



On the southern shores of Ysyk Köl, the largest lake in Kyrgyzstan and one considered holy to Kyrgyz, is a tiny *ail* (village) called Akterek.<sup>1</sup> Even in May 2002, a small white building's signage still declared, in bold lettering, that this was the "club" of the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic.<sup>2</sup> The official purpose of a club or House of Culture (or, in Kyrgyz, *Madaniyat Ui*) was to introduce Bolshevik ideology to indigenous populations through adult education and entertainment. The existence of a Soviet club adjacent to this religious site seemed striking; the very traditions that considered the lake holy survived many years of antireligious Soviet "campaigns" to stamp them out. Every *ail*, town, and city on the shores of the lake had a club, centrally and prominently located in each case and ostensibly displaying the power of the Soviet state and its institutions.

In 1996, in Osh, the second-largest city in southern Kyrgyzstan, it was apparent that although the clubs no longer functioned as they had during the Soviet period, many of them were still social gathering places. They often appeared to have been the only Soviet structures ever to intrude upon the seamless beauty of these wide-open spaces. The symbolism of these buildings, like the edifices themselves, had also endured. After the Kyrgyz Republic established its independence, the residents of Osh were reportedly

saddened that one of their clubs was to be converted to a government office, one unrelated to arts or culture. Although the townsfolk no longer used the club for its intended purpose, its symbolic power was still apparent when residents expressed their disappointment about its future. This club had represented a cultural focal point that the townsfolk came to accept as their own. It became a place where Kyrgyz traditions and Soviet art forms merged, crafting the images of Kyrgyzness.

Soviet citizens of Kyrgyzstan, such as the club administrators, artists, actors, writers, and even the ordinary people who participated in the activities of the Soviet Houses of Culture (referred to hereafter as clubs), helped forge the images and symbols of Kyrgyzness. In historical terms, the clubs constitute a wonderful laboratory. In their functioning and in people's memories of them, one may observe the Soviet discourse and practice of "culturedness" or cultural development, understood as cultural change or cultural revolution, as conveyed by the Soviet clubs and intellectuals in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>3</sup>

Why and how did the Kyrgyz populations come to see the Soviet clubs as their own? After all, the sole purpose of the clubs was ostensibly to eradicate the so-called "backward" way of Kyrgyz life. If the clubs were a significant part of an ongoing process of creating a Soviet Kyrgyz community during the 1920s and 1930s, the connections between the clubs and Kyrgyzness need to be understood in order to assess the significance of Soviet culture in Kyrgyzstan and the rest of Central Asia. After all, Kyrgyz people who were involved in the cultural activities of the clubs, Stalinist festivals, Soviet theater, and education were crafting Kyrgyzness in the Soviet Union. Through public performances and artistic expressions, these citizens imagined, symbolized, and expressed what it meant to be Kyrgyz. The experiences of these influential Kyrgyz citizens also provide an excellent opportunity to examine the individual's role in creating a new Kyrgyz identity in the 1930s and beyond.

The stories of ordinary citizens who came to represent their nationalities in Soviet cultural space suggest that in pushing certain talented individuals to become the cultural elite, the Soviet system set out to define twentieth-century Kyrgyz culture. Many of these individuals took significant risks in the name of progress and modernity. They stepped out of their comfort zones even if it meant confronting their families, communities, and normative behavior patterns. While accepting the challenges presented by Soviet modernity, however, they often venerated the Kyrgyz ways of living. In other words, they did not forsake everyday patterns of behavior and ways of being that represented Kyrgyzness to them.

The Soviet administration developed cultural policies that included the establishment of these palaces, houses, and clubs while trying to assert political power in Kyrgyzstan. When the first Soviet club opened its doors in

the ail of Kyzyl Kyia in March 1920, Kyrgyz lands were still part of the newly established Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (1918–1924).<sup>4</sup> In October 1924, when the Kara-Kyrgyz Autonomous Oblast (1924–1925) became a separate entity under the jurisdiction of the Russian Federation, there were thirty-five clubs in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>5</sup>

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when Russian forces began to install a new political system in the Kyrgyz lands, they encountered resistance, as was the case with most other Turkic/Muslim societies in Central Asia. The Qurbashy (or Basmachy) revolts against the forces from Russia, including both the Bolsheviks and sometimes those sympathetic to the imperial regime (the Whites), should be regarded as the most prominent resistance in the Kyrgyz lands.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the Kyrgyz pushback began in 1916 as a struggle against an imperial decree conscripting Central Asians into the Russian army. Despite this widespread resistance movement, the Bolsheviks gained power definitively in Kyrgyzstan in the mid-1920s and established the Communist Party there in 1924. But the party leadership consistently remained non-Kyrgyz, as Russian politicians held the position of first secretary of the party until 1950, when Ishkak Razzakov was appointed (1950–1961).

Although the Soviet state ordered the translation of laws and regulations into the Kyrgyz language in 1924, most of the documents actively in use at the time were in Russian. Furthermore, although Kyrgyz individuals held many government positions in Kyrgyzstan, officials from the western parts of the Soviet Union did most of the administrative decision making. In other words, the lack of education and training, especially in the 1920s, limited the meaningful participation of Kyrgyz populations in Soviet administrative activity, including that which involved the clubs.

In the early 1920s, the Turkestan Narkompros (Narodnyi kommissariat prosveshcheniia, or People's Commissariat of Enlightenment) issued regulations that dictated how the new cultural institutions should be run. The commissariat designed the local club building to suit the region's population and to make it an inviting place where the people could spend their leisure time. The Uzbeks called their club a Red Choikhona, which, as suggested by the name, was akin to a traditional Uzbek teahouse, while the Kyrgyz club was called a Red Yurt, after the traditional dwelling of the region's nomads.

Providing leisure-time comfort, however, was not the primary reason for the clubs; they were primarily intended as venues for revolutionary education. Numerous state documents referred to the "idle Central Asians" as backward populations waiting to be reformed.<sup>7</sup> The commissariat proposed that effective reforms could best be implemented through educational programs for adults, and it thus expected the clubs to stage activities, such as readings (for example, a literate member reading the newspaper out loud for the illiterate

majority) and short plays, to support the Communist Party's educational efforts.<sup>8</sup> Club administrators often preferred theater activities because the plays simultaneously entertained and educated the club members.<sup>9</sup> Clubs, schools, youth organizations, collective farms, local history museums, and other institutions all attempted to define the indigenous populations in Kyrgyzstan and give them a new, suitably Soviet identity. Clubs often gave the children of Kyrgyzstan their first taste of Russian and other Western forms of artistic expression. Beginning in the 1950s, when Kyrgyz schoolchildren read stories by Chingiz Aitmatov that provided fictional role models such as the influential Soviet heroine Jamila or the revolutionary teacher Duishon, they began to construct their own national role models in the image of these characters, who were presented as socialist heroes.<sup>10</sup> This book delves precisely into the phenomenon of how Kyrgyz discarded or preserved their pre-Soviet traditions while participating in the creation of this new culture.

The activities of club managers, festival organizers, actors, and authors show how these Soviet government agents and activists worked toward a so-called "modern" culture. Making Kyrgyz culture "modern" was not an entirely new concept for these Soviet cultural workers; they had inherited it from their pre-Soviet predecessors.<sup>11</sup> The commissars and other high-ranking officials sent out directives and reports to all clubs, ordering them to promote cultural activities that furthered the Bolshevik ideology. Regional and all club administrators, on the other hand, viewed these new cultural institutions and activities as providing opportunities for cultural development and for the improvement of cultural knowledge. These differing views of the clubs' purpose arose from the official correspondence regarding the clubs; it was written in the particular language of the Bolsheviks, which had its own political connotation for the oft-used phrase "cultural development."

Kyrgyz intellectuals of the Stalinist era internalized the new Soviet culture. In their lives and work, however, they showed that crucial aspects of Kyrgyz values endured. There emerged a complex culture in which the expressions of Soviet citizenship and artistry reshaped Kyrgyz traditions to reflect the contemporary trends of the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s. Examples of Kyrgyz traditions that Soviet worldviews influenced include *salt* (codes of conduct for everyday habits and customs), such as reverence for elders and the natural environment, and the appearance of heroes and heroines from Kyrgyz oral tradition in poems, songs, stories, plays, and festivals published or sponsored by the Soviets.

Official documents such as state regulations and directives and the reports by administrators of the Houses and Palaces of Culture, produced between 1925 and 1941, reveal the influence of state and local administrators

and intellectuals in constructing these cultural institutions as agencies that guided “cultural development” in Kyrgyzstan. Most of this government documentation consists of correspondence between regional and higher-level administrators in Frunze or Alma-Ata. An examination of the language used in official directives from the “higher-ups,” along with the expressed concerns, requests, and complaints of the regional administrators, exposes the sometimes haphazard, sometimes systematic processes of creating culture.

Nevertheless, official documents often leave out a larger part of the story because they offer only a partial record of how these cultural institutions functioned on the ground. Oral accounts of people who lived during this period, and of those who heard their stories, are also invaluable sources when examining the emergence of Soviet cultural cadres in Kyrgyzstan. Interviews, newspaper articles, and memoirs provide additional glimpses of Soviet heroines such as Zuurakan Kainazarova, a beet grower turned national hero, and the actress Sabira Kumushalieva; their life stories illuminate the connections between the activities of cultural institutions and the creation of Soviet political and cultural leadership.

Kumushalieva and three contemporaries—Saira Kiyizbaeva, Baken Kydykeeva, and Darkul Kuiukova—were collectively called the “Four Daughters of Tököldösh,” named for their native village. Darkul Kuiukova’s elder brother, poet and playwright Kubanychbek Malikov, himself from Tököldösh, coined that phrase for his four compatriots.<sup>12</sup> I return to Kumushalieva’s story and consider it in some detail at a later point in this book.

Another crucial vanguard of Soviet culture in twentieth-century Kyrgyzstan was Chingiz Aitmatov, without whom neither Sovietness nor Kyrgyznes could be fully understood. Aitmatov was an internationally celebrated author, and his life and early short stories about the prewar era clearly underscore the significant connection between imagining Kyrgyznes in the 1930s and 1940s and then making it a reality. Even after his death, Aitmatov remains the most respected and beloved intellectual of Kyrgyzstan and possibly all of Central Asia, and his work has been accepted as the very definition of Kyrgyz culture. The characters in his early works, mostly written in the 1950s and 1960s, reflect how the state and Kyrgyz intellectuals crafted Soviet heroes like Zuurakan Kainazarova and Sabira Kumushalieva. Aitmatov’s characters symbolize ideal Soviet citizens cloaked in their Kyrgyz national traditions. They represent the hard-working *kolkhoznitsa*, such as Jamila, who broke the chains of tradition. They symbolize the first ail teachers, such as Duishon, who took over the job of educating long-neglected Kyrgyz girls.<sup>13</sup> Aitmatov effectively provided young and enthusiastic Kyrgyz children with role models. He constructed a history of the Kyrgyz ail, one in which Kyrgyz

children would be proud of their achievements and the cultural changes in their Soviet past. Kumushalieva and other actors portrayed Aitmatov's fictional characters in their theatrical, operatic, and cinematic roles to promote these idealized heroes as models for Kyrgyz.

Aitmatov published his first short story, "Gazetchik Juyo" (Newspaper boy Juyo), in the *Komsomolets Kirgizii* newspaper in 1952. He saw himself as a historian who thrived when telling the stories of his childhood during the 1930s. His autobiographical and semi-autobiographical early stories, therefore, resemble an oral history experience, peppered with passion and subjectivity. Taking all this into account, we must acknowledge Aitmatov's work as a necessary depiction of a cultural landscape in which Kyrgyz people experienced multidimensional and multidirectional revolution within their *turmush* (everyday life and habits). What is more, Aitmatov's literary contributions helped embed the cultural revolution into the collective memory of Kyrgyz and other Soviet peoples.<sup>14</sup> Aitmatov's early short stories and novellas, as well as the stories of the "Four Daughters," reveal that Kyrgyz intellectuals played a crucial role in creating a discourse of cultural change.

This book is the first to scrutinize the relationship between the clubs, the construction of Kyrgyz identity, and the negotiation required to fashion "Kyrgyzness."<sup>15</sup> More specifically, it offers an examination of the ways in which club and theater administrators contested or cooperated with regional directives.<sup>16</sup> There are only limited analyses of how Soviet cultural policies created a Kyrgyz identity.<sup>17</sup> This book offers a view that reverses the depiction of Kyrgyzness as a somewhat static identity. It argues that those charged with putting official policies into action were active agents of contestation and influence. It examines the ways in which Russian colonial cultural policies influenced those of the Soviets and, in turn, led the Kyrgyz cultural elite to rediscover their own cultural forms. Homi Bhabha's work on mimicry and hybridity informs this inquiry, guiding this investigation into whether Russian imperial attention to Kyrgyz cultural forms informed Soviet policies and consequently enticed Kyrgyz intellectuals to "mimic" colonial fascination with their own culture.<sup>18</sup> Soviet clubs offer a laboratory in which one may test Kyrgyz society's cooperation with and resistance against the Soviet state as a modern phenomenon of cultural "mimicry." Although Kyrgyz intellectuals have adamantly rejected the notion that the Soviet state represented a colonial power, they imply that Soviet Kyrgyz identity was a fusion of both cultures. Soviet clubs were one of the institutions that established this fusion.

Ultimately, the creation of clubs, theater, and festivals was an ideological act that aimed to establish a single text or discourse—the cultural revolution in Soviet Kyrgyzstan. This ideological approach was to be the blueprint of Kyrgyz education and liberation from backwardness. However, the sovietiza-

tion implemented through the clubs, theaters, and festivals did not preclude the possibility of crafting a contemporary Kyrgyz culture, even if Soviet administrators viewed the Kyrgyz people's so-called development as a step toward "raising the Kyrgyz" to the level of the European peoples of the Soviet Union.<sup>19</sup>



Map of Kyrgyzstan, by Bill Nelson. The country was known as the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic during the period covered by this book.