Chapter 8
Cowboys, Gangsters, and Rural Bumpkins: Constructing the "Other" in Kazakhstan's "Texas"
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"*Shymkent – eto nash Texas*," we have been told countless times over the years in Kazakhstan. "Shymkent is our Texas." The idea of Shymkent – if not the entire South Kazakhstan *oblast*' (region) – being equated with Texas is a cultural trope that is typically repeated without thinking. A prime example of "substituting cliché for thought,"[2] most Kazakhstanis express a degree of surprise and inarticulateness when they are asked "Why?" This chapter analyzes their struggle to produce an answer to our – perhaps impertinent – question. Some suggest that the label comes from the region's southern location within Kazakhstan, along the border with Uzbekistan, comparable to Texas' southern location in the United States, along the border with Mexico. Others suggest that it is because both places are hot, that the landscape is similar, or that the shape of South Kazakhstan *oblast'* looks a bit like the shape of Texas. While all this may have a degree of truth, the trope primarily operates in the cultural landscape of contemporary Kazakhstan as a means of describing – and specifically *stigmatizing* – a certain kind of person coming from the south, coding them as "criminals," "bumpkins," and variously "foxy" or "cunning" (*khidryye*) characters. This dominant use of the metaphor to insult Southerners is by no means undisputed. As we show in this chapter, explaining why South Kazakhstan is called "Texas" is a political process, whereby ordinary Kazakhstanis create and contest their situated geographical imaginaries about the independent state and its socio-cultural divides.

Scholars of contemporary Kazakhstani politics have long considered ethnic divisions within the country and, in particular, the political and social implications of independence for the so-called "beached diaspora" of ethnic Russians.[3] Often locally termed the "Russian question," the shifting status of Kazakhstan's Russian minority has been a major point of scholarly interest.[4] However, this fixation with Kazakhstan's inter-ethnic borders has resulted in a systematic failure to analyze certain divisions among ethnic Kazakhs themselves. Where scholars have considered intra-ethnic divisions, their work has focused on clan politics and tribal affinities.[5] Although they note that many of these divisions map onto regional divides, they do not attempt to account for regional identities per se. This is the task taken up in this chapter. We argue that analyzing regional identity construction is a productive alternative to illustrating how *difference* is performed in contemporary Kazakhstan – moving beyond both essentialized ethnic divides (Russian vs. Kazakh) and tribal affinities (Great/Middle/Junior *zhuz*). In particular, we focus on just one of Kazakhstan's many regional imaginaries – that of "the south" – to raise broader questions about intersecting affinities, stigmas, inequalities, and territorial imaginaries. We thus begin by outlining some of the scholarly work on regionalism and "internal othering" and sketch some general characteristics of Kazakhstan's regional divisions before then moving on to the case study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Regionalism and "Internal Othering"

Political geographers and nationalism scholars have amply illustrated that national identities are usually constructed through articulating a national "self" in opposition to a foreign "other."[6] But as David Jansson underscores, while it is true that these foreign others are essentialized, they are also connected with constructing an essentialized self.[7] Curiously, few scholars have considered how national identity construction unfolds through processes of othering groups *internal* to the national body. So even though it is acknowledged that a coherent national "we" must be constructed – out of a presumably heterogeneous population – few have actually considered how the hegemonic "we" can also take shape through this very

heterogeneity. This is an especially important project for those who adopt a constructivist approach to nationalism and consider it to be "a social process by which certain historically contingent forms of territorial identities, symbols and ideologies are instilled into the social and individual consciousness. Through this process individual experiences are colonized by collective ones to join them in the communal story."[8] But, Anssi Paasi asks, how do "individual life-histories become involved with more general socio-spatial processes in various social practices in concrete time-space-specific contexts"?[9] And what happens to those alternative narratives that are deemed unworthy or discordant with the hegemonic nationalist vision?

The most common academic approach to analyzing diversity internal to the "nation" itself is to focus on ethnic, racial, and religious divisions. When some groups are seen as representing norms antithetical to prevailing nationalist ideals, they can be subject to a practice of "internal othering."[10] However, national groups and territories are often divided regionally and frequently on the basis of stark internal inequalities. A smaller set of studies have thus considered these regional divisions, which give rise to place-based identities of groups that are (a) *not* separatist and (b) *unquestionably understood to be part of that national group*. That is, they are not irredentist "others" with inclinations toward an alternate ethno-territorial structure. They are simply understood as somehow different from the dominant national "we." Previous studies on such "internal others" have only considered a handful of contexts, ranging from Europe[11] to the U.S. South[12] and China.[13] In these studies, the region that is being othered is always positioned as an exception to the national norm and frequently evincing values and behaviors that are deemed antithetical to dominant understandings of nationhood.[14] Because othering, as a set of practices, implies variously-scaled power differentials, the group or place considered exceptional is most typically stigmatized for their otherness. That is, their difference is denigrated rather than celebrated.[15]

In the case of Kazakhstan, this stigmatization does not necessarily lead to or result from economic and political subordination. More accurately, the various rhetorical practices of stigmatizing the "other" are a reflection of *contest* over power differentials. Indeed, what makes Kazakhstan so instructive is that in the years since gaining independence, the relative power balance between the North and South, the city and the village, and the Russified Kazakhs and the non-Russified Kazakhs has been undergoing rapid transformation.[16] We thus agree with Johnson and Coleman's point that "the economic and cultural marginalization of a seemingly subordinate region are contemporaneous and dialectical processes."[17] Power relations are necessarily at the heart of any study of regionalism for, as Paasi has argued, regions are "social constructs that do not rise in a vacuum," but "are made in broader social practice – regions are hence contested results of power relations." The very act of defining a region "is an act of power."[18]

Regionalism in Kazakhstan

The fact that Kazakhstan is said to have "its own" Texas is not unique. Internationally, the moniker is somewhat popular (at least among the media): Nigeria has been called the "Texas of Africa,"[19] Alberta is commonly known as the "Texas of Canada,"[20] and Mongolia has been dubbed the "Texas of Asia."[21] Although the metaphor is deployed for various reasons in all these cases, in Kazakhstan, it is bound up with the same civilizational metaphors explored in the "studies of internal othering noted above. That is, the dominant use of the Texas label is one of dividing Kazakhstan's territory in spaces of modernity, order, and civilization and spaces of backwardness, lawlessness, and tradition – a division that is then mapped onto the people from those different regions. The country's urbanites and northerners are generally coded as more modern and civilized, typically evidenced by their urban way of life and their cultural and linguistic Russification, and supported by their comparable political and economic privilege. By contrast, rural and Southern places and people have conventionally been framed as traditional, uncivilized, and culturally and linguistically Kazakh.[22]

Although these binaries are rooted in Soviet and pre-Soviet identity projects, they acquired new significance upon the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.[23] As Michael Billig has noted, "Sudden crises can produce quickly sharpened stereotypes [that] will build upon older cultural myths."[24] With the

loosening of residency controls after independence, large numbers of southerners and rural migrants moved to the city, while many ethnic Russians and other non-Kazakhs left the country. The result was a dramatically altered social fabric in Kazakhstan's urban centers, as well as a heightened visibility and awareness of social disparities. President Nursultan Nazarbayev even acknowledged as much in the country's development agenda, *Strategy 2030*:

> Today we witness new poles of confrontation: between the poor and the wealthy, the rulers and the ruled, the countryside and the city. Polarization acquired a geographic manifestation in the relations established between the city and the countryside. In both cases we witness a global process of social differentiation with the gap there between growing steadily. Within the nearest decade the countryside must become a priority area from the point of view of giving an additional impetus to market transformations, to emphatic settlement of social problems and development of infrastructure. We are to expect considerable rejection of a free labor force in the countryside, significant migration to the city from the countryside and ever developing processes of urbanization.[25]

In a truly Soviet fashion, Nazarbayev here names urban-rural disparities as a problem, and one that needs to be addressed, lest it impede the country's future development.[26] But the development of infrastructure and economic opportunities in Kazakhstan's hinterlands today has so far been insufficient to remedy these disparities and to keep rural and southern migrants in place.

In moving to the city, rural migrants are understood to bring the village with them – identified through various physical attributes, dress, manners, and use of the Kazakh language.[27] Catherine Alexander explains: "There was huge resentment from longstanding citizens against these incomers. Sometimes this was expressed as more competition for few jobs, but very often a whole raft of anxieties crystallized around these rural migrants."[28] In the 1990s, these new arrivals were the subject of extensive fear-mongering and rumor-mills, accused of bringing disorder, crime, and backwardness from the village to the city.[29] As Nazpary argues, "The urban population lumped street traders and hooligans together as southern Kazakhs (*Iuzhnye Kazakhi*) or *aul* Kazakhs (*aul'nye Kazakhii*), whom they blamed for crimes."[30]

Based on this association of southerners with criminality and social disorder in the 1990s, it is easy to see how Kazakhstanis came to narrate parallels with the "wild west" image of Texas cowboys and lawlessness. It is impossible to say precisely where and how this metaphor originated, as it has taken on a life of its own in the past decades. Yet our data amply demonstrate that people pick up on a diverse range of similarities between South Kazakhstan and the U.S. state. Metaphors are not simply a matter of language, as Lakoff and Johnson have famously argued: "They also govern our everyday functioning, … structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people."[31] If the function of metaphor is to allow us to comprehend one aspect of a concept in terms of another, this requires that the metaphor "highlight some features of reality and hide others …, which forces us to focus *only* on those aspects of our experience that it highlights."[32]

By considering the different ways that Kazakhstanis articulate the Texas–South Kazakhstan comparison, we can gain insight into how the metaphor both structures thought and practice in contemporary understandings of space, place, and identity in Kazakhstan. Importantly, this approach also allows us to explore how the othered individuals – the South Kazakhstanis themselves – interact with the trope. This is important because, as Jansson has noted, "internal orientalism" is significantly more complex than Orientalism as elaborated by Said because those in the othered region "have more of a voice in the national discourse than the Orient had in the discourse of the Occident."[33] Although more research is needed to adequately capture the voice of those from South Kazakhstan, our data do indicate an effort by the small number of respondents from South Kazakhstan to push back against the hegemonic script and articulate a more positive image of the region.

METHODS AND RESULTS

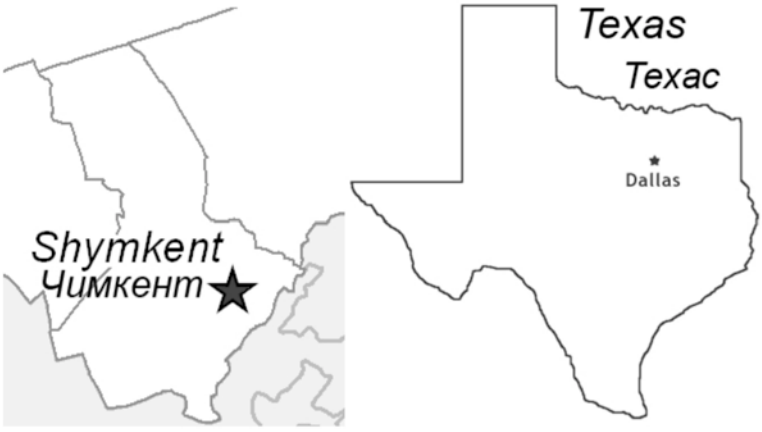
Methodology

The data for this project comes from four sources:

1. focus groups conducted in October 2010 (n=36 individuals, 5 groups total);
2. a countrywide survey conducted in September and October 2010 (n=1233);
3. ethnographic methods, including informal interviews and participant observation, conducted from 2005–2014; and
4. a mini-survey conducted with students at KIMEP University in Almaty between 2010 and 2013 (n=406).

A detailed description of the methods and sampling procedures for the first two sources is available elsewhere,[34] but we should note that for the purposes of this chapter, we only use a few questions from the survey and responses from only one of the focus group "trigger images," which is shown in Figure 8.1. In the groups, which were conducted at Kazakhstan National University, participants were shown approximately eight images, to which they were asked to respond freely. When necessary, the moderator (a Kazakh woman in her 50s) asked a pre-defined set of questions to stimulate discussion about the images. The image in Figure 8.1 was specifically designed to get participants talking about the South Kazakhstan–Texas metaphor, as a means to explore popular imaginaries of place and regional identity within Kazakhstan. Lastly, the mini-survey consisted of five questions, which were listed in English, Russian, and Kazakh; and students answered in any of these three languages. The results were transcribed into a digital database by a Syracuse University student research assistant who identified as Azerbaijani, but had family ties in Kazakhstan. Fluent in Russian, Azeri, and English, she translated all results into English. Where Kazakh was used, she used her Azeri skills or when this was insufficient, she consulted with her Kazakh-speaking relatives to secure the best English translation possible.

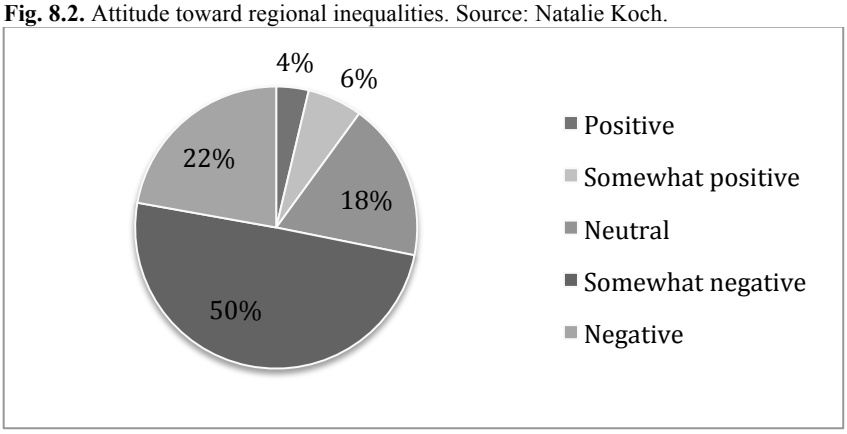
Fig. 8.1. Trigger image for focus groups: map of South Kazakhstan *oblast'* and map of Texas. Source: Natalie Koch.



General Attitudes Toward Regional Differences in Kazakhstan

In the large, countrywide survey, there were several questions pertaining to regional disparities that sought to address citizens' perceptions of divisions within Kazakhstan. One question asked respondents to consider whether regional inequalities actually existed in Kazakhstan. Some 72 percent (888) of the respondents replied in the affirmative, with the remaining 28 percent (345) claiming that there are no inequalities on the basis of territorial location. For those answering in the affirmative, they were asked a further question of how they viewed these inequalities on a positive/negative scale (n=888). As Figure 8.2 illustrates, 72 percent of respondents saw this as either "negative" or "somewhat negative," whereas 10 percent viewed it as "positive" or "somewhat positive," and the remaining 18 percent were neutral.

Fig. 8.2. Attitude toward regional inequalities. Source: Natalie Koch.



The next questions pertaining to regional differences asked respondents to consider the most and least desirable places to reside in Kazakhstan. To better contextualize these responses, they were asked how they judged what made locations of residence desirable. The answers, which included the possibility for ranking the top three rationales, are found in Figure 8.3. Economic opportunity is a clear first choice for most participants, with proximity to family and other ancestral ties to the locale appearing to be the second-most common rationale. The natural environment, location, and cultural activities were ranked as somewhat less important factors determining whether some place is deemed a desirable place of residence. Figures 8.4 and 8.5 illustrate the responses to the questions about the most and least desirable places in Kazakhstan. They show a clear identification of Kazakhstan's southern and western provinces as being least desirable, whereas Astana and the Almaty regions (both the cities themselves, which have a special administrative status, as well as the regions in which they are situated) come out clearly as the most-favored regions, while North Kazakhstan also ranked among the top five places mentioned.

Fig. 8.3. What makes a place desirable to live in? Source: Natalie Koch.

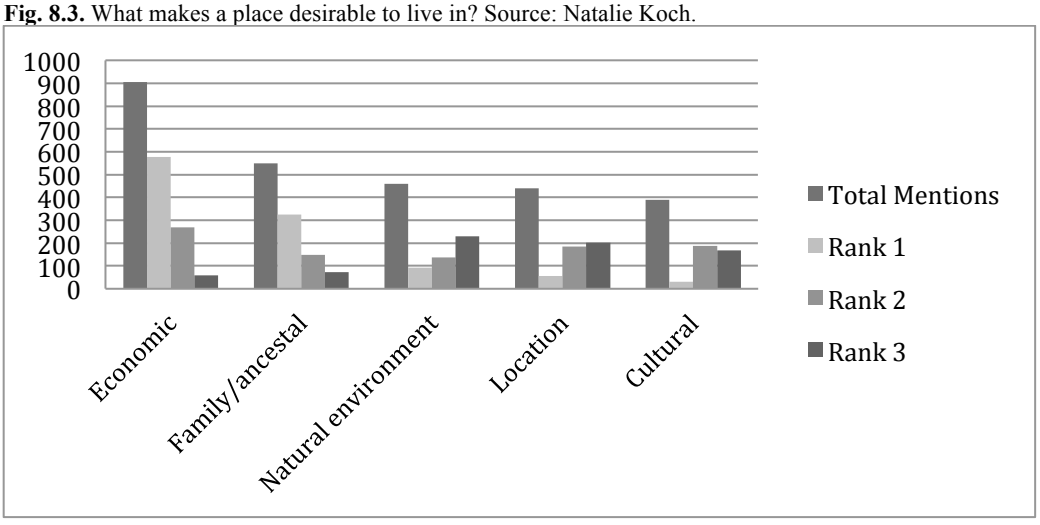


Fig. 8.4. Least desirable (left) and most desirable (right) places of residence. Source: Natalie Koch.

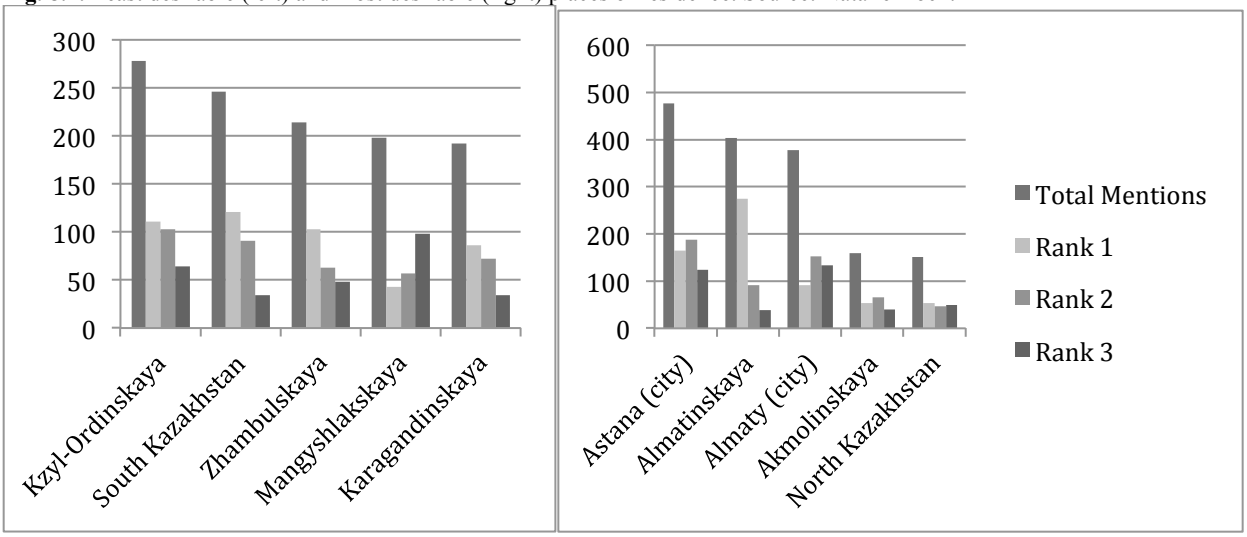
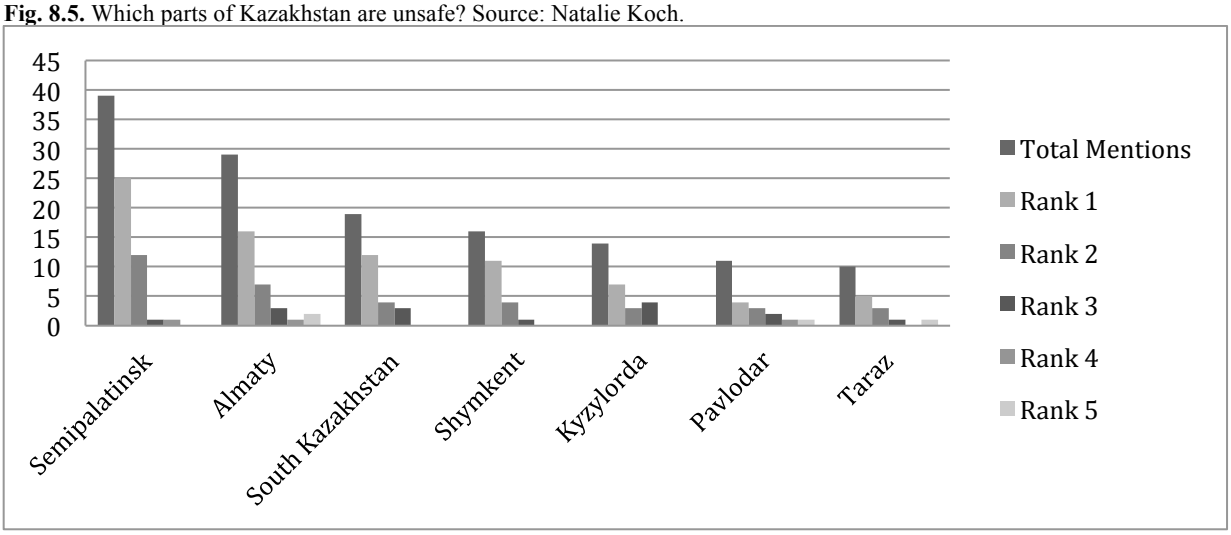


Fig. 8.5. Which parts of Kazakhstan are unsafe? Source: Natalie Koch.



The last question about state-scale regional differences asked respondents whether there are certain areas of Kazakhstan that they consider unsafe. Only 9.5 percent of the total sample (n=1233) answered in the affirmative, and those who did were asked to specify where. The top seven responses are shown in Figure 8.5 (n=117). This question was actually asked out of anticipation that Southern Kazakhstan might surface as a perceived site of danger, but as the graph shows, Semipalatinsk, near the Soviet-era nuclear weapons testing site that still suffers from extensive nuclear contamination, was identified most frequently. Almaty, Kazakhstan's largest city, comes in second, only then followed by southern places, including South Kazakhstan oblast', Shymkent, Kyzylorda, and Taraz. Besides Semipalatinsk, Pavlodar is the only northern location that was mentioned as a dangerous place (presumably because of its proximity to Semipalatinsk, although this is uncertain).

Interpreting Kazakhstan's "Texas"

Drawing from our ethnographic experiences, focus groups, and the mini-survey, this section introduces some of the common themes in narratives about South Kazakhstan, used by Kazakhstanis of diverse backgrounds. The vast majority of our interlocutors did not come from the region; for example, only 40 of the 406 survey respondents (9.9 percent) were from southern oblasts (Kyzylorda, South Kazakhstan, or

Zhambul) and of those, seventeen (4.2 percent of the total sample) were from Shymkent. As such, the narratives explored here are predominantly *about* the region, rather than *from* the region. More often than not, our respondents had no direct experience of traveling in South Kazakhstan. Since stereotypes are often *not* based on contact with the group or place being labeled, exploring the narratives of "outsiders" is perhaps the most appropriate method for understanding how region-making is at work in Kazakhstan today.

Like myth and rumor, stereotypes do not operate through rationalist measures of "truth" and "fiction," but rather circulate as second-hand *information*, about which "there is a sort of lethargic indifference, or at least hesitation, about truth and fiction."[35] This indifference is captured succinctly by one focus group participant, who remarked on the credibility of stereotypes about South Kazakhstan with the aphorism: "There's no smoke without a fire" (FG4P5). For this respondent, and many others who were not conflicted by claiming hearsay as actuality, even if unverifiable, the very fact that such stereotypes circulate so widely is deemed proof that they must have some grounding.

In the mini-survey, the first question asked: "Where are you from? (country, city/town)." As noted above, 9.9 percent came from southern oblasts, while 10.8 percent were from western oblasts (West Kazakhstan, Atyrau, Aktobe, Magystau), 51 percent from Eastern oblasts (East Kazakhstan, Almaty), 10.8 percent from north and central Kazakhstan (North Kazakhstan, Kostanai, Karaganda, Pavlodar, Akmola), 3.4 percent from unspecified regions of Kazakhstan, and 14 percent from abroad. The responses for international respondents were eliminated from the analysis for this section, as our interest lies in how *Kazakhstanis* perceive and articulate regional identities and traits in their homeland. The second question asked: "Do you know about a region here in Kazakhstan known as 'Texas'?" Of all the students surveyed, 90.6 percent affirmed that they did. Question 4 asked: "Which cities/towns are included in 'Texas'?" The answers to this question are mapped in Figure 8.6, showing a clear association with South Kazakhstan, although not exclusively. Beyond this oblast', some respondents named other places in the south more generally and, occasionally, Kazakhstan's western regions.

Fig. 8.6. Map of places mentioned in response to question, "Which cities/towns are included in 'Texas'?" The circular symbol is proportional to the number of mentions. 91.5 percent of the named locations were geo-coded and mapped, 4.5 percent of the named locations were regions (not locales) and not depicted on this map, and the remainder were not locatable. Map source: Natalie Koch.

The remainder of this section considers the answers to Questions 3 and 5, which were related and thus analyzed together: (3) "Why, in your opinion, is this region called 'Texas'?" and (5) "Please describe any cultural attributes/characteristics unique to 'Texas'?" The short answer responses to these questions were coded for common themes, and Table 8.1 indicates the number of times one particular code appeared in any answer. Some single answers might have covered five or six different thematic codes, whereas others might have addressed only one. The table thus indicates the total times a theme was mentioned by all respondents.

Table 8.1. Themes mentioned by individual respondents.

Theme	Count
Behavior / mentality	169
Culture / traditions / religion	131
Climate	113
Language / dialect	110
"Wild" / crime / gambling	94
Location (South / West)	91
Cars / driving	43
Agriculture / livestock	24
Family / gender / patriarchy	23
Uzbekistan / Uzbek culture	23
Physical appearance / dress	18
Oil / gas	14
Shape of the territory	14
Bride kidnapping	13
Development status	12
Population size (large)	7

Behavior and Mentality

The study participants most frequently emphasized that people from South Kazakhstan have a unique mode of comporting themselves and possess a particular southern "mentality" (*mentalitet*). Respondents would frequently just mention that they have their "own" mentality and behave differently, without specifying what they meant by "different." When respondents were more specific, the most common adjectives included some combination of the following: aggressive, angry, bad-mannered, cheeky, confident, conservative, crazy, dishonest, family-oriented, foxy/cunning/clever (*khidryi*),[36] impudent, impulsive, patriotic, pushy, rude, spirited, talkative, rough, uncivilized, uncultured, unintelligent, violent, and wild. Common nouns included: bumpkins, cowboys, rednecks, *membets*,[37] "cool guys" (*krutyye*), and show-offs (*ponty*). For example, one respondent explained that the region is called Texas "because there are a lot of people who are still living like in villages. As I know, Texas in USA is also the place full of undeveloped personalities (bumpkins)" (student from Almaty). Another illustrated their supposed rudeness through the following example: "They use very unpleasant swearing words like humiliating your mother" (student from Zharkent), or another simply noted: "Abuse of swearing words, especially mother related" (student from Almaty). Indeed, the southern use of foul language was mentioned frequently in the survey, and the region's unique repertoire of curse words is well known around the country.

South Kazakhstanis were also frequently described as being highly entrepreneurial or enterprising, but typically in a bad way. For example, one respondent explained that "they always seek to

gain benefit from any relationship (use people in their own interest)" (student from Almaty), while another argued: "People mostly look for profit in anything: it is because of the lack of money there" (student from Kazakhstan, unspecified). Or in the words of another:

> People from Shymkent are foxy, they always try to benefit from others. They do "bastard" things very often, especially on the roads. But if they are sitting in governmental organizations, you are really unlucky, because Shymkent people always wish some bribes. (student from Almaty)

The issue of official corruption is discussed below, but this example points to how people from "Kazakhstan's Texas" are often said to be so single-minded in their enterprising spirit, that their behavior becomes downright unsociable and unscrupulous.

While the survey responses coded under the behavior theme were predominantly negative, there were fifteen individual mentions (of 169 total) of regional hospitality and locals' kindness. Oftentimes this was attributed to being an element of traditional Kazakh mores, which is discussed in the following section. Sometimes this more positive stereotyping originated with those from the region, as in the case of one respondent from Shymkent, who wrote, "People in South Kazakhstan are very kind, many of them are religious, students are clever." But this was not always the case, as those offering praise actually came from all over the country – Almaty, Astana, Mangystau, etc. The following survey response is also typical of our ethnographic observations, whereby people explaining the stereotype would first list the negatives and then qualify this with another list of positives: "[They are] impudent, confident, but for some reason they live in good conditions. But I can also mention good parts; they are kind and generous. Actually, it all depends on the person, so we cannot generalize everyone. Some are very, very good" (student from Almaty). Similarly, in one author's interviews in Astana, a young Kazakh woman in her 20s, Dinara, explained of the stereotypes: "in the South, they are very kind, generous, helpful, open, but they will sell you out for money or any other immediate benefit."

In a few cases, though, respondents were less circumlocutory in the way they sought to temper the negative stereotypes. For example, Dinara's cousin, also a 20-something living in Astana, rejected the negatives by arguing that the stereotype about South Kazakhstan being like Texas "is really just about the people who left [the region] and came to the cities – not about the people living there now. All the people from Shymkent that I know are very nice, but actually, I know some very bad people, who are from Almaty and Astana." For her, being "bad" is not a fair character judgment for people from this region, but can be applied to individuals from all over the country. In other cases, some respondents outright refused to speak about the issue, rejecting it as utter nonsense, as in the case of one survey respondent who simply wrote: "It is pure marginalism covered by stupid stereotypes" (student from Karaganda), or another who explained that the region was called Texas "because some stupid guys labeled it so" (student from Almaty).

In one of the focus groups, a young man from Shymkent, who had been highly vocal throughout the discussion, clammed up when the Texas slide was shown. He got visibly agitated and, waving his arms, exclaimed in English, "No comment!" He did interject at a few points, though, to insist that the region's criminal reputation lacks validity and is only a stereotype, and to argue that the Kazakh nation does not have regional differences: "Kazakhstan is altogether Kazakh – all of it, not piece by piece" (FG4P9). Although few of our interlocutors actively negated the stereotype – in no small part, but not entirely, due to the study's methodology – some did seek to present a more positive image of people from "Kazakhstan's Texas." This ambivalence is also reflected in the second and fourth most frequently mentioned themes, culture/religion and language/dialect, which are analyzed together the following section.

Culture and Language

As noted above, South Kazakhstan is popularly understood to be a bastion of Kazakh tradition, where locals "consider themselves the keepers of Kazakh culture" (student from Almaty). Within this set of

narratives, the speaker's positionality is essential to determining whether this was deemed a positive or negative – although our respondents were mostly in accord that this characterization was correct. Some, for example, were clearly not in favor of the southern affinity for Kazakh traditions, evident, for example, in the way that the following respondent codes it as extreme: "People are more concerned with culture [and] traditions in this region and I think that it is even radical" (student from Almaty). On the other hand, some were more clear about their respect for their values: "People there speak only in [the] Kazakh language (I respect them for it)" (student from Almaty). Indeed, in discussing the locals' traditional values, many respondents explicitly framed this in terms of "honoring" or "respecting" traditions and Kazakh culture:

> Shymkent is known as the city where traditions of Kazakh people are *honored* by many people. (student from Shymkent)
>
> People from Shymkent are very hospitable, they *respect* Kazakh culture more than other Kazakhs in other regions. (student from Astana)
>
> They *respect* old traditions. (student from Shymkent)
>
> For me, in Texas live patriots of Kazakhstan, they all *respect* all Kazakh tradition[s]. They really love speaking in Kazakh. (student from Almaty)

Another mode of framing this was to say that people "saved" (*sokhronili*) Kazakh traditions in the face of Russian influence, as in the following set of survey answers:

> It is usually considered that people in Shymkent are different from other region's population in terms of culture. We can say that our history began in this region and of course people in Shymkent are more patriotic and *saved* all the customs and traditions of Kazakhs, and *saved* its cultural identity. (student from Almaty)
>
> Southern people try to *save* Kazakh culture and language. [This region] differs from others, where Russian language and culture dominate. (student from Shymkent)
>
> I strongly believe that this region was not under big influence of [the] Russian Empire and USSR. I can say that they tried to *save* almost all traditions and cultural peculiarities. (student from Kazakhstan, unspecified)
>
> People from south Kazakhstan are more likely to speak Kazakh in contrast with northern Kazakhs. Also, southern people try to know all traditions and customs more than northern [people]. There is no domination of Russians. (student from Kyzylorda)
>
> We are real Kazakh people. This is [a place of] real and ancient culture of Kazakh people [who] *saved* Turkistan. (student from Shymkent)

Numerous other respondents mentioned the region's many historical buildings and religious/pilgrimage sites, such as the Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi in Turkistan, noted in the last quote. These narratives are interesting for the way that they reflect a spatial imaginary about the extension of Russian colonial power prior to and during Soviet times. As becomes apparent in these quotes, respondents often framed this in terms of the "reach" of Soviet or Russian power. In the case of one focus group discussion, when the moderator asked why South Kazakhstan is commonly said to be more traditional, one participant twice answered: "Because Russia simply didn't reach it (*ne doshla prosto*)" (FG2P9).

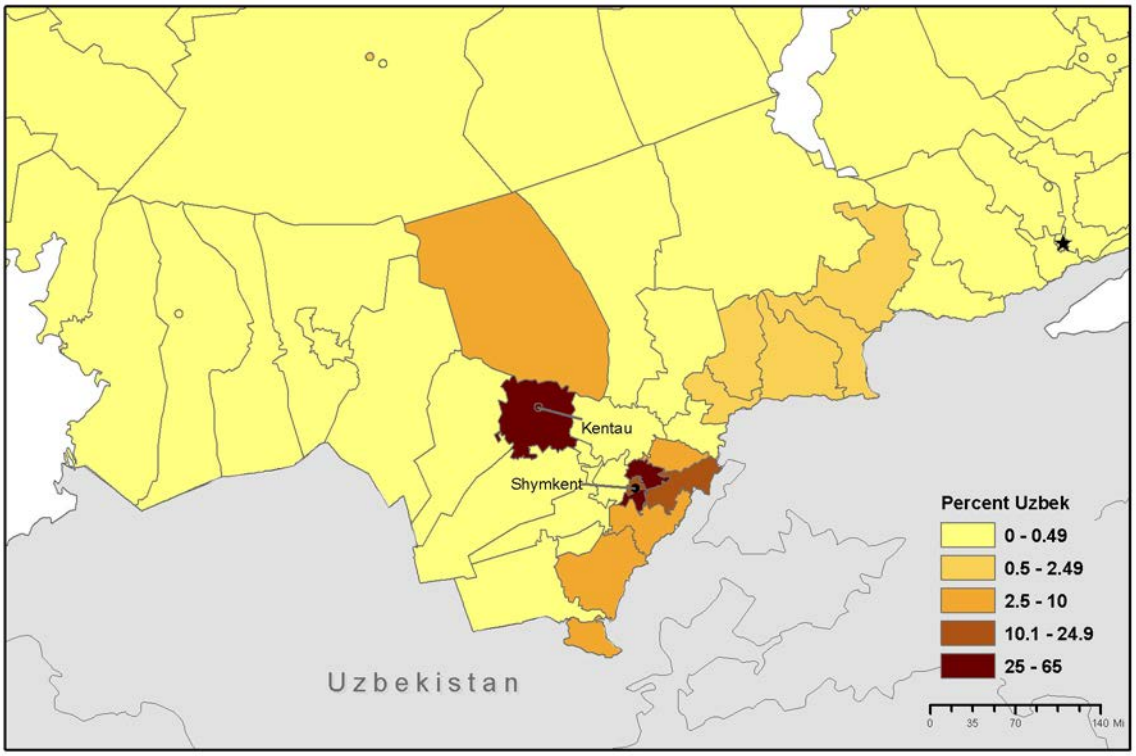
Another important element of these narratives is that they tap into ideas about what it means to be a "real Kazakh." Though rarely articulated as explicitly opposed to Russian influence, the "real Kazakh" trope depends precisely on this binary: that there was some more essential Kazakh identity that predated Russian influence. The participants were rarely overly specific about what it meant for those from South Kazakhstan to hold onto "real Kazakh" culture, often stating that they are simply "conservative" or something like the following: "I think people from Texas really keep or try to keep all traditions, our culture and language, compar[ed] to those who live in Astana for example" (student from Almaty). That said, when they did give examples, the most frequently mentioned elements were dress, the prioritization of family, food (especially *shashlik*), holiday celebrations, hospitality, language, patriarchy, and respecting elders.

Fig. 8.7. Actors at the Celebration of Nomadic Civilizations in 2011. Source: Natalie Koch.

The "real Kazakh" narrative also operates on the basis of an urban/rural binary, in that rural areas are understood to be the home of traditional culture. As Natalie was told by her Russian host family in Almaty, who had never traveled to the villages, "You've been to the village, where the 'real' Kazakhs are."[38] This sort of romanticization or exoticization of the rural is pervasive of nationalist imaginaries the world over and is enacted through a wide range of cultural festivities in Kazakhstan.[39] The distinctly rural nationalist "we" is both essentialized and written into the country's urban landscapes through objects such as yurts, which are erected during various national holidays, like Astana Day. Figure 8.7 illustrates this at work in Astana during the "Nomadic Civilizations" celebration during Astana Day 2011. The actors at this event were simply walking around the complex assembled near the Khan Shatyr, to be photographed like the fairy tale characters roaming about Disneyland – but functioning as exotic symbols of "traditional" Kazakh culture rather than Walt Disney's figures of fantasy.

As orientalist discourses do anywhere, romanticizing Kazakh traditions and culture frequently obscures deeper stigmas and marginalization. This ambivalence is again apparent in how language was discussed in the survey responses. Many simply noted the prevalence of Kazakh language use, which does not come across as an overt critique when it stands alone. However, as Nazpary has discussed, speaking Kazakh in the cities in the 1990s was highly stigmatized, since during Soviet times, "Russian language was associated with civilisation, progress and urbanisation and Kazakh was depicted as a backward tribal language (*ne razvityi kochevoi iazyk*)."[40] Although Kazakh language use is far less stigmatized today than it was twenty years ago, it remains a political issue, around which citizens variably articulate their own affinities and claims to modernity. Yet, having an accent from South Kazakhstan is still stigmatized, and numerous respondents remarked upon locals' "unique phrases" (student from Aktan), as well as their unusual pronunciation, slang, and overall dialect. For many, this was seen as a product of Uzbek influence – with the language said to be mixed or in one case, "deformed" (student from Semipalatinsk) – due to the proximity with the Uzbekistan border and the large Uzbek minority there (see Figure 8.8).

Fig. 8.8. Uzbeks as a percent of total *raion* population. 2010 census data from the Agency for Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan (ASRK 2010). Map source: Natalie Koch.



Gender relations – particularly *patriarchal* family relations – were noted by various respondents, as well as the practice of bride kidnapping (mentioned by thirteen respondents total), which was suggested to persist in this region alone. Most of these characterizations were negative and coded as signs of regional backwardness. Some examples illustrate this:

> [The] man is domineering in Shymkent families. (student from Shymkent)

> Boys [are] not democratic with girls (after marriage, wife should stay at home). (student from Almaty)

> They all marry virgins only. All Kazakhs are like this, but sometimes non-virgins are acceptable. But in Shymkent it is shame. (student from Almaty)
>
> Women and men are not treated equally in this area. Men run this area. There is one tradition, which is seen [as] most likely [to occur] in this area, called "abduction of women," where men can steal a woman and make her marry him without her agreement. (student from Almaty)
>
> My mother told me to never marry a guy from Shymkent. The daughter-in-law is not equal to everyone else. If I married [someone from there], I would [be] wearing slippers and serving everyone. (student from Almaty)

These quotes reflect a wide range of anxieties, from gender to class and beyond, but it is interesting to point out that, even though we did not collect data about the gender of the respondents, it was clear that women had been warned about the supposed dangers of marrying a man from South Kazakhstan (and more generally any man from the village). Some respondents, though, did mention that "Texas girls are good wives" (student from Almaty), and that a local woman "can be a great house wife, she knows how to cook, very good" (student from Karasai). We cannot say with certainty, but it is likely that these respondents were men, who had been socialized in quite a different manner than their female classmates, who were threatened with loss of status and liberty if they married a "Texas guy."

Lawlessness, Hooligans, and Corruption

In addition to the first theme about South Kazakhstanis' "unique" behavior and mentality, many respondents explicitly referenced the region's "high criminal rate" and the fact that it is heavily populated with "cowboys," "as in Texas's movies, wild wild west!" (student from Pavlodar). When they specified the shape of local criminality, respondents would mention theft, murder, gun violence, fighting, bribery and official corruption, driving violations, drug use, gambling, and the prevalence of "gangsters." This was also observed in the other methods we employed, including our informal interviews and the focus groups. For example, when asked about negative stereotypes of Shymkent, one focus group discussion proceeded as follows:

> FG3P6: Lawlessness!
>
> FG3P2: [It is a] dangerous region, criminal region.
>
> FG3P1: Yes, very dangerous.
>
> FG3P4: Why do they call it Texas?
>
> FG3P3: Because there are gangsters there.
>
> FG3P9: Gangsters have been preserved in Texas like a tradition.

In addition to simple attributions of South Kazakhstan being "the most dangerous state in the country" and characterized by "lawlessness" (*bespredel*), some would describe how laws are simply not respected or circumvented, as in the following example:

> They have "cool grass" [weed] and there it's like characters of westerns: power dominates law, not the civil law. This may be some informal truth… In "Texas": (1) If something is "not allowed" (for example after the restaurant closes, to go inside and have dinner), but [if] "you really want to" then you can. (2) Law functions through "fairness" according to the situation. (student from Almaty)

Other respondents noted the use – or abuse – of family connections to secure one's desired ends, such as getting a government job. Similar to John Agnew's description of the Northern Italian conflation of Sicilians and *Mafiosi*, there is a sense in these narratives about other parts of Kazakhstan experiencing "a veritable invasion of criminal elements whose presence corrupts the local fibers of what is left of a healthy body politic."[41] This sense of "contamination" is a longstanding point of concern for the former Russified elites of Kazakhstan since independence, and it is often narrated through the alleged "takeover" of government positions by southerners.[42] This was apparent in a few responses in this study, however the corruption of order on Kazakhstan's *roads* was discussed far more by our respondents. Students – mostly those from Almaty as in the following examples – consistently emphasized that "people from Shymkent […] don't know how to drive a car. On the road they are really ill-bred." They were also said to "drive the car like insane people," have an "Inability to drive normally," and that "drivers from 'Texas' are considered to be the worst." People could identify drivers from Shymkent because of their license place, which used to (until very recently) begin with the letter "X." Some people indeed saw this very letter as the connection with the label "Texas," though it is perhaps more frequently connected with another term for people from Shymkent: "X-men" (see Figure 8.9).

Fig. 8.9. Drawing of one survey respondent, depicting a man from "Kazakhstan's Texas" and his car. Source: Kristopher White.

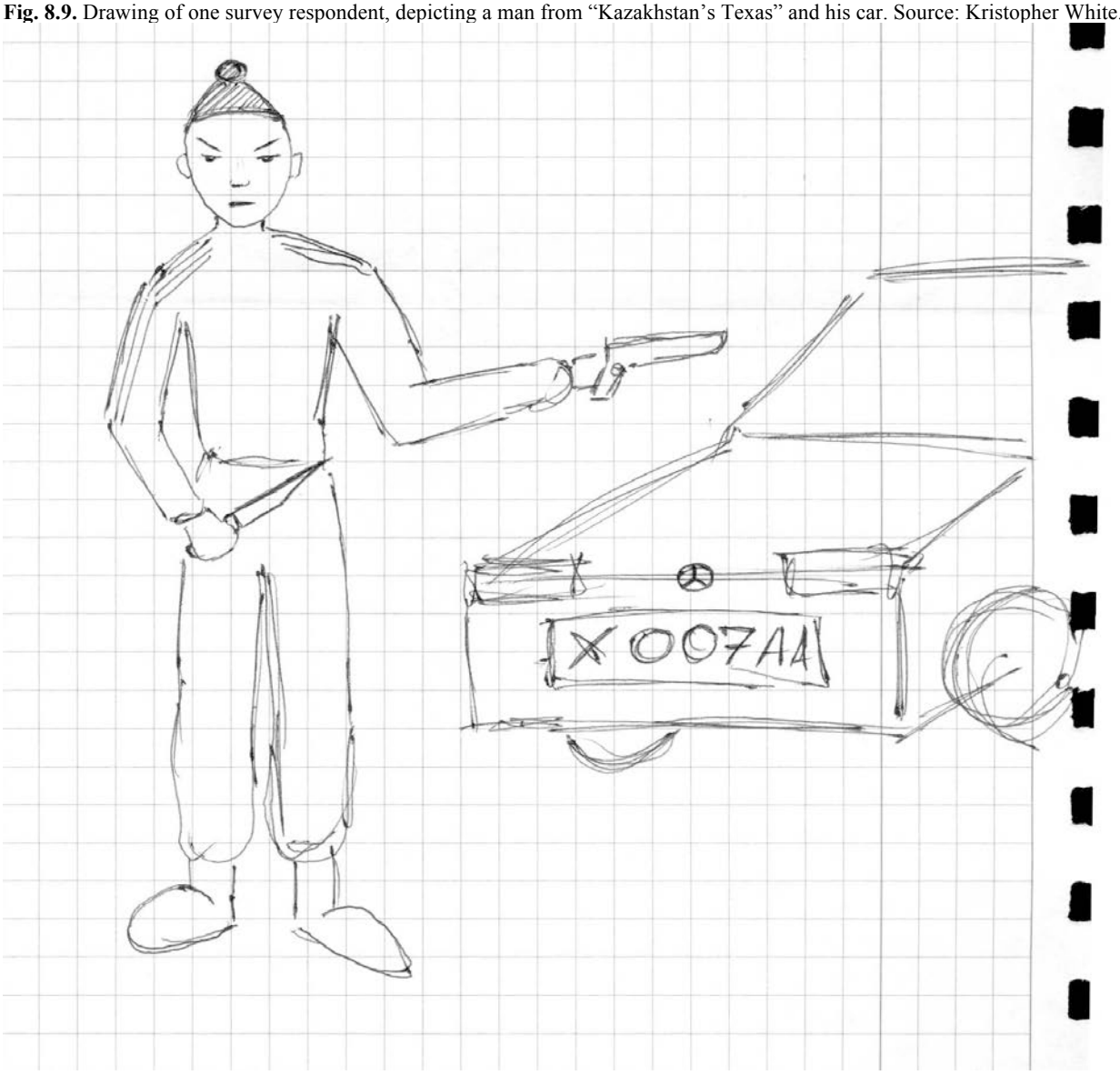


Figure 8.9 is also of interest because of the clear racialization of this apparently criminally-minded man: he looks far more "Asian" than how most Kazakhs are popularly portrayed. As Table 8.1 indicates, there were various mentions of peoples' physical appearance – "black color of faces," "dark faces," "black color eyes" – and sometimes their cleanliness – "dirty people" (all students from Almaty). In general, though, explicit racism was largely absent from the accounts we collected. That said, our respondents were far more comfortable openly insulting individuals from South Kazakhstan through jabs at Uzbeks. As Nazpary has also suggested, southerners and villagers are "seen as being closer in culture and manners to Uzbeks (versus Almatians as closer to Russians)" and that all the negative characteristics explored here "are often ascribed by urban Kazakhs to Uzbeks."[43] One focus group discussion about "Texans" illustrates this:

Moderator: But on the other hand, they are viewed with caution. Why?

FG5P5: They cheat [*obmanyvayut*].

Moderator: Why – cheating?

FG5P5: They associate [*svyzalis'*] with Uzbeks.

[men in the group laugh together]

Moderator: It is influence of the Uzbeks, huh?

FG5P4: Well it's a border; it was always restless and it simply stayed that way.

Moderator: "It stayed that way." And everyone thinks so?

FG5P5: They are cunning [*khidryye*].

Moderator: Craftiness [*khidrost'*] – is it a trick they developed from trade?

FG5P5: They learned it from Uzbeks.

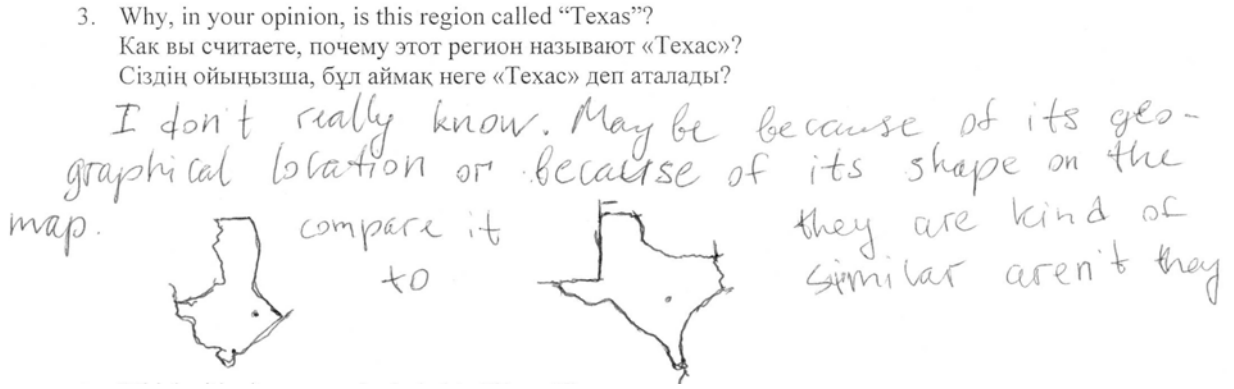
This alleged absorption of criminal or "foxy" behaviors from Uzbeks is based not just on spatial proximity, but actual association and interaction: "In my opinion their culture attributes are influenced by Uzbek people. Because many of them are foxy as Uzbeks" (student from Aktau). Or as another student explained: "In 'Texas' there are Uzbeks, since Uzbekistan is closer to the region. This brings to the idea that there is language deformation, Kazakh culture deformation, as well [as] very developed corruption!" (student from Semipalatinsk). By relegating these negative characteristics to a particular *space,* these narratives are indicative of a broader phenomenon that Jansson describes as "spatializing" or "regionalizing" undesirable traits.[44] Johnson and Coleman develop this idea by exploring how places of internal otherness are not only constructed as repositories or spatial containers of backwardness, but that they consequently come to be seen as "impediments to national progress."[45] As such, by "hierarchicizing space" in this manner, "internal orientalist discourse represents a subordinate section of the state in a particular (unflattering) way so as to produce a national (i.e., state-scale) identity with desirable characteristics."[46] By writing off the ills of lawlessness, criminality, foxiness, and all manner of anti-social behavior, Kazakhstanis assert their own commitment to a particular vision of legality and honesty. Whether it is a "real" commitment is neither verifiable nor particularly relevant: such rhetoric is more about narrating one's own self as a reverent and truly *civil* subject.

Climate, Landscapes, Location, and Shape

We recognize that in many cases, our respondents were merely unsure about the origin of the South Kazakhstan–Texas connection. In fact, there were 112 discrete mentions of the phrase "I don't know" in the entire survey. Many were followed by an effort to come to some conclusion, but the expression of

uncertainty was apparently important for speakers to qualify their statements and refuse authority on the matter. Figure 8.10 gives an example of precisely this – as well as illustrating the last theme we will briefly mention: explaining the Texas connection through physical geographic similarities. These answers – found through all our methods – were dominated by references to the heat and climate, desert landscape, location along the country's southern border, and the similar shape of the two territories' outline as viewed on a map.

Fig. 8.10. Example of one answer specifying territorial shape as a reason for the name association. Source: Kristopher White.



As Koch discusses in her analysis of narratives about Kazakhstan's capital change, the most common answers to the survey question of why the capital was moved was Almaty's location in a dangerous earthquake zone.[47] She argues that this answer was likely selected frequently because it reflects an official narrative, but that of the many official reasons given by President Nazarbayev and his discursive machine, "This is arguably the most depoliticized: the move is constructed as something that had to be done for safety and on the basis of 'objective' physical geographic facts."[48] Writing off highly political questions to an issue of physical geography certainly has the power to diffuse potentially inflammatory discussions, and there were surely study participants who found this to be a quick way to dismiss our questioning. But once ideas like this start to circulate, people do also come to believe that physical geography is the explanatory factor. Of course, this leads to a sticky, ultimately unresolvable "which came first, the chicken or the egg" question, but in any case, these narratives were the least political tack a respondent could take.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS: SPATIALIZING INTOLERANCE

In this chapter, we have argued that explaining why South Kazakhstan is called "Texas" is a political process, through which ordinary Kazakhstanis articulate situated geographical imaginaries about the independent state and its socio-cultural divides. Moving beyond the hitherto prevailing focus on the country's "Russian"/"Kazakh" divide and looking to divisions internal to the Kazakh nation, this study has been informed by the recent literature about how national identity formation occurs through discourses that need not be physically performed at international borders – that it is far more diffuse and connected to wider territorial imaginaries.[49] Although we have focused primarily on narratives about the region from actors with little or no contact with the place, we have noted that Shymkentsy are not irrelevant actors in this discourse. Rather, as Jansson also notes in his work on the U.S. South, many from the region seek to advance their own representations of the region.[50] Some no doubt strategically mobilize the Texas metaphor – extending it, and bringing it to life – whereas others may seek to actively negate it or seek to ascribe South Kazakhstan more positive traits. Furthermore, as Kazakhstanis are increasingly on the move in the years since independence, they are interacting more with their compatriots from different regions of the country.[51] For some, this has led to the break-down of certain stereotypes, whereas for others, it has led to their entrenchment.

Regions "are perpetually 'becoming' instead of just 'being'," and as we noted in the introduction, the very act of defining a region is an act of power.[52] Regions, produced through the likes of popular metaphors like the Texas analogy, are, in Paasi's felicitous expression, "structures of expectations," which "are the basis for the narratives of identity, mobilisation of collective memory, and they also constitute the visible and invisible social 'gel' based on values, norms and ideologies."[53] As this case study illustrates, the modes of characterizing South Kazakhstan do indeed structure the expectations of ordinary citizens. Though they are far from static, popular imaginaries about Kazakhstan's internal divisions – both spatial and social – are still informed by certain binaries about rural/southern backwardness and urban/northern modernity. And yet, through ostensibly "innocuous" forms of expression, such as joking that Kazakhstan has its own Texas, speakers employing this narrative to denigrate certain internal others are spatializing their intolerance. By shifting the locus of criticism from an individual person to an abstract region, the act of spatializing intolerance obscures their outright prejudice. The veil of humor is assumed to obscure this ill-natured intolerance. And yet, this veil is readily transparent, and none of our interlocutors from Shymkent would be convinced that being called a Texan is a badge of honor, even if it is "just a joke."

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[37] According to Nazpary, *membet* is a derogatory term for a "stupid and backward Kazakh from the *aul*" (i.e., village) and generally connotes the same set of negative character traits explored here, such as "being religious, traditional, backward, rich, cunning, Mafioso, violent, patriarchal, dishonest, bigoted." See, *Post-Soviet Chaos*, 169–170.

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[42] See Koch, "Bordering on the Modern."

[43] Nazpary, *Post-Soviet Chaos*, 169.

[44] Jansson, "Internal Orientalism in America," 311.

[45] Johnson and Coleman, "The Internal Other," 865.

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[53] Paasi, "The Resurgence of the 'Region' and 'Regional Identity'," 133.