

INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDY
Rights to Cultural Heritage in Central Asia

Indiana University Sponsoring Center: Inner Asian and Uralic National Resource Center

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Learning Outcomes:

- A. To expand teachers'/students' knowledge about intangible cultural heritage in Central Asia.
- B. To identify multiple perspectives on the issue.

What is the disputed issue?

Claiming ownership of intangible cultural heritage

In what world region and/or country is the disputed issue located?

Central Asia and China

What is the essential question that frames the disputed issue?

Who can claim ownership of cultural traditions?

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A. What visual resource might ignite the conversation and/or frame the disputed issue?

Figure 1. *Mosque Make-Over*



Rebel Pepper. (2024). *Mosque Make-Over* [Cartoon]. Radio Free Asia.

<https://www.rfa.org/english/cartoons/mosque-make-over-02292024100550.html>

Note: Cartoon alluding to the Chinese government's controversial plans to redesign a mosque: "A historic mosque in southwestern China whose dome and minarets were demolished last year has been refitted with Chinese-style pagodas and billboards praising the Communist Party. The 14th-century Najiaying Mosque is the latest target of President Xi Jinping's nationwide crackdown on Muslim, Christian and Tibetan Buddhist activities and venues in the name of the 'Sinicization,' or 'making-more-Chinese,' of religion." (Source: *Chinese police clash with protestors over plans to demolish mosque*. The Washington Post. (2023). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/05/29/china-yunnan-mosque-hui-muslims/>)

B. What are the key vocabulary terms that students must know in order to understand the disputed issue?

Acculturation: The processes of practices changing as a result of contact between two or more cultures (Britannica).

Central Asia: A region in Asia consisting of five former republics of the Soviet Union: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan (Britannica).

Epics/Epic poems: Long narrative poems recounting heroic deeds (Britannica).

Heritage: The traditions, achievements, beliefs, etc., that are part of the history of a group or nation (Britannica).

Intangible cultural heritage: Traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts (UNESCO).

Kyrgyz people: Turkic-speaking people of Central Asia, most of whom live in Kyrgyzstan (Britannica).

Kyrgyz Republic: A country in Central Asia, formerly part of the Soviet Union. Also known as Kyrgyzstan (Britannica).

Manas: The most famous oral epic poem of the Kyrgyz people; also the name of the hero of this epic.

Manaschi: A person who performs the *Manas* epic.

Nation: A territorial division containing a body of people of one or more nationalities and usually characterized by relatively large size and independent status (Merriam-Webster).

Nationalism: A political ideology where the loyalty of a person is given first and foremost to their nation-state, rather than any other individual or group interests (Britannica).

Oral transmission: The system of passing on knowledge only from spoken or sung words to a listening audience. See also: Tradition (Britannica).

Pastoral nomadism: A system of living where people migrate with herds of animals to various pastures within an established region (Britannica).

People's Republic of China (PRC): The current name of the nation state and government of China, the largest country in East Asia (Britannica).

Soviet Union: A nation consisting of 15 socialist republics in Eastern and Northern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, largely under the control of Russia. It existed from 1917 to 1991 (Britannica).

Sinicization: The act or process of making something more Chinese in character, or bringing something under Chinese influence (Dictionary.com).

Tradition: The handing down of culture from generation to generation, especially by word of mouth (See also: Oral transmission), or by practice (Dictionary.com).

UNESCO: The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. A specialized agency of the United Nations (Britannica).

United Nations (UN): An international organization established after World War II, with the goal of maintaining peace and security across the world (Britannica).

C. What are the general descriptions and context of the disputed issue?

It is easy to recognize some monuments to human creativity—from the Great Pyramid of Giza to the *Mona Lisa* held in the Louvre, material objects can be kept in museums and visited by tourists. But what about elements of human creativity that cannot be captured in a physical object? It is possible to write down the words of a joke or record a rock concert, but these preserved recordings are not the same as their *performance*. Words on a page or stored in a hard drive can't capture the experience of singing "Happy Birthday" to a friend or family member or chanting with other fans at a sporting event. These types of creative acts are known collectively as **intangible cultural heritage**. Although these manifestations of creativity are not permanent, they can become **traditional** through **oral transmission**—passing on by word of mouth—from generation to generation. These oral traditions can be shared in groups as small as a circle of friends or as large as all the members of a major religion or ethnic group.

Epics are one important type of oral tradition. An epic, also known as an **epic poem**, is a long narrative poem. While there are many literary epic poems (poems that are written, usually by a single author), cultures from around the world have traditions of oral epic poems, which are sung out loud in public performances and passed from generation to generation through oral transmission. The most famous oral epics are the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which were sung in Ancient Greece before they were written down. Other epic poems such as the Old English *Beowulf*, the French *Chanson de Roland*, the Indian *Mahabharata*, and many others were likely oral before they were recorded in writing. Epic poems about larger-than-life heroes are called heroic epics. These heroes are often associated with a particular people or country, and heroic epics may become national epics when they come to represent a nation and are used for political purposes.

This is the case for the oral tradition of the **Kyrgyz** people, who have historically practiced **pastoral nomadism** and have a rich tradition of storytelling, oral poetry, and songs. The most famous and valued of these oral traditions is known as the **Manas** epic poems. This group of epic poems includes three parts: *Manas*, *Semetey*, and *Seytek*. *Manas* is the most famous hero of these poems, and *Semetey* and *Seytek* are his son and grandson, the heroes of their own poems. When Europeans first heard Kyrgyz **Manaschis** singing these epic poems, they compared them to the epics of Homer: the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Even when the Kyrgyz people came under the control of Russian and Chinese states from the mid-1800s to the 1920s, they continued to practice their oral traditions including the *Manas* poems. The poems were collected by scholars and published in books, increasing their international popularity in both

the **Soviet Union** and the **People's Republic of China (PRC)**. Some performances were recorded on phonographs and video cameras (examples provided in Section J), and they grew still more popular when some performances were aired on TV in the Soviet Union. Manas has become **Kyrgyzstan's** national hero, and there are many statues and monuments of Manas in the country (the main airport in Kyrgyzstan is even named the Manas International Airport). In the early years of independence, the government of the Kyrgyz Republic used the image of Manas as a symbol for Kyrgyz **nationalism** as they tried to distinguish their newly independent **nation** from its past as part of the Soviet Union.

In the twenty-first century, **UNESCO** has begun collecting lists of intangible cultural heritage. These lists attempt to act as a repository of human cultural creativity and diversity. Examples of intangible cultural heritage on the UNESCO lists include traditional Mexican cuisine (Source: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/traditional-mexican-cuisine-ancestral-ongoing-community-culture-the-michoacan-paradigm-00400>), Greek Orthodox chanting (Source: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/byzantine-chant-01508>), and traditional games from the Philippines (Source: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/tugging-rituals-and-games-01080>). Having a place on these lists is a point of pride not only for the communities that carry these traditions, but also for the nations that are associated with them. However, controversy erupted in 2009 when UNESCO officially recognized the *Manas* epic as the intangible cultural heritage of the Kyrgyz minority in the People's Republic of China.

Due to complicated historical circumstances, the Kyrgyz people are both the majority ethnic group of Kyrgyzstan (also known as the Kyrgyz Republic) and a minority ethnic group in Xinjiang (also known as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region or East Turkestan) in the People's Republic of China. Both the people and the government of Kyrgyzstan were offended that their versions of the *Manas* epic tradition were not recognized by UNESCO. Relations between the two nations have not always been easy. On the one hand, the PRC shares close economic ties with Kyrgyzstan. On the other hand, there are accusations by human rights activists that the PRC oppresses the Turkic Muslim population in Xinjiang, including Kyrgyz people. When the PRC claimed this hugely important part of Kyrgyz culture for their own, the government of Kyrgyzstan worried that it would damage their nation's international reputation. The situation changed again in 2013 when the *Manas* Epic Trilogy—*Manas*, *Semetey*, and *Seytek*—was also added to the UNESCO Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Now there are two entries on the UNESCO lists for the Manas tradition; so, what does this mean?

Kyrgyzstan wants to demonstrate their strong cultural traditions by representing themselves with the *Manas* epic, while the PRC wants to show the world the rich culture of their minority groups (despite their political oppression). The situation is further complicated by the fact that

the PRC has the most items of any nation inscribed on the UNESCO Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage—43 items in total—many of which are the traditions of other ethnic minorities who some say are also being oppressed. Do the UNESCO lists celebrate the diversity of the PRC as a multi-ethnic nation? Or is the PRC taking credit for the traditions of groups they are actively oppressing? The government of the Kyrgyz Republic wants to use the Manas epic to demonstrate the strength of the Kyrgyz people, but is this dangerous for ethnic minorities in Kyrgyzstan, such as Uzbeks? UNESCO wants to preserve and share the variety of human creativity in the world, no matter which nation it appears in, but is this what the affected communities want?

D. What are the names of the unique multiple perspectives involved in the disputed issue?

Perspective One: Kyrgyzstan/Kyrgyz Republic

Perspective Two: People's Republic of China

Perspective Three: UNESCO

E. Why does the disputed issue matter?

Historical Background

The Central Asian Revolt of 1916— or *Ürkün*, meaning “exodus” in Kyrgyz—took place over several months in the Zhetysu (Semirech’ye) Oblast’ (district) of the Russian Empire, and had lasting effects for the administrative and political competence of the empire’s officials in **Central Asia**. Many Russian officials in charge of the region had pushed to redistribute land and transport Kyrgyz and Kazakh populations further south, which was consistent with population integration techniques seen in other parts of the Russian Empire, where land was requisitioned and taken under the empire’s official control. The Stolypin reforms (1906–1912) prompted the disproportionate reclamation of large land plots for massive Russian population settlement, which led many local people to feel that they were being ignored and swindled out of their land, regardless of their pledged loyalty.

The uprising began on July 4th, 1916, and lasted through the summer. Civilian, rebel, and military deaths associated with the riots and resistance efforts are greatly conflated by all accounts, but hundreds of thousands of Russians and settlers were killed. The uprising can be attributed to a startling lack of ethnographic and cultural literacy on part of the empire’s

officials and administrators in their attempts to over-centralize all aspects of power and injudiciously apply their methods of selective concession to locals in the region.

Geographical Background

Central Asia is a region with a rich national, cultural, linguistic, and economic heritage, dating back to the beginnings of human history. The Silk Road—which is in fact not a single route, but a series of interconnected trade routes—helped to facilitate the economic interaction and exchange of ideas between nations, dynasties, empires, and peoples from East Asia to Western Europe. Several dynasties have laid claim to the vast expanses of the Central Asian Steppe, including various khanates of the Mongol Empire, including Chinggis (Genghis) Kha'an. As a result, the importance of lineage through blood, group connection, occupation, or cultural production all have varying levels of significance for the peoples of the region. Nation-building initiatives, such as the creation of Soviet socialist republics under the Soviet Union and the establishment of the People's Republic of China, have produced mixed results in their attempts to find solutions to issues of cultural and national heritage.

Civic/Political Background

When discussing the history of Central and East Asia, it is important to keep in mind that centuries of human history have produced different understandings of what it means to belong to a “country,” “nation,” or “people,” which do not always match up. It is also important to account for the fact that culture and identity contribute to attitudes about these concepts, just as any of these ideas about a group or country help to define what “culture” is. When differing attitudes collide, it produces complex arguments about who might, should, or cannot belong. The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, recognized as a political territory of the PRC, has a longstanding history of national identity and geopolitical importance, lending itself to several dynasties of rule throughout the region and expanding across the Eurasian continental landmass. At the turn of the twentieth century, the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) brought about entirely new political visions for unity and belonging. Different cultural and ethnic groups started to engage with each other in a national sense that had not been seen before, and this new ideology of common nationality necessitated more ways of understanding heritage and culture.

After nearly a century of external wars and internal conflict, the People's Republic of China emerged as one of the strongest and fastest growing economies in the world in the early 2000s, with Xinjiang playing an important role. The region of Xinjiang contained large amounts of natural resources which could be used to further advance the PRC's industrial, manufacturing, and technological sectors. However, it was also the least-developed region of the nation. In the wake of the 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, the PRC began to engage in anti-Islamic

security measures alongside other nations in North America and Europe. However, many critics felt that these security measures disproportionately targeted the Turkic Muslims of Xinjiang, including Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and Kyrgyz. These security measures were heightened during ethnic clashes between majority Han Chinese and Uyghurs in 2009 and again in 2017, at which point the PRC began selectively sending Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang to vocational training schools, which critics have likened to reeducation or concentration camps.

The situation for Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang remains tense and uncertain in 2021, threatening relations with neighboring Turkic Muslim countries such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. However, the PRC has also heavily invested in the One Belt, One Road Initiative, which has brought infrastructure development to the often-impooverished countries of Central Asia to boost trade across the region. The PRC is also seen by Central Asian governments as a counterbalance to the Russian Federation, which still holds significant economic, political, and military power in the region following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Despite the opinion of the public, which includes many who may have relatives imprisoned by the PRC, the Kyrgyz government relies on the PRC and cannot risk a denouncement based on shaky claims of religious and ethnic oppression.

F. What is the timeline of significant events that are related to the disputed issue or that describe its stages?

Figure 2. Timeline of the Disputed Issue

1916	Many Kyrgyz people flee from Russia to Xinjiang after the Central Asian Uprising
1917	The Soviet Union is founded following two revolutions in Russia
1936	The Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic is founded within the Soviet Union
1945	The United Nations and UNESCO are founded in the aftermath of World War II
1949	The People's Republic of China is proclaimed by Mao Zedong
1991	The Soviet Union collapses and the Kyrgyz Republic gains independence
2009	The <i>Manas</i> becomes UNESCO intangible cultural heritage for the PRC

2013

The *Manas Trilogy* becomes UNESCO intangible cultural heritage for Kyrgyzstan

2017

Accusations of oppression of Turkic Muslims by PRC begin to worsen

McLaughlin, S. and Storsved. B. (2024).

G. What map(s) can help students understand this disputed issue better?

Figure 2. Modern Political Map of Central Asia



Map Source: Wikipedia User Cacahuete. (2006). *Political map of Central Asia together with Afghanistan*. Wikipedia Commons.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Central_Asia.png

Note: This map shows the modern political borders of the five countries of Central Asia, each of which were previously republics within the Soviet Union. Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan each gained their independence when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. Afghanistan, highlighted on this map, is sometimes included in the region of “Central Asia” because of the large Uzbek population, but was never part of the Soviet Union.

Figure 3. Historical Political Map of the Republics of the Soviet Union

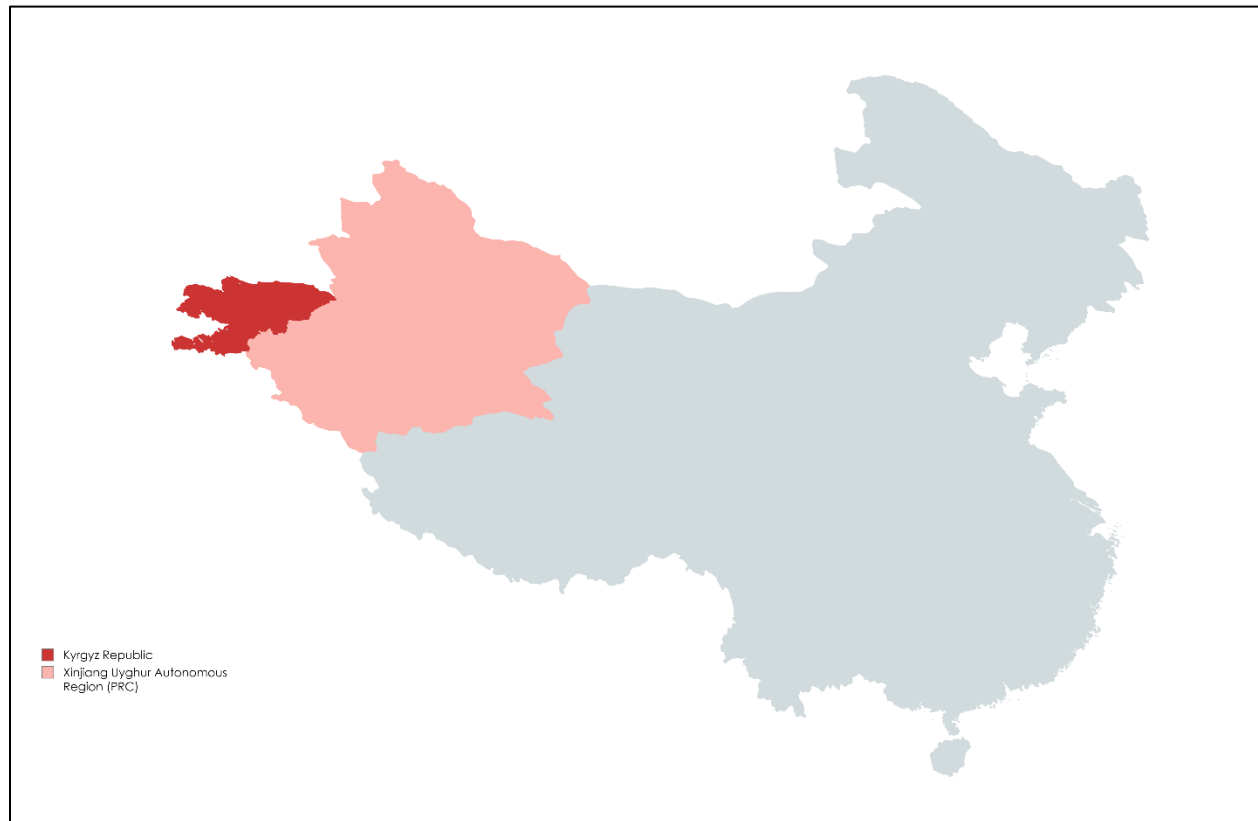


Map Source: *An American map of Soviet Union Administrative Divisions*. (c.1989). Wikimedia Commons.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Soviet_Union_Administrative_Divisions_1989.jpg

Note: This map shows the republics of the Soviet Union in 1989, two years before it collapsed. Each of these republics became independent nations in 1991.

Figure 4. Map of Kyrgyz People in Kyrgyzstan and the People's Republic of China.



Map Source: Storsved, B. (2024). *Map of Kyrgyz People in Kyrgyzstan and the People's Republic of China*.

Note: This map provides a rough estimate for the regions of the world inhabited by the Kyrgyz people. The Kyrgyz Republic is colored in dark red and is home to 5,379,020 Kyrgyz people as of the 2020 census (Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Kyrgyzstan). The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (also known as East Turkestan) is colored in light red and is home to roughly 300,000 Kyrgyz people as of the 2010 census (Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kyrgyz_in_China#:~:text=The%20majority%20of%20the%20Kyrgyz, counties%20also%20commonly%20speak%20Uyghur).

Figure 5. Map of Kyrgyz autonomous prefectures and counties in China



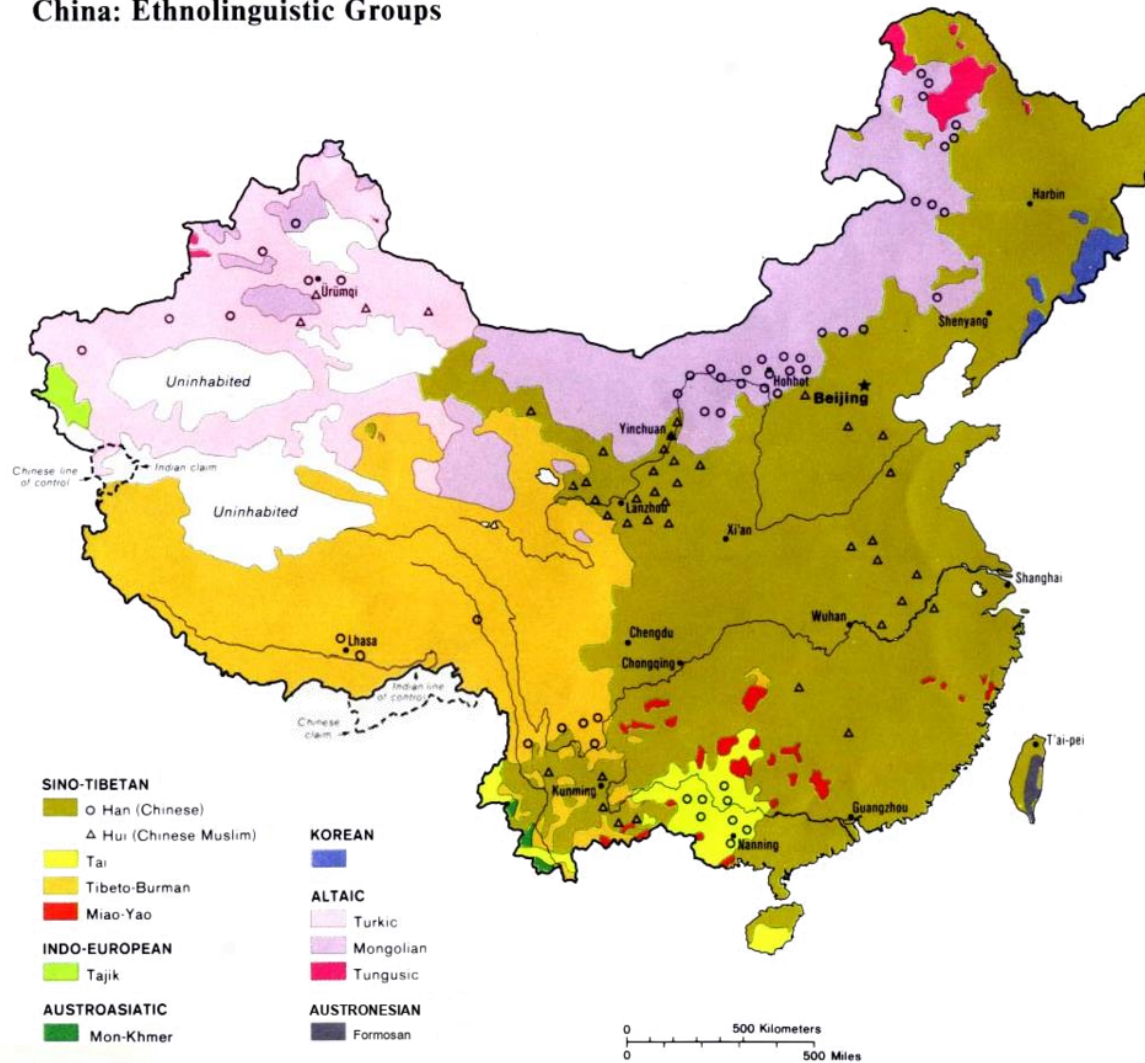
Map Source: Wikipedia User Abrahamic Faiths. (2015). *Map of Kyrgyz-designated autonomous prefectures and counties in China*. Wikimedia Commons.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Kyrgyz_autonomous_prefectures_and_counties_in_China.png

Note: This map shows the regions of the People's Republic of China designated as autonomous regions for the Kyrgyz people, shown in pink.

Figure 6. Ethnolinguistic Map of the People's Republic of China

China: Ethnolinguistic Groups



Map Source: *Ethnolinguistic Map of the People's Republic of China, 1983.* (2010).

Wikimedia Commons.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ethnolinguistic_map_of_China_1983.png.

Note: This map highlights the ethnic diversity of the People's Republic of China by showing the regions in which different languages are spoken. It demonstrates that there is not just one "Chinese" language or culture in the national sense.

H. What short (6-10-minute) video can provide an overall understanding of this disputed issue?

Video Title: [“Manas”](#)
URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMDklwoLf34>
Alternative Search: On YouTube, type in “Manas UNESCO”
Author: UNESCO
Year: 2009
Length: 9:59 minutes



Note: This video is an educational explanation of the plot of the *Manas* epic and its importance for Kyrgyz people in terms of the “Kyrgyz nation.” It also shows how intangible cultural heritage is preserved by UNESCO.

I. What additional deliberations questions complement the essential question?

1. Should cultural heritage be preserved by nations, institutions, or people?
2. How large must a minority population group be to claim heritage, even if they live outside their majority nation?
3. Is international recognition (i.e., by an international group or institution) justifiable for defining belonging and heritage? What other ways can heritage be defined?
4. If a group does not have a legitimate claim to a cultural source of heritage, what could be at stake for the group on a bigger scale?

J. What optional and supplementary resources might shape an understanding of the disputed issue?



Video Title: [“Epic of Manas: The history of Kirgiz in Xinjiang”](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VTK4edXPuP0)
URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VTK4edXPuP0>
Alternative Search: On YouTube, type in “Manas Xinjiang”
Author: China Global Television Network
Year: 2018
Length: 1:15 minutes



Video Title: [Captivating Kyrgyz History: The Epic Manas Unraveled](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vj0R1eMeYYM)

URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vj0R1eMeYYM>

Alternative Search: On YouTube, type in “Manas Epic”

Author: EpicManas

Year: 2023

Length: 5:08 minutes

K. What are some ways in which students might safely civically engage in response to this case study?

Find suggestions at:

- **Better World Info**—many different topics and ways to take action:
<https://www.betterworld.info>
- **DoSomething**—has campaigns to join and challenges to take action:
<https://www.dosomething.org/us>
- **Global Citizen**—offers petitions to sign on various global issues:
<https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/take-action/>
- **The Global Goals**—suggests ways to take action on the 17 UN Sustainability Goals:
<https://www.globalgoals.org/take-action/>
- **United Nations: Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**—“The Lazy Person’s Guide to Saving the World”: <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/takeaction/>



MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES HANDOUTS FOLLOW ON NEXT PAGES*

*** HANDOUTS ARE ONLY FOR STUDENT SMALL GROUP PRESENTATIONS***

***NOTE: These are not to be handed out to the whole class, but to small groups after the class has learned about the case content.**

INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDY

Water Rights in the Middle East

PERSPECTIVE ONE*:

Kyrgyzstan

***This perspective description is being handed out to your team only.**

NOTE: This description is written from the perspective of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic (Kyrgyzstan).

General Description: Identification with the *Manas* epic represents far more than a simple political claim to a literary and artistic work; for citizens of Kyrgyzstan and Kyrgyz living throughout the world, the intricate networks of national memory, cultural heritage, and spiritual reverence for preserving the epic demonstrates that its influence is lively even to this day. Under the Soviet Union, many ethnographic, anthropological, and folkloristic committees and experts took great care to engage with *Manaschis* and create a new space for the epic. However, as Soviet scholars, including both Russians and Kyrgyz, studied the epic as an object of scientific and historical inquiry rather than living tradition, the Kyrgyz people began to see it instead as a symbol of their nation. The independent Kyrgyz Republic is still very young, in contrast with these ancient, storied epics we hold in the highest regard. In a national sense, *Manas* celebrates past, present, and future as the Kyrgyz people strive to take their traditions and sense of self into their own hands. It is common for Kyrgyz scholars to debate on issues of style and “canon” for the *Manas* epic and similar Kyrgyz traditions, but these debates are an expression of ongoing care for the priceless heritage of the Kyrgyz people. It is complicated for a political nation with boundaries to dictate ownership of an epic like *Manas*, but the practice of caring for and promoting the epic was always, and should continue to be, the responsibility of the Kyrgyz people in the Kyrgyz Republic. The *Manas* epic is a national resource and treasure. Though the political nation might be young, it is best suited to claim this title of heritage so that relics of this ancient tradition can endure the social challenges of the modern world.

Values: Community, self-reliance, tradition

Comments and Resources Supporting this Perspective:

- Countries like the Kyrgyz Republic have a rich national heritage that extends beyond their relatively young political status as independent nations. It is important and productive for them to be in control of a unified national heritage, and also helps other countries get visibility for similar issues.

Resource: *Does UNESCO listen to the voice of the Kyrgyz community?* Azattyk. (2010).
https://www.azattyk.org/a/Kyrgyzstan_Culture_Manas/1922706.html

- Giving the right to national cultural heritage to a titular country (meaning the representative nation of a majority group) would offer Kyrgyz identity more power in international arenas that recognize heritage in new ways, bringing different advantages, from the realm of politics to historical acknowledgment of connections between groups and culture throughout human history.

Resource: *The “Manas People” society was established.* Azattyk. (2010).
<https://www.azattyk.org/a/1937446.html>

Comments and Resources Opposing this Perspective:

- Tying Kyrgyz cultural heritage to the Kyrgyz Republic could jeopardize the identities of Kyrgyz living in other parts of the world, such as Xinjiang, where Kyrgyz identity might be reduced or lose political or cultural agency in favor of national unity, like “Chinese” or another multiethnic vision of belonging.

Resource: Reichl, K. Oral epics in the twenty-first century: The case of the Kyrgyz epic *Manas*. *The Journal of American Folklore*. (2016).
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/jamerfolk.129.513.0327?seq=14>

- By giving multiethnic states more agency in “protecting” cultural heritage, it can offer them more power to rewrite not only history—the study of events and their records— but also historiography—the study of how historians have interpreted events as worthy of record or not, and their style in writing about them—in very dangerous ways.

Resource: Jacquesson, S. Claiming heritage: The Manas epic between China and Kyrgyzstan. *Central Asian Survey*. (2020).
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2020.1765739>

Primary Outcomes of Perspective: Bestowing the right of intangible cultural heritage upon the Kyrgyz Republic would provide an opportunity for the relatively newly independent nation to strengthen its means of preserving and spreading its cultural identity within its communities. It would also be an indispensable opportunity to interact with other global communities of expertise focused on issues facing national groups as they seek to preserve their identity and increase educational initiatives for those who want to feel connected with all forms of national time: past, present, and future. It would mean a great deal for Kyrgyz people all over the world to have a centered feeling of authority and heritage coming from their titular country, even if they live elsewhere.

Secondary Consequences: Giving a political nation the right to claim cultural heritage for a given group says a great deal about the relationship between culture and politics. It might even come to define the entire worldview of citizens, whose ideas about forms of literary and artistic expression can change so much that their sense of group belonging begins to fall along political lines like citizenship or national residence. Future challenges might also complicate the nation's relationship with other countries, exacerbating issues of cultural identity. Folklore, literary works, artistic expression, and community organization do not occur in a national vacuum; human history is full of processes of interaction and groups spreading and changing. Furthermore, the Kyrgyz Republic is not a single-ethnicity nation. Like the United States, there are many different groups all living together within one nation: Kyrgyz, Russians, Uzbeks, Dungans, and many others. How does the *Manas* epic represent the whole nation if it is only the heritage of Kyrgyz people? How does the claim of "one country, one heritage" impact the ways that people think about their place in the nation?

INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDY
Rights to Cultural Heritage in Central Asia

PERSPECTIVE TWO*:
People's Republic of China

***This perspective description is being handed out to your team only.**

NOTE: This description is written from the perspective of the Government of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

General Description: The People's Republic of China sees the national benefits of claiming and protecting cultural heritage as being greater than questions of borders and political bodies. Regional bodies of government in places like Xinjiang make great efforts to preserve traditions and pieces of heritage in ways that offer both members of these communities and the scholars who study them the most agency to do what they see fit. Moreover, "Chinese" is not just an ethnic term; many different groups maintain a deep understanding of their belonging to the nation, bringing people a sense of cooperation and common belonging. It is not only possible but wise to see cultural heritage as a source of pride and responsibility for a multinational state. Scholars of the *Manas* epics are highly esteemed in Xinjiang and other regions of the PRC; they receive healthcare and financial assistance to attend conferences and world-renowned gatherings of folklorists to share their knowledge and to strengthen the ties between national groups and their sources of identity, including the *Manas*. By entrusting the People's Republic of China with such important works and sources of national heritage, global collectives of expertise on these topics are taking substantive steps to ensure that matters of identity and heritage remain accessible for community members across political and national borders. Chinese institutions of higher education, moreover, place titular representatives of these groups at the forefront of all leading scholarship and authority on decisions of cultural preservation; there is much more to issues of Chinese identity preservation within a multinational state than may meet the eye.

Values: Stability, Diversity, Unity

Comments and Resources Supporting this Perspective:

- This perspective promotes a greater degree of belonging and national unity. It also opens the door to future solutions to similar issues.



Resource: *Epic of Manas: The history of Kirgiz in Xinjiang*. CGTN. (2018). YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VTK4edXPuP0>

- Cultural perspectives about heritage and the interpretive power and significance of art and literature change over time, and it is better to make sure that institutions defining cultural values address those changes. Multiethnic states are uniquely equipped to meet those challenges.

Resource: *Preserving the epic of “Manas”*. Global Times. (2012).
<https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/718499.shtml>

Comments and Resources Opposing this Perspective:

- Cultural heritage and national preservation could become an economic issue, where more world cultural representatives might seek to align with larger states because of issues like lack of institutions to preserve and study literature in their own countries.
- Multiethnic nations must address the needs of all communities while maintaining stability. Definitions of cultural heritage and national importance might have to adjust and, as a result, miss the finer details of what specific groups hold most dear when considering their own heritage.

Resource: *Tajik literature and poetry*. Advantour. (n.d.)
<https://www.advantour.com/tajikistan/culture/literature.htm>

Primary Outcomes of Perspective: There could be a way to redefine the status of intangible cultural heritage for folkloric and cultural sources of identity, not only for Kyrgyz but for any and all minority groups living in the PRC. This redefinition might stipulate stable financial support for specific organizations to ensure that *Manas* experts in Xinjiang, for example, are capable of performing their work and making significant progress preserving these traditions and developing new ways of educating the world about Kyrgyz history.

Secondary Consequences: The history of multinational states is often characterized by imperialist ideals that cause an overarching political body to define what is and is not culturally and nationally important. While good things can come from the centralized governmental allocation of money and resources to help minorities, it also can become a problematic situation in which very highly learned members of groups might not have the visibility they need to explain their case on specific issues. Many of the Kyrgyz experts living in China have a complicated relationship with national borders, because of oppression and the need to flee forms of aggression to find a stable national and cultural life. If the PRC took the right of cultural heritage, as opposed to any titular republic doing so, it would certainly damage political

relations with neighboring countries like the Kyrgyz Republic, which has reason to take issues affecting Chinese Kyrgyz communities very seriously.

INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDY

Rights to Cultural Heritage in Central Asia

PERSPECTIVE THREE*:

UNESCO

***This perspective description is being handed out to your team only.**

NOTE: This description is written from the perspective of Members of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

General Description: UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, is a part of the United Nations (UN) and has the goal of supporting the UN's efforts towards world peace by promoting cooperation between nations in culture, education, and science. UNESCO was founded alongside the UN in 1945, following the end of World War II. Its founding mission was "to advance peace, sustainable development and human rights by facilitating collaboration and dialogue among nations." UNESCO offers both financial and logistical support for cultural, educational, and scientific programs around the globe, as well as working to protect independent media and the freedom of the press, to preserve cultural history and traditions, to translate and disseminate world literature, and much more. It is best known for establishing prestigious lists of World Heritage Sites and Intangible Cultural Heritage. In 2009, the *Manas* epic was nominated by the People's Republic of China for inclusion on the UNESCO Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage on behalf of their Kyrgyz minority population. Because the epic and its performance are such a unique and impressive monument to human cultural skill and creativity, the *Manas* as it is sung in Xinjiang, China was of course added to the lists and given UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage status. However, this stirred controversy in Kyrgyzstan, where people protested that the *Manas* epic should not be viewed as the cultural property of the PRC, but rather of the Kyrgyz Republic. So, in 2013, a slightly different entry was added to the UNESCO Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage: the *Manas* Epic Trilogy (*Manas*, *Semetey*, and *Seytek*), on behalf of the Kyrgyz Republic. It is the mission of UNESCO to record, preserve, and nourish human cultural creativity around the world, no matter which modern nation it is associated with.

Values: Equity, Sustainability, Cooperation

Comments and Resources Supporting this Perspective:



- The UNESCO lists, both for World Heritage Sites and Intangible Cultural Heritage, increase the tourism and popularity associated with certain lesser-known cultural traditions and places. This is especially important for developing nations, who depend on tourism and for whom a greater presence on the global cultural stage can improve political prospects.

Resources:

- *Here's how World Heritage status helps destinations around the world.* National Geographic. (2021). <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/here-is-how-world-heritage-status-helps-destinations-around-the-world>
- *The significance and benefits of being on the UNESCO World Heritage list.* The Week. (2023). <https://theweek.com/feature/briefing/1025471/the-significance-and-benefits-of-being-on-unescos-list>
- Despite the messy politics associated with the UNESCO heritage lists, the overall goals of UNESCO are more important than backstage arguments between countries. Ideally, nations will work together within the UNESCO framework to preserve the amazing pieces of world heritage that are under threat.

Resource: *UNESCO has always been mired in squabbling, but this shouldn't detract from its work.* The Conversation. (2021). <https://theconversation.com/unesco-has-always-been-mired-in-politics-and-squabbling-but-this-shouldnt-detract-from-its-work-163353>

Comments and Resources Opposing this Perspective:

- Tradition is by nature always changing. As each new generation learns a tradition, they shape it in their own way. The “preservation” done by UNESCO can sometimes “freeze” a living tradition, preventing further growth and development, and taking it out of the hands of the community and putting it into the hands of universities, governments, and other institutions.

Resource: *The unintended consequences of UNESCO world heritage listing.* Khan Academy. (n.d.). <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/special-topics-art-history/arches-at-risk-cultural-heritage-education-series/xa0148fd6a60f2ff6:cultural-heritage-endangered-round-the-world/a/the-unintended-consequences-of-unesco-world-heritage-listing>

- Inclusion on a UNESCO list, both for World Heritage Sites and Intangible Cultural Heritage, can sometimes have unintended consequences. Beyond international competition and claims over heritage, the global popularity that comes with inclusion in a UNESCO list can often dilute that heritage, due to an increase of tourism or popular media associated with it. Furthermore, UNESCO often lacks the funds to support the



preservation and restoration of these traditions and heritage sites.

Resource:

- *A world heritage designation can be a blessing, or a curse.* The New York Times. (2023). <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/25/arts/unesco-world-heritage-site.html>
- *UNESCO impotence takes shine off world heritage status.* The Guardian. (2015). <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/02/unesco-impotence-world-heritage-status>

Primary Outcomes of Perspective: UNESCO has added the *Manas* epic poems to their list of intangible cultural heritage twice: once for the People’s Republic of China, and once for Kyrgyzstan. This has led to controversy between the governments and peoples of these nations, but it has also brought recognition to these traditions, allowing them to be preserved and shared with the world.

Secondary Consequences: Some critics of UNESCO argue that they should not associate the cultural traditions they uplift with the nations they exist within. Other critics say that the very act of defining a tradition as “heritage” effectively freezes it in time, stopping it from continuing to grow and change within a particular culture. However, it is hard to deny the important work that UNESCO does in preserving the traditions that seem to be disappearing due to industrialization, globalization, and the spread of literacy across the globe.