

Decolonisation of knowledge governance in Kazakhstan: an autoethnographic inquiry into faculty study tours in Japan

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to analyse the author’s role in navigating the “hybrid coloniality” of Kazakhstani higher education. It explores how the author sought to deconstruct the epistemic frameworks of knowledge governance through study tours organised for Kazakhstani faculty in Japan.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper employs autoethnography to centre the author’s personal narrative, emotional labour and ethical dilemmas as a “bridging scholar”. It moves beyond observation to examine the researcher’s own vulnerability and the power dynamics involved in mediating between two distinct academic spheres.

Findings – The narrative reveals that facilitating epistemic disruption requires substantial emotional labour and continual negotiation of an “insider-outsider” identity. The author finds that decolonisation in this context is not a systemic overthrow but a relational process of unsettling taken-for-granted norms, in which she herself remains implicated in the power structures she seeks to critique.

Originality/value – By reframing the study tour as a site of mutual epistemic struggle rather than knowledge transfer, this paper contributes to decolonial literature by illustrating how “epistemic disruption” operates at the micro level. It offers a nuanced account of the anxieties inherent in decolonial praxis in post-Soviet Central Asia.

Keywords Kazakhstani higher education, Higher education reform, Knowledge decolonisation, Knowledge governance, Autoethnography, Epistemic delinking

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

The global discourse on the decolonisation of higher education has gained momentum, challenging the assumptions and power structures that have long shaped academia (Shah, Choo, Couch, & Marlowe, 2025). This movement extends beyond curricular diversification, calling for a fundamental “unsettling” of colonial legacies and a reconstruction of knowledge systems that centre marginalised voices, perspectives and epistemologies (Shahjahan, Estera, Surla, & Edwards, 2021). It seeks to dismantle the Eurocentric hegemony through which knowledge from the Global South is often appropriated, theorised and disseminated through a Western lens (Adefila *et al.*, 2021).

At its core, this is a struggle over knowledge governance. Knowledge governance extends beyond administrative policy to encompass the politics of knowledge: the processes through which knowledge is legitimised, knowers are recognised and ways of knowing are validated and promoted (Wheeldon & Sahay, 2025). Historically, the modern university functioned as an apparatus of “enclosing knowledge,” separating “university knowledge” from other forms of knowing, often relegated to superstition or common sense. This enclosure has been described as inherently colonial. As universities in the Global North established a global hierarchy, Western academic practices, perspectives and languages became positioned as universal



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standards and primary pathways to academic success. This process contributed to what has been termed “epistemicide” – the destruction of other knowledge systems – and perpetuated “epistemic injustice,” whereby entire communities are marginalised in their capacity as knowers (Hall & Tandon, 2017). Consequently, calls to decolonise higher education are also calls to decolonise knowledge governance and dismantle the structures that perpetuate historical inequalities.

This conversation is particularly salient in post-socialist contexts, where the collapse of the socialist (Soviet) ideological empire was often followed by the growing influence of the capitalist (Western) one. To engage critically with these influences, Walter Mignolo calls for confronting coloniality, the enduring systemic logic of Eurocentric domination that outlives formal colonial administrations and continues to shape power, knowledge and being (Mignolo, 2011). Coloniality enforces a “zero-point” monopoly of Western universalism that has historically marginalised local ways of knowing (Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012). Silova *et al.* (2017a, 2017b; 2021) have extensively examined the “coloniality of knowledge production” in the post-socialist spaces of the former Soviet Union and Central and Eastern Europe. Their work challenges the simplistic narrative of a linear transition “from plan to market”, revealing a complex interplay between Soviet legacies and global educational reforms, particularly in Central Asia (Silova & Niyozov, 2020). Addressing these realities requires a shift from political and territorial decolonisation to epistemic decolonisation that is concerned with “delinking” from the colonial matrix of power (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). For Silova *et al.* (2017b, 2018) “delinking” from Western-centric knowledge means creating space to reinterpret socialist pasts and to reclaim the capacity of local scholars to understand the world through their own lived realities as legitimate “epistemic subjects”.

Within this global conversation, Kazakhstan’s higher education system presents a compelling and complex case. Situated at the crossroads of empires and ideologies, Kazakhstan’s academic landscape reflects successive epistemic dependencies – first on the Russian Empire and its Soviet successor and subsequently on the Anglophone West in the post-independence period. This condition is not merely a historical artefact; it is a lived and ongoing tension that may foster epistemic anxiety – a persistent insecurity that local knowledge is inadequate and requires external validation. After independence, Westernisation was welcomed as a means of de-Russification but also created a precarious dynamic in which escaping one dependency appeared to require embracing another, leaving little space for a locally grounded and autonomous intellectual tradition. Kazakh anthropologist Alima Bissenova characterised this condition as “hybrid coloniality”, in which we (scholars) found ourselves “despite our political independence, without yet having fully digested, reflected on (our new cultural, intellectual, and even political dependence on certain external standards of modernity), or overcome our previous coloniality” (Bissenova, 2022, p. 165). Analytically, this term captures a dual entanglement: the lingering influence of Soviet legacies and an emerging metric-driven dependence on Western standards.

This paper emerges from my personal and professional navigation of this complex terrain. As a Kazakh scholar tenured at a national university in Japan, I occupy a unique vantage point: an insider by heritage and an outsider by location. From this position, I initiated a series of short-term study tours for faculty from various Kazakhstani universities at my host institution in Japan. This was not a state-mandated programme but a personal intervention intended to offer colleagues a different lens through which to view themselves and their academic systems. The intervention is unconventional because it steps outside the dominant Russia–West geopolitical and epistemic axis that defines Kazakhstan’s post-Soviet trajectory. Japan, a non-Western yet highly modernised nation with its own history of engagement with the West, offers a counter-model that may disrupt the binary thinking underpinning “hybrid coloniality”.

This profound personal engagement compels me to reflect on my role in these study tours. With each tour, rather than assuming the capacity to effect systemic change, I increasingly recognised the potential for micro-level epistemic disruption, both among participants and within myself. Consequently, the central research question of this paper is: “What is my role in

facilitating study tours for Kazakhstani faculty, and what have I learned from these experiences?” To answer this question, I turned to autoethnography, as it challenges canonical, “objective” approaches to research and instead treats inquiry as a “political, socially-just and socially-conscious act” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). I position autoethnography itself as an act of “delinking” by centring my own experiences, vulnerabilities and reflections. Through this process, I connect the personal and the cultural, using my narrative to illuminate the structures of power and knowledge that shape the lives of my Kazakhstani colleagues and myself. This paper is therefore a personal account of sustained self-examination, an attempt to determine whether my intervention in Japan contributes meaningfully to the pursuit of epistemic freedom in Kazakhstan.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. First, I provide an overview of Kazakhstan’s higher education landscape, outlining its history of Soviet influence and post-independence Westernisation and reviewing the scholarly discourse on decolonisation in the region. Next, I discuss autoethnography as a method of decolonial inquiry. This is followed by an autoethnographic account of the study tours and a critical reflection on my role in them. In the Discussion section, I connect these experiences to the broader concept of knowledge governance and its decolonisation. Finally, I consider the potential of such interventions to foster epistemic pluralism.

2. Kazakhstan’s higher education landscape: reform, internationalisation and search for decolonisation

To understand the significance of the study tours and the insights they generated, it is essential to first examine the complex and layered landscape of Kazakhstan’s higher education system, shaped by Soviet inheritance, post-independence crisis and active Westernisation. Its current form reflects a turbulent history and an ongoing search for a modern identity inextricably linked to the broader project of epistemic decolonisation. Kazakhstan’s political and territorial decolonisation was formalised in 1991.

2.1 Reform and internationalisation

Kazakhstan inherited a paradoxical educational system from the Soviet Union. This legacy provided significant assets, including free education and near-universal literacy – a dramatic increase from 2% literacy at the beginning of the 20th century (Yakovets, 2014). It prioritised the natural sciences and mathematics and separated research from higher education (Ahn, Dixon, & Chekmareva, 2018; Kuzhabekova, 2022). However, this system also reflected Soviet colonial structures. Controlled by Moscow, educational policies largely replicated those of the Soviet centre, fostering intellectual dependency. The social sciences and humanities were saturated with Marxist–Leninist ideology and served political indoctrination rather than critical thinking (Kuzhabekova, 2020c, 2022; Niyozov & Bahry, 2021). Pedagogy emphasised memorisation and rote learning, discouraging independent thought (Yakovets, 2014). This legacy aligns with Freire’s (1970/2000) critique of “banking education”, in which students are treated as passive “vessels” for ideological instruction rather than active learners. It also suppressed indigenous Kazakh pedagogical traditions that emphasise the holistic integration of humans with nature and the spiritual world as guides to harmonious living (Kabylbekova, 2015; Mun, Gafu, & Anuar, 2025), expanding educational access while constraining intellectual freedom (Mynbayeva & Pogolian, 2014).

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 plunged Kazakhstan’s education system into crisis. Moscow’s funding ceased, reducing educational expenditure from 4.1% of the gross domestic production 1995 to 2.4% by 2004 (Tastanbekova, 2020), leading to deteriorating infrastructure and a teacher exodus (Tastanbekova, 2018, 2020). Reforms aimed to adapt the system to the market economy. The end of the state monopoly facilitated the growth of private universities and market mechanisms. The number of higher education institutions increased

from 55 in 1990 to 181 by 2004 (Tastanbekova, 2019). Seeking global integration and economic competitiveness, Kazakhstan adopted the bachelor's–master's–PhD system and joined the Bologna Process in 2010, aligning with European and international standards (Ahn *et al.*, 2018; Tastanbekova, 2019).

The internationalisation agenda has shaped Kazakhstan's higher education policy for two decades, creating opportunities while presenting contradictions. The Bolashak Scholarship Programme has enabled thousands of students to study at Western universities, producing a pool of highly skilled specialists (Kuzhabekova, 2020a). Universities have expanded international partnerships and attracted foreign scholars. Nazarbayev University exemplifies this trend through collaborations with institutions such as Cambridge University, Duke University and Pennsylvania State University (Sabzalieva, 2017; Hwami, 2023).

However, this process reflects complex geopolitics of knowledge. The adoption of Western models risks reinforcing epistemic hierarchies in which Western knowledge and English function as universal standards (Kuzhabekova, 2020a, b; Kuzhabekova, Bilyalov, & Mussabayeva, 2022). Academic advancement increasingly depends on Western metrics, particularly publication in English-language journals indexed in Scopus or Web of Science (Kuzhabekova, 2020b, c; Kuzhabekova *et al.*, 2022). This devalues research conducted in Kazakh and Russian, and local topics while burdening scholars with the demands of English-language publishing (Bahry, 2020; Bayanbayeva, 2025). Although Kazakhstan has adopted Western institutional structures (degree frameworks, credit systems and quality-assurance mechanisms), it continues to grapple with the transition from Soviet administrative traditions to Western ideals of academic freedom and critical inquiry (Narbaev, Amirbekova, & Bakdaulet, 2025). This tension between Western appearance and practical implementation is reflected in the experiences of the Kazakhstani professors who participated in the study tours in Japan.

2.2 Scholarly discourse on decolonisation in Central Asia and Kazakhstan

Decolonisation has become a major focus of academic inquiry (Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012; Tlostanova, 2015). Scholars such as Niyozov and Bahry (2021) highlighted the “multi-layered colonialism” of post-Soviet states, where nations must navigate the legacies of Russian imperialism while confronting Western academic colonialism. They emphasised the need to move beyond Soviet educational traditions while critically assessing new pedagogical approaches within the Central Asian context. However, Niyozov and Bahry (2021) challenge Tlostanova's characterisation of Central Asian scholars as those who “mostly agreed on continuing discrimination and Orientalism in relation towards themselves in Western dominated academia” (Tlostanova, 2015, pp. 50–51), pointing to works such as Silova and Niyozov's (2020), which demonstrates Central Asian scholars' active contribution to alternative perspectives (Niyozov & Bahry, 2021, p. 174). It is important here to distinguish “multi-layered colonialism” from “hybrid coloniality”. The former describes the historical accumulation of successive imperial influences, whereas the latter captures the contemporary, lived experience of these overlapping systems operating simultaneously in researchers “daily lives” (Bissenova, 2022).

In Kazakhstan, anthropologist Alima Bissenova advocated moving from historical grievances towards contemporary self-examination, exploring decolonisation through place, identity and subalternity (Bissenova, 2022, 2023). This includes examining national narratives and the status of marginalised groups post-1990s reforms. Sharipova, Bissenova, and Burkhanov (2024) similarly define decolonisation in Kazakhstan and beyond as the “decanonisation of imperial and national narratives” – the dismantling of state-sanctioned historical myths. Kuzhabekova (2020b, p. 126) extends this critique to the global academic economy, arguing that the North–South dichotomy marginalises Eurasian scholars by positioning them as “Southern in expertise but Northern in income”. This formulation highlights a unique “Second World” predicament: although Eurasian scholars may lack the

Western-trained expertise privileged in global academia, they often enjoy higher living standards and greater access to state research funding than their counterparts in the Global South. Consequently, they occupy a blind spot within global decolonial discourse – too privileged to be considered “South”, yet epistemically excluded from the “North”.

I situate these discussions within [Tostanova and Mignolo's \(2012\)](#) framework of epistemic delinking. In *Learning to Unlearn*, these authors critique the corporate university as a key site of knowledge production, validation and dissemination. They argue that it governs knowledge through market-driven, neoliberal mechanisms of globalization, including standardised metrics, international university rankings and pressure to publish in English-language Scopus-indexed journals. They call for delinking from this model by “unlearning” Eurocentric supremacy and elevating non-Western ways of thinking, knowing and being as equally legitimate within global scholarly discourse.

For scholars in peripheral regions such as Central Asia and Kazakhstan, epistemic delinking is not an isolationist rejection of Western knowledge. Rather, it represents an act of epistemic disobedience that challenges universalising Western categories that delegitimise indigenous ways of knowing. In this sense, the search for decolonisation in Kazakhstan is fundamentally a search for epistemic delinking – a process of overcoming uncritical dependence on both Soviet administrative legacies and Western-centric publication metrics.

3. Methodology

Pursuing epistemic delinking requires a shift from detached, impersonal inquiry to reflective engagement with marginalised ways of knowing. For a question as personally and structurally embedded as my role in facilitating study tours for Kazakhstani faculty and reflecting on my own experiences, a traditional objectivist methodology is inadequate. Rooted in the Western positivist tradition, such approaches require a detached researcher and reinforce a rigid distinction between knower and known, potentially reproducing colonial power relations ([Takayama et al., 2017](#)). I therefore turned to autoethnography, a methodology that is not merely a tool for data collection but also a practice of decolonial thought ([Datta & Chapola, 2023](#)).

Autoethnography emerged from the critical turn in the social sciences as a challenge to the colonial legacy of traditional research, particularly ethnography, which historically involved Western scholars studying, defining and representing the non-Western “other” ([Datta & Chapola, 2023](#)). By contrast, autoethnography seeks to describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal (auto) experience to understand cultural (ethno) experience ([Ellis et al., 2011](#)). By centring the lived experience of the researcher as a cultural member, it reclaims narrative authority, dismantles the researcher–researched hierarchy and honours indigenous ways of knowing and being ([Nisa-Waller & Piercy, 2024](#)). For a scholar from a post-Soviet context – a space where individual and national identities have been historically defined by powerful external states – choosing a methodology that positions the self (auto) as the primary site of legitimate knowledge production constitutes an act of epistemic delinking and self-determination. It challenges both the Soviet legacy of subsuming the individual to the collective state ideology and the neocolonial pressure to adopt a disembodied, “universal” (that is, Western) scientific discourse. As [Silova et al. \(2017, S94\)](#) call on scholars from the “blurred zone or boundaries between different ‘worlds’” to use autoethnography to disrupt “the established binaries of being”, the methodology validates narrative, emotion and vulnerability as both data and analytical tools ([Nisa-Waller & Piercy, 2024](#)). It connects the “personal to the cultural”, enabling researchers to use their own experiences to illuminate broader social, political and historical forces. Rather than denying subjectivity, it accommodates the researcher’s influence on the research process ([Ellis et al., 2011](#)). In this study, my memories of organising the tours, emotional responses to participants’ reactions and struggles in navigating a complex positionality are not anecdotal asides but the substance of inquiry. Exposing these vulnerabilities is both a methodological requirement and a commitment to honest and accountable scholarship.

My specific case, as a Kazakhstani scholar researching and teaching education at a Japanese national university, reflects a complex positionality. The legacy of Russian and Soviet colonialism in Central Asia has shaped my academic identity. I was born in the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic a decade before independence following the dissolution of the USSR. I spent my childhood and received my primary education during the Soviet period, experiencing what [Piattoeva, Silova, and Millei \(2018, p. 2\)](#) describe as “some mixed feelings of attachment, optimism, dullness, and alienation associated with our participation in ‘building’ socialist futures”. I completed high school in independent Kazakhstan at the end of the turbulent 1990s and was determined to study abroad. Enrolling in a Japanese language and literature programme at a university in Kazakhstan laid the foundation for doctoral study in Japan and, ultimately, a tenure-track position. I was recruited to support my department’s internationalisation as a “young, foreign, female” scholar. Although I no longer meet the age criterion, I still feel the weight of this intersectional expectation more than a decade into my career. This experience partly motivated my decision to organise the study tours.

My methodological praxis involved a multi-layered process. First, I retrospectively documented the “epiphanies” – moments of profound insight and cognitive shift ([Ellis et al., 2011](#)) – experienced by both myself and the Kazakhstani participants during the study tours in Japan between 2016 and 2019. These accounts formed the study’s core data. I then reflected systematically on these experiences through a decolonial lens and critically examined my own role, power and positionality throughout the process. This approach allowed me to interrogate what it means to know and to challenge Eurocentric modes of knowledge production, making the research process itself a liberatory project ([Datta & Chapola, 2023](#)).

4. Autoethnographic account: facilitating epistemic (De)Construction on Japanese ground

4.1 The genesis of an idea: a personal mandate

The study tours emerged from a long-standing intellectual curiosity among Kazakh scholars about Japan. At the beginning of Kazakhstan’s modern nation-building efforts in the early 20th century, Alash intellectuals – leaders of a political and cultural movement striving for Kazakh autonomy – viewed Japan as a powerful countermodel of national development. The Meiji Restoration demonstrated how a non-Western nation’s could modernise rapidly, build a strong state and resist colonial expansion while preserving a distinct cultural identity ([Saktaganova, Baibossyn, Bizhanova, & Kanenova, 2024](#)). For Alash leaders like Alikhan Bukeikhanov, navigating the pressures of Russian imperial rule, Japan offered an alternative to uncritical Western imitation ([Mustoyapova, 2024](#)). This interest in Japan as a counter-model persisted among later generations of Kazakh intellectuals, including myself.

Against this backdrop, the idea for the study tours crystallised. The immediate impetus was an enquiry from a university professor in Kazakhstan who wished to visit Japanese universities. I welcomed the idea because I had long contemplated how I might contribute to my home country from my position in Japan. The request resonated with my experience of navigating two academic worlds and my awareness of the anxieties faced by colleagues caught between a Soviet past and a Westernising future. It felt less like a simple request than a contemporary expression of a long-standing intellectual quest. It was the perfect opportunity to act on a personal mandate I already felt – to build a bridge and create a space in which colleagues could gain a different perspective on their own context.

4.2 The cohorts: award-winning educators seeking new horizons

Between 2016 and 2019, I organised and hosted four study tours, each involving 10–15 professors from universities across Kazakhstan. Most participants – all but three over the four years, who were self-funded – financed their trips awarded to winners of the “Best University Teacher” competition. Established by the Ministry of Education and Science, this national

award recognises outstanding educators based on pedagogical innovation, research output and educational publications. My guests were therefore not disaffected outliers but highly accomplished academics who had successfully navigated the Kazakhstani system and received formal recognition for their achievements. Their willingness to invest their award funds in these visits reflected a strong commitment to professional development beyond established pathways.

Another notable feature of the groups was their gender composition. Across the four years, approximately 90% of participants were women, ranging from early-career lecturers to senior professors. Although this may reflect the gender distribution within Kazakhstan's humanities and social sciences, it also shaped group dynamics and my role as a facilitator, a point to which I return later.

4.3 A curriculum of contrast: designing the study tours

I determined the aims and content of these tours in consultation with the study tour leader and my host institution, the Institute of Human Sciences. Although both entrusted me with considerable authority in shaping the programme, its delivery relied heavily on my Japanese colleagues, who served as lecturers and arranged visits to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology of Japan (MEXT) and local schools. The tours were designed to be immersive, moving beyond observation to engagement with multiple levels of Japan's education system.

The programme included lectures by prominent Japanese scholars on aspects of the education system that offered a productive contrast with the Kazakh context. The central theme was "Internationalisation of the Higher Education System of Japan in the Era of Globalisation". The content remained largely consistent across the four years, covering the historical development of the system since 1945, contemporary challenges such as population ageing and workforce adaptability, and efforts to foster social engagement and individual development. Participants also received detailed explanations of major policy initiatives, including the "300,000 International Students Plan", "Global 30", "Go Global Japan" and "Top Global University Project", through which the government funded international engagement among students and academics.

To complement the lectures, the programme included site visits. Participants observed teaching and learning in local public schools and visited the MEXT to gain insight into educational policymaking and implementation, including its role in promoting lifelong learning and internationalisation.

Each tour concluded with a structured reflection session in which participants synthesised their experiences, shared their "moments of revelation" and discussed how insights from the lectures and visits might be contextualised and applied in Kazakhstan. These sessions were intended not as simple transfers of information but as catalysts for dialogue and deconstruction.

4.4 Moments of revelation: a Kazakh Gaze on Japanese academia

The most significant outcomes of the tours were not recorded in feedback forms but emerged through informal conversations, surprised reactions during Q&A sessions and reflective discussions over coffee. These moments of epiphany and epistemic rupture prompted participants to reassess assumptions about their own systems. Their impact lay in making previously taken-for-granted norms suddenly and strikingly visible. Three themes repeatedly surfaced: academic freedom, the supervision of international students in Japanese and the constant pressure to publish in English.

4.4.1 Academic freedom. A recurring theme was participants' surprise at what they perceived as the high degree of academic freedom enjoyed by Japanese academics. They were struck by the apparent autonomy over curricula, research agendas, and public engagement. This perception, however, stands in tension with the complex reality of academic freedom in

Japan, which faces pressures arising from government signalling, funding structures and cultural norms that discourages dissent (Kingston, 2023). The point was not that Japan was a perfect haven of liberty. Rather, for visitors whose professional lives are often shaped by top-down directives associated with Soviet administrative legacies (Kuzhabekova, 2022; Narbaev et al., 2025), the contrast itself was revelatory. It opened a conceptual space for imagining a different relationship between academics and the state. In my journal, I recorded a remark by the head of a department at one of Kazakhstan's oldest universities: "*We spend half our lives writing reports for the Ministry about what we plan to teach. I had forgotten that a professor could actually be trusted to just... teach.*"

4.4.2 Doctoral supervision in the vernacular. Perhaps the most striking revelation came from observing research life at the university. Participants were deeply impressed by Japanese professors providing rigorous doctoral supervision to both domestic and international students entirely in Japanese. This directly challenged a widespread assumption embedded in Kazakhstan's internationalisation agenda: that "world-class" scholarship must be conducted and communicated in English. They encountered a tangible counter-example – a nation that had achieved scientific and technological prominence without abandoning its own language in the pursuit of "globalization". Although Japanese professors discussed strategies such as recruiting international faculty to teach and publish in English (Huang, 2018), the experience nevertheless prompted participants to question the inevitability of Anglophone linguistic dominance.

4.4.3 The politics of publication. Discussions of research evaluation and publication metrics elicited a complex range of responses. Participants learned that many Japanese academics, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, faced less institutional pressure to publish in high-impact Anglophone journals and that high-quality publications in Japanese continued to carry substantial weight in promotion decisions. Initial reactions of relief and envy were often followed by insecurity and confusion. Participants began questioning the logic of their own system. Why were they assessed through metrics that seemed to devalue their language and research contexts? Was the emphasis on Scopus-indexed publications intended primarily to improve research quality, or did it also serve as a performance of global competitiveness for external audiences? The tension became particularly evident during a Q&A session following the lecture. When I explained that publications in Japanese journals remained highly valued in tenure reviews, a senior professor turned to the group and remarked: "*It seems that while we are running on a treadmill chasing Scopus percentiles, they [Japanese professors] are actually building knowledge in their own language for the development of their own society*". The sentiment was met with strong agreement.

These were not simply observations about another country. They were moments of deconstruction in which assumptions about academic freedom, the language of scholarship and the measurement of intellectual value became contingent, open to question and reimagination.

5. Autoethnographic reflections: navigating my positionality, power and purpose

Reflecting on this narrative, I now turn to a deeper examination of my role, the power dynamics I navigated, the ethical questions that emerged and the overarching purpose that informed my facilitation of the study tours.

5.1 The insider–outsider paradox

Throughout the tours, I occupied a fluid and paradoxical positionality. On the one hand, I was an insider. My Kazakh heritage, fluency in Kazakh and Russian and familiarity with post-Soviet academic culture created an immediate basis for trust and rapport. I understood the unspoken meanings behind frustrations, bureaucratic complaints and anxieties surrounding "internationalisation". This shared cultural grammar enabled a depth of communication that

would have been difficult for a non-Kazakh host to achieve. I was one of them – a “sister” – and this bond facilitated the encounters.

Simultaneously, I was an outsider. Two decades in Japan, a tenured position at a prestigious national university, and integration into a different academic system had created substantial professional and experiential distance. I was no longer subject to the daily pressures and constraints defining their realities. This position offered critical perspective but also carried the risk of appearing privileged, out-of-touch or judgemental. Was I a bridge between two worlds, or was I standing on a distant shore, beckoning to a place they could not reach? This duality remained a constant source of tension. I had to maintain enough insider identity to sustain trust while drawing on outsider knowledge to offer alternative perspectives. In many ways, my position reflected the broader geopolitical and epistemic dynamics explored in this study: a Kazakh scholar who had established an academic career outside both Russian and Anglo-American spheres of influence.

As the tours progressed, performing this dual identity felt increasingly precarious. When participants expressed surprise at the autonomy of Japanese academics and the absence of ministerial micromanagement, I became more than a translator of Japanese policy; I became a mirror for their epistemic anxieties. I recall one occasion when a senior professor asked whether Japanese academics were truly exempt from submitting detailed reports on teaching activities and students’ achievements to the ministry. At that moment, I felt the sharp collision between my insider knowledge of Soviet-derived bureaucracy and my outsider experience of academic life in Japan.

5.2 The weight of emotional labour

Organising these tours involved far more than logistical planning and academic lectures. It required sustained emotional labour, defined by Arlie Russel Hochschild as the management of feelings as part of one’s work (cited in [Han, Yin, Yang, & Wang, 2021](#)). This labour is multifaceted and often goes unnoticed. I served as a cultural translator, not only of language but also of norms and expectations. I acted as a mentor, offering guidance and encouragement; as a confidante, listening to personal and professional concerns and as a facilitator, managing group dynamics and maintaining collective well-being. A significant part of my role involved care: anticipating needs, soothing anxieties about navigating a foreign city and creating a psychologically safe space in which participants could feel vulnerable enough to question their professional identities.

This emotional labour was intensified by the gender composition of the groups. As a woman hosting groups composed largely of women, I felt both solidarity and expectation. As in many professions, academia often implicitly assigns care work and emotional maintenance to women ([Newcomb, 2021](#)). Although essential for fostering community and learning, this work is rarely recognised in performance metrics or workload models. The exhaustion I experienced at the end of each tour was not merely intellectual or physical, but also emotional. Participants were not simply questioning university administration; many were questioning the value of a lifetime’s work within a system that continually signalled they were “lagging behind” the West. Emotional labour became the “glue” that held the tours together. I had to project confidence to demonstrate what was possible while remaining vulnerable and approachable to maintain connection. My exhaustion stemmed from absorbing and managing the hopes, fears and cognitive dissonances of a dozen colleagues – a burden that remains a familiar, if uncredited, aspect of academic life for many female scholars.

5.3 Navigating power and hierarchy

Despite my efforts to create an egalitarian atmosphere, the tours were shaped by complex and shifting power dynamics. I was acutely aware of the influence I held. Institutionally, I was the host, a representative of a prestigious Japanese university, and the gatekeeper to this unique experience. Epistemically, as organiser and principal lecturer, I had the power to frame narratives, select topics and shape how participants viewed the Japanese system. This responsibility led me to question whether I was broadening perspectives or simply advancing

my own interpretation. When selecting themes like “Internationalisation” or “Academic Freedom”, I often wondered whether I was idealising Japan in order to critique Kazakhstan.

For instance, during the visit to the MEXT, I watched colleagues diligently taking notes on policies that I knew many Japanese scholars criticised as top-down. I hesitated. Should I immediately deconstruct the Japanese model by exposing its flaws (gender inequality, rigid hierarchies)? Or should I allow the image of a “non-Western modern system” to stand in service of epistemic disruption? I chose the latter, yet the decision felt ethically uncomfortable. I realised that to facilitate disruption, I had to momentarily silence my own criticisms of Japan. This was itself an exercise of power: shaping the narrative to maximise the contrast with Soviet legacies, even if it meant presenting a somewhat essentialised image of Japan.

However, this power was neither absolute nor static. Participants were not passive recipients of knowledge. As recipients of the “Best University Teacher” Award, they possessed considerable status and intellectual authority. They challenged my interpretations, contributed their rich experiences and co-constructed the meaning of the tours through discussion and reflection. Power was continually negotiated. In the lecture hall, I was the expert; over dinner, I was a fellow Kazakh sharing stories from home. My positionality shifted between mentor, peer and guide depending on the context. Recognising and navigating these dynamics was essential to maintaining the trust on which the tours depended.

5.4 Ethical entanglements: representation and responsibility

This autoethnographic project carried significant ethical responsibilities. In telling this story, I expose not only my own vulnerabilities but also represent the experiences and voices of my colleagues. This raises important questions of representation and responsibility (Ellis *et al.*, 2011). My primary commitment is to portray their “revelations” respectfully and faithfully, without reducing complex intellectual and emotional journeys to data serving my own academic purposes. To this end, I changed identifying details and focused on the thematic substance of participants’ reflections rather than individual personalities.

An ethic of reciprocity is equally important. Participants entrusted me with their time, confidence and intellectual engagement. This paper is an attempt to reciprocate by amplifying their questions, validating their concerns and bringing their experiences into a broader scholarly conversation that may contribute, however modestly, to positive change within their institutions. It is also an attempt to honour cross-cultural exchange through rigorous, self-critical analysis that remains attentive to context and committed to decolonisation. Autoethnography requires an ethics of care directed not only towards others but also towards oneself (Ellis, 2007). Through this process, I seek to understand my responsibilities as a scholar situated between worlds.

6. Discussion

The experiences of the Kazakhstani professors in Japan involved more than observing a different education system. They constituted an encounter with an alternative mode of knowledge governance that illuminated the coloniality embedded within their own system. Kazakhstan’s higher education sector, shaped by a condition of “hybrid coloniality”, continues to grapple with the decolonisation of knowledge governance. Soviet rule imposed a highly centralised model of knowledge management. Following independence, the shift towards Western models, although framed as modernisation and de-Russification, introduced a new layer of coloniality by subjecting scholars to the asymmetrical power relations of the neoliberal global knowledge order.

6.1 Japan as a counter-model

In this context, the significance of Japan lies in its positionality outside the dominant Russia–West binary that has shaped Kazakhstan’s intellectual landscape. Japan provides a compelling

example of a nation that modernised rapidly and became a global powerhouse while fiercely protecting and developing its national language as the primary vehicle for high-level scholarship (Kariya, 2024). Participants observed that a university system they regarded as world-class – a judgement itself shaped by global rankings that often reflect Euro-American biases (Shahjahan, Blanco Ramirez, & Andreotti, 2017) – could flourish in a non-Western, non-English environment. This example demonstrated that modernisation need not entail Westernisation and that linguistic sovereignty is not antithetical to global scientific engagement. Such insights challenged the perceived association between English and intellectual progress that underpins contemporary hierarchies of knowledge.

However, using Japan as a counter-model requires a crucial decolonial caveat. Japan was itself an imperial power that weaponized education for cultural assimilation. During the Meiji and pre-war Shōwa periods, the state enforced Shinto–Confucian ideologies and imposed *kokugo* (national language) policies in Korea and Taiwan, suppressing indigenous identities and demanding intellectual conformity (Lee, 2009). Nor is contemporary Japan an academic utopia. Japanese higher education faces many of the same pressures of internationalisation and neocolonialism that affect Kazakhstan. Government-led internationalisation initiatives have been criticised as top-down, inward-looking responses to demographic decline and institutional competition rather than genuine forms of global engagement (Ota, 2018). The system remains fundamentally Japan-centred, creating linguistic and cultural barriers for international students, for whom Japanese proficiency often functions as a gatekeeper to services, integration and career opportunities (Dalglish, 2025). Academic freedom also faces unique challenges. Neoliberal reforms have compromised university autonomy and reinforced hierarchical structures. Political signalling, particularly from right-wing forces, discourage research on sensitive topics such as Japan’s wartime past, leading to self-censorship and marginalisation (Kingston, 2023). A chronic lack of diversity – with women and international scholars underrepresented in faculty positions – fosters a conformist “groupthink” that can stifle critical inquiry (Nagatomo, 2020).

Although these issues were discussed in lectures and reflection sessions, participants remained struck by the ability of Japanese academics to maintain a robust vernacular scholarly tradition despite such pressures. These imperfections and internal contradictions make Japanese higher education a more relatable – and ultimately more useful – case than any idealised model.

6.2 Reflecting on my role in the decolonisation of knowledge Governance in Kazakhstan

I now return to the central question of this paper: what is my role in facilitating study tours for Kazakhstani faculty, and what have I learned from these experiences? Answering these questions requires moving beyond self-affirming narratives of individual influence towards an ethic of relational accountability, as conceptualised by De Oliveira (2021). Relational accountability is an ethical commitment to evaluate our work not through immediate, top-down systemic changes but through the honesty with which we confront our complicity in systemic harm and uphold our non-transactional responsibilities to those with whom we are connected.

In addressing the first question, my role must be understood as a deeply relational act of mediation and care rather than a unilateral transfer of knowledge. As a “bridging scholar”, I occupied a fluid insider–outsider paradox. As an insider sharing a post-Soviet heritage, language and academic socialisation, I was able to establish trust and solidarity with the participants. As an outsider tenured in Japan, I represented an alternative epistemic possibility. Within this paradoxical space, my role was to facilitate a temporary clearing for epistemic disruption. By positioning Japan as a reference point outside the dominant Russia–West binary, the tours offered a tangible example of a higher education system that, although subject to many of the same knowledge hierarchies, has maintained a degree of resistance through its strong vernacular academic tradition. This encounter catalysed what Takayama (2019) terms

“negative comparative education”, whereby experiences of surprise, discomfort and cognitive dissonance enabled participants to challenge familiar ways of knowing and being. This experience encouraged them to recognise the contingency of both their own “hybrid coloniality” and the neocolonial metrics of global knowledge governance.

Crucially, this role involved an embodied performance of emotional labour and care. My responsibilities extended beyond curating academic lectures to creating a psychologically safe space. I acted as a confidante, absorbing and soothing the epistemic anxieties of highly accomplished, award-winning educators who were not merely navigating bureaucracy but actively grieving the systemic devaluation of their life’s work within a global academic hierarchy that continually signals they are “lagging behind”. This emotional support was the “glue” that held the tours together, enabling participants to reflect critically on their academic reality without becoming defensive or overwhelmed.

The second part of my research question concerns what I learned from these experiences. It requires dismantling my own professional and geopolitical privileges.

First, I learned the dangers of romanticising my host country. In my desire to maximise the “curriculum of contrast” and disrupt the Soviet legacy, I temporarily silenced my critical perspective on Japan’s own history of educational expansionism. I had to unlearn this selective curation and confront the reality that Japan’s celebrated vernacular academic tradition developed alongside, and at times through, assimilationist educational policies. Furthermore, I had to acknowledge that contemporary Japanese higher education faces its own structural constraints, including a chronic lack of diversity and pressures on academic freedom (Kingston, 2023). Presenting Japan as a flawless counter-model was a strategic choice that temporarily obscured these shared historical and neoliberal patterns of domination.

Second, I learned to confront the contradictions of my own positionality. As a tenured faculty member at a national Japanese university, I operate from a space of considerable institutional security, shielded from the daily administrative burdens and metric-driven pressures my Kazakhstani colleagues face under neocolonial knowledge governance. Through De Oliveira’s (2021) ethic of relational accountability, I learned that to act as a benevolent, detached helper who “brings” decolonisation to others risks reproducing the very paternalistic hierarchies of coloniality that I seek to critique.

Ultimately, this autoethnographic analysis contributes to broader discussions of delinking from Western modernity and coloniality by demonstrating that delinking is not merely a macro-level theoretical ideal but a lived, micro-level praxis. Methodologically, by centring emotional labour, vulnerability and relational accountability, this autoethnography delinks from the disembodied, “zero-point” monopoly of Western universalism (Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012). Analytically, it reveals delinking as an uncomfortable, affective process of “unlearning” (Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012). By interrogating my own positionality and confronting my complicity within the very neoliberal structures I seek to critique, I argue that delinking from Western modernity requires scholars to confront the “hybrid coloniality” embedded within their own academic subjectivities. The cracks exposed in the edifice of knowledge governance during these tours, and the epistemic anxieties they provoked, do not represent a completed project of decolonisation of knowledge governance. Rather, they constitute the crucial, relational work of delinking. It is within such cracks that space emerges to imagine alternative, non-hegemonic epistemic futures.

7. Conclusion

This autoethnographic inquiry traces a deeply personal and professional journey, beginning with a simple desire to connect colleagues from my home country with those in my host country and culminating in a complex interrogation of my own role within the global currents of knowledge, power and “hybrid coloniality”. Through an account of organising study tours for award-winning Kazakhstani faculty in Japan and a reflection on the positionality, power dynamics and emotional labour involved, this paper has sought to answer the question of my

role in these tours. The analysis suggests that, although my role neither constituted nor could serve to produce systemic decolonisation, it functioned as a form of epistemic disruption. By positioning Japan as a counter-model outside the dominant Russia–West binary, the tours facilitated the questioning of taken-for-granted assumptions about academic life, language and measures of success.

The broader implications of this micro-level study point to a potentially valuable strategy for decolonial praxis, particularly in contexts like Kazakhstan that are defined by “hybrid coloniality” (Bissenova, 2022). Where academic cultures are caught between the legacy of one imperial power and the hegemonic pull of another, decolonisation may not involve a simple return to a pre-colonial past or a complete rejection of the “foreign”. Instead, it may require engagement with alternative, non-hegemonic reference points – counter-models – that can break the spell of binary thinking and foster epistemic pluralism. It is vital, however, not to present Japan as a “superior” model for Kazakhstani higher education to emulate, as this would merely replace one colonial centre with another. The value of the tours lay in the potential for horizontal, bidirectional learning. Just as participants reconsidered assumptions about English-language dominance, their “Kazakh gaze” prompted me to reflect on the limitations and insularities of Japanese institutions. The goal is not to identify a new model to import but to cultivate an awareness that diverse pathways to epistemic sovereignty exist, thereby creating intellectual space for scholars to forge their own.

This inquiry deepened my understanding of the complexities and contradictions inherent in engaging in decolonial work from a position of relative privilege. It reinforced my conviction that decolonisation is not a destination to be reached or a title to be claimed, but an ongoing, iterative and deeply personal process. It requires a continual commitment to questioning assumptions, reflecting on our position within the intricate webs of power that define our world, and taking small, intentional actions to create spaces for critical consciousness and alternative possibilities. My journey, like that of my country’s academic system, is far from over. This inquiry is just one step in a lifelong process of learning how to be a more responsible and effective bridge between the worlds I inhabit.

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