

## **Authentic Kyrgyzstan: Top-Down Politics Meet Bottom-Up Heritage**

**K. Anne Pyburn, Indiana University**

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Abstract. The Soviet modernist policy of severing ties with the past has left the rapidly globalizing post-Soviet Kyrgyz Republic with some difficulties in the presentation of national heritage identity. Nevertheless, heritage identity is an important political tool and development commodity and government officials have identified nomadic culture as the only authentic Kyrgyz heritage. When I first came to Kyrgyzstan I was told by educated people living in the capital city that, since nomads do not leave anything behind, Kyrgyzstan has no significant material heritage. However, people living in rural areas enthusiastically claimed that their ancestors created the huge burial mounds (kurgans) and stelae (balbals) that are scattered across the landscape. In other areas, villagers are proudly aware that they live atop buried medieval cities. In fact, Kyrgyzstan is an archaeologist’s paradise, with a record of human activity extending from the Paleolithic across history to include the remains of Zoroastrian fire-altars, Hindu monasteries and magnificent Kara-Khanid monuments. Whether Kyrgyz heritage is credited to a single lifeway and language group is not merely an abstract issue as conflicts between Kyrgyz speakers and Uzbek speakers of the southern Fergana Valley (whose heritage is supposedly not nomadic) have become violent.

Over the past twelve years I have collaborated with Kyrgyz citizens to promote a national conversation about heritage, based on grass roots engagement and sentiment. Countering the essentializing political rhetoric about nomadism, small community museums showcase diverse local heritages and celebrate culturally complex pasts. Kyrgyz speakers happily present the artifacts of ancient cities alongside the balbals of ancient nomads in their community museums and have collaborated with Uzbek speakers to create a national heritage society. No history spanning millennia is without conflict, but the heritage of the silk roads can be understood as a triumph of negotiation, cooperation, and collaboration that bridged the eastern and western worlds for centuries. In this paper I will describe several grass roots education programs and community museums that I have been involved with in Kyrgyzstan and consider their potential for countering ethnic violence. This is a very difficult paper for me; it is about a successful heritage preservation project that I instigated and shepherded in Kyrgyzstan over the past 12 years. It is difficult for three reasons.

First, although I initiated the project it was never intended to be my project, but to be program of support for people who were interested in preserving and promoting their heritage and the heritage of Kyrgyzstan. I set out to capture their interest, and share ideas and options, but after that it was up to them. Because I was successful I will be talking about other people’s efforts and accomplishments rather than my own and I feel uncomfortable speaking for people whose right to speak for themselves I have championed for 12 years. The human right to claim, protect, and decide how to portray heritage was, in fact, the crux of the project.

Second, the goal of the project was for me to become irrelevant and invisible. How can I claim success if I stand in front of you claiming relevance?

Third, I cannot prove the project has been successful. I can explain what I did and why I did it and the subsequent things that people did that seem to be correlated with my efforts. But any good social scientist knows that a correlation is not proof of causality. For me to argue that many good things have resulted directly from my work, or even indirectly is an arrogant oversimplification.

I am not mistrustful of quantitative research, but sometimes the measurements we can collect fail to express experience accurately. I will be telling you about the numbers of new museums and teachers trained and data collected, but these cannot capture the impact of what we, my Kyrgyz colleagues and I, have done. Each teacher has many students who all have families and each community museum has been visited by people who have already begun museums of their own, and all the varied people who have participated now have relationships with each other, sometimes indirect, sometimes uncomfortable, but together they make up a kind of community that is greater than the sum of its parts.

But I have to tell this story because I am sure there are connections among the events I will describe that show that something has happened that is worth knowing about and perhaps even something that can be done again in another place to change strained and potentially hazardous ideas about heritage.

The project

Kyrgyzstan is one of the most beautiful countries in the world with an incredibly rich and exciting history. Evidence of that history, in the form of ancient monuments and archaeological sites is everywhere; in the mountains, in the cities, beside the beautiful lakes glistening in Kyrgyz valleys. This wealth of material culture is an important source of national pride and is beginning to pull tourists from all over the world to visit and explore.

In the wake of many important political changes in Kyrgyzstan in recent decades, Kyrgyz people have begun to celebrate their cultural heritage and international organizations such as UNESCO and World Bank have taken an interest in preserving and promoting the heritage of Kyrgyzstan, both material and spiritual. But although the people who live in the lap of their history know its value, tourists often do not, and even some Kyrgyz people do not realize just how rich in history is their national landscape. For example, some people have the impression that the ancient nomadic cultures that raced across the Altai Mountains and grazed their herds in the Fergana Valley left behind little material evidence of their life ways and achievements, and that kurgans and balbals (tombs and mortuary stelai) would be of little or no interest to tourists.

In other parts of the world, where the forces of globalization have a longer history, petroglyphs, burial mounds, and monuments exactly like those found all over Kyrgyzstan are the focus of community museums that have not only an educational function, but also a special appeal for visitors. These museums can teach young people about the past, and instill an interest in visitors by placing local history in its cultural context. They often showcase the pride of the local communities that steward the remains of their past and consequently discourage looters or vandals from careless damage, and also from casually marketing items some Kyrgyz citizens might consider part of their national patrimony. In these situations, people may find out too late the importance of what was sold for far too little.

While Kyrgyzstan does not have the pyramids of Egypt or the temples of Guatemala, it does have buildings of comparable beauty and significance at places such as Navikat (Krasnaya Rechka), Suyab (Ak Beshim) and Balasagyn (Burana). But unlike almost any other place on earth, Central Asia and particularly Kyrgyzstan, carries the evidence of the rise and spread of many nations, many languages, and many cultures. Some of these cultures originated in Kyrgyz territory, others came and went over time. And while a complex history is not unique to Kyrgyzstan, the ability to shelter together and inspire diverse cultural systems, varied ways of life, and contrasting forms of philosophy and art is unsurpassed in the world. As the heart of Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan stands today on a heritage of astonishing cultural diversity. While other nations may decide to simplify the past by attributing the rise of their modern state to a single group, the heritage of Kyrgyzstan is much richer than this, and it is this history of cross cultural interaction and centuries of tolerance underlying the legacy of the Silk Road that will bring the world to Kyrgyzstan.

The heart of the project I describe here began to beat as a result of a multi-year US state department grant to me in 2005. The “Partnerships for the Silk Road” project was at base an information sharing project. The first part of the project was to learn about Kyrgyz archaeological heritage and how Kyrgyz people talk about the past and what interests them most. Through discussions with many different sorts of people it became clear that many Kyrgyz people are passionately interested in their heritage and very eager to share it with visitors, but only aware of a small part of their nation’s archaeological record. It also seemed that Kyrgyz people often did not see how their heritage could interest visitors and that tourists were rarely able to understand the significance of Kyrgyz monuments. These problems are shared by many developing nations.

The goal of the second part of the project was to share information about preservation and tourism from communities where such issues have a long history. People from Kyrgyzstan who are interested in tourism and heritage were invited to the United States to meet with communities that have their own museums and their own strategies for managing community resources. The reason for this trip was simply to introduce some Kyrgyz people to some American counterparts who are coping with similar situations in which education of the next generation, preservation of the material record and interaction with visitors need to be juggled in a way that benefits everyone. Among the many important experiences were a 3 day visit with the *Anishinaabe* Chippewa nation in Michigan and meeting Civil War re-enactors at the living museum of Connor Prairie in Indiana. It is not likely that the American solutions will apply directly to Kyrgyzstan and the American consultants had no interest in claiming to have answers that will work in Kyrgyz contexts. But as Kyrgyz history has shown, breaking bread and sharing information with people whose experience and way of life are different can lead to new ideas and new solutions, and also enrich the lives of all concerned. At the conclusion of the trip participants decided they wanted to pursue the idea of community museums further through grants.

The final phase of the Partnerships project took place in Bishkek in the fall of 2009, when project members and their guests came together to talk about what had been accomplished and what might happen next. The symposium in the National History Museum and the workshops on grants writing and museums were a great success. Although participatory action research of this sort does not mandate a particular outcome, every effort was made in the design of the project to create opportunities and provide useful information to participants, without stipulating any single goal or unified mission. This approach was successful and I recommend it to future change agents working in Kyrgyzstan.

In 2011, a second grant from (Intellectual Property Issues in Cultural Heritage) IPINCH allowed me to support some of the projects designed through the Partnerships project. During the 2 years since the end of the Partnerships project Kyrgyz participants had forged ahead and realized several important goals. With the IPINCH funding a series we accomplished even more.

#### Outcomes/events.

In total, the two phases of funding supported 17 different small-scale projects. These projects included more than 200 people, including school children from 12 schools, 50 teachers from 50 different secondary schools, 3 avocational and 4 professional archeologists, and 3 museum workers. During the project, participants took 17 trips, including 12 trips within Kyrgyzstan, three from the US to Kyrgyzstan, two from Kyrgyzstan to Canada, two to city museums, four to local museums, five to history classes. Classrooms were equipped with visual materials about history, archaeology and cultural heritage of Kyrgyzstan in the form of wall posters. Fifty teachers were trained and given handouts, books about ancient sites of Tyan-Shan, visual materials, and presentations about local cultural heritage. Avocational archaeologists received information and knowledge from resources and a chance to be more professional and to feel supported and encouraged. Some of them, such as Zamir Aldayarov and Konurbaev Kairbek, participated in a series of interviews for local TV news programs about the protection of archaeological heritage in Kochkor. Due to the efforts of project members, Kairbek with help of professional archaeologists from TICA (the Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency) became interested in pursuing research on the medieval city in Kum-Dobo in summer 2016.

As a result of these activities and accomplishments, there are many new conversations about heritage and archaeology in Kyrgyzstan. People routinely ask about the political aspects of history and heritage. Preservation has become a greater concern for many people, not just historians and archaeologists and tour guides. Children proudly promise to respect petroglyphs and balbals. As new emphasis is placed on heritage as an important subject for school children, Kyrgyz teachers have commented that the chance for children to touch artifacts helps them learn.

The older generation seems very interested in preserving their knowledge. A surprising number of people have generously given personal possessions to local museums to be curated and shared. Thus far, no person who has been asked by project members to share their memories and knowledge on video has refused. In some cases, people have come forward and volunteered to be filmed, discussing their expertise and life history. In cases where objects were deemed too valuable to give away, owners consented to have them recorded before they were sold.

Many participants noticed that when people live with ancient sites and ancient artifacts every day these objects and landscapes become part of the background of life – no one pays much attention to them, and many people do not even know what such things are. During the course of the project, participants saw over and over how children and adults responded enthusiastically to learning about the material heritage of Kyrgyzstan that lies underneath their feet and decorates their mountains and valleys. Students who passed a balbal in their school yard every day were found clustered around it, discussing it and touching it for the first time after a lesson from their teacher explained what it was. Land use planners who were shown pictures of familiar places but learned for the first time that these hills and mounds and walls were the remains of ancient sites and cities were surprised and delighted with this information. Immediately they began to spontaneously suggest methods of preservation.

There is already good evidence that the project will have effects far beyond the small steps taken during these 10 years. Objects and memories that would have been lost have been preserved. Some of

the people who shared their personal heritage stories and artifacts have already passed away. Many people who might have casually defaced a petroglyph or used an ancient wall to make a new one have voluntarily pledged to curate such things more carefully in the future. Not only are many people more aware of their material legacies, there has been an outpouring of pride as people are thrilled by new knowledge that connects them to their past.

## War and Peace

My motive for initiating this project was not simply the preservation of heritage. While I was saddened to find ancient objects on sale in tourist shops across the street from the national capital building and stunned to be told repeatedly by tour guides and educated citizens that Kyrgyzstan has no archaeology, because nomads don't leave anything behind, I was frightened by a type of government rhetoric that was growing. The president of Kyrgyzstan was beginning to make patriotic speeches about Kyrgyz heritage essentializing the national past as "nomadic." As many scholars are now painfully aware, archaeology is a splendid tool for supporting nationalist rhetoric and has a long track record of association with political oppression and violence. The "nomadic" trope is problematic for Kyrgyzstan because a significant percentage of Kyrgyz citizens speak Uzbek rather than Kyrgyz, and consider their heritage urban. There is a significant fault line running through Kyrgyz politics between Uzbek and Kyrgyz speakers. There had already been a deadly altercation between Uzbek and Kyrgyz speakers in the south when I first visited Kyrgyzstan, and the tension on the border between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan was getting media attention. There was another violent episode in 20xx.

The Russian occupation of Central Asia had a complex effect on national identities and ethnic boundaries. Without attempting to untangle the web in the short time I have here, I will just say that educated people were taught that although Kyrgyz history was nomadic, the archaeology around them was not related to their own heritage but to earlier people who had left long ago. Most people's ideas about nomadism had more to do with novels and cinema than with historical or archaeological data; in this fantasy macho nomads raced across the steppe murdering and pillaging and reciting heroic poetry. So I believed I was looking at the genesis of a rapidly globalizing postcolonial nation state claiming a heritage of violence and Hollywood style tribalism that would define a significant portion of their citizenry as "inauthentic" at best, and enemies, at worst.

If you think this has nothing to do with archaeology, let me remind you about the [Ayodhya](#) sacred site in India where data from an archaeological excavation fed into a conflict between Hindus and Muslims and resulted in riots across India in which 2000 people died. If you think the Buddha's of Bamayan were bombed because the Taliban disagreed with their religious message, you don't know the whole story – they were destroyed to shock the world and demonstrate ruthlessness and most of all to make the Taliban the focus of world attention. The Gaza strip is probably the most archaeologically well-studied place on earth, and not simply because of its association with ancient religions, but because archaeologists who dig there are charged with establishing a basis for national priorities. Government awarded grants for archaeological research exist within a political context in all modern nations.

Archaeologically speaking, Kyrgyzstan is a paradise. As the heart of the silk routes, its material heritage includes an astonishing gamut of sites. Historically, although the nomads who built the burial mounds that dot the Kyrgyz landscape left, they came back and they ARE the ancestors of much of the modern population. But these nomads were more like transhumant pastoralists, not ruthless marauders, and they had relationships with people with many other subsistence patterns living within their culturally complex world. It is unlikely that any of them spoke only Kyrgyz, but likely were as multilingual as people are today.

What is likely is that the members of a single tribe – or even a single family – were both nomads and urban merchants. Archaeologists were already trying to tell people this but no one was listening.

Of course this was none of my business, but it seemed like an opportunity to “wag the dog,” by which I mean that if archaeologists could get people to think about a complex and inclusive heritage that emphasized the cultural negotiations and ethnic interactions of the preceding millennia it might be harder for politicians to whip up genocidal fury between language groups. Wouldn't it be possible to be proud of a glorious and romantic heritage of diversity and “working things out”? I didn't now but I wanted to try it.

This is where my story gets thin and speculative, because all I can tell you is what seems to be happening now. There is now a minister of cultural preservation, a new government post that oversees a brand new contract archaeology program. The minister and the main contract archaeologist were both project members.

My colleague Kubat Tabaldiev now routinely teaches his classes at the Manas Turkish Kyrgyz University about the politics of archaeology and the potential for scientific observation to be subjective. Next season he will begin his excavations in a rural area with a blessing from a shaman whom he will bring to the site to allay the fears of the residents. It is a Medieval urban site. A new emphasis on the Kyrgyz past is getting media attention.

Kubat has also written a text book on Kyrgyz archaeology with 2 chapters on heritage preservation. The teacher educator who was a part of the project distributed 50 copies of it to 50 schools, funded by IPinCH. They have no access to computers or the internet. I have a video tape of the teachers' workshop, that shows their surprise and delight at hearing about their heritage for the first time – previous history available to them was all about the history of Russia.

Excavation for the construction of a new Naryn campus of the University of Central Asia has hit a medieval city; the Aga Khan is considering making it into an on-campus museum.

Another project member Zamir who is a high school principle took a group of his students on a hike above their school to see petroglyphs. He videotaped the trip, you will soon be able to see it on the IPinCH website. The kids were fascinated by the Bronze Age petroglyphs which they had thought were just modern graffiti.

I was taken to a community museum that displays posters of several types of heritage site, there is a plaque on the wall thanking me; I had never met the creator.

Several of the community museums display historic artifacts alongside ancient ones. Awareness of the suffering of the recent Colonial past is surfacing and the nostalgia for Russian control which was rife on my first trip is thinning. Many people now know the meaning of the term Colonialism, which I was unable to translate for the first 5 years of the project. People are beginning to question received wisdom about their past; several school teachers asked Kubat why his lectures didn't match their textbooks.

I taught introductory archaeology at the American University of Central Asia this spring. I arranged for archaeologists from 8 countries to skype into the class to talk about their work in their own national context. Community engagement and public archaeology were central themes to all the talks. Students shared their ideas about heritage with me; the diversity was heartening.

I can go on listing these events that seem to me to be ripples resulting from a stone I encouraged Kyrgyz citizens to cast into the water. But I think this is sufficient to make my point. The success of a truly grass

roots heritage project, instigated but not controlled by someone like me, cannot really be documented. Outcomes cannot be stipulated in advance and the repercussions of the activities cannot always be traced. I am however quite confident that Kyrgyz archaeology will never be pulled onto a political agenda to exterminate Uzbek speakers. I can't tell you how I know that, I just do.