Recently returned from field research in Central Asia, Irina Morozova offers us glimpses of nation-building in the region, and provides us with fascinating insights on how geo-political space and historical time are reflected in national monuments built in the cities of Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia.

National monuments and social construction in Mongolia and Kyrgyzstan

Irina Morozova

Sükhbaatar monument and new high-tech buildings surrounding Sükhbaatar Square, Ulaanbaatar. Photograph courtesy of the author

In the changing geo-political arena of Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia have shown signs of adopting the neo-liberal corporate power model practiced by their more powerful neighbours, Kazakhstan and Russia. The so-called 'Tulip revolution' - the overthrow of A. Akayev's presidency in Kyrgyzstan in March 2005 - was perceived by Central Asian governments as a destabilising and threatening power transition scheme and a turning point in the course of economic reform. While the new Kyrgyz President K. Bakiev has tended to consolidate elite around the access to strategic assets, the ruling party of Mongolia - the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) - initiated discussions on changing the country's political system from a parliamentary to a presidential republic. Privatisation of Kyrgyzstan's energy sector and disputes over nationalisation of natural resources in Mongolia indicate a possible shift of power model towards corporate elite structures. What directions might the nation-building policies take? What lexicon do the political elites choose to promote their interests among wider sections of the population? What symbols are adopted? And how do temporal interests coincide with and impact upon historical memory?

Chinggis khan, Manas and geo-politics in Bishkek and Ulaanbaatar

At the beginning of the 1990s, Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia found themselves in similar economic circumstances. Having been largely dependent on Soviet budgets, investments and trade, now the resource-producing republics were in need of foreign assistance to cope with collapsing economies and a drastic fall in living standards. The governments were forced to let the international markets and financial institutions in and open the public domain to international human rights organisations and various NGOs. Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia adopted the IMF reforms and underwent shock price liberalisation and hyper-inflation and found themselves in the lists of countries with high levels of poverty. Till about the mid-1990s, Kyrgyzstan had been known as an 'island of democracy' surrounded by autocratic post-Soviet Central Asian Republics; and Mongolia is still viewed by many as the most open society in East Asia.

At the same time, however, Kyrgyzstan presented a poor example with social and ethnic conflicts continuously being escalated on its territory, while the MPRP re-consolidated its rule in Mongolia, claiming to be a guarantee of socio-political stability. While economic reforms in the two countries followed similar schemes, their political cultures and nation-building processes appeared to be very different: with a greater normative respect for tradition, an apparent willingness to compromise and a considerable degree of independency within the international socialist system, Mongolia found itself in a more lucrative position after the USSR's disintegration. In the 1990s, in both countries diverse groups in power, including ruling elite and intellectuals began revising the historical past and searching for symbols capable of uniting their populations, demoralised by poverty and social marginalisation.

In Kyrgyzstan, attempts to expand the image of the legendary epic hero Manas into the symbol of national unity did not bring the desired results. In many parts of the country, there is a tradition of performing or reciting parts of the Epos of Manas, a traditional epic poem with close to half a million lines. But not everywhere. So a decision by the former President Akayev to build monuments to Manas not only in the capital Bishkek, but in other cities, such as Batken, in the southern region where many communities do not follow the tradition of performing the epos, had little resonance with the people. In the end, the affirmative actions to promote the Manas epos, as well as other ideas promoted by the President, such as the "uniqueness of nomadic culture" and "Kyrgyzstan - a country of mountains" were not supported by many sedentary communities, especially in the south, and consigned to history alongside their architect, Akayev. In Mongolia, the cult of Chinggis khan had not only existed among the general population in various narrative and epic forms, but it had been developed by historiographers over the centuries and become a form of nationalist pride among the Khalkha, the dominant Mongol group, living in Central Mongolia and in the capital Ulaanbaatar.

In 2006, a monument to Chinggis khan was built in Ulaanbaatar central square, to mark the celebration of 800 years of Mongolian statehood. Today, this monument is seen as the starting point for every excursion around the capital, but certainly not the last grand project in honour of the Great khan. The figure of Chinggis in the centre of the monument is surrounded by his son and grandson, Ögödei khan (who inherited the core Mongolian lands from his father) and Qubilai khan (the founder of the Yuan dynasty). If the inclusion of Ögödei does not raise questions, the appearance of Qubilai does: his transfer of the Mongolian capital to Beijing in 1271 is perceived by nowadays' Mongols as a betrayal of national interests.
Despite certain nationalistic and anti-Chinese sentiments among Khalkha Mongols, the Chinese were hired in to renovate the central square prior to the Chinggis monument appearing on it. Interestingly though, the Mongols did not commission the Chinese constructors to restore the socialist monument to the revolutionary hero D. Sükhbaatar which was left in its original place in the centre of the square. (The Mongols also left intact the monument to Kh. Choibalsan, the "Mongolian Stalin", in front of the National University of Mongolia). Currently a Northern Korean project to restore the Sükhbaatar monument is being discussed in Ulaanbaatar.

Geo-political pluralism, albeit selective, is still working in terms of Mongolia's balancing act between the two great powers – Russia and China – and the involvement of a 'third force' - the US or any other state that demonstrates interest in Mongolian land. For example, the prospective reconstruction of the Mongolian Parliament Building – an example of socialist monumental architecture – is believed to be funded by Qatari investors. A host of new high-tech buildings are under construction in the area surrounding Sükhbaatar square, all funded by various foreign investments and it would seem without much urban planning. These buildings are not only changing the face of the city, but marking Mongolia's adoption of a neo-liberal model for its weak economy.
While certain features of the monument to Chinggis khan may be criticised some, it's safe to conclude that most Mongols view the statue with respect. The same cannot be said of the national monuments in the Kyrgyz capital, which provoke self-deprecating and even bitter jokes. While there is some sympathy towards the monuments dedicated to epic heroes such as Kozhumkul baatyr, (1889-1955), a legendary wrestler known for his extraordinary strength and courage, the newly invented symbols of Kyrgyz statehood, such as the Erkindik (independence) monument in the capital's Ala-Too Square, are regarded as a failed attempt by the state at collective national identity construction. The search for genuine historical figures who could be propagandised as contributors to Kyrgyz statehood has also proved, so far, to be less than successful, partly due to the legacy of Soviet historiography and its focus on the fighters for national liberation. The monument to Kurmandjan datka (1811-1907), known as the 'Alai queen', situated in the centre of Bishkek, is supposed to portray a wise, powerful and independently-minded Kyrgyz female ruler, who struggled to sustain her people's existence during the war between the Kokand Khanate and the Russian Empire. Yet, the fact that Kurmandjan eventually capitulated and allowed her territory becoming a Russian protectorate does not ring true with such a triumphant image.

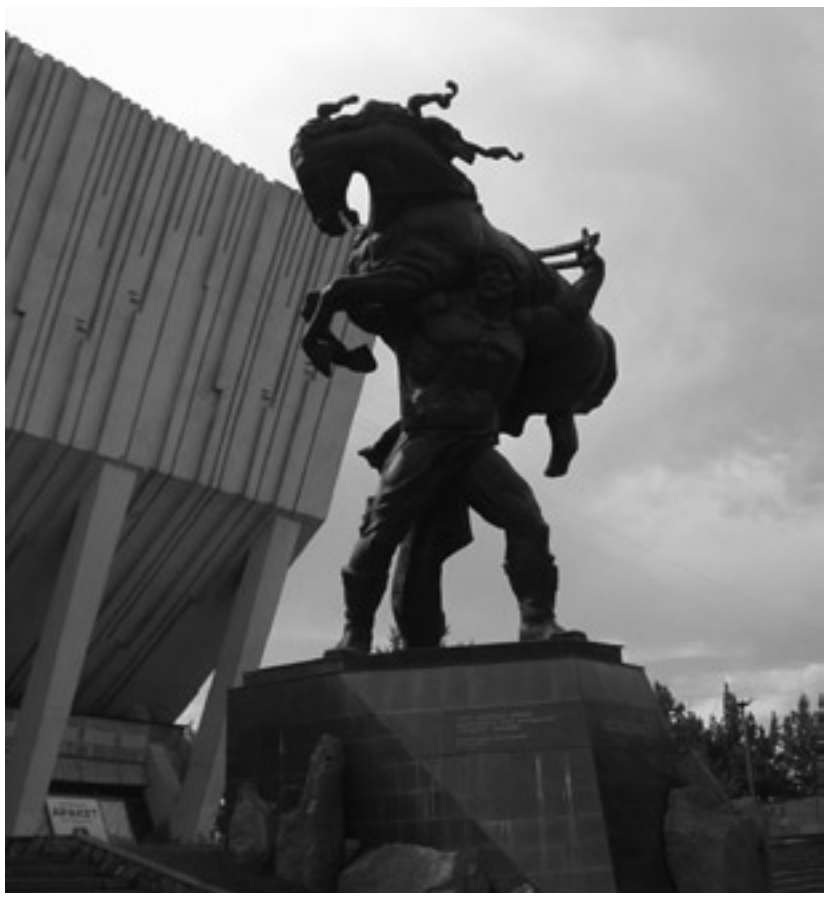
The present Kyrgyz President Bakiev has neither been persistent nor inventive in creating a new national ideology, leaving space for discussion among different intellectuals and political groups about the best nation-building project. However, most of the concepts put forward were too local or marginal, and thus unsustainable and unworkable at a national level.

Regional nationalisms: the cases of Khovd and Osh

Scholarship reveals that every Mongol tribe had its own historic nationalism. The Western Mongols, the Oirat tribes, are renowned for the longest and most determined resistance against the Manchu conquest. Their leaders, and in particular Galdan Boshogt khan (1644-1697), made huge efforts to unite the Mongol tribes under their command and managed to sustain the independency of their small polity – the Junghar Khanate, from the early 17th century to the mid-18th century. In Khovd, the capital of the Western Mongolian aimag (province) Khovd, the portrait of Galdan Boshogt khan adorns the office walls of officials and politicians (in contrast to the Chinggis khan portraits which dominate in Ulaanbaatar). In the city's central square there is an impressive monument of Galdan Boshogt with a sabre. Western Mongolian pride and confidence in their historic past and independent existence (the Western Mongols were also the last to be integrated in the Mongolian People's Republic) is married with tolerance. Ethnic tolerance - Khovd *aimag* is among the most ethnically diverse in Mongolia, with around 16 ethnic groups sharing territory without much dispute; religious tolerance - one can see a Kazakh mosque in proximity to a Mongol Buddhist temple; and cultural tolerance – reflected, for instance, in the Khovd Mongols' acceptance of Chinese food (while in Ulaanbaatar it is unpopular). Their regional exclusiveness and self-sufficiency confirmed, Khovd politicians and intellectuals promote trans-border integration projects that aim at economic cooperation and exchange with China, Russia and Kazakhstan in the framework of a broader Altai region concept.

Lenin monument in the Central Square, Osh. All photographs courtesy of the author

The former silk factory, Osh. The socialist slogan on the building says: "More good commodities for the people!"



Kozhumkul baatyr monument in Bishkek.

One experiences quite a different picture of 'provincial life' in the southern Kyrgyz city of Osh. To start, a clear link with a historical group that founded a famous polity is missing. The rulers of the Kokand Khanate, which encompassed the Osh area before Russia's conquest and annexation, preferred to link their genealogies with Emir Timur, a famous 14th century Turkic conqueror of Central Asia, to whom the Uzbeks trace back their genealogies. At present, the Osh Kyrgyz are believed to belong to *ichkilik*, according to them, a core Kyrgyz tribe. The Kyrgyz from the northern regions, in turn, like to stress their tribes' key role in history and culturally oppose themselves to the southern Kyrgyz. The genealogical trees of Kyrgyz exhibited in the National Museums of Osh and Bishkek are sketched differently to stress the importance of one regional group's origin over the others. Some ethnographers have presented substantial evidence that the population of the Ferghana valley, where the city of Osh is situated, and the adjacent mountainous areas was completely recomposed and renewed in the 19th century (Abashin 2007) (due to the arrival of, among others, the Junghars). In the 20th century many groups were classified as Uzbeks, who nowadays are regarded as the second largest ethnic group in the south of Kyrgyzstan. In 1990, against the background of a collapsing economy and social deprivation, ethnic diversity divided rather than consolidated communities, and bloody clashes occurred between Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Slavic populations living in Osh and the surrounding areas. Later, while the majority of Slavic people left the region, the Uzbeks re-established their business domains and showed tendencies to political consolidation. Their leaders, periodically, tried campaigns to mobilise nationalism among their communities, while the state authorities, especially those in Bishkek, used demobilisation political technologies to neutralise Uzbek nationalism in the struggle for power.

Several international organisations operating in Kyrgyzstan regularly publish their expert assessments on the mood of the various population groups in the country. These surveys reveal the prevalence of positive expectations, as well as the potential for protest and unrest among people in the south, including Osh. Under President Bakiev, many 'southerners' believe they have a better chance for political representation and gaining more social prestige. For the last two years private construction has been booming in Osh: the city is seeing ever more opulent houses being built by local businessmen, officials, high-ranking academicians and other 'wealthy' groups.

Yet there has been little municipal construction in both Khovd and Osh in the last two decades. The factories of the former Soviet/socialist state have been left in ruins, the odd communist slogan daubed on buildings still visible. The monuments from these times remain intact: one can still see Lenin in the central square of Osh and the Mongolian revolutionary Ayush next to Galdan Boshogt in Khovd. People's attitudes towards these monuments reveal a recognition of these figures' contributions to history.

Generally, Mongolian nation-building policies are seen as 'successful' and the Kyrgyz state example seen as 'failing'. However, the view that Mongolia is the only post-socialist country in Asia that has managed to avoid sharp social confrontation has recently changed (particularly in the light of the riots in Ulaanbaatar in June 2008, following parliamentary elections). The centralisation tendencies (also reflected in discussions on the transition to a presidential republic) and nation-building policies in Mongolia will fail to become truly meaningful if they are not supported by social reform and campaigns. Are the new nation-building symbols referring to a heroic past, genealogies or cultural exclusiveness empowered to convince people the state has chosen the correct political course? Or, are these monuments and buildings insignificant against the background of minimal social construction? With neo-liberal reform imposed upon Mongolian society the country would, probably, reach the moment, when even Chinggis khan looses his consolidating image in the eyes of the new urban citizens.

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