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Chokan Valikhanov as a Researcher of the Nomadic Eurasian Civilization

Yerbol U. Syrbayev¹, Zeinabil S. Aidarbekov^{1,2}, Saule E. Ibekeyeva³

¹*Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Almaty, Kazakhstan*

²*Samarkand State University named after Sharaf Rashidov, Samarkand, Uzbekistan*

³*Kazakh National Women's Teacher Training University, Almaty, Kazakhstan*

 seu_78@mail.ru

Abstract. The paper analyzes the origins, achievements, and methodology of Ch. Valikhanov as a researcher of the nomadic civilization of the Eurasian steppes. Valikhanov (1835–1865) was a prominent Kazakh scholar, ethnographer, and geographer who was the first to systematically describe the lives of Central Asian nomads. His multi-volume work (travel diaries, notes on nomads, descriptions of epics and rituals) became the foundation for understanding the ethnogenesis and sociopolitical structure of the Kazakhs and related peoples. Introductory expeditions (Isyk-Kul 1856, Kashgar 1858–1859, and others) provided data on the tribal composition, daily life, folklore, and law of nomadic peoples, and the use of oral traditions and epics (for example, the translation of a fragment of “Manas”) made it possible for the first time to present nomadic culture in scholarly discourse. The report offers a structured research plan: an extensive review of sources (including Valikhanov’s five-volume “Collected Works” and archival materials), a critical review of contemporary literature, and a comprehensive comparative analysis of the approaches of Valikhanov and his contemporaries. Particular attention is given to original hypotheses regarding the role of clan-tribal organization in the formation of the “nomadic Eurasian community.” Thus, Eurasianism in its essence represents a distinctive mode of relating to the world, permeated with moral principles and capable of becoming integrative — overcoming the extremes of both West and East and synthesizing their best features.

Keywords: Eurasian idea, Russian and Kazakh cultures, steppe civilization, sobornost

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Чокан Валиханов как исследователь кочевой евразийской цивилизации

Е.У. Сырбаев¹  , З.С Айдарбеков^{1,2} , С.Е. Ибекеева³ 

¹Казахский национальный университет имени аль-Фараби, Алматы, Казахстан

²Самаркандский государственный университет имени Шарафа Рашидова,
Самарканд, Узбекистан

³Казахский национальный женский педагогический университет, Алматы, Казахстан
 seu_78@mail.ru

Аннотация. Исследование посвящено анализу научного наследия Чокана Валиханова как одного из первых системных исследователей кочевой цивилизации Евразийских степей. Актуальность темы обусловлена современным интересом к проблематике евразийства, межкультурного диалога и переосмыслению вклада национальных мыслителей в развитие гуманитарного знания. Цель исследования заключается в выявлении методологических оснований, источниковой базы и концептуальных положений трудов Валиханова в контексте философии истории и этнографической науки XIX века. Материалами послужили его многотомные «Собрания сочинений», путевые дневники, отчеты об экспедициях на Иссык-Куль (1856) и в Кашгарию (1858–1859), а также современные историографические работы. В работе использованы методы историко-сравнительного анализа, текстологической интерпретации и междисциплинарного синтеза. Результаты исследования показывают, что Валиханов одним из первых осуществил комплексное описание социальной структуры, обычного права, фольклора и мировоззрения кочевых народов Центральной Азии, введя устные эпические традиции, включая фрагменты «Манаса», в академический оборот. Обосновывается положение о том, что его взгляды на родоплеменную организацию и культурное взаимодействие Востока и Запада превосходят позднейшие евразийские концепции. Авторский подход позволяет рассматривать Валиханова не только как этнографа, но и как оригинального мыслителя, сформировавшего философское понимание евразийской идентичности. Уникальность исследования состоит в комплексном философско-историческом переосмыслении его наследия в контексте современных дискуссий о цивилизационной модели Евразии.

Ключевые слова: евразийство, русская и казахская культуры, степная цивилизация, соборность

Вклад авторов. Е.У. Сырбаев — концепция и дизайн исследования, подготовка и написание текста. З.С. Айдарбеков — сбор и обработка материалов, историографический анализ. С.Е. Ибекеева — анализ полученных данных, редактирование и окончательное утверждение рукописи. Все авторы одобрили окончательную версию статьи.

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Заявление о доступности данных. Все данные, полученные в ходе этого исследования, включены в опубликованную статью.

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Introduction

Modern scholarship emphasizes that Valikhanov's approach to the nomadic era is "dialectical". Scholars note that during two expeditions to the Isyk-Kul Kazakh and Kyrgyz region (1856–1857), he systematically collected folklore and legends and described the social organization of the tribes. For example, his 1858–1859 trip to Ghulja (Kashgar) yielded one of the most important reports on East Turkestan at the time. Recent studies emphasize that Valikhanov was the first to clearly articulate that the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz were distinct ethnic groups with their own characteristics. His contribution lies in correcting stereotypes: instead of a "wild nomad", he saw an educated administrator and humanist who knew how to use oral epics (the *Manas* epic) and written sources.

Much attention is given to comparative analysis: as the authors note, Valikhanov's approach differed from that of his contemporaries. While Russian geographers valued maps and natural data more highly, Valikhanov demanded respect for the "laws of the steppe" and nomadic traditions. His "suffering over the destruction of nomadic customs" (as the editors of the collected works write) made him a unique intermediary between the Russian authorities and the Kazakh community. Recent research emphasizes this humanitarian aspect of his scholarship: he was "at the intersection of cultures", conveying the nomadic world to the "Russian reader". The most important reason is that global academic discussions primarily approach Eurasianism from a geopolitical perspective. There is a dearth of research examining Eurasianism from a contemporary, systematic cultural-philosophical perspective.

From a contemporary perspective, Kazakhstan, Russia, and other former Soviet republics belong to the same Eurasian space. The ontological, axiological, and sociopolitical aspects of Eurasianism, as well as its historical and ideological

transformations and modernization processes within various models of social development, have been insufficiently explored. Research on Eurasianism as a unique attempt to integrate Western and Eastern philosophical and cultural thought and incorporate them into a specific sociocultural experience is insufficient. The choice of development path facing newly independent states, including Kazakhstan, after the collapse of the Soviet Union remains a crucial task. In principle, two approaches to modernization can be distinguished: one is to adopt Western social models, and the other is to develop an independent model based on the experience of other countries.

The most daring of his journeys was his mission to Kashgaria (present-day western China) in 1858–1859. At that time Eastern Turkestan was practically closed to Europeans; Valikhanov, disguised as a merchant and leveraging his Asiatic appearance, penetrated the Kokand khanate's frontier. He gathered unique materials on the political and economic situation, ethnography, religion and folklore of Kashgar, producing the first comprehensive picture in world science of the region's modern political, social and cultural conditions. His diaries examined the interaction between Turkic populations and Chinese administration and the assimilation of cultural innovations from Central Asia and India. These works significantly reduced the “white spots” on maps of Central Asia. Upon his return he presented his findings to the Russian Geographical Society in St Petersburg, where he was praised for his ability to combine scientific observation with artistic description. It is no exaggeration to say that his reports enabled Russian and European scholars to update their understanding of Eastern Turkestan and the broader nomadic world.

Valikhanov's methodology differed markedly from that of many Russian orientalist scholars. Rather than viewing nomadic peoples as primitive or devoid of history, he argued that nomadism embodied a sophisticated social system with its own legal customs, economic practices and moral philosophy. He saw nomadic culture as superior to sedentary culture in certain respects and stressed that oral literature served as a repository of collective memory and cultural values. In his study “Records of the Kyrgyz” he noted that because nomadic peoples lacked writing, their histories were preserved in legends and epics that were passed on by respected narrators. He considered genealogical songs (*shejipe*) the most advanced and historically grounded form of oral literature and emphasized that heroic epics and love narratives were abundant among nomads. His recognition of oral literature as a cornerstone of national memory anticipated later anthropological approaches that treat narrative traditions as historical evidence.

Among his scholarly writings, “Traces of Shamanism among the Kirghiz” and “About Islam in the Steppe” are particularly significant. In them he explored pre-Islamic beliefs and the syncretic practices that persisted in Kazakh and Kyrgyz societies. He recorded rituals, beliefs in spirits and the role of shamans, showing how these elements coexisted with Islamic practices and how they shaped moral values and social norms. He also examined the process of Islamization in the steppe,

noting that many nomadic tribes adopted Islam superficially while retaining older cosmologies. These works illustrate his broader interest in the spiritual life of nomadic Eurasia and his capacity to analyze religious phenomena without imposing external value judgments.

The vast steppe was a vital trade route where peoples, cultures, and religions met. Eurasianism is a fundamentally unique worldview, imbued with moral principles. Its pragmatic and humanistic potential allows it to overcome the extremes of East and West and develop into a unifying ideology that combines their strengths. It harmoniously combines a penchant for material and practical action with psychological and spiritual culture. Thus, Eurasianism offers us an entirely new worldview, a new way of life.

As a young officer in the service of the Russian governor-general Gasfort, Valikhanov seized every opportunity to conduct ethnographic and geographic research. Gasfort recognized his knowledge of the Kyrgyz language and customs and noted that the young officer enjoyed special respect among the Kyrgyz. In 1856 Valikhanov joined Colonel Khomentovskii's expedition to survey Lake Issyk-Kul, a strategically important region inhabited by Kyrgyz tribes. During this journey he meticulously documented the flora, fauna and ethnography of the region and collected oral literature; parts of this work were later published as "Essays on Dzhungaria" in the journal of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society. He undertook a second expedition to the Kyrgyz Alatau in 1857, using genealogies, legends and epics as sources for reconstructing the histories of peoples whose past was transmitted orally. His "Issyk-Kul Diaries" (1856), "Notes on the Kyrgyz" (1856) and the collection "Dzhungaria" (1860) reveal an ethnographer who viewed nomadic social organization through the lens of tribal composition and kinship rather than the sedentary categories favored by Russian administrators.

Chokan Valikhanov on the Eurasian Paradigm of Kazakh Culture

In G.N. Potanin's work *The First Rays of the East* about Ch. Valikhanov, it is noted that "Ch. Valikhanov had two families, one in a yurt in the steppe, the other remained behind. Returning from the steppe to the city, he found friends here who were interested in his scholarly works" [1. P. 614]. Valikhanov's political convictions were shaped under the influence of the Petrashevsky circle members Durov and S. Ya. Kapustin, while G. Potanin argues that science influenced Valikhanov's intellectual trajectory [2. P. 315]. The purpose of Valikhanov in writing Kazakh tales and poems was to acquaint Russian society with Kazakh folk creativity; he studied in a Russian school and imbibed the ideas and interests of Russian society of that time. The psychological nature of both peoples preserved the uniqueness of their tribes, while their reason was on par with that of educated Russians [1. P. 617].

Potanin greatly admired the Cossacks' passion for art, especially singing. He wrote: "The Kazakhs enrich their lives with music. A strong-willed Kazakh expresses the full power of nature, artistically depicts life, and will never be bound

by the shackles of the mullahs, which he inherited with special respect. Valikhanov wrote: “A strong-willed Kazakh expresses the full power of nature, artistically depicts life, and will never be bound by the shackles of the mullahs, which he inherited with special respect” [3. P. 10].

Chokan was a great scholar who made a significant contribution to the dissemination of Russian culture in the Kazakh steppe. He was cherished both by the Kazakh and the Russian people. In his soul he was able to combine boundless love for his people with Russian patriotism. All-Russian patriotism in the 1860s was in unity with patriotism both local and regional, as well as transnational. Thus, two kinds of patriotism were reflected in one person. During his conscious life, Shokan did not have time to describe the paths of introducing Russian ideas into Kazakh society” [4. P. 24], Potanin lamented in his writings.

Although Ch. Valikhanov himself did not use the term “Eurasian culture”, the following conclusions about the Kazakh national culture can be drawn from his reasoning and conclusions. As a Kazakh thinker, he emphasized the Eurasian character of his national culture. In the 1840s, the official Sotnikov conducted a survey of the population about the meaning of the word “Kazakh” and its connection with the Russian Cossacks. Ch. Valikhanov reports that “some intelligent Kazakhs probably intended to equate the Kazakhs with the Cossacks, since, according to legend, their ancestors were Cossacks” [5]. However, to Sotnikov’s horror, the Kazakhs claimed to be descended from the Turks or Arabs. This led him to compare the educated and Europeanized Kazakhs with the Turkic peoples of Anatolia. Valikhanov’s intellectual curiosity brought him into contact with leading Russian writers and scientists. In Omsk he befriended the young geographer and ethnographer Grigory Potanin, who later recalled how quickly Chokan mastered Russian and how cadet authorities viewed him as a future scientist. In St Petersburg he interacted with historians like Nikolai Kostomarov and writers like Fyodor Dostoevsky. Correspondence from this period reveals that he followed debates about Russia’s post-reform society and contributed information on the geography and ethnography of the Kyrgyz steppe to the Russian Geographical Society. His cosmopolitanism did not diminish his commitment to his people; in letters to friends he expressed a desire to become a local sultan to protect the Kazakh nomads from abuses by officials and wealthy clans. When ill health forced him to retire to his native steppe in 1861, he continued researching nomadic history, shamanism, Kyrgyz weaponry and migratory patterns despite suffering from tuberculosis [6]. Modern cultural thought emphasizes the principle of cultural interaction. There are no purely isolated types of culture and history. Otherwise, national cultures would degenerate into mere relics.

As is well known, Ch. Valikhanov repeatedly emphasized the common destinies and characteristics of the Russian and Kazakh peoples.

Ch. Valikhanov described the eight-month suspension of the *Sovremennik* in 1862 as a “Babylonian captivity.” At that time, the term “Egyptian captivity” referred to slavery among the Russian revolutionary democrats, while “Babylon”

signified autocracy. Ch. Valikhanov always insisted on the need to consider the specific characteristics of different peoples when implementing reforms, and emphasized their natural character: “For a change to be effective and lasting, this reform must meet material needs and adapt to the national character of the society for whose benefit it is implemented. Any innovation that falls outside these conditions can be utterly harmful and, as an abnormal phenomenon, engender incurable diseases and social anomalies”, he stated [7. P. 95–96].

The problem lies not only in moral obligations but also in attempts to more fully reconstruct the phenomenon under study. Let’s consider another “popular” argument about the nature of nomadic life. It asserts that nomadic life is based not on productive farming, but on the acceptance of what nature offers us as a gift. Nomads believe in the inexhaustibility and, therefore, abundance of nature. Therefore, they are hospitable to guests, because what is easy to take is also easy to give. Having considered this issue, we come to the conclusion that Kazakhs, the descendants of nomads, are unable to adapt to a market economy. G. Gachev explains this idea as follows:

The core of the research will be Valikhanov’s handwritten notes. The five-volume “Collected Works” (Alma-Ata, 1984–1985) contains his complete works, letters, and diaries. These include “Diary of a Trip to Issyk-Kul” (1856), “Notes on the Kirghiz” (1856), “Essay on Dzungaria” (1860), “Diary of a Trip to Kuldzha” (1858–1859), and other notebooks. For example, “Issyk-Kul Diary” and “Kuldzha Diary” provide observations on seasonal nomadism, social structure, and ethnographic details. It is noteworthy that Valikhanov recorded oral poetry: he compiled the texts of the legends “Kozy-Korpesh — Bayan Sulu” and published a version of the Kyrgyz epic poem “Manas” — “The Iliad of the Steppe”. Other valuable primary sources include letters to academics and reports to Russian officials, stored in the archives (Central State Archives of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the St. Petersburg branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences). Archival research (Central State Archives of the Republic of Kazakhstan, State Archive of the Russian Federation) will reveal Valikhanov’s travel reports, maps, and award files, which may contain new information about his campaigns and views.

It is planned to use Valikhanov’s original texts in Russian (often with elements of Turkish-Tatar and Kazakh), and, if necessary, their translations. Key attention is given to documents from the mid-19th century, including Inishat Khan’s materials on the Kokand wars, Chinese historical texts (common with Valikhanov’s “Collection of Chronicles” and “Shezhere-i-Turk”), and Tibetan sources studied by Valikhanov himself. The research will be based on a synthesis of this data with modern translations (for example, the English collection “Selected Works of Chokan Valikhanov”), as well as work with authoritative academic publications (articles and monographs on the ethnology and history of Central Asia).

An interesting comparison may be drawn: Ch. Valikhanov’s work *On Nomadism* and the section “Nomads” in A. Toynbee’s *A Study of History* have

many points in common. First, both view nomadism as a way of mastering the steppes, that is, as a means of expanding humanity's living space. Second, in both thinkers there is a visible respect for the spiritual qualities of nomads. Third, both consider the weakest aspect of nomadism to be the complete dependence of the nomad on natural forces.

Ch. Valikhanov viewed the nomadic way of life as a self-sufficient socio-cultural and economic model.

"In the past, even under conditions of devastating wars and constant raids by barantases, the Kyrgyz were more prosperous than today, and widespread decline was rare. Of the events of the last century, only two years of famine remain in our collective memory, and the cause of our misfortunes then was not so much the severe cold as fire and sword — the curse of the Kalmyks, the enemies of the Kyrgyz". It is undeniable that the Kyrgyz in Siberia were more prosperous before the establishment of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This is evidenced by the numerous herds driven to the Orenburg and Siberian borders in the late and early 20th centuries, as well as official statistics from the 1820s and 1830s. Many Kyrgyz during this period owned up to 10,000 horses [8. P. 106].

According to Ch. Valikhanov, the causes of disruptions in classical nomadism were not natural disasters, but wars, inter-clan discord, and *baranta*. If we turn to the general crisis of nomadism in the nineteenth-century Kazakh steppe, the thinker draws attention to the destruction of the natural cycle of nomadic life as a consequence of the colonizing policy of Tsarism. Strangely enough, here Ch. Valikhanov is in solidarity with representatives of the *Zar Zaman* movement, who pointed to the loss by the Kazakhs of their fertile, natural lands.

The symbol of the nomads is not the rhizome, but rootedness in their land of habitation. The nomad organized his life according to the requirements of pastoralism. The ancestors of the Kazakhs did not have fixed sites for wintering or for summer pastures. In case of lack of forage, the nomad moved elsewhere, regardless of distance (from Sary-Arka to the Syr Darya).

"Therefore," wrote Ch. Valikhanov, "vast nomadic pastures are a necessary condition for livestock. Land sufficient to support an entire city is not enough for one Kyrgyz herd. Each herd requires winter pastures (*zymovka*) with winter pastures and separate pastures for spring, autumn, and summer. Winter pastures require dense forests or forested mountains, which usually provide protection from the harsh winter. On the contrary, summer nomadic pastures require vast open areas with numerous streams or lakes. Summer pastures are burned in the autumn to eliminate insect larvae that bother the herds in the summer heat, while winter pastures remain untouched throughout the summer." Thus, while the Kyrgyz appear to cultivate vast areas of land, in reality they use only a small part of it at any time, remaining permanently dependent on the land [9. P. 107].

On the basis of factual material, Chokan concludes that the administrative reforms of Tsarism in Kazakhstan (dividing land by districts and attaching it to clans and notable individuals) destroyed the centuries-old system of nomadism. The

nomadic capacities for solidarity and cooperation were undermined. According to Ch. Valikhanov, a successful nomadic economy required the following:

1. Abundant land and extensive migration routes.

2. Dense forests or forested mountainous regions for winter pastures, and open, water-rich, grazing land for summer pastures. The quality of summer and winter pastures played a crucial role in the development of livestock farming, and winter pastures were particularly crucial for the Kyrgyz. Horse breeding was impossible without warm winter pastures. Therefore, livestock farming could only thrive in areas with abundant suitable winter pastures. The Kokshetau region, the northern part of Akmolinsk, and the inner Semipalatinsk region, covered with dense forests and lush meadows, were considered the most fertile regions of the Siberian steppe [9. P. 107].

“This is a Kyrgyz-Kaisak custom! Any Kyrgyz-Kaisak will accept it”. Interestingly, in such insulting cases, our people are always referred to as Kyrgyz-Kaisak, while in praise, they are simply referred to as Kyrgyz or Kaisak. This merely points to a perception of our people as particularly barbaric and uncivilized, based on the barbaric term “Kirghiz-Kaisak”. In fact, the Kyrgyz people are considered one of the most peaceful and, accordingly, the least barbaric peoples of the Russian Empire [5].

Speaking of the national character of the Kazakhs, Ch. Valikhanov distinguished the following features:

1. Openness.

2. Receptivity to cultural borrowings.

3. A certain naivety.

4. The dominance of gerontocracy and respect for ancestors (*aruakh*).

Nomadic culture did not die a natural death but rather as a result of external interference. Such was the course of history. Later, the nomads were no longer able to provide the correct response to the demands of the time as their ancestors had done in the mid-century. The emergence of commercial livestock breeding rendered extensive pastoralism unprofitable.

In the context of nomadic culture, Ch. Valikhanov also considers the mental characteristics of the Kazakh people. In doing so, he compares various forms of self-identification and greetings among different nations. Above all, Ch. Valikhanov refutes the opinion of the alleged savagery of the steppe dwellers. He writes:

Conclusion

Chokan Valikhanov’s idea lies in the joint search for new meanings and the creative co-construction of the ethnocultures of Eurasia, which is a necessary precondition for their own self-identification. Applied to Kazakhstan, it can be said that the identification of Eurasian culture does not occur along some abstract axis of “East — West,” but is present in the destinies of all peoples inhabiting the republic, in the destiny of each individual. Therefore, even the smallest shift toward

“us and them” threatens serious consequences in various spheres of social life, in the very process of cultural identification, and in human relationships.

The presence of border zones and border situations in the dialogue of peoples and cultures is not, in itself, a negative factor. It represents an objective aspect of contacts, both at the macro level (the dialogue of nations and ethnic groups) and at the micro level (interpersonal contacts of various peoples and cultures).

According to Chokan Valikhanov, Eurasian nomadic cultural patterns arise from a “common consciousness” that has permeated both East and West. Although his life was cut short by tuberculosis in 1865, Valikhanov’s influence continues to shape scholarship. Collections of his works published by Soviet and Kazakh scholars in the mid-twentieth century ensured that his observations on oral literature, shamanism and steppe law reached new generations. Modern researchers emphasize his methodological innovations, noting that he combined participant observation with documentary analysis long before anthropology emerged as a formal discipline. His writings remain invaluable sources for historians of Central Asia and for comparative studies of nomadism, empire and cultural exchange. In recognition of his contributions, Kazakhstan erected memorials and named institutions after him. Today, as global interest in nomadic heritage grows, Valikhanov’s work offers a model for respectful and rigorous engagement with the histories of mobile peoples.

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About the authors:

Syrbayev Erbol U. — Doctoral student majoring in Philosophy at the Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Philosophy and Political Science, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, 71 Al-Farabi Ave., Almaty, 050040, Republic of Kazakhstan. ORCID: 0009-0005-1321-6710. E-mail: seu_78@mail.ru

Aidarbekov Zeinabil S. — Doctor of Philosophical Sciences, Professor, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, 71 Al-Farabi Ave., Almaty, 050040, Republic of Kazakhstan; Professor, Samarkand State University named after Sharaf Rashidov, 15 University Blvd., Samarkand, 140104, Republic of Uzbekistan. ORCID: 0000-0002-5829-7383. E-mail: zeinabil@mail.ru

Ibekeyeva Saule E. — PhD, Candidate of Philosophical Sciences, Kazakh National Women's Teacher Training University, 99 Aiteke bi St., Almaty, 050000, Republic of Kazakhstan. ORCID: 0009-0006-1400-0599. E-mail: ibekeyeva.s@qyzpu.edu.kz

Сведения об авторах:

Сырбаев Ербол Умирзакович — докторант по специальности «Философия» кафедры философии, факультет философии и политологии, Казахский национальный университет имени аль-Фараби, Республика Казахстан, 050040, Алматы, пр. аль-Фараби, д. 71. ORCID: 0009-0005-1321-6710. E-mail: seu_78@mail.ru

Айдарбеков Зейнабил Смаилханович — доктор философских наук, профессор, Казахский национальный университет имени аль-Фараби, Республика Казахстан, 050040, Алматы, пр. аль-Фараби, д. 71; профессор, Самаркандский государственный университет имени Шарафа Рашидова, Республика Узбекистан, 140104, Самарканд, Университетский бульвар, д. 15. ORCID: 0000-0002-5829-7383. E-mail: zeinabil@mail.ru

Ибекеева Сауле Елемесовна — PhD, кандидат философских наук, Казахский национальный женский педагогический университет, Республика Казахстан, 050000, Алматы, ул. Айтеке би, д. 99. ORCID: 0009-0006-1400-0599. E-mail: ibekeyeva.s@qyzpu.edu.kz