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Svetlana Jacquesson

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Claiming heritage: the Manas epic between China and Kyrgyzstan

Svetlana Jacquesson

Palacky University, Olomouc, Czech Republic

ABSTRACT

In this article I argue that the renewed promotion of the Manas epic in Kyrgyzstan after 2010 should not be reduced to an attempt to consolidate a national identity or strengthen the state by endorsing ethno-nationalism. Instead, since the 2009 inscription of the Manas epic on the UNESCO List of Intangible Heritage by China, Kyrgyzstan has undertaken a full-scale heritagization not only of the Manas epic but also of its other tangible or intangible cultural assets. This heritagization has been shaped by an anxiety that Kyrgyzstan's most valuable cultural asset might be appropriated by China. By shifting the focus from Manas as a potential national role model to the epic as national heritage, I suggest that Kyrgyzstan's latest outburst of 'Manasification' is better understood as an attempt to resist China's ongoing attempts to harness the heritage discourse in rewriting the cultural and historical narrative of Eurasia.

KEYWORDS

Epic; heritage; heritagization; Manas; Kyrgyzstan; China

Introduction

Kyrgyzstan is allegedly the only country in the world to have a law on the protection and promotion of an epic as part of its national heritage and an official holiday to celebrate it. It is also the only country where lessons on the epic are mandatory through primary, secondary and higher education and where an entire academy is now dedicated to its study. Considering the importance of this epic, referred to as the Manas epic or the Manas trilogy, in the consolidation of post-Soviet national identities, Kyrgyzstan's Manas phenomenon – the promotion and celebration of the epic – remains surprisingly under-studied. Bloggers and scholars have coined several shorthand expressions for this phenomenon, including 'Manasification', 'Manas mania', and 'Manas-pulation'.

If we put aside the works of Prior (2000) and Van der Heide (2008), most students of nation-building and nationalism in Kyrgyzstan discuss the Manas phenomenon rather cursorily. They agree that Kyrgyzstan's first president, Askar Akaev, produced (or was helped to produce) a substantial amount of writing on Manas as a national epic and as a pillar of Kyrgyz statehood (Gulette 2006, 149–159; Marat 2008; cf. Akaev 2002) and that in most of his writings Akaev foregrounded the themes of cultural diversity and ethnic harmony purportedly contained in the epic narrative. They note that by securing UN support for the

CONTACT Svetlana Jacquesson jacquessonsvetlana@gmail.com

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thousand-year anniversary of Manas in 1995, Akaev was attempting to put the newly independent state on the map of world cultures. They also admit that this state-orchestrated enthusiasm eventually faded in the middle and late 1990s, together with state support for its promotion.

Scholars have analysed the resurrection of the Manas phenomenon 15 years after the 1995 anniversary primarily within the context of domestic politics, relating it to the 2010 ethnic violence in the south of the country and to the nationalist fever that seized Kyrgyzstan's titular nation thereafter. In these analyses (Rickleton 2011a, 2011b; Wachtel 2013, 2016), 'Manasification' is a policy deployed by state officials and politicians in an attempt to consolidate a national identity around an ethnic majority and to keep the state from disintegration by making it Kyrgyz. Moreover, all recent analyses focus on the hero of the epic, Manas, and seem to attribute the unifying capacity of the epic to the possibility of turning its hero into a national role model.

This narrow focus on Manas as a politicized ethnic issue internal to the Kyrgyz state excludes external concerns and contexts, particularly those related to China and its efforts to claim the epic. Beijing listed Manas on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding in October 2009 on behalf of its Kyrgyz minority.[1] There followed an uproar among Kyrgyzstan's elites and a mobilization to correct UNESCO's 'wrongdoing' in accepting China's claim to ownership of the epic as cultural heritage. Four years later, in December 2013, the Manas epic – presented for the occasion as a trilogy comprising the stories of Manas, his son Semetey and his grandson Seytek – was added to the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, this time on behalf of Kyrgyzstan.

In this article I want to add nuance to the existing analyses. It is difficult to argue against 'Manas mania' as an ethno-nationalist endeavour to consolidate a Kyrgyz identity. Yet, I claim that by focusing on the attempts to turn the hero of the epic into a national role model these analyses fail to explain the success and scope of the recent 'Manas mania' as well as its particular manifestations. Most scholars note how difficult it is to turn an epic character into a unifying or inspiring modern national hero, an observation many Kyrgyzstanis agree with. I suggest instead that the competitive heritage-making into which Kyrgyzstan was drawn by China's UNESCO nomination offers a more promising analytical approach. Such an approach implies shifting the focus from the promotion of Manas as a national hero to the defence of the epic as a national heritage.

Critical heritage studies, a field of investigations that has been largely shaped as a critique of UNESCO's heritage practices, emphasize that social actors understand intangible heritage, previously called folklore, as practices and expressions that are in the process of passing away. Their passing away, whether real or imagined, signals a change between a past and a present. When social actors claim a heritage, or consider certain practices and expressions as traditions, they do it as actors in the present or, as some scholars suggest, as 'modern subjects' (Hafstein 2012). Such a conceptualization takes account of the fact that as often as not social actors proudly claim practices otherwise considered rustic, old-fashioned or outright backward as heritage. It also helps us understand why many Kyrgyzstanis stand in defence of the epic as a national heritage even while finding the epic narrative and its hero timeworn.

I suggest also that it is worth problematizing the fact that Kyrgyzstan had to renew its claim over the Manas epic as a response to China's alleged cultural expansion. That

UNESCO served as the venue for the contention between China and Kyrgyzstan has had some very important consequences for the content and shape of Kyrgyzstan's latest Manasification. Ever since the creation of its programmes on World Heritage Sites (1972) and Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003), UNESCO has been criticized for providing 'an arena through which nations may parade and assert "their" heritage' (Smith 2015, 136). UNESCO has also acquiesced to a set of heritage-making genres that induce the folklorization of intangible heritage UNESCO itself claims to fight against (Hafstein 2009, 2018). The former explains the widely shared conviction that cultural items 'belong' to nations, and hence Kyrgyzstan's distress with the Manas epic being recognized as 'belonging' to China. The latter provides a background for understanding the specific ways in which Kyrgyzstan engaged in (re)claiming the epic, or the specific shapes of the recent outburst of Manasification.

Claiming or defending a heritage at UNESCO comes at a price, namely the commitment to safeguard it. Safeguarding has been institutionalized, largely by UNESCO and its experts, through the so-called 'heritage genres', which include but are not limited to publications, translation, the opening of museums and exhibitions, and the organization of festivals (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004). Safeguarding, then, is a process through which collective actors accept the objectification of their practices and expressions as 'heritage' while at the same time constituting themselves as bearers or owners of this heritage. That is, they commit to safeguard and promote it by subjecting themselves to national or international heritage policies (Hafstein 2012).

The existing studies of China's heritage regimes emphasize that China enthusiastically embraced the concept of intangible heritage as an opportunity to amend the damage of its 10-year assault on the 'four olds' (customs, culture, habits and ideas) and as a convenient way of constructing an inclusive Chinese cultural identity; these goals are often achieved by appropriating selected cultural practices and expressions of its ethnic minorities as national assets. China's desire for global recognition has made the country's heritage bureaucracy receptive to UNESCO heritage practices, not the least because some of these practices – the objectification of heritage and the subjectification of its bearers – match the desire of the Party to promote a national culture while also closely controlling it (Anonymous 2006; Maags and Svensson 2018; Lee 2019).

Along with Japan and South Korea, China has not only taken an active part in establishing the Intangible Cultural Heritage programme at UNESCO but has also very successfully benefitted from it. In 2018, China had the second-largest number of World Heritage sites listed (48), together with the largest number of Intangible Cultural Heritage practices (38). Though committed to defending its 'ownership' of the epic, Kyrgyzstan could match neither the funding nor the bureaucracy invested in the promotion of heritage in China. What it could do, however, was to look at China as a model and attempt to follow China's example of how to succeed at UNESCO. In other words, Kyrgyzstan largely engaged in the same kind of heritagization practices that allowed China to have the epic inscribed on the UNESCO list.

After providing a brief overview of the 2009 China nomination and its aftermath, I analyse publications and performances as crucial dimensions of the heritagization of the Manas epic. In a claim to an epic, publications serve as tangible supports for assessing the significance of the cultural asset, quite often in quantitative terms. Performances of the epic, on the other hand, are often perceived as a way to demonstrate the quality of the tradition, or its authenticity. Both publications and performances indicate states' and

nations' respect for the asset and also serve as showcases to the outside world and as tourist attractions. In my analysis, I seek to foreground the interrelatedness of activities on both sides of the border and how, in trying to wrest the epic away from China, Kyrgyzstan emulated China's heritage-making practices – or, as some would claim, its heavy-handed folklorization – while also making different claims, most notably in relation to the authenticity of its epic tradition.[2] I conclude with some reflections on the similarities and differences in the ongoing heritagization of the Manas epic in Kyrgyzstan and China and on Kyrgyzstan's Manasification in the context of regional and global heritage making.

China-stirred heritage awareness

At its fourth session in Abu Dhabi, UNESCO's Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage approved China's nomination of the Manas epic and inscribed it on its List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding. On 22 October 2009 Sadïk Sher Niyaz, a director and producer as well as a politician and one of the first home-grown sponsors of the promotion of Kyrgyz language and culture, held a press conference in Bishkek at which he mentioned China's nomination and declared that the Manas epic could not be inscribed on the UNESCO list by any nation but Kyrgyzstan. Otherwise, Sher Niyaz argued, the world would be misled as to which nation the epic actually belongs to (Azattïk 2009a).

In step with Sher Niyaz, the local news media highlighted 'public' shock and indignation. Allegations of 'China's cultural expansion' and manifestations of Sinophobia intensified when the news of the nomination broke (Bakchiev 2009; Azattïk 2009a, 2010a). However, they were mostly short-lived: very soon the head of Kyrgyzstan's UNESCO commission made it clear that China had nominated the epic on behalf of its Kyrgyz minority. Moreover, the same source emphasized, the epic had been recognized by UNESCO as an endangered piece of intangible heritage because in China the epic was known only by the Kyrgyz minority, 'which was in urgent need of protection and support by China's authorities' (AKIpress 2009).

In an attempt to address the anger and preserve its friendly relations with China, official Kyrgyzstan opened its media space to China's Manas scholars, most of whom belong to the Kyrgyz minority, to discuss the destiny of the Manas epic in their country. In a landslide of interviews, these scholars acted as exemplary and well-disciplined public diplomacy officers. They continuously praised state funding and support for research on the epic as well as for the preservation and promotion of the cultures and histories of ethnic minorities. They touted the feverish activities at the Manas Safeguard and Research Centre in Akqi,[3] the Xinjiang Association for the Study of Folklore and Crafts in Ürümqi, and the Institute of Ethnic Literature of China's Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing. They repeatedly expressed their gratitude to the Chinese state and the Chinese people for the respect they show for the epic and the epic tellers (Azattïk 2010b; Karmïshtegin 2011; *Kïrgïz Tuusu* 2011b). They emphasized that the Chinese government paid epic performers monthly allowances and provided some of them free health care and transportation. One interview after another hammered home the idea that the epic and the epic tellers were not only better taken care of in China than in Kyrgyzstan but also more respected and better celebrated.[4]

It took some time for Kyrgyzstan to decide how best to act. If, in the beginning, there were suggestions to 'revise' or 'correct' UNESCO's decision and have the epic inscribed on the list of intangible heritage by both countries, Kyrgyzstan eventually decided to proceed independently and nominate its own version of the epic, the Manas-Semetey-Seytek trilogy. This decision was taken on the eve of 2010, a turbulent year in the Kyrgyz Republic, with preparation for the nomination taking four years, rather than the single year originally envisioned. Notwithstanding the economic and political challenges facing the country, in 2011 the parliament adopted a law on the protection and promotion of the epic, and shortly after, the government followed with a state programme for implementation of the law (2012–2017). Both the Manas Law and the Manas State Programme echoed China's official policies on intangible heritage by focusing on the epic as a 'masterpiece', the publication and study of its existing versions, and the discovery of new ones.

Unlike in China, however, epic-related activities in Kyrgyzstan were not only state-orchestrated during these four years or after.[5] As discussed below, public foundations and individual sponsors also took up the task of promoting the epic and the epic tellers. The activities of these non-state actors were largely shaped by a desire to demonstrate that Kyrgyzstan's respect for the epic and epic tellers was no smaller than China's, but also, and as importantly, by a will to distinguish Kyrgyzstan's heritage practices from China's.

Assessing China's claim to the epic

Publications appeared quite early during the controversy over China's nomination. Though the epic was inscribed on the list of intangible heritage, in China this piece of intangible heritage had in fact very tangible supports: on the one side an 18-volume publication, and on the other a bard, Jusup Mamay (1918–2014), a native of Akqi County who was acclaimed not only as the performer of the most complete version of the epic but also as the one to have written it down entirely by himself.[6] Just as important, this version told the stories of eight generations, as opposed to the versions in Kyrgyzstan spanning only three.

China's Manas scholars used the size and the scope of the publication, both informally and publicly, in their claims over the epic. Thus, in an interview to *Kïrgïz Tuusu* in 2011, one declared:

> In fact, even if in Kyrgyzstan they say that they used to have epic performers who could tell the stories of five generations, the publications we have seen cover only three generations. While in China, we have published a text covering eight generations. (*Kïrgïz Tuusu* 2011b)

In a different type of exchange, this one informal, between a renowned epic teller from Kyrgyzstan and another Manas scholar from China, the latter teased the former: 'You do not have the eight-generation-long epic that we have. If you had it, why have not you published it yet?' (Bakchiev 2010).

Such claims frustrated Kyrgyzstani scholars, intellectuals and officials. Right after the 2009 nomination, the head of Kyrgyzstan's UNESCO commission emphasized that China had earmarked 55 million yuan for the promotion of the epic and had already been able to publish it in 18 volumes. Kyrgyzstan, in his words, could not match such an effort, and in fact had been unable to secure funding to publish the epic in even five or

six volumes (Azattïk 2009b). Beksultan Jakiev, a writer well known in Kyrgyzstan for his novelized version of the epic as well as for his active participation in the preparation of a successful 2003 UNESCO nomination of Kyrgyzstan's Art of Epic Tellers,[7] chimed in:

> Our close relatives [*boorlosh tuugandar*] in Kizilsu Prefecture [Kyzylsuu Oblast] have the Manas epic. They have the Manas epic of Jusup Mamay published in 18 volumes. As for us, we have not been able to even publish the full versions of Sagïmbay and Sayakbay.[8] (*Nazar* 2009)

At the same time, Kyrgyzstani intellectuals and epic tellers did attempt to contest the legitimacy of Jusup Mamay as a bard, and therefore the value of the 18-volume Chinese publication. They claimed that no Kyrgyzstani had ever heard Jusup Mamay recite the epic, that he had not had a vocation dream, and was not therefore a 'traditional' epic teller.[9] Moreover, as Jusup Mamay himself admitted on several occasions, he had learned the epic from a written version set down by his elder brother Balbay Mamay, a folklore collector who in the beginning of the twentieth century, and especially in the years following the 1916 uprising in what was then Jetisuu Province of the Russian Empire, used to host refugee epic tellers from present-day Kyrgyzstan and write down their versions of the epic (Ying 2001; Bakchiev 2009, 2010). The boldest and most radical claim was that the epic version used by China to obtain UNESCO's nomination had plagiarized unpublished or published texts by Kyrgyzstani bards (Azattïk 2009c). Claims, criticisms, replies and rejoinders kept Manas scholars and fans busy on both sides of the border for quite some time. Kyrgyzstanis tried to prove that Jusup Mamay's version was not the longest. There were claims of epic performers on Kyrgyzstan's side of the border who told stories not only of Manas but also of several of his descendants, though these claims were dismissed for lack of tangible proof, that is to say, archived records or published texts.

To add fuel to the fire, in 2011, China's Manas scholars shattered the Manas epic tradition again by publishing the story of the 15 ancestors of Manas recorded from Satïbaldï Aalï (1933–2006), a Kyrgyz from Ili Prefecture. The local news report on this publication, produced by a journalist from Kizilsuu Prefecture, did not miss the opportunity to emphasize that 'the story of the ancestors of Manas that had been forgotten by the Tengir Too Kyrgyz was in fact preserved by the Kerme Too Kyrgyz' (Azattïk 2011).[10] Besides this unexpected supplement to the epic, no new versions were published in China after 2009. Instead, China's Manas scholars busied themselves with translations of Jusup Mamay's text into Chinese and as many foreign languages as possible.

Producing tangible proofs of Kyrgyzstan's epic tradition

In Kyrgyzstan, on the other hand, from 2010 on efforts and funding were addressed to publishing as many of versions of the epic trilogy as possible, and in their most complete form. New 'full' versions of the Manas epics of Sagïmbay and Sayakbay were published in 2010. In the same year, Urkash Mambetaliev (1934–2011), the only officially appointed performer of the epic on the stage of the National Philharmonic Theatre, had his version of Semetey printed, with commentators noting the 'beauty' of the published book. If we trust Oleg Bondarenko, head of the Association of Kyrgyzstan's Publishers and Booksellers,

the Manas epic 'overwhelmed' all other publishing activities in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 (24.kg 2011).

In 23 January 2012, Bakït Romanov, the president of the Uluu Bayan [Great Epic] Foundation, established in 2010, announced at a press conference that the foundation would allocate KGS 60 million (about €986,000) to the publication of all 84 versions of the epic preserved in the Manuscript Fund of the Institute of Language and Literature of Kyrgyzstan's National Academy of Sciences. At the time, Romanov also claimed that the project would be realized within two years, with each version being published in 10,000 copies (Kant.kg 2012). The Uluu Bayan Foundation was more successful in offering support to Kyrgyzstan's living epic tellers (see below); its publishing ambitions remained largely unfulfilled.

In 2013 the Institute of Language and Literature published the Manas versions of Togolok Moldo (1860–1940) and Shapak Rïsmende uulu (1863–1958). It is worth noting that among the many versions of the epic kept in the Manuscript Fund, Togolok Moldo's version, which was written down by the bard himself, like Jusup Mamay's, was among the first selected for publication. In the words of Omor Sooronov, a long-time curator of the Manuscript Fund, had Togolok Moldo not been ignored for having written down his own version, something that did not fit Soviet understandings of what an 'epic performer' was, he would have been as famous as Sagïmbay and Sayakbay (Azattïk 2017). The following year, 2014, the institute hosted an inauguration event for the publication of 'the most complete version of the Manas epic, recorded from Sagïmbay and recognized as a classic'. The 2014 edition of Sagïmbay comprised '9 books published as 8 volumes', or 183,000 lines on 5765 pages. The same year, on the occasion of the 120th anniversary of the birth of Sayakbay Karalaev, a solemn ceremony was held by the same institute to announce a 'new' four-volume publication containing Sayakbay's version of all three sections of the epic. Both events, however, were tinged with some sadness, because, as the director of the Institute noted in his statements to the press, these 'unique academic editions' were started back in 1992, and many of the scholars who had worked on them had passed away by the time of publication (*Vechernij Bishkek* 2014; Sputnik 2015a).

Until 2014, epic-related publishing activities depended for their funding on the Manas State Programme, and funding was scarce, even if the programme itself was focused on promoting the epic through publications. Established in 2014, the State Programme on Kyrgyz Language and Language Policies (2014–2020), proved more generous. It is enough to note here that 2010, the year in which the Manas epic dominated publishing activities in the country, pales in comparison to 2017 or 2018 in terms of publications relating to the epic. In two years, the Institute of Language and Literature combed its Manuscript Fund and published 20 versions of the Manas trilogy in 31 volumes averaging 500 pages each (Bilim AkiPress 2019).

Kyrgyzstan's publishing activities reached a climax in April 2019 when the Bishkek Humanities University celebrated the publication of an 'unknown unique manuscript' of the Manas epic. The manuscript belonged to Meder Mergenbaev (1896–1983), 'a man of letters and a well-known performer of the epic'. It was deemed 'unique' because it contained several versions of the epic set down by Mergenbaev himself between 1921 and 1928, among them two versions of Sagïmbay's Manas, the first in the Arabic script (1130 pages) and the second in Cyrillic (2648 pages). The Cyrillic version was prepared by Mergenbaev himself in 1961–1966 and was conspicuously longer because Mergenbaev

had 'improved' and 'expanded' what he initially recorded from Sagïmbay (BBC Kïrgïz kïzmatï 2018). The 3962 pages of records of Mergenbaev were kept in the library of the Bishkek Humanities University. The publication of the first of the six planned volumes was made possible by the support of the International Turkic Academy.[11] It is not clear from the existing information whether Mergenbaev's manuscript is 'unique' because it had remained unknown or whether its 'uniqueness' resides elsewhere. My hunch is that the manuscript came to be celebrated as 'unique' because it is, in many ways, the Kyrgyzstani counterpart of the work of Jusup Mamay, that is to say, an extensive and composite version of the epic written down by a renowned epic performer.

The number of publications of the epic since 2010 in Kyrgyzstan is impressive but also confusing, since 'fuller' and more and more 'complete', or republished or unpublished versions, were and are being regularly announced. Many of these publications do attempt to reassert the greatness of Kyrgyzstan's Sagïmbay and Sayakbay over China's Jusup Mamay. Many of them also seek to prove that the Manas epic tradition had been flourishing in Kyrgyzstan. These new publications are noticed and appreciated only within a narrow circle of epic scholars or epic fans, China's Manas scholars included. And even if the number of copies published is derisory – most of the publications do not exceed 1000 copies – these publications, together with the advertisements in the media and the solemn book inaugurations promoting them, did add to the impression of a growing Manasification of Kyrgyzstan.

Copycat celebrations of the epic heritage

In 2005 the government of Akqi County started celebrating Mamay's birthday with epic-reciting competitions (China.org.cn 2010). In 2007, the government of Kizilsu Prefecture joined, and the birthday celebration was promoted to a Xinjiang Manas Festival (Globaltimes.cn 2012). The 2007 festival was attended by around 100 participants, most of them epic performers, Manas scholars, or regional officials (Azattïk 2007). In 2010, the festival allegedly attracted around 10,000 visitors and was renamed the Manas International Culture and Tourism Festival (China.org.cn 2010). That same year the festival featured 1000 persons – 'men, women, boys, girls, and elders' – reciting an excerpt from the epic together, with some of the Kyrgyzstani officials in attendance noting that the mass performance 'took their breath away' (*Kïrgïz Tuusu* 2011a). No fewer than 30,000 people attended the festivities the following year, among them former president of Kyrgyzstan, Roza Otunbaeva (Globaltimes.cn 2012). Though I could not find more recent reports on the festival, it seems that it is still running, after a short break occasioned by the death of Jusup Mamay in 2014.

Kyrgyzstan's Ministry of Culture, Information and Tourism launched the Festival of World Epics at the same time China started the Xinjiang Manas festival. There followed a long break, most probably for lack of funding, after its first edition in 2006, though the festival was revived in 2011. After its third edition, in 2015, the ministry decided to make it a biennial event; it has been held regularly ever since. Kyrgyzstan's Festival of World Epics is yet another example of the twenty-first-century festivalization of culture (Hafstein 2018), and except for claiming to be a festival of world epics, and thus more inclusive or more ambitious than China's Manas International Culture and Tourism Festival, it differs little from the latter. Both festivals foreground variously shaped ethnic or local

traditions, give ample space to demonstrations of ethnic arts and crafts as well as food, put on display ethnic or traditional clothing, and include variously styled performances of the epic. Yet, one observation is worth discussing here.

As I mentioned, some of the Kyrgyzstani officials in attendance at the Xinjiang Manas Festival in 2011 were particularly impressed by 1000 persons reciting the epic together. They did not hesitate to introduce this practice in Kyrgyzstan. Age groups of both sexes recited the epic at the 2014 Summer Festival in Batken Oblast, with the groups roughly corresponding to the age of the three heroes of the epic: the 'group of Manas' (30–60 years of age) had 80 persons; the 'group of Semetey' (18–20 years of age) and the 'group of Seytek' (schoolchildren from the 8th to the 11th grade) had 40 persons each. In an interview with the local news media, the vice-governor of Batken Oblast explicitly stated that she had imagined these novel ways of performing the epic after travelling to 'the brother Kyrgyz of China' in 2011 (Aimak.kg 2014). One cannot but also notice that the nearly one-hour pageant at the opening ceremony of the Third World Nomadic Games, held in Kyrgyzstan in September 2018, was closed by 1000 beautifully dressed young men and women reciting an excerpt of the Manas epic together, exactly in the Chinese style introduced at the 2010 Manas International Culture and Tourism Festival.

'Kyrgyzstan's got talent'

Though various celebrations of the epic as heritage were reinvigorated after 2009, the living performers of the epic in Kyrgyzstan did not enjoy the same support and recognition from the state as the Chinese Jusup Mamay. The 2012 State Programme paid lip service to 'developing the skills of epic performers', but it remained poorly funded all through its existence. State support for the living performers, numbering 12–15 around 2010, was also meagre, as was official recognition.[12] Several foundations, freshly established after the 2009 China nomination, stepped in to demonstrate that Kyrgyzstan cared for its performers no less than China. In December 2010, the Uluu Bayan Foundation introduced the title of People's Epic Performer (El Manaschïsï) and the award for Outstanding Epic Performer (Zalkar Manaschï) and then bestowed them on two of Kyrgyzstan's senior epic performers, Saparbek Kasmambetov and Urkash Mambetaliev.[13] In 2012, the foundation gave seven epic performers personal vehicles, offered six of them housing in the capital, and allocated one-time cash rewards to another three (*Slovo Kyrgyzstana* 2012).

In 2016 another foundation, the Sayakbay Karalaev Foundation, established in 2014, held a special event at the National Philharmonic Theatre to mark the Year of History and Culture. During the event, the foundation decorated several epic performers with its medal, the Sayakbay Manaschï Medal, to recognize their contributions to the preservation and promotion of the epic. The foundation also offered three-room flats in the capital to three epic tellers and a personal vehicle to another one (Mediamanas 2016).

Regularly held competitions, and even 'competing competitions', offered another way of both promoting and rewarding the epic tellers. Though these kinds of competitions dated back to the Soviet period and were never really interrupted during the years of independence, their style changed: along with diplomas and certificates, the winners began receiving lavish monetary prizes. The Manas Muras Foundation (established in 2003) and the Aytïsh Foundation (established in 2001) were the most active sponsors in this field, in cooperation with ElTR, one of Kyrgyzstan's state-sponsored TV and radio channels.

In 2010 they held a competition, Epic Performers of the Twenty-First Century, in the hopes that 'one of Kyrgyzstan's modern epic tellers would be able to dethrone China's Jusup Mamay' (Limon.kg 2010). The prize announced for the winner was KGS 500,000 (about €8000), and the competition was held annually until 2013, the year when Kyrgyzstan succeeded in having the Manas trilogy inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List (Gezitter.org 2013).

In 2010 another public foundation, Manas El (The People of Manas), launched a competition for the purpose of 'discovering new talents'. To the best of my knowledge this competition is still held annually: it takes place not only in the capital but also in other towns of the country. It features schoolchildren and university students and runs for 18 days in some years (Azattïk 2015). Finally, in 2016, the Sayakbay Karalaev Foundation, in collaboration with KTRK, the Public Broadcasting Corporation of the Kyrgyz Republic, also launched a yearly competition targeting young performers (15–25 years of age). The first edition of the event ran for a month. KTRK broadcast the event in its entirety and invited the public to vote by SMS for the performer of their choice (KTRK 2016).

In her seminal study of the destiny of the Manas epic in Kyrgyzstan in the first 10 years of the twenty-first century, Van der Heide (2008) emphasizes on several occasions that both Soviet and post-Soviet official policies and activities were focused on the epic as text or on the promotion of the two 'great epic tellers' of the past, Sagïmbay and Sayakbay, while the living epic tellers and the living performances of the epic were pushed to the margins. If we judge by the ever-growing number of titles, awards and rewards, with or without competitions, for living performers of the epic, something changed in Kyrgyzstan in the second decade of the twenty-first century. And the declaration of Kyrgyzstan's prime minister that from 2016 on six epic tellers would be officially employed by the Ministry of Culture, Information and Tourism is yet another token of this change (Sputnik 2015c). I submit then that the timing of this change in Kyrgyzstan, as well as the ways in which it took place, cannot be dissociated from the 'cult' of Jusup Mamay in China and from China's 'caring' attitude towards the bearers of its cultural heritage.

Reclaiming a 'Kyrgyzstani' Manas tradition

Yet, not all were pleased with the ways these various events and competitions showcased the epic and its performers, whether in Kyrgyzstan or in China. Talantaalï Bakchiev, himself an epic performer with a university degree in philology, became the spokesperson for 'a return to the tradition' (*De-Fakto* 2012). Such a return implied first and foremost a changed relationship between the performers and the audience. In place of the standardized short recitals of random excerpts from the epic at festive events or during competitions, established epic performers would gather, and each would take a turn in unfolding the storyline of the epic for as long as they could, with the performances lasting for hours or days as a result.[14]

Such a performance was offered for the first time in October 2014 to celebrate the 120th anniversary of Sayakbay Karalaev and was sponsored by the foundation established in his name. Seven yurts were set up at the site where Sayakbay had received his vocation dream, and seven performers made the epic sound for seven days and seven nights.[15] The event, according to the available reports, was a success: people from all over the country attended the performance, and some of them stayed for the entire duration. They set up

extra yurts, brought the necessary cooking ware, and prepared food for the performers. If we trust Bakchiev (2015a), one of the organizers, state officials and politicians also spared time for the epic and listened to it for hours.

The event moved to the capital, Bishkek, in 2015. That same year, a government decree made 4 December, the same date on which in 2013 UNESCO inscribed Kyrgyzstan's Manas-Semetey-Seytek trilogy on its list of intangible heritage, an official holiday. The epic performers, according to Bakchiev, wanted to show how the epic should be celebrated. And though the event took place at the posh Dasmia complex, a collection of lavishly decorated permanent yurts built of concrete and metal, its organizers and participants kept it as close to 'the tradition' as possible. Again the recital of the epic lasted seven days and seven nights. It was opened by sacrificing a mare to the ancestral spirits, and to the spirit of Manas. Thirteen performers from all over the country took turns narrating the epic; one of them spent nine hours just describing the birth of Manas. Attendance was free of charge, and hundreds of people dropped by and listened to the epic. While some came empty-handed, others brought animals to sacrifice and gifts for the performers. The event was so successful that officials and public figures did not want to miss the opportunity to show up. The prime minister himself attended the closing and offered wristwatches to three of the performers (Gezitter.org 2015; Sputnik 2015b).

It is worth emphasizing here that Bakchiev, the initiator and the main organizer of these events, was also the most outspoken detractor of Jusup Mamay and his Manas epic right after the 2009 China nomination. He was and still is the most eloquent defender of a uniquely Kyrgyzstani Manas tradition. In many ways, this tradition had to be reinvented by stripping it from all the superfluous epic-related actors and activities and foregrounding the relationship between the performers and the audience. In such a way Kyrgyzstan could reclaim its Manas without being involved in a competition over heritagization with its powerful neighbour. The shadow of the powerful neighbour, however, could not be easily shaken off. In March 2019, when Bakchiev had already been expected for some time to be appointed president of the brand-new National Academy for the Study of Manas and Chingiz Aytmatov, he again foregrounded the 'Chinese threat' by claiming that if Kyrgyzstan remained inactive in the study of the epic as an internationally recognized cultural treasure, China would seize the opportunity and open such an academy (Sputnik 2019). Bakchiev confirmed with this statement that China continued to haunt the main actors of the heritagization of the Manas epic in Kyrgyzstan.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that the resurgence of 'Manas mania' some 15 years after the 1995 anniversary cannot be understood within the domestic context of Kyrgyzstan alone, which is the focus of most existing studies. From the 2009 statement of Sher Niyaz to the 2019 statement of Bakchiev, China lurks in the background of many of the epic-related activities in Kyrgyzstan. This is not to claim that 'Manas mania' is independent of efforts to keep the country united or to nurture national pride and even patriotism. Yet I hope to have demonstrated that the way Manas 'struck back' in the twenty-first century was much more shaped by Kyrgyzstan's anxiety over China's purported encroachment on its cultural heritage than by a uniquely domestic agenda.

Between 2009 and 2019 many epic-related activities in Kyrgyzstan, and many manifestations of Kyrgyzstan's 'Manas mania', were and remain an attempt to challenge China's two main claims in succeeding in the 2009 UNESCO nomination of the Manas epic: to have published the most complete version of the epic; and to be, or to have been, the homeland of the greatest living epic performer.

This competition over the epic occasioned both emulation (mimicry) and a search for distinction. In Kyrgyzstan, state and non-state actors joined efforts in the promotion of the epic and its performers, in contrast to China, where all actors involved in heritage making are state-endorsed. Based on the preceding analysis, it would not be too far-fetched to suggest that emulation – whether in subsidizing the publication of the epic in more and more volumes, and in thicker and thicker ones, or in turning its performances into colourful pageants staged on official or public occasions – seems to govern the activities of state and official actors. Official practices also are predominantly turned to the past, or to the promotion of the epic as a heritage whose bearers, the 'great' epic tellers on both sides of the border, either belong to the past or are in the process of 'disappearing'. State and official actors are also the ones to most insistently foreground the good relations between the two countries and the two communities of Kyrgyz, as well as to claim that the Manas epic is a 'bridge of friendship' and not an 'apple of discord'.

In contrast to their official counterparts, Kyrgyzstan's non-state actors are more prone to Sinophobia, or an enduring mistrust of their neighbours, be they Kyrgyz or Chinese. They were the ones to openly question the epic and its 'made in China' bard in the wake of China's recent boom in heritagization. They were also the ones who invested funds and effort in attempts to wrest the Manas epic tradition away from China. And they were successful, by focusing on the epic as performance instead of on the epic as text, and by turning their gaze from the past to the present. As of 2019, 'chain recitals' are landmark events in the yearly celebrations of Kyrgyzstan's Day of the Epic. Their success is growing, though they certainly cannot match the size of the Xinjiang Manas festival. Instead of quantity, however – whether in terms of visitors or performers – they offer 'quality', or the opportunity to enjoy the epic in a more intimate and engaging way, or in an 'authentically Kyrgyz' way.

The Manas epic had already become a national symbol during the Soviet period. Yet, as the independence period shows, national unity or identity cannot be consolidated by a top-down promotion of the epic. In exchange, the threat of a UNESCO-endorsed cultural 'misappropriation', or the need to defend the epic against the claims of another nation, can inject new significance into the heritage item and new vitality into the nation as its collective owner. The latest outburst of Manasification in Kyrgyzstan is then neither home-grown nor home-made. Instead it is shaped by a tacit competition with China over the custodianship of the epic. In this sense it differs from Soviet-era attempts to promote the epic. As in the case of the Sakha and their *Olonkho* epic (Andreev 2017), the Kyrgyz no longer need to prove that they are not backward, or that they too have a literary tradition and language, and thus a right to a place in the Soviet house of cultures; instead, they seek to secure a place on the map of world cultures and receive global recognition for their cultural achievements. And it is in the process of pursuing this goal that Kyrgyzstan's ambitions clash with China's.

If, as Smith (2015, 141) suggests, heritage is 'a discourse involved in the legitimatization and governance of historical and cultural narratives', then the series of heritage disputes in

which China has been involved since 2005 indicate that China is actively attempting to revise the historical and cultural narratives of Eurasia. Kyrgyzstan's recent Manasification is one among other attempts to resist this new cultural imperialism.

Notes

1. There are slightly more than 200,000 Kyrgyz in China, and they are recognized as one of China's 56 official ethnic minorities. The Kyrgyz live mainly in Kizilsu Prefecture in the south-western part of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, with small groups also found in Ili Prefecture and elsewhere. The Kyrgyz minority in China comprises both 'old settlers' – Kyrgyz who found themselves on the Chinese side after the delimitation of the border between the Russian and Qing Empires – and more recent ones, who fled to Xinjiang to escape reprisal after the 1916 anti-Russian revolt.
2. My analysis is based on news media reports of two kinds: interviews or statements by the actors of the heritagization on both sides of the border; and events related to the Manas epic as reported by the press. The overwhelming bulk of these data are in Kyrgyz and were mined from Kyrgyzstan's newspapers. I have had very limited access to English-language online sources from the Chinese side of the border, and none to Chinese-language ones. In this article, then, China speaks overwhelmingly in Kyrgyz, through the representatives of its Kyrgyz minority. As for the actors, the promotion and preservation of cultural heritage are often the privilege of the elites, or of their nationalist-minded representatives. They are also the ones who most often use the news media as a platform. This does not mean that rank-and-file citizens are not interested in heritage, but their opinions are not decisive for my argument here, and I have not had the opportunity to engage in such an investigation. In the following analysis I use real personal names only when they are important for my argument. Each time this is not the case I omit them, especially when discussing actors on the Chinese side. In the latter case, I occasionally refer to the projects and activities of official organizations.
3. The seat of Akqi County, Kizilsu Prefecture, and the birthplace of Jusup Mamay (see below).
4. See for instance *Vechernij Bishkek*, 6 November 2009, or BBC Kïrgïz kïzmatï, 23 February 2013.
5. Maags and Svensson (2018) draw attention to the diversification of institutions and people involved in heritage making in China and foreground the agency of non-state actors. In the case under study here, however, all the actors from the Chinese side belong to state-supported official organizations.
6. On Jusup Mamay and his version of the Manas, see Ying (2001); *Kïrgïz Tuusu*, 19 September 2011; Kenensariev (2014).
7. The success of this nomination as well as the 1995 UN sponsored Manas Jubilee partly explain the bewilderment in Kyrgyzstan after the 2009 China nomination of the Manas epic.
8. Sagïmbay Orozbakov (1868–1930) and Sayakbay Karalaev (1894–1971) were two of Kyrgyzstan's most renowned epic tellers.
9. Though late in his life Jusup Mamay did say that he had had a vocation dream, and several publications by Chinese scholars discuss this revelation – Ying (2001), for instance – it seems that for quite a long time, and most notably during the Cultural Revolution, Mamay never mentioned it and insisted instead that he had learned the epic from the records of his elder brother. This was the case during Mamay's visits to Kyrgyzstan, in 1992 and 1995, and it explains why many Kyrgyzstanis continue to question the 'authenticity' of his gift as an epic performer.
10. Tengir Too Kyrgyz and Kerme Too Kyrgyz are popular ways of referring to Kyrgyzstan's and Xinjiang's Kyrgyz, respectively.
11. Established in 2012 on the initiative of Kazakhstan's president, Nursultan Nazarbaev, the academy has as a mission the coordination and promotion of scientific research on the history of the Turkic world and the study of Turkic languages and literatures.
12. On the epic tellers of the twenty-first century see Van der Heide (2008, 141–149); Bakchiev (2015b, 2017).

13. The title was accompanied by a one-time prize of KGS 5000 (about €80), while the award provided individual lifelong monthly allowances of KGS 2000 (about €32).
14. For historical precedents of this type of epic performance see Ying (2001, 223–224).
15. In the words of Bakchiev, he had the idea of a seven-day, seven-night recital because Sayakbay passed away on 7 May 1971, at the age of 77. Besides, seven is a 'sacred' number among many Turkic groups in Central Asia and beyond.

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