

Peer Review

Review of: "From Tsarist Rule to Independence: The Transformation of Ethnic Identities in Kyrgyzstan"

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Peer Review Report

From Tsarist Rule to Independence: The Transformation of Ethnic Identities in Kyrgyzstan

This article makes a valuable contribution to the socio-demographic analysis of ethnic groups in Central Asia, particularly in present-day Kyrgyzstan. It focuses on "human capital"—education, economic occupations—and inter-state relations from the 19th century to the present. The study aims to highlight the imperial (colonial) context of ethnic group formation and the dynamics of their interaction within the given territory. Covering a broad historical period, a vast geographical area, and a diverse population, the article employs a rich dataset, including historical censuses, interviews with contemporary Kyrgyz residents of various ethnicities, ages, and genders, and a qualitative analysis of social media content using AI tools.

The article is significant for understanding interethnic relations in Kyrgyzstan over the past two centuries. However, a general reader might find that it lacks a sufficiently robust theoretical and methodological foundation. The literature review notably overlooks key contributions from Western scholars on nation-building in Soviet Central Asia. In particular, Terry Martin's seminal work on Soviet nationalization strategies during the Stalinist period—a crucial phase in the formation of Soviet national republics—is absent. Other influential scholars such as Francine Hirsch, Adeeb Khalid, Ali Igmen, and Olivier Roy (among others) might also be considered. Engaging with these works would help contextualize the processes that shaped the various ethnic groups in Kyrgyzstan, particularly during the 19th and 20th centuries.

The article sometimes applies generalized characteristics—such as education levels or urbanization—to ethnic groups defined by their language (as determined by historical censuses). This approach risks overlooking the historical conditions under which different segments of the population were subjected to interventionist state projects. As Adeeb Khalid has argued, such projects played a key role in shaping modern identities in Central Asia. Consequently, the article at times applies a "groupist" perspective, as described by Rogers Brubaker, in its analysis of ethnic categories.

Another concern arises in the use of oral-history interviews to support historical analyses of ethnic group formation. The article cites interviews with contemporary respondents as direct evidence for events from the 19th century, the Stalinist era, and later periods. However, these narratives reflect historical memory shaped by education and socialization rather than firsthand accounts. To strengthen its approach, the article should consider a more critical engagement with these narratives, examining how interviewees construct historical discourse, memory, and representation. The author could draw on theories such as Serge Moscovici's concept of social representations or Hayden White's framework on historical narratives to analyze these accounts with greater theoretical depth.

For example, the following passage illustrates this issue:

"Contrary to isolation, there was active encouragement and pressure from the Uzbek official apparatus on minority group members (Dungans, Uyghurs) to register as Uzbeks [17]:

[Quotation from an oral-history interview] In Kyrgyzstan, Uyghurs took advantage of career opportunities by registering as Uzbeks, thanks to language similarities and social benefits. Meanwhile, in northern Kyrgyzstan, Uyghurs have kept their language, though some now mainly speak Russian. (Respondents from Bazar Kurgan, South Kyrgyzstan, 2017, Uyghur nation, married couple, approximately 45 years old, farmers.)"

Rather than presenting such oral accounts as direct historical evidence, the author could critically analyze them as expressions of historical consciousness and social memory. This approach would enhance the article's methodological rigor and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how historical representations are constructed and transmitted.

Additional Observations

- The phrase "present-day Kyrgyzstan" is frequently used, which can sometimes lead to confusion. For example:

"Initially, locals in present-day Kyrgyzstan accepted Russian serfdom, but growing discontent over land seizures and conscription led to a mass uprising against the Russian government in 1916." A clearer time frame would improve precision.

- The article states:

"For example, Koreans were deported from the Far East to Central Asia in the 1930s." (p. 7)

While correct, the major deportations occurred in 1937, and specifying this date would improve accuracy.

- The sentence:

"The Kyrgyz suffered from a high illiteracy rate of 95%." (p. 10)

The term "suffered" may reflect a modernist bias toward literacy as an inherent societal good, which may not align with the perspectives of traditional communities. A more neutral phrasing would be preferable.

- The article notes that Tatars were key educators and played a crucial role in Kyrgyz society (p. 10). While this is valid, the author could further analyze the historical and social reasons behind the Tatars' higher education levels and professional overrepresentation.

- The discussion of Soviet national policies (p. 10) states that from 1927, a "strong policy of russification (or sovietization)" was implemented." However, the early Soviet period emphasized nationalization/indigenization policies (see Martin, Khalid). The author should clarify the transition between these policies.

- A potential contradiction appears regarding Turdakun Usubaliyev's tenure (p. 12). The text first states that his leadership marked increased Russian influence but later claims that his policies fostered national identity. A clearer explanation of this dynamic would be helpful.

- The claim that education was "inaccessible" for many Koreans in the USSR (p. 13) needs clarification. Soviet education was universal and compulsory, enforced even against resistance. Perhaps the author refers to the lack of mother-tongue education in Korean?

- The sentence:

"Korean language use in rural collective farms was replaced by Russian in urban settings." (p. 14)

This statement could be made clearer by specifying whether the shift was due to policy changes or voluntary adaptation.

- The article states that the Turkic-speaking population from China was unified under the "Uyghur" ethnonym, connecting it to an ancient ethnic group. A reference to the "Piedmont principle" (Martin, 2001) would be useful here.
- The phrase:

"Dungans typically migrate to places with some familiarity." (p. 16)

This requires clarification—does "familiarity" refer to linguistic, cultural, or economic factors?

- The article states:

"Social ties based on reciprocal exchange are characteristic of Kyrgyz households but are nearly absent in Russian ones." (p. 19)

This generalization is problematic, as Russian society also has strong traditions of mutual aid and support networks (see Humphrey, Caldwell). The author should be cautious about applying overly broad social labels to Kyrgyz Russians.

- The methodological discussion of online discussions and machine learning (starting with "Analysis of internet discussions offers insights into these relationships, highlighting user reactions that might be obscured in traditional surveys.") should be moved to the methodology section for coherence.

Conclusion

The article is well-researched and valuable, drawing on important original sources. However, incorporating the suggestions outlined above—particularly a stronger theoretical foundation, historical precision, and careful handling of oral narratives—would significantly enhance the depth and clarity of the analysis.

Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.