

Kyrgyz Minorities in China

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Keywords: Kyrgyz, ethnic minorities, China, Kyrgyzstan, Tarbagatai, Kizilsu

INTRODUCTION

The main aim of this paper is to show the cultural specificity of the Kyrgyz minority living as an indigenous population in China. The materials are based primarily on long-term field research conducted in 2007–09 in Kyrgyzstan, China, Tajikistan and Afghanistan, along with previous research from 2000–06. The focus in China was on two areas of compact Kyrgyz settlement in Xinjiang: the Tarbagatai mountains in the Ili-Kazakh Autonomous Region, and Kizilsu, near Kashgar/Kashi, in the Kyrgyz Autonomous Region. Research was conducted in the Kyrgyz language. Inhabitants of Kizilsu use the local Kyrgyz language, which is relatively well understood and similar to codified Kyrgyz. The Kyrgyz in the Ili-Kazakh Autonomous Region speak Kazakh, but because the Kyrgyz and Kazakh languages are close to each other, it was also possible to conduct research in Kyrgyz.

There is a dearth of professional literature concerning the Kyrgyz minority in China. The reason is that, for many decades, it was not possible to do any field research in this sphere and even today the possibility of research is greatly limited in some places (in cities and villages closed to foreigners).

From the historical literature concerning Chinese Kyrgyz, there are available only some older, mainly historically focused, publications by Soviet authors – for example A. Baytur, S. Zakirov and A. Turdueva – and the seven-volume work *Manas* published by Zhusul Mamaj, the Chinese (Kyrgyz) *manaschi* (diseur of the *Manas* epic). Kyrgyz authors have not yet published on this topic. As for more recent Russian authors, we can mention M.A. Chertykov from the State University of Khakasia, who conducted short-term research in the Tarbagatai Mountains in 2005. There exist only a few English publications related to this topic – for example, *China's Last Nomads: the History and Culture of China's Kazaks* by Linda Benson and Ingvar Svanberg (1998), which concerns a close ethnic group (Kazakhs) in western China. Chinese authors address the topic of the Kyrgyz in China only in brief, providing not very detailed historical data – for example, Yu Xue Bin's *Heilongjiang Kirghiz* (2003), describing the Kyrgyz in

Manchukuo/Manchuria. Since 2000, there have been only a few other Chinese academic articles devoted to Kyrgyz culture in China.

Using ethnographic methods, this report serves to introduce some of the cultural practices of the Kyrgyz in China in an attempt to begin to fill this gap in the literature.

Kyrgyz living in China represent approximately 5% of global Kyrgyz, and China is the second (after Uzbekistan) of the states with a large Kyrgyz minority. The Kyrgyz ethnic group is most populous in Kyrgyzstan, where the 2009 census reported the Kyrgyz population to be 3.8 million people (71% of the country's population). The vast majority (99.8%) of these identified Kyrgyz ethnicity with the Kyrgyz language (Statisticheskije perepisi 2009). Kyrgyzstan has the largest distribution of Kyrgyz people (87%). Six per cent of the world's Kyrgyz live in Uzbekistan (the total number of Kyrgyz in Uzbekistan is 160,000–370,000); China has 5% (160,823, according to the 2000 census); Tajikistan 2% (approximately 70,000); and Kazakhstan 0.3%. A compact Kyrgyz group of about 30,000 also lives in northern Afghanistan (Kokaisl 2008: 107).

Chinese Kyrgyz are one of the 56 officially recognised nationalities of China. In just one decade, 2000–2010, their number increased by one third, to 200,000 people (the data from the year 2010 are estimated). This increase was not caused by migration of Kyrgyz from Kyrgyzstan, but almost exclusively by a relatively high fertility rate. The main region of compact settlements in China is the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Within this region, Kyrgyz live in two relatively distant areas (see Figure 1a). Although many Kyrgyz moved into this region from today's Kyrgyzstan in the first half of the twentieth century, we can consider the Chinese Kyrgyz as an autochthonic population, since allied Kyrgyz clans helped one another and accepted relatives across the regions of today's China and today's Kyrgyzstan, no matter where the state border actually went.

The Kyrgyz SSR – the only autonomous Kyrgyz political entity – was created in the USSR in 1936, shaping that population of Kyrgyz into a 'socialist nation'. Kyrgyz living in other former Soviet republics have, in many respects, a similar way of life. By contrast, the Chinese Kyrgyz have a rather different lifestyle. Nevertheless, when tracing the origin of Kyrgyz families in China, it is not possible to discern which are native to the areas that are today Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and China. Individual families in the past travelled in a given territory. Only the creation of boundaries determined where individual Kyrgyz families stayed.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE KYRGYZ SETTLEMENT IN CHINA

A large part of the Central Asian territory was under Russian administration in the nineteenth century. What is today Kyrgyzstan was annexed by Russia around 1860. Most of this territory had belonged to the Khanate of Kokand, which became a vassal state of Russia until 1876, when it was abolished. The Khanate

of Kokand was a state with repressive taxation, juridical system and ‘feudal-style’ military politics, which led to war with the neighbouring Emirate of Bukhara. In the 1850s, the Kyrgyz population had begun to ask Russia to be granted vassalage. (Later, when Russia began to draft local men into the army, the population began to rebel against the Russian government.)

Meanwhile, inside western China, in 1862 the Muslim population (Dungan) in began to rebel against the Chinese government. The insurgents tried to create an independent state, which they managed for a short time, but the Chinese army brutally suppressed this rebellion. This event had an impact on the ethnic population. The Dungan who escaped the Chinese soldiers fled to Russia, where they



FIGURE 1a) Settlements with Kyrgyz Population in China (western China and Fuyu district in Manchuria 1b) Detail of western China settlements)
 Source: <http://wiki.central-asia.su/subdom/wiki/lib/exe/fetch.php?media=map-kg-in-china3a.tif>
 & <http://wiki.central-asia.su/subdom/wiki/lib/exe/fetch.php?media=map-fuyu-district.tif>

settled in Semirechie (Dzheti Suu); this area is today part of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In this context it should be noted that changes in the ethnic composition refers mainly to the settled population, which relied heavily on agriculture. Nomadic populations experienced much less change. Until the twentieth century, Kyrgyz nomads migrated freely between the territories that are today Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, parts of eastern Tajikistan and China. The nomads did not perceive any importance in the fact that their nomadic life lay in the territory of two states.

Significant changes began to occur in the early part of the twentieth century, when Russia (and later the USSR) and China began to establish stable borders. These borders gradually became completely impenetrable. Of course, this meant restrictions on nomadic life. In some situations, one part of a family would be forced to stay in one state and the second part in another. Reunions did not take place for many decades.

The nomadic population left Russia and the USSR for China in several waves. The first wave was associated with the 1916 uprising against Russian rule in Andizhan (present-day Uzbekistan). The uprising was suppressed, and a significant number of nomads fled into China. Further waves of migration to China occurred after the start of Soviet collectivisation in the 1920s and '30s. Nomadic people fled from the USSR, not only to China but also to Iran and Afghanistan. The third wave took place during World War II. After the war, many Kyrgyz wanted to leave China and return home, but the repressive Chinese communist regime made this impossible.

Although, according to its proclamations, China built the perfect communist society, conditions were quite different in comparison to the Soviet Union. The main difference after 1917 derived from the aims of planned revolution. The Soviet Union's ideal of communism was understood to be the liberation of workers from exploitation and repression. In China, this ideal was understood mainly as liberation from the repression of large imperialistic powers: USA, UK, France and Japan. The Soviet Union built communism among the Eastern European states, but its relationship with the most populous communist country was none too friendly:

Although Mao Zedong finally triumphed over the Kuomintang with the help of Soviet weapons, and the Soviet Union helped China obtain nuclear bomb production technology, China began to act openly against the Soviet Union after 1962. In 1968–76 military conflicts flared up on the Soviet-Chinese border. China began to ally itself with the USA in the 1970s, and China and the USA armed Islamic groups in the Soviet-Afghan war. (Kolontaev 1998: 5)

The Soviet Union nevertheless had a strong political, economical, cultural and ideological influence in China, mainly in Xinjiang and the Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture (founded in 1954). A large number of immigrants from the Soviet Union lived in this area, in contrast to northeast China and Shanghai. The total number of Russian immigrants in China (some of them had emigrated

from Tsarist Russia) was approximately 140,000–160,000 people in 1954, of whom 80,000 lived in Xinjiang. These people intermarried with the local population (Kazakhs and Uyghurs). The core of this group was created by co-workers with Soviet citizenship who were employed by the organs of the Party in Xinjiang and Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture.

After Soviet–Chinese relations cooled in the 1950s and '60s, the activity of Soviet consulates in Xinjiang intensified. Soviet support was oriented toward its compatriots with Chinese citizenship. The Soviets convinced some of the population along the Chinese border to return to the USSR in April and May 1962. This year was an important milestone in the history of ethnic minorities living along the Chinese–Kazakh border. On 29 May a group of Chinese had attacked the administrative building of the Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture. More than 60,000 people fled from the Chinese border area to the Soviet Union during the spring and summer of 1962. After the events in the Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture, the Chinese purged the Soviet influence. In 1966, there were only 201 emigrants from Russia in Xinjiang, who lived under permanent control (Dan'chujej 2004).

KYRGYZ POPULATIONS IN CHINA: A CULTURAL OVERVIEW

According to Chinese statistics (China's Official Gateway 2006), there are 160,823 Chinese Kyrgyz (2000 census). Another source mentions a significantly higher number: 437,238 (Zhenhua 1999). This larger number is unlikely, because it approaches the total population of the whole Kyrgyz autonomous prefecture in Kizilsu, the centre of the Chinese Kyrgyz.

The Kyrgyz living in Xinjiang form two different groups (see Figures 1, 2). One group lives in the Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture in the mountains of Tarbagatai, and these Kyrgyz are atypical in many respects. Although they have some degree of religious engagement with other Kyrgyz, i.e. connections with Islam typical for this ethnic group, the Kyrgyz of Tarbagatai are in large part Buddhists. Also unique is their language: nearly all of them speak Kazakh. Nevertheless, they retain a relatively strong common national awareness and marry exclusively within their own group. Although they speak Kazakh, they are united against the local Kazakhs. Among the Kyrgyz, religious difference (Buddhists *vs* Muslims) does not separate them into different groups. Marriages are arranged among the Kyrgyz across religion; they also share common cemeteries. As with nationality, religious belief is inherited through the father's line. However, it is not exceptional, in a religiously mixed family, for the children to be Buddhists like their father, but circumcised according to their mother's religious traditions. Religious belief is, for the most part, not expressed by an active religious life. It is more a certain tradition: father was Muslim, thus we are Muslims too. These Kyrgyz know the tradition of the national hero Manas (mythic integrator of the Kyrgyz).¹ This is obvious from the derivation of their

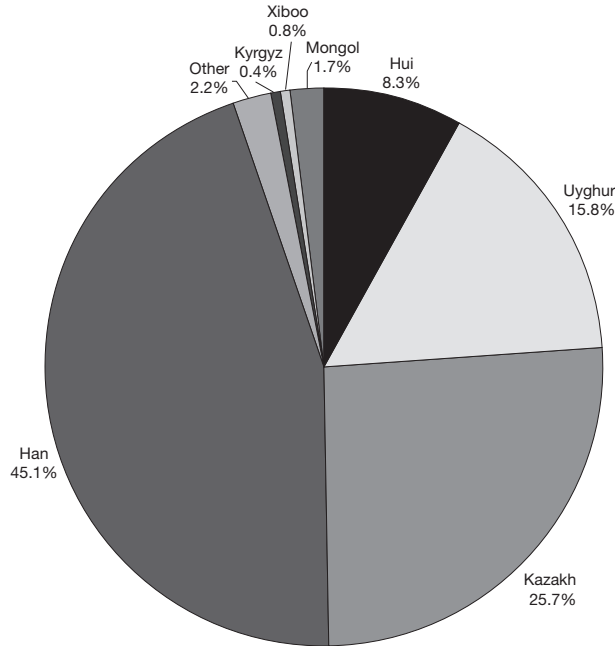


FIGURE 2. National Composition of Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture (2005).

Source: www.uighurbiz.cn (chart by the author).

origin during narrations, but also from some local names (Manas City, Lake Manas, River Manas).

The main group of Chinese Kyrgyz lives in the Kyrgyz Autonomous Prefecture, Kizilsu. Unlike the Kyrgyz from Tarbagatai, these Kyrgyz are all Muslims. They do not practise their belief very formally, but all family members pray several times a day. The local Kyrgyz of this area speak Kyrgyz very well, with only a partial Uyghur-influenced dialect. Kyrgyz is spoken in schools. Only new words in the language have been replaced by Chinese expressions (as by Russian in Kyrgyzstan).² Kyrgyz in Kizilsu retain a strong national awareness and culture; the most important of these are bride payments (the village custom is to give a horse to the bride's parents and later the agreed *kalym*, or bridal payment), the building of yurts and the wearing of traditional hats (*kalpaks*).

In addition to the regions mentioned above, the Kyrgyz population lives in other places in China: near Wushi/Uqturpan, Aksu, Shache/Yarkant, Yingisar, Tashikurgan/Taxkorgan/, Pishan/Guma/固玛镇, and in Tekes/特克斯县, Monggolkure/Zhaos, Emin/Dorbiljin, Bole/Bortala, and Jinghe/Jing. In the northern part of Xinjiang Province, the Kyrgyz live in Gonliu/Gongliu/Tokkuztara/巩留县. Some hundreds of Kyrgyz, who entered northern China 200 years ago, live in Wujiazi (Fuyu district, Heilongjiang province, Manchuria).

*Kyrgyz from the Tarbagatai Mountains*³

This group of Kyrgyz lives scattered in the Tacheng/Tachen/Chuguchak/塔城 and Emin/Dorbiljin/额敏县 districts in the Uyghur Autonomous Region near the Chinese–Kazakh border. These Kyrgyz comprise 0.8% of the population of Tacheng, according to the official data. In Emin they make up 0.2% of the total number of an ethnically very diverse population. There are 1,870 Kyrgyz in Tarbagatai, in the Tacheng district (three families live in Aakchi; more than 20 families live in Karachilik; 100 people in Yaks; 100 in Chuparagashchu; 70–80 in Uzunagashch; 100–200 people in Pozydak/Bozidake/Bozi Dake; 300 in Chagychi (Aks); and 500–600 in Oitailou) (Chertykov 2005). We have very little information about the history of this ethnic group. According to oral tradition, the Kyrgyz came to this area over 300 years ago from the Ala-Too region.⁴

Historically, these Kyrgyz lived together with Mongols in Orchochar (near Emin) and Lamazhao/Lamadzho 喇嘛昭,⁵ but in a strongly subordinated position. Property was owned mainly by Mongols, who rented it to the Kyrgyz. The Mongols forced the Kyrgyz to convert to Buddhism. Of 300 families thought to have been present before the nineteenth century, only 30 remained Muslim. The Kyrgyz tried to gain their independence with the help of the Chinese government. According to Ktan, who lives in Tacheng and is interested in Kyrgyz history, Karash, a Kyrgyz representative from Tarbagatai, went to Peking in 1833 to obtain a document confirming Kyrgyz independence from the Mongols. He was successful, but when he returned home, he met up with Mongols who, knowing

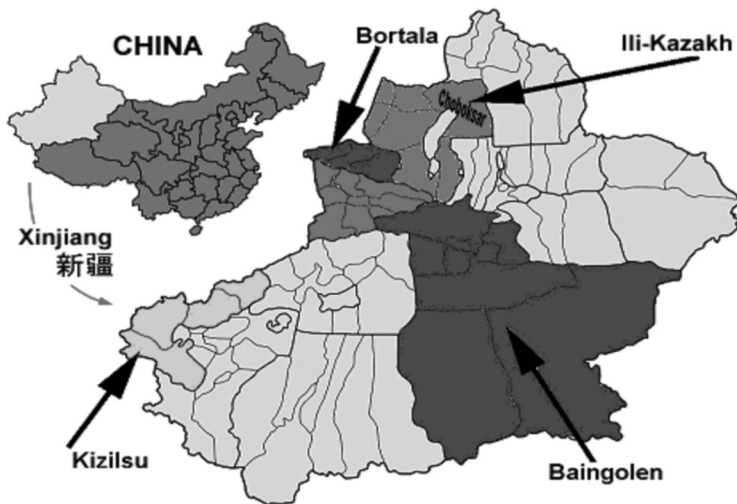


FIGURE 3. Kyrgyz, Kazakh and two Mongol Autonomous Prefectures in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (China).

his hobby of vodka drinking, got him drunk. The Mongols removed the seal from the document, and Kyrgyz dependence on the Mongols continued.

One Kyrgyz who lives in Pozydak/Bozidake village mentioned that, till the mid-twentieth century, about 400 Kyrgyz families lived in Orchochar. After the Chinese purge of 25 August 1962, the Kazakhs fled to the Soviet Union on a massive scale. They did not leave only their homes; some also left their families or children in China. After the Kazakhs left, only 20 Kyrgyz families remained in Orchochar. Approximately 100 families live in Pozydak today, and 30 of them are Kyrgyz. These Kyrgyz families are often religiously mixed: one spouse is Buddhist, one Muslim.

The forced conversion to Buddhism was relatively recent. Fifty-year-old Ken Zhakyn from Chal village (not far from Tacheng) remembers that the Mongols forced his parents to accept Buddhism and convert from the Muslim faith. Ken Zhakyn's ancestors have mostly Mongol-like names; only his father and grandfather have Kyrgyz names: Tanyzbaj (father)→Kokoj (grandfather)→Chazynbaty→Mukurtaj→Meerman→Saarman.

Although Buddhism is the main religion of the local Kyrgyz, which they probably accepted in the mid nineteenth century, the majority who describe themselves as Buddhists do not practise Buddhist rituals and practically do not differ from the Kyrgyz Muslims. Religion, like ethnic affiliation, is passed down through the father. The mother may influence ceremonies related to childbirth, and so a family that describes itself as Buddhist may circumcise its boys, as do the Muslims. The Muslim Kyrgyz are a minority in this area.

The Buddhist Kyrgyz revere the Panchen Lama as their faith's highest representative, and homemade altars display the 10th Panchen Lama, who died in 1989. Problems occurred with his successor, because the Chinese administration did not agree with the commission that chose the next incarnation of the Panchen Lama. The administration presented its own boy Panchen Lama. The local Kyrgyz solved this politically sensitive conflict by displaying the previous incarnation.

Marriages between Buddhists and Muslims are common among the Kyrgyz, but only within the Kyrgyz ethnic group. In contrast, it is not possible to get married within one lineage. The Tarbagatai Kyrgyz include Sarybagysh, Monduz, Baryn, Sart, Najman, Kitaj, Kerej, Kalmak and Chotaj lineages (Chertykov 2005). The *kalym* payment is typical for all Kyrgyz, regardless of whether they are Buddhists or Muslims.⁶ The Kyrgyz cemeteries in this area are mostly common both for Muslims and Buddhists.

The Kyrgyz from Tarbagatai have only a weak knowledge of their ancestors up to the seventh generation. Kitepbaj from Tacheng mentioned the *dzheti-ata*.⁷ He is interested in the history of the local Kyrgyz, and wrote a book about them (local issue in Tacheng, 1995, written in Kazakh language, Arabic script). The Mongol origin of the names is apparent from the list of his ancestors, except his father: 1. Doot_2. Daut_3. Daupen_4. Mangyn_5. Merem_6. Senbej_7. Kijka_8. Kitepbaj (Ktan). (The influence of the Mongol population is apparent not only in



FIGURE 4. Kyrgyz house in Tarbagatai, first room, (2007)



FIGURE 5. Kyrgyz house in Tarbagatai, second room (2007).

the case of names, but also in the case of physiognomy: some local Kyrgyz have a wider face. The Mongol population lives in these parts of China in its own Autonomous Prefectures, adjacent to the Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture: Baingolen-Mongol (48,000 Mongols) and Bortala-Mongol (27,000 Mongols) Autonomous Prefectures. Moreover, a part of the Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture is also the Mongol Autonomous Prefecture Choboksar.)

Almost none of the local Kyrgyz speak Kyrgyz; the great majority speak Kazakh. One reason for this is that education is exclusively in Kazakh. Despite the common language, there is a relatively sharp ethnic border between the local Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, and both groups are well aware of this boundary.

Kyrgyz houses in Tarbagatai have two rooms with brick floors. The cattle barns are located separately from the residential house. In the first room, there is typically a raised area and small low table for eating (Figure 4). The second room is equipped differently with a table surrounded by chairs (Figure 5). The Kyrgyz

often eat bread, butter, and salty tea with milk and butter. Cooked 'bread' is a culinary favourite of the Kyrgyz in Pozydak.

KYRGYZ IN KIZILSU

Eighty percent of the total Chinese Kyrgyz population lives in the Kizilsu Kyrgyz Autonomous Prefecture, in the western part of Xinjiang Province. The area of the prefecture is 69,112 km² and Artush/Artux (see maps, Figures 1 & 13) is the capital city. Because of the geographical and climatic conditions, it is a very sparsely populated area; the total number of prefecture inhabitants is 439,688, and the population density reaches only 6.36 inhabitant per sq. km. Although it is a 'Kyrgyz' prefecture, the Kyrgyz population is less than one third of the total number of prefecture inhabitants.

The Kyrgyz from Kizilsu claim that their origin can be traced to the time of Manas (see note 1). In Tojun Töbö, according to oral tradition, people say they lived for over 700 years not far from what is today the village of Topo. In 1870–80, they fought the Kalmyks, defeating them and taking over their lands. They considered the Kalmyk territory to be a part of their native land. The main lineages that live in Kizilsu are the Kushchu, Chonbagysh, Kypchak, Djoosh and Cheryk.

In the Kizilsu prefecture, elementary school education is conducted in Kyrgyz and this language is commonly used among the Kyrgyz of all age groups. Knowledge of Chinese is relatively low among the Kyrgyz (as with the Uyghurs), although Chinese is learned in school. Some Kyrgyz also speak Uyghur, but using this language is very often given by a certain understandability of both languages. There are many borrowed Uyghur words in spoken Kyrgyz. Both the Uyghurs and the Kyrgyz in China use Arabic script.

In many Kyrgyz areas, people make an effort to show 'traditional' Kyrgyz culture by building typical Kyrgyz dwellings. It is common to see yurts made from concrete (Figure 7) or, in big cities, monuments with motifs of Kyrgyz symbols: e.g. *kalpak* hats, the musical instrument *komuz* (Figure 8) or a symbol of an eagle (Figure 9). Other than Artush, the most important towns in Kizilsu are Aktu/Akto, Ulugqat/Uluchat, and Akchi/Akqi, which is closed to foreigners.

Some cities and villages in Kizilsu are closed to foreigners. It is possible to visit them, either illegally or based on permits issued by police in the prefecture capital, Artush. The state deters illegal visits with severe punishments; taxi drivers who take foreigners into prohibited areas are also punished, allegedly even having their cars confiscated. Police permission is given only in the case of invitation from relatives living in the closed areas, and it is never given to foreigners that do not have relatives there.

The local Kyrgyz are Muslims and they carefully observe Muslim religious ceremonies. They visit the mosque for regular prayers five times a day, and pray *namaz*. They use the mosques together with the Uyghurs, but cemeteries are sep-

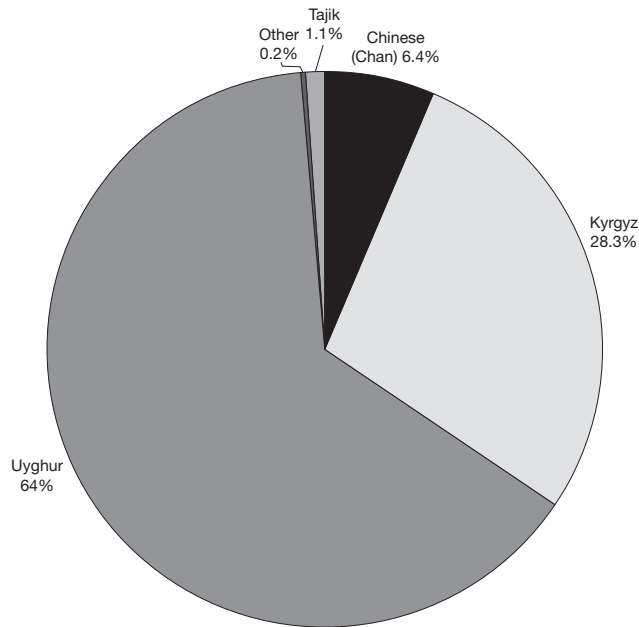


FIGURE 6. National groups in Kizilsu (2000).
Source: www.china.org.cn (chart by the author).

arate for Kyrgyz and Uyghurs. Wedding traditions are similar to those of the Kyrgyz in Kyrgyzstan: a *kalym* of 10,000 to 40,000 *yuan* (1,500–6,000 USD) is paid for the bride. The marriages remain mostly among the Kyrgyz.

Livestock herding and farming are two of the main ways of life among the Kyrgyz, and some Kyrgyz make a business out of agriculture. The highest monthly salary is around 3,000 *yuan* (440 USD).

Kyrgyz village houses are still most often earthen. The Kyrgyz adopted their way of building from the Uyghurs. The state tries to support new house construction and offers loans for building brick houses. Kyrgyz who live in the mountains (Aktu) are trying to buy houses nearer to Kashgar, the capital of the Uyghur Autonomous Region. The price of these homes reaches approximately 14,000 *yuan* (2,000 USD). In the villages, houses have two rooms. The walls are earthen and the floor is made of brick. Around the edge of the room is a raised place, where people can sit. There are carpets both on the floor and on the walls. Houses in the cities have more rooms.

Housing differs between villages: the houses in Kafu village have only one room, for example, where the whole multi-generation family cooks and sleeps. Another room is dedicated as the cattle barn, but the cattle often return from grazing through the single living room. Other animals (yaks, sheep, goats, horses, or camels) may also be kept outside in stone pens. On average, one family has 300 sheep, five yaks and one horse.



FIGURE 7. Concrete Yurt (Near Jang-Chang Village).

Among the Kizilsu Kyrgyz, the standard meal is wheat bread in the form of cakes and salty tea with yak milk and butter. This meal is similar to that of the Uyghurs, and Kyrgyz cuisine is based on Uyghur cuisine. The Chinese influence on Uyghur cuisine is mentioned, for example, in the publication of Bellér-Hann and Cesaro (2007: 185–7). Here, however, Uyghur cuisine has been put into opposition with the Chinese kitchen. This applies in many ways because, for Muslim Uyghur, Chinese cuisine is absolutely unacceptable owing to the use of various forbidden kinds of meat. So Uyghur cuisine should be closer to the Kyrgyz, as they are both Muslim (which we can see for example through the frequent use of noodles as a side-dish). On the other hand, Chinese influence is also evident in Kyrgyz cuisine, especially in cities, but partially also in villages.

Among the Kyrgyz in neighbouring regions are those of Tashikurgan, who migrated from Afghanistan 50 years ago. According to oral tradition, Afghani Kyrgyz first came to the Chinese territory in the 1950s, and when they saw how nice the houses were near Tashikurgan, they stayed. The main lineages are Boston, Alapa, Kutan and Chok. One Kyrgyz, Muhambet Pajzy, who remembers emigrating from Afghanistan, named his ancestors up to the fourth generation (Kodjagy khan (father)→Toktosyn adjy khan→Kutan→Alapa). According to him, some Arabic names are still used today.

As Tashikurgan is in the Tajik Autonomous Prefecture, the majority of the population, including the Kyrgyz, speak Tajik. Kyrgyz children may also learn Kyrgyz in school. The clothing of the local Kyrgyz is similar to the Tajik (including the typical hats). Marriages are closed among the Kyrgyz, but not permitted inside their own lineage. *Kalym* paid at marriage is around 1,000–2,000 *yuan* (150–300 USD).



FIGURE 8. Monument in Ulugqat [Ulugchat]: Kyrgyz *kalpaks* and *komuz*.



FIGURE 9. Monument near Topo: Kyrgyz eagle.

The Kyrgyz who live in the small mountain village of Karakul, in the Kulma pass along the Tajikistan border, came to China after the Russian October Revolution in 1917. They migrated from the southern parts of Kyrgyzstan and belong to the Sart lineage.

Other Kyrgyz live in Bulunköl village, near the Mustag-ata Mountain. More Kyrgyz live near the Karakul Lake below the Mustag-ata mountain in Kafu,

Cubash, Mustag-ata, and Gungöru villages, and in another village called Karakul (different from the Karakul village mentioned above) (Figures 10, 11, 12). In Bulunköl there is an older Kyrgyz settlement, allegedly around 300 years old. The Kyrgyz settlement in the other villages dates from after the October Revolution. The Kyrgyz language that is spoken in Bulunköl is considered to be the clearest form of Kyrgyz among all the villages. Bulunköl is a village that retains elements of collective or communal life. In 2005 the main representative of the local Kyrgyz was the leader of a working group named Shudji. His assistant was named Shandjan. Both are Kyrgyz, but the main leader is always Chinese. The Uyghurs follow a similar rule, where group leaders can be Uyghurs, but the main leader is always Chinese.

Nearby Mustag-ata Mountain (7,546 m) and Karakul Lake are rewarding destinations for many Chinese and foreign tourists. Income from accommodating tourists is a welcome budget increase for many Kyrgyz. *Kalym* for these Kyrgyz is higher than for the Kyrgyz from Tashikurgan: 5,000 *yuan*, 10 sheep and one horse.

RELATIONSHIPS OF CHINESE AND KYRGYZSTAN KYRGYZ

After the deterioration of Soviet–Chinese relations and the border closure, all contacts between Kyrgyz on either side of the border were completely cut off, including between families. At times, it was dangerous even to receive any postal shipments from relatives on the other side of the border. The respondents in Kizilsu Autonomous Prefecture mentioned that they fled to China from the Soviet Union during World War II. When Mao Zedong installed a hard dictatorship after the war, all aspects of people’s personal lives were examined closely. When a letter came from relatives from the USSR, Chinese Kyrgyz were required to burn it unopened to be clear that they were not interested in such contacts. If they did not agree to this pretence, they would be arrested.

Although the life of Chinese inhabitants has significantly improved, the state still has a strong impact on the life of both families and individuals. As a small example, the state may evaluate the quality of family life of Kyrgyz from Tarbagatai. A special commission evaluates the quality in each case, and exemplary families receive a certificate of appreciation that they put in a special place in the home.

Travelling into China is easier for the Kyrgyzstan Kyrgyz today, although they must still obtain a visa by means of an invitation or from a travel office. Kyrgyz began to visit relatives they had not seen for decades, or only heard about and never met. Business contacts also began to develop when it became possible to travel. So-called ‘back-up non-legal migration’ has appeared more and more in the last years. Due to the lack of ready money among the Kyrgyzstan Kyrgyz, businesses are paid in advance in goods. The Kyrgyzstan Kyrgyz come to the Uyghur Autonomous Region and offer certain types of barter trade, e.g. products



FIGURE 10. Mustag-ata and Karakul Lake: Kafu village.



FIGURES 11, 12. Small house in Kafu and concrete yurts at the lake.

from non-ferrous materials. The Chinese or Uyghur contractors agree to a transfer of goods that should be sold in Kyrgyzstan, but they keep some people as hostages and revoke their passports. One of the group returns to Kyrgyzstan, but if he is not successful in selling the goods, the Chinese contractors transfer the hostages from the border region, Topo, to Kashgar or Artush. The contractors cooperate with border control to ensure the hostages cannot escape. If the value of the goods is not paid within a certain time frame, the male hostages are required to serve as workers and the women are forced into prostitution. Even escaping and reporting the lost passport is often problematic, because the police

Yet nowadays, the influence of the Chinese state is still very strong. On the one hand, there is state support, which can be described as positive. We can, for example, mention education in the Kyrgyz language (the strong ideological loading in education is a disadvantage – but this is normal in China, regardless of the language of instruction). Among other positives mentioned by the Chinese Kyrgyz are the state policies of providing cheap bank credits, and later direct government grants for building brick houses or for intensification of agricultural production. On the other hand, we often met with less welcome state interventions, which markedly demonstrate state power. These are concerned with the organisation of life in rural areas, where the main representative, who is normally a member of the ethnic group living in a certain village (Kyrgyz, Uyghur), is subordinated to another representative, always Chinese. (A similar situation prevailed in union republics at the time of the USSR.) Through its controls the state also intervenes in the privacies of homes and assesses them in many ways. Among other significant restrictive measures, we can also include the fact that some Kyrgyz villages are closed to foreigners – even Kyrgyz representatives in the capital city of the Kyrgyz Autonomy, Artush, do not know the exact reason for this measure.

State interventions in religious issues are still very considerable, but it is very hard to judge whether this situation is becoming more open or not, because there are no available comprehensive data about the religious situation of Chinese Kyrgyz during previous years. Only on the basis of statements of respondents can we conclude that the present situation is partially better than it used to be, but it is definitely not ideal – for example, as mentioned earlier, people currently display only the picture of the long-deceased Panchen Lama, because of strong political disputes about his successor.

An increase in political freedom and purchasing power for village inhabitants has led to increased migration. Sometimes villagers only try to move closer to the bigger cities. But some members of the younger generation of Chinese Kyrgyz leave to study in cities (such as Ürümchi) and do not come back to the rural areas. In these cities the youth establish and maintain contacts between both the Kyrgyz communities described earlier. In urban surroundings, marriage within one's own ethnic group is no longer taken so seriously and we observe Kyrgyz merging with the majority society.

NOTES

¹ Manas is the mythic integrator hero of the Kyrgyz, used as a symbol of Kyrgyz national unity primarily after the USSR's disintegration. An event that took place in Kyrgyzstan in 1995 was quite extraordinary: celebrations of 1000 years of Manas epos, although a long time before, in Soviet times (1946), I. Razzakov, the chairman of the central committee of the Kyrgyzstan communistic party, initiated a decision about the celebration of 1100 (!) years of 'Manas'.

these areas were planned for routing gas or oil pipe-lines, or as areas to build up new military bases.

Nowadays the influences of two significant powers meet together in this region – Russia and China. While post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan has traditionally strong ties to Russia (and it is trying to deepen these ties further), China is trying to expand its activities in this region. Thus the Kyrgyz minority may come to play a significant role in China. Although during the twentieth century the Chinese Kyrgyz greatly changed their way of life (compared to Kyrgyz in Kyrgyzstan), there are still many elements common among all Kyrgyz that evoke a sense of extraordinary closeness.

The creation of a national state in Kyrgyzstan had a significant influence on the national awareness of the Kyrgyz. Many respondents in Kyrgyzstan compare the present situation with the time of the USSR and pointed out that ethnic affiliation was much less important in the past. In a region where the Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Tajik populations live close together, nationality was not taken into account as much and these groups often intermarried. Today, the situation is different, and although the relationships are not without problems, marriages take place primarily among members of the same nationality.

The change in the understanding of traditions started after the disintegration of the USSR. There existed ancient Kyrgyz traditions tested by history of many hundreds of years, but today the customs from times immediately before the October Revolution in 1917 (which is seen negatively by many people) are emphasised more. The reason is the connection of this period with feudalism and the rule of feudalists (*manaps*). These traditions enter stealthily into family ceremonies (mainly through TV and radio), while other traditions, mainly religious, were rediscovered and new traditions have been created at the same time. However, an active religious life is now very half-hearted in both the north and the south of the country. A stronger national awareness started to manifest itself by consolidation against other ethnic groups. In Kyrgyzstan this became clear in the relationship with the Russians shortly after establishing an independent country. Later, the national politics changed, and the motto *Kyrgyzstan for the Kyrgyz* was replaced with the much more conciliatory *Kyrgyzstan – our common house*.

The Chinese Kyrgyz, however, have a different history. Some have lived in China for several centuries. The ancestors of certain groups were nomads whose lands straddled the borders of present-day China and the former Russian empire. Yet whatever their group origin, and although some groups do not use the Kyrgyz language and instead speak Kazakh, Uyghur or Tajik, and although they are not religiously united, the Chinese Kyrgyz still consider themselves members of one ethnic group. This awareness comes mainly from cultivating a common history and from following cultural traditions that produce a sense of togetherness and link them to Kyrgyz on the other side of the border (e.g. housing and yurt types, literature, clothing, cuisine, funeral practices and cemeteries and paying *kalym* bride-price).

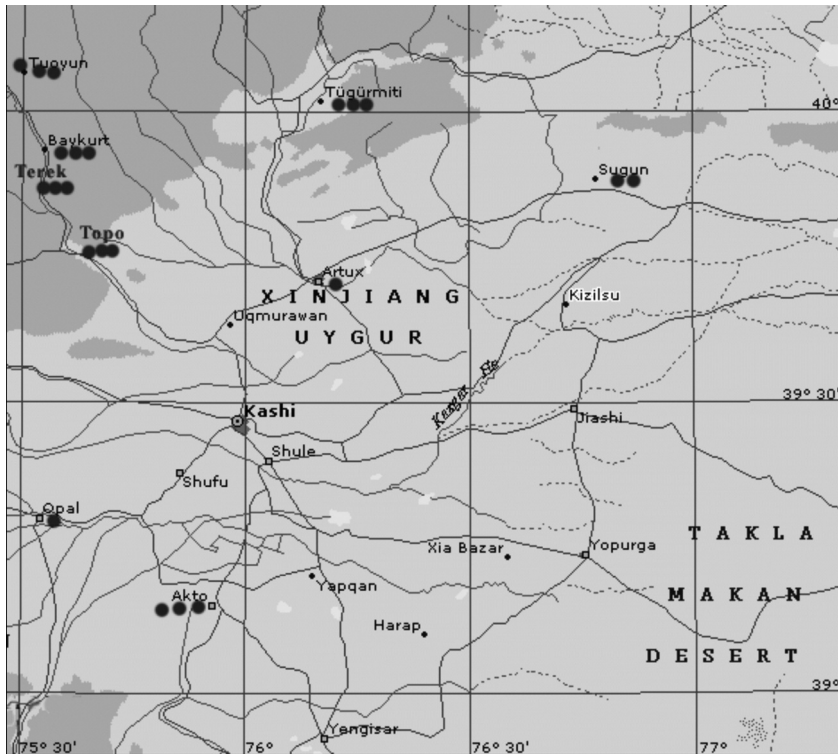


FIGURE 13. Settlements with Kyrgyz Population Near Kashgar (Kashi).

Number of points means the approximate share of Kyrgyz population in individual settlements: • Minority Kyrgyz population, ••• settlements with predominantly Kyrgyz population. Map: <www.expedia.com>, author's marking of the Kyrgyz settlement according to the respondents from Ulugqat [Uluchat].

may accuse these persons of non-legal migration and arrest them. Then the only solution to this situation is transport by truck drivers, who sew immigrants into rice sacks or hide them in boxes and transport them from China to Kyrgyzstan (Batilov 2002: 145–6).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The Kyrgyz ethnic group lives in a region that had been considered unimportant (apart from the ancient period, when the Silk Road went through there). Only the interest of Russia and Great Britain, mainly in the nineteenth century, gradually increased the significance of the Central Asia region. This importance increased even more after the break-up of the USSR, when Central Asia became a region of considerable strategic and geo-political importance for many reasons – whether

² A large number of new words began to be used by nomadic herdsmen after 1917. In Kyrgyzstan, there is only the Russian form (potatoes – *kartoshka*, socks – *naski*, shoes – *tufli*). Chinese Kyrgyz use the Chinese term *tudou* for potatoes, or the Uighur term *yangyo*, but sometimes one also hears the Russian *kartoshka*.

³ The uncited data in this section are based on field research in 2008.

⁴ Ala-Too: a mountainous area in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.

⁵ Some place (village) names in the neighbourhood contain the word Kyrgyz; e.g. *Ke'er Kezi* (=Kyrgyz) *Dengke Zile* 克尔克孜登克孜勒.

⁶ *Kalym* as a payment for a bride before marriage was and still is typical for all Kyrgyz, including the Chinese Kyrgyz. Preparation for marriage was based on an agreement between the parents of the bride and groom. Previously, *kalym* was paid to the whole family group of the bride's father, then to closer relatives and finally only to her parents. Representatives of the aristocracy used to collect resources for their own *kalym* as a form of tax. We can find a reference to this also in the Kyrgyz national epos *Manas*, in which the cattle to pay *kalym* for Khanikey, wife of Manas, are collected from subordinate people. Thus, although paying *kalym* is typical for all Kyrgyz, its original meaning changed over time and it also differs according to region – greater importance is definitely attributed to the payment for a bride in southern parts of Kyrgyzstan. In contrast, in the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek, the *kalym* is understood more and more only as symbolic and is sometimes not even paid in cash. Typically, relatives of the groom give the bride's parents a bag with corn, or a ram, instead of the real *kalym*, which used to be of much higher value (and remains much higher in the village areas, especially in southern provinces). In the Kyrgyz villages in China, a horse is given first, and then *kalym* is paid in a money 'tribute' to the bride's parents. The tribute is approximately 1,000 USD for farmers, but it can reach up to 5,000 USD in the case of well-off families.

⁷ *Dzheti-ata* [lit. seven fathers]. It means that each Kyrgyz should know the names of seven male ancestors from the father's side.

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