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## Report on Research Findings

### The Kyrgyz in Western Travel Books of the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries

Cholpon Turdalieva, Fulbright Visiting Scholar, University of Washington, Seattle, Wash., USA, Associate Professor, Dept. of Eastern Languages and Cultures, I. Arabaev Kyrgyz State Pedagogical University, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, cholpon@freenet.kg

In the late 19th-early 20th centuries, as part of the Great Game, Western travelers competed in the exploration of Central Asia. They had different occupational, educational, religious, and cultural backgrounds. Books, maps, records, accounts, photos, and drawings resulting from the trips became popular among Western readers interested in the region. Most of the books contained elements of both enchanting novels and formal scholarly accounts.

In the fall of 2004, with funding from the Fulbright program, I started a project to explore the history of the Kyrgyz people and Kyrgyzstan based on the English-language accounts of Western visitors to the region in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.<sup>1</sup> The primary sources of my research are:

<sup>1</sup> In 2000, after having conducted research in Central Asian libraries, I curated an IREX-funded exhibition on Russian and Western travelers to Central Asia at the National Historical Museum of the Kyrgyz Republic in Bishkek. In 2002 a Central Asian Research Initiative grant from the Open Society Institute supported my research on European travelers. The project allowed me to develop a course called “Kyrgyz History and Culture in the Works of European Travelers of the 19th Century,” and to organize an international conference in 2003 in Bishkek on the subject of “Historical Sources: The History and Perspectives of Development.”

travel accounts found in the libraries of the University of Washington; documents from the Central State Archive of the Kyrgyz Republic, the Central State Archive of Uzbekistan, and the State Archive of Omsk Province in Russia; and historical and ethnographic collections of the National Historical Museum of the Kyrgyz Republic. I was able to find only a small number of these travel accounts in Central Asia itself. Soviet-era historiography on Central Asia considered Western travel writing unreliable and not valuable academically. Today, these travel books are found primarily in libraries in Europe and the United States. For example, the library of the Academy of Sciences in Bishkek has Sven Hedin’s *Through Asia* (1899) translated into Russian, and the Alykul Osmonov National Library has Ármin Vámbéry’s *Puteshestvie po Srednei Azii* [Travels in Central Asia] (1867). The Alisher Navoi State Library in Tashkent holds one of the two original copies of *Turkestanskii sbornik* [Turkestan Collection], compiled by the Russian bibliographer V. I. Mezhov,<sup>2</sup> which contains articles and book extracts by various Western travelers.

<sup>2</sup> V. I. Mezhov compiled this collection in the 1860s-1880s. It includes more than 500 volumes. For information on travelers mentioned in this report, see volumes 67, 100, 178, 200, 206, 238, and 301-302.

What can we learn from these sources? What is their contribution to our knowledge about Kyrgyzstan and the Central Asian region in general? Official Kyrgyz history is mostly based upon the descriptions and observations made by Russian travelers and explorers (e.g., Aristov 2001; Grum-Grzhimailo 1948; Przheval'skii 1947; Semenov-Tian'-Shanskii 1946; Severtsov 1947). As a result, scholars developed only one point of view regarding the formation of Kyrgyz identity during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Sources about Kyrgyz people and Kyrgyzstan written by Westerners provide a novel source of materials, which have caused people in the West to have a different base of knowledge about and a certain image of Kyrgyz people. Travel books written in the "contact zone"<sup>3</sup> (Pratt 1992: 5-6) were products of European supremacy, and thus provide material for the study of the colonial encounter and discourse. As such, they contain significant biases provoked by their presumed superiority, as well as by a lack of basic knowledge about nomadic people. We need to keep these factors in mind when examining these works.

#### *Research Methods*

Interdisciplinary, historical, and comparative analyses are my principal research methods. To check the reliability of the Western sources, I compare them with Russian travel accounts, archival materials, and contemporary studies on Central Asia. I also employ textual analysis as a method with a focus on questions of authorship, publishing, republishing, and translation. I am interested in finding answers to the following questions: Why were books about Central Asia published and later republished several times in the West, and why were they translated into Russian and English in the 19th and 20th centuries? Was this due to Central Asia's popularity as a topic among Western politicians and the general reading public, or was it perhaps a product of competition between Western and Russian Oriental studies?

Intertextual and chronological comparison of travel accounts by Western travelers provides some unexpected results. Explorers in the early and mid-19th century (e.g., Burnes 1835; Wood 1872) focused their investigations primarily on geographic particulars and the political and economic situation in Central Asia. By contrast, investigations dating

from the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Bonvalot 1889; Dunmore 1893; Hedin 1899; Huntington 1907) sought geographic and anthropological information, reflecting on issues such as "man and his relationship to landscape." Ellsworth Huntington, an American geographer who traveled to Kyrgyzstan in 1903, went further. He saw an interconnection among three aspects: environment, nomadic economy, and traditions of the Kyrgyz nomads.<sup>4</sup>

The first and most important geographic feature of the Tian-Shan plateau is, as we have seen, the pamirs, or plains of rich grass. They determine the character of animal life, including man... The completeness with which Khirghiz life and character are determined by natural surroundings makes the relation between physiography and life far more evident than in the case of more highly civilized people (Huntington 1907: 109, 125).

I classified Western travelers' works according to the themes they explored. These included ethnic history, nomadic households, the political situation, dwellings, dress, food, religion, and folklore of the Kyrgyz people. This thematic classification is appropriate for my research because travelers' descriptions of the aspects of Kyrgyz life listed above differ in quantity and quality. For example, some travelers focused on Kyrgyz dwelling spaces, while others gave their attention to geography and political conditions.

I tried to contextualize and explain travelers' accounts of the origins and the tribal and social history of the Kyrgyz people. I discovered that some accounts of tribal characteristics were superficial and overly generalized. This puzzled me greatly because Western accounts of the social and tribal characteristics of, for example, indigenous Australians or Americans, are much more detailed and descriptive. I suggest that there are three reasons for this difference in degree of detail. First, Western travelers visited Central Asia after it had already become part of Russia. Consequently, their mobility and ability to observe Central Asian life were restricted by the Russian authorities in Turkestan.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Subsequently, Huntington founded the field of social geographical studies based on the relationship between human beings and their environment. For more information, see Huntington and Carlson (1929).

<sup>5</sup> The Turkestan Governor-Generalship developed a procedure for foreign travelers seeking to enter the region. See the Central State Archive of Uzbekistan, Fund 1, Chancellery of the Turkestan Governor-Generalship:

<sup>3</sup> "Contact zone" refers to a space in which peoples who are otherwise separated by geography and history come into contact with each other.

They were often accompanied by Russian officers and soldiers both to ensure their security and to control their movements. Second, some gathered information from interpreters representing the local Russian colonial administration or they hired local Uzbeks, Tatars, and Persian-speakers to accompany them. For instance, French traveler Gabriel Bonvalot hired local people from villages near Termiz,<sup>6</sup> who accompanied him in his expedition to the Pamirs (1889: 1-3). These interpreters often had poor knowledge of the Kyrgyz people's past and contemporary life and gave mistaken information about them. Third, in that time in the West there was a lack of information about Kyrgyz people.

I pay specific attention to accounts by Western women. They never traveled alone or headed an expedition. Usually, Western women accompanied their husband or brother during the latter's expeditions to the region. For example, the British woman Ella Sykes accompanied her brother, Brigadier-General Sir Percy Sykes, to Kashgar. In 1920 she published a book about her trip (Sykes and Sykes 1920). French explorer Charles-Eugene Ujfalvy de Mezö Kövesd and British Consul in Kashgar Sir Clarmont Skrine were accompanied by their wives Marie de Ujfalvy-Boudon and Doris Skrine, respectively. In his book, Clarmont Skrine describes his wife's effort to collect information about the Kyrgyz in the Eastern Pamirs. Women travelers also recorded their observations concerning how Kyrgyz women expressed their self-determination through their family and tribal roles. In their writings, women gave more careful attention to anthropological details than men.

### *Research Content and Questions*

My research focuses on the ethno-historical, tribal, material, and spiritual identity of the Kyrgyz as portrayed in the books of Western travelers. These accounts show variety and uncertainty

regarding basic information. I will give just two examples from my research so far.

One focus of my research is travelers' records of pastoral nomadism. I am interested in the following questions: Did travelers from the West observe the nomadic economy, especially the quantity and quality of livestock and its production? Did they see any changes and challenges to Kyrgyz nomadic households after Russian colonization? How and why did they describe the contacts of nomadic and neighboring sedentary people? The English missionary Henry Lansdell traveled in the districts of Pishpek (present day Bishkek) and Sokuluk in 1882. While he described in detail Russian peasants' environment, including their farmland, church, school, and a botanical garden planted by the Russian botanist Fetisov in Pishpek, he wrote nothing about their relationship with Kyrgyz people (Lansdell 2003 [1885]: 360-361). My research attempts to understand the reasons for such omissions. Were such descriptions omitted on purpose to avoid tensions with Russia, or for some other reasons? Most Western travelers did not portray the relationships between the Russian administration, colonists, and Kyrgyz nomads accurately, and exaggerated the civilizing role of Russia among nomads. For example, Huntington considered Russian colonizers capable of civilizing nomadic people by giving them goods and creating a market for livestock products (Huntington 1907: 126). In fact, Russia's invasion into the nomadic space and time had negative as well as positive effects on Kyrgyz people. The occupation of valley pastures by Russians brought about the brutal destruction of pastoral migration and the Kyrgyz tribes had to settle. Russians used a "divide and rule" policy among the Kyrgyz tribes, and supported intertribal hostility. Such policies later resulted in the great popular revolt throughout the region in 1916. But at the same time, a settled existence gave the Kyrgyz an opportunity to join a different culture, and internationalize their own national development.

Another example is representation of Kyrgyz cultural life. Most travelers considered nomadic culture to have primitive and uncivilized forms and expressions. Describing Kyrgyz dress, dwellings, and food, travelers often compared them with European culture. They tried to substitute local names such as *yurt* and *bos-üy* with the European or Russian words — "tent," "white house," "nomadic dwelling" and "*kibitka*" [Russian for "hut"]. In their descriptions travelers described themselves as being surrounded by an unfamiliar cultural space. For

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op. 1, d. 1255, "*O peresmotre pravil poseshcheniia inostrantsami Turkestanskogo kraia,*" 8 apr. 1908; op. 2, d. 298, "*O razresheniakh na priезд v Turkestanskii krai inostrantsev podannykh evropeiskikh stran-germantsev i anglichan i dr.*" 31 dek. 1913; op. 20, d. 8730, "*Po pis'mu presidenta Russkogo geograficheskogo obshchestva ob okazanii sodeistviia uchenomu professoru vyshei shkoly vostochnykh iazikov Parizha Karlu Uifal'vi pri puteshestvii ego v Turkestanskii Krai,*" op. 27, d. 167, "*O razreshenii vremennogo priězda v Krai angliiskogo podannykh indusov, prozhivaiushchikh v Bukhare.*"

<sup>6</sup> Termiz is located on the territory of modern Uzbekistan.

instance, Sven Hedin wrote about the Kyrgyz instrument *komuz*: “How many and many nights did I not spend thus during the long years that followed, listening to the dreamy sounds of that primitive Kirghiz instrument!” (Hedin 1899: 133) The national cultural codes are also depicted by words such as “deprived,” “discrimination,” and “privacy” (Sykes and Sykes 1920: 115-116) that reflect travelers’ aspirations to incorporate their own social and cultural values into nomadic reality and make the place and people more understandable for Western readers. It was a kind of a technique developed by travelers that I would call a “verbal bridge,” referring to the extension of European thinking and cultural superiority into the non-European space.

### Conclusion

I believe that travelers and their books could involve the West and Central Asia in one global network of cross-disciplinary learning and understanding. Westerners colorfully described physical, geographical, biological, and zoological features of the region. But they did not avoid some imperious biases and serious mistakes, especially in the anthropological sphere. Most of them lacked professional geographical or anthropological knowledge. Furthermore, during their journeys travelers had to be aware of surveillance by Russian and Chinese authorities, and had to agree with official orders and restrictions. However, we can see elements of both picturesque novels and dry serious accounts, even though most travelers did not have professional literary skills.

Descriptions and observations about the Kyrgyz people are important because they help to reconstruct a national identity and enrich Kyrgyz history. They might be classified into three types of information: 1) ready information about the origin of the Kyrgyz and their tribal history borrowed from Russian sources (most Western travelers honored Russian explorers); 2) information based on fresh, first-hand observations and conclusions concerning nomadism and its material and spiritual consequences in the life of the Kyrgyz people; and 3) photos and drawings that visually reflect Kyrgyz cultural codes, images, characters, and tribal specifics and traits. My on-going research seeks to evaluate in depth each of these types of information.

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