A Tale of Two Heroes: Kyrgyzstan in Search of National Role Models

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National identity can be based on a wide variety of shared markers that encourage members of a given community to identify with their putative conationals. National heroes comprise one such potential shared marker. This paper focuses on national hero creation in Kyrgyzstan, a small Central Asian country currently in the active phase of nation creation. Specifically, it examines the ways in which Kyrgyz nation creators are deploying the figures of Manas, a legendary hero of the eponymous oral epic, and Kurmanzhan Datka, an actual historical personage from the nineteenth century. For the contemporary Kyrgyz, Manas provides a highly masculine, aggressive portrait of a national unifier, while Kurmanzhan, no slouch herself in the unifying and heroic categories, lends a touch of pragmatism and statesmanship to the national imaginary.

National identity can be based on a wide variety of shared markers that encourage members of a given community to identify with their putative conationals. Over the past half-century, a great deal of work has been done by scholars coming from many disciplinary perspectives to explain how and why national identity is created both on the theoretical and practical levels. As this scholarship is extremely well known, there is no reason to summarize it here; instead, I would like to focus on one particular potential pillar of national identity and examine how it is currently being developed in Kyrgyzstan, a relatively small Central Asian country currently in the active phase of nation creation.[1] Specifically, I will focus on the creation of national heroes and ask, "How does a given nation choose heroes who are meant to embody the national ideal?"

The role of heroes in creating a national self-image long predates the modern nation state. Heroes are understood as objects for emulation for putative national citizens. In ancient Greece, for example, the heroes of the epics at-

[1] The paper will not ask whether nation-building is itself a positive force in the 21st century or not. In the author's view, given the alternatives, it is, but this is beside the point. The process is taking place, and the task of this essay is to assess how it is happening, not to pass moral judgment on whether it should be.

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tributed to Homer were used precisely in this way, as we can see from Panegyricus of Isocrates (380 BC):

> Moreover, I think that even the poetry of Homer has won a greater renown because he has nobly glorified the men who fought against the barbarians, and that on this account our ancestors determined to give his art a place of honor in our musical contests and in the education of our youth, in order that we, hearing his verses over and over again, may learn by heart the enmity which stands from of old between us and them, and that we, admiring the valor of those who were in the war against Troy, may conceive a passion for like deeds.[2]

In a less martial vein, for Christians, the lives of Jesus, Mary, and the saints have provided a non-national model for imitation that has exerted a powerful pull for more than 2000 years.

In the modern world, many nations use heroes as part of the arsenal of material on which national identity is based. Such heroes can be drawn from ancient figures (real or imagined) linked to the contemporary nation in some way, modern political actors, as well as individuals who are felt to embody the nation's essence. Their images appear in statuary, on coins, bills, and stamps, and are featured prominently in school textbooks and curricula. Which figures are chosen in a given nation depends both on who is available as well as on the deeper cultural models around which the nation has been organized. In Eastern Europe, Russia, and the former Soviet Republics, following a model originally proposed by German thinkers, language tends to be the single most salient marker of national identity. As an abstract entity, however, language is difficult to embody, so those who create in it have come to take an outsized role in these societies. Writers, and in some cases the characters they have created, tend to play a central role in nation-building and maintenance in this part of the world.[3]

Kyrgyzstan, as a distant but nevertheless ideologically linked part of the Eurasian world, has followed the lead of more consolidated nations of Eastern Europe, and for reasons to be discussed below has focused its nation-creating efforts around two main figures: Manas, a legendary hero of oral epic and, more recently, Kurmanzhan Datka, an actual historical personage of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. In this paper, I would like to explore why these two heroes were chosen and examine what needs they fulfill and problems they create for a modern society attempting to use them as role models. Before beginning my analysis, however, I need to show why, until very re-

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2 Isocrates, "To Demonicus," Speech 4, section 159, ed. George Norlin, available at http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0144:speech=4:section=159&highlight=homer, accessed 29 December 2015.

3 On this topic, see the introduction and first chapter of my book *Remaining Relevant After Communism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

cently, the Kyrgyz people lacked a consolidated national identity, particularly because many scholars have claimed that the USSR produced such identities and was even destroyed by them.

Among scholars who have treated the breakup of the USSR, there is a fairly strong consensus that nationalism was one of the key issues that led to state collapse.[4] Ronald Suny made this claim as early as 1993: "As the present generation watches the self-destruction of the Soviet Union, the irony is lost that the USSR was the victim not only of its negative effects on the non-Russian peoples but of its own 'progressive' contribution to the process of nation-building."[5] And as Terry Martin noted, "Soviet policy did systematically promote the distinctive national identity and national self-consciousness of its non-Russian population. It did this not only through the formation of national territories staffed by national elites using their own national languages, but also through the aggressive promotion of symbolic markers of national identity: national folklore, museums, dress, food, costumes, opera, poets, progressive historical events, and classic literary works."[6]

Nevertheless, although the USSR did devote much attention to nation-building, an analysis of Kyrgyzstan (and other Central Asian republics) indicates that the Soviets were in fact not much better at nationality creation than they were at developing a functioning economy or political system.[7] As a result, in Kyrgyzstan, which, after some hesitation, has ultimately chosen an ethnic-collectivistic European-style nation-state development path, the creation of a solid national identity among its Kyrgyz citizens has become a matter of urgent attention.[8]

A closer look at Kyrgyzstan will help explain why Soviet efforts at creating a consolidated Kyrgyz nation did not succeed. Liah Greenfeld has usefully

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4 To be sure, few would claim that nationalism was the only cause for the collapse of the USSR, and many more conventional accounts of this process focus on political and economic malaise.

5 Ronald Suny, *The Revenge of the Past* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 101. Among key later works to explore the irony noted by Suny are Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001). Subsequently there have been a plethora of books, dissertations, and articles on the subject.

6 Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, 13.

7 While I do not disagree that rising nationalism played a role in the collapse of the USSR, it is worth noting that the main areas in which it was crucial had all had a well-consolidated national identity before becoming Soviet republics (Georgia and the Baltic states in particular).

8 For a discussion of various nationalist "roads to modernity," see Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992). For a deeper discussion of how, why, and when Kyrgyzstan moved from an initial phase of civic nationalism to ethnic nationalism, see my article "Kyrgyzstan between Democracy and Ethnic Intolerance," *Nationalities Papers* 41, no. 6 (2013): 971–86.

noted that the mere existence of shared group characteristics (commonly understood as ethnicity) does not in and of itself guarantee that a group of individuals will choose to identify with each other. What is more, she points out that although nationalism is usually assumed to require things like common language, shared traditions, religion, territory, or history, such a basis is not in fact necessary, and that "nationalism does not have to be related to *any* of these factors."[9] This is a valid theoretical point, but in practice some forms of shared identity, particularly language and religion, appear to be easier to use than others when creating national identity. An examination of Kyrgyzstan reveals that neither language nor religion was easily available for use as national "glue," requiring a search for other identity markers.

If we start from religion, we can see an obvious issue. For while the Soviets were able to square the circle at least theoretically on nationality vs. centralism ("national in form, socialist in content"), thus getting around the Marxist belief that nations were problems rather than solutions, they could not do the same with religion (the "opiate of the people"). As such, shared religion could not become an official part of national identity in the Soviet context, depriving potential nations of at least one solid building block.[10] Even today, post-Soviet Central Asian leaders, all of whom came of age in the officially atheist USSR, remain wary of using Islam for the purposes of nation-building.[11]

In the European ethnic arsenal, shared language is, however, the single most salient building block for national identity, and the Soviets, at least in principle, had no objection to the development of local languages. Nevertheless, Soviet policy did not lead to the flourishing of Kyrgyz. There were many reasons, but the first was probably the ethnic mix that prevailed in Kyrgyzstan. (This was the case in many of the other so-called national republics and regions as well.) In 1926, ethnic Kyrgyz made up some two-thirds of the population of the Kyrgyz ASSR. By 1939, however, their percentage of the population had dropped to just over 50% and for the rest of the Soviet period ethnic Kyrgyz would never make up more than half of the republic's inhabitants.[12] Furthermore, much of

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9 Greenfeld, *Nationalism*, 7.

10 In the case of Islam, the religion was shared by many Soviet ethnic groups and so, by itself, could not have become the sole basis of, say, Kyrgyz national identity. It could, however, have become part of such an identity, particularly as Kyrgyz Islam contains Tengrist traditions that could have been emphasized to create particularity in the larger Islamic world.

11 This wariness has only been compounded by the association of Islam with fundamentalism and terrorism since the early 2000s. For more on the topic of Islam's role in contemporary Kyrgyz identity, see Chris Hann and Mathijs Pelkmans, "Realigning Religion and Power in Central Asia: Islam, Nation-State, and (Post)Socialism," *Europe-Asia Studies* 61, no. 9 (2009): 1517–41, esp. 1528–31.

12 The oft-maligned *Wikipedia* provides a nice breakdown of Kyrgyz demographics at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Kyrgyzstan (accessed 29 December 2015), using as their source something called *Demoskop*, produced by Moscow's Higher School of Economics.

the ethnic Kyrgyz population was concentrated in rural areas, while cities, especially the capital Frunze (today Bishkek) were dominated by non-Asian non-Muslims (Russians, Ukrainians, Germans). The best schools educated students in Russian and the best students (ethnic Kyrgyz in particular) were selected for university study in European Russia. Although the program of *korenizatsiia* did produce an ethnic Kyrgyz elite who held public positions of power, and subsidies encouraged Kyrgyz-language publications, theater, and film, Kyrgyz-language culture lived inside and was always subordinate to Russian linguistic culture.[13] As a result, a good portion of ethnic Kyrgyz in urban areas spoke Kyrgyz badly or not at all, thereby making problematic perhaps the single easiest-to-use building block in the nation-creating arsenal.[14]

One other marker was potentially available to create Kyrgyz identity but it was also not exploited in the USSR for ideological reasons: nomadism. Traditionally, the Kyrgyz were stock raisers who engaged in seasonal migrations—up to mountain pastures in the summer and back down to protected valleys in the winter. The Soviets, however, taking seriously the Marxist teleology that nomadism was a lower form of civilization than settled agriculture, did what they could to suppress nomadic traditions. Collectivization in the 1930s deprived families of their own herds, and collective farm stock was watched over by a small number of professional shepherds while most families were required to engage in agriculture. The prejudice against nomadic traditions thus again deprived the Kyrgyz of a potential building block for national identity.[15]

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13 *Korenizatsiia* was the process by which local communist elites were created; see Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, chapter 4. Complaints about the inability and/or unwillingness of ethnic Kyrgyz (let alone minority groups) to use the official state language can be found quite frequently in the Kyrgyz public sphere. See, for example, Asylkan Shainazarova, "Kyrgyzstan: Iazyk kak instrument," *24.kg*, 20 September 2012, available at http://www.24kg.org/community/137466-kyrgyzstan-yazyk-kak-instrumenthellip.html, accessed 3 December 2012.

14 For more on this topic, see William Fierman, "Identity, Symbolism, and the Politics of Language in Central Asia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 61, no. 7 (2009): 1207–28, esp. 1215–16. That language and religion are not readily available markers for national identity in Kyrgyzstan even today can be seen in an informal survey I periodically conduct of students at the American University of Central Asia. As part of a required class on "Manas Studies" (about which, see below), I ask students to write down what they think are the top three attributes of Kyrgyzness. In three years of asking, I have received answers relating to language or religion from only about 2% of students. Generally, they choose various kinds of traditions ("we eat a lot of meat") or geographical markers of the land in which Kyrgyz people live (Lake Issyk-Kul, the mountains). While such markers may indeed be recognizable attributes of Kyrgyzness, I would assert that it is more difficult to create a functional national identity around them than around more conventional ethnic and religious commonalities.

15 This ambivalence remains to this day. While many Kyrgyz in everyday discourse reference their nomadic traditions positively (to explain why they are more democratic than some of their neighbors, for example), official discourse on the subject is more ambivalent, as Damira Umetbaeva points out: "The textbook authors'

Insofar as the USSR did try to create a Kyrgyz national identity, one pillar that was used was the epic *Manas*. The choice was by no means surprising. Since the first half of the nineteenth century, nation builders in Eastern Europe, under the influence of German theorists, had focused on epics as carriers of the nation's soul, and there was already long tradition of reviving and/or creating such works for Soviet theorists and practitioners to draw upon as part of their nation-building efforts in the far-flung reaches of the USSR. Nevertheless, such activities were not without controversy because, as Nienke van der Heide puts it, "the line between national self-determination and bourgeois nationalism was thin and illusive."[16] As a result, "the Manas epic was applauded one day, but condemned the next."[17]

When Kyrgyzstan became independent in 1991, the country's first president, Askar Akaev, attempted to avoid creating an ethno-national state for the Kyrgyz. Rather, he opted for a liberal state of citizens under the credo "Kyrgyzstan—Our Shared Home (*Kyrgyzstan—Nash obshchii dom*). As he noted in his programmatic book, *Looking to the Future with Optimism*: "All citizen (sic) of Kyrgyzstan, regardless of ethnic background and religious affiliation, form a single nation and are responsible for the worthy future of the country and each individual."[18]

However, a number of factors conspired to undermine the liberal, non-nationalist approach to nation creation. First of all, and not surprisingly, Kyr-

approaches to the destruction of the traditional, nomadic, and tribal way of life is contradictory. They regard the transformation of society as positive and progressive, while at the same time enumerating its negative consequences." See "Official Rhetoric and Individual Perceptions of the Soviet Past: Implications for Nation Building in Kyrgyzstan," *REGION: Regional Studies of Russian, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia* 4, no. 1 (2015): 81.

16 Nienke van der Heide, *Spirited Performance: The Manas Epic and Society in Kyrgyzstan* (Ph.D. diss., University of Tilburg, 2008), 251.

17 Ibid. For more on this topic see Daniel Prior, *Patron, Party, Patrimony: Notes on the Cultural History of the Kyrgyz Epic Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

18 Askar Akaev, *Looking to the Future with Optimism: Reflections on Foreign Policy and the Universe* (New York: Global Scholarly Publications, 2004), 197. The English translation of this text is grammatically quite creative. It must be admitted that Akaev is not always consistent in his avoidance of Kyrgyz ethno-chauvinism in this book. Thus, in another section he speaks from the voice of "We, the people of the sovereign Kyrgyz Republic, guided by the world experience of democracy, perpetual wisdom of the Kyrgyz people, and representatives of other nationalities of Kyrgyzstan" (196), thereby separating the Kyrgyz from the rest of the population on the basis of their ethnicity. Nevertheless, on balance, Akaev seems in the first years of his rule to have desired to avoid ethno-nationalist leanings. On the ambivalent relationship of "nationalist" and "multi-nationalist" discourses in Kyrgyz nation-building efforts, see Asel Murzakulova and John Schoeberlein, "The Invention of Legitimacy: Struggles in Kyrgyzstan to Craft an Effective Nation-State Ideology," *Europe-Asia Studies* 61, no. 7 (2009): 1229–48.

gyz elites proved incapable of creating robust state institutions out of the wreckage of the USSR. As has been well documented, the collapse of the Soviet state led to an enormous drop in living standards throughout the former Union and in Kyrgyzstan in particular.[19] At the same time, Kyrgyzstan's difficult economic situation was exacerbated by other Soviet legacies, including a prevailing culture of corruption and clientalism, and weak judicial and legislative systems incapable of providing effective checks on executive power. Under the circumstances, the state could not provide a powerful centripetal ideology and Kyrgyz citizens of all ethnicities quickly lost faith in the state's fledgling institutions, leading them to search for other bases of solidarity, including those of ethnos and tribe.[20]

At the same time, the demographic balance characteristic of the Soviet era altered swiftly, making the possibility of creating an ethno-national state far more realistic. By 1999, ethnic Kyrgyz, whose percentage in the population had not been above 50% since the 1920s, made up 65% of the whole, and Uzbeks increased their share modestly to about 14%. However, the crucial story was the rapid disappearance of non-Asian non-Muslims, whose share of the population decreased from some 36% in 1989 to less than 15% in 1999.[21] According to data from 2009, these demographic trends have continued, with the ethnic Kyrgyz population comprising approximately 70% of citizens, and non-Asian, non-Muslim populations having dropped to approximately 8.5%, almost all of them concentrated in the capital of Bishkek.[22]

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19 In the words of Johannes F. Linn, the economic collapse of the post-Soviet states "was probably an unprecedented phenomenon during peacetime in recent economic history," as it amounted to a contraction twice that of the Western economies during the Great Depression. "Economic (Dis)integration Matters: The Soviet Collapse Revisited," paper prepared for the conference "Transition in the CIS: Achievements and Challenges," Academy for National Economy, Moscow, 13–14 September 2004 (revised October 2004), available at http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/research/files/papers/2004/10/russia%20linn/200410linn.pdf, accessed 3 December 2012.

20 Surveys conducted by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) illustrate the lack of success that the Akaev regime had in terms of convincing Kyrgyz citizens that the state was developing in a positive direction. According to the IFES survey of 2001: "On the whole, Kyrgyzstanis are extremely dissatisfied with the performance of the government and do not exhibit a great deal of confidence in any public institution or personality." See Vladimir Pototskii and Rakesh Sharma, "2001 IFES Survey in Kyrgyzstan," available at http://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/kyrgyzstan_report_print_2.pdf, accessed 3 December 2012.

On the importance of subnational groupings in Kyrgyz self-understanding, see David Gullette, *The Genealogical Construction of the Kyrgyz Republic: Kinship, State, and 'Tribalism'* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

21 Most of the initial outmigration of non-Asian, non-Muslims took place quite quickly, between 1991 and 1994.

22 For official census data from 1999 and 2009, see http://www.stat.kg/stat.files/din.files/census/5010003.pdf, accessed 3 December 2012.

Given the rapid rise in the proportion of ethnic Kyrgyz in the new state and the failure of state institutions, it is hardly surprising that the Kyrgyz political elite, led by Akaev himself, turned away from the idea of building a civic nation based on liberal and individualist values and instead decided to focus on creating an ethno-national state for the Kyrgyz. In the European tradition, national identity is based on a claim to shared ethnos. Looking back into the past, elites find a glorious golden age that has been tragically suppressed and which must be "revived" in the present, either by building on folk culture or/and through the creation of new cultural works that emphasize past glory and give hope for the future.[23]

When the Kyrgyz began to look around for such potential building blocks, one was readily available: the oral epic poem *Manas*, which as we have seen already had been used to some extent by the Soviets for Kyrgyz nation creation. A full-scale fetishization of Manas began under the Akaev regime, however, particularly during the Manas "millennium" celebrations of 1995 when the international airport was named after the hero, an enormous equestrian monument was erected in front of the Bishkek Philharmonic Hall, and the so-called Manas village complex was created in Bishkek.[24] After 2010, when there were real fears that the country might break apart because of intra-Kyrgyz rivalries, the central government began an ever more active campaign to Manasify the country. Among other efforts one can point to the installation of a Manas statue on Bishkek's central square (replacing a far more ecumenical monument to peace which had stood there since it had replaced Lenin in the immediate post-Soviet period, and giving the city two immense equestrian monuments to the hero some 500 meters apart), the dedication of an equally monumental Manas sculpture in the city of Osh, and the erection of a Manas monument in Moscow. Even more striking is a 2012 decree by the Kyrgyz Ministry of Edu-

[23] For the classic work on this subject, see Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[24] The rapid shift from an "internationalist" to a "nationalist" outlook in Akaev's thinking can be seen through an analysis of the speeches he gave on each Kyrgyz Independence Day (31 August). In an interesting analysis of these speeches, Aijan Sydykova notes that in 1995, as opposed to previous and subsequent years, the president's Independence Day speech was not printed. Rather, Kyrgyz newspapers, "published a full version of the President's speech delivered at the celebration of what was claimed to be the 1000th anniversary of the creation of *Manas*." Aijan Sydykova, "Nationalism and Nation-building through the Prism of Presidential Rhetoric: The Case of Kyrgyzstan, 1991–2004" (unpublished senior thesis, American University of Central Asia, 2013), 40. In the years that followed, the president's Independence Day speeches "use the literary image of the strong and powerful hero in order to evoke the historical self consciousness of the Kyrgyz people, mobilize society against external threats, and emphasize the importance of ideas like unity." Ibid., 41.

cation which makes a course in "Manas Studies" a graduation requirement for every university student in the country.[25]

Nevertheless, there are problems with the promotion of Manas as the national hero for contemporary Kyrgyz. These mainly have to do with how Manas appears in the epic and what he implicitly stands for. Essentially, the story of Manas focuses on the life of a fairly typical Central Asian warlord. Such leaders (Genghis Khan being by far the most famous and successful) created bands of warriors loyal to themselves personally and attempted through charisma, bravery, and cunning to expand territories under their nominal control so as to support their major source of wealth—herds of horses, cattle, sheep, and goats.[26] *Manas* loosely describes the life of such a man, focusing on precisely the activities he could be expected to have engaged in—hunting, feasting, sports of all kinds, and most of all, intermittent low-level raiding against neighboring tribes. The final section of *Manas* in the best-known Soviet-era versions describes an enormous campaign against the Chinese, which in many versions ends with Manas's death.

Although most Kyrgyz claim to see Manas as the national hero, it is worth asking whether a character whose life is characterized by more or less endless aggression and engaged primarily in activities totally unconnected to the life of a modern state can serve as an appropriate and successful unifying model today.[27] Because although scholars sometimes claim that the actual content of national myths is irrelevant for the purposes of nation-building, it still does seem that there should be some correspondence between a national hero and the reality of a nation's circumstances.[28] Thus, we could ask, is it realistic for

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25 As far as I am aware, Kyrgyzstan is the only country in the world to require the study of a national literary work at the university level.

26 The history of *Manas* is beyond the scope of this article, but it is worth pointing out that the consolidated text most Kyrgyz would recognize as *Manas* today is a creation of the Soviet period in great measure. Based on surviving texts from the nineteenth century (in particular, see Arthur T. Hatto, *The Manas of Wilhelm Radloff: Re-edited, Newly Translated, and with a Commentary* [Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1990]), it can be seen that in the pre-Soviet period the epic existed as a set of more or less free-standing scenes, which twentieth-century bards stitched together at the suggestion of Soviet nation builders.

27 That Manas was a somewhat problematic figure from a moral standpoint was already noted by Valikhanov, the first collector to have transcribed oral performances of parts of the epic: "He also reported that in the poems he heard, Manas was a woman-chaser and grossly unfilial to his father." Quoted in Prior, *Patron, Party, Patrimony*, 9. While no contemporary Kyrgyz *Manas* promoter has openly noted the problematic nature of the epic, Askar Akaev's attempt to glean seven lessons from it (many of which have at best a tangential and unconvincing relationship to the work) can be seen as an implicit attempt to deal with these problems. See his *Kyrgyz Statehood and the National Epos 'Manas'* (New York: Global Scholarly Publications, 2003), 282–85.

28 In his fascinating analysis, Prior has noted that Manas has had his ups and downs since the time the epic was first written down in the mid-nineteenth century. Prior

Kyrgyzstan to build its entire national identity around an aggressive, expansionist, highly masculine hero such as Manas?[29]

The Kyrgyz government has never publically acknowledged the limitations of Manas, but efforts since 2010 to create a second, complementary national hero provide some hints that the problematic nature of the epic has been recognized. This complementary figure is Kurmanzhan Datka, the so-called Queen of Alai. As opposed to the fully mythical Manas, Kurmanzhan was unquestionably a real person who lived a full and fascinating life (1811–1907) at a complex and turbulent time in the history of the Kyrgyz. Coming from the Alai Mountains (what is today the southwestern part of Kyrgyzstan), she was married off at a young age, but showed her spirit by refusing to live with the much older man to whom her family gave her. Having successfully evaded her erstwhile husband, in 1832 she married Alymbek, a local strongman whose title datka, bestowed by the Sultan of Bukhara, means something like General/Clan leader. Alymbek was embroiled in the endless feuding and intrigue of the Kokand Khanate, the nominal overlords of the southern Kyrgyz tribes. The Khanate itself was at this point falling apart, not just because of its own internal problems but also under the pressure of relentless Russian expansion into Central Asia. Alymbek was killed in 1862, at which point Kurmanzhan was accorded the title of datka (the only known instance in which a woman was so dubbed).

Over the next decade or so, she and her sons attempted to carve out a space in which they could live, migrating from the Alai Mountains to today's China and Afghanistan at various points. Eventually, however, Kurmanzhan decided that it was hopeless to resist the incursions of the troops of the "White Khan," and she signed an agreement that brought her and her fellow Kyrgyz clansmen under Russian rule. She did not speak for all the Kyrgyz tribes, many of which continued to resist the Russians, nor even for all of her sons, one of whom refused to submit. Nevertheless, the Russian authorities considered her a valuable ally. They made her a variety of rich presents over the years and allowed her sons to take up positions of local authority.[30] She became a kind of

notes that the epic about Manas's son Semetei seems to have been more popular in the late nineteenth century, and that *Manas* was even, perhaps, in danger of dying out before Soviet-era bards rescued it. See Prior, *Patron, Party, Patrimony*, 10–12.

29 The dangers of using a martial epic as the basis for national identity can perhaps be seen by the experience of Yugoslavia, Serbia, and Montenegro with the epic *Gorski vijenac* by Petar Petrović Njegoš. Although generations of readers were encouraged to see the epic as a work extolling national unity, the fact that it describes the massacre of Muslim Montenegrins by their Orthodox brothers has made the work highly problematic since the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. See my article "How to Use a Classic: Petar Petrović Njegoš in the 20th Century," *Ideologies and National Identities: The Case of Twentieth Century Southeastern Europe*, ed. John Lampe and Mark Mazower (Budapest: CEU Press, 2003), 131–53.

30 Later, however, her sons were implicated in smuggling, and one was hanged by the Russian authorities for his role in this activity.

celebrity as well, and a visit to her camp was a required stop for the few intrepid civilian travelers who made it out to the distant edge of the Russian empire.

During the Soviet period Kurmanzhan was not considered a significant figure in Kyrgyz history. While *Manas* engendered much debate, at times being seen as a key text for nation-building efforts in the region and at others attacked for creating a basis for national chauvinism, Kurmanzhan was pretty much ignored.[31] From the perspective of Soviet scholars, she was a feudal and aristocratic leader, which trumped the fact that she was a woman (and at least in principle they believed in gender equality) and a "progressive" leader insofar as she brought the Kyrgyz (some of them anyway) into the Russian orbit.[32] Nevertheless, as a building block for national identity, it was better from the Soviet perspective to make use of a legendary figure like Manas than a real individual whose life did not fully conform to expectations about how nineteenth-century leaders should look and behave. Kurmanzhan was simply too cozy with the hated Russian tsarist regime and too much of a traditional aristocratic leader for Soviet tastes. As a result, in Soviet-era histories of Kyrgyzstan, Kurmanzhan gets at best a paragraph, and is never described as a figure of genuine historical importance.

In the post-independence period, however, Kurmanzhan's stock rose precipitously. Her portrait appears on the 50-som bill (second series of Kyrgyz currency, issued in 1994). Her statue has occupied a prominent place in Bishkek since 2004, and another has been erected in the southern capital Osh. In 2011, during the presidential mandate of Roza Otumbaeva, a "year of Kurmanzhan Datka" was proclaimed, and numerous events were held in her honor. It is perhaps not surprising that a female president, the first in the history of Central Asia, would have wished to raise the profile of the only woman to have previously held a prominent public political position in the region. But preference on the part of a female political leader for an illustrious predecessor does not explain why Kurmanzhan's star has continued to rise under the rule of Kyrgyzstan's current president. The most recent manifestation of her increasing importance in the national pantheon was the release in late 2014 of an expensive bio-epic film devoted to her, sponsored for the most part by Kyrgyz government funding.

While any conclusions must remain speculative, given that no government officials have expressed their motivations for supporting Kurmanzhan as a national hero, it does seem logical that she would be a serious candidate at

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31 For a summary of reasons why figures like Kurmanzhan were ignored, see Tursunai Omurzakova, "Kurmanzhan Datka: Epokha. Lichnost', Deianiia" (Avtoreferat, Natsional'naia Akademiia Nauk Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki, 1996), 4–5, available at http://cheloveknauka.com/v/17177/a?#?page=1, accessed 3 December 2012.

32 In the middle of the nineteenth century the Kyrgyz were in no sense a unified group and identified primarily with their tribe. And it was as groups of tribes that they accepted the protection of the Russian state, beginning in 1855 with some of the tribes in the north of today's Kyrgyzstan, and finishing in 1864 with the south.

this juncture of Kyrgyzstan's history. To put it bluntly, in its first 15 years of existence, post-independence Kyrgyzstan looked forward to its future as an independent state with optimism and attempted to play a role in international politics. In a world in which Russian influence was clearly receding, it made sense for Kyrgyzstan to broaden its contacts, including opening up to China, Turkey, and the United States. After US-led forces invaded Afghanistan in 2001, Kyrgyzstan made facilities at the Manas International Airport available to NATO, and the vast majority of coalition troops into and out of Afghanistan were ferried through Kyrgyzstan. President Kurmanbek Bakiev, Askar Akaev's successor, was quite skilled at playing American, Russian, and Chinese interests against each other, extracting the maximum concessions both for Kyrgyzstan and for himself between 2005 and 2010. During this period, then, the aggressive and optimistic Manas was perhaps an appropriate marker of national identity for the Kyrgyz.

Since Bakiev's ouster in 2010, however, the context in which Kyrgyzstan lives has changed radically. Russia, resurgent under Vladimir Putin throughout the 2000s, has been putting increasing pressure on weak Central Asian states to reintegrate with their former Soviet overlords, while the US has become an increasingly distant and unreliable partner. Since the election of President Atambaev, the pace of reintegration has quickened. Kyrgyzstan has agreed to join the Russian-led Eurasian Union, although at least in the short term this will likely have negative consequences for an already weak economy. The American base, long a thorn in the side of the Russians, was closed in 2014, again to the clear detriment of the Kyrgyz economy. In 2013 GazProm acquired the entire gas distribution system of Kyrgyzstan and Russian investors inked agreements to develop the country's extensive hydropower resources, thus guaranteeing Russian control over the energy sector. Indeed, a dispassionate observer might easily conclude that the Russians and Kyrgyz have concluded an unspoken deal whereby Russia will keep Kyrgyzstan afloat in exchange for control over the country's security policy and economy.

In this environment, Kurmanzhan Datka has become a more appropriate national hero than Manas. While the latter is portrayed as an aggressive expansionist, a hothead, and an independent, if unpredictable, actor, the former was a calculating politician who recognized a bad hand when she had one and played it as best she could. As one recent biographer said of her: "Kurmanzhan clearly understood the historical inevitability of fate, the futility of struggle with Russia, and made the conscious choice to accept Russian protection.... For Kurmanzhan during this period the most important thing was to preserve peace and tranquility in her region, avoiding unnecessary bloodshed and strengthening the bonds of friendship between the native and immigrant peoples."[33]

[33] Tashmanbet Kenensarev, "Fenomen Kurmanzhan Datki" (translation mine), available at http://www.akipress.org/kghistory/news:9001, accessed 29 December 2015.

As noted earlier, Kurmanzhan's position as top-flight national cultural hero has been cemented recently with the release of a bio-epic film entitled *Kurmanzhan Datka*. Although strictly speaking the project is private and the state did not have a role in creating the film's scenario or in dictating its ideology, the Kyrgyz state did invest some 1.5 million dollars to make the picture, which was characterized by parliamentarian Akhmatbek Keldibekov as crucial to "preserve our ideological values."[34]

A close reading of the film indicates that while in part it conforms to expectations about how a national patriotic epic should present the past, at least in some areas it opens interesting questions about Kyrgyz identity. It should be noted again that there is no indication that the Kyrgyz government had any direct editorial control over the film. At the same time, the film's director (Sadyk Sher-Niyaz) and producer (Aitysh Film) were undoubtedly aware of what was expected of them, at least on a macro-scale, so we can say that the film, while not an explicit expression of state ideology, does not contradict it either.

The film begins with a short historical overview which claims that the Kyrgyz were masters of a gigantic state in Central and East Asia that lasted from the seventh until the thirteenth century. There is no historical basis for such an assertion, which conveys the kind of hackneyed romantic nostalgia for a legendary glorious national-past golden age well known to students of nationalism.[35] As is usually the case with such claims, the film's narrator tells us that external forces led to the demise of the once-great state and, eventually, brought the once-mighty nation to the brink of disaster. When we pick up the story in the early nineteenth century, the Kyrgyz have dwindled to some 40 tribes under the dominion of the Kokand Khanate.[36] The central political message of the film is that the Kyrgyz, small and vulnerable, can only survive if they overcome their own internal (north/south) differences. In the film, bringing the various Kyrgyz tribes together is the driving idea of Kurmanzhan's husband

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34 As quoted in K.News, 8 April 2013, available at http://www.knews.kg/parlament_chro/30247_sadyik_sher-niyaz_dlya_togo_chtobyi_snyat_film_kurmanjan_datka_na_mejdunarodnom_urovne_neobhodimo_15_milliona_dollarov/, accessed 5 July 2013.

The amount of money in question might seem fairly trivial, but it constituted something like .00066 percent of annual government spending. That is to say, it was equivalent to the US Congress having budgeted 250 million dollars (approximately the combined annual budget of the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities) to subsidize a single film promoting American values.

35 At one point in the ninth century it does appear that a short-lived steppe state, perhaps under Kyrgyz nominal rule, existed. However, such pre-modern states were not nation states in any sense of the word, and in any case there was certainly no such state over the time period suggested.

36 The Kokand Khanate was a state which broke away from the Khanate of Bukhara and existed in the Fergana Valley (covering at various times parts of today's Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, and even Kazakhstan) between 1709 and 1876.

Alymbek Datka. Kurmanzhan is said to have wanted to build on this vision, which was also supposedly shared by the northern Kyrgyz leader Shabdan batyr. Its realization is hindered both by the evil Khan of Kokand (who orders Alymbek's murder in the film) and, later, by the Russians. Although there is some historical evidence that Alymbek was interested in creating a rapprochement between the northern and southern Kyrgyz (though little that Kurmanzhan herself followed up on), the consistent harping on the issue in the film is more a representation of contemporary nation-building requirements than historical reality.[37]

More interesting than the ways in which the film bends history to suit the political needs of the present day is what it has to say about aspects of Kyrgyz identity that are less obviously political. Specifically, I have in mind its implicit claims about Islam and gender as well as its treatment of relations between the Kyrgyz and the Russians. Near the beginning of the film is a scene in which a young woman is to be stoned by a group of men, supposedly for adultery. As the stoning begins, Alymbek chances to ride by and asks what is happening. The local men tell him and warn him not to "abuse your power by going against Shariah." Nevertheless, Alymbek halts the execution, accepting the hearsay testimony of women witnesses as relayed by the girl's brother. Given Alymbek's status in the film as a positive figure, the scene acts as a strong condemnation of Islamic obscurantism as embodied by the local village leaders.

Nevertheless, lest viewers believe that Alymbek is some kind of atheist and that the Kyrgyz are not Muslims, a powerful scene later in the film clearly identifies him as a believer. On his way home from a meeting with the northern Kyrgyz leader, Alymbek stops to say his prayers at a small mosque. There he is ambushed and killed. The scene of his murder is handled with great delicacy. Seeing he cannot escape death, he spreads his prayer rug on the ground and completes his traditional namaz as his killers wait to behead him. Thus, in the vision of the filmmaker, the Kyrgyz are unquestionably Muslim, but they avoid the excesses of fundamentalism so worrisome for the leaders of contemporary Kyrgyzstan.

The film's commentary on gender issues is even more obviously relevant to the creation of a contemporary Kyrgyz national identity than is its treatment of Islam. In general, nation-building texts have been rather masculine affairs in Eastern Europe and the former USSR. Given that most of them celebrate the creation of the nation through armed struggle, this is perhaps not surprising, but it does mean that the female half of the population is often given short shrift. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, Manas and his band of brothers forcefully present a traditional masculine front, and, as noted earlier, the majority of the

[37] The need to overcome problematic relations between Kyrgyz in the north and in the south is a constant feature of contemporary Kyrgyz political discourse. The problem came to a head most frequently after the ouster of southerner Kurmanbek Bakiev in 2010, when the federal government, based in the northern city of Bishkek, for all intents and purposes lost control over the southern parts of the country.

epic is devoted to such typically male pursuits as fighting, hunting, and feasting. To be sure, there is one strong female character in *Manas*: the hero's wife Kanykei. But she is herself more a martial than a feminine character, which she proves by stabbing Manas when he comes unannounced and unexpected to her tent in the middle of the night.

In the film, Kurmanzhan is also at times portrayed as heroic and brave—refusing to escape to safety when her tribe is attacked by the army of the Khan of Kokand, hectoring doubting men into fighting by invoking the spirit of Manas, and so forth. But she is also portrayed as politically astute, vulnerable, playful (at least as a girl), wise, and willing to compromise when necessary, even at great personal cost. Needless to say, these are not characteristics of the more one-dimensional Manas, and in this respect Kurmanzhan, at least as portrayed in the film, presents a counter model for Kyrgyz identity, one perhaps better suited to the modern world than that projected by the archaic values of the oral epic.

The pragmatic side of Kurmanzhan's personality is particularly exhibited in sections of the film portraying Kyrgyz/Russian relations. Although in reality it was Kurmanzhan who made the agreement to bring the Kyrgyz over to the Russian side, in the film this step is attributed to a different leader, perhaps to avoid the question of whether such a move, even if necessary, constituted a kind of sell-out. Overall, though, the film cannot be said to portray the Russians in a positive light, thereby at least tacitly calling into question the pro-Russian policies of today's leaders. Although General Skobelev is presented quite positively, depicted as speaking with Kurmanzhan in Kyrgyz and claiming that the Kyrgyz warriors were model soldiers, most of the other Russians are presented as either overbearing colonialists or boors, and a Kyrgyz audience would be forgiven for thinking that this is not a group of people to whom the nation and state should voluntarily give itself.[38]

The film ends with a wonderfully ambiguous scene based on an episode toward the end of Kurmanzhan's life. A Russian military exhibition is in Central Asia and the photographer is taking pictures of some Kyrgyz children. He has only one plate left and decides to take a shot of the aged Kurmanzhan sitting on horseback (the photo actually exists). He tells her to hold herself well as the photo will preserve her for history but his companion corrects him, noting that she became a historical figure long ago. And who is this perspicacious Russian officer? None other than Gustav Mannerheim, who in the late 1930s would lead the successful defense of Finland against Soviet invasion. It is hard to say whether the inclusion of Mannerheim is merely a reference to historical fact (he really was there) or rather a coded message about Russia's attitude toward its neighbors and former colonies.

[38] This is particularly clear in the scenes involving the hanging of Kurmanzhan's son, which is presented as a kind of provocation by the Russian authorities. Kurmanzhan refuses to beg for his life or to allow her followers to try to rescue him, displaying both her heroic and pragmatic sides despite great person cost.

In any case, with Manas and Kurmanzhan firmly in place as models, we can say that Kyrgyzstan has created at least a portion of the symbolic cultural capital necessary for a robust national identity. Manas provides a highly masculine, aggressive portrait of a unifier, while Kurmanzhan, no slouch herself in the unifying and heroic categories, lends a touch of pragmatism and statesmanship to the national imaginary. Are these narratives sufficient to build a modern nation to inhabit a vulnerable state in a world in which globalization and out-migration threaten the very existence of these concepts? That is of course unclear, but given the realities of post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, we can say that, for better or for worse, the Kyrgyz state is attempting to create a robust national identity, using the cultural material it has inherited as best it can.

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