are voiced by “particular informants”, thus situating them in “particular times and places”’ (Caplan, 2000, p. 25; Boholm, 2015, p. 10). This approach explores how ‘risk issues are embedded in local context, taking into account the ways in which culturally framed experience and knowledge shape how risk is understood, managed, negotiated and contested in terms of power, identity and social belonging’ (Boholm, 2015, p. 10). The merits of this approach closely follow the benefits of ethnography in general, but here, Caplan shows the efficacy of an ethnographic approach in the study of risk.

We need to look to other strands of anthropological enquiry, such as the anthropology of climate change, to discover many of these contextualised ethnographic accounts of risk. In her survey of the anthropology of climate change, Susan Crate (2011) argues that ‘anthropologists are strategically well suited to interpret, facilitate, translate, communicate, advocate, and act in response to the cultural implications of unprecedented change’ (Crate, 2011, p. 178 [Crate & Nuttall, 2009]). In contrast to the wider literature on the anthropology of risk, the field of anthropology and climate change has a strong applied agenda, focusing on how anthropologists can work with communities to better understand how global issues play out in local contexts. Perhaps this advocacy for the rights of subjects is a direct consequence of studying the wider context in which their vulnerability to risks has emerged. In providing ways to

understand and theorise cultural approaches to change, this body of literature is relevant to my research in Almaty.

While many of the changes in Kazakhstan are not linked to climate change, the anthropology of climate change is also helpful to my study of Almaty because it ‘presents novel challenges, especially by rendering what were once suitable survival strategies as obsolete’, just as many of the ongoing changes in Kazakhstan have done (Crate, 2011, p. 182 [Oliver-Smith, 2009]). Ethnography with a focus on climate change explores strategies for making sense of significant change. For example, in her 2008 work ‘Gone the bull of winter?’, Crate explores what happens when the stories that people have used to explain the environment around them no longer make sense. Recognising that traditional narratives personifying the winter as a fierce bull have been rendered obsolete by a warming climate, Crate explains that changes to local narratives were not just the result of a changing climate, but also reflected changes in household-level production. As in Almaty, these changing narratives reflected a wider gamut of societal changes.

The threat of future change is often a pressure on life in the present. In Lazarus’s ethnography of the governance of vulnerability in Tuvalu, the threat of ‘sea level rise, surface and sub-surface temperature increases, ocean acidification and coral bleaching, coastal erosion, increased intensity but decreased frequency of rainfall, and an increased frequency of extreme weather events, including drought’ jeopardises the existence of those who live there. Lazarus argues that because people are denied access to power structures, they become increasingly vulnerable (Lazarus, 2009, p. 242). In the conclusion to this thesis, I discuss how my young informants’ ability to protest in public is restricted by the government. This leads to a feeling of helplessness, which often magnifies existing worries and intensifies informants’ perceived vulnerability to a range of environmental, political, and social hazards.

Ibañez-Tirado documents an experience of helplessness in Tajikistan through an analysis of two events described locally as *folia* (disasters): the ongoing effects of a flood, experienced alongside a state campaign to build a hydroelectric dam (Ibañez-Tirado, 2015, p. 5). Ibañez-Tirado suggests that ‘Kulob residents do not see disastrous events and stagnation as ruptures, risks or circumstances that they can prevent and administer. Instead, Kulob residents often refer to disasters as “normal”’ (ibid.). Other

such ‘disasters’, such as ‘constant debt and chronic illnesses, combined with a lack of sustainable sources of income and affordable medical care’, were not considered as events, ‘but rather constant aspects of people’s daily lives’ (ibid., p. 3)—a phenomenon which Ibañez-Tirado describes as living with ‘everyday disasters’. The author cites ‘joking’ and ‘cunning’ as local strategies which informants adopted to talk about and deal with everyday disasters; this is another example of a linguistic strategy used on an everyday basis to fold difficult, unwanted, and threatening circumstances into everyday life. Ibañez-Tirado uses Hoffman and Lubkemann’s (2005) discussion of war to exemplify how ‘the distinction between event and the everyday is difficult to define’ as everyday uncertainty becomes a certainty (Ibañez-Tirado, 2015). Like climate change, war has been described as a ‘dynamic pressure’ which increases existing vulnerabilities in society as what are normally considered long-term risks are forced into everyday decision-making (Wisner, 2004 [1994], p. 53). Hoffman and Lubkemann suggest that ‘contemporary modes of ethnographic representation still fruitfully carry forward a long legacy of marking specific moments for their ability to reveal the unremarkably common patterns that operate at the general level’ (Hoffman & Lubkemann, 2005, p. 317). In Chapter 4, I make a similar assertion, using the rupture of a sudden flood event—and the consequent responses of my informants and the general public—to understand the everyday negotiation of uncertainty.

Yet the secrets to everyday understandings of risk and uncertainty are not always revealed by dramatic events. Sometimes they are only uncovered through close analysis of how particular concepts are understood locally. In his ethnographic study of Aralsk, in the Aral Sea region of Kazakhstan, William Wheeler explores how the ambiguous term *ekologiala* is used to talk about ‘the entanglements of economic and ecological problems which preoccupy so much of the discourse of the town’, illustrating how his research informants see these areas as part of an interlinked whole (Wheeler, 2016, p. 248). Wheeler’s informants use the term *ekologiala* in relation to pollution; personal health issues such as high blood pressure; the unknown effects of rocket explosions at the Russian-operated Baikonur cosmodrome; and the anecdotal healing properties of local sand. Everyday concepts’ ability to acquire a diverse range of meanings suggests that no term should be taken at face value and that meanings can shift depending on context. Breaking down how stories of change, risk, and uncertainty are narrated by my informants, I will analyse the intersection of influences on everyday life, including



ethnicity, life aspirations, the politics of language use, urban/rural stereotypes, educational attainment, corruption, and trust in kinship and close friend networks.

When local populations have little or no say in the risks to which they are exposed, local strategies emerge for folding risks into the everyday, either creating coping strategies or normalising the severity of risks. In *The Nuclear Peninsula*, Zonabend describes how living with the potential of catastrophic risk is part of everyday life for those who work at a nuclear-waste processing plant (Zonabend, 1993 [1989]). The everyday reality of living with risk extends to the families of workers and the communities who live in close proximity to the plant. As the plant is one of the main employers in the area, the risks involved are a necessary part of local employment. In order to cope with the risks on an everyday basis, workers undertake novel strategies of naming potential risks, normalising their existence and incorporating them into everyday practice.

Through harnessing and controlling personal narratives, members of the public can find ways to handle difficult situations which are otherwise out of their control. Petryna (2003) describes how citizens in post-Chernobyl Ukraine took advantage of the additional health support offered by the state to those who had been affected by radioactive pollution, thus mitigating the withdrawal of state health provision that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. Petryna explains that citizens took control of their personal narratives to create *sviaz* (ties) with the state, which entitled them to health care provision. In this way, they took advantage of governmental support for those affected by Chernobyl in a process she describes as ‘biological citizenship’: ‘Biological citizenship became a complex bureaucratic process by which a population attempts to secure a status as harmfully exposed and deserving of compensation’ (Petryna 2003, p. xxv). Petryna’s study shows that in facing risks, citizens can take control of a situation and find novel ways to overcome significant change and the hardships that accompany it. As citizens seek to negotiate changing social and political and ecological landscapes, responses to risk are not just coping strategies, but can offer the potential for empowerment.

Anthropologists look at risk through the quotidian. Even in examples of living with risk, climate crisis, and war, the study of everyday strategies has been shown to be important—and this informs my thesis’s focus on the everyday lives of my informants. The rapid changes experienced in post-socialist contexts, particularly in Central Asia,

have significantly impacted everyday life in Almaty. It is to this geographical and topical focus that I now turn.

### *Anthropology of Central Asia*

The anthropology of Central Asia is a relatively young yet thriving field of academic study. It sits within the context of the wider body of literature on the anthropology of socialism and post-socialism. Key topics covered in this section include changes in late socialism; privatisation and decentralisation; nationality and ethnicity; language; nationalism; religion; and modernity. I divide my discussion between two clusters of topics. The first cluster includes those aspects of socialism and post-socialism experienced across the former Soviet Union, referencing the particularities of the Central Asian context of these issues. The second cluster focuses on how change has taken place in Central Asia and Kazakhstan in particular.

Only a few ethnographic studies took place during the Soviet era.<sup>5</sup> Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, it became easier to carry out fieldwork, and there was an increase in international and local scholarship in formerly impenetrable field sites. This led to what Berdahl et al. (2000) describe as an ‘avalanche’ of new research, focused on documenting and understanding the realities of both socialist and unfolding post-socialist experiences.

Many Western academics, including political scientists and economists, have employed triumphalist narratives which frame capitalism as having overcome socialism (Berdahl et al. 2000, p. 1). This narrative has also been described as a ‘rescue scenario’ where Western advisers are either seen as doctors or gods, intervening to heal an illness or to create a new world from scratch (Verdery, 1996a, p. 225). These narratives were the result of an influx of Western advisers from institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Travelling to areas of the former Soviet Union, these advisers assumed that there was an inevitable role for neoliberal policies in these places (Berdahl et al., 2000, p. 2). In response to this, anthropologists have encouraged more nuanced approaches to understanding the existing processes of change

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<sup>5</sup> Notable studies include Humphrey (1983), Verdery (1983), and Ries (2009).

that were already underway in the early 1990s, which were influenced by existing Soviet policies and local political, economic, and social contexts. This has been described in terms of following a ‘trajectory of change’ (ibid., p. 9).

### *Aspects of socialism and post-socialism experienced across the former Soviet Union*

The various Central Asian experiences of post-socialism can be understood by building on the foundation of literature covering the wider geographical area of the Soviet Union. Alexei Yurchak draws our attention to changes in ‘late Socialism’ in Russia before the collapse of the Soviet Union. He argues that ideological discourse shifted from a semantic model, which followed the literal meanings of ideological doctrines, to a pragmatic model which simply reproduced the form, but not the substance, of ideological discourse (Yurchak, 2003, p. 481). Soviet state policies shifted with *perestroika*, and Nancy Ries (1997) found that Soviet populations discussed these policies on an everyday basis using lived examples and stories of suffering and misfortune. These discussions of *perestroika* are limited in the extent to which they can be applied to other former Soviet countries, however. Mandel explains that ‘Poland, Hungary, Kazakhstan and Mongolia undertook similar policies in the 1990s [...] yet the consequences have been very different’, suggesting that we must be careful in applying findings from one area to another (Mandel & Humphrey, 2002, p. 11). For this reason, I focus on how general trends in the study of the former Soviet Union have been understood by anthropologists studying Central Asia.

Different perspectives on how to understand decentralisation have been put forward in the literature, from Luong Jones’s (2002) focus on institutional change and political continuity in Central Asia, to Haghayeghi’s (1997) focus on the politics of privatisation. With the collapse of Soviet rule in Central Asia, power was devolved to newly independent states. Within the new republics, a national power vacuum was filled by those who already had political influence. In Kazakhstan, the first secretary of the Communist Party, Nursultan Nazarbayev, was elected as president, only stepping down in 2019. Roy argues that, faced with forming all the complexities of a functioning nation-state, it is no surprise that many Soviet-era structures were reappropriated—at times only the names of organisations, policies, and institutions were changed (Roy, 2000).

One significant change that took place was the privatisation of state assets. This led to deepening inequality as those with political influence, such as state bureaucrats and *apparatchiks* (functionaries of the Communist Party), took advantage of their existing positions. Beginning in 1991, privatisation in Kazakhstan expanded to include state-run factories, mines, refineries, housing, and utilities, among other areas (Haghighi, 1997). In her work on privatisation in Almaty, Catherine Alexander argues that the former ubiquity of the state in the everyday lives of citizens was only revealed in its absence (Alexander, 2009a). Describing the privatisation of a sweets factory and textile *Kombinat*, Alexander explains that the rights of Soviet citizens used to be administered through the workplace; with privatisation, however, many of these links with the state were broken. Mass privatisation therefore led to a ‘fracturing of unity, multiplying of difference and an introduction of instability’ (ibid., p. 271). Shreeves argues that in rural areas of Kazakhstan, privatisation did not replace state influence with new businesses, but instead led to the ‘withdrawal and collapse of services and living standards’ (Shreeves, 2002, p. 216). It was during this time, in the context of rapid societal change, that the young urban middle-class informants with whom I formed close relationships during my fieldwork were born. The Soviet worlds their parents had grown up in were replaced by a period of uncertainty marked by economic crisis, increasing crime, and difficulties in sourcing everyday goods (Nazpary, 2002). This uncertainty resulted from the collapse of supply-and-demand networks as the state withdrew its involvement in the everyday lives of its citizens. Therefore, when studying the young urban middle class, I consider generational comparisons a key tool in understanding ongoing change.

#### *Aspects of socialism and post-socialism unique to Central Asia*

Soviet policies played out in unique ways in Central Asia. The Soviet Nationalities Project, which has an ongoing impact today, is the first policy I will consider. I will explain the impact of this policy alongside an analysis of my data in Chapter 6, but here I discuss the literature I have used to develop my understanding of it. By using the wider anthropological debates on the topic of identity, and examining how the conceptualisation of identity in relation to a nation-state impacts the conceptualisation of ethnicity, I situate my discussion of the Central Asian context in which my fieldwork was undertaken.

Perhaps the most important subject for anthropologists of identity has been dispelling the determinism of culturalism. Wikan (1999) argues that culturalism is a 'notion of culture as static, fixed, objective, consensual and uniformly shared by all members of a group' and that this 'is a figment of the mind that anthropologists have done their share to spread' (p. 62). Vertovec (2011) ascribes this 'assumption of common beliefs and practices within a discrete ethnic group' as being a common feature 'within contemporary policies of multiculturalism' (p. 243). As I explain in this section, in a Central Asian context, the frequently referenced multinational society is predominantly a result of Soviet policies which introduced a particular framework. Within this framework, identities have been constructed in the post-Soviet republics, including Kazakhstan. In order to dispel culturalism as essentialising and an oversimplification of fluid identities, it has been proposed that anthropologists 'eschew homogenous, reified, static and unchanging notions of culture and emphasize its dynamic, heterogenous, changing, contested and transformative nature' (Grillo, 2008, p. 32; cited by Vertovec, 2011). In following this suggestion, I also acknowledge that culturalist models of identity exist as social facts; therefore, I also study how these models have come about and their impact on Kazakh society.

Focusing on the use of symbols is one way in which I analyse how identities are constructed by both the state and members of the public. Anthropologists have examined how reactions to 'cultural differences are structured by particular images, narratives and symbols of national culture', as Vertovec (2011) discusses (p. 242). This is particularly important in Chapter 6, where I consider how symbols of a nomadic past are used as reference to a common, and historically rooted, notion of ethnic Kazakh identity. It also recurs in the concluding chapter, where the use of symbols and metaphor is shown to be a way for my informants to reflect on their current situation.

Drawn from discussion of theory in the discipline of international relations, anthropologists have used the Identities, Borders, and Order (IBO) model to help understand the perception of identity in relation to nationalism and nation-states (Albert et al., 2001). Vertovec (2011) explains that this model is based on particular assumptions that 'a) some sense of cultural identity is presumed to characterize a people; (b) this identity/people is believed to be contiguous with a territory, demarcated by a border; (c) within the border, laws and a moral economy underpin a specific social and political order' (p. 245). Lapid (2001) advocates for the utility of the model, arguing

that ‘the dynamic nexus constituted by interrelated processes of bordering, ordering, and collective identity building opens a uniquely well-situated analytical window to observe issues of mobility, fluidity, and change in contemporary world politics’ and as such, it is a useful tool to help think through these topics (p. 2).

This is relevant for my thesis argument as I document and analyse the mechanisms by which identities are formed and then communicated to others. Vertovec draws our attention to the mechanisms by which this nexus of processes affects identities, including a ‘system of narratives, public rituals, representations and institutions, informal social relationships, written and unwritten regulations, and expectations of civility and public behaviour’ (2011, p. 245). While acknowledging the fluidity of identity, I interrogate the role of these mechanisms in affecting certain perceptions of identity in the context of my field site. To do this, however, we first need to understand both the historical and contemporary influence of the Soviet Nationalities Project.

Launched by decrees following decisions made during the 1924 Communist Party conference, the Soviet Nationalities Project had the ‘aim to create a multi-ethnic empire and [...] system of governance. A process “defined as “inter-nationalism”’ (Roy, 2000, p. ix). This has an ongoing impact today, as it formed the basis of the new republics following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Schatz (2000) explores the continuing effects of Soviet ‘internationalism’ in the formation of post-Soviet Kazakhstan, arguing that a dual emphasis on ‘lingering’ Soviet internationalism and the promotion of an ethnic Kazakh state has led to societal divisions. Furthermore, Roy (2000) discusses the intricacies of how this policy impacted the formation of the modern delineations of states and ethnic groups.

Davé (2004) explores the proportions of different ethnicities in Kazakhstan over time and their impact on Kazakhs, who found themselves as a minority ethnic group upon independence. She gives particular focus to how this fuelled the Kazakhstani state to undertake a range of nationalising policies, designed to shift the balance in favour of ethnic Kazakhs. Sarsembayev (2010) argues that these nation-building policies led to ethnic Kazakh nationalism becoming the default position of Kazakh nationalism in the 1990s. Yessenova (2005) has discussed the importance of traditional Kazakh systems in recognising lineage, as well as the role they play in how Kazakhs make sense of the physical journeys they have taken in life. Dubuisson and Genina (2011) explore the

ramifications of state support for an ethnic Kazakh identity that created the notion of *Kazakh-shylykh*, a ‘Kazakhness’ that stretches across both time and space. Catherine Alexander (2018b) explores how, despite a shared international notion of Kazakh identity, there are differences in how Kazakhs from different places are treated. She focuses in particular on the societal perception of *oralmen*, Kazakhs returning from outside Kazakhstan’s borders. Werner and Barcus add to this discussion, commenting on how the re-traditionalisation of Kazakh identity has led to disparities between gender roles, as male heroes are valorised and Kazakh women are framed as ‘reproducers and homemakers’ (Werner & Barcus, 2015, p. 11).

Nation-building policies have also affected other ethnicities in Kazakhstan. Davenel has explored how the state’s encouragement of ethnic-group identity played out for Tatars in Kazakhstan: while they were encouraged to build their own ethnic identity, they were not able to perform the role of ‘fully-fledged citizens’ (Davenel, 2012, p. 27). Oka (2006) has written about how different ethnic groups, namely Russians, Uighurs, and Koreans, have had different experiences in the post-independence years, as Kazakh state nation-building policies play out differently for each ethnic group. I will focus on such experiences in more detail in Chapter 6, but here I will provide an overview of some of the ongoing debates regarding these ethnic groups.

Russians, referred to by Peyrouse as the ‘imperial minority’ in Kazakhstan, have faced their own significant changes over the last 50 years (Peyrouse, 2008, p. 2015). Peyrouse (2007, 492) argues that Russians have been emigrating from Kazakhstan to Russia since the 1970s. This phenomenon accelerated under *perestroika* and changed again after independence, with the potential for regional destabilization: thousands of ethnic Russians found themselves ‘abroad’ as administrative boundaries transformed into national borders after 1991 (Laurelle & Peyrouse, 2004; Peyrouse, 2007). Davé (2004) reports that significant numbers of ethnic Russians left Kazakhstan to live in Russia in the 1990s. Additionally, she comments on the geographical variation of ethnic Russian populations: the north of Kazakhstan is home to a higher proportion of ethnic Russians. Peyrouse suggests that the issues facing Russians were ‘gradually solved by a double phenomenon—the emigration of those who wanted to leave the country and a depoliticisation of those who preferred to stay or who had no choice’ (2007, p. 41). Matthew Blackburn argues that despite having no lived experience of the Soviet Union, a young generation of ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan see a ‘cultural continuity with how

the past is imagined', stating that the "cultural colonial' habitus of the Soviet period has survived in a new post-Soviet generation' (Blackburn, 2019, p. 230). The ongoing influence of Russian culture and language can be seen most keenly in urban areas, including Almaty, which remain mainly Russophone. In Chapter 5, I discuss how the young urban middle class is a mainly Russophone group, despite the fact that it is a heterogeneous mix of ethnicities. Aksholakova discusses the role of the Russian language in Kazakhstan in a post-Soviet context. Although Russian is the official language of international (inter-ethnic) communication, it is steadily being replaced by Kazakh in state administrative procedures (Aksholakova & Ismailova, 2013).

Oka (2006) has written about the linguistic Russification of the Uighur community in Kazakhstan, and Roberts (1998; 2007) discusses everyday Islamic practice in a Uighur neighbourhood of Almaty. Clark and Kamalov (2010) write about the migration of Uighurs across borders, an issue which is discussed by my informants as one way in which the Uighur population has dealt with societal change.

Kokaisl (2018), as well as other academics such as Chang (2016), consider the distinct groups of ethnic Koreans living in Central Asia to be a result of Stalin's deportation of Koreans from the Russian Far East in 1937. Kokaisl has found that Koreans in Kazakhstan have assimilated with the national population to a greater extent than those in other Central Asian republics. Yem and Epstein (2015) explore this from a different angle, studying Korean inter-ethnic marriage practices in a historical study of marriages in Almaty between 1937 and 1965. These debates are drawn upon in Chapter 6, where I will discuss how a Korean informant's marriage caused a rupture in everyday life. Other aspects of Korean culture have caused Korean identity to impact Soviet culture (Song, 2016). This can be seen in terms of food; in terms of music, where individuals such as Victor Tsoi, lead singer of the band Kino, informed fashions across 1980s Soviet popular culture; and in terms of films such as *Needle* (1988), which sparked the Kazakh New Wave film movement (Abikayeva & Zhamanbalina-Mazur, 2003).

Religion is an important influence on the population of Central Asia. Following Soviet-era repression and control of religious practice in favour of atheist and secular policies, independence has brought about a 'Christian revival' alongside an 'Islamic renaissance' (Omelicheva, 2011, p. 250). It is important to understand trends in religious practice, as historically religion has been a way for people to deal with uncertainty and existential



threats. The literature engages with the influence of religion on everyday life; personal morality; the understanding of rapid social change; narratives of modernity; syncretic practices such as spiritual healers and the flourishing of medical pluralism; and the ‘securitisation’ of Islam in public culture.

During my fieldwork, I found that religion was not as important for the young urban middle class as it was for their parents’ generation. My young informants often faced a disjunction between following what they perceived to be a ‘proper’ Islamic way of life—for example, as a model Kazakh—and the values and way of life adopted by the young urban middle class. Understanding the context of these divisions, and the consequent issues that arise for my informants, is an ongoing discussion throughout my thesis.

Dragadze (1993) discusses how religious practice was officially banned during the Soviet era, but continued to be practised in domestic contexts. This brought one’s religious adherence closer to a personal moral practice as opposed to an act of collective worship. Féaux de la Croix argues that the analysis of religious practice in Central Asia is often studied in isolation from other aspects of life. However, in her discussion of *mazars*, holy sites and places of Islamic pilgrimage—a topic that is also explored by Dubuisson and Genina (2011, p. 472)—she encourages a perspective that sees *mazars* embedded in everyday life. She compares them to dams and *jailoo* (pastures), which would normally be conceptualised as existing in different spheres of life (Féaux de la Croix, 2016, p. 133). The role of Islam in everyday life has been a fertile area of research. Louw, who carried out fieldwork in Bukhara, Uzbekistan, explains that ‘people’s engagement in Islam, their efforts at creating a satisfying social existence, took place against the background of profound social changes that had made the ground shake beneath their feet, making them feel deprived of the means to adapt to these changing conditions for their lives’ (Louw, 2007, pp. 174–75). In this respect, religion is one way of dealing with the ‘scale and rapidity of changes’ experienced in post-Soviet Central Asia (ibid., p. 176). These changes have played out in different ways in different places, ranging from Kazakhs in Turkistan in the south of Kazakhstan, where pilgrimage has become an important spiritual and economic resource for the town (Privratsky, 2001), to Uighurs in a neighbourhood in Almaty where, even within a single event marked with ceremonial toasts, each speaker had a different perspective and personal take on how religion informs everyday ceremonial practice (Roberts,

2007). In my thesis, I argue that in urban contexts such as Almaty, religion is more important for some demographic groups than others and that this has an impact on all my informants. However, religion has not been a source of support to which my young, urban, middle-class informants have turned to help them deal with uncertainty.

Religion and religious practice impact the lives of my informants in Almaty in various ways as a result of their relevance for an older generation, their wider kin groups, and some of their friends. Syncretic practices, such as the use of magic, fortune-telling, and shamanic healing, have been folded into everyday life in such a way so that they are not considered specifically religious. Féaux de la Croix describes the ‘exotic cache and political role’ of ‘Islam and Shamanism’ that has led many academics to study various practices in Central Asia (Féaux de la Croix, 2013, p.542). Penkala-Gawęcka, who has studied spiritual healers, argues that there has been ‘a surge of medical pluralism in the post-Soviet period’ based around the role of healers, whose ‘relations with biomedicine are shaped by complex economic, social, and political factors’ (Penkala-Gawęcka, 2013, p. 37). Penkala-Gawęcka adds that ‘the government’s acceptance of ‘folk’ medicine, including spiritual healing, [...] mainly lies in its interest in the resurgence of Kazakh culture and history, important to the legitimacy of the newly independent state’ (ibid., p. 47).

Being Muslim as a cultural, rather than religious, distinction is an important aspect of post-independence Central Asian culture for many ethnicities. Rasanayagam (2011) argues that his informants in Uzbekistan did not make a distinction between the practice of religion in a mosque and the Islamic influence on life-cycle rituals, such as circumcision in the home, which continued during the Soviet era and into the post-Soviet period—these are all aspects of being culturally Muslim. The tie between religion and ethnicity is also strong. As Omelicheva (2011, 246) argues, ‘for Kazakhs [in Kazakhstan], ethnic identity is a Muslim one; being Kazakh means being Muslim’, a point I will return to in Chapter 6 to discuss Kazakh identity alongside comments from my informants.

As Islam isn’t always brought into everyday practice, the contrasting angle is the ‘securitisation’ of Islam, a narrative which frames Islam as a threat to society in reference to its radical and/or militant factions (Omelicheva, 2011). Louw illustrates how this enters everyday life for her informants in the form of a narrative of ‘extremists’

or *wahhabis*, which is seen as the opposite of what it meant to be Muslim in post-Soviet society for her (Louw, 2007, p. vi).

One reason my informants are not turning to religion is because religion does not play an important role in their onstage narrative performance of what it means to be modern. Mostowlansky has explored what being modern means to those living along Tajikistan's Pamir Highway, arguing that his informants perceive modernity as 'non-linear, overlaying, and in need of perfection', bringing together aspects and understandings of Soviet "projects" of modernity, the places they live and "worlds beyond" (Mostowlansky, 2017, p. 149). People along the Pamir Highway see modernity as 'an endangered condition that is in need of revival, reconfiguration, and improvement'; it is therefore an existing narrative to be reformed, retold, and expressed as a way of understanding ongoing change (ibid., 153). Along the Pamir Highway, religion plays a role in *a* narrative of modernity, as opposed to a universal shared notion of what modernity is or should be. My informants have formed their own idea of what it means to be modern in what I describe as a young urban middle-class way of life.

Laszczkowski and Bissenova both look to Astana, Kazakhstan (renamed Nur-Sultan in 2019) to understand the role of modernity in Kazakhstan as both a 'space' and a 'place' where Kazakh politicians sought to 'claim their place on the "global" stage' by physically building a utopian idea of the future in the present (Laszczkowski, 2011; 2016, p. 179; Bissenova, 2013). Laszczkowski argues that 'the Astana project has served to revive, for Kazakhstani citizens, the faith in progress and "modernity" that has been bitterly lost with the atrophy of the Soviet Union' (Laszczkowski, 2016, p. 178). Ultimately, however, he finds that "'the spectacular' is always complexly enmeshed with 'the mundane'" (ibid., 181). It is these quotidian contexts, then, upon which I turn my analytical lens in order to understand how my informants fold ongoing and often large-scale change into their everyday lives.

### *Concluding Comments*

My thesis builds upon the academic debates introduced in the literature review. As an urban ethnography, I contribute a new perspective focusing on the young urban middle class of Almaty. Bound by a unique post-socialist urban identity, they are a demographic

group that has not yet been studied by anthropologists because of their age, despite being distinct as the first generation to come of age since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

I build upon existing anthropological studies of narrative by focusing on the way that stories are told, the contexts in which they are told, and the shared narratives that my informants reproduce on an everyday basis. Focusing on the role of rumour in Almaty, I analyse how it is used to explore and verify private concerns in public contexts when public narratives are no longer trusted by my informants.

My informants face myriad risks in everyday life, including seismic risks; the risk of flooding; the persecution of ethnic groups; pollution; a lack of trust in professional qualifications; and the threat of continuing currency devaluation, among many others. The literature provides ways of understanding risk as folded into everyday decision-making. Through an emphasis on the quotidian, rather than on large-scale threats, I seek to understand the threat of various risks and the uncertainty they trigger in the lives of my informants.

The anthropology of Central Asia, and its broader basis in the anthropological study of socialism and post-socialism, provide a foundation from which multiple and ongoing societal changes underway in Kazakhstan can be understood. Examples of cultural strategies for dealing with decentralisation, privatisation, ethnic differences, the role of religion in post-Soviet society, and ideas of modernity call for methodological attention to a constantly changing social and cultural context. Members of the young urban middle class are both the product of past change and a social group from which further societal changes are emerging. This thesis contributes an original study into the background, motivations, and challenges faced by the young urban middle class of Almaty.

## Chapter 3

### **A Transect from West to East:**

#### Fieldwork, movement, and making sense of change

This chapter discusses three locations along a transect of the city of Almaty. These locations are key sites from which I based my fieldwork, but they also reflect three distinct areas from which we can question the constitutive parts of an urban field site and weave together narrative accounts of my informants' lives. The three locations are a *Khrushchevka* housing district, downtown Almaty, and a village on the site of a former collective farm. I explain the connections between these locations by focusing on various types of movement, including migration; commuting; shopping trips; the flow of gas, information, and transport; movements towards modernisation; and movements in search of health, prosperity, and safety. The accounts we hear juxtapose the narratives of a generation who grew up in the later years of the Soviet Union with those of my young urban middle-class informants. These narratives show different approaches to forming coherent stories, as well as to making sense of past change and the various uncertainties in everyday life which are linked to the places in which people live, work, socialise, relax, and go shopping.

#### *Transects*

Here in Chapter 3 and in the following chapter, I adopt the approach of using a transect to structure my presentation, discussion, and analysis of my informants' lives and my fieldwork in Almaty. As Krebs and Pilz (2013) have argued, '[T]he application of a transect, a methodology originally used in the natural sciences, specified and implemented for urban planning, seems to be a promising tool for urban anthropology' (p. 4). Their support for the approach lies in their experience in Baku and Tbilisi, two post-Soviet urban contexts where they found that a transect proved a fruitful way of providing a snapshot of a changing cityscape at a certain point in time. Specifically, they found that transects allowed them to 'classify typical and non-typical interrelations between the general structure of a city and certain places. It makes it possible to recognize the interplay between different levels like 1st the global, the local, and the

regional, 2nd the past and the contemporary, 3rd the collective and the individual' (ibid., p. 8).

Methodologically, the anthropological use of transects has little association with the New Urbanists' approach, dominant within the wider social sciences, of categorising cities into six zones based on building density—an approach rooted in the New Urbanists' mapping of industrialised North American cities (Duany & Talen, 2007; Duany, 2010). The transect approach I adopt in these chapters is closer to both Margaret Kusenbach's (2016) 'go-alongs', which entail following an informant in their everyday movements, and Elke Krasny's (2008) 'city telling', an experimental go-along where, for example, the researcher might pick a specific route, taking a narrative approach to constructing a path through the city. In this chapter and the next, the transects I explore benefit from what Krebs and Pilz (2013) detail as the role of the informant in classifying these areas, as transects allow for a discussion of the 'ways in which these [transect] sites form part of the routes of everyday life and how they are appropriated by memories or narrations of the city' (p. 13). As such, transects are narrated tales of the city; the lives of informants are contextualised in a description of the built environments in which they live, work, and go about their everyday business.

Finally, I want to stress the importance of using a transect at this point in the thesis. Although Krebs and Piz (2013) argue that the 'urban transect is an instrument for the start of fieldwork; a first exploration of the diverse urban conditions in a cross-section from the center to the outskirts' (p. 17), I argue that a transect, for many of the same reasons, is a good way for me to introduce the field site to the reader, structuring the movement of both the informants we hear from in the thesis and my own movements through fieldwork as a researcher.

### *Khrushchevka Housing District*

The online weather forecast said that it was -15° Celsius in Almaty. Thick ice covered the city's footpaths, and cars were left idling at the foot of the block of flats where I was staying. They emitted clouds of steam into the frosty air as their engines crept up to

temperature and their owners sipped warming tea in their flats.<sup>1</sup> It was the second day of my extended fieldwork stay in Almaty. I stepped out of my host's apartment, through two fortified steel doors, and onto a communal staircase. The walls were painted floor to ceiling in the Kazakh national colour, *koq* (a bright bluish turquoise). The front doors of four apartments opened onto each staircase landing. Walking down from the top (fifth) floor, I passed a mosaic of different doorframes bordered by a messy spaghetti of utility wires. During my time there, most of the neighbours stayed boxed into their apartments, escaping the winter cold. The few interactions I had were limited to brief exchanges, passing neighbours on the stairs. Many of the apartments sharing this *podelka* (staircase) were rented on a short-term basis with a carousel of changing occupants. Other apartments housed whole families in four square rooms, common to many *Khrushchevka*.

*Khrushchevka* is a colloquial name given to apartment-block housing made of prefabricated concrete panels. These are named after Nikita Khrushchev, who first championed the buildings' design and strategy.<sup>2</sup> Typically four or five storeys high, these buildings could be constructed quickly and cheaply. The Soviet Union was plagued by chronic housing shortages from the outset, a result of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation. Shortly after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the government seized luxury apartments and converted them into multiple-family-occupancy *kommunalka*, communal apartments where families lived in a single room and shared cooking and washing facilities. Over the next 74 years, Soviet urban planning was characterised by significant state intervention and monumental architectural

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<sup>1</sup> Many cars in Almaty are retrofitted with remote controls so that in the cold weather it is possible to start the car while keeping it locked outside. This means that when it is time to leave, cars have reached a temperature at which they can operate, even on the coldest winter days.

<sup>2</sup> In January 1951, Khrushchev held a conference for the development of low-cost and quick-build housing as a solution to the growing housing crisis. After the death of Stalin and Khrushchev's subsequent rise to power, the changes first proposed in the conference were instigated. 1955 saw a decree for the 'liquidation of excesses', which led to a simple and functional architecture, typified by the archetypal *Khrushchevka* housing blocks. Discussing the dramatic effects of this policy within Russia, Varga-Harris describes how 'between 1956 and 1970, it yielded approximately 34 million units of living space, and more than 126 million people—more than half the country—moved into them' (Varga-Harris, 2008, p. 561).

*Khrushchevka* benefitted many families, providing them with their own apartments.

interventions (Scott, 1998). As Varga-Harris notes, the ‘housing construction campaign that Khrushchev instituted entailed a broad transition from communal to “one-family” living’. This now characterises the majority of housing in Almaty (Varga-Harris, 2008, p. 561). *Khrushchevka* are known for their small rooms and low ceilings, a result of a design focus on economy, functionality, and rapid construction. These identikit and prefabricated models were erected across the Soviet Union, and similar buildings can be found in cities as far away as Yerevan and Ulaan-Baatar. Varga-Harris argues that the resultant domestic realm that typified the Khrushchev era was ‘ideologically charged, constituting a material cultural “artifact” of de-Stalinization and communist construction’ (ibid., p. 564). In Almaty, these blocks have undergone their own transformations since independence—Nazpary has analysed such transformations, suggesting that the stairways of these structures can tell us about changing urban social relations. Nazpary argues that the transformation of many of the hallways, where wooden doors were replaced with steel ones, was a sign of the dangers he might face during his fieldwork in Almaty and of locals’ general fear of each other (Nazpary, 2002, p. 25). During my fieldwork, 15 years later, these feelings of immediate danger had subsided, yet the increased isolation of urban living during the 1990s had eroded some of the community aspects which these housing blocks, built with communal courtyards, had been intended to promote (Nazpary, 2002).

I stayed the first three months of my fieldwork in this *Khrushchevka*, which sits between two main roads. Locals wouldn’t refer to its address, and instead would give the nearest crossroads (Zhandosova/Gagarina). This habit is a reflection of the directions given to informal taxi drivers that buzz around the city—unlicensed, unregulated, and with prices negotiated on the spot. I would often travel around the city using them, as would my middle-class informants. Normally costing 200 to 300 *tenge* for a short 10-minute ride, by the end of my fieldwork the price for the same journey had risen to 300 to 400 *tenge* as a result of significant currency devaluation<sup>3</sup> (discussed in detail in Chapter 5). To hail a taxi, stand at the roadside and point your index finger down until a car pulls over and its driver winds the window down. State the crossroads you wish to travel to and a suggested offer for the fare. The driver may nod in

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<sup>3</sup> Devaluation appears throughout this thesis; during my fieldwork it had a significant effect on the lives of everyone across Kazakhstan. See Chapter 5 for discussion of how it affected the young middle class.



agreement, reply with a higher suggested amount, or simply drive off with no comment if the destination is not in the direction they are travelling. To indicate a local journey, a gesture more often used as you move farther from the city centre, rotate your hand in small circles while pointing at the ground. These taxis provide a vital transport solution, moving people within and between city districts. More expensive than local buses, trams, and trolleybuses, they were often used by my middle-class informants when they were not driving their own cars.

Stepping out of the *Khrushchevka* on the second day of my fieldwork, I set off on foot in search of somewhere to get a new key cut so I could come and go when my hosts were not present. I walked south in the direction of the mountains, heading towards the major Al-Farabi Ring Road which encircles the city centre to the south. Trudging through icy streets, with busy rush-hour traffic growling along the congested roads, I ducked into a small covered market. Metal kiosks with heavy shutters and grocery stores fronted by UPVC double glazing dotted the gaps between the large concrete housing blocks or were installed in their bottom levels. Local movements on foot can secure access to basic foodstuffs and goods through small convenience stores. I was able to find a small kiosk that could cut a copy of my key. This configuration of Soviet-era housing blocks interspersed with small shops is typical for this area of the city.

Image 3.1, following page: Map of Almaty showing the three transect locations discussed in this chapter. The base map is copyright OpenStreetMap contributors used under Creative Commons License 2.0.



The housing area where I lived is located in the southwest of Almaty. Transect location 1 (Image 3.1) includes the Bostandyk district of Almaty city (total population 1,877,584), which was reported to have a population of 345,764 on 1 July 2019 according to the Kazakh government's official statistics bureau (Republic of Kazakhstan Statistics Committee, 2019). The neighbourhood, a heterogeneous mix of buildings, ethnicities, incomes, and occupations, is experiencing a general trend of ongoing change from a mainly residential housing district to a mixed-use commercial satellite, with flows of people from across the city coming to shop or visit the Presidents Park to the south of the ring road. The area is heated by a communal coal-fired power station. I met Kazakhs, Russians, Uighurs, Korean Kazakhs, and Germans living here. Many residents commute to other areas of the city to work using buses, taxis, or private cars. The buildings in this district include *mikro-raion* (micro-district) *Khrushchevka* housing, single-storey wooden houses that were formerly *dachas* (summer houses with gardens), and some industrial units, as well as a large shopping centre called MEGA. Two blocks down, a large gold-topped mosque was being built, with the help of Turkish funding,<sup>4</sup> when I first moved in, and was completed by the end of my fieldwork.

While living in this location, I carried out 31 interviews, informal conversations, and discussions with my informants. These ranged from long-form life-history accounts over multiple hours to short discussions with my research assistants and informants where we discussed everyday life or topical events. I spoke to both men and women among a broad range of ages from 18 to 67. My informants were from different ethnic backgrounds, including Kazakh, Uighur, Korean, Volga German, Ukrainian, Uzbek, Tajik, and Turkish. My sampling targeted those with expertise in disciplines influential to the study and management of seismic risk, my research focus in the early stages of fieldwork, although these conversations also brought a broad set of insights into other topics. Consequently, in this location I interviewed and had interactions with architects, scientists, public relations professionals, archive officials, a Christian priest, a Muslim imam, a driver at an international oil company, taxi drivers, students, a graphic designer, a shop assistant, and a mother who stayed at home looking after young children.

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<sup>4</sup> Since independence, both the Turkish government and Turkish non-governmental religious organisations have sought to extend their influence in the region. As Kazakh is a Turkic language, there is some affinity between the countries based on a supposedly shared heritage.

This transect location features in Chapter 4, where a description of the destructive flood includes a discussion of informants living in both Bostandyk and the adjacent Nauryzbai city district. I will also return to a neighbouring housing district in Chapter 6, where I discuss a Uighur neighbourhood and the challenges faced by the Uighur community, as well as cultural strategies for mitigating risk in the neighbourhood.

A 500-metre walk to the south of where I was staying brought me to the apartment block of one of my informants, Aizhan. Due to the scale and complexity of urban field sites, it is difficult to survey large populations; hence, my examples focus on the accounts of specific families and contextualise them within the makeup of the city. Aizhan's family was not randomly chosen. I met them because they were friends of my hosts, and they later became informants. Explaining these social connections helps to build a clear picture of the people with whom I spoke and helps to explain the context from which their opinions come. Aizhan's family story is an example of some of the significant historical changes and risk of future change that people in Almaty live with. What is striking here is how significant ruptures and disruptions to the family's life are given stability and coherence through the way they are narrated and structured in their recounting to me as a fieldworker.

*Aizhan:* People are nervous here. There are, like, earthquakes and stuff because we live in one of the most dangerous cities in the world. In social life, we don't have stability. There is *tenge* devaluation and political stuff. For example, our president is super old and we don't know who else is coming up to follow him.

Aizhan and I were sitting on a playground bench in the shared courtyard of her block of apartments. Her opening comments were in response to my question 'What is it like living here?' She cited different sources of worry—natural hazards, social instability, currency fluctuations and political uncertainty—and suggested that they make people feel nervous in Almaty. These issues are all examples of potentially disruptive change. A plethora of subjects for discussion were opened up by this comment, but where to start? Informants' comments often increased the apparent complexity of a situation rather than clarifying it. The combination of concerns Aizhan mentioned and the reasons that she worried about them only start to make sense when told with the added context of her and her family's lives, which makes the potential for catastrophic change feel like a much more probable occurrence.

Aizhan is Kazakh and was 24 years old when we first met in 2014. She had recently left her job as a graphic designer and was focusing on freelance projects while she looked for permanent employment. She completed her studies at the university which is the focus of my discussion in Chapter 5. It was through university's programme coordinator that she knew my hosts after having spent time as a FLEX student studying in the USA.<sup>5</sup> She spoke fluent English and helped me with translation from Russian when we interviewed her mother. During conversations, Aizhan would often add her own comments, which offer their own interesting insights and are included here.

I spoke to Aizhan's mother Sholpan, aged 47, on a number of occasions. Sholpan had time to speak while taking her young six-year-old son to play in the park, or while I accompanied her on trips to the local neighbourhood supermarket to buy groceries. Her account is therefore pieced together from various separate interviews. Sholpan's narrative brings together the family's biography. It also situates Aizhan's life in the context of wider societal change and demonstrates generational differences in the way that the present is perceived.

*Sholpan:* I was born in Eastern Kazakhstan near Oskemen [Kazakh name for the city also known by the Russian name Ust-Kamenogorsk]. It is around two hours from the Chinese border. I was living in a village called Akzhar and it was a central village, so quite big. There is also a micro-district in Almaty which goes by the same name. I think a lady who was born in Akzhar named it after there. I came to Almaty to study. I was the only person in the village to get a gold medal. [Aizhan interjected, 'She didn't say that comment about the medal but I am adding it in'.]

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<sup>5</sup> 'Begun in 1993, the Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) program is a competitive, merit-based scholarship program funded by the U.S. Department of State. FLEX students who pass multiple rounds of testing earn a scholarship to spend an academic year in the United States living with a volunteer host family and attending a U.S. high school. FLEX students gain leadership skills, learn about American society and values, and teach Americans about FLEX countries and cultures. FLEX is a highly competitive program with over 26,300 alumni who have contributed over *one million hours* [sic] of community service in cities and towns across America. The students return home to active alumni networks that carry out inspiring activities'.

<http://discoverflex.org>, accessed 28 June 2019



My mum was a teacher and died in October. She was 91. My granddad was serving in World War II. He came home and someone had shot him in the leg, so he couldn't bend it. I met my husband here in the university. I wanted to go into chemistry and because of my sister I ended up in physical chemistry and carrying out research into metal processes. My husband has an engineering degree in mining, and mine is in physics and chemistry.

In the literature review, I mentioned Tim Ingold's description of telling a story as the relating of constituent parts by 'picking up the threads of past lives' (Ingold, 2007, p. 30). We can see examples of these threads in Sholpan's account: the common name 'Akzhar' ties the place she has come from to the place where she now lives. Looking back at a life, it often appears fragmented, punctuated by memorable events. In Sholpan's account, these are significant moments of change, including deaths in the family, war, injuries, and education. These threads make a coherent story—until there is a point of rupture. A similar phenomenon was found by Wheeler in his research in Aral in Western Kazakhstan, where changes between past and present are hooked on moments of rupture in everyday life (Wheeler, 2016, p. 113). A key turning point in Sholpan's story is narrated through a discussion of changes to everyday life and their effect on the family:

*Sholpan:* Then I had Aizhan and after that I didn't work. I only began working again by selling stuff—buying things in Almaty and then selling them in Oskemen, in very cold weather. I was doing that for a while and then I was selling cigarettes. Aizhan was born in 1991. It was the end of the Soviet Union, and all the factories they had which were relevant for my husband to work in were all shut down. We had to work out something to do to make money. You know, we didn't have any foreign companies... we didn't have anything. There is a big bazaar on Rozybakieva and I was working there selling cigarettes. Then I got a job working with cash machines. After that, I opened my own company. I went to another university 12 years ago, got another degree, and right now have my own company working as an accountant... I like the time right now because of the stability. There are no revolutionary changes.

Aizhan perceives both the present and future to be uncertain. In contrast to this, her mother Sholpan emphasises the stability of the present, following a period of significant change after 1991. Generational differences in these two perspectives are a result of

different life experiences at different stages in life. The end of the Soviet Union coincides with a new chapter in the story Sholpan told. However, Sholpan does not mark these changes by macro-discussions of significant political change, but through important personal life events, including the birth of her daughter Aizhan; changes in the availability of employment; and the new movements that she had to undertake in order to generate an income, travelling between Almaty and Oskemen. Pragmatic solutions were made possible by drawing upon her existing links to other areas of Kazakhstan.

The specialist skillset that Sholpan gained in physical sciences and chemistry was no longer relevant when state-run industries were shut down. As Alexander discussed in relation to the closure of a sweets factory and fabric *Kombinat* in Almaty, ‘mass privatisation entailed a fracturing of unity, a multiplying of difference and an introduction of instability, mobility, and a new short-term temporality’ (Alexander, 2004, p. 271). These circumstances meant that Sholpan was forced to reinvent herself and change direction on multiple occasions by seeking out new ways to generate money. These experiences appear to have built her resilience to change in a way that her daughter has not yet experienced. These life experiences explain the generational difference between Aizhan and Sholpan in their perception of the present. Movement has been key to the survival and success of Sholpan, who was able to adapt to previous change. Movement has also been key to Aizhan’s life, where her foreign-exchange programme in the USA and her ongoing involvement with AISEC, an international student organisation, have created an international set of connections.

I argue that Aizhan’s international connections increase her resilience to local change in Kazakhstan because she is able to draw support from a wider base of social connections. As many of these are farther afield, they are less likely to be affected by local changes such as currency devaluation. In many ways, this wide base of connections parallels the benefits of traditional Kazakh kinship networks, which spread a risk burden across different geographical areas through a cultural practice of exogamy (out-marriage) (Esenova, 2002, p.26). In a traditional pastoralist subsistence society, this would allow for kin to offer assistance if there were a geographically localised degradation of pasture. As Wheeler suggests, environmental and political issues are bound together when it comes to discussing resilience and vulnerability in Kazakh society (Wheeler, 2016, p. 21). For the young urban middle class, the terrain has shifted. With the

liberalisation of the economy, it is now economic independence and resilience to localised economic change that ensure stability and security. As a result, Aizhan's international social connections offer both actual resilience and an increased *feeling* of resilience. This is because the threats are in the future, and so she is dealing with issues of both risk and uncertainty (Boholm, 2003, p. 167).

Reflecting on my own situation as an international researcher working in Kazakhstan, perhaps the willingness of many members of the young urban middle class to participate in my research was a result of them building their social network. A year after my fieldwork, I was asked to provide a reference for one of my research assistants; my English-language conversations for another informant, Sasha, who is introduced in the third transect location, helped him prepare for an interview with an international company where part of the interview was conducted in English. These are examples of how my presence impacted the lives of my informants, and this can also speak to how international connections are valued locally. However, it is difficult to say whether these are conscious motivating factors for Aizhan specifically or whether they are wider trends in society which we see reflected in my informants' everyday practice. In Chapter 5 I discuss further examples of the moral and material aspirations of the young middle class in Almaty.

Aizhan's personal connections were also important links for my informant networks during my fieldwork. I met one of my primary research assistants Alma because at the time she was head of the AISEC international student group, of which Aizhan was also a member. Alma is a young Uighur in her early 20s who was studying at a private university in downtown Almaty but who lived in a neighbouring district, also in transect location 1, where there is a majority Uighur population (see Chapter 6). She lived with her family in a detached house which I visited on numerous occasions to interview her family and to share meals together. Alma was very active in her international student group and is now, in 2019, completing a masters in Malmo in Sweden.

The land between Aizhan's apartment and mine is a bulldozed rectangle of scrubland, formerly an area of single-storey housing that had been demolished to make way for new developments. On the other side of the scrubland is a large shopping centre called MEGA. It houses shops, bars, fast-food restaurants, cinemas, and a large supermarket. During my fieldwork, the first-ever Starbucks in Kazakhstan opened. There was



massive hype on social media and long queues formed around the shopping centre. Branded cups and mugs became the new fashion item of choice and could suddenly be seen in the hands of young Almatineans in the universities, on the streets, and sitting at the tables of the local cafes in the centre of town.

The excitement for new Western products was not universal. During one of our joint shopping trips to the large supermarket with Sholpan, we had a long discussion about the different products for sale. 'We still buy Sultan pasta—I think it is closest to the Soviet pasta, and the quality of everything was better then. It wasn't a business, and so the government ran those factories and the quality was better. The quality of everything was better. Even clothes... [the only benefit is] now you have choice'. As we stood in the queue at the checkout, I counted 21 different types of chewing gum for sale.

While Sholpan sees the past as unstable and punctuated by dramatic change, there are some aspects of Soviet life which she sees in a nostalgic light. This is not uncommon and has been documented in many other post-Soviet places (Berdahl, 1999; Boym, 2007; Reifová, 2017). Reifová, considering the dynamics in Czechoslovakia/the Czech Republic during the 1990s, argues that the Soviet past is often remembered for its difficulties, whereas nostalgia for aspects of everyday life 'served as the venue through which continuity with socialism was redeemed' (Reifová, 2017, p. 1). In this sense Sholpan is again forming a narrative which helps to bring continuity to the everyday change that she has experienced. While products in the supermarket can mean a nostalgic link to the past for Sholpan, other international brands can have a different meaning for Aizhan and her generation as a link to international markets, trends, and fashions. The shopping centre is therefore a place of both nostalgia and contemporary trends, and differences in generational narratives can be witnessed in everyday interactions in residential areas.

### *Moving on*

After the first three months of my fieldwork I chose to move closer to the city centre, nearer to the local university and into a more central location from which to travel out to meet people for interviews. As Foster has commented, '[W]hen anthropologists study a general social institution or a group of people spread throughout the city, we nearly

always find an apartment or house in a convenient area, then commute to visit informants' (Foster & Kemper, 2002 [1979], p. 139). As many of my interviews and interactions were taking place downtown, and it was the focus of social life for my young, urban, middle-class informants, I chose to move to a more convenient apartment in what became my second transect location.

In summary, the first transect location was a residential area of the city, with small commercial businesses and a large shopping centre. As a result of the flows of goods, people, and services, this transect location is linked with other areas of the city. Many local and citywide movements from this transect location occur on a daily basis in the form of commuting, shopping, and local service provision. These movements range from slow-paced walks to the fast journeys of the highway and the steady rhythm of the regular trolleybuses. General ongoing trends of change include large-scale shopping-centre consumerism taking over from local fruit and vegetable markets. To reach downtown, my next transect location, the options for travel included a 300-*tenge* taxi ride, a 60-*tenge* bus ride, or an hour and a half's walk. You travel down Gagarina, turning onto Rozybakieva, passing Nuriya's family apartment and the local market where Sholpan had sold goods, and turn onto Abay, the oldest street in the grid-planned area of the town centre. At the end of this road is a university, the focus for my research while I lived downtown and the second transect location discussed in this chapter.

### *Downtown*

The second area where I lived and carried out research, downtown, is a hub where different paths intersect. I lived in a three-storey *kerpich* (fired-brick) apartment building constructed in the 1930s. Right in the geographical centre of the city, east of the first transect location, the second transect location proved a useful base from which to travel to meet and interview different informants. Many people from other areas of the city would also come into the city centre to go shopping, meet people, or visit the large central parks, and living here provided a good opportunity to meet with them. I lived in a commercial district with many cafes and restaurants, where I could join social gatherings with friends and informants or arrange to meet people in public places. Urban ethnography requires a focused methodological approach to sampling for interviews when we are surrounded by potential informants on a daily basis, and Foster

reminds us that ‘only a few of the people urban anthropologists meet in the course of a day are potential informants. Although casual encounters may offer insights into city life, researchers must work at building a network of informants’ (Foster & Kemper, 2002 [1979], p. 139). In order to enrich my sample and understand the context and connections of my informants, I expanded my network out from my research assistants, who acted as gatekeepers to the young middle class. In addition to this, I contacted and interviewed specialists in areas of relevance to my discussion of risk.

While living in transect location 2, I carried out 62 interviews. As in the first location, my interactions were with a range of people, including university lecturers, students, UN officials at UNISDR and UNDP, British Council employees, archive officials, an emergency planning consultant, architects, local and national government officials, journalists, Kazakh artists who are part of the *Kyzyl Traktor* (Red Tractor) collective, a security officer and former soldier, the regional director of a European airline, a film critic, an oil worker and businessman, a photographer, bank workers, a marketing and sales professional, an inventor, language teachers, a scientist at the Nuclear Research Institute, the lead researcher at Tien Shan Astronomical Observatory, an IT professional, an evangelical church pastor, a fortune teller, and street traders. The different transect locations gave me access to different sets of people from various professional backgrounds, all of whom can be considered part of the wider urban milieu that makes up my field site.

I also chose to expand the network of informants connected to my research assistants due to the access I was able to obtain. One condition of obtaining a Kazakh research visa was to establish an association with a local university, taking at least one course. I chose to take Central Asian history and politics, which turned out to be a great way to meet people and discuss these topics. As a legacy of Soviet bureaucratic processes, Kazakhstan is a difficult country to navigate, with mountains of paperwork and idiosyncratic procedures. My personal experience of this was the more than 20 stamps and signatures I had to physically collect from different institutions in the city, mainly by different doctors and specialists in hospitals, to certify that I was fit to be able to stay in the country. This included chest X-rays for TB, an HIV test at a local clinic, and certificates of financial independence. Catherine Alexander cites one of her informants as saying that ‘Kazakhstan is infact ‘Qaghazhstan: ‘land of documents’, punning on the

name of the country and the similarity in the sound of the phrases (Alexander, 2018a. p.8).

In discussing my second transect location, I ask two questions: Who did I find in this part of my field site, and what is the view from those in the centre? An introductory talk for new students and exchange students at the start of the university term discussed how the city is talked about in relation to particular symbols. Zabira, the university's international student representative, gave an overview of the city, highlighting both the assets and the risks it is associated with:

*Zabira:* We have big beautiful mountains, and they come with earthquakes. The city is at the bottom of the Illy River, which flows through the city, keeping it green, and so we have mudslides and floods. We have a busy urban centre, and as a result there is lots of pollution [from traffic].

Zabira's comments draw upon common symbolism used to talk about the city. The community interest group Urban Almaty (now known as Urban Forum) surveyed people on the streets of the city centre, asking them what they thought of when they thought of Almaty. The group is putting together what they have described as a 'brand for the city'. The public responses included mountains, nature, Medeu (a high-altitude ice-skating rink), architecture, apples, and Kok Tobe (a raised hill overlooking the city with a cable car, radio tower, and small theme park).<sup>6</sup> An additional point, discussed in Urban Almaty's monthly meetings which I attended at the university, was Almaty as a 'commercial capital'.<sup>7</sup> Urban Almaty and the international student representative therefore stressed the location of the city as a middle place between the mountains and the steppe, a place where flows of water, people, ideas, commerce, and business pass through and where opportunity is balanced with risk.

Coming from those living in the centre of the city, these responses are very much an objective view of the city. They feel sterile without any mention of how people factor into the city's makeup. Combined, the responses appear as a view of how an outsider

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<sup>6</sup> <https://urbanforum.kz/>, accessed 12 July 2019

<sup>7</sup> Since the capital of Kazakhstan moved to Astana (renamed Nur-Sultan after I completed fieldwork) in 1997, Almaty, still the most populous city in Kazakhstan, is often referred to as the country's economic or commercial capital.

might see the city—how it would be presented in a student prospectus, for example. These shared symbols suggest that they might be a specific urban perspective. However, while my informants may be sharing space and a common idea of that space, more often than not they don't share the same backgrounds and life experiences, as my next account from my research assistant demonstrates.

I first worked with Anna when I moved to the centre of town. She was the editor of the student newspaper and agreed to help me out with the transcription of focus groups and student interviews. I was introduced to Anna through Aizhan's contact Alma, who was head of the university branch of AISEC at the time; Alma is Uighur, and her family story is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6. Anna became my long-term research assistant, and we are still good friends today. She is a dedicated hard worker with strong and passionate ideas. The most critical insights often came from our post-interview debrief discussions: we would sit and discuss in detail the responses informants had given me, and she would let me know her thoughts on the topics. Foster argues that 'the best and most accurate data come from persons who like and trust [the researcher]' (Foster & Kemper, 2002 [1979], p. 133). This was the case with Anna. It wasn't until later that year, after we had spent many hours together and I had visited her family home in Kyrgyzstan for her father's birthday party, that she opened up about her family history. I discuss her family story for two reasons. First, it gives some idea of the heterogeneity of the city and how diverse individuals' life stories can be. Second, Anna's comments appear throughout this thesis, and her backstory contextualises these thoughts and opinions. Anna's family's backstory introduces the complexities and changes facing the young urban middle class. It gives some idea of the different movements my informants have undergone and continue to undergo—migration, persecution, the arbitrary delineation of borders, ethnic identity and belonging, language and nationality—as well as the impact these movements have had on their lives.

### *Anna's story*

Anna describes herself as Russian. She lives in Almaty and works as a journalist, and we met when she was at university in her early 20s. She was another of my main research assistants who I worked with throughout my fieldwork and became an important informant in her own right. She first came to the university in Almaty from

Kyrgyzstan, where she was born. She is from the town of Tok Mok, close to the Kazakh/Kyrgyz border and around four hours' drive from Almaty, which is relatively close by Kazakh scales of distance. After independence, her family found themselves split between two countries as villages were divided between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. There is an important point to be made here about the changes in administrative and state borders—both the wider context and specific ways in which my informants' lives were affected.

The break-up of the Soviet Union brought about a change in both the function and everyday public experience of borders. Across the former Soviet Union, borders that had previously been mainly administrative between Soviet republics became state boundaries. Laura Assmuth discusses the everyday realities and public experience of these changes at the former administrative border between the countries of Estonia and Russia (Assmuth, 2013). Assmuth gives the example of 'Küllli, a 37-year-old Seto woman who lives on the Estonian side of the border in a village just ten kilometres from the border crossing'. Külli had crossed the border 57 times in the first six months of 2000 to visit her sister and, very importantly for the Orthodox Christian Seto, to 'tend her father's and grandparents' graves' (ibid., p. 150). This brought her into a wider experience—documented by Assmuth on both sides of the border, and echoed in the comments of my informants in Almaty—where 'people complained about the actual practices at frontier crossing points: long lines and waiting times, the need to present endless documents, the hassling and outright harassment by border guards and customs officials' (ibid., p. 152). Assmuth describes how these encounters bring out local differences and inequalities, including both gender and generational disparities, with the impact of these new state borders.

In locations such Tok Mok, where my informant Anna was from, the impact of these border changes was that everyday movement, such as commuting to work, became international travel. The story of Anna's family, in her own words, gives an example of the common complexity of ethnicity, identity, and nationality experienced by those living in Central Asia, illustrating how the transformation of the Kazakh/Kyrgyz border appears as an arbitrary delineation imposed on a multi-ethnic family. This story helps to situate Almaty's young urban middle class in a wider societal context:

*Anna:* My father is from Siberia and he was in a gang there before he left. He says he didn't have a father; his mother had three husbands and four kids. They grew up with their mother and grandparents. My grandfather went to fight in the Great Patriotic War.<sup>8</sup> While he was away, my [paternal] grandmother got a new husband; when he came back from the war, he found out, and so decided to leave again and fight in Japan. He was killed there. People said that my grandfather was a gypsy, and as far as she knows, her grandfather's mother was also a gypsy. My grandmother says that it was her husband that destroyed her life. The whole family moved from Siberia to Kyrgyzstan, I think it was because my grandmother got a job there. She worked in a radio electronics microphone factory and she lost her job with the end of the Soviet Union.

Anna's family has experienced the trauma of multiple wars, family conflict, and migration in search of work. It is with this migration that the first split in family identity is seen.

*Anna:* My father has always said, 'I am Russian', but for me my homeland is Kyrgyzstan. It was only when I reached high school that people started to differentiate, for example telling me that 'you are Russian'.

Anna's mother's story brings further complexity to Anna's family history:

*Anna's mother:* My great-grandmother was from a really rich Chechen family who were affected by *raskulachivaniye* (dekulakisation). [It was] a time when they would attack and kill rich families, especially at the 'edges' of the Soviet Union. Grandpa [Anna's great-grandfather] was a poor Tatar guy working on the goldmines of her family. They came and killed her family and her grandpa stole her away from there to save her. It's all fucking tragic!

Dekulakisation was a significant historical event in the Soviet reform of class distinctions, based on the Marxist principle that accrued wealth was evidence of the expropriation of workers' labour. As a result there were many conflicts and strategies by which family histories were reworked and redrafted in order to break potentially dangerous associations (Fitzpatrick, 1994, p. 234). For Anna, this traumatic experience in her family history is folded into the context of a rescue story: the efforts of her

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<sup>8</sup> 'The Great Patriotic War' is the name given to World War II in the former Soviet Union.

grandpa and the fate that befalls her great-grandmother's family are part of a personal family history, rather than the descriptive pages of a history textbook. Anna's generation is once again benefiting from growing wealth, freedom of choice, and opportunities not seen since the turn of the 19th century. In this respect there is a clear distinction between her Soviet family history, the difficult period experienced in the 1990s, and the relative prosperity of the present.

With her parents' generation, another chapter unfolded in the story of Anna's family. She recounted, 'My grandparents [on her mother's side] were Volga German. Mum's father was a Lutheran priest and Mum learnt German at their house. They were generally well off'. However, the ethnic differences within the family after the marriage of Anna's parents were still the subject of everyday discussion. As Anna told me, 'When my mother and my siblings went to the [German] mother's family, they were called "invading Tatars", and when they went to see the [Tatar] father's family, they would say, "The fascists are here!"'

Describing ethnicity with Anna's family is incredibly complex. In the 1990s Anna's parents decided to go to live in Germany as returning Volga Germans. When her mother's grandfather had been asked to complete documents detailing their nationality, he had written that Anna's mum was Tatar. Anna told me, 'You can't say, "Both", and you can't say, "No Identity."' This document came back to haunt them. There had been tragedy in the family: Anna's mum's youngest sibling, Anna's aunt, had left her partner. He killed her in the street, then went home and killed himself. They had a daughter who was taken in by the partner's mother. The grandmother did not want Anna's mum to leave Kyrgyzstan for Germany with the orphaned daughter, so she sent documents stating she was Tatar to the German authorities. This meant that Anna's parents couldn't emigrate, as it invalidated their claim, and they were forced to stay in Kyrgyzstan. However, there was a benefit to being Tatar: it allowed her mother to get into the university, as Anna told me that 'there were strong anti-German sentiments at the time'.

Anna is a blonde, fair-skinned woman living in Almaty. People often make assumptions and Anna is labelled as 'Russian'. I witnessed this firsthand when other informants would switch language to talk about us in Kazakh while both Anna and I were present,



because we had both been speaking in Russian and English and it was assumed that we did not speak Kazakh. As Anna was brought up in Kyrgyzstan, she also speaks and understands Kyrgyz, which is in the same language family as Kazakh, so she could often understand what they were saying. I was surprised that many people were so quick to generalise and make assumptions, as the complexity of Central Asian identity was a recurring theme for most of my informants.<sup>9</sup> Anna held claim to being Russian, Kyrgyz, Tatar, German, and Kazakhstani. Depending on how the story of a life is narrated, different ethnicities can be emphasised and can result in access to different entitlements.

Over the last hundred years, Anna's family has experienced massive turmoil as well as dramatic and damaging events. The complexity of this trauma is both a burden and an asset. Telling a certain story, for example emphasising an aspect of one's experience, history, or identity, can allow for access to further opportunities. Anna chose to apply for—and gained—Russian citizenship and a Russian passport during my fieldwork. Anna is a career-driven journalist and a young member of the middle class. The narrative of Russian identity provides her with the most opportunity, and so she chose to follow this path. In Almaty, members of the young urban middle class, including Anna, have a strong focus on the present and the future, yet drawing upon the past is often what enables them to carve out their own identity.

The opportunities that Anna experienced in Almaty, in particular through the university, are seized on as a tool for change, development, and progression. Through the university, I explore the urban middle class, highlighting how the city can be a good place to initiate an anthropology of the region through the personal stories of individuals who are brought together in a fast-paced context of change.

In the light of Anna's story, as an informant who could be considered typical (in the complexity of her background and life experience), how should we understand the centre of town? I see it as a place where individual lives come into contact—running

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<sup>9</sup> A clear and interesting account of the complexities of ethnicity and the interaction of language, passports, identity, and nationality can be found in Louw's account of Bukhara (Louw, 2007, pp. 68–70). Out of the conflicting influences and state policies emerges a distinct—but not unproblematic—'Bukharan' identity.

parallel, crosscutting, colliding, and joining together. Students travel to the centre of town on a termly basis. Workers commute across the city to work on a daily basis. Goods flow into the city to supply a high concentration of humans living an increasingly consumption-based lifestyle. These qualities also make the centre of the city good for fieldwork. For example, I brought together focus groups of students at the university; I was able to join groups of friends in cafes and bars; I attended weddings, birthday parties, and other celebrations. With the help of my research assistants, I was able to speak to people from different businesses and government institutions, architects, and local and national government officials, following threads in understanding the architecture, history, and risk profile of the city as I explored urban perceptions of risk, particularly seismic risk. What emerged from these discussions was a wider context of how risk is dealt with on an everyday basis through the narratives that people tell about their lives.

The centre of the city is often a stop along the way on a different journey: the time it takes to study for a degree, the contract length of a job, or the time it takes to visit the central market before returning to other areas of the city. The city's web of influence stretches out beyond the centre to the places where workers live, priced out of the expensive central accommodation; the areas where outdoor leisure pursuits take place; and the places where goods such as food are produced and products are manufactured before being transported into the city. The city is also a place where journeys can change direction through difficulties, trauma, or opportunity. In trying to understand what constitutes an urban identity, the obvious question becomes: What is an urban identity different to? In this case, what is it to be rural?

At this stage, it is good to further question the 'unboundedness' of the field site (Candea, 2010b, p.16). The final destination of my transect of the city pushes conventional notions of urban boundaries. I ask my informants what they see as different while also documenting what they see as an encroaching urban influence, debates which I argue are required to be part of a discussion of what 'urban' means in Almaty.

*Former Kolkhoz (collective farm)*

The journey is 45 minutes by car or an hour by bus, with a further 10-minute taxi ride. To reach this final location of my transect, I travelled from the main bus station, located next to the Central Mosque and north of the main *Zelenyi Bazar* (Green Bazaar). Taking a shared taxi, I weaved around the original *krepost* (fortress), a Russian military fortification built in 1854 which grew to become the city of Almaty. The minibus continued on past the city's ring road in the direction of the airport. After passing the turning for the terminal, the road was lined with car dealerships, small industrial units, and a crumbling Soviet-era brick factory. Official signs flitted past the window, marking the beginning and the end of separate villages, now amalgamated into the urban sprawl. Traffic was heavy and at times moved slowly in a constant train of vehicles. Having reached the final stop, the bus pulled into the town of Talgar. As an informant who moved there five years ago from the city centre described to me, 'Almaty and Talgar [is] the same conglomerate'. The people on the streets of Talgar suggested that there is a much higher proportion of Kazakhs living here than other nationalities, but there are no official statistics to corroborate this. From here I would either take a taxi the last few kilometres or start walking up the road, towards the mountains, flagging down a car for a lift. After five minutes, I reached my destination: two villages which formed part of a *kolkhoz* (collective farm) during the Soviet era.

I carried out 44 interviews on the farm and in the surrounding areas. These were less frequent than my interviews downtown, as they needed to fit into the working schedules of different jobs, many of which involved waking up early to feed the animals and sleeping during the middle of the day. Although I joined in many of these activities, it was more difficult to sit down for longer interviews, with the exception of those held over meals or planned weeks in advance; even these would only sometimes take place, despite the advance planning. I interviewed agricultural farm workers, smallholding owners, a horse breeder, a shepherd, staff at the leisure complexes, a paediatric nurse, a computer programmer, tractor mechanics, two former accountants, a Uighur community representative, an executive in a multinational company, a local politician, market traders, a member of local disaster-preparation committee, a carpenter, taxi drivers, a teacher, and a military veteran. What drew the majority of this heterogenous group of occupations to this place were the qualities of the place itself.

This has always been a good place to live. As I was told by my hosts, ‘It has been a place where Kazakhs herded animals for hundreds of years; there was even an ancient battlefield there’. There are rich green grasses and good summer pasture for animals, as well as fresh water from a mountain stream. While the stream still flows, many of the problems, challenges, and risks that the villagers reported to me are linked to insufficient flows of different kinds which have gained or lost importance as the area has entered the urban milieu and which interrupt the movement of goods, services, and information to and from the area. These include the privatisation of spring water; the pollution of the stream; no gas flow to overground pipes; intermittent mobile phone signal; a lack of internet; increased vehicle traffic from the city; the construction of a new road; the demolition of the only local shops; the drying up of funding from the local government for a local health post; and a lack of village employment. During my stay, these issues of flow—and the unpredictable cessation, delay, and withdrawal of promises made by both the local and regional *akimat* (mayor’s office)—caused an increase in local uncertainty, prompting me to ask: To what extent are these flows evidence of connection or dislocation from the urban environments of the city?

### *Villagers or urbanites?*

Bakyt is a 77-year-old Kazakh woman who was introduced to me as a ‘village elder’, someone who would be able to answer my questions. She told me, ‘I’m the oldest person here in the village. There is an older person, but she is very sick and can’t remember a thing about the past anymore’.

Children are taught from a young age to respect elder members of their community, in particular elder family members. At a Kazakh traditional meal, such as that eaten at *Nauryz* (the spring festival), a sheep’s head is boiled and parts are symbolically given to different members of the family. The youngest person is given a piece of an ear to symbolise their need to listen. When I arrived at Bakyt’s house in the village, I found five generations of her family present. We held an open discussion, with contributions from all members of the family (except the young baby who was present). Bakyt, as the grandmother and the oldest person present, told me about her family and the area:

*Bakyt*: I was born in 1942; my parents used to live in this house before I did. They were born in this *oblast* [an area roughly equivalent to an English county], but not in this village. They would spend one part of the year in one area and the other in another [herding animals]. This village is in a place called a *jailau*; this was the summer pasture. Now there are 100 or 120 houses in the village. There are a lot of new houses being built now. The village started as a *kolkhoz* [collective farm]. The farm was really big in the past, and this village was the fourth part of it. There weren't many houses here when it was first established, possibly just nomads here. This place was chosen because it is close to the mountains and there is a river here; it is good for the animals here. The apple orchards were part of the collective farm, and famous Almaty apples also come from here. I remember planting the apple orchards in the 1960s. The village is made up of Uighur, Kazakh, and Russian people. There were no major changes and no racism.

This introduction gives a good idea of the village as a place which appears to have a rural context, with mention of pasture, animals, rivers, and orchards. Part of Bakyt's description of the area is a discussion of the flow of information, goods, and utilities. Yet her discussion begins to show the connections—and difficulties in connections—that link the area to the greater urban environment:

*Bakyt*: We have satellite TV, but we don't have internet. There is some cellphone internet, but that is not good. The gas pipes arrived two or three years ago, but there isn't any gas and so at the moment we use charcoal. Gas would be better for the ecology, first of all; it would be less work for the heating, too. [We] used to have oil here and still have the container outside [but] the prices got too high. It is also a problem that there is no drinking water here. You can drink the river water if you boil it.

As the villages are becoming increasingly involved in urban flows, their need for connection to flows of information and utilities is increasingly important. The village has been particularly impacted by the flow of people coming from the city centre, through the village, and on to the nearby Ak-Bulak ski resort and international boxing academy. For many villagers, these new developments came as a surprise. As Gulzhan, a Kazakh woman in her late 60s told me, 'I didn't know we lived in paradise until they built Ak-Bulak resort'. Gulzhan's statement came with an exaggerated look over her

shoulder and around the land near her home. She continued, 'Each of the families used to have home animals, but Ak-Bulak took away the grazing land. When the *kolkhoz* split, the fields were given to those working there on a 99-year lease, but later on, in 1997 or 1998, the government changed it to a 49-year lease and took the land to build the resort'. Unpredictable government changes, such as the reduction of the lease length, increased uncertainty for villagers and undermined the certainties they required for everyday life.

The development of the leisure facilities near the village is perhaps the most significant change that has taken place in the last 25 years. Currently, the ongoing rebuilding of the main road through the village is a conspicuous and potentially transformative change. Workers were present during the entire 18 months of my fieldwork. The sides of the roads were cleared so that a much bigger multi-lane highway could be built, as the current road was only a single track. The development of the road was framed by the local *akimat* (mayor's office) as bringing development to the village, but those living there have mixed experiences of *akimat* promises in the past. For example, the ghostly shell of a half-built health post sits prominently on the main road, with successive local *akims* (mayors) starting and then never finishing the project. Those living nearby blamed this abandoned construction on corruption and a lack of intention to ever finish it in the first place, and the project influenced perceptions of the road's construction.

The new road was a requirement for bringing the ski resort, biathlon training village, and boxing academy into the plan for Almaty to host the Winter Olympics in 2022. The construction of the new road necessitated the demolition of the only two shops in the area, both of which stand at the side of the main road. Their demolition would sever the autonomy of the village, requiring villagers to travel farther into town for basic goods. Construction workers cleared all around the buildings until they sat as awkward reminders of the detrimental effect of the road. The construction work was intended to be conspicuous, and the next winter I saw the International Olympic Committee being driven in a cavalcade of police cars and minibuses to view the facilities. Unfortunately, Almaty's bid was unsuccessful, and this marked the end of any further development. The road remains unfinished; piles of rubble and large concrete drainage pipes are strewn along the roadside, but the shops remain open.

The promise of a new road has also fuelled new construction along its route encroaching upon the old orchards that were part of the farm. The urban middle class have been buying up land and constructing massive concrete houses with high walls and metal gates. Nazym Shedenova, a Kazakh academic based at KazGU in Almaty, has written about how these new detached houses are the physical evidence of an expanding middle class and also provide places in which the middle class fix their position in the physical landscape of Almaty (Shedenova, 2012, p. 31).

The connection of flows is considered part of development, but the connections which are actually made tell us about the motivations behind decision-makers' choices. While villagers are increasingly brought into urban flows through working in the city, providing services to the leisure resorts, producing farm products consumed in the city, and furnishing a place for *otdykhat* (rest), they also see themselves as differentiated from those in the city in a number of ways. Moldir, a Kazakh woman in her early 70s, commented on the ongoing changes in the village and also how she saw herself as distinct from city dwellers.

*Moldir*: When the farm fell apart, the name changed. Now the village is growing as relatives and others come to live here. There are no distinct groups in the village, only nationalistic [ethnic] groupings. The new people who come here are more nationalistic than those that have been here for a while. Those who have been here a while will just talk to each other, as all nationalities [ethnicities] are equal. If there is a funeral, then everyone helps. On 1 April, one child in that other house died, and everyone came to help. It does not depend on whether we are Muslim or Christian; we are all neighbours... If there is conflict, it is over in two days and we drink tea together, as we are *drug/podrug*a [literal translation 'male or female friends']. When there was a *kolkhoz*, there was community. For you [Alex] to know what it is like, you have to live here... the shop knows all the gossip, the humans are the wildlife here...

...I want another century to go by without disaster. Anything can happen; you can predict, but you can't say for sure. They have never had a social or political disaster in the village. A *sel* [flood, mudflow, or landslide] happened in Talgar two years ago, and that did kill people. My daughter saw the flood, but she is not afraid of God or the landslide. If the water and river come here, then it will just go into the ditches. I don't remember anything happening in the distant past, but they

say that the big stones that you see in the river come from a flood a long time ago. You can see in some places that it is really rocky; rocks are linked to the flood. If you dig down, you find sand, soil, and stones. I know this because it's hard when you have to put a toilet in.

While Moldir is confident there is something different about the village, she is also aware of processes of ongoing change and the threat of future change. Many of the changes underway are bringing the city closer. The example of the Koryo<sup>10</sup> family allows us to explore these changes in more detail and think about the different types of movement and changes associated with family life, helping us to understand their motivations for taking action through the stories they tell. Through these, we can understand the interweaving of village narratives and city narratives, which I argue shows an increasing amalgamation of the two.

*Mikhail Koryo: 'Life is like a river: if you stop, you will be swept backward'.*

Continuing south on the road towards the mountains and the ski resort, low single-storey buildings give way to ageing apple orchards. The road forks right, to the biathlon training camp, and left past a shiny new petrol station to Ak-Bulak ski resort and the boxing academy. Between these two roads there is a smallholding, accessed by a dirt track lined with 50-metre-high poplars. Getting out of the car and opening the metal farm gate brings you onto a curving dirt track along the edge of a hayfield where a herd of cows graze. The track is bordered by a fast-flowing shallow stream, heading north from the mountains out towards the steppe.

On my first visit, the taxi couldn't get farther than the turning from the main road, so my research assistant and I trudged the final stretch on foot. Boris, my research assistant at the time, was a colleague of my hosts in the first transect location and worked with me throughout my fieldwork. He worked at a non-governmental organisation that was funded by the United States. A few of his colleagues were American and he often assisted them with translation although his primary job there was IT systems. As Boris

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<sup>10</sup> I use the name 'Koryo' instead of the actual family name to preserve anonymity. *Koryo-Saram* is the phrase used by some Koreans living in Kazakhstan to refer to their nationality/ethnicity.



is a Korean-Kazakh man in his early 30s, other villagers suggested that we visit the family living near the mountains because they were also Korean-Kazakhs. When we reached the farmyard, we were greeted by Nastya, who by the end of my fieldwork would introduce herself as my ‘Kazakh mum’ to my friends. Nastya stood in the farmyard wearing a wide-brimmed sun visor, small dark sunglasses, a thick winter coat with a heavily stained apron, and rubber galoshes. Always happy to welcome guests, the family’s time away from their animals was often spent entertaining. Nastya welcomed us into the house, where we met her husband, Mikhail, also Korean-Kazakh and in his mid-50s. Mikhail has a jovial face and was wearing small square sunglasses. His strong handshake and warm smile made him instantly likeable. After being invited in, we were greeted with a heady mix of vodka, steaming pots of herbal tea made from local wildflowers, and dozens of hours of conversation. We sat around the table and talked, in Russian, about their lives, politics, culture, news, families, food, and travel, among many other subjects.

Mikhail and Nastya have two children, Sasha (32) and Alona (28). Sasha became a good friend during my fieldwork, and I will discuss his personal story more in Chapter 6. The family describe themselves as ethnic Koreans. Many Koreans, who had migrated to Siberia in search of land to farm in the 1860s and ’70s, were moved by Stalin in 1937 to stop them joining in any conflict, as they had been associated with the Japanese infiltration of Soviet Siberia (Oka, 2006). During the late 1930s, families were forcibly moved to Central Asia; Nastya’s father worked as a railway engineer, and her parents were among those moved. Mikhail was born in Stalinsk, Siberia. He spent his childhood there and finished school in 1977; as he said himself, ‘We are Soviet’. Mikhail came to work in Almaty in business and accounting. Although they never talked much about this time of their lives, even when asked, they emphasised their life on the farm: ‘We live by a Chinese philosophy. There is zero and there is one. If you prioritise health, then you have one; if you don’t, then you have zero in front, you have nothing’.

Health issues led to change, and in 2004–2005 they bought land and erected a *yurta*, a traditional Kazakh tent used by nomads, in this location just outside the village. Nastya and Mikhail would come with their children from the city to relax here, and they were keen to describe to me why they bought this land:

The altitude here is 1400 metres. [Mikhail disappeared into a nearby room, returning with a hunting rifle.] [...] Deer would come to this place because there is a national park nearby; there used to be a lot of wildlife around here. Ak-Bulak resort was not here when we first bought this place—it seems like development follows us wherever we go.

To what extent are Nastya and Mikhail part of this ‘development’? Are they one of the people that Moldir described as coming from the city with their relatives? In some ways, yes, but they have also embraced the rural lifestyle, looking after the apple orchards and raising animals. In many ways, some of the more traditional industries in the village continue precisely because others have come from the city to practise them, while those living in the city undertake higher-paid work in the city:

Our philosophy is to create, not just to consume. When we bought this place, the orchards were abandoned. Now they are producing fruit up to 400 or 500 grams [...] in the 1990s nature was everywhere; now there is nothing. Children in Almaty may not be okay, as they’re not able to find out about nature here anymore.

The family considered their move to the farm to be a positive change. They differentiated this rural lifestyle from their previous urban lifestyle by their interaction with nature. They told me with pride that rural means cleaner air, quietness, fresh water, plants, and animals. They also said that they ‘live on a mainly organic lifestyle, but not everybody lives in a natural way, because natural products are not affordable’. Since the 1990s, a healthy lifestyle appears to have become a commodity for purchase and consumption by urbanite Almatineans. In contrast to the assessment of rural life, the family described how urban environments are synonymous with risk:

A lot of people there are not prepared for an earthquake. A lot of our friends went to Astana [now called Nur-Sultan] because they were scared of the earthquake. If it happens, then it’s your fate. There are other reasons, though. During the Soviet time, nothing was built higher than 12 storeys, and they were made to work up to eight *bal* [a measure of the intensity of shaking]. If you want to know about earthquakes, you should talk to the government. They are the ones who allow up to 30 storeys high now. These buildings are mostly made from glass—this is a disaster. Modern ways of building Almaty are not even good for five *bal*. In Soviet times there were strict ways to build, and now there are no rules: money,

corruption, and business have led to bigger buildings. Also, the qualifications people get now are in economics and law; there are not so many technical people.

Mikhail suggested that there is a generational difference marked by people who grew up during the Soviet era: 'I'm 50 years old; changes happened when I was 30, therefore I have a Soviet education. Nepotism is now the way things go: there is 98 per cent literacy and this is the legacy of the Soviet Union. Now the 98 per cent literacy is only because of this legacy. Who are the middle class? The middle class are earning 100,000 *tenge*'.

Mikhail provided an example of how things that might be taken for granted in other countries were sources of worry for people living in Almaty. His daughter Alona works in a hospital in Almaty, and during this discussion he commented that 'only 30 per cent of doctors are professional; the others are rich. There is one answer that closes all other questions: that is money. [For] this reason, people are afraid of devaluation. Who is not afraid? Only those who do not have money!' Mikhail gave a bleak view of the city, one which reinforces the positive situation in which his family now lives. His 'escape to the country', as the common English phrase goes, is exactly that: an escape from the uncertainty, risk, and danger of the city to the rural and therefore healthy lifestyle. However, the life his family leads involves a much more connected and symbiotic relationship than he presents. Their large 4x4 and city friends keep them connected to the flows of the city, even if they look a bit odd in their country attire amidst the city's gleaming shopping centres.

These examples from the third site in my transect demonstrate encroaching urbanisation in a village context. Escaping urban life was Mikhail and Nastya's goal. They decided to make choices to support a healthy lifestyle, while at the same time drinking vodka to excess and lamenting the increased urbanisation of the village. Is health a luxury to be bought? Many of the commercial industries that have sprung up around the village turn health—the quality which the area is perceived to have in abundance—into a commodity for consumption by urban residents. For those living in the city, there is a feeling of lack of control due to corruption and nepotism, and this is what Mikhail and Nastya have tried to escape. But as Mikhail puts it, it appears that development follows them. *Dacha* (summer houses) and luxury villas have appeared in the village; four-bedroom concrete-block family homes have replaced the older tradition of small

wooden buildings next to small gardens. With these new villas came the privatisation of one of the two water supply points in the village as the land was bought and walled off, preventing access.<sup>11</sup> While they may be physically located in the village, it could be argued that these villas are satellites of the city, not participants in the local ethos. For example, part of my stay in the village required me to get involved in reciprocal community obligations, for example with the hay harvest. Although it was not directly discussed by my host family, their relationship with other people in the village was clearly different to those who came just for relaxation at their villas or for exercise and leisure at the ski resort.

Some of the flows to the village—such as leisure and tourism—bring change. Other examples of disconnection and a lack of flow—for example, in gas, internet, and information—mark something that, for villagers, hasn't changed fast enough. There is a constant balance to be reached between having right of access to goods and services (e.g. utilities) and sharing village resources (e.g. nature, clean air, organic goods, and a healthy lifestyle) with the city.

My time in the village was an interesting and unique part of my fieldwork. Unlike the relative isolation I experienced in my city-centre accommodation, I was quickly brought into community relations while staying on the farm. Many of Mikhail and Nastya's friends travelled from abroad or from a long distance across Kazakhstan to visit them, often because the farm was considered a healthy place to visit. Group activities commonplace in everyday life, such as helping to mend farm machinery, taking care of the apple trees, and having discussions with neighbours, allowed me to have interactions that were much harder to achieve in the city centre. Somewhat paradoxically, the family's search for rural life had brought the area into the sphere of greater city influence. They were not an exception, but in fact they were themselves part of a wider process of the growth of urban life—the focus of this thesis.

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<sup>11</sup> *Zabord* (literally 'fence' in Russian) is the process of 'fencing' or border delineation between properties which my research assistant Alma described as becoming increasingly prominent in Almaty in the 1990s where higher walls were built around private properties. Mikhail lamented the erection of fences and talked about the land '150 kilometres from here where you will find no fences and there are wild ducks'. These small-scale manifestations of liberal economic policies of privatisation are writ large in the everyday lives of those living with change.

## *Chapter Conclusion*

This chapter has introduced both the places and the people who are the subject of this research, arguing two main points. First, these three areas of Almaty should be understood as being part of the greater urban milieu. Understanding the breadth of opinions and backgrounds of the young urban middle class therefore requires me to consider the lives of those informants living in the three transect locations which constitute my urban field site.

Second, members of the young urban middle class narrate their lives in a unique way that is differentiated from that of the older generation. The older generation, from my examples, are able to tie together multiple traumatic, damaging, or life-changing events and bring a common thread to their life narratives which promotes a feeling of stability in the present. In comparison, my young urban middle-class informants are all too aware of the uncertainty that undermines their public ‘onstage’ narratives.

In the first transect location, Sholpan recounts a life that involves dramatic change, finding the present a prosperous and stable time. In comparison, her daughter Aizhan focuses on the uncertainty she sees in the present, a result of her age and her focus on what the future may hold. In the second transect location, we hear of Anna, cut adrift from any one place by her family’s traumatic history, which includes many threads to different ethnicities and places. Anna seizes upon certain aspects of her story—particularly her ability to claim a number of different nationalities in order to obtain a Russian passport and greater security for her future employment as a journalist—through framing her life’s onstage public persona in a certain way. In the final transect location, Mikhail takes a philosophical approach to life, making choices that ensure his own health and well-being and taking hold of the freedoms he has to make what he sees as healthy life choices. As I will explain in detail in Chapter 6, his son’s challenge to this stability is met with unexpected and harsh punishment from his family. In each of these examples, narrative ways of telling life stories give meaning to the present and help my informants to understand the past. In the following chapter, I will ask what happens when these narratives are ruptured and the foundations on which they are built are called into question.

## Chapter 4

### A Transect from South to North:

#### Tracing the disruptive flow of the Kargalinka River

During my fieldwork, a large *sel* (mudflow) came from the mountains, flooding a number of neighbourhoods in the south of the city and triggering widespread panic. In this chapter, I explore this exceptional event and discuss how it can be seen as an ethnographic moment which brought my informants' background worries and concerns to the fore. The *sel* also changed my perspective as a researcher. My informants' narratives of uncertainty didn't fit the reality of the hazards faced; there was a social force that was driving this disparity between perception and reality. This event showed me that I should be focusing on narratives of risk, rather than the physical hazards themselves.

I undertook multiple visits to the city district of Nauryzbai, where people were directly affected by the *sel*. On these trips, I was accompanied by my research assistant, Anna. We walked south, following the flow of the river, from a dam on the outskirts of the city to a more built-up area, and finally on to housing districts adjacent to where I lived in a *Khrushchevka*, described in the first transect location in Chapter 3. The conversations cited in this section are a result of the random encounters we had with the people we met along our transect walks, as well as with people we were introduced to by those living there. As we progress along the transect and reach the more built-up areas, I include further comments from other informants living across the city. These comments are drawn from discussions of the *sel* in the context of everyday conversations and from structured interviews I carried out, in which I discussed a broader range of natural hazards as a result of my initial focus on seismic risk. Considering accounts from informants among a range of ages, I examine what characterises the responses of my young urban middle-class informants. I have included an array of responses to represent the diversity of backgrounds and opinions of those affected by the *sel*. These diversifying factors—including where one lives, their ethnicity, life experience, age, gender, worries, and fears, as well as notions of who is responsible for dealing with hazards—all influenced the way that the events were experienced, interpreted, and narrated.

My description is parcelled into three sections for the purpose of analysis. My discussion of the first section focuses on the firsthand experiences of those living in close proximity to the dam. The second section corresponds to an area where the river burst its banks and houses were flooded. The third section includes people living in less directly affected areas across the city who only heard about the *sel* from others through word of mouth or online reports. I try to avoid imposing false divisions between these places—what Ingold terms the ‘assemblies of connected elements’, which he argues are an artefact of ‘modern metropolitan societies’ (Ingold, 2007, p. 24). Instead, I emphasise the flow of the river—a thread which, like the paths of those travelling between different areas of the city, and my own walking transects following the river, comprises journeys which cross over and overlap. Through exposure to a *sel*, these everyday paths through life are broken.

### *Exposure to a Sel*

The word *sel* is used to describe a broad category of hazards that can include mudflows, debris flows, landslides, and floods. The word originates from the Arabic word *sayl* (torrent) and has entered common usage in both Russian and Kazakh. Because the buildings in Almaty have been constructed in at-risk areas, the city is vulnerable to infrequent but severe flooding. The rivers that flow across Almaty are fed by snow melt, glacier melt, and rainwater. The foothills of the Alatau Mountains are mainly formed of loess—windblown sediment that is easily eroded and carried by water—and granite boulders that have broken off major rock formations. When these factors combine, and when the flow rate of the river increases, it is able to erode and transport material from the mountains, often in combination with larger-scale ground movement such as landslides. This material ranges from smaller pieces of sediment to large granite boulders. When the suspended material reaches more than 60 per cent of the volume of the water, it is considered a debris flow in Western scientific classification (Hungar, Leroueil, & Picarelli, 2013). Major instances of *sel* in the past have led to large-scale engineering projects by the government of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic. One example is the construction of the Medeu Dam, built to mitigate the risk of flooding. However, Almaty is exposed to multiple river channels that each have their own associated risks and are liable to flooding (Elie, 2013).

This transect follows one of these channels: the Kargalinka River, which runs from high in the mountains south of Almaty, through the city, and out onto the steppe until it reaches Lake Balkash. On 23 July 2015, the moraine wall of unsorted glacial sediments, which was holding back a pool of melt-water, gave way. This sent a massive flow of water down the Kargalinka River. Image 4.1 shows a comparison of the river before the rupture on 11<sup>th</sup> of July, where the turquoise melt-pond is visible at the top of the picture, and on 27<sup>th</sup> of July, where the lake has disappeared and there is a higher volume of water visible in the river leading down towards the anti-mudflow dam. The dam is designed to hold back large rocks and debris such as trees while allowing water to pass through, draining the lake which forms behind it and reducing the percentage of suspended material in the water. The Kargalinka flows through areas of the city which used to be apple orchards, but are now packed with *dachas* (summer houses). Houses have been built here by their owners rather than through government led schemes or large-scale commercial developments. Many houses have been constructed here as exclusive residences for businessmen and government officials. Following the flow into town, the buildings become higher. As we reach the area in the vicinity of the Al-Farabi main ring road, the river flows past Soviet-era microdistricts, mainly comprised of *Khrushchevka* housing developments. These are the areas in which my informants live and work.





Image 4.1: Before-and-after comparison of floodwater in the Kargalinka River. Copyright NASA Earth Observatory images by Jesse Allen, using Landsat data from the U.S. Geological Survey. Accessed 20 July 2019 from <https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov>.





Image 4.2: Anti-mudflow dam on the Kargalinka River after the *sel*. Image taken by author.

*First section: Close proximity to the dam and firsthand experience*

Göksu and Firat sat on the bonnet of their dusty red car while they chatted to Anna and me, squinting and shielding their eyes from the sun with their hands. The large structure of the concrete anti-mudflow dam loomed in the near distance (Image 4.2). Their car was parked alongside a gravel track that follows the edge of the current river channel, bordered by steep earthen banks over six metres high and falling into the fast-flowing stream at the base. Behind the car were single-storey dwellings with square foundations, two front windows, walls of breezeblocks and roughly rendered bare concrete façades.

Göksu and Firat are in their mid-30s and from Turkish families<sup>1</sup> living in the housing surrounding the Soviet-era concrete dam. We spoke in Russian, the official language of ‘inter-ethnic communication’ in Kazakhstan.

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<sup>1</sup> Turkish migration came in two distinct periods. First, Meskhetian Turks were forcibly deported from Georgia to Central Asia in November 1944 during WWII under accusations of spying for the then-enemy outside of the Soviet Union (Khazanov, 1992, p. 3). Second, since

When I asked them if they had experienced the flood, they responded that they were alerted that something was wrong at 2 a.m.: ‘*Nashy* [Our] hunters were high in the mountains and heard a big noise and understood that water was coming, and so they came down to the houses to warn people’. The hunters were considered part of Göksu and Firat’s community, and so the information they brought was accorded a high level of trust. With this information, members of the community took the preventive step of leaving their houses and moving to higher ground, where they ‘gathered with friends and families, everyone gathered together in the field’. To illustrate their point, Firat lifted his arms, gesticulating towards the raised ground above the houses.

Anna asked if the dam had broken, as this was one of the rumours she had heard from friends living in the centre of the city. Göksu and Firat shook their heads. ‘[The sluice] was opened up and it worked as it was supposed to. The dam did a great job because it kept back all the stones and trees, which were the most dangerous hazard’. In this case, their personal experience allowed them to dispute the rumours Anna had heard discussed among her friends in the city centre. Their distance from events, both in terms of community and physical location, introduced uncertainty. Describing the reasons for the *sel*, Göksu referred to a *merena*, a river that forms melting ice. ‘Small rivers form from the lake and water starts to come out slowly. Supposedly a big piece of ice fell in the lake... which is what caused this flood’. The glacial lake he mentioned is located 15 kilometres south, high in the mountains. His information likely came from a secondary source, as the lake is very difficult to reach and there is some uncertainty about what supposedly happened.

When I asked them about the official government response to the flood, Göksu argued that the Ministry of Emergency Situations (MChS) was conspicuous in their demonstration of help, possibly because they didn’t want people to be angry with them, and that the action taken was the result of a higher authority:

*Göksu:* MChS arrived at around 6 a.m. For the first two weeks after the flood, MChS were really active and they brought all the necessary things. We were

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independence, there has been a growing Turkish influence in Kazakhstan. The Turkish government has instituted a policy to promote a ‘pan-Turkic union’ between Turkey and those countries in Central Asia that speak Turkic languages, including Kazakhstan (Aydin, 2004, p. 7).

grateful for that. They wanted to calm the people affected by the flood. The higher authorities learned about it, and that is why local authorities did something. I don't think it was the *akim* (mayor), but some higher authority that pushed him to do it. There was also compensation for those affected. It wasn't much, but at least it was something.

Göksu's comments could be considered a rumour. He doubted the urgency was a result of local officials and so attributed a higher authority with the ability to get things done. This is illustrative of how he perceives local political structures, particularly government actions on a local basis. To some extent, this suggests that there may be a disconnect between the local neighbourhood context, where the flood was experienced, and the citywide administrative context, in which the official response was organised. In a study of the aftermath of a 2001 earthquake in Gujarat, India, Simpson describes how the state sought to 'strengthen and extend its reach' in the political and social turmoil that followed (Simpson, 2014, p. 55). Commenting on the government's rebuilding work following the earthquake, Simpson remarks that it is not inherently bad, 'but it is never as neutral or innocent as people often claim and sometimes appear to believe' (ibid., p. 1). As in Simpson's example, the *sel* was a rupture which not only disrupted everyday life on a local basis, but was also seized upon by the state as an opportunity to further its own agenda of increasing its local influence and support.

These experiences have not changed how people in Göksu and Firat's community perceive where they live; they continue to feel that it is a good area to live in, despite the uncertainty that it introduced into their lives. Göksu spoke in the present tense, commenting simply, 'We like living here'. The flood has not changed that. In some ways, the risks that those in this community are exposed to are folded into the uncertainties of everyday life. While Ibañez-Tirado (2015) described how exposure to risks in Tajikistan, including flooding, was seen as a life of 'everyday disasters', for this Turkish community in Almaty, such risks are not seen as disasters: they are perceived to be manageable on a community basis, and the local failure of the state does not have such a dramatic impact. Perhaps, as Göksu and Firat demonstrated in their chronological narrative of events, they are confident that they have a good understanding of what happened. Their knowledge distinguishes this account from the accounts that follow, in which a lack of information correlates with a feeling of greater uncertainty.

This section shows how the dam marks a boundary between natural threats, symbolised by the mountains to the south, and spheres of social and political influence, which extend out from the city. The flood broke the technological defences of the city; in so doing, it provoked those informants who were affected by it to question the sphere of political influence. Without information, they turned to supposition and rumour to openly discuss the ambiguities of the situation, in this case with an inquisitive international researcher.

*Second section: An area that was flooded*

This section explores the comments of informants who lived half a kilometre downstream from the dam. The riverbanks were breached at this location, small bridges were swept away, and some houses were flooded. I analyse the accounts of two people: a Kazakh woman, Dilnaz, and a Russian man, Nikita. I spoke to Dilnaz outside her house after introducing myself on one of our walks down the river. I also met Nikita outside his property, where he was painting a sign. I spent more time with Nikita, drinking tea at his house and taking a trip in his four-wheel-drive car; he showed me the upper stretches of the river, starting above the dam and travelling down to his house. He did this to help explain to me what had happened in each place. The informants living in this area were affected in a different way by the rupture of everyday life caused by the *sel*. They expressed a greater degree of confusion around the actual events that took place, fiercely criticised the state, and discussed a wider range of potential risks. They also questioned who was responsible for dealing with those risks, suggesting that the *sel* was more disruptive for them than it had been for those living closer to the dam.

Dilnaz is a young mother in her late 20s. She lives with her extended family, who are ethnic Kazakhs. She was at home at the time of the flood and gave her account of what happened, speaking to us in Russian.

*Dilnaz:* It was 1:50 a.m. and nobody notified them. I heard that sound. I thought that it might be an earthquake, so I went outside and the neighbours had already gathered there. Everyone was looking into the river, but it was really dark, so they couldn't see what was happening. It was very dark, and both the electricity

and the water were turned off. It was really scary, like a horror movie; it could even have been *temnii sily* [the literal translation is ‘dark power’ in Russian, but was likely used by Dilnaz to indicate an evil or supernatural force]. Smelt strongly like *hvor* [Russian word for pine trees].

Three key observations emerge from Dilnaz’s account: first, a power cut meant that those living near her could not see what was happening. This led to confusion. The disconnection of electricity and water supply further intensified an emotional response of fear and isolation. In the previous chapter, I argued that my informants view connections, such as the supply of utilities, as an integral part of what it means to be urban. In Chapter 6, I suggest that the deliberate disconnection of a Uighur neighbourhood was used by the local government to isolate the community. In Dilnaz’s case, the severing of these connections dislocated her from the community and support of the city, leading to uncertainty.

Because of this disconnection, Dilnaz knew little of what was going on. She told me, ‘Lots of people and I were wondering if it is our destiny and we will die today’. This was not the only account I heard which mentioned a fatalistic approach to major natural hazards; indeed, it was a frequent trope that appeared when discussing seismic risk. When events fell outside of people’s ability to make sense of them in the context of shared public narratives, for example when discussing the threat of a major earthquake, my informants cited divine will as an explanation of responsibility for major change. This can have serious consequences; for example, Paradise argues that attributing causation to the wrath of God has a significant effect on the action taken in response to a hazard (Paradise, 2005, p. 171).

Second, Dilnaz had expected that she would be notified about the hazard, but she received no such notification. This intensified a feeling of uncertainty, as the expected course of events was undermined. The Ministry of Emergency Situations (MoES) normally uses SMS alerts, sent to mobile phones, to warn people of potential hazards. On average, I received one of these warnings every couple of weeks. They would include messages about hazards such as avalanches in the mountains, strong winds on the steppe, or potential flooding due to snowmelt and heavy rainfall. Dilnaz had an expectation of an official series of events: in these circumstances, she felt the state should have been present and offering assistance. She told me, ‘MoES is responsible for

preparing the river, managing that river, making the channel wider and opening the sluice gates, but they failed. They had to prepare people because people didn't think it possible because they haven't experienced it'. Dilnaz expected the state to be involved in dealing with this hazard—an expectation reflected in a joint Overseas Development Institute and Earthquakes Without Frontiers conference report on natural hazard risk in Kazakhstan, which agreed that 'governments are ultimately responsible for public safety—and they are not only responsible for what they do, but for what they don't do' (Overseas Development Institute, 2016, p. 18). In this instance, the expected public narrative course of events, including training and preparation, was not followed. Consequently, Dilnaz's trust in the government's ability—and its willingness to care for the public—was undermined.

Third, there was a strong sensory experience of the hazard. Dilnaz was unable to see what was happening, and she commented on the unfamiliar experience of encountering a strong smell of pine trees for which she had no frame of reference. This was possibly caused by the rocks smashing trees as they were carried by floodwaters; hundreds of trees were found caught behind the dam the following morning. Gregg comments on how, preceding a tsunami in Thailand following the 2004 Sumatran earthquake, a lack of experience meant that people did not react to unfamiliar sights and sounds, despite being potential warnings of the incoming tsunami (Gregg et al., 2006). In Kazakhstan, where there is previous experience of minor earthquakes, Dilnaz was able to interpret the sounds that she heard as being linked to known hazards, especially those that are background worries in everyday life. When her ability to explain events through personal experience was exhausted, and with no public narrative of events supported by state-provided information, she turned to those around her for answers.

Dilnaz's grandmother, Karlygash, helped her make sense of the situation in the aftermath of the flood. Dilnaz recounted how Karlygash had told her, '50 or 60 years ago, something like this happened; it happened because the ice was melting'. In the absence of an official public narrative of events, Dilnaz was able to form a narrative version of events pieced together from different sources, including firsthand experience, memory of past events, and local media reports which appeared the next day and corroborated her experience and memory. This brings us to the account of my next informant, Nikita.

Nikita, a Russian man in his mid-50s, lives at the spot along the river where the floodwaters swept away two small bridges. He lives in a single-storey home with his wife and works in the centre of the city. I asked Nikita how people in Almaty approached hazards such as this flood, to which he replied:

*Nikita:* How to explain... they don't think about anything. They just build their houses. That's it. As I say, they just live today, without thinking about the future. The danger passed by this time, thank goodness. If someone's property has been touched by the flow, he will probably enhance it and build again at the same spot and will think that it might happen again in 20 or 30 years. Everyone likes to think that anything might happen to others, not ourselves. *Nash* [Our] mentality is a bit... not a *bit... catastrophically* different.

It was Nikita's opinion that people in Almaty live with a *carpe diem* mentality. Although there are many reasons why people could have this approach to risk, Nikita's comments can tell us something about how some people deal with risk in a context of rapid change. Nikita referenced a timespan of 20 to 30 years. This marks a generational gap, the time since the end of the Soviet Union and the age of the cohort that I focus on: my young urban middle-class informants. While it may seem illogical to rebuild a house in a location that is known to be dangerous, in doing so one is taking advantage of the relative stability of the present compared to past experiences of change, acting in the face of what may appear to be inevitable uncertainty in the future. Nikita didn't distance himself from the mentality which he had observed in society, saying that it is '*nash*' (our) mentality. This ambiguous statement could indicate those living in the neighbourhood, the city of Almaty, or the country of Kazakhstan. He differentiated this mentality from mine, but again this could mean my English, European, or Western mentality, among other possibilities. Nikita's account of the *sel* provides an example of what he believed to be the consequence of having this mentality—rebuilding in areas which have been flooded in the past.

On the night of the *sel*, Nikita had come back late from work. He tried to sleep, but the sound of the river kept him awake. He drifted off, but then:

*Nikita:* I woke up and realised that there was no electricity, and I decided that something had happened. When I went outside, I saw people sitting all on the street. If not for the dam, my house would be destroyed for sure; those living on



the other side of the river in that hollow wouldn't have survived... the neighbours were screaming at night, they were very scared. The houses were built improperly, as usually happens here. Right after the big bridge there is a house which suffered a lot, and it is being demolished now. By destiny's irony, the house was purchased and occupied by the family of the head of the Department of Emergency Situations, and he was removed from the position after the event.

Nikita gave these examples to illustrate how a *carpe diem* mentality could lead to certain behaviours, such as choosing to build a new house in an area which had flooded only a few weeks before the *sel*. He also argued that people knew that their houses might be badly built, and that is why they were scared when the *sel* came. This suggests that there is an underlying uncertainty about building standards in Almaty and that it is only in exceptional circumstances, such as in the event of the *sel*, that these uncertainties become more immediate concerns. Nikita laughed at the irony that one of the most badly affected buildings belonged to someone whose professional duty was to know, understand, and prepare for risks. This brings us back to the issue of responsibility, calling into question the trustworthiness of the public narratives of support issued by these officials. Although I heard this story from more than one individual, I was unable to verify if this house had actually been owned by a government official. It is possible that this was actually a rumour—a narrative account which manifests the sense of public distrust in the state's support and perpetuates the uncertainty that the potential of a recurring *sel* hazard places upon those living in the area. As a narrative account, it can be easily shared, joked about, and reflected upon. Ibañez-Tirado argues that joking was one of the ways which her informants in Kulob, Tajikistan, made light of their dire situation to normalise the risk of flooding they faced and turn it into another aspect of everyday life (Ibañez-Tirado, 2015, pp. 5 & 13). This anecdote about the official's house could be just such an example of this, illustrating the consequences of a particular mentality.

Despite these narrative ways of reflecting on everyday uncertainty, Nikita's comments, along with those of the other informants we have heard from in this section, challenge this uncertainty head-on. There is a local expectation of responsibility: people believe that the state should have been involved to a greater extent and that it neglected its duties.

*Nikita:* The collective opinion is that he [the government official] was fired because they [MoES] neglected that lake. They weren't monitoring the situation because nobody knew that the lake existed there and that its water was close to breaking through to the valley. I'm not sure—was it a closed or open lake, underneath the glaciers or above them? But the core thought here is that the event has happened, but nobody in the authorities had done anything to prevent it. There were no notifications.

In the accounts of my informants from this area, the lack of action taken by the state was seen to have eroded public confidence in the state's abilities. Proportionate to a declining trust in the state, there is an increasing feeling of vulnerability and uncertainty in Almaty. It appears that those living in the area affected by the *sel* make sense of things not on a societal level, but on an individual level. They take advantage of opportunities such as the ability to purchase very cheap land, even if it comes at the cost of the significant risk of further flooding. This could be a reflection of a wider shift in responsibility for dealing with risk, moving from the state to the individual, which came with decentralisation after 1991. This could also be combined with a changing approach to risk-taking, as neoliberal policies push the potential gains of risk-taking and downplay the negative effects of inequality that this risk-taking produces. To investigate this shift, I seek to compare narratives with those of my young urban middle-class informants. In comparison to members of the older generation, who grew up with the paternalistic support of the Soviet state, my younger informants have adopted a different societal and institutional approach to risk.

In the next section, I move north—down the slope, away from the mountains—along my transect, following the river into concrete channels throughout the more densely populated urban housing districts. Here, the *sel* triggered widespread panic verging on mass hysteria. Narratives of abandonment, a lack of trust, and disconnection grow stronger as multiple voices contribute their opinions to the discussion.

*Third section: On hearing about the sel*

Dinara is a Kazakh woman in her mid-20s and lives in a Soviet-era *komunalka* (shared dormitory apartment). Although Dinara falls within my selected age group for those

who grew up outside of the Soviet Union, she cannot be considered part of the young urban middle class: she has not been to university, and she did not share my other young informants' same type of narrative performance or any of their moral and material aspirations (see Chapter 5). I had first spoken to her during a transect walk farther upstream, when I stopped into a shop where she worked. Dinara spoke with us in Russian; she was a native Kazakh speaker, but Anna was my research assistant at the time and wasn't confident translating from Kazakh. Dinara lived further downstream from the *sel*, so it wasn't until 3 a.m. that she first knew something had happened:

*Dinara:* There was a woman shouting and screaming, 'The dam has been totally destroyed, there is a massive water coming!' I have four children and so I was so... so afraid and started to collect their stuff into bags. Since I have no husband and no car, I was trying to get a lift. No one stopped, and no one would help until we found some old guy. We went to another microdistrict until the next afternoon. There were already crowds there. The people were walking around and observing the mountains, trying to work out what was happening.

Dinara's account was fraught with panic. Due to a lack of information, exaggerated rumours emerged, and potential fears rose to the surface and were expressed in this unchecked form. Dinara's fear was a result of her four children. Her fear was intensified by her social isolation, as she lived alone with them. She did not tell me why she was single, but as a consequence, she had to rely on others for help. Tobin and Whiteford, speaking from the context of a volcanic hazard in Ecuador, argue that in a 'post-disaster' context, 'those with the least resources—usually the marginalised—are often both the hardest hit and least able to cope' (Tobin & Whiteford, 2002, p. 29). Dinara's social isolation is one example of how social circumstances lead to people being impacted in different ways by a hazard. Living in a *komunalka*, and without the support of a husband or access to a car, it is likely that she has a low income, as this is one of the cheapest housing options in the city. When she travelled to another district of the city, she found many others in the same position as her. Without official sources of information or any way to verify rumours, they used their senses to try and find out more information about what was happening, looking to the mountains in search of answers. Without the kinship networks through which Dilnaz, for instance, was able to gain a better understanding of what was happening, public information channels did not reach Dinara. This increased both her actual vulnerability—due to her inability to respond to the actual hazard, as it was unknown—and her uncertainty, as this lack of

knowledge meant that rumour, gossip, and hearsay became her main source of information.

Dinara relied on one source of information in particular: SMS text message warnings from the MoES, which were not sent on the night of the *sel*. The lack of information changed Dinara's behaviour in the months following the flood; she told me that she receives these messages 'maybe twice a month', and when she does she cannot sleep all night and is constantly checking because she is so scared of floods now. This suggests that incomplete or ineffective communication channels can be problematic and potentially more damaging when not operated properly or complemented by a more comprehensive information strategy. However, Dinara was not angry about how her life had been changed, saying, 'I don't blame anyone and do my best to get by'.

The information given in these SMS messages is brief and limited to one sentence, provided in Russian and then repeated in Kazakh. A comment on this topic by Daria, a young urban middle-class informant who is in her mid-20s and works in IT in the city, gives a contrasting perspective. Daria said that the messages 'don't bring any emotional response in me whatsoever'. This could suggest that the messages trigger a range of responses that unearth underlying worries for those who receive them; it could also indicate that responses are based on personal experiences, rather than the information contained in the messages. Hamilton Bean has researched the efficacy of SMS messages in the United States, where they are known as WEAs (Wireless Emergency Alerts). Bean found that these WEAs, due to their brevity, were 'often deemed confusing, difficult to believe and impersonal. Participants consistently found WEAs and tweets to be fear inducing and uninformative' (Bean et al., 2016, p.136). In Kazakhstan, the limited information in messages and short-term timing of alerts has the potential to amplify underlying fears; in instances where recipients can do little to prepare, such alerts have the potential to lead to panic. These messages also need to be consistent. In the case of the *sel*, the lack of any message exacerbated worries, and for those who could not directly experience the flood and only heard about it through others, the potential for damaging rumour and misinformation to spread was magnified.

As a key group of interest, the responses from members of the young urban middle class, many of whom did not live in areas that were flooded, give us an insight into their background worries and concerns. Up until this point, we have heard from inhabitants

of the Nauryzbai district from a range of backgrounds. An interesting point to note here is the lack of young urban middle-class informants I encountered living in these areas farther up the river; geographically, my younger informants were concentrated around the centre of the city. Those who did have links with these outer-city districts were likely connected to these areas because their families lived there, as was the case for Alma, Sasha, and Nuriya. For those informants who had come to Almaty to study, they lived on campus or in the city centre, many choosing to stay in that area after graduation.

I undertook a series of focus groups at the university, which I will explore in detail in Chapter 5. These focus groups were semi-structured and followed a set of predetermined discussion topics. Each focus group included students from either a private or state university. They were a roughly even mix of men and women of different ethnicities. I chaired the discussion and introduced a range of different topics for discussion, one of which was the *sel*. I will give more details on these focus groups in the following chapter, where I discuss those who were present and why I chose to speak to these informants. Here, I want to include the response of one of the participants.

Gulnara is in her early 20s. One of her parents is Kazakh, and the other is Tatar. She has lived most of her life in Almaty and also studied in Northern Europe for a year. She speaks excellent English and was keen to speak in English at the focus group, so her quotes are direct with no translation.

*Gulnara:* How I knew about the flood? My friend lives here, like somewhere here. [Looking at a map of the city I provided, she points to a Soviet-era microdistrict that lies alongside the Kargalinka River in the Nauryzbai district in the southwest of the city.] He called me, and he was like, ‘Do you know the bridge over here on Ryskulova Street?’ It was stuck with traffic in weird directions—people didn’t know which way to go because they didn’t know where to run from the flood—and he was like, ‘I was with my friends, and now I’m driving at 4 a.m. in the morning back home’, and he sees all the people and he is like, ‘I thought it was apocalypse’, so he was freaked out and he called me because he thought that the river was the one next to me. I freaked out and I opened my laptop. I go to [the] MChS [MoES] webpage; I see nothing, because

they usually report how many times per day they have to go out and do stuff. They didn't report anything that day, but they were out. And my mom was like, 'Wow... you know, maybe they were out and they didn't have time to report', and I was like, 'Mom, the dispatcher, the people behind the desk, they don't have to go out'.

The conversational tone of Gulnara's account reflects the way that these issues were talked about in everyday life by my young urban middle-class informants. She found out about the flood after a friend called her to check that she was okay; the friend recognised that something was wrong when he encountered an abnormal traffic jam in the middle of the night. These informal sources of information are key to navigating risks and uncertainty. Gulnara expected the government to be providing information, and she checked the relevant website only to find that there was nothing there. By this time, other family members had woken up, and Gulnara was surprised that her mother was not as worried about the lack of information. When I asked Gulnara why this lack of information concerned her, she responded:

*Gulnara:* Well, it is [a] major problem here, I think, because even when they do their job, people still perceive them as not doing their job properly... People don't trust them and now they have to build the trust, because seriously, they might be very good at their job... like, really. I saw some emergency cars that were really, like... I don't know how to say that... the doctors, the firemen, they are trying their best and then you just see one example of not doing his best and then you see all of them not doing anything right... They have to work on that. They have to work with the public. If you are not public, no one knows what you do, no one trusts you because when you are not transparent, people can't trust you.

Transparency is a key trope of the neoliberal 'solutions' that economists brought to post-Soviet countries in the 1990s. As Patico argues, these 'solutions' value "transparency" over informal social networking', and these values often 'differ from local norms' (Patico, 2008, p. 17). Gulnara's expectations are different from those of her mother, suggesting that there might be a generational difference in what is expected of the state in this situation. For Gulnara, perceptions of transparency were strongly correlated with trust in public services and would suggest a value system more akin to the neoliberal 'solutions' that were prevalent as she was growing up. Other members of

the young urban middle class have picked up these themes as valuable and desirable traits, symbols of an international way of living. However, if we consider what actually took place, the information reached Gulnara through her informal social network. Patico's discussion of a post-Soviet middle class, using an ethnography of teachers living in St. Petersburg in the late '90s, cites Wanner's use of the idea of a Soviet 'moralising lens' through which regimes of value are scrutinised (Patico, 2008, p. 17; Wanner, 2005, p. 516). As an informant who grew up during the Soviet Union with this 'moralising lens', Gulnara's mother appeals to her daughter, suggesting that the emergency services have good moral intentions and there must be a reason why there is no information. Gulnara, on the other hand, frames the MoES response in terms of a failure of service, not seeing MoES's work as an extension of the state's moral obligation to protect the population, but rather as a business that has failed to support its customers. The government's control of public information channels has led to a shortage of reliable and trustworthy information, to which Gulnara and her mother respond differently. This shows the differences in generational frames of understanding, and I hypothesise that members of the young urban middle class expect a functioning public system, but that expectation is undermined by the failure of the MoES to provide official information. What information, then, was available in official and public channels?

### *Media Accounts*

By the next day, local media outlets had begun to report on the flood. Excerpts from a local broadcaster give an indication of the widespread panic that had been triggered by the *sel*; the examples I provide come from TengriNews, a majority state-owned media outlet. At the time of publication, this was one of the few sources of information available about the *sel* in Russian and Kazakh.

TengriNews regularly published news pieces in Russian, Kazakh, and English. However, these multilingual news services have now been dropped; specific news pieces are targeted to Russian- and Kazakh-speaking populations independently, and only some news articles are translated into both languages. The following images accompanied a TengriNews report on the *sel*.

Image copyright limits publication here. The original image can be found here:

<https://tengrinews.kz/events/sel-v-almaty-live-278175/>

(Accessed 25<sup>th</sup> September 2020)

Image 4.3: Highway on the outskirts of Almaty.  
Published on 23 July 2015 by TengriNews.

Image copyright limits publication here. The original image can be found here:

<https://tengrinews.kz/events/sel-v-almaty-live-278175/>

(Accessed 25<sup>th</sup> September 2020)

Image 4.4: Highway on the outskirts of Almaty.  
Published on 23 July 2015 by TengriNews.

Images 4.3 and 4.4 show the large scale of panic which swept the city. In the first image, we can see traffic jams in multiple directions. If we look closely at the cars to the left of the centre of the image, we can see that it is nose to nose with another car on the wrong side of the road. The car doors are open, and its occupants can be seen looking around and making calls on their mobile phones. In Image 4.4, a long line of cars trails



off into the distance. Again, cars are stuck facing in both directions on both sides of the road. In the far distance, the dark band of the mountains is visible under the layer of cloud and smog as people flee the source of the panic. Fleeing danger was a sensible choice in this situation, especially when there was a lack of public information regarding which areas of the city were affected. Although the lack of official information led to confusion, informal social networks proved helpful, as exemplified by Gulnara's phone call from a friend. With hindsight, the area directly affected by the floodwaters was relatively small, limited to one or two square kilometres. The scale of the public's response suggests that those living in Almaty expect the worst: their response is proportionate to a much bigger hazard, evidence that widespread uncertainty is a presence in the lives of many urban residents.

Online articles with information about the *sel* provide an unlikely place for public discussion of events and the uncertainty surrounding them. At the time, comments could be left anonymously under the main body of an article, a feature that is now missing from many new articles published on the TengriNews site. Though we know little about the background and context of these different voices, we can learn a lot by thinking critically about what people are willing to share publicly. The use of online pseudonyms means that these comments are anonymised and can be understood as similar in form to the rumours that I have previously discussed. Their function is to air private comments in a public context, and the anonymity affords the speakers some level of protection—either to speak the truth or to spread malicious gossip. This is a good example of offstage discussions breaking through to onstage contexts, and Paz's (2009) discussion of a local gossip magazine among the Latino community in Israel, discussed in Chapter 2, provides important insights to help understand what might be happening here. Paz found that a local gossip column allowed for reflections within a marginalised community, giving them a voice they didn't have in mainstream Hebrew press. However, in this example from Almaty, there is a much broader population speaking: the wider urban public are expressing their opinions and concerns in the context of a strictly state-controlled public media. This is therefore much closer to the 'offstage' discussions which Scott discusses as a 'weapon of the weak' (Scott, 1985). Here, the subordinate power dynamic is between the urban population and the state. The following examples of comments show a range of concerns about, and criticism of, the state:

*'Inhabitant', 07/23/2015, 8:44*—Just resent information to support disaster! When it is not necessary, [MoES] send thousands of SMS, and then a single news item! At 5 a.m. all were frightened. The website had zero information. On TV—silence. The worst thing is not so much distress as panic, and our [population is] frightened. I see both this reaction and apathy. There is no official information, therefore any lie is taken for the truth! People are more frightened and so are running to villages... someone started a rumour... The only way to stop them—is with official information.

At first this account appears very similar to those we have already heard, but *Inhabitant* goes a step further, suggesting that this lack of information has led to distress, panic, apathy, lies, and rumours. With anonymity, *Inhabitant* is able to offer a scathing critique of the state's actions. However, what we see is a response to the panic—a plea for help. *Inhabitant* asks the government for more information in order to tackle what they see as a damaging spread of rumours. Another commenter, *Saltanat*, echoes *Inhabitant*, conveying the sentiment of some of my informants: 'There was no warning, no hint of it. They [MoES] inappropriately write a hundred posts, but today everything was quiet'. *Dina* replied to this comment and a debate opened up, thanks in part to the ability for individuals to quickly reply to comments on an online forum:

*Dina: Saltanat, why slander our services. People work harmoniously. The siren and the evacuation were deployed where necessary, the people themselves have spread panic and began to throw themselves from the city, people have enough reason to sow panic, bitterness without you already OK!*

*Dina's* comments suggest that the population has reason to panic, but *Dina* does not go into detail about what these reasons may be. This suggests that there is an undercurrent of uncertainty, with reasons that are not publicly shared. *Dina* sees *Saltanat* as responsible for spreading this discontent and comes to the defence of the authorities, suggesting that there is more subtlety to the situation than a simple divide between state and population. The other possibility is that the state employs its own voices anonymously within the comments in order to combat public disquiet. Commenters such as *Inhabitant* are able to air concerns that may not be covered in highly censored public media. As I will explain in more detail in Chapter 5, my young urban middle-class informants consider public media to be among the least trusted sources of information. As a consequence, when there is a lack of trust, there is a greater reliance

upon family, friends, and close community. This is shown in a post from Erlan, who writes that he ‘even got a call from the other end of the city, that is from a rural area at 5 a.m.’. Erlan acknowledges the source, saying that he wants to ‘thank you friends for the warning’.

As a source of reliable information, these public spaces for discussion are also treated with suspicion. Although the motives for posting here may be mixed, one example shows that even here, the public choose to share the impact of trauma from the past to offer support to those in need. Later the next day, once the initial *sel* hazard had subsided and water levels in the riverbed were reduced, Galina reflects on what has happened: ‘Thank God, people are alive! I remember in 1976 we were evacuated from the area during the night in the area of Zhandosova [a street that runs through my first transect location]. Our house stands near the river. There was a terrible roar of the thunder of huge stones, I understand and sympathise with people emerging from this experience. Let the whole world help all those in need, to the extent that is possible’. As these examples show, the comment section became an unlikely venue for personal comment, gossip, concern, and argument. The state’s heavy censorship of media provides no balance to reporting, no public discussion, and no criticism. However, as the comments illustrate, the state’s media censorship does not remove these opinions, but simply suppresses them. It takes an event such as the *sel* to expose these opinions and ideas, since such an event falls outside of the condoned narrative of stability and security that the public state relies on for its continued authority over the population.

### *An Official Response*

One perspective has been conspicuous in its absence from this chapter so far: the official position of the state, and the personal opinions of various state actors, employees, and representatives. This information provides the final piece in helping us to understand how events played out and how such a broad array of feelings, thoughts, and concerns rose to the surface. The day after the *sel*, an official version of events was presented by Yuri Ilyin, the deputy to the *akim* (mayor) of Almaty, during a televised news interview:

There was a breakthrough of the moraine lake [...] under the Kargalinka glacier. The volume of this lake was about 40,000 cubic metres, which provoked the formation of the *sel* flow. The *sel* flow came till the Kargalinka dam, which reached 10 to 12 meters at the ridge. The basic water bulk was withheld by the protective construction. At the moment, the condition of the *sel*-protective construction is stable: there are no defects or damage. The water discharge is being done through two apertures which are working and in the proper condition. We observe higher volumes of water in the Kargalinka River which currently constitute about 10 to 12 cubic meters per second [...] Currently the evacuation of people is taking place, and hereinafter we are going to undertake a yard-by-yard visiting round with the aim to identify the precise quantity of flooded houses [...] The situation is under control. The emergency group has been formed both from the committee of emergency situations, national guard, local authorities...

This press statement provides answers to many of my informants' questions—answers they lacked during the night of the *sel* and the following morning. However, the statement is scientific, technocratic, and does not address the major issue raised by my informants: the failure of the state apparatus to inform and support the population.

A month after the *sel*, I was able to arrange an interview with Nurlan Madyrov, the deputy head of emergency situations for the city of Almaty, and his head of public relations. The interview was conducted in Russian, and we met in the MoES headquarters in Almaty at Baizakov 300 (the address has become a colloquial nickname for the emergency responders themselves in reference to the Spartan 300 of Greek mythology). To begin with, Mr Madyrov chose to emphasise the support volunteered by the urban community.

*Mr Madyrov:* Officially there were over 2,000 volunteers that came to help. Also some organisations [which] believe there were many more people. Private restaurants and shops brought hot food. Basically, they brought two hot meals a day for two weeks. Building merchants were also helping with that. We also help other countries when something happens somewhere else. It is not a surprise for us that there were 2,000 volunteers. It is just a normal reaction.

Madyrov's example praises the local population, with an emphasis on volunteer help. However, it is difficult to know if his comments that there were over 2,000 volunteers are true. In the context of speaking to me, an international researcher, it would have been important to present things in a positive light. I only heard one comment from the public about volunteers: a group organised by a Russian Orthodox Christian group went with shovels to clear debris from people's houses.

There is a particular post-Soviet aspect to Madyrov's response. In a shift of responsibility, emphasis is placed on private organisations and individuals fulfilling some of the roles which would previously have been the responsibility of the state. Madyrov is keen to show that with this setup, the population still gains the assistance they need, suggesting that Kazakhstan is also in a position to show support to other countries in need. In contrast, my informants' comments suggest that they consider the state responsible for providing them with information, assisting them in situations such as a *sel*, or assisting them in recovery stages in the aftermath of major hazards. The government official's comments suggest that from the state's perspective, there is a subtle but important shift of responsibility from the public to the private domain.

I followed up with questions about the failure of the MoES's public communication channels. Madyrov was candid in his responses, highlighting what he saw as the difficulties that they faced and admitting that 'social networks are being more effective than official methods. Facebook and VKontakt (Russian version of Facebook) have all the information: for example, what, where, and when.' Especially for my young urban middle-class informants, digital communications and social media are an integral part of everyday life and relied upon for communication. These platforms include WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, VKontakt, Instagram, and Snapchat. There are serious consequences when official government information is presented on a level playing field within these apps alongside personal opinions, rumours, and hearsay. In the case of the failure of communication on the night of the *sel*, the MoES blamed the mobile phone operators for not sending their alert messages, while mobile phone companies blamed the MoES for not providing messages in standard format, which meant that they couldn't be sent. This left official versions of events as just one of many competing voices on social media. As this thesis continues, with its focus on the young urban middle class, I will show how a high level of distrust in public media suggests that rumour, gossip, and hearsay may actually be taken as more trusted sources of

information than official channels—especially when they are repeated by family members or close friends.

### *Chapter Conclusion: The Articulation of Transects*

Although an influential government official spoke to me about the characteristic behaviour of the Kazakh population, his comments contrast sharply with what I have documented in the aftermath of the *sel*. However, in combination with the generational differences seen in the narratives of the transect in Chapter 3, I am able to comment on the coexistence and intersection of these dual narratives as expressions of different ways of dealing with uncertainty. The key to this argument is that the *sel* can be seen as an ethnographic moment that brings background concerns and anxieties to the fore.

This government official, the national head of the Directorate of Deterrence and Prevention of Emergency Situations, has been working with the MoES for 23 years. We spoke at a conference held by the UNISDR (now UNDRR, United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction) in Georgia, where I was assisting the UNISDR team as part of their resilient cities programme. He told me that the Kazakhstani population are ‘psychologically very solid. They are not prone to panic. When disaster happens, they understand that it is nobody’s fault; it is natural disaster. And they realise, they know that help will come and if something is not coming yet, it will come’. How can this opinion about the population’s behaviour be reconciled with the widespread panic seen in the aftermath of the *sel*? The answer is that each of these accounts is a different type of narrative. The official’s account is an idealised public notion of Kazakh identity, a people exhibiting strength in the face of adversity. Drawing upon stereotypes supported within the context of government nation-building initiatives, it is a public story which the government tells in order to promote national unity; in this case, it was regurgitated by the government official. The coexistence of apparently mutually exclusive versions of events can be explained by comparing the accounts shared in the previous chapter with those included here.

The two different transects presented in this chapter and the previous chapter overlap and build upon each other. However, there are some key differences. In the first transect from west to east, the older generation who grew up in the Soviet era use narratives to

introduce stability and coherence when talking about people's life experiences, structuring events to make sense of change. My young urban middle-class informants face greater difficulties in narrating the changes that they face, such changes are equally part of their future and their past. Instead, this younger generation seek to tell new and exciting narratives of prosperous growth, opportunity, and positivity, despite their apparent uncertainty and worry about the threats they face. Therefore, the first transect builds a sense of place for both me as a researcher, making sense of the urban environment, and for my informants, whose narratives tie their life stories to the places, people, and connections of the city.

These long-term narratives are overturned in the second transect, which follows the river from south to north. Here, for informants of all ages, backgrounds, and ethnicities, the dramatic and disruptive events of the *sel* bring to the surface concerns, worries, and awareness of risk faced on an everyday basis. The transect begins at the edge of the city, where people have firsthand knowledge of hazards; rely on smaller, trusted communities; and receive information and support through their kinship and community networks. Moving down the hill into the more densely populated areas of the city, the communities in this transect become more separated geographically, but are more densely connected through digital communications. In this context, rumour is presented with equal weight alongside official information due to the state's inability to keep up with rapid technological change and, furthermore, due to the damaging effects of government censorship of my informants' trust in public media. Often these different narratives counteract, contradict, and undermine each other, leading to further uncertainty. The gap between public and private narratives strikes at the heart of the articulation between the two transects: long-term stories are key to everyday stability, while short-term stories of events such as the *sel* are everyday ruptures that shatter these narratives, revealing the hidden worries and concerns simmering below the surface. In the next chapter, I focus in on the narratives of my young urban middle-class informants to understand the everyday difficulties they face in narrating their lives.

## Chapter 5

### **The Young Urban Middle Class:**

#### Difference, community, and risk

##### *Part 1*

##### ***Who are the young urban middle class?***

##### *Differentiation and the vision of success*

In this chapter, I go into greater detail about the distinct societal group that is central to this thesis: the young urban middle class. I investigate how they characterise themselves in everyday conversation and their social relations, as well as how they make sense of their place in society. Developing upon Patico's (2008) argument that the post-Soviet middle class are bound by a shared narrative, I argue that members of the young urban middle class in Almaty share a distinct, public, onstage narrative which binds together a heterogeneous group from different places and family backgrounds, comprised of different ethnicities and genders.

Because universities are a central aspect of life for the young urban middle class in Almaty, the majority of my interactions with my middle-class informants took place in my second transect location, downtown, where there is a cluster of higher education institutions. This includes state-funded universities, technical universities focused on areas of study such as agriculture, and privately funded universities specialising in business and finance. Within walking distance of the university campuses, there are a number of small businesses fulfilling the needs of students, many of whom live in dormitories on campus. Abay—one of the oldest streets in the planned section of the city, built after the fort of Verny was extended in 1867—is a main area of social life for young Almatineans. On one side of the street are two universities, including the private university I attended, and a public university that was state-funded and specialised in agricultural technologies. Abay is a busy street, and the only way to cross is through underpasses with small kiosks and shops tucked into the tunnels. These shops include bookbinders, printers, locksmiths, phone kiosks, fast-food steamed-corn vendors, *samsa* (triangular pastries filled with minced meat and onion) bakers, and toy shops; there are also public toilets in the tunnels. These underpasses are always a busy hive of activity.



Emerging from the underpass on the opposite side of the street, there are kebab shops, an upmarket steak restaurant, an American-diner-themed restaurant, and Café Nadelka.

Café Nadelka is a very popular cafe and an institution for the young urban middle class. Always packed, the modestly priced coffee shop was a hub of social relations. It was a place to be seen and hang out for many of my young research informants, including those who had recently graduated and worked in the downtown area. I mention this cafe for two reasons. First, I would often meet my research assistants there to debrief after longer interviews. Second, its popularity can tell us a lot about the fashions and trends which the young urban middle class value, in this case an Americanised and ‘modern’ coffeehouse. As this coffee house was always busy, it was not always possible to carry out interviews here; I would often go to quieter cafés and restaurants outside of peak times, as it afforded my informants a little more privacy.

### *Methodological approach to studying the young urban middle class*

I tailored my methodological approach to research so that I could speak to informants from different backgrounds, including members of the young urban middle class. I interviewed many individuals—scientists, architects, and local state officials—because of their occupation, role, or expertise. However, understanding how something is spoken about in an everyday social context, such as middle-class tastes, fashions, and perceptions, is best done through both participant observation and group discussion. Focus groups were a key tool in understanding the lives of my young urban middle-class informants. As I found on a number of occasions, they work well because multiple voices can lead discussions in unexpected directions. I was interested in topics including the apparent division between public and private universities, which communities these informants belonged to, and how their lifestyle affected the way they dealt with risk.

In the first part of this chapter, we hear from four informants: two men and two women, all in their early to mid-20s and of Uighur, Russian, Korean, and Kazakh ethnicity. The second part of this chapter is based on discussions from two focus groups. All of the focus-group informants—five men and six women, including my research assistants—are in their early 20s. They were from a range of ethnic backgrounds, including Kazakh, Russian, Korean, Uighur, and Tatar. The difference between the groups is that the first

focus group was made up of students who attended a private university and the second group of students came from three different publicly funded universities. These groups included topic-focused discussions and drawing activities, including the production of diagrams of trust and community relations, and lasted just over two hours each. Further detail on the methodological approach of using focus groups for this research is detailed earlier in the thesis beginning on p. 35.

In the third part of the chapter, we hear from a Kazakh man, a Kazakh woman, and a Russian woman, all in their early 20s; a Kazakh woman in her mid-50s; and a Russian man in his mid-40s. Other data used in this chapter came from participant observation in everyday interactions with the young urban middle class. I attended birthday parties in local restaurants, visited art galleries with a local artist, and participated in social events, such as meals arranged by various student groups. Other interactions I draw upon here include those with my language teachers, friends, and hosts. There is also a vibrant live music, party, and entertainment scene, which included Russian billiards halls and karaoke venues.

Another important place for the young urban middle class are the large shopping malls, frequently visited in the cold of midwinter and the searing heat of high summer. In a study of the MEGA shopping mall in Aktobe, Kazakhstan, Jäger (2016) argues that the shopping centre became a focus for social life, particularly for the younger generation. He also draws upon the analogy of performance, describing the shopping centre as a stage where the young generation go both to see the latest international trademarks and fashions, and also to be seen. Jäger argues that the centre consequently offers young women a new social space where they have greater freedoms away from the codified behaviours of other public places in the city. In Almaty, the food court on the upper floor of Dostyk Plaza, a large downtown shopping centre that is a 10-minute walk from the universities, would be packed throughout the day. An area of seating in the food court is surrounded by more than 20 different food stalls serving a range of food, including traditional Kazakh *bash-bar-mak* (the literal translation is ‘five-fingered’, as it is traditionally eaten by hand), Uzbek *plov* (a slow-cooked rice dish which in Kazakhstan is often prepared with carrots, onions, raisins, and mutton), Burger King, and Korean bubble teas. It was a place to meet, get lunch during work breaks, or hang out and socialise in the evening, particularly for those who did not drink alcohol. These

different social contexts and my observations and interactions in these places all feed into this chapter's discussion and analysis.

### *Differentiating the young urban middle class*

The bustling spaces downtown are shared by a diverse range of people, and the young urban middle class are a heterogeneous group. In a series of discussions at Café Nadelka, my research assistants explained what they saw as important social distinctions that were relevant for one's identity. They based these distinctions on which university a young person currently or previously attended, where somebody came from, and the language they spoke. I documented distinctions that were made between rural and urban; Kazakh-speaking and Russophone; and the past and the future, as well as associations with private versus state-funded universities. My research assistant Alma told me, 'People from the city are known as *gorodskii* [literal translation 'being of the city'], and [the private university] is full of these'. The *gorodskii* are stereotyped as Russophone, future-oriented, and likely to be studying finance, business, or economics at a private university. As these stereotypes were reported by my research assistants, who themselves fulfil many aspects of the stereotype, this suggests that many of these traits are not viewed in a negative light.

Nevertheless, there are some negative stereotypes associated with the *gorodskii*. Anna said, 'There are specific things [about those who go to the private university]; they say they are spoilt children or they pay for it with money from corruption, which is why they are rich'. As Anna was attending a private university at this time, she offered a rebuttal to this stereotype: 'Maybe they say this because there is jealousy from students and other institutions. Without reason they don't like [private university] students. It is partially true about the money, but you don't know if it's from corruption. Many parents work abroad, so maybe it isn't from corruption'. Anna's comments suggest that a perceived hierarchy between institutions underlies in-group distinctions that are made between young urban middle-class Almatineans. She also indicated that when a student's parents work abroad, they are wealthier. Implicit in her statement is the fact that if you are rich in Kazakhstan, it is likely that your money has come from corrupt sources.

Discussing how corruption is talked about in Almaty, Alma highlighted the term *agashka*: ‘This is a name given to an uncle who is rich and has a good network. The term is often used anecdotally as a way to discuss networks and contacts. Sometimes it is used to say that’s why someone is in a position [of influence]’. In Ledeneva’s encyclopaedia of informality, Oka has written an entry for *agashka* which supports Alma’s definition, adding that ‘[a]*gashka* is in wide currency mostly among Russian-speaking Kazakhs in contemporary Kazakhstan, but not generally used in the Kazakh language’ (Oka in Ledeneva, 2018, p. 86). This term is intersectional: it emerges from ethnic Kazakh practices, but has gained wider currency for my Russian-speaking informants, no matter what their own ethnicity may be. Age is also an important aspect of this term, as it suggests that an older person is responsible for the success of a young person—yet this in itself counteracts a public narrative of individual self-sufficiency and success through personal means, a neoliberal ethos that has become embedded in young, urban, middle-class public narratives for young Almatineans. A more colloquial form of *agashka* for a young Almatinean is the term *baki shaki*, which Alma said can be used to talk about anybody who is thought to have a good network or for whom corruption is perceived to be the key to their success.

From these discussions with my research assistants, I found that my young urban middle-class informants were publicly rejecting the support of these family and kinship connections, as they are reframed within their public onstage narratives as being examples of corruption. This perception is influenced by the value regimes of neoliberalism—what Yurchak refers to as ‘entrepreneurial ethic’ imported from Europe and the United States by experts from the IMF and World Bank during the ’90s—which reframed informal exchange practices as immoral, instead emphasising transparency, hard work, and self-sufficiency (Yurchak, 2003, p.72). While this may be influential to my informants’ onstage presentation of self, they are nevertheless aware that many parts of society are plagued by corruption and nepotism, as I will discuss in the following section. As a result, there is widespread offstage uncertainty that a public presentation of self may only be a mask or façade and therefore cannot be trusted. Yet paradoxically, in this climate of uncertainty and mistrust, it is these close social relations whom the young urban middle class turn to for information.

The literature offers an explanation for the unique role informal social networks play in post-Soviet contexts because of their importance during the Soviet era as a way of

redistributing scarce goods in an economy of shortage (Schatz, 2004; Kornai, 1980). Verdery draws our attention to a 'repertoire of strategies for obtaining consumer goods and services' that was important during the Soviet period and found new utility after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Verdery, 1996b, p. 27). One such informal practice is *blat*, a Russian word which refers to the practice of obtaining goods or services through an informal 'economy of favours'; the practice became influential during the Soviet era and is still used today (Ledeneva, 2018, p.41). Ledeneva's commentary is based on research in a Russian context but is relevant across the former Soviet Union, including Kazakhstan (Ledeneva, 1998).

Before proceeding with a discussion of *blat*, it is important to define the wider concept of corruption and how the particular forms in which corruption has been discussed in relation to Kazakhstan have been a problematic area for definition. Werner (2000) discusses how, in Kazakhstan, 'the boundaries between "corrupt" behaviour and "cultural" behaviour are not always clear, especially when it comes to the distinction between "bribes" and "gifts"' (p. 12). Werner suggests that a definition of corruption could include 'bribery, fraud, embezzlement, nepotism and patronage', which would implicate the support of *agashka* as an example of corruption (ibid., p. 16). She also argues that the accepted scholarly definition of corruption as the 'abuse of public power for private gain' is problematic when applied to Kazakhstan, where corruption is 'not limited to the public sector': 'corrupt acts sometimes benefit somebody or something other than the public official who commits an illegal act', and 'what constitutes abuse will vary depending on legal or cultural standards' (ibid., p. 16). She settles on a more subjective assessment of corruption which 'takes local perceptions of morality into account' (ibid., p. 20). This definition provides a basis for the ongoing discussion of informal exchange practices and their impact on negotiating uncertainty in Almaty.

*Blat* 'referred to routine, mostly non-monetary, give-and-take practices, often associated with mutual help, mutual understanding or cooperation of "us" versus "them"' (Ledeneva, 2018, p.40). As resources were publicly owned, the boundary between public and private domains was blurred. *Blat* was influential because it allowed for both vertical and horizontal exchanges. Vertical exchanges included the transfer of goods from state enterprises down to those who worked there; horizontally, goods and services were transferred among social or kinship networks. Since independence, *blat* has taken on new significance as different forms of capital enter into everyday exchanges. For

example, *blat* played an influential role in the privatisation of state assets, which led to the elite capture of resources as those with influence leveraged their position for preferential treatment and/or access to resources (Ledeneva, 1998).

The concept of elite capture is summarised succinctly by Dutta as ‘a phenomenon where resources transferred for the benefit of the masses are usurped by a few, usually politically and/or economically powerful groups, at the expense of the less economically and/or politically influential groups’ (Dutta, 2009, p. 3). This ties back to Alma’s discussion of *agashka*, the manifestation of these trends in everyday social relations. While my young urban middle-class informants see practices such as *blat* as synonymous with corruption, Ledeneva argues that *blat* is distinguished from corruption or bribery by the indirectness of the transaction, which relies on mutual indebtedness and notions of reciprocity for it to function (Ledeneva, 1998). According to Werner’s suggestion, this would suggest that the indirectness of the transaction contributes to a perception of the morality of *blat* as differentiated from corruption (Werner, 2000). The distinction has become increasingly blurred since independence. Oka argues that money has begun replacing mutual indebtedness in these exchange networks, in which case my middle-class informants would be right to perceive instances of *blat* as being possible evidence of corruption (Oka, 2015). A real-world example of this was my informants’ perceived uncertainty of the integrity, trustworthiness, and reliability of qualifications when these important markers of cultural capital<sup>1</sup> can be bought rather than earned.

The recent economic situation for many young people in Kazakhstan has been one of great inequality. In 2010, just five years before my fieldwork, sociologist Ken Roberts writes that ‘exceptionally high rates of youth unemployment and under-employment in many regions’ are distinctive features of life for youth in Kazakhstan and that this appears alongside an ‘intense spread of poverty’ (Roberts, 2010, p. 537). Roberts, whose research was carried out in Almaty, says that this occurs despite a high proportion of young people going through university (ibid.). Young people in Almaty have benefitted

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<sup>1</sup> As Bourdieu (1986) argues, cultural capital is the attribution of value in society through recognised forms of status (such as university degrees) or markers of artistic achievements (such as prizes) which indicate a certain level of knowledge or ability recognised within a social group or a society.

from Kazakhstan's economic growth, and other young people have travelled from across the region to study in Almaty and take advantage of available opportunities. Although the situation had somewhat improved five years after Roberts was writing, aspirations to a middle-class life are the manifestation of young people's drive to escape this economic uncertainty, unemployment, and poverty.

I found that international links, such as those gained through working or travelling abroad, are highly valued by my young urban middle-class informants and aligned with their public narrative of success. For example, a highly coveted government scholarship named *Bolashak* (literal translation 'Of the Future' in Kazakh) supports students from Kazakhstan to study abroad on a full scholarship on the condition that they then work in Kazakhstan for five years after graduating. Zhansaya, a friend and informant that I met early on in my fieldwork, received a *Bolashak* scholarship and studied engineering in Manchester University and Exeter University in England. She now works for Tengri-Chevron, a branch of a large multinational oil and gas corporation in joint enterprise with the Kazakh government. As a consequence of the scholarship, many members of the young urban middle class who have studied abroad now hold influential positions and highly skilled jobs in Kazakhstan with strong international connections. As these international links were viewed as a sign of success—both by the government who sponsors the scholarships and by the young adult informants that I met—this also has methodological implications for me as an international fieldworker; those who assisted me in my research went on to use me as a reference so that they could secure full-time jobs after graduation.

In contrast to the private university *gorodskii*, students at state-funded universities are subject to different associations and stereotypes. State-funded universities, such as Al-Farabi State University, have a much higher proportion of ethnic Kazakh students in comparison to those that are privately funded. This is due to the scholarships offered to ethnic Kazakhs to come from across the country to study in Almaty. Alma told me that these students were often ridiculed. *Mambet* was the most offensive term used to refer to these students (and indeed others in society) who had come from rural areas and could be recognised in an urban context by being out of place, wearing unfashionable clothes, or behaving in an uncouth way. Catherine Alexander also cites an example of her middle-class informants using this term as an insult in a 'jocular exchange over dinner' to indicate a rural origin or backwardness (Alexander, 2018b, p. 7). Laszckowski

emphasises the way that the term *mambet* provoked different reactions, comparing an offstage discussion with informants at a party, when it was used in a humorous and playful manner, and a time when he used the term in a meeting with staff at a university. In the latter instance, the term was seen by an elderly Kazakh lady as an offensive term used by Russians and Russified Kazakhs to belittle Kazakh culture and language (Laszczkowski, 2016, pp. 58–59). Alma said that a less offensive version of this word would be *aulskii*, which translates as ‘being from a village’.

There are a host of other slang terms used locally that all have slightly different connotations, and I asked Anna whether there was a term used locally that described the group that I am calling the ‘young urban middle class’. Anna said that there was a term that approximated this for ethnic Kazakhs: they are called *iigil* (eagle), a reference to the national symbol of the eagle which spreads its wings across the national flag, *assfalt qazaq* (asphalt Kazakh), or simply *assfalt*, which Anna said referred to ‘Kazakhs who have grown up all their lives in a city as opposed to those who grew up in a village where there is no asphalt’. Anna added that there are other terms which loosely fit: familiar to a Western readership, these terms have travelled internationally as concepts and become Russified in their everyday use as *miileniial* (millennial) and *hiipster* (hipster), the latter denoting a certain fashion subculture that emerged from New York and East London fashion in the late 2000s and is now an established part of international popular culture as shared through social media apps such as Instagram.

During my fieldwork discussions, private university students made a distinction between private and state-funded universities, suggesting that this was an important distinguishing social marker for them. Laszczkowski has also identified this distinction in Astana: his informant Ainura expresses a preference for the Eurasian ‘elite’ university when she remarks, ‘Anyone can go to the agrarian’ (state-funded university) (Laszczkowski, 2016, p. 76). Serik, a Kazakh student in his early 20s who was studying at a private university, referred to state-funded universities’ academic approach and style of teaching, differentiating his own university by saying, ‘In other universities it is still some Soviet Union stuff’. Anna, who attended the same private university, commented, “‘Soviet’ is a synonym for ‘Old World’ and everything that is antiquated. You use it if you want to say that something is old-fashioned’. Both Serik and Anna demonstrate a young urban middle-class perspective which differentiates their way of life in opposition to a Soviet past. I found there to be some truth to Serik’s statement. When I visited a state-funded



university and interviewed lecturers in ‘life security’, I asked them about their approach to teaching the compulsory course designed to prepare people for a range of natural and man-made hazards. They told me that their curriculum had changed little since the 1980s and supported a civil defence approach to dealing with natural hazards, using course materials which had not been updated. They also said that they had no access to Western journals. When I explained what I was doing, they asked me why I was speaking to different groups, commenting, ‘Different groups are not interesting—all people act the same’. This uniformity in dealing with a population could perhaps be the legacy of a Soviet approach to equality. However, my research has shown me that the young urban middle class are a unique group, holding certain values which influence the way they act on an everyday basis.

The young urban middle class place a high value on appearances, in particular looking wealthy or outwardly displaying signs of success in business and work. Ventsel (2006) has documented a similar example in post-Soviet Siberia, where even famous local musicians—who may wear expensive designer clothes and outwardly display signs of wealth—live in small two-room apartments. There is an added dimension to this public display of wealth: one’s onstage presentation doesn’t always reflect actual wealth and may instead be a marker of social aspirations. Alma explained what she understood to be at the root of these displays in Almaty, linking it to a Kazakh tradition of demonstrating bridal wealth: ‘People will take a 20-year loan to have a good wedding. This comes from the past when the number of animals you had [in your herd] was a display of wealth. It was much easier back then to show this; now it is much harder to look rich. If you had a bad wedding, then people here would mock it, so it is important to make sure that is good and displays wealth’. The conspicuous display of wealth is an everyday concern for my young urban middle-class informants, who have to think creatively about how to present themselves in public.

Anatoli is 25 years old and an ethnic Russian who has lived in both Moscow and Almaty. He works as a freelance ‘lifestyle photographer’, a job which entails visiting bars and clubs across Almaty to photograph the rich, famous, and attractive clientele. My interview with him gives further insight into my middle-class informants’ strategies for displaying wealth in Almaty. Patico argues that such insights help a researcher understand what she describes as ‘logics of value: the manner in which people in a particular historical context routinely consider measures of material wealth [...] and other

kinds of value' (Patino 2008, p. 7). In Almaty, the photographs Anatoli shoots are posted online to promote the venues. They are then shared by the individuals featured in them as a public display of association with particular places and people as an example of the conspicuous consumption they can afford. Anatoli told me more about the people he photographed:

*Anatoli:* My generation and the younger generation of people, they don't want to be something—they want to appear to be, they pretend. They have dreams and desires, but they don't really try to achieve them. And they are happy with that façade they let others see. So if this person comes to the club, they probably have some money, they are successful. But they leave the club and wake up in the morning and they won't really have anything. I mean that moment when somebody looked at them in the club is gone.

Anatoli's comments suggest that the middle-class narrative may only be a 'façade'. This fits with Goffman's (1959) argument that everyone is 'playing' their role in society in an onstage context. The form of this façade is a neoliberal notion of material and financial success. The young urban middle class in Almaty have adopted a distinct cultural style: it is fashionable to ostentatiously display wealth. This is most visible at night: the streets are filled with expensive black Mercedes G-Class SUVs, and the most expensive bars, with \$250 table tabs (charged in USD), are packed with smart young men and women, clothed in designer labels and sipping expensive cocktails. Alexei Yurchak discusses the 'performative acts' that created 'the true careerist', a new societal role that emerged in Russia in the 1990s which relied on certain aspects of performance, including the bodily acts of 'appearance, clothes, gestures, movements, way of walking, manners, voice, style of drinking', to fulfil the 'new norms of the neoliberal model' (Yurchak, 2003, p. 80). Anatoli was describing a local, Almatinean identity that has hereditary links to the New Russians of the 1990s, but which is unique in its expression among a new generation.

Anatoli suggested that these façades are limited to certain situations; when in the privacy of one's own home—a perfect example of an offstage and private context—such a façade is no more. I asked why he thought his younger generation played this superficial role.

*Anatoli:* Because people who lived in the '80s and '90s and even 2000s were a bit more closed. They were very cautious about what they said because of the high crime rates in the '90s. And people were cautious in the Soviet time, too. The

Soviet power were like inquisitors. You had to watch your tongue; somebody could easily misunderstand you and you could be accused of something, even if you may have meant something else.

Anatoli differentiates the young urban middle class from the previous generation because of the societal uncertainty that held the previous generation back from truly expressing themselves in public. I argue that much of this uncertainty has not simply vanished, but has been pushed in offstage contexts away from a public façade of success, stability, and security. To challenge the public façade would be to break the shared societal performance. This, Goffman argues, is what keeps society moving; as each and every person contributes to keeping the performance going, it is in their interest not to undermine the shared narrative. As a consequence of this, there is a shared understanding that what is said in public is often fake and cannot be trusted.

*A vision of middle-class success: Onstage, performative, and public image*

As Anatoli suggests, outward appearances are important for the young urban middle class in Almaty. I observed other examples that were not often discussed by my informants. In the foyer of the private university, there were life-size cutouts of students and posters signifying students' nomination or candidacy for different student competitions or committees. Accompanying captions ('Finance student of the year') gave examples of these public status roles, and large banners advertised the transformation from being a student to having a 'dream job' in 'financial accounting' (Image 5.1). In the photographs, students are dressed in suits or smart blouses with ties and shiny shoes, fulfilling an image of success—examples of the country's future leaders in finance and business. There is a model for this image: the New Russians of the 1990s, successful businessmen and entrepreneurs. Yurchak describes how the business magazines of the late '90s had 'endless lists of "best bankers" and "best managers"'—much like the student cutouts and banners, these are a public declaration of success. There is a question as to why these models of a 'neoliberal "homo-economicus"' (Yurchak 2003, p. 73) are still echoed today, up to 20 years later, in the behaviour of Almaty's young urban middle class.



Image 5.1: A promotional banner at a private university in Almaty advertising their Financial Accounting degree programme. University branding has been removed.  
Taken by author 3 September 2015.

For the answer, we have to look to wider societal efforts to re-image the present. I argue that the post-Soviet ‘homo-economicus’ is an enduring type that renews and refreshes itself with each generation as long as the public goals of society, framed in the government’s nation-building narratives, remain focused on economic growth and prosperity. We can see a Kazakh example of this in how the government has undertaken the rebuilding of Astana (renamed Nur-Sultan in 2019) to be, at least in appearances, a skyline comparable to other international capital cities (Bissenova, 2013; Laszczkowski, 2016). In Yurchak’s description of Russia’s new rich, he encapsulates the post-socialist situation I describe: ‘Indeed, while you are forging, molding a career for yourself, you are also forging, or counterfeiting, a neoliberal model of meaningful life that looks almost like “the real thing,” only without the “trivialities” of human ethical dilemmas’ (Yurchak, 2003, p. 90).

## Part 2

### ***How the Young Urban Middle Class Live:***

#### *The everyday creation of middle-class identity*

I begin with the introductions two young women gave in the first focus group, which consisted of private-university students. Gulnara—whom we heard from in the previous chapter’s discussion of the *sel*—and Katya were both in their early 20s at the time. Gulnara spoke in English, while Katya spoke in Russian.

*Gulnara:* My name is Gulnara—we don’t need last names, right? I don’t think you’ll spell it the right way. I was born and raised in Almaty. My family comes from Almaty as well. I have been studying at [a private university] for two years and one semester I’ve spent abroad in Norway. I am looking at having one more experience abroad. I’m majoring in finance and my specialisation will be financial management, but right now I’m trying to figure out if it’s the sort of thing I want to do! That’s it.

Gulnara’s comments fulfil many stereotypes associated with private university students. She is from the city, has studied abroad, and is specialising in finance. One parent is ethnic Tatar and the other Kazakh; they speak Russian together at home. Gulnara, born and raised in Almaty, is therefore *gorodskii*, from the city. Although not all participants in the focus group were from the city, they were all considered *gorodskii*. Adilet told me that he is ‘from Kyrgyzstan. I entered [the private university] and then moved to Kazakhstan’. Another student, Nurislam, said, ‘Actually, I live in Atyrau but came here to study [...] Atyrau is a city in the western part of Kazakhstan’. Rather than being from the city, what these students have in common is their attendance at the university in the city. This is one of the primary ways in which these cultural attributes are acquired; it is not necessary to be from the city to be labelled as *gorodskii*. On one occasion at a local cafe, I was speaking to friends who introduced me to some other students who were part of their group. They told me that ‘these students are like students from a private university, and you wouldn’t know that they went to a state-funded university because they are so similar to us’. Being *gorodskii* is not about where you are from, but the role that you play in public. In this example, the outward, onstage performance is similar, while the offstage background is different. Each of these students is playing a similar public role.

The term *gorodskii* is used in other former post-Soviet places in subtly different ways, and the definition I outlined above is specific to the context of my fieldwork in Almaty. For example, Schröder (2017) encountered the term *gorodskii* in his research into youth and urban change in a neighbourhood of Bishkek, the capital of neighbouring Kyrgyzstan. He found that the term *gorodskii* was used interchangeably with ‘urbans’, which in the context of his fieldwork he found to be an ‘identity boundary separating those Kyrgyz who were long-time inhabitants of Bishkek... and those Kyrgyz who had not been born in the capital, but relocated there at a later point in their lives from a peripheral area’ (ibid., p. 9). This subtle difference in the local meaning of *gorodskii* suggests that in Almaty, the ability for my informants to ‘play’ different roles in public allows them to become *gorodskii* by going to a private university and presenting a certain outward presentation of self, whereas in Bishkek the term is used as a marker of where one is from.

In fact, my young urban middle-class informants can come from many different backgrounds. Another student told me, ‘My name is Katya. I’m Korean, actually. My family came from Uzbekistan because of the historical situation in 1937. I was born here in Almaty’. In Katya’s comments, which came from her introduction to the focus group, she asserted both her ethnicity and alluded to the events that led to her family coming to Almaty. In 1937, ethnic Koreans were deported from the Russian Far East to Central Asia, a subject I will discuss in detail in part three of Chapter 6. While they share the same type of performance, other factors, such as ethnicity, influence my informants’ offstage lives outside of their everyday onstage performances. Even in these few examples, we can begin to see different influences come together in making up a heterogeneous middle-class population.

My informants’ introductions in this focus group show that members of the young urban middle class situate themselves according to the subjects they study, their ethnic background, and the places they are from. In the next section I explore the role these narrative performances play in forming, supporting, and spreading connections between people. What does community mean to the young urban middle class?

Through an analysis of my informants' discussion of community, we can begin to understand and tease out a young urban middle-class approach to everyday life—specifically, how they relate to the wider flows of people, goods, and ideas in an urban environment. This discussion helps us to understand the extent to which the young urban middle class are either a coherent community in their own right or embedded in other distinct communities.

*Gulnara:* The first community I belong to is my family, because my family is quite large. This is a part of Kazakh tradition; we have a lot of relatives all around Kazakhstan. I guess the next community will be my university community, and the last one will be my exchange-group community, because I still keep in touch with them though we are not in the same place. We are all spread over the world.

Gulnara's strong social links are to her family, her university community, and her exchange-group community. She attributes her large number of family relations to Kazakh tradition, demonstrating a link for her between ethnicity and community. Katya also ranked family, followed by university, as the most important communities for her. Katya's ethnicity is the distinguishing factor of a third group: 'The third community, I guess, is the [ethnic] Korean community, because we have the same mentality—we have a common mindset which is different from other nationalities'. While it appears in different forms in my informants' accounts, ethnicity is an important aspect of community for my young urban middle-class informants. In the following chapter, I will analyse the impact of this and what it means to be both middle-class and Kazakh, Uighur, or Korean.

Social relations, in a variety of configurations, have been shown to be a way that young people have responded to the uncertainties that have come with change in post-Soviet spaces. For example, Frederiksen (2013) researched the lives of young men in the city of Batumi, Georgia. Frederiksen found that young men from diverse backgrounds experienced a much wider sense of social isolation than what I believe my informants in Almaty experienced. These men, Frederiksen argues, became victims of what he terms 'temporal marginality', finding themselves with no role in the present and fraught with uncertainty as both the trauma of the 1990s and the uncertainty of different potential

futures haunted them in the present. Frederiksen found that in response to this uncertainty, ‘brotherhoods’ formed as stable groups bound together by common experiences of the past and feelings about the future. In this instance, shared experiences—particularly the problems they found as men trying to identify a new societal role for themselves—is what brought them together. Likewise, my informants in Almaty are bound by their common societal role, yet the prospects that this role offers, such as the promise of upward social mobility accessed through education, come with their own uncertainties.

The shared university experience is one thing my middle-class informants in Almaty have in common; it is a part of their middle-class identities, forming an important time when they are enculturated into a particular way of life and take part in a shared performance. However, university communities are just one of many other communities that my informants are part of. Both family and ethnic communities remain significant to their social lives, even though these communities hold no clear role in the onstage performance of middle-class life. What other social connections do my informants have? Are they all treated the same?

Anthropologists have used mapping techniques as a qualitative method for data collection and an exploratory tool for data analysis and synthesis (Genz & Lucas-Drogan, 2019; Turnbull, 2007). Although they have most often been used to explore spatial relationships, I employed them as a way to map social relationships, asking my informants to draw diagrams of their social lives to visualise their social connections. I also asked them to think about how they received information from these connections and the level of trust they had in them. I did this in order to visualise the relations between my informants and different groups, people, and sources of information. Not all social relations are created equal, and this affects how the young urban middle class gain knowledge about the world: differences in relations’ form, content, and trust affect the giving and receiving of information, the verification of its credibility, and how it informs life choices. I have shown multiple examples of how offstage uncertainty worries my informants—for example, in Nuriya’s account in the prologue and Aizhan’s account in the first transect location in Chapter 3. I have also highlighted how this uncertainty, coupled with a lack of information about a hazard, manifested itself as panic after the *sel* in Chapter 4. Through diagrams of their social lives, I explored the



theme of trust with my focus-group participants in order to better understand the role of their social connections in managing uncertainty.

In response to my request, my informants produced a range of visualisations, including concentric ring diagrams and spider diagrams. One informant drew a Soviet-era apartment block, putting different groups in different apartments. I discuss a few examples below, starting with that of Aslan, a young Kazakh student.

*Aslan:* Can I start? First of all, I drew myself in the centre, then my connections with the world. The first [circle] is my life experience; then the second is my family, then to my close friends. I can find my place in the world through the examples of others and by history.

Aslan's diagram placed the highest level of trust in his own experience, followed by his family and then his friends. He made no mention of other groups or communities in society that he trusted.

Darya, who chose to draw a multi-storey apartment block to illustrate her social relations, explained:

*Darya:* Each flat belongs to that building and it means there is already one community [...] these people from different flats in the same multi-storey house don't communicate as much as they used to before in different times [...] Each member of the community [in a block] might switch communities and transfer information between them. This is the city. Inside the city there is a phenomenon called *sarafannyy mefeon* [word of mouth], and we sometimes receive information because someone told us, and in turn someone has told this to the previous person, too. It may go further and further; it is not clear where the information has originated from. This is the city.

Darya highlighted the links between different social communities by using the metaphor of the *Khrushchevka* housing block to describe how they are related. Darya said that the individual apartments communicated less than they used to, suggesting that she thinks that individuals within the city have become more isolated over time. She described receiving information through *sarafannyy mefeon* as a particularly urban phenomenon. As Gluckman argues, the passing of information by word of mouth, for example in the

form of gossip, is often used to distinguish group identity and to both explore and delineate the boundaries of a community (Gluckman, 1963). However, in this example, Darya is suggesting that rather than serving as the insular bounding of gossip within a community, *sarafanny meleton* is a way that information anonymously travels between individuals across society. This begs the question: Why is private and offstage communication so prevalent, and what does it offer over more public forms of communication such as newspapers or TV?

Islam's diagram helps us to explain the prominent role of offstage communication over more public channels. His diagram is a good example because it has many similarities to those drawn by the other students in the focus group. Islam explained that his family are his most trusted social relations: 'I am sure that they tell me what they really think is the truth. I fully trust their words'. Working outwards through the consecutive concentric rings of Islam's diagram, each circle marks a progressively diminishing level of trust. Islam said, 'The last circle is the whole society in general—including mass media, radio, TV, and internet. All of these are the last circle because it is important to understand that everything that is being communicated through these channels is always being communicated with a particular purpose'.

Islam's diagram signals the existence of a wider distrust of the media, which was corroborated by my other informants. Ulyana commented on the trustworthiness of mass media, saying, 'As a journalism student, I can say that some of them are corrupted and held by the strong hands of the authorities. Especially TV'. My informants also commented on the state's control and censorship of media sources that do not toe the government line. Darya remarked, 'Recently they've closed one [newspaper], *Adam Bol*. It was such a stupid reason they've used to close them'. By shutting down news outlets through strategies such as filing criminal charges of financial mismanagement, the government's repression of dissenting voices has reduced the trust that members of the young urban middle class place in the media. However, Darya told me that she thinks that this lack of trust is not the same for everyone in society and it is greater for the younger generation: 'Everything depends on the target group. If we will, for example, observe older people, they are reading newspapers. They watch Russian and Kazakh television. They are told something there and they believe it. There are some people who don't go for news at all. They don't think they need it'.



Image 5.2: Graffiti text reads, 'The walls have ears'.  
Image taken by author in downtown Almaty, 2015.

There is a precedent for this present-day uncertainty and distrust in hegemonic state information channels in society, which was also mentioned by Anatoli earlier in this chapter. Image 5.2 shows graffiti in downtown Almaty which reads, 'The walls have ears'. This graffiti references an evolving trope in Soviet—and now Kazakh—society. First appearing in a WWII poster discouraging gossip (Image 5.3), the phrase came to indicate the uncertainty prevalent during the Soviet era, with people fearing that the secret police were bugging apartments or their neighbours were overhearing and

reporting on unpatriotic activities. This graffiti is a tongue-in-cheek dig at the authorities in present-day Almaty. Yurchak (2003) commented on the emergence in the literature of a theoretical binary in which the Soviet state is framed in opposition to the people. As an example, Yurchak cites John Young's argument that 'Soviet citizens are "non-conforming" dissidents, who "counter the deceptions of government by setting forth 'the facts' in contrast to official falsehood"' (Yurchak, 2003, p. 482; Young, 1991, p. 226). Such a binary is evoked in this graffiti. The graffiti's creator clearly sees relevance in bringing back an old trope to reflect upon society today, and the artwork could be seen as posing a question to those who see it: Who can be trusted? In so doing, it demonstrates the existence of a public offstage debate, outside of official channels and in resistance to state hegemony over public information.



Image 5.3: WWII Soviet propaganda poster.  
Text reads, 'Don't gossip! Be aware, these days, walls can overhear you, treason is not far from empty chatter and gossip'.

By combining Islam's point—there is always a purpose to what is said—with the observation that the young urban middle class have little trust in the media, we can understand more clearly why they perceive that the state is not acting in their interests. If they did trust the state, then they would also place greater trust in the media—as they do with close family, who are trusted precisely because they are perceived to have their kin's interests at heart. 'Public transcripts', where 'social action takes place in the open', are difficult to produce in Almaty due to the state's censorship of the media (Besnier, 2009, p. 8). This discussion, along with wider debate of these topics in cafes, restaurants, and the universities, is a prime example of the 'hidden transcripts' which Scott discusses as a form of resistance, placing the young urban middle class at odds with the present-day Kazakh state (Scott, 1985). The young urban middle class, thanks in part to strong international links and study abroad, are critical citizens, not only aware of the censorship and bias in society, but also speaking against it in offstage contexts in a way that older generations may not be. As a result, the government sometimes perceives the young middle class in Almaty as a potential threat.

My young urban middle-class informants find themselves in a difficult situation. In an urban context, the majority of people one meets on a daily basis are not known (Foster & Kemper, 2002 [1979], p. 139). As a result—and in the context of their increasing social isolation from wider societal groups—my informants' everyday lives are fraught with uncertainty. Does this mean that the young urban middle class live cautiously? Far from it. Everyday life for the young urban middle class in Almaty is characterised by a unique approach to risk-taking. This is tightly bound to fulfilling the hopes and aspirations integral to their onstage performance, but also has important ramifications for the uncertainty plaguing their offstage lives. This topic receives further attention in the third section of this chapter.

### *Part 3*

#### ***Living with Risk:***

##### *Aspiration, opportunity, and threat*

##### *A hybrid approach to risk*

Mary Douglas emphasises how the configurations of everyday life influence the prioritisation of risk (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982, p. 8). Almaty has experienced two distinct periods of influence: a history of Soviet state paternalism and the introduction of neoliberal policies in the 1990s following independence. In Kazakhstan, a unique post-Soviet approach to risk has emerged. For my young urban middle-class informants, their parents have direct experience of Soviet state paternalism, but as they were born after 1991 themselves, they only have direct experience of a post-Soviet combination of the two different influences. What we see today is a combination of these influences—just one aspect of what Burawoy and Verdery describe as the ‘hybrid societies’ that have emerged following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Burawoy & Verdery, 1999, pp. 1, 33). Here, I focus on the resultant ‘hybrid’ approach to risk.

Neoliberal policies, introduced by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the 1990s, encouraged a more positive attitude to risk-taking, framed within the context of opportunity and emphasising potential gains. In a speech to students at Nazarbayev University in Astana in 2016, Christine Lagarde, the head of the IMF, said, ‘Your country, and the region as a whole, have made great strides since independence. Growth has averaged more than 7 per cent per year over the past two decades. In a single generation, living standards—in terms of per capita GDP—more than tripled, and many countries, including Kazakhstan, achieved middle-income status’ (Lagarde, 2016). Lagarde’s statement signals economic growth in GDP as a sign of success. Her use of the term ‘middle-income status’, an economic marker of wealth on a comparative global scale, is further evidence. She directly addressed the young urban middle-class students who were present, saying, ‘You—the young people in this audience—are enjoying the fruits of discipline and hard work by the previous generation. You must now lead by example and carry the baton, securing prosperity for the next generation’. Her remarks place the responsibility for future prosperity upon the young urban middle class, suggesting that this is dependent on furthering neoliberal goals. However,

Lagarde's speech also included a warning: 'Greater openness, of course, means greater sensitivity to external shock'. The increased vulnerability of a society following neoliberal economic policies is an additional burden shouldered by the middle class in urban contexts. In Central Asia, the vulnerability of the middle class is particularly acute: Reeves (2014b) has commented on an example of this vulnerability in Kyrgyzstan, where the 2008 global financial crisis, in combination with the doubling of electricity rates in the run-up to a planned privatisation of state assets, 'sent Bishkek's emergent middle-class back below the poverty line' (Reeves, 2014b, p. 68). As I show through their discussions of risk, members of the young urban middle class in Almaty balance a public onstage façade of success, stability, and prosperity against an offstage uncertainty experienced in daily life.

#### *Devaluation of the Kazakh national currency*

The young urban middle class live an outwardly consumerist lifestyle. Wealth, in particular the outward appearance of wealth, is an intrinsic part of my informants' public performance of their image of middle-class success and prosperity. During my fieldwork, there were two successive waves of currency devaluation, which challenged the dominant public societal narratives of stability, security, and success that originate in the Kazakh government's nation-building rhetoric (The Strategy for Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan until the Year 2030; Kazakhstan, 1997). For the young urban middle class, their aspirational and future-oriented public performance was undermined. The way in which my informants discuss this threat, and the way in which they responded to devaluation, reveal their feelings of uncertainty; as with the *sel*, it exposed their own vulnerability.

The Kazakh national currency, *tenge*, received significant government support until 2014. Government monetary investment in the currency had increased following the 2008 global financial crisis. The government bought gold reserves to prop up the currency in the face of rapid inflation. Their actions made the *tenge* uncompetitive against a similarly depreciating Russian *ruble*, making exports too expensive and depressing trade with Russia, one of Kazakhstan's biggest trade partners. In August 2015 the currency was floated on the stock market and appeared to go into free fall. Chingis, a Kazakh man in his early 20s and a good friend of my research assistant Anna,

commented on what was happening, as we were together on the day when the currency started to plummet:

*Chingis:* I knew it would happen. I thought it would happen at the beginning of the year. Damn, it is getting tougher to be Kazakh. I don't think the public will protest, but they're certainly not going to like it when the price of imported goods increases.

Commenting on how devaluation had been a background worry, Chingis said he had expected the devaluation to happen six months earlier and had been living in anticipation of significant change since then. While he acknowledged that devaluation makes everyday life more difficult, he did not know how the public will respond, but believed they will not protest. Other informants reacted differently, adopting a range of strategies for dealing with devaluation. Nuriya, whom we heard from in the preface, discussed the devaluation with two of her close friends and me. This conversation took place in the period between the first and second waves of devaluation.

*Nuriya:* Current discussion topics [with friends] include devaluation, and current predictions are for 10 February. People are really afraid because all the prices are going up and salaries are not changing. It is getting difficult to live, actually; everything is getting really expensive. A high dollar is responsible for these changes.

Saltanat, Nuriya's friend, had taken practical steps to reduce the effect of devaluation on her life: 'Since the last devaluation, I have had my savings in a U.S. dollar account'. Her comments reinforce Chingis's suggestion that devaluation is making some of my informants' everyday lives more difficult. The ongoing squeeze of wages, in combination with rising everyday costs, challenge the young urban middle class's aspirational way of life, which is based on ongoing financial prosperity and conspicuous consumption. The economic vulnerability exposed by devaluation is a result of the Kazakh economy's reliance on the U.S. dollar. This in turn is a consequence of the economy's reliance on fossil fuels and mining—for example, the oil industry accounted for an estimated 21.1 per cent of Kazakhstan's GDP in 2017—which have been affected by declines in global markets (World Bank Group, 2017, p. 9). Saltanat's comments on the 'high dollar' are an example of the problem being framed as external to Kazakhstan, a narrative which originates in the Kazakh government's public discussion of the issue.



While practical steps, such as Saltanat's savings account in U.S. dollars, went some way to protect the interests of the young urban middle class, protecting the credibility of the narrative itself—continuing the *appearance* of prosperity—was perceived to be just as important, if not more so. As mentioned by the photographer Anatoli, the outward presentation of wealth in a club doesn't necessarily equate to having money in an offstage context, when one wakes up in the morning with an empty wallet.

We can see movement to keep up appearances most clearly in the way that the government has sought to shift blame, reframe uncertainty, and deflect criticism. In the first wave of devaluation in February 2014, shortly before I started my extended fieldwork stay, the Kazakh government blamed the 'crisis of the world economy' and 'the "bad" dollar' (Atabaev, 2014). Government promises were broken and Aidar Alibayev, the chairman of the Association of Pension Funds, warned that 'as a result there will be mistrust of people towards the government, the increase of social tension, rise in the costs for living, usually followed by a decrease in quality of life' (ibid.). To avert disaster, Nazarbayev, the president at the time, dismissed the head of the national bank, scapegoating the problem in an effort to restore trust in the government. Nazarbayev's actions worked to some extent, although standards of living fell for many as prices of imported goods rose dramatically.

By August 2015, there was a change in the government's approach to the financial management of the national currency. Significant state intervention in the economy, which had mitigated the risk of currency fluctuations through purchasing further gold reserves, ceased. On 30 August 2015, the government made the decision to float the *tenge* on the open market. The *tenge* immediately fell by more than 30 per cent and continued to fall by almost the same amount again over the next five months (Azatik, 2015). The online news site nur.kz reported that the 'devaluation of tenge in Kazakhstan was unavoidable', citing the devaluation of many regional currencies (nur.kz, 2015). The economy of Kazakhstan is closely linked with its neighbours through trade and remittances, and it was impossible for the government to shield the population from all external risks (Alexander, 2018b, p. 10). As with devaluation in 2014, the government reframed the situation, promoting confidence in its actions and absolving itself of responsibility. In an article from TengriNews, the prime minister, Masimov, explained 'why they couldn't keep the promise of the head of National Bank Kairat Kelimbetov':

The situation of the global economy is continuously worsening, the prices for the main exporting goods of our country, oil and metals, keep falling, which negatively affects the growth rate of GDP and increases the economy's vulnerability to the external shocks. (TengriNews, 2015)

Devaluation in 2014 and 2015 demonstrated to the public in Almaty that current prosperity was vulnerable. Devaluation challenged the foundations of economic stability and security, which the public narratives of both young urban middle-class identity and government power, influence, and authority relied upon. This set public onstage and private offstage narratives on an increasingly divergent trajectory—what something appeared to be was no guarantee of its credibility. Indeed, the economy has not been the only place where this phenomenon can be seen.

#### *Corruption in academic establishments in Almaty*

Practices including gift giving, bribes, and patronage are widespread in universities in Almaty and affect the integrity of locally awarded qualifications that are ostensibly social markers of merit-based achievements. As my informants discussed, these can be considered corrupt practices because they go against socially accepted moral codes. As a result of these widespread practices, a degree is no guarantee that one's university work has been completed. This is one of many examples of a broader issue of similar corrupt practices in Kazakhstani society: for instance, a driving licence gives no indication of a competent driver, and perhaps worst of all, a doctor may not have completed all of their training and could have bought their certificate. As with devaluation, a public façade is no guarantee of veracity.

The proliferation of corrupt practices in Almaty has established money as a way for people to overcome uncertainty, simultaneously creating greater uncertainty for those who do not have access to money. At the start of this chapter, I discussed how nepotism and the influence of *agashka* was seen as a common practice in Almaty. At universities in Kazakhstan, it was common for money to be used to secure success in exams and coursework, a practice documented in other post-socialist places as well. Denisova-Schmidt argues that in Russia, these practices were indicative of a 'longstanding tradition of corruption in almost every area of society' (Denisova-Schmidt, 2015, p. 20).

*Krysha* ('roof' in Russian) is a practice of providing protection: in Humphrey's (2012) example from Russia and Mongolia, *krysha* involved academic guardianship for students through payments to teachers and lecturers. Humphrey describes various monetised strategies, from the top-down influence of a dean to direct payments for success in exams. The examples Humphrey cites, including the work of Denisova-Schmidt, Huber, and Leontyeva (2016), are evidence that the practices I recorded are not unique to the young urban middle-class in Almaty and are widespread in post-socialist contexts.

During my fieldwork, I observed many references to universities tackling corrupt practices. A key aspect of the private university's mission statement was a 'commitment to quality and intolerance of nepotism, corruption, and discrimination'. While this may be a value supported by many universities, there was a particular emphasis placed on it in Almaty. The use of money to secure an advantage was openly discussed, with one lecturer announcing an exam to the class with the comment, 'You cannot buy a pass in my class'. The University prided itself on its American marking and exam system and sold itself as an international institution, teaching classes in both English and Russian while lecturers often spoke Kazakh informally in class. A Western approach to higher education was perceived to indicate a fair and less corrupt system. As a result, it was a coveted place to study for the young urban middle class because there was a higher perceived degree of integrity to their qualifications. Making these types of choices was one way that the young urban middle class reduced their exposure to uncertainty; the other is their use of informal networks to secure access to services, goods, or information that could be trusted.

### *A middle-class approach to seismic risk*

As I have explained in the introduction to this thesis, my route into researching risk and uncertainty was through the study of seismic risk in Almaty. This city's risk profile, of exposure to a major but infrequent hazard, has similarities with other risks my informants cited as background concerns or worries in everyday life. The discussion of seismic risk—an example of how the young urban middle class live with risk and uncertainty—presents a microcosm of my research thesis.

Earthquake risk is normalised in everyday discussion. Despite a fair amount of knowledge of the potential risks faced, my informants take few practical steps to lower their vulnerability. Instead, narrative techniques, such as telling jokes, help to alleviate concerns and a feeling of helplessness by making light of the situation. Svetlana, a young ethnic Russian woman in her mid-20s who lived downtown and worked in IT, helped me with language practice classes on a weekly basis. During one of these classes, we discussed seismic risk and everyday responses to it. Describing an office she used to work in, she said, ‘There are jokes about this. Our office had an evacuation plan hanging on the wall. There were arrows all formed into a circle and the diagram showed everyone running around in a circle. It comes from the national mentality—I think it is a post-Soviet Union thing. In the past, the government was always saying that they were under constant threat’. Svetlana referenced a particular post-Soviet approach to risk, making light of what had been a serious concern in the past. The other side to this particular post-Soviet approach to risk is that when there are inevitable or seemingly unavoidable risks, the feeling of uncertainty can be crippling. Svetlana’s story is reminiscent of Ibañez-Tirado’s findings that joking is used ‘as [a] means to endure and circumnavigate disastrous events towards everydayness’ (Ibañez-Tirado, 2015, p. 13).

When I engaged in serious discussions with my informants about the potential effects of a major earthquake, it revealed a potential rupture in everyday life. This was an uncomfortable reality for Svetlana, who said, ‘People are not used to a feeling of constant danger—I can’t bring myself to... I prefer not to think about it’. Methodologically, discussing these topics with informants had the potential to trigger feelings of uncertainty and panic; often my discussions were a form of intervention in themselves, which led to these topics being spoken about in a way that they may not have been otherwise. A level of trust had to be established between my informants and me so that their discussions with me as a researcher could be considered private communications.

Other triggers can also bring these uncertainties to the surface. Bruckermann (2018) observes how an earthquake rumour led to her informants confronting the potential consequences of an earthquake. This resulted in a rupture of the division between public and private domains as personal concerns crossed over into public discussions. Bruckermann’s example suggests that risks, including seismic risk, have the potential to

lead to ruptures in the division between onstage and offstage narratives that are navigated in everyday life.

My informants perceive that responsibility for dealing with seismic risk in Kazakhstan lies with the government. In combination with a relaxation of strict Soviet-era building standards and an increase in corruption in building projects, there has been significant diversification in the hazards to which people are exposed. For example, those who live in much taller apartment blocks face new threats, since the nine-storey height limit for constructing new buildings was lifted in the early 1990s. In recent years, new buildings have been constructed up to 38 storeys high. Chingis told me that in the event of a magnitude 8 or 9 earthquake, ‘all new buildings will be in ruins and it is more likely that Soviet buildings will be standing’. My informants have greater confidence in the Soviet buildings, partly due to their distrust in the newer buildings—a result of the damaging influence of endemic corruption that is assumed to have influenced their construction. Government strategies for mitigating earthquake risk have changed little over the last 30 years; they remain grounded in Soviet-era methodologies which are no longer adequate for the diversity of risks now faced in the city.

The population of Almaty has taken steps to mitigate a range of hazards, although steps taken for short-term gain can expose populations to longer-term risks. The majority of the urban middle class live downtown or in Soviet-era *mikro-raion* housing districts—transect locations 2 and 1, respectively, discussed in Chapter 3. Downtown Almaty, especially in the hot days of summer or the temperature inversions of cold winters, is drowned in a soupy smog due to heavy traffic and coal-fired heating power stations, which provide communal heating to *mikro-raion* around the city. The entire city is on a hill, with the southern areas of the city climbing into the foothills of the mountains; consequently, the air becomes cleaner the higher you go. The more temperate climate in the foothills means that *dacha* (weekend homes and gardens) and sanatoria such as Arasan are situated there. For those who can afford to, moving to the foothills—to cleaner air and lower summer temperatures—is seen as a way to mitigate these hazards.

As a result, the area in the foothills is known for exclusivity, which is increasing with the building of extravagant homes and apartments. These homes are a distinguishing factor of the urban elite, who, unlike many among the urban middle class, have sufficient wealth to live in these more expensive areas. To distance themselves from the

Soviet past, the ostentatious and ill-proportioned buildings are a deliberate affront to the simple and functional designs of Soviet minimalism; they are constructed in a style which Holleran (2014) has labelled as ‘Mafia Baroque’ in his study of Albanian post-Soviet architecture. Measurable risk from natural hazards is high in this area due to its proximity to the mountains. With a greater proportion of moneyed elite living and working in the south of the city, there is an inversion of the common observation that ‘marginalised people live in the riskiest environments’ (Mutter, 2015, p. 1). In Almaty, the richest are more likely to be exposed to significant, measurable hazard risk, but they are also more likely to have money to build again. This is the result of a trade-off between the short-term benefits of moving to a ‘healthy’ environment with cleaner air and the long-term risks of natural hazards such as *sel* or earthquakes.

Earthquakes are indiscriminate hazards. As Kanatbek Abdrakhmatov, director of the Institute of Seismology in Bishkek, is quoted as saying, ‘Earthquakes don’t care whether you’re Kyrgyzstani or Kazak, man or woman’ (Overseas Development Institute, 2016). There is still a significant risk faced from seismic hazards across Almaty, whether one is a member of the elite or the urban middle class. There is still a society-wide reliance on the government to deal with large-scale hazards. However, this is impacted by a lack of trust in the government, which is linked to how it has been perceived to deal with major threats; as Svetlana said, ‘The higher up in government you go, the less I trust them. The president said that devaluation wouldn’t happen!’ She shrugged her shoulders, holding her hands out to emphasise her point.

When the authorities are not trusted, my informants turn to those they do trust, including family and close friends. However, there is little personal experience of earthquakes, as the last major earthquake in Almaty was in 1911. Often this means that there is no experiential framework for interpreting seismic hazards. Therefore, in search of information, the young urban middle class turn to rumours—such as a rumour of mass graves outside the city—to understand the true potential of the hazard, which the government avoids discussing in order to minimise panic.

I first heard about a rumour of mass graves from Zhuldyz, an official who worked at a state archive. This was towards the beginning of my fieldwork, and it would crop up again in numerous interviews over the next 18 months. I was introduced to Zhuldyz, a Kazakh woman in her mid-50s, by a mutual contact, and we met in her apartment

downtown. Zhuldyz and I chatted while drinking tea on her balcony. I asked her a range of questions, as I was still scoping out my research at the time and I hoped the archive would help me contextualise and understand the history of my research topics. We were discussing earthquakes, and she said, ‘I have heard that the authorities have built a large mass grave in the city which is able to take thousands of bodies for when there is an earthquake’. If we break down this comment about a mass grave, we see that the information contained in the statement is plausible. However, the source of the information is not cited, and this makes it a rumour. It is simply ‘heard’.

Informants often looked to me to verify what they had heard elsewhere. As a researcher who was talking about earthquakes with different people across the city, including government officials, my informants saw me as a potential source of information. My exchange with Zhuldyz fulfils the defining features which Paz cites as particular to gossip and rumour, in particular that ‘there is a sense of telling news which does not appear across authoritative news channels’ and that this exchange happens in a ‘face-to-face interaction’ (Paz, 2009, p. 118). I mention this particular rumour of a mass grave here because it appeared in different forms in interviews with a range of research participants—including my young urban middle-class informants—but also in a wider context, which suggests it was circulating across the city. For example, another time I heard the rumour was from Stanislav, an ethnic Russian inventor in his mid-40s. Stanislav had made a steel caged bed, designed to protect the occupant from falling rubble in the event of an earthquake. In his account, the rumour was fleshed out with more detail: ‘A mass grave has been built outside the city. Two years ago one was built for 300,000 people, and now there are graves for 500,000’. Almaty’s population was 1,877,000 on 1 July 2019. It is easy to see how a mass grave of this size would be a shocking and scary revelation if it were official information. However, as a rumour, it was a point from which to discuss the potential impact of a major earthquake, a way to quantify the human impact of an unknowable hazard causing widespread uncertainty in society.

The government appears to be aware of the potential for panic that could be caused by revealing information about preparations such as a mass grave. This issue was discussed at a UNISDR conference in Tbilisi, Georgia, previously mentioned in Chapter 4, which I attended as an assistant to the Central Asia office. When delegates from local municipalities across Central Asia discussed making a public database of hazard risk,

local Kazakh government officials and members of the national Kazakh committee argued that agreeing to such a register was likely to *cause* panic rather than alleviate it—the suggested outcome the conference was aiming for. According to their argument, knowing the risk to which you are exposed, without the ability to do anything to reduce the potential effect, would lead to widespread panic—perhaps this is an insight into what happened with the *sel*. This example shows that the Kazakh government’s priority is to uphold a public narrative of stability and security, despite the potential measurable risks to which the population might be exposed. My young urban middle-class informants therefore live in a context where public information is a government tool to support a particular narrative, rather than a resource from which offstage uncertainty can be prepared for and mitigated.

### *Chapter Conclusion: Difference, community, and risk*

In this chapter, I have shown that the young urban middle class are a heterogeneous group with intersectional identities which crosscut categories of gender, ethnicity, language, place of birth, family background, and university education. As Patino (2008) found with ‘a middle-class’ in St. Petersburg in the 1990s, what binds members of this group together, differentiating them from the previous generation, is a common onstage narrative: internationally oriented, individualised, ambitious, and critical, it is a hybrid post-Soviet approach to risk-taking which combines the ‘entrepreneurial ethic’ of the New Russians of the 1990s, a Soviet notion of state responsibility and support, and a Western notion of transparency and democratic values. Supported by government scholarships, the generation that has grown up since the collapse of the Soviet Union has a distinct identity. Through a public onstage narration of their lives, placing an emphasis on opportunity and the potential benefits of risk-taking, members of this generation downplay the potential negative consequences which come to form background offstage uncertainties.

Offstage, the negative consequences of risk-taking manifest themselves as a society-wide uncertainty, experienced as a distrust of those outside of kinship and close friend networks. Official channels of information are viewed as heavily censored; state-controlled online news sites, newspapers, radio stations, and television channels are therefore treated with suspicion and are not trusted. When there is no experience of risk,



either personally or within trusted social networks, the young urban middle class look for answers in unofficial offstage face-to-face forms of communication such as rumours. These rumours circulate across the city and provide new sources of information, speculation, and discussion, but the anonymity that allows them to exist is also a further source of uncertainty.

When ruptures in everyday life take place and risks are realised in hazardous events, members of the young urban middle class turn to those they trust. In the next chapter, I look in more detail at how informants from different ethnic groups not only face different threats, but also have unique ways of responding to them through their resources and social networks. In examining these differences, I explore how a young urban middle-class way of living can play out in myriad ways.

## Chapter 6

### **Being Middle Class**

#### and Kazakh, Uighur, or Korean

This chapter explores the differences in everyday life for my middle-class informants, asking what it means to be both a middle-class citizen of Kazakhstan and ethnically Kazakh, Uighur, or Korean. I provide examples of how being a particular ethnicity impacts upon the everyday lives of my informants, as well as how this affects the challenges and risks that they face and the support that their kinship networks are able to provide.

I begin this chapter with a brief explanation of the historical events that have influenced the current ethnic diversity of Almaty. This discussion covers the different ethnic populations in the wider region before the Soviet period, the impact of the 1924 Soviet nationalities project, and the demographic changes that came with independence. This overview provides the context for the three main parts of the chapter, which consider Kazakh, Uighur, and Korean ethnicities, respectively.

First, I consider what it means for my informants to be both Kazakh and middle class, focusing on the accounts of three of my Kazakh informants: Nuriya, Zarina, and Saltanat. Through their accounts, I explore their perception of important aspects of Kazakh identity: the role of Islam, the importance of tribal affiliation and clan identity, and distinctions between rural and urban Kazakh identity. Ethnic Kazakh identity is shown to have distinct gender roles, and I discuss the particular challenges this presented for the women I talked to. I argue that my informants' accounts show a rupture, disjunction, or incompatibility between being a modern Kazakhstan middle-class citizen and upholding traditional expectations of Kazakh identity.

Second, I investigate what it means to be both Uighur and middle class. In comparison to ethnic Kazakhs, Uighurs are a much smaller minority population. Here, I focus on a particular neighbourhood, located adjacent to my first transect location. My discussion and analysis is structured using the example and account of my research assistant Alma, with additional material from interviews with her close family and neighbours. Topics covered include a description of the neighbourhood, 'ghettoisation', the perception of

risks faced by the Uighur community, and the state's response to the persecution of Uighurs in China's Xinjiang Province. In this section, I argue that the Uighur community confront a unique set of challenges, exposing them to both risks and uncertainties that other middle-class informants living in Almaty do not experience.

Third, I discuss what it means to be both Korean and middle class. My research assistant Boris explains the history of the Korean population in Almaty. Building upon this background information, I discuss how the ethnic Korean identity of one family I lived with impacted their son Sasha's life. When Sasha chose to marry a Tatar woman, it caused a rupture in his close family relations. My analysis illustrates how ruptures in kin relations on a family scale can have a massive impact—especially when kinship is the most trusted source of support and information in society, as my young urban middle-class informants have suggested.

This chapter argues that the challenges my young, urban, middle-class informants face in dealing with uncertainty—in particular the different experiences they have and how they come to narrate them—are influenced by their different social positioning, explored in this chapter in relation to their ethnicity. These examples are not given as representative of the communities, but offer examples of how being differently positioned within society can impact everyday experiences of uncertainty. Upholding a middle-class public identity often clashes with 'traditional' ethnic practices which have seen a resurgence in the post-independence period. This conclusion supports Roberts' (2010, p. 537) assertion that '[y]oung people in Central Asia also face distinctive difficulties in anchoring their personal biographies, assessments of their current situations, and future hopes in historical narratives about their people'. Each example illustrates generational differences in how ethnic identities are enacted, showing the difficulty faced by the younger generation as they attempt to reconcile their social positioning as part of a particular ethnic community, on the one hand, with leading a middle-class lifestyle, on the other.

### *A History of Nationality and Ethnicity in Kazakhstan*

Kazakhs trace their heredity to Temüjin, better known as Chingis Khan—a name which translates as the equivalent of 'universal emperor' and was given to him in recognition

of his role in establishing the Mongol Empire. He lived between the mid-1160s and 1227 (Golden, 2011; Olcott, 1987). Historically, Kazakhs were a nomadic pastoralist group who lived across the Eurasian Steppe, which includes the present-day territory of Kazakhstan. By the mid-19th century, Russian imperial influence was strong in the region and a number of military forts were established (Becker, 2004, p. 6) to protect the frontiers of the Russian Empire. The fort of Verny, established to protect the Zhetysu (Seven Rivers) region, was renamed Alma-Ata during the Soviet period; after independence, it was changed to the more Kazakh-sounding Almaty.

There were significant changes to how different ethnicities were recognised following the Communist Party conference of 1924, when, as Esenova explains, ‘Moscow launched an ambitious project focusing on reorganization of the Soviet Union along national lines, and by 1938 the old-style Central Asian cultural and political systems were replaced with that of Soviet nationalities’ (Esenova, 2002, p. 11). The concept of nationality ‘referred to a religious and cultural community which had no territory and no state of its own’ (Roy, 2000, p. ix). This constituted the foundation of both a ‘multi-ethnic empire’ and a ‘system of governance’ that was deemed ‘inter-nationalism’ (ibid.). The Soviet Nationalities plan was formative in the creation of different ethnic delineations that my informants identify with today. These categories are described locally as ‘nationalities’, following the Russian term used by the Soviet state. According to Roy, the continuance of these categories post-independence is a consequence of the re-appropriation of the Soviet model as a foundation of the new Central Asian nations (ibid.).

Theoretically, there was equality between the different nationalities under the Soviet state, but this may not have always played out in practice; as Roy explains, ‘The disappearance of the USSR [in 1991] exploded the notion of the supra ethnic state and left a collection of nationalities in search of a state of their own’ (Roy, 2000, p. 174). After 1991, Kazakhs became the titular nationality, despite constituting only 39.7 per cent of the population in the 1989 Soviet census. The difficulties Kazakhs encountered as a minority group were compounded by the ethnic and linguistic Russian dominance of main urban centres, including Almaty. The table in Image 6.1 (Davé, 2004) lists the largest ethnic populations in Kazakhstan and shows how their numbers have fluctuated over time. Most notably, by 2009 Kazakhs are recorded as making up 63.1 per cent of

the population, while the percentage of ethnic Russians has fallen from 37.8 per cent, as measured in 1989, to 23.7 per cent in 2009 (Image 6.1).

Nationality	1959	1970	1979	1989	1999	2009
Kazakh	30.0	32.6	36.0	40.1*	53.4	63.1
Russian	42.7	42.4	40.8	37.4*	29.9	23.7
Ukrainian	8.2	7.2	6.1	5.4	3.7	2.1
Belorussian	1.2	1.5	1.2	1.1	0.8	-
German	7.1	6.6	6.1	5.8	2.4	1.1
Tatar	2.1	2.2	2.1	2.0	1.7	1.3
Uzbek	1.5	1.7	1.8	2.0	2.5	2.9
Uighur	0.6	0.9	1.0	1.1	1.4	1.4
Korean	0.8	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.7	-
Other	-	-	-	-	-	4.5

\*The original 1989 census data showed the Kazakh share to be 39.7 per cent and the Russian share to be 37.8. The 1999 census amended the shares of Kazakhs and Slavs represented in the 1989 census.

Source: 1959 and 1970 data are from Table 2, *Itogi vsesoiuznoi perepisi naseleniia 1970 goda*. Vol. IV. *Natsional'nyi sostav naseleniia SSSR*. Moscow: Statistika, 1973, 13; 1979 data are from Table 10, *Itogi vsesoiuznoi perepisi naseleniia 1970 goda*. Vol. IV, Part 1, Book 2, Moscow: Goskomstat, 1989, 179; 1989 and 1999 data are from *Itogi perepisi naseleniia 1999 goda v Respublike Kazakhstan*. Vol. I. *Natsional'nyi sostav naseleniia RK*. 2000, Almaty: Agentstvo RK po statistike, 21–2.

Image 6.1: A table showing the percentages of different ethnicities that make up the population of Kazakhstan. This table is an updated version of Davé (2004) which now includes the 2009 census data taken from the government of Kazakhstan's statistics agency website (stat.gov.kz, accessed 10 October 2019; Davé, 2004, p. 442).

Following independence, Kazakhs were a minority population. The state therefore had to make a concerted effort to reinforce the position of ethnic Kazakhs and legitimise the government's authority over non-titular minorities. There are two important aspects of this effort: first, how it was carried out, and second, the continuing consequences of the government's actions.

One of the government's tactics was an ongoing public campaign to promote Kazakh interests. Davenel argues that the 'promotion of Kazakh heritage has been used to assert the titular nationality's legitimacy (that is, Kazakh nationality) and hegemony over the territory of the Republic of Kazakhstan' (Davenel, 2012, p. 17). In this campaign, the

promotion of Kazakh heritage included various elements. The Kazakh language has played an increasing role, for example in state bureaucracy: administrative documents, such as those used for the registration of visas, are now only available in Kazakh. Kazakh celebrations were also incorporated into the national calendar; the Kazakh spring festival of Nauryz is now included alongside holidays that were implemented during the Soviet period. The campaign also featured government acceptance of Islamic practice under the auspices of a secular state.

Kazakh government policies since independence have had far-reaching consequences. Following independence, there was significant demographic change due to the migration of some non-titular minorities. Oka describes how government policies led to different levels of international migration within different ethnic communities: '[I]n contrast to the Russians, whose number decreased by a quarter in the ten years after the last Soviet census in 1989, there has been no large-scale out-migration among the Uighurs and Koreans' (Oka, 2006, p. 361). Many ethnic Russians living in Kazakhstan were able to move to Russia, but emigration was not as simple for Uighurs, as they faced potential persecution in China. Many among the Korean population did not speak Korean; their ancestors having moved two generations before, they no longer had places with established connections where they could return. An exception to this language issue was the now Russophone Volga-German population living in Kazakhstan: many took the opportunity to move to Germany, where a greater degree of financial certainty outweighed the challenges of not speaking German. These out-migrations are important because they changed the demographic makeup of urban Almaty.

Almaty's demographic makeup was also significantly impacted by a second type of migration: rural to urban movement within Kazakhstan. As Catherine Alexander discusses, Almaty's *akim* (mayor) 'Zamanbek Nurkadilov [...] called for young Kazakhs to come and make a home in their homeland's capital' (Alexander, 2018a, p. 8). This request was intended to boost Kazakh representation in the mainly Russophone urban capital, shifting the balance in the favour of ethnic Kazakhs, which Alexander argues was the basis of a new, independence-era social contract (ibid.). A third type of migration has also changed the urban population. The national government issued a call to *oralmen*, ethnic Kazakhs living abroad, to return to the 'homeland' (Alexander, 2018b). Returning *oralmen* often over-fulfilled the state's markers of Kazakh identity, speaking fluent Kazakh and still practising traditions which had been suppressed in

Soviet Kazakhstan. This led to the curious situation of returning Kazakhs often being ‘more Kazakh’ than their counterparts who had not left Kazakhstan (ibid.).

The state sought a careful balance, seeking to promote Kazakh interests without alienating non-titular minorities and leading to ethnic conflict. As Davenel argues, ‘[I]n official texts, the Republic of Kazakhstan is defined as a multinational state, and has made inter-ethnic and inter-confessional tolerance an important part of its image presented to the international community’ (Davenel, 2012, p. 18). Therefore, this ‘double process’ involves both ‘nationalization in favour of the members of the titular nation [...] and the promotion of a civic Kazakhstani identity’ (ibid., p. 19). One important consequence of this double process is that it has led to Kazakh, Korean, and Uighur nationalities adopting different strategies, as each has a unique history and situation which impact their role in modern Kazakhstan. Throughout the rest of the chapter, I will consider the impact of these recent historical policies on the lives of my young urban middle-class informants.

### *Being Kazakh*

Here, I focus on three young urban middle-class informants who are also Kazakh. These three informants were all in their early 20s during my fieldwork. They did not know each other, although two of them studied at the same university. Their separate accounts provide subtly different angles on the same issues, and I bring these together in discussion with existing literature to argue that over the last 10 years an incompatibility has emerged between a reimagined ‘traditional’ Kazakh identity and the values and way of life of the young urban middle class.

Saltanat considered being Kazakh an important part of her identity. Her family story locates Kazakh traditions and identity in the context of the societal transformations and challenges of living in Almaty over the last 25 years. Saltanat was a 22-year-old student studying marketing at the private university when we met; she now works for Air Astana, the Kazakh national airline, in a marketing role. I was introduced to her by my research assistant Anna. Saltanat spoke excellent Kazakh and agreed to teach me in private language lessons. During these lessons, I studied the Kazakh language and we discussed Kazakh poetry traditions and Kazakh culture in general. Saltanat was happy

for me to include these communications and discussions as part of my research. I also worked with her to produce a detailed kinship diagram. This process prompted her to recount many details of her family story, and it was during this discussion that she made many of the comments included here.

Saltanat's family members come from different cities across Kazakhstan. 'My mother is from Kyzylorda and my father is from Aktobe', she told me. 'My parents met studying at KazGU [a state university]. My father is a lawyer now'. I mention these details because this is another account of a young middle-class informant's family who came to Almaty to study. In this instance, Saltanat's whole family came to Almaty—not just those studying, but her grandparents, too. Saltanat commented on the difficulties her family faced in the 1990s.

*Saltanat:* My parents said that the '90s were [a] hard time. When my dad's brother moved to Almaty, he had only been here a few days when he was stabbed in the street and died. At this time they had money but couldn't spend it. Mum's dad was a policeman and was well respected in the *raion* [city district]. When my grandmother went to the shop, she would get things because they would hide produce and sell it to those who were more influential. Even then, it was difficult to get everything, and my father says that they used to hunt pigeons and then eat them.

Although Saltanat's family faced clear hardships in the 1990s and kin were an important source of support, there are no aspects of this account which are specific to ethnic Kazakhs; similar hardships were faced by most of society during this period. However, there are specific distinctions in how Kazakhs record and recognise kin and organise social relations, networks which were drawn upon for support in these difficult times<sup>2</sup>. The traditional Kazakh practice of *shezire*—knowing seven generations of one's family—is not always practised by the younger generation. Saltanat explained to me her understanding of how Kazakhs recognise kinship relations and how these impact everyday life.

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<sup>2</sup> There are three Kazakh *zhuz* (tribes or hordes): upper, middle, and lower, which are also known as elder, middle, or junior or *uly*, *orta*, and *kishi*. These *zhuz* are then subdivided into *ru*, which are patrilineal clan associations. Tracing seven generations of ancestors within a patrilineal clan is a cultural tradition known as *shezire*.



*Saltanat*: *Ru* [clan] is important when you first meet someone that you might consider dating—you ask them about their seven generations. My *zhuz*<sup>1</sup> [tribe or horde] is Kishli and my *ru* is Alim. I know this through my great-grandfather's name. My father knows to the 11th generation, and he has written this in a book at home. Normally the parents would also ask a boyfriend's family about their *ru*. The reason that you shouldn't mix blood from the same *ru* is that it leads to disfigurement in the children. For example, an Arab friend of mine who is closely descended from his own family has three front teeth.

The topic of Kazakh kinship and identity has been discussed in the literature; Yessenova (2005) argues that Kazakhs turn to ideas of their roots through the tradition of *shezire*, in which individuals recite seven generations of their ancestors that they have learnt by rote, in order to help them explain the routes that were taken—often from the countryside to the city—and that have led to their current circumstances. Yessenova argues that in doing this, Kazakhs are able to make sense of their apparent distance from 'traditional' rural Kazakh life in post-socialist urban environments like Almaty. This statement can apply to Saltanat, who explained *shezire* to me as an important marker of her identity as an urban Kazakh living in Almaty.

Tradition and cultural heritage have been shown to play an influential role in asserting identities in Central Asian contexts. Aksana Ismailbekova (2017, p. 8) discusses the intricacies of this discussion—for example, the use of problematic terms in public contexts such as 'clan politics'. Often used to describe the association between cultural traditions and social networks of allegiance in Central Asian politics, this term can lead to criticism of the impact of culture on democratic systems. Ismailbekova argues that 'political scientists, NGO workers and journalists' have adapted terms such as 'clan politics', 'clan networks and tribalism' to indicate political failure (ibid.). Her argument is based on anthropologists' criticism that the term has no empirical basis as a measure of people based on hereditary relatedness and is based on individuals' 'genealogical narratives' (ibid., p. 9). Ismailbekova argues for 'alternative ways to think about kinship and patronage through social poetics, manipulative strategy and strategies of identification' (ibid.). Again, as we have seen in other examples throughout this thesis, we find that the stories people tell, and the way in which they are told, are important tools in the formation of identity and the negotiation of a social in-between as the individual marks out their place in society.

Ismailbekova's (2017) ethnographic research in Kyrgyzstan, in a town only a few hours' drive from Almaty, illustrates her point through an exploration of how individuals have drawn upon traditional Kyrgyz practices of tracing kinship to legitimise their social and political roles in society. As an example of the influential role of patronage in Kyrgyz society, Ismailbekova describes how, through making and emphasising a potentially fictive kinship claim and an association with a prestigious lineage, a local businessman assumed a representative role within a local community. He went on to enjoy a successful political and business career, established on the basis of his role in the community being legitimised through his kinship. This is just one example of the ways that cultural heritage, based upon ideas of traditional practices, act upon present situations.

In Kazakhstan, aspects of cultural heritage, tradition, and the importance of a nomadic pastoralist past for ethnic Kazakhs are important elements of public narratives related to identity. These narrative elements are reaffirmed in the present through government nation-building policies. I argue that in the present, my informants' concern for these topics is related to the way in which state policies promote ethnic Kazakh tradition as a way to legitimise current government actions and policies. There are parallels with Ismailbekova's example, but in the case of Kazakhstan, the influence of these factors can be seen most clearly in the role of former president Nursultan Nazarbayev and the ruling Nur Otan political party. Nazarbayev, now installed in his position as *de facto* father of the nation, is the prime example of the blurred line between political democratic representation and the evocation of cultural tradition in support of legitimacy. In addition to winning successive presidential elections, Nazarbayev also purports to be *ak suyek* or 'white bone', a historical ruling hereditary lineage outside of the three main *zhuz* which my informants refer to. This interweaving of democratic principles and ideas of traditional symbolism and values has become commonplace in Kazakh politics. Following Ismailbekova's argument, cultural heritage and tradition should be understood not as a fact of heredity, but as an aspect of the social poetics through which social identities are constituted.

To create a national and civic identity after 1991, the government drew upon cultural heritage and traditional Kazakh culture as a model. Key symbolism drawn from Kazakh nomadic pastoralist traditions has become central to the projected image of modern

Kazakh identity. This can be seen in the use of the *shanyrak*, or central supporting lattice of a traditional Kazakh yurt, in the logo of the ruling Nur Otan party, as well as in everyday contexts, such as the ironwork of municipal fences in public parks and benches on the streets of Almaty. Archaeological finds such as the ‘Golden Man’, a well-preserved warrior’s grave with gold armour, have been adopted as ‘Kazakh’ history. Further archaeological evidence of people having lived in the area around Almaty led to the government announcing slogans such as ‘My native city for 1,000 years!’ (*Moyemu rodnomu gorudu 1,000 let!*) in celebration of *Nauryz*, a Kazakh celebration of a Lunar New Year festival originating from ancient Persian culture. Roy argues that while the nation-states of Central Asia were born out of the Soviet period, they are also formed in opposition to it: ‘1,000 years of history’ is used ‘as a way of anchoring the present in a timeless and ahistorical past’(Roy, 2000, p. 161).

While the use of these symbols as a trope of ethnic Kazakh nation-building was especially impactful in the 1990s and early 2000s, I found that the perception of practices rooted in Kazakh cultural heritage has been changing over time: these practices were seen as a sign of backwardness by some of my urban informants. For example, Zarina, another of my Kazakh informants living in Almaty, did not have the same feelings towards the relevance of *shezire* in present-day Almaty. Zarina is a close friend and another language teacher who was 24 years old when we met. Her mother is also a language teacher, and her father is an astronomer. They are a Kazakh family from the southern city of Taraz. Zarina came to Almaty to study and stayed on as a language teacher, teaching English to local staff at a large city-centre hotel. Her insight on the practice of discussing which *zhuz* someone is from suggests that my young informants have a changing approach to traditions of *shezire*. Speaking to me in English, she told me:

*Zarina:* These fights between people from different *zhuz*... it kills me—I mean, come on, guys. People think that upper is better than middle, and middle is better than lower. When they ask me, I don’t want to answer. People used to ask a lot more, even five to 10 years ago. Even taxi drivers would ask you when you got into the taxi. Among my friends, we don’t talk about these things. It is talked about more in rural areas. They ask to find out if you are [a] relative of theirs.

Zarina’s comments suggest that the influence of clan for the young urban middle class may have changed since 1999, when Yessenova carried out the fieldwork which formed

the basis for her 2005 research paper. My fieldwork—which began in 2015, 16 years after Yessenova’s—also indicates that the priorities for some young urban Kazakhs, particularly the generation of the young urban middle class that I focus on, may have shifted since then.

There are a number of potential reasons why this change could have occurred. It could be that this disassociation with Kazakh tradition is only taking place among the young urban middle class, who were only just coming of age in 2005. Another potential explanation is that the idea of traditional lineage clashes with one’s modern urban identity, as in Zarina’s case; she remarked to me that she ‘feels very Kazakh, but dreams of living elsewhere’. Yessenova tackled this second explanation, arguing that ‘rural to urban migration is bound up with the movement from the state of “villager” to that of “urban resident”, both defined in society as stable social positions’ (Yessenova, 2005, p. 665). Perhaps this is evidence of a full transformation. Zarina’s account of change could be the result of her own personal journey from a small, Kazakh-majority town to the multi-ethnic urban centre of Almaty. Her new urban identity is now dominant, and discussions of clan are an indicator of a past rooted in a romanticised idea of Kazakh ethnic identity.

An account from my informant Nuriya, whom we heard from in the preface, supports the argument that the young urban middle class in present-day Almaty face a unique challenge that cannot simply be overcome by establishing meaning through ties with *shezire*. Young urban middle-class identity has come to a point where it is increasingly difficult to reconcile a dual Kazakh and urban identity; this is being replaced by a distinct middle-class identity.

In the later stages of my fieldwork, Nuriya was doing public relations work for a coffee company. While discussing religion, another important factor in the state’s ethnic Kazakh nation-building, she said, ‘There are two different types of Muslim. The first type attend mosque and abstain from alcohol. The second type is just being Kazakh. To say that you are not Muslim is to say that you are not Kazakh’. These ideal types demonstrate the strong link Nuriya saw between Islam and Kazakh identity. However, this caused an existential problem for Nuriya when she tried to reconcile this expectation with her present-day middle-class life. She told me, ‘I have been brought up to be like all of my family, but I am not a practising Muslim. I don’t feel that I am

Kazakh—I was born Kazakh, but now I belong elsewhere’. The similarities between Zarina and Nuriya’s comments are striking. The two do not know each other and all that they share, both being young, urban, middle class, and Kazakh. This similarity in their accounts—Zarina’s ‘dream of living elsewhere’ and Nuriya’s comment that she ‘belongs elsewhere’—support my argument that there is an incompatibility between the cultural values of the younger urban middle class, which promote an internationally oriented modern identity, and the traditional ethnic Kazakh revivalism, which the state has used to reframe Kazakh identity in the context of a multi-ethnic state.

Nuriya gave further evidence that the young urban middle-class feeling of not belonging is a recent phenomenon that marks an ongoing change underway in society. This evidence emerged in a discussion Nuriya and I had about the expectations associated with Kazakh gender roles, in which she stated, ‘In Kazakh culture, men are expected to be chivalrous; they are expected to pay for things. Traditional values are important and keeping them is patriotic. Another example is that 10 years ago it was not seen as good if the woman was not married at 23 or 24’. Nuriya made the connection between following traditional Kazakh values and being patriotic. Her comments on the difference between today and 10 years earlier support my argument that the young urban middle class are adopting a new and distinct way of life. In Nuriya’s case, she is now 28 years old and is not married. This could therefore be a way that she reconciles her current situation with the cultural exceptions placed upon her, justifying her unmarried status. It could also be an indicator of the incompatibility between her situation (and that of the young urban middle class in general) and the state’s outdated model of ethnic Kazakh nationhood.

Saltanat is the only informant out of these three women who had up until now been sympathetic to the state-produced image of Kazakh ethnicity. However, on one occasion she described to me what she thought constituted the image of the ‘good Muslim’, something that I have already shown to be linked to Kazakh identity:

*Saltanat:* To call yourself a Muslim, you should do prayers. My mother and brother do. I should be wearing hijab, I shouldn’t drink and go to clubs [...] If I start wearing a hijab, I should also change the people I hang out with.

Saltanat’s comments show that she is aware of the societal expectations of being a good Muslim and being Kazakh. However, this is not what she practises; such a practice is

incompatible with her current way of life and that of her other young urban middle-class friends.

### *Being Uighur*

*Alma:* I am first of all a citizen of the world, then Kazakhstani, then Turkic, and then Uighur.

The second part of this chapter focuses on the influence of Uighur ethnicity for my informants. My main insight into the Uighur community came from my research assistant Alma, a young urban middle-class informant who was Uighur; Alma opened doors to her local Uighur community for me. There is also additional information from three Uighur *bek* (elders) and other young informants. As the opening quote suggests, Uighur ethnicity is just one aspect of Alma's identity, but as a member of the young urban middle class, it is ranked below much broader societal groupings. In this section, I seek to find out the reasons behind this, as well as its consequences in everyday life for the experience and narration of uncertainty.

In comparison to Kazakhs, who live throughout the city, the Uighur population is concentrated within particular districts of Almaty. As a result, there are specific challenges that Uighurs face, and there is a strong geographical focus to the community assistance and support that is offered within the community. For this reason, my discussion focuses on one such Uighur neighbourhood, located in my first transect location discussed in Chapter 3. I do not name the neighbourhood here, as some of the rumours that I recount are critical of the local government; I want to reduce the possibility that the particular streets and communities I am discussing could be identified. Despite the fact that their ethnicity has led to many of the challenges and risks which my young urban middle-class Uighur informants face, traditional Uighur practices which offer community support and assistance are becoming less important for young urban middle-class Uighurs.

Alma was in her early 20s when we first met. She was head of the AISEC international student group and was studying business management at a private university. Alma also introduced the Uighur population in Almaty to me:

*Alma:* We are mostly living in one area of town, and also there are some living in Dostyk *mikro-raion* [micro-neighbourhood]. My relatives are from China and moved to Almaty in the 1960s. Some of them are known as *Zarya Vostok*, which translates as ‘Eastern Dawn’. Most of the areas in which Uighur live are older and lower-height houses. This area [we are in now] is kind of old and could be described as a ghetto, although our house is modern. Most of the people own the land that their house is built on because when they moved there in the 1960s, it was a kind of abandoned area. In the 1960s the area was not in Almaty; it was outside of the city. The people who have lived here for a long time refuse to move out!

Alma gave me a walking tour of the neighbourhood, telling me about different areas as we went. Along the main road on the edge of the district were two large concrete buildings. One was a school where teaching was in Russian, and the other was a school with classes taught in the Uighur language. Both Alma and her father had gone to the Russian-language school, although she spoke Uighur at home with her grandmother who lived with the family and didn’t speak Russian. Oka has suggested that ‘linguistic Russification’ of the Uighur population has taken place, although she argues that the extent of this is ‘limited compared to many other ethnic groups in Kazakhstan’, an observation supported by my own experiences during fieldwork (Oka, 2006, pp. 370–371). The ability to study in the Uighur language reinforces a sense of linguistic identity which extends to other areas of the community. Alma took me to visit a mosque, one of two in the district: one offered prayers in the Uighur language and the other in the Kazakh language. Although we tried on a number of occasions to arrange interviews with the imam at the Uighur mosque, each time we returned the meeting was rearranged, the interlocutor was not available, and I was treated with some suspicion as a researcher. This could be linked to wider uncertainty in the Uighur community, because over the last 15 years there has been growing tension between the Uighur community and the general public. Oka argues that ‘in recent years, the Uighurs in Kazakhstan (and Central Asia as a whole) have been increasingly labelled as “extremists” or “terrorists” who are plotting armed struggles with an aim to build a Uighur state or an Islamic caliphate’ (Oka, 2006, p. 369). This has led to the persecution of Uighurs, a topic I will return to later in this section.

Religion also appeared to be a less important part of cultural identity for the young urban middle class. Alma gave an example of generational differences in her family, explaining, ‘My grandma is really religious. My parents are 50/50 religious and I am agnostic’. While religious practice was restricted during the Soviet period, it may be expected that this reduced the level of religious observance in society. However, for many people, religious practice did not cease, but was simply brought into offstage contexts such as within the home, avoiding public scrutiny (Dragadze, 1993). If Alma’s situation is indicative of others who are also young, urban, and middle class, perhaps religious practice is in fact less widespread today than it has been in the past.

On our walking tour, Alma showed me a large construction site on the edge of the neighbourhood. The construction of a new metro station was extending the single metro line in the city, offering a direct connection to the city centre. However, this new connection also came with uncertainty; even these potential benefits for the community were treated with suspicion. Alma remarked, ‘There have been many rumours and a lot of gossip that the neighbourhood and these houses will be demolished by the government—that they will be razed to the ground’. Many people have been living in this neighbourhood since the 1960s. Although it is geographically located inside the city, encircled by a busy urban ring road, the area is disconnected from many urban flows. We were just one street back from the main road, a well-paved two-lane highway, but the streets here are unpaved and open sewers and drainage ditches run alongside the potholed track. That evening, as Alma gave me a lift back to the *Khrushchevka* where I was staying, I commented that it was very dark and there were no streetlights. Alma replied, ‘There were lights, but for some reason the government came and took them away’. The community’s literal disconnection from the networks of the city—in terms of both transport and utilities—suggests that it is isolated by the local government; at the very least, it is treated differently to other nearby districts. In the context of the government’s abandonment and isolation of the district, the construction of a new metro station, which could benefit the community, was being overshadowed by the uncertainty of what that could mean for the Uighur community, who have dealt with a history of being deliberately left out of potentially beneficial change.

These local uncertainties come in the wider context of the persecution of Uighurs—in particular, those living in Xinjiang Province in China, where Alma’s family are from. Discussion of this persecution in the literature suggests that the Kazakh government’s



interests in regional stability may be a priority over supporting the Uighur community; this could explain the Kazakh state's apathy towards the Uighur population living within its borders.

Oka writes that 'in Xinjiang, Beijing not only cracks down on national independence movements, but polices any "suspicious" activity of the Uighurs' (Oka, 2006, p. 369). Due to Beijing's stance, 'the Uighurs in Kazakhstan not only lack a kin-state, but also increasingly are alienated by the state ruling their external homeland and their home state that wishes to maintain friendly relations with it' (ibid.). Oka wrote this over 10 years ago, but her arguments are still relevant today. In fact, the situation has only deteriorated since then. Since 2017, after the end of my fieldwork, it has emerged that between 800,000 and 2 million Uighur and other Turkic Muslims have been interned in political re-education camps in China. This situation marks a dramatic escalation of violent persecution against ethnic Uighurs (Smith Finley, 2019, p. 2). The Kazakh government, still responding to the desires of Beijing, has also arrested and put on trial a Uighur activist, living in Kazakhstan, who has advocated for the rights of those held in the camps in Xinjiang Province; as of August 2019, his trial was currently underway in Almaty. These current issues are some of the risks and uncertainties faced by Alma and other members of the young urban middle class who are also Uighur, particularly those living in this neighbourhood today.

The Uighur population have dealt with many significant changes over the last hundred years, and I discussed these changes with both Alma and her father. Our conversation helps to illustrate how the older generation have made sense of and narrated these changes, as well as how Alma, as a member of the young urban middle class, can see the same events from a different angle. Our discussion then moved on to discuss traditional Uighur practices of community assistance, which have offered a source of support in the past, and touched on how the younger generation are no longer interested in these traditional practices.

*Alim:* I was born in China in a place called Chungu Chag. My parents were also born in China. In 1961 the whole family moved to Kazakhstan. I joined the Soviet army, where I worked as a mechanic and electrician. I then spent two years in Moscow, where I was trained, and then came back to Almaty. I've since spent my whole life in the district we are sitting in now.

Alim delivered a stable narrative of his life. He provided this sense of stability by avoiding discussing the reasons why his entire family had left China in 1961. He then described living in the district as a single experience, which he phrased as a ‘whole life’. At this point Alma interjected, saying, ‘Even during my lifetime we have moved more than seven times, although it has been around the same place’. The same story was narrated in different ways. Alim, having lived through significant hardships, presented a clear and stable narrative, but this struck Alma as unrepresentative of her life.

The literature offers a number of potential explanations for this disparity. Ibañez-Tirado, for instance, explores what happens when challenges are frequently faced in everyday life. Facing a constant barrage of change, her informants ‘do not simply *cope* with misfortune but *deal* with the normalcy of non-development and everyday disasters in creative, lively and morally informed ways’ (Ibañez-Tirado, 2015, p. 4). Two aspects of this argument need unpacking to make sense of what is being said: ‘the normalcy of non-development’ and ‘everyday disasters’. Ibañez-Tirado uses these phrases to refer to the state of constant threat that residents of Kulob in Tajikistan face on a daily basis (ibid.). Rather than seeing these threats as ruptures or significant individual events, they are folded into everyday life as part of what is to be expected. If we apply this analysis to Alim and Alma’s discussion, it suggests that Alma sees occurrences such as moving house as significant events, but for Alim these changes are just an expected part of everyday life. Having lived through dramatic and significant change throughout his lifetime, Alim chooses to emphasise a stable narrative; however, the same is not possible for Alma, who sees these changes as events which expose her own vulnerability to the risk of further change and uncertainty in the future.

As I have shown, simply being Uighur, living in Uighur neighbourhoods, or speaking out against the persecution of Uighurs is an additional source of risk and uncertainty for my urban middle-class Uighur informants. However, a Uighur community tradition called *meshrep* offers mutual assistance within the neighbourhood. Although this established practice of mutual assistance could be of potential benefit to my young informants, my research suggests that young people are neglecting these traditions, potentially making them more vulnerable to a range of threats. My explanation for this phenomenon of neglect is that living a young urban middle-class life in Almaty does not align with following traditional Uighur community practices.

This is Alim's explanation of the traditional practice of *meshrep*, a regular gathering within the Uighur community:

*Alim: Meshrep* is a Uighur gathering that happens at least once a month. I haven't been to one in about six months because I have been busy. There is a leader there and you must be invited to go. They talk about problems and sort them out at the meetings. It is not just about problems, though, but also about music, singing, and dancing. Now it's just a cultural thing. You can only go after you finish school, when you're an adult. Each Uighur district in the city has one, so there are around five in Almaty. Others will come to this *meshrep* from other cities too. These groups are becoming less important now, as the younger generation are not interested in tradition.

These community gatherings are regular events. By bringing together adults in the community, these meetings are also community bonding sessions. In describing a *meshrep* in Almaty in 1997, Roberts gives an account of how young Uighur men are bringing an all-male, "traditional", more comprehensive and overtly Islamic form of meeting back into existence after years of its being neglected which functioned to build male peer groups in the local community (Roberts, 1998, p. 675). While my informants also mentioned peer bonding, they described *meshrep* as a much more informal and relaxed social occasion for the whole community. Roberts also describes how *meshrep* during the Soviet era were more informal gatherings of both men and women, which has more similarities with the form of meeting described by my informants (ibid., p. 694). Burhandin Tazhidinov, *bek* (head) of the Uighur cultural centre in the Auezov district of Almaty, was responsible for organising a citywide *meshrep* in 2009. He described the ways in which he understood the practice to have changed over time, telling me that 'in order to gather for *meshreps*, our ancestors would travel long distances on horses, and now people travel easily by cars, trains, etc. *Meshreps* used to be held in gardens or by rivers, lakes, whereas these days we have them in cafes or restaurants'. Burhandin links the current *meshrep* to a historical practice while emphasising the way that the practice has adapted to modern urban contexts. However, from my conversations with my young urban informants, it appeared that there were other ways in which, over time, the role and relevance of *meshrep* were changing.

Although Alma is now an adult who lives in the neighbourhood, she does not attend *meshrep* meetings. When Alim said, 'The younger generation are not interested', Alma

responded, 'I do know about this, but it is really not important for me'. Interested in the role of *meshrep*, particularly for the younger generation, I spoke to Bari, who studied marketing at a private university. As Roberts discussed how *meshrep* could be a predominantly male gathering, it was important for me to gather a range of perspectives from both men and women.

Bari lived outside this district and has a Uighur father and a Kazakh mother. I asked him about his thoughts on the relevance of Uighur cultural practices such as *meshrep* for young people of his generation who have attended university, and he replied that there was 'no relevance, I think'. He added, 'Even though I am Uighur, I know nothing about my culture—I don't even know what *meshrep* is. I don't think that it is important for my life. My values are shaped by my experience, rather than the ethnicity that I happen to be'. The comments made by Alma and Bari, both young middle-class informants, were at odds with those of other informants that I spoke with, including Uighur community elders. For example, Raziyeu Alymzhan, *bek* of the *meshrep* in Dostyk district in Almaty, explained that 'almost any boy knows about *meshrep* from childhood. There's even a saying which states, "If you want to raise a decent man, bring him to *meshrep*."'

To understand the disparity in opinions, we must consider the way in which Uighur cultural practices are passed on, either between generations or within geographical communities. Raziyeu Alymzhan emphasised the importance of generational knowledge exchange: '[*Meshrep*] plays an important role in preserving the culture and traditions of our ethnicity which are passed from one generation to another. The role of *meshrep* in Uighur society is irreplaceable and preserved in its original form'. As a community representative, Raziyeu was keen to emphasise the importance of this practice to me as an anthropologist and outsider. Bari, on the other hand, explained that this practice didn't apply to him. Although his father spoke Uighur, he didn't learn the practice of *meshrep* from his father, as he 'wasn't really practising any cultural stuff'. Instead, Bari explained that as he saw it, the reason for a disparity between opinions on the role of cultural practices such as *meshrep* was a consequence of growing up 'living in a multicultural neighbourhood'. The question then presents itself: What are the younger generation missing out on by not participating in Uighur traditions such as *meshrep*?

Barat Mishrat, a Uighur man in his mid-50s who worked as a chairman in a local *akimat* (district mayor's office), said, 'Young people need *meshrep* in order to learn the history, culture, and traditions of their people. It unites young people and offers new methods of social and charity work, as well as the opportunity to take part in big cultural and sports events in a district or city'.

In a discussion of the components of *meshrep*, Alim gave an insight into the ways in which *meshrep* might help my informants living with uncertainty through social, moral and practical support and assistance. Alim explained, 'There are three sections to *meshrep*: sharing news, solving problems, and socialising. An example of when *meshrep* had been useful was the opening of the stadium [a sports venue in the district]'. Alim added, 'If someone were living in bad conditions, then they could collect sponsorship to support them. Contributions would only be made by those who were able to [help]. For example, there was a house that was damaged by fire. In this instance, it was a Russian family that they helped'. I enquired about the requirements for being included in the help offered by the *meshrep*. At first, Alim said that 'it was living within the boundary of the main road'; then he said, 'If you live close by, you might still be helped'. This suggests that the provision of assistance may not be bound to a specific ethnic group, but instead to one's district or close social relations, an assertion which supports Bari's comments that his reason for knowing less about Uighur cultural practices was a result of the neighbourhood he was brought up in.

There are a few threads to explore from Alim's comments. Firstly, news is shared at these events. If the young urban middle class do not trust the public state-controlled news, as was suggested in the previous chapter, why are they not using *meshrep* as a source of reliable face-to-face information from within the community? By not attending the group, the young urban middle class in Almaty are missing out on an opportunity to be supported by their community. Their lack of interest in attending *meshrep* suggests that they have different priorities; the places where I often met them and where they hung out, such as coffee shops, the shopping mall, and local cafes, were more suited to their public performance of a particular way of life—traditional community gatherings such as *meshrep* were not included in this.

It is worth mentioning the apparent changes that have taken place over the last 30 years regarding the support *meshrep* offers the community. Roberts (1998) notes that in the

past, *meshrep* had ‘served as a grassroots movement to tackle social problems that the Uighurs of the area felt the state was not properly addressing’, which turned out to be an important factor in the revival of the ritual of *meshrep* within the Uighur community in Xinjiang. Roberts (1998, p. 685) mentions an example in which *meshrep* offered a safe space of support for young Uighurs with heroin addictions—an argument supported by my informant Burhandin, who commented on how ‘during *meshrep* people study and discuss [the] behaviour of its members, for example if someone drinks, takes drugs, or does bad things’, and referred to the information exchanged there as a ‘school of life’. Barat’s comments further support this argument: ‘*Meshrep* teaches participants to be disciplined, patriotic, and open to express oneself or self-reflect on one’s behaviour and be critical about it’. This relevance for Uighur youth, as reported by community elders, seems to have diminished over time. Roberts details how at the time of his fieldwork in 1997 the ‘less ritualized versions’ of *meshrep* offered direct material support in the form of a ‘rotating credit system, functioning as a more material strategy for adapting to economic and social changes’ (ibid., pp. 694–695). *Meshrep* now appears to have a wider role, located not just within the Uighur community but also geographically; according to Alim’s comments, for instance, its assistance extends to a Russian family affected by a fire. In addition to these changes, the practice is no longer all-male and overtly religious, but has a diminishing influence on a younger middle-class generation.

If we return to Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical theory to explore onstage and offstage aspects of life in Almaty, we can see a strong division in the Uighur community. When onstage, in the public eye, members of the Uighur community must be careful how they tread. The state is constantly watchful and policing their ‘performance’. As a necessary aspect of the state’s own performance of a harmonious multi-ethnic nation, the role the Uighur community must play is one that does not challenge the status quo. Their shared Turkic roots mean that there are many similarities with the ethnic Kazakh population, as well as with other Turkic-language-speaking groups. These similarities mean that potential discord, such as the persecution of another Turkic group, has the danger of targeting shared values such as religion, language, or other traditions. This particular threat has been rising to the surface, as recent reports suggest that ethnic Kazakhs are now also being detained in Chinese government ‘re-education’ camps along with Uighurs; this issue is addressed in detail in a 2019 special issue of *Central Asian Survey* with an introduction by Smith Finley, p. 6). There is potential for the narratives of Islamic extremism, cited by the Chinese government in support of their severe policies,

to also influence the perception of ethnic Kazakhs in China and abroad. This would then challenge the Kazakh government's own narrative of being a stable state, successful in promoting regional stability in a context of political uncertainty.

In offstage aspects of Uighur life in Almaty, Uighurs are able to reflect on the difficult position and relative vulnerability of their ethnic group in comparison to ethnic Kazakhs. *Meshrep* gives an offstage forum away from the scrutiny of Kazakhstani public life. In this forum, community assistance can build both actual resilience and a feeling of reassurance that there is community support available if and when needed. Although it appears the young urban middle class rejects this type of support and turns to close family and friends in the face of societal uncertainty, my younger Uighur informants are not taking part in this tradition. Perhaps this is because it clashes with the Westernised, consumerist lifestyle of the young urban middle class.

Ultimately, being Uighur and a member of the young urban middle class has its own risks and opportunities. However, as was the case with ethnic Kazakhs, these two aspects of an individual's identity come into conflict. As Alma said when I asked about the role of ethnicity for her and her friends, 'Young people do not like to talk about it; they try not to talk about background and ethnic groups between young people'. As a young urban middle-class Almatinean, it was most important for her to first of all be a 'citizen of the world' and least of all to participate in public life in the context of a Uighur identity.

### *Being Korean*

Ethnic Koreans have a distinct place in Kazakh society, which can be traced back to the way in which they first came to Kazakhstan. Oka explains that 'Koreans differ from the Russians and the Uighurs in that they had been forcibly taken to Kazakhstan and never claimed a native status' (Oka, 2006, p. 376). In the late 1930s, Koreans, 'mainly from the northern part of the Korean peninsula who had settled in the Russian Far East since the second half of the 19th century', were deported to Central Asia to stop them joining the enemy in the Soviet-Japanese border conflicts (Oka, 2006, p. 373; Chang, 2016). A consequence of this deportation was an influx of ethnic Koreans: 'whereas the 1926

census recorded only 42 Koreans in Kazakhstan, by 1939 this number had exploded to 96,453' (Yem & Epstein, 2015, p. 136).

My initial insight into the Korean population of Almaty was through my first research assistant, Boris, a colleague of my American hosts in my first transect location. Boris worked for a Kazakh national NGO that received USAID funding. He worked in an IT role, but he was often called upon to help with translation because he spoke a high level of English. He grew up in Almaty and was 32, a few years older than me, when we first met. He therefore bridges the gap in my distinction between the 'Soviet generation' and the young urban middle class. This is interesting in itself because his memories of the late 1980s and his teenage years in the 1990s show a detailed awareness of the uncertainty of everyday life at the time. Boris was an interesting personality; he could often be found in the pub or pool hall, and he often gave a critical perspective of modern life in Almaty while chain-smoking cigarettes.

Boris and I met at a pub to have a meal together and speak in detail about the Korean population. It was his choice to meet at a local Irish-themed pub rather than one of the many Korean restaurants that dotted the city. After settling down to his first beer, Boris gave me his description of the Korean community, starting from the early 1990s:

*Boris:* At this time there was a few Koreans who were powerful in the community. Many of these were connected to the criminal spheres in the '90s. '91, '92, and '93 were the most criminal times. The criminals at this time were called *zanyait* [the literal translation is 'takes']. You could recognise them by the way they dressed—wearing sports shoes and trousers. They would often wear leather jackets with these. Most of them were guys with lots of muscle. At first, most of the criminals were Russian, but then they started to subdivide by nation. In every *oblast* [county], they were running everything.

Boris highlighted this as a time of great uncertainty. Nazpary, who carried out research in Almaty during the '90s, describes the phenomenon of *diki* (wild) capitalism. Nazpary argues that in order to survive, everything turned into a commodity that was then up for sale. Nazpary describes how people turned to prostitution when they had nothing else, selling their bodies as the only commodities they had (Nazpary, 2002). The shift of power—from the state to ruthless individuals who prioritised their personal interests over the common good—brought uncertainty into each aspect of everyday life.



As an example of how these criminals influenced everyday life, Boris told me about a cafe established in the 1990s that is still running today. ‘This cafe is named after the guy who set it up: “Ginger Alma”’, he said. ‘The cafe is opposite a graveyard. It was said that the reason the cafe was put here was because at the time it was a more rural area and it would be easier to bury bodies if the cafe was nearby’. In this example, Boris cited a rumour (‘It was said that...’), giving form to the illicit dealings that people assumed had been happening in this cafe as a result of the known *zanyait* who ran it. Speaking about it in the third person allowed Boris to tell me about these concerns without making specific accusations himself. This is particularly important as the cafe is still in existence today. This uncertainty still weighs upon the present: as Boris told me, ‘After 1996 they became official and became businesspeople rather than gangsters’. Once again, as seen in other instances, societal risks and uncertainties reach each corner of the population. The problems Boris described are not unique to the Korean population, but are an example of these wider issues manifesting themselves within a specific community.

Boris went on to explain what is unique about the Korean population in Almaty, emphasising that Koreans have a close-knit community. This discussion sets the scene for an event I will discuss shortly: a rupture that occurred in everyday life when one of my young, urban, middle-class, and Korean informants stepped outside the boundaries of the Korean community. Boris discussed the unique parts of the Korean community and how, in the late 1990s, a number of Korean community buildings were built that are still influential today:

*Boris:* There is a ‘Korean building’ near Gorky Park. It was built by Koreans and it’s mostly Koreans who live there. They also built the Korean cultural centre around this time, too. From the age of 14 to 16, I attended the youth centre at this place. They have other meetings, such as interest groups including Korean drumming and dancing for the girls. There are also the South Korean churches and missionary churches—these are the second main aspect of the Korean community in Almaty. We are closely linked—in fact, maybe 80 per cent of my friends are Korean.

Boris’s comments suggest a physical focus for the Korean community in the form of the Korean cultural centre and ‘Korean building’. The Korean community are well funded

and organised as a result of monetary and social support from the South Korean government. However, it should be pointed out that some distance remains between the Koreans living in Central Asia and those in South Korea, as many members of the Korean community in Central Asia do not speak Korean. This is a result of their having been educated in Russian at Soviet schools. Yem and Epstein argue that by 1956, for Koreans living in Central Asia ‘many elements of culture brought from Korea, such as calendar holidays, [had] largely disappeared; traditions were preserved most stably in food culture and family relations’ (Yem & Epstein, 2015, p. 139).

Perhaps Boris’s high proportion of ethnic Korean friends is a consequence of the time he spent socialising at the Korean youth centre when he was a teenager. This close-knit community has also been formed as a result of Korean marriage practices. Boris explained, ‘It is traditional to marry within the Korean community. This kind of running joke exists that all Koreans know each other. You can be *tyagubya*, pureblood Korean, or *argubya*, half-blooded. All my grandparents and great-grandparents were Korean, and so I am *tyagubya*’. From Boris’s comments, we can get a sense of the closeness of the Korean community and the cultural practices which help maintain relations within the community. As a small minority population, Koreans in Almaty are careful to protect their own interests.

In the context of this community background, here I will discuss the life events of my friend Sasha. Sasha is the son in the Koryo family I lived with on a smallholding in the third transect location (see Chapter 3). He is only slightly older than me; he was born in 1988, and like Boris, he can be considered to be towards the upper limit of the young urban middle-class cohort I focus on. As a result of going to school in Almaty with classmates of many different nationalities, he speaks Russian and Kazakh; his parents only speak Russian. As a teenager he had a strong interest in video games, computer programming, and movies, which complemented his school lessons in English; this means he has a high level of English-language skills, too. I met Sasha at a family meal with my host family towards the beginning of my stay with them. Each year during the hay harvest, Sasha and his friends would spend a few days staying at the farm and helping his family out. I was also there that year to lend a hand. The long grass is cut with an old Soviet-era machine and turned by hand with pitchforks to dry in the sun. The family had two small hay fields, but we also helped out on other villagers’ fields. On one long, hot summer afternoon, Sasha and I worked together turning the hay by

hand. I practised my Russian and he practised his English as we discussed his life, and so the conversation was recorded in a mix of the two languages. Our conversation meandered, and we eventually moved on to discuss the time after he finished university. He told me about the ‘difficult times’ he had faced since then, and his story caused me to change the way that I perceived his parents and their relaxed liberal attitudes to life.

*Sasha:* I first met Maryam at a social event in Almaty. We got on well and this led to a relationship. We decided to marry, and this turned out to be a difficult time. There is a saying that ‘if your parents do not come to your wedding, then you have no parents’. That is what happened to me. Maryam is Tatar and so my parents wouldn’t support me. I had to pay for the whole wedding myself and this was very difficult. My parents did not attend and wouldn’t talk to me after the wedding. It was only when my son was born this year that they started talking to me again. They didn’t want to miss out on knowing their grandson.

I had spent over a month living with Sasha’s family before I heard this story. It was hard for me to reconcile his parents’ treatment of their son with their warm, jovial hospitality or with the impression of a liberal attitude to life that I had gained through my conversations with them. Their objection was rooted in Sasha’s choice not to marry a Korean woman, and his marriage to a Tatar woman was seen as a betrayal. The young urban middle-class lifestyle that Sasha had lived up until this point became incompatible with his Korean family’s expectations. He stuck steadfast to his decision, but this came at a great personal cost. He continued to live what he saw as his preferred path in life, one that fitted with his values and understanding of the world.

Marriage among the Koreans of Central Asia has specific significance. According to Yem and Epstein, ‘marriage traditionally was a highly significant moment in the life of Koreans: individuals were not considered adults, regardless of age, if they had not married’ (Yem & Epstein, 2015, p. 142). In this respect, Sasha’s marriage would be seen in a traditional context as a key life stage. This coming of age was therefore not an entrance into the Korean community, but into the multi-ethnic culture of the young urban middle class. There is limited literature on inter-ethnic Korean marriage in Kazakhstan, but one of the few studies focuses on marriage between 1937 and 1965 (Yem & Epstein, 2015). Even during this time in Almaty, there was a high proportion of interethnic marriage between Koreans and those of other ethnicities: 36.7 per cent

between 1937 and 1963 (ibid., p. 144). Why, then, did Sasha's parents disown him for not marrying a Korean woman?

It could be that Sasha's parents highly valued their Korean identity. They proudly cooked Korean food on a regular basis and would emphasise the origins of any dish (including a dog-meat stew) that had its origins in Korean cuisine. The farm had figures of Korean spirit guardians hanging on its gates. Whenever they took me to social events with their friends, they were often the only Koreans there. Sasha's marriage to a Tatar woman impacted his parents' public presentation of their Korean identity.

Unfortunately, this topic was an elephant in the room that I could not discuss with his parents. It is possible to say, however, that this single moment served as a rupture in the lives of both Sasha and his parents. Sasha found himself financially and socially vulnerable, cut off from his kin, while his parents found that their public identity was challenged by their son's actions.

### *Chapter Conclusion*

In each of the three parts of this chapter, I have presented different aspects of 'traditional' practices within Kazakh, Uighur, and Korean populations in Almaty. In the examples I have given, these 'traditional' practices are shown to be incompatible with the way of life that my young urban middle-class informants choose to follow. While many of them identify as Kazakh, Uighur, or Korean, this does not have the same meaning to them as it does for their parents' generation. As a result, my young urban middle-class informants face greater uncertainty and potentially greater risks. My young informants' social positioning—in these examples, demonstrated in relation to different ethnic identities—affects both their experiences and the way they narrate their feelings of uncertainty. One consequence of my young informants' choice to follow an urban middle-class lifestyle is that traditional ways of narrating and dealing with uncertainty are being abandoned. This, in turn, leads to greater uncertainty, as my informants are missing out on the support of their kinship and ethnic community groups as a consequence of publicly following a young urban middle-class lifestyle and narrative,

## Chapter 7

### Conclusion

#### Rumour, uncertainty, and narrating change

When I first met Nuriya, she presented me with an onstage narrative of her life. It began with her childhood in the 1990s and brought us up until the present day, highlighting what she presented as important life goals such as completing university and getting a job in marketing in Almaty. There were similarities between Nuriya and her mother Nurbakyt's narrative accounts of life: each provided a sense of structure, stability, and coherence in the face of past change. Nurbakyt spoke about her move to Almaty, the difficulties she faced living as a teacher in a small, remote village on the steppe, and the challenges of finding work and surviving on rationed basic goods between the difficult years of 1992 and 1996. However, Nuriya did not discuss the major challenges she had faced in everyday life, which had been a prominent aspect of Nurbakyt's narrative. Six months after we met, my friendship with Nuriya had grown, and following a discussion on one of our walks across the city, she told me that her father had died in an industrial accident. This disclosure was not part of her public onstage narrative which, up until that point, was all she had shared with me. The disclosure marked a sharing of a private offstage narrative, which I found to include her concerns, uncertainties, and fears not shared in her public narrative of her life. I realised that my other informants' narrative accounts may also have been similarly selective.

The main chapters in this thesis have revealed the existence of onstage narratives, exploring how they are enacted through public performance. This thesis has also investigated how events can rupture these narratives, revealing that such public façades are socially constructed in order to present an appearance of success, security, and stability. There are many reasons why my informants may narrate their lives in this way: impression management, creating myths of identity and origin, dealing with trauma, negotiating bureaucracy, providing self-confidence, relating to others, finding a place for Kazakhstani life in a global culture and economy, creating new opportunities, and instilling public confidence in one's abilities. Each of these reasons for narrating a story in a certain way is linked to their ability to negotiate uncertainty, to take control of unpredictable factors and adopt a level of agency that circumstances may not otherwise allow. However, as these public narratives are often at odds with an individual's

experience, there is consequentially a societal awareness of the potential superficiality of such narratives, a fear further magnified by individuals' awareness that they themselves are often actively reproducing them. In response to this, my informants found new narrative strategies to discuss their concerns outside of public narratives.

Once I started to look for them, I began to see further examples of private offstage narratives. These were often closer to the surface in times of difficulty, seen in the example of the *sel* (Chapter 4) and with devaluation (Chapter 5), when public onstage narratives were disrupted to reveal private offstage uncertainties. The question that follows is: How were these private concerns discussed, and why were they not shared publicly?

Turning my focus to these narratives of uncertainty, I draw out the threads of discussion that run through the main chapters of this thesis. I argue that the way in which my informants make sense of past change and the risk of future change is through the stories they tell: their narratives of uncertainty. This leaves one last question: What forms do these narratives of uncertainty take? In this final chapter, I investigate this question, discussing the example of rumour and examining how this narrative form has certain properties which allow my informants to move their discussion of uncertainty, normally restricted to private offstage contexts, into public onstage spheres.

### *The Journey So Far*

In the introduction, I laid out my strategy for exploring the key themes of narrative, risk, and uncertainty in the context of a Central Asian urban field site. I also outlined my focus on understanding an understudied and under-theorised group in society: the young urban middle class. I traced the roots of a Soviet-era middle class, allowed to develop in Soviet society through an implicit 'Big Deal' through which Stalin allowed for a limited range of material rewards as part of a recognition of the role of a new cohort of industrial managers (Dunham, 1990). This precedence was expanded further under Brezhnev in what Millar (1985) describes as the 'Little Deal'. I have followed Patiko's argument that there is no single post-Soviet middle class, and therefore consider this thesis a study of *a* post-Soviet middle class. Rather than focus on the way that a Soviet generation were forced to change and adapt, I bring my focus forward to understand a

generation who grew up in a post-Soviet society and who are now coming of age and establishing themselves as an important part of future urban life in Almaty.

I offer an additional perspective to urban anthropology, considering the role of a young post-Soviet generation whose onstage narratives and presentation of self are driving a consumer boom in coffee shops, restaurants, and nightclubs—all of which are part of a modern identity for my young urban middle-class informants. Anthropologists have demonstrated the importance of narrative in offering people coherence when facing change or the risk of future change (Cruickshank, 2000; Ibañez-Tirado, 2015; Petryna, 2003; Wheeler, 2016; Zonabend, 1993 [1989]). However, there is further opportunity for an ethnography of a Central Asian urban context that fully acknowledges the important insights available through the role of narrative in ongoing societal transformations in Kazakhstan. In the second part of the literature review, I argue that the anthropology of gossip and rumour provides tools that help us understand what happens outside public onstage transcripts (Besnier, 2009; Gluckman, 1963; Paz, 2009). Anthropologists of risk and uncertainty suggest that it is important to research both quotidian contexts and spectacular events (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982; Hoffman & Lubkemann, 2005); following this, I believe that risk and uncertainty are a consequence of social, cultural, and economic factors in addition to the direct threats posed by hazards.

The urban field site is a broad construction, connected by the flow of goods, services, people, and information. In Chapter 3, I argue that carrying out fieldwork from three transect locations gave me an insight into the backgrounds of a heterogeneous urban middle class. In the narratives of the older generation, including the parents of my young middle-class informants, the present is seen as a time of relative stability in comparison to the significant change experienced in the past. For the younger generation, uncertainty is much closer to the surface, as their public narratives are focused on their present and future. For example, Anna was able to sculpt the onstage narrative of her own ethnic identity in her favour. She retold the story of a traumatic past, including the ambiguity of her family's ethnic background, in a way that afforded her what she saw as greater opportunities in life. She emphasised her claim to Russian citizenship, which allowed her to get a Russian passport. Sasha's father Mikhail provided an example of the narratives of an older generation who grew up during the time of the Soviet Union (see Chapters 3 and 6). Mikhail has used his onstage narrative

to reframe his life and justify the choices he has made to benefit his health, escape the pollution of the city, move to the countryside, and eat organic produce. Mikhail has created a new and stable present in opposition to the perceived risks he faced living in the centre of the city. In Chapter 3, I conclude that there are a range of onstage narratives presented in everyday life by my middle-class informants; furthermore, there are clear generational differences between the narratives of my older and younger informants.

In Chapter 4, the coherence of everyday narratives in Almaty is shown to be vulnerable. Here, I explore how offstage uncertainties rise to the surface as a result of the disruptive flow of the Kargalinka River. Chapter 4 employs a cross-cutting transect to demonstrate how a *sel* hazard triggered a large-scale rupture in the routines and onstage narratives of my informants' everyday lives, exposing uncertainty that is usually confined to private and offstage contexts. The state's failure to provide information, alongside a lack of alternative communication channels, demonstrates the large scale of deep-rooted uncertainty in society. Chapter 4 also gives us our first insight into how my informants respond when facing immediate risks and uncertainty in public contexts—by searching for information through social networks of trusted friends and family when public information channels are found to be inoperative, unreliable, or lacking in detail.

At this point in my thesis, it is clear that there is a distinct group in Almaty that approaches life in a unique way and has its own specific narratives, tropes, and vulnerabilities. Chapter 5 shows that this young urban middle class is united by the form and substance of their onstage narratives as internationally oriented, individualised, and ambitious. They exhibit a hybrid post-Soviet approach to risk, combining an 'entrepreneurial ethic' and a Soviet-era notion of state responsibility and support with a Western notion of transparency and a view of democratic values as important moral requirements in society (Yurchak, 2003, p.72). What separates this group from others in Kazakh society is a plethora of offstage concerns that are a result of their wide range of backgrounds. Influential factors, including ethnicity, gender, and family background, not only expose them to different risks, but also affect their ability to prepare and respond to them—an argument I take up in Chapter 6.

Chapter 6 considers one of the variable categories of my young urban middle-class informants: their ethnicity. I have chosen ethnicity because it is a category through



which I can also discuss differences in religion, gender, and family background. I argue that the way that these different ethnicities are perceived in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, often as a result of the state's nation-building agenda, frequently clashes with my informants' middle-class way of life as put forward in their public onstage narratives. When my informants' onstage narratives are threatened, they turn to their trusted social connections, yet they often find that they are distanced from their community members or are unable to draw upon support as a result of living a public lifestyle at odds with the values of that community. This brings us to the final thread of my argument: the role of rumour. This thread has shown itself in fleeting glimpses throughout the previous chapters, and in this final section I draw together these insights in order to understand the consequences of the way in which my young urban middle-class informants narrate their lives. When facing uncertainty, my informants look to rumour for information, confirmation of suspicions, or to express private concerns in a public context without the fear of retribution or of undermining their own onstage narratives.

### *The Power of Rumour*

Rumours have appeared in my informants' comments throughout this thesis. There were rumours that the anti-mudflow dam had failed; 'whispers' that there was a second flood; screams about the total destruction of the dam; rumours of the health effects of pollution; speculation over the government's removal of streetlights in the Uighur neighbourhood; rumours that this neighbourhood would be 'razed to the ground' by the government; rumours that the government had built a mass grave for hundreds of thousands of people as preparation for a major earthquake, rumours that a hundred years after the last earthquake, there would be another. There are many other rumours that I recorded during my fieldwork but have not yet been mentioned: rumours of an infestation of poisonous spiders in the trees of Almaty that had come to the city in wood brought by rural migrants; comments that street-balloon sellers were vendors for illicit drugs and that President Nazarbayev was in poor health and would soon die; rumours about another devaluation of the currency linked with national holidays and the president's birthday; public discussion of street graffiti; rumours that famous Kazakh rock musician 'Viktor Tsoi is alive' and conspiracy theories surrounding his death; gossip about which lecturers were tough markers and which were corruptible; and

rumours that everyone living in Almaty was susceptible to chronic headaches that disappeared for those who moved away.

I am not the first to document the role of rumours in Kazakhstan, and these examples substantiate the importance of my own findings as evidence of a widespread and influential discursive practice across Kazakh society. While rumours are a phenomenon found throughout the world, in this thesis I show how they are used in a unique way in Kazakhstan. In her research on the topic of waste in Almaty, Catherine Alexander discusses her informants' use of rumour to discuss the uncertainties they are facing in everyday life. In the context of the disposal of chemical waste from an industrial site in urban Almaty, Alexander describes how an unlined waste pit was rumoured to be leaching chemicals into the soil and groundwater supply (Alexander, 2009b, p. 13): 'Evil-smelling clouds of smoke from the occasional explosions on site would drift over the neighbouring suburbs. "The water tasted strange sometimes," one ex-resident said, "sort of metallic, so we tried to boil it first. There were lots of people complaining about bronchial things—not public complaints, but we knew our neighbours' children had the same sorts of illnesses as ours"' (ibid.). In this example, rumours circulate concerning things out of the ordinary, such as the taste of the water or possible causes of illness. Those living in the area link these issues to the uncertainties surrounding the potential risks that local residents may be exposed to. As a result of residents having no way to confirm or deny their suspicions through official channels, these rumours have emerged. Importantly, because they are 'not public complaints', they circulate in offstage contexts; the local residents are protecting themselves from public criticism and potential escalation of tensions between them and the owners of the industrial site (ibid.). Crucially, these rumours circulate as a result of residents' perception that they lack agency in reducing the risks they are exposed to.

The rumours I have recorded share many similarities with Alexander's example, including the rumoured construction of a mass grave in preparation for a major earthquake (discussed in Chapter 5). The scale of the grave's estimated capacity to hold 300,000 to 500,000 bodies, with a city population of 1.8 million, is testament to how both the potential scale of the seismic hazard and the consequences of the risk are perceived locally as severe and uncontrollable. Publicly challenging the state—for example, criticising its lack of preparation to avoid the deaths in the first place—is perceived by my informants to be a risky undertaking. My focus-group participants in

Chapter 5 discussed the corruption and fraud charges that were brought against media outlet *Adam Bol* after its journalists were understood to have spoken out against the government. These actions led to the collapse of the group as the government silenced public opposition.

Rumours can also be used to cope with risk in other ways, such as scapegoating responsibility to avoid making accusations within a trusted community. William Wheeler (2016) provides an example of how rumours were used in his ethnographic study in the west of Kazakhstan near the Aral Sea, discussing one rumour that:

*kommersanty* (businessmen) come to buy fish off poachers, and that the fish mysteriously disappears out of the region unprocessed. The provenance of these *kommersanty* varies—often they are said to come from Shymkent, the crime capital of Kazakhstan and source of all rumours about anything bad; sometimes from the Caspian or from Aqtöbe; and sometimes from abroad—from Russia or from Georgia (Wheeler, 2016, p. 232).

The rumours Wheeler describes are concerned with the potential threat of lost revenue in the local area as unidentified businessmen profit from exploitation of the protected stocks of fish. Rather than place blame within the community or even the local area, the rumours form a narrative which externalises the threat, placing responsibility elsewhere. If we followed Gluckman's argument that narratives can function to promote in-group cohesion, hence othering those from Shymkent and farther afield, these comments would constitute a form of gossip. However, this explanation misses some important subtleties in what is happening. The community is faced with a double bind. In the first potential scenario, these rumours reduce locals' agency in addressing the issue by externalising the threat and relieving the feeling of uncertainty that someone whom they trust could be behind it. The second option is no better, however: locals would have to face the possibility that trusted social relations may be responsible, undermining group cohesion and increasing a feeling of uncertainty in everyday life. As Goffman argues, it is in the interests of all members of a group to keep the public performance going; one aspect of this is dealing with elements of life which are juxtaposed with the performance or threaten to derail or disrupt it (Goffman, 1959, p. 108). Rumours are a societal way to avoid breaking the fourth wall of public onstage performance, acknowledging the limitations of current narratives and exploring potential alternative

futures. In Wheeler's example, rumours are a route through which public accusations can be avoided while providing the community with a topic and discursive space in which issues can be discussed. This example also illustrates how rumours are able to influence onstage and offstage narratives, shifting blame, externalising threats, and relieving uncertainty. With these potential uses in mind, I turn to how rumours are perceived by my young urban middle-class informants in Almaty as a way of making sense of change.

Through a discussion of rumour in a focus group, my young urban middle-class informants contextualised their views, which helps us to understand how they perceive the role of rumour in society:

*Arman:* Personally for me, rumours have more power here in Almaty and in our post-Soviet Union countries than they have in the West. Our parents lived in a country with a much less individual approach and everybody needed to know everything about their neighbours. That is why rumours were considered as a source of credible information. And of course now we are in a different society; we are more individualist, but it is in our upbringing and still has influence on us. That's why I think rumours are important.

Arman was 22 years old when we spoke and a student at a state-funded university in Almaty. He makes a powerful point, arguing that rumours have a unique role in post-Soviet contexts as a result of the experience of their parents' generation during the Soviet era. He argues that the communal approach upon which Soviet society was organised necessitated a flow of information in local contexts that was not available in public spheres. There are several potential reasons for the importance of this offstage communication. It could have emerged out of fear of being reported to the secret police for denouncing the state; it could also have been a way of obtaining information when public narratives were limited in their scope or untrustworthy.

I argue that in Almaty, these flows of information parallel those of the informal exchange networks, such as *blat*, that were primarily concerned with flows of goods and services (Makovicky & Henig, 2018, p. 35). Informal exchange networks were motivated by the need to access goods in an 'economy of shortage' (Kornai, 1980). As Ledeneva (2018, p. 43) discusses, these informal exchange networks have evolved alongside wider societal changes. For example, *blat* has been increasingly monetised, replacing the moral

obligation of mutual indebtedness that ensured that favours were reciprocated. In post-Soviet Kazakhstan, a different state-controlled shortage has emerged: a dearth of trustworthy information. Cultural strategies have been developed for obtaining and sharing information through rumour. These strategies are similar in form to networks which developed in response to a shortage of goods and services. Mutual indebtedness and trust in reciprocation of actions, the moral currency that these networks heavily relied upon during the Soviet era, are still influential today in the offstage discursive narratives that include information exchange through rumour. Arman's comments help to explain how their parents' generation influenced my informants in turn and became the route through which these cultural tools for accessing information were impressed on them during their upbringing.

The concept of rumour is often considered alongside gossip, which Besnier describes as 'often regarded as a reprehensible activity to be avoided or feared' (2009, p. 13). As such, it also has negative connotations with slander, misinformation, or moral degradation. However, the Oxford English Dictionary definition emphasises rumour as an 'unverified or unconfirmed statement or report circulating in a community' (OED 2019). This definition makes no comment on the validity of a claim, only that it is unverified. Arman suggests that in Almaty, rumours are considered a credible source of information. I argue that in some circumstances, my informants see information that is unverified and unconfirmed as an asset. The lack of verification breaks the information's connection with its source, offering the source a degree of protection through anonymity. Anonymity also provides the rumour's bearer with protection from blame or retribution that may have otherwise resulted from public criticism. Because it is not possible to verify the original source of unverified information contained in a rumour, its credibility is judged according to the degree to which the bearer of the rumour is trusted. Each person mediates the content of the rumour and passes it on only if they believe the rumour either contains some credibility or an important point for discussion. An exchange between Arman and Darya explores this further:

*Darya:* Can I ask? What if these rumours will reach you through your parents? What then?

*Arman:* You mean that...

- Darya:* Well, you say that you trust your parents the most. But what if your parents will receive rumours from anywhere and tell these rumours to you?
- Arman:* OK. I'm not going to trust them. [Laughter]
- Darya:* But why? They are the closest circle?
- Arman:* There is a very important thing to consider who is the original source of the information. If my parents just heard it somewhere, they are not the original source.
- Darya:* What if they start spreading rumours? You would trust them?
- Arman:* They won't.
- Darya:* OK. Sorry. But let's just hypothetically assume that they will.
- Arman:* Just hypothetically, if they will, I will probably trust them. But you should understand, even if they tell me a rumour, they always indicate that this is a rumour.

This discussion reveals a subtlety in the role of rumour. My informants critically appraise the information they receive; like other sources of information, discussed in Chapter 5, it is understood that there is always some motivation behind what is said. Darya was keen to understand the degree of power that Arman placed in rumours. Importantly, Arman's response that his parents would 'always indicate that this is a rumour' tells us that rumours are understood as a distinct type of information that comes with their own culturally distinct ways of understanding, communicating, verifying, and reproducing them.

### *Rumour in Action: Protest, History, and Public Action*

*Aslan:* Last year, before the 16th of December, our government heard from somewhere that students were preparing for a demonstration against our government. As a result, they asked every student who is not originally from Almaty to leave the city before the 16th of December.

A final example from my data shows rumour in action. Aslan recounts a rumour that the government sent students home to avoid a protest—this rumour is itself about another rumour within the government that students were organising a protest against it. Through a discussion of this example with my young informants, we can see the power of rumour

to act not only as a discursive tool they use to reflect on their offstage uncertainties, but also as a threat to the government's stability, prompting them to take action.

The power of this rumour is a consequence of historical events in Kazakhstan that have triggered changes in the past and continue to impact everyday life today. The threat of recurring historical protests, understood to be formative in Kazakhstan's national history, demonstrates the unique context in which my young informants live in Almaty. Protests on 16 December 1986, which have come to be known as *Zheltoqsan* (named after the month of December in Kazakh), were a turning point that heralded a change in dominant public narratives of the time, both official and unofficial. Protesters took to the streets of Almaty to voice their objections to Gorbachev's appointment of Gennady Kolbin (an ethnic Russian) to replace Dinmukhamed Kunaev (an ethnic Kazakh) as First Secretary of the Party in Kazakhstan (Alexander, 2009b). The event is still 'shrouded in mystery', with little official information on what occurred: a police shutdown of the protests was heavy-handed, with many arrested, frozen by water in the winter temperatures, or killed by police (ibid., p. 11). The consequences of this protest became the subject of rumour in Almaty; Catherine Alexander quotes one of her informants as 'whispering [to her] that thousands and thousands of young Kazakhs had been murdered by the police and dumped in a pit outside the city' (ibid.). Protest was a rare occurrence in the Soviet Union; the potency of these events was accompanied by a wave of public uprising and discontent which led to further incidents, including the fall of the Berlin Wall, and climaxed in the collapse of the Soviet Union. Nazarbayev's government perceived a repeat of these events as too great a threat to its own position of political dominance and ability to control official public narratives and so, in 2015, it took action to preserve the status quo.

There is a precedent for the government's actions in 2015, and the Kazakh government has taken action in the past to stop protests against it. During Nazarbayev's time as president of Kazakhstan, the government has taken an overbearing approach to controlling public protest. This includes a notorious incident in which police violently shut down state oil-worker protests in the town of Zhanaozen in the west of Kazakhstan—this also happened on 16 December, but in 2011. Police opened fire on protesters, killing or 'disappearing' an unverified number of protesters. Protests in Almaty in recent years have also been met with a strong police presence; protesters have been arrested en masse and swiftly bundled into police vans before any large crowds have been able to amass. Achilov, writing in 2015 about the previous 10 years, reported that

‘Kazakh officials have been systematically restricting and preempting all venues for collective demonstrations through strict security measures’ (Achilov, 2015, p. 710). Aslan, whose comments opened this section, described his version of events in 2015, which tally with Achilov’s assessment of the situation. Aslan described how the government responded to a rumour:

*Aslan:* The government asked the university to take action. The university then brought forward the dates of our midterms and our finals. They even called some of us and said, like, ‘I know that you are from another city—where are you now? Students shouldn’t be in the city now!’

Aslan’s comments suggest that the government was able to exert its influence on universities and was motivated by the rumour to ensure that no demonstrations could take place. According to Aslan, the government did this by preventing students from staying in the city during the holidays. My young urban middle-class informants’ discussion of these rumours about government actions in 2015 is a way for them to explore their offstage uncertainties regarding their ability to protest publicly and the potential force the state would use to stop them doing so.

- Islam:* In reality, I think nobody was preparing for the protests.
- Darya:* But everyone knew that all of the students would be sent out of the city in order to avoid the tensions.
- Aslan:* Maybe it was because of that historic event of the 16th of December. What year was it—’90? ’91?
- Everyone:* ’86!! [Laughter]
- Aslan:* I’m bad at history, sorry. And because of that event, somebody got an idea that students will do it again.
- Alma:* But still, what is the reason?
- Darya:* I don’t know. Our government is just afraid.
- Islam:* Just because it was a rumour in the government, they’ve decided to keep themselves safe.

Here, my informants indicate that historical events provided a basis for these rumours. My young informants’ discussion of rumours—those about the government’s actions as well as those that may have prompted the government to react in the first place—provide



a platform upon which different ideas are sounded out between trusted social relations in the private space of a university meeting room. These informants understand that their generation is a potential threat to the government; in turn, the government is concerned enough to act in order to avoid a potential rupture in which offstage uncertainties would break through into public contexts in the disruptive form of protest on the streets of Almaty. The government operates with similar onstage performances as my informants—in this case, a narrative of stability and security—and these rumoured protests were seen to have the potential to disrupt these narratives.

In this chapter, rumours have been shown to be more than simply a discursive space for offstage reflection. In the case of Almaty, rumours were influential enough that actions were taken in response to them. This was the case for both members of the public and the government. The government does its best to ensure that private concerns are not able to break through into public contexts in the form of protests that could destabilise their official onstage narratives. While my informants employ a range of strategies to make sense of change, their use of rumour goes one step further and provides a tool for introducing and discussing these narratives of uncertainty in public contexts.

*Afterword: The Unpredictability of Change, Surprising Developments,  
and New Freedoms?*

My last visit to Kazakhstan was in 2017, and much has changed since carrying out my fieldwork. The unpredictability of change continues to be a central concern for my informants in Almaty. There is a glimmer of hope that there may be new freedoms for the young urban middle class, but this is a story which is still being told. This research is one contribution to an ongoing project of understanding how the young urban middle class in Almaty make sense of change in their social, economic, and cultural lives.

In March 2019, then–78-year-old president Nursultan Nazarbayev stepped down after having presided over the country since independence. In this unexpected move, Nazarbayev was once again able to take control of public onstage narratives surrounding his potential succession. During my fieldwork, multiple informants shared a rumour with me that Nazarbayev was in ill health. This rumour was linked to uncertainty surrounding the future of the president and the country; at the time, there was no clear route for a

succession of power. My informants were worried about potential political upheaval, and discussing Nazarbayev's health served as an analogy to reflect on not just the president's future, but also that of the country.

By naming Kassym-Jomart Tokayev as his successor, Nazarbayev was able to maintain his influence by taking up a new symbolic position, stating in a televised broadcast that he would retain 'major powers to determine the country's external and domestic policies' (BBC, 19<sup>th</sup> March 2019). Following the succession of power, Tokayev passed a resolution renaming Astana, the capital, to Nur-Sultan in honour of Nazarbayev's influence in making the city what it is today. Astana, the 'city of the future', slips into history just as its former manifestation as Tselinograd, the city of an industrialised Soviet future, did before it (Laszczkowski, 2016, p. 105). While ensuring that Nazarbayev retains influence and cements his place in Kazakhstan's history books, this succession of power and the renaming of Astana simultaneously reinforce the turbulence and unpredictability of public life in Kazakhstan.

Yet there is some hope for my young urban middle-class informants. On 30 August 2019, a small group of protesters from the recently established *Oyan, Qazaqstan* (Wake Up, Kazakhstan) organisation held a protest in Almaty on the National Constitution Day. The group called for reform of the current political system to create a new parliamentary democracy (Gordeyeva, 30 August 2019). The police did not shut down this protest or arrest protesters. Olzhas Aueyev, a political journalist writing for Reuters, reported that since his appointment, Tokayev has 'invited some [...] prominent government critics to discuss future reforms at a special council and has shown greater lenience towards dissident groups such as *Oyan, Qazaqstan*'. A defining feature of *Oyan, Qazaqstan* is the age of its members, most of whom are in their late teens and 20s. Although it is difficult to say at this early stage, it is possible that under Tokayev, this young generation are to be granted public freedoms that were denied to their parents' generation. Perhaps this change in leadership will aid the young urban middle class in their efforts to make sense of the change they face—rather than having to resort to rumour and rely on private offstage sources for information, the public sphere may become a place for open debate through an uncensored media, a democratic and representative parliament, and peaceful public protest.

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