

## RESEARCH TRENDS IN KYRGYZ HISTORY (1991–2009)

### INTRODUCTION

Kyrgyz historiography finds the first mention of the Kyrgyzs in the Chinese chronicles, in *Shi Ji* by Si Ma Qian (c. 203–201 BC), where the Kyrgyzs were known as “Ge-kun.” Next, they were recorded as “Jian-kun” in 49 BC in Ban Gu’s work *Han Shu* [Jusaev 2003]. These are only two of the various names for the Kyrgyzs that appear in the Chinese sources. In addition, information regarding Kyrgyz history may also be found in many other sources, including those written in the Turkic, Arabic, Persian, Russian, and Western languages. Kyrgyz history as recorded by indigenous Kyrgyz people did not appear until the end of the 19th century, mostly due their nomadic culture and the Kyrgyz tradition of oral history and literature. The systematic investigation of Kyrgyz history was carried out during the Soviet period, although under a certain amount of ideological censorship and directives, while from the late 1980s on, especially during the post-Soviet period, new trends in the study of Kyrgyz history have developed.

This article will discuss mainly research trends in Kyrgyz history during the post-Soviet period, beginning with an overview of general history and reference works, followed by a chronological treatment of the

most popular topics, in which historical writing of the Tsarist and Soviet periods will be briefly reviewed.

## 1. GENERAL HISTORY AND REFERENCE WORKS

The majority of the general histories and reference work on the Kyrgyzs were written during the Soviet era. *Materialy po istorii kyrgyzov i Kyrgyzstana* (Sources on the history of the Kyrgyzs and Kyrgyzstan), in 2 volumes, deals with the Arabic script sources, mainly Arabic and Persian, but also Uighur and Tajik (chief editor V. A. Romodin) [Romodin 2002] in volume one, and with Chinese sources (chief editor K. Jusaev) [Jusaev 2003] in volume two. Furthermore, the research by Ch. Ch. Valikhanov [1984–85] and W. Barthold [1997] are accepted as the first profound and scholarly treatments of the primary sources on Kyrgyz history, while A. N. Bernshtam [1998] stands as a pioneer in archaeological expeditions in Kyrgyzstan, and S. M. Abramzon's contribution to the anthropology and ethnology of the Kyrgyzs [1960, 1990, 1999] is also valuable.

*Istoriya Kirgizskoi SSR* (History of the Kirgiz SSR) [Istoriya 1984–90] is 4-volume collection covering Kyrgyz history from the ancient period to 1960 within the framework of Marxist-Leninist ideology and the concept of “class.” At the end of the 1990s, the Institute of History at the Academy of the Sciences of the Kyrgyz Republic took the initiative in writing a new three-volume history of Kyrgyzstan in the Kyrgyz language, but the work has yet to be published. The first volume is planned to cover from ancient times to the end of the 16th century AD, and some of its main topics have been published as a project in the journal *Kyrgyzstan Taryhynyn...* [2006:98–133].

## 2. RESEARCH TRENDS DURING THE TSARIST PERIOD

Along with Tsarist expansion policies into Central Asia, a number of researchers actually visited the land of the Kyrgyzs and recorded valuable data concerning the local people in terms of their everyday life, political and economic activities as well as the social aspects. Such scientists, scholars, administrators, and military officials as P. P. Semenov-Tyan-Shansky [1946], N. Severtsov [1860, 1873, 1876], W. Radloff [1976], Ch. Ch. Valikhanov [1984–85], N. A. Aristov [2003], N. Seeland [1885], K. Mannerheim [1909], G. Zagriazhskii [1874, 1876], N. Tikhmenev and I. Poslavskii [1883] have left us writings in the form of books, notes, letters,

diaries, and reports (sometimes classified as secret), not to mention charts and statistics and visual materials, such as pictures, drawings, maps, and photographs, all of which describe the life, values and traditions of the ordinary Kyrgyzs as well as their leaders during mainly the 19th century, providing important information for Tsarist Russia to plan its annexation of the region [Kurmangaliyeva Ercilasun 2008].

As mentioned above there were few indigenous people who wrote historically about the Kyrgyzs, since historical events mainly commuted from generation to generation via oral history and literature among the pre-Soviet Kyrgyzs. Notable exceptions are Osmonaaly Sydyk uulu [1913, 1915, 1992, 1993] and Belek Soltonoev [1993]. Osmonaaly Sydyk uulu is considered to be the first historian of Kyrgyz descent, producing two monographs, *Muhtasar Tarih Kyrgyziyya* and *Tarih-i Kyrgyz Shadmaniyya: Kyrgyz Sanjyrasy*, which were published in Ufa. Belek Soltonoev began writing *Kazak-Kyrgyz taryhy* (History of the Kazakhs and Kyrgyzs; later *Kyzyl Kyrgyz taryhy* [Red history of the Kyrgyzs]) in 1895 and finally finished it in 1934, only to be persecuted under the Stalin regime for its content. This 2-volume work covers the ancient Kyrgyzs to the events of 1916.

### 3. KYRGYZ HISTORY WRITING DURING THE SOVIET PERIOD

During this period of systematic, yet “ideologically correct,” study of Kyrgyz history, A. N. Bernshtam is considered the founder of the archaeological research on Kyrgyz, taking part in historical and archaeological expeditions to the region during the years 1936 and 1941. Excavations were mainly conducted in the Talas, Chu, and Ysyk Köl (Issyk-kul) regions. Bernshtam’s research mainly focused on the ethnogenesis of the ancient and mediaeval Turkic people of Central Asia, as well as the social and economic structure of its nomads. One of his publications was severely criticized for “political incorrectness,” and he was even accused of being “pan-Turkist” [Tashbaeva 1998:5–16]. Nevertheless, the pioneering steps taken in archaeology by Bernshtam successfully continued during both the Soviet [Zadneprovskii 1960] and post-Soviet eras.

S. M. Abramzon’s works on the ethnography and anthropology of the Kyrgyzs [1960, 1990, 1999] represent an important source on social structure, material and spiritual culture, and the oral tradition. Ya. R. Vinnikov [1956] also studied the clan and tribal systems of the Kyrgyzs. Furthermore, O. K. Karaev and I. B. Moldobaev were Kyrgyz historians who were active mainly during the Soviet period. Karaev (d. 2002)

contributed to the research on the ethnogenesis question and advocated the Yenisey ties of the Kyrgyzs [Karaev and Moldobaev 1989]. I. B. Moldobaev (d. 2005) studied the epic of Manas for its historical data, as well as the ethnographic legacy of the Kyrgyzs and their historical and cultural ties with the Mongols, Buryats, and Yakuts [Moldobaev 2003; Moldobaev and Pirimbaeva 2006]. The above-mentioned *Istoriya* [1984–90] and *Materialy* [Romodin 1973] were also products of this period. It should be mentioned that these trends were not peculiar to Kyrgyzstan; rather, the same kinds of research with similar titles and uniform ideological perspective were published for other republics of the USSR as well.

#### 4. THE POST-SOVIET PERIOD

The dissolution of the USSR was for Kyrgyzstan, like other ex-Soviet republics, an epoch-making event, ushering in a new era, in which the interpretation of history would go through significant changes in the direction of national historical writing. Some new topics were taken up, while others began to be interpreted differently from discussion of Soviet era [Usenbaev 1993; Jakypbekov 1995; Kurmanov and Sadykov 2002; Djanybekov 2003]. The following is a summary of the research done to date during this era, beginning with the four most popular topics being investigated.

##### 4.1 Historical figures

After Kyrgyz independence, historical figures who could not be mentioned during the Soviet period were introduced to the public, giving rise to a group of previously unknown heroes, while re-evaluations or new interpretations of known historical personalities appeared. For example, Bars-beg, who was honored as the *kaghan* of the Yenisey Kyrgyzs at the end of the 7th century, became the subject of new research [Mokrynin and Ploskikh 2003]. Similarly, other historical figures active from the 19th century on, like Shabdan baatyr [Moldokasymov 1992; Üsönbaev 1992; Jakypbekov 1992; Jusupov 1992; Saparaliev 2004], Ormon khan [Usenbaev 1999; *Istoričeskie...* 1999], and Kurmanjan datka, became the subject of renewed scholarly attention.

Furthermore, the life, activities and role of Iskhak Razzakov, the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Kyrgyz SSR Communist Party between 1950 and 1961 became topics of a number of studies [Otorbaev

2000; Oruzbaeva 2000; Djunushaliev 2000; Attokurov 2000; Askarov 2000; Abdrazakov 2003].

## 4.2 Kyrgyz ethnogenesis

The ethnic origins of the Kyrgyz people became the source of lively discussion. Kyrgyz historiography contains several major views about ethnogenesis, one which focuses on the Yenissey stage of Kyrgyz history and ties between the two groups. Although not accepted during the Soviet period, this view became widely adopted after independence, as Kyrgyz ethnogenesis became one of the most popular topics during the era [Jusupov 1993, 1997].

## 4.3 Celebrating jubilees: Special dates and events

The celebration of Kyrgyz historical events is deeply related to the construction of a post-independence national ideology, but several scholars have criticized the dating of these events, arguing that they are not supported by the written sources, and that they had been chosen symbolically, like 1995 to mark the 1000th jubilee of the epic “Manas,” the oldest work reflecting Kyrgyz history, which is a product of the oral traditions. Other examples included the determination in 1995 of 2000 as the 3000th year of the city of Osh [Jumagulov 2001] and 2006 as the 300th anniversary of Jaiyl Baatyr (Jaiyl, the Hero) [Tölöbaev 2006; *Jaiyl* 2006], and 2003 as the 2200th year of the Kyrgyz statehood, which was celebrated on a nationwide level under government caveat and determined based on the date of the first ethnonym related to Kyrgyzs appearing in Chinese historiography, the previously mentioned *Shi Ji* (c. 203–201 BC). Initially, a conference was held to commemorate the *Shi Ji*; which was followed by a decision on the part of the government to celebrate the event on a national scale as proof of the age of Kyrgyz statehood. As a result, the topic attracted the attention of the scholarly community, in which a number of conferences were organized, and books and articles published [Kakeev and Ploskikh 2002; Kakeev *et al.* 2002].

It was in 2006 that the study of the events of 1916 became very popular in light of their 90th anniversary. The year of 1916 exerted a crucial impact on the people Central Asian people, beginning with the decree of the tsar conscripting male Central Asians between the ages of 19–45 into the imperial army and introducing new taxes on the region to pay for the counter-revolution, which resulted in mass uprisings throughout Central Asia, having especially deep impact upon Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan

and the northern parts of Kyrgyzstan. These events in Kyrgyzstan were followed by mass flood of refugees into China through the Ysyk Köl (Issyk-kul) region, which the Russian Army attempted to block, resulting in a numbers of deaths at Bedel Pass. The research done mainly in 2006 resulted in the recovery of remains at Bedel Pass, related documentaries, many articles, and the special edition devoted to the subject by a scholarly journal [Bedelbaev 2006; Djunushaliev 2006].

The year of 2007 presented a good opportunity to study or at least inform the public about the events of 1937, marking the 70th anniversary of the Stalinist Repression, which spread throughout the Soviet Union. The year 1937 actually marks the beginning of the second wave of the Repression, several years of political terror, during which an enormous number of intellectuals, party members, soldiers, and ordinary workers in Kyrgyzstan were stripped of their civil rights along with their comrades in all the other republics of the USSR. However, not much light was shed on the subject [Usenbaev 1993; *Kyrgyzy* 1996].

#### 4.4 The oral tradition

The oral tradition is an important source for studying Kyrgyz history, because there are still many fields of study and topics yet to be clarified and because of its marked development among Central Asian peoples.

One of the pioneering works on oral history and memory is an ongoing joint project in Kyrgyzstan, called *Living History of Central Asian People: The Case of Kyrgyzstan*. This multi-year project, under the leadership of Komatsu Hisao (the University of Tokyo), with project members Timur Dadabaev (University of Tsukuba), İlhan Şahin (Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University), and Güljanat Kurmangaliyeva Ercilasun (Maltepe University) began in Kyrgyzstan in February 2007, focusing on everyday life during the Soviet period.<sup>2</sup> This project was initiated in Uzbekistan<sup>3</sup> under the name “Kitchen Stories about the USSR” in 2005 [Dadabaev 2008b].

Another oral history project coordinated by Şahin Karasar and Konuralp Ercilasun was conducted in 2007 by Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University and Maltepe University (Istanbul), focusing on the Soviet period and the formation of Kyrgyz national identity. Interviews were conducted throughout Kyrgyzstan, resulting in 90-minute documentary film.

#### 4.5 Textbooks, general histories and reference works

National independence made it necessary to rewrite Kyrgyz history as we know it. In addition, more emphasis was put on the local history of Kyrgyzs and Kyrgyzstan school curricula, than during the Soviet period. The most noteworthy general histories and textbooks have been written by R. Doronbekova, V. Mokrynin, and V. Ploskikh [1993], Dj. Djunushaliev, A. A. Asankanov [Asankanov and Osmanov 2002], Ö. Osmonov [2007], T. Tchorotegin, K. Moldokasymov, V. A. Voropaeva [Voropaeva and Ploskikh 2004], and U. Chotonov [1998]. While the textbooks may differ in specific content, they all cover such topics as Kyrgyz ethnonyms in Chinese sources, ethnogenesis, the ancient Kyrgyz homeland, ancient states in what is today Kyrgyzstan, mediaeval history, historical figures, and the eras of Tsarist rule, the Kyrgyz SSR, and the present day independent Republic.

Regarding general reference works, A. Mokeev [2009] is conducting profound research on the problems of tribalism and regionalism in Kyrgyzstan, and their impact on the formation of the modern political elite. Archaeological excavation and analysis is another flourishing disciplines in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan [Tashbaeva 2001, 2006; Tabaldiev 1996, 2003, 2005, 2006; Tabaldiev and Alimov 2004]. The work of Russian scholar D. G. Savinov on archaeology [1978, 1984, 1989] has also done much to shed light on Kyrgyz history.

#### 4.6 Selected works on post-Soviet historiography

A. Tabyshaliev [2001] provides a general overview of historical studies in Kyrgyzstan from the October Revolution to 2000, referring not only to the authors and topics, but also their constraints. T. K. Tchoroev's work [2002] on the subject provides a comprehensive overview of the literature, in addition to discussing the impact of Soviet ideology on the Kyrgyz historical writing, what has changed since the 1980s, and the popular topics investigated during the post-Soviet era until 2001. T. D. Djumanaliev [2006] deals with historical problems characteristic of 20th century Kyrgyzstan, stressing that the Marxist approach cannot in itself explain all the known facts, especially those related to the actual development of nomadic society in the region. In addition, he underlines the importance of the role of history as a discipline geared towards the benefit of society and pupils, concluding that textbooks should be written objectively with a full disclosure of the available facts. Djumanaliev also warns that historical science in Kyrgyzstan faces a crisis characterized

by old ideas, perceptions, and methods caused by stereotypes, which can be overcome by adopting more multi-factored historical methodology.

A. Mokeev [2008] offers an analysis of historical writing in post-independence Kyrgyzstan, stating that in general, post-Soviet historians have abandoned the tradition of Marxist-Leninist interpretation of events, while indicating that the process of national revival and the quest for national identity has led to two tendencies in interpreting Kyrgyz history. The first involves professional historians gradually overcoming their former Soviet clichés and adopting innovative research methods. The second involves amateur “folk historians” who invent dates and historical personalities, thus becoming part of social problems rather than their solutions. In the latter case, while history becomes popular and public subject, the many invented and unrealistic facts not only threaten history’s objective and scholarly bases, but also threaten to provoke ultranationalism. To combat such dangers Mokeev has taken the lead in organizing a scholarship-based lecture series on the historical reality of the Kyrgyzs and their homeland.

Conducting research today in the field of Kyrgyz history remains a difficult task, due mainly to a lack of easy access to archives and limited access to the research that has been published, since books are printed in lots of only around 500–1,000 and sometimes may not be found even in the National Library. The other limitation which the historians of Kyrgyzstan confront is a lack of financial support, since few universities and institutions can provide support for publications, research projects, conference participation expenses, etc. Subjective bias is also a serious drawback due to a tendency for emphasis on Kyrgyz being the most ancient people in Central Asia and having the longest history to influence historical writing.

## CONCLUSION

This article has been an attempt to present an overview of the history writing on the Kyrgyz with emphasis on the post-Soviet period. The most characteristic feature of the field today has been the tendency for national anniversaries and celebrations of historical events and personalities to determine topics of study. For example, the year 1995 was celebrated as the 1000th year of the famous Kyrgyz epic “Manas,” which gave rise to a number of research studies on the subject [Jusupov 1995; Karypkulov 1995; *Kyrgyzy* 1996]; the 2200th anniversary of Kyrgyz statehood produced many studies conferences and discussions on this issue,

resulting in a large amount of published research; and 2008 marked the 80th birthday of Chingiz Aitmatov, the prominent writer whose sudden death shocked the nation.

The year 2009 will be no different, since it marks the 90th birthday of Turdakun Usubaliev, who was the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Kyrgyz SSR for almost 25 years. On 7 February, a resolution was signed by the president of the Kyrgyz Republic to hold celebrations for the prominent statesman. We look forward to many studies appearing on his biography as well as the period, 1961–85, which marked his career.

Mentioning such a link between the research and national celebrations is not intended to generalize about all of the available research or criticize the field of Kyrgyz history, but merely show the influence of the Soviet tradition on the field and point to a lack of independent academic financial support. Surely there are exceptions.

Turning to the positive features of the post-Soviet historiography, new research methodologies are being adopted by the younger generations of scholars, who have chosen to avoid the stereotypical interpretations and clichés that still remain from the Soviet era. Another development in the research approaches is the utilization of sources regarding the Kyrgyz oral tradition in conjunction with the archival and written record. The resulting oral history projects promise to unveil many heretofore unknown aspects of Kyrgyz history.

In sum, post-Soviet Kyrgyz historiography is now faced with contemporary academic requirements, making many scholars are aware of the necessity to change both their minds and methodology. The era was marked by both re-interpretation of existing topics and altogether original research. It is in this way that the writing of modern Kyrgyz history is trying to keep pace with the times and the process of progress and transformation.

## NOTES

- 1 Chinese words have been transcribed in *pinyin*.
- 2 The first results of the project were presented in a number of conferences, such as at the University of Tsukuba (2007), in Ysyk Köl (Issykkul), Kyrgyzstan (2008), at Stockholm University (2008), and at the University of Cambridge (2008).
- 3 For comparative perspectives on Uzbekistan, see Dadabaev [2006, 2008a].

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