



CULTURAL ORIENTATION

KYRGYZ



*Mountain view near Lenin Peak on the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border
Flickr / twiga269 FEMEN*



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*View of Talas in northern Kyrgyzstan
Flickr / Roberto Saltori*

Chapter 1 | Kyrgyz Cultural Orientation

Profile

Introduction

Approximately 5.7 million people live in the Central Asian nation of Kyrgyzstan, which is slightly smaller than the state of South Dakota.¹ Kyrgyzstan is a land of snow-peaked mountains, fertile valleys, deserts, and stunning natural beauty.² The country's name references its long and proud nomadic history; the name of Kyrgyzstan means Forty Tribes, derived from old Turkic *kyrg*, meaning "40," and *yz*, meaning "tribes." The suffix "stan" is Persian for land.³

Besides ethnic Kyrgyz, the nation is home to more than 100 nationalities.⁴ Ethnic tensions between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, particularly in the south, have erupted into

violent confrontations.⁵ In addition to ethnic tensions, a weak economy and widespread corruption present serious challenges.^{6, 7}

Geography



*Tian Shan Range
Flickr / Daoud Alahmad*

Kyrgyzstan, a landlocked country in Central Asia, is surrounded by Tajikistan to the south, Uzbekistan to the west, Kazakhstan to the north and northwest, and China to the east and south.⁸ The average elevation of the country is 2,750 meters (9,022 feet), and 94% of Kyrgyzstan's surface is over one kilometer (3,280 feet) in elevation.⁹ The Tien Shan (Heavenly) Mountains and the Pamir Mountain Ranges dominate more than 60% of the land. The country's highest peak is Victory Peak (Jengish Chokusu) in the Tien Shan range on the border with China, rising to an elevation of 7,439 m (24,406 ft).¹⁰ The second highest peak is Khan Tengri on the Kazakh border, rising to 7,010 m (23,000 ft). Around 8,000 glaciers cover 4% of the country, and glacial runoff feeds rivers that drain into nearly 2,000 lakes. Only 6.7% of the land is arable, located predominantly in the fertile Fergana Valley in the southwest, but 48% of Kyrgyzstan's land can be used only for pasture.¹¹ The northern region near the border of Kazakhstan is a desert, where temperatures can soar to 50° C in the summer (122°F).¹²

The Northwest

The northwestern region is dominated by the Chatkal Range of the western Tien Shan. The area is covered in rugged terrain and dotted with lakes and valleys.¹³ Located in north Tien Shan is the Chuy River Valley, which is home to the nation's capital, Bishkek. The warm summers and abundance of water makes this important lowland region suitable for farming. The Chuy region is the most populous and most developed region in the country, where most of the economic and human resources are located.¹⁴



*Mountain view near Toktogul
Flickr / Mountain Partnership at FAO*

Issyk-Kul and the Central Tien Shan



Northern Tien Shan
Flickr / yuichi hayakawa

Most of the eastern portions of the nation are covered by the rugged central Tien Shan Mountains and the Lake Issyk-Kul region. Issyk-Kul is the world's second largest alpine lake, after Lake Titicaca in Bolivia. The lake is called Issyk-Kul (Hot Lake) because it does not freeze in winter due to high salinity and geothermic activity. The lake maintains a temperature range of 2-23°C (36-73°F), despite having an elevation of over 1,600 meters (5,249 feet) and a depth of 668 meters (2,190

feet). The lake helps create a mild microclimate in the region, which provides comfortable conditions for herders and tourists.¹⁵ Underwater ruins of buildings from the Middle Ages reveal that the water level of the lake was lower than it is today.¹⁶

The Tien Shan Mountains extend approximately 2,415 km (1,500 mi) in an east-west direction along the border with China toward Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Temperatures in the mountains drop drastically in the winter. Higher elevations have a polar climate. Permafrost covers the ground in most areas above 2,750 m (9,022 ft). Temperatures in the region have dipped to lows of -50°C (-58°F).¹⁷

Fergana Valley

Surrounded by mountains on three sides, the 22,000 sq km (8,500 sq mi) Fergana Valley lies mostly in Uzbekistan, but it crosses Uzbekistan's borders into Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The fertile valley is the source of most of Kyrgyzstan's arable land and is a critical economic resource. The Fergana Valley is the second most densely populated region in Kyrgyzstan and one of the fastest growing regions in Central Asia.¹⁸



Jalal Abad, in the Fergana Valley
Flickr / Mountain Partnership at FAO/Richard Slaby

The borders in this region are poorly defined. In addition to regional ethnic tensions, border clashes between security forces and civilians are common.^{19, 20, 21}

Climate



*Yurt near Bishkek
Flickr / zsoolt*

Kyrgyzstan has a diverse climate due to its geography. The country's extensive mountainous terrain, valleys, distance from an ocean, and the salty Lake Issyk-Kul all contribute to the variety of climates. The lower elevations such as the Fergana Valley have a subtropical climate with hot, wet, humid summers. As the elevation rises, there is a shift to a drier continental climate. The foothills and steppes of the Tien Shan have a more temperate climate, and subarctic and polar conditions are found in the higher mountain elevations. Lake Issyk-Kul's warm water contributes to the mild temperatures and precipitation in western Kyrgyzstan.^{22, 23, 24}

In the summer, temperatures reach an average high of 25°C (77°F), and temperatures can exceed 40°C (104°F) in some of the lower elevations. The average high in the winter is -6°C (21.°F), and temperatures can drop to as low as -50°C (-58°F) in the mountains. Permafrost is prevalent in elevations exceeding 2,750 meters (9,000 feet). Kyrgyzstan has an average of 270 sunny days a year and receives an average of nearly 500 mm (19.6 inches) of rain annually. Fertile river valleys are fed by glacier melt off in the summer months.^{25, 26, 27}

Bodies of Water

Lake Issyk-Kul (Ysyk Kul)

Lake Issyk-Kul is the second-largest alpine lake in the world, located in northeastern Kyrgyzstan. The lake's mild microclimate and the mountains that surround it support a unique environment with rare animal species and many fruit trees.²⁸

This lake is 182 km (113 mi) long 61 km (38 mi) at its widest point, and 668 m (2,192 ft) deep. Its high salt content, which prevents the lake from freezing in winter, makes



*Lake Issyk-Kul
Flickr / Thomas Depenbusch*

the water unfit for drinking or irrigation. Carp and whitefish from the lake are fished commercially. The north shore of the lake is a popular recreation spot that offers resorts, hot springs, and health spas. In 2001, UNESCO designated the lake as a Man and Biosphere reserve.²⁹ Contamination from industrial sources going back to the Soviet era is a threat to the lake that has not been addressed.^{30, 31}

Lake Song (Song Kul)

Lake Song is about half the size of California's Lake Tahoe, and it is Kyrgyzstan's highest and second-largest lake. It is located in central Kyrgyzstan on a high plateau. There are no resorts or hotels by the lake, but local residents sell food and rent out yurts during the summer months. The area is a popular summer pasture (*jailoo*) for the livestock of Kyrgyz nomads. Early snows in the summer sometimes make it impossible to reach the lake; the lake is most accessible from July to September, before it freezes over and the roads become impassable due to snow. Fish were introduced in the lake in 1959, in an effort to start a fishing industry, but the commercial fishing ventures were unsuccessful.^{32, 33}



Lake Song-Kul
Flickr / Darren and Sandy Van Soye

Toktogul Reservoir



Toktogul Reservoir
Flickr / oh contraire

The Toktogul Reservoir is the nation's largest manmade lake. It was made after the completion of the Toktogul Dam in 1973, which was part of the Soviet Union's series of irrigation and infrastructure projects in Central Asia. The dam provides 90% of Kyrgyzstan's electricity, but it also contributed to the drying of the Aral Sea. The dam regulates water flow downstream, which has caused tension with Kyrgyzstan's neighbors; water is in high demand in Uzbekistan's portion of the fertile Fergana Valley. When Soviet irrigation projects

were undertaken, planners did not foresee the environmental impact or political problems that the dam would cause after the collapse of the Soviet Union.^{34, 35}

Naryn River



Naryn River
Flickr / oh contraire

At 430 miles in length (700 kilometers), the Naryn is Kyrgyzstan's longest river; glacier and snowmelt from the Tien Shan Mountains feed the river. The river flows west from its source near the town of Naryn, in central Kyrgyzstan, before turning north and then south, as it flows into Uzbekistan. In the Fergana Valley, the Naryn joins the Kara Darya River, and they become the Syr Darya River. The Naryn is a significant source of hydroelectricity and irrigation, especially for Kyrgyzstan

and Uzbekistan; management of the river is a matter of international relations. The Toktogul Dam obstructs the Naryn River.^{36, 37}

Major Cities

Bishkek

Bishkek is the nation's capital and administrative center. With a population of 865,000, it is Kyrgyzstan's largest city.³⁸ The city lies in the central part of the Chuy Valley at the foot of the Ala-Too Mountains, at an elevation of 800 meters (2,600 feet). Two tributaries of the Chuy River flow through the city.³⁹



Bishkek
Flickr / cercamon

The fortress of "Pishpek" was built on the site of the modern city in 1825, but it was captured by the Russians in 1862. In 1924, Bishkek became the administrative center of the Kara-Kirgiz Autonomous Region. The city was renamed Frunze in 1926, after Mikhail Frunze, a Bishkek native, revolutionary, and Red Army hero. In the same year, it became the capital of the newly established

Kyrgyz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. Following Kyrgyzstan's independence in 1991, the city was renamed Bishkek.⁴⁰

Strong Soviet influences prevail throughout the city, including the architectural style of buildings, monuments, and public parks; a statue of Lenin stood in the central square for over 20 years after Kyrgyzstan gained its independence. Bishkek is also home to many museums and theaters.⁴¹ Heavy industry commenced during World War II when the USSR moved some of its manufacturing capabilities away from the western front.⁴²

Osh



Street scene in Osh
Wikimedia / A.Savin

Osh is located on the eastern fringe of the Fergana Valley, in southwestern Kyrgyzstan. Osh is Kyrgyzstan's second largest city, with a population of 243,200. It is also the nation's oldest city, with a history dating back 3,000 years. Osh is a regional capital and a major administrative center for southern Kyrgyzstan, and the city is home to a large Uzbek population. The invading Mongols destroyed the city in the 13th century; it was rebuilt in the 15th century and developed into an important

stop along the Silk Road. In the 19th century, the city was among the most important cities in Central Asia as Britain and Russia competed for influence in the region.⁴³ Today, Osh is home to one of Central Asia's largest bazaars, the Jayma Bazaar.⁴⁴ Although the Kyrgyz majority and Uzbek minority have in the past lived peacefully alongside each other, Osh saw outbreaks of ethnic violence in 1990 and 2010.⁴⁵

Jalal-Abad

Jalal-Abad, the nation's third-largest city, has a population of 92,100; it is located on the eastern end of the Fergana Valley.⁴⁶ The city has a large Uzbek population, and like Osh, was the site of ethnic violence in 2010.⁴⁷ The city developed as an agricultural and trading center. Under Soviet rule, Jalal-Abad's famous health spas, agricultural development, and food industries were expanded. Today, it is an industrial center with a prominent food industry and two universities. Fruit orchards and vegetable plots dot the surrounding countryside. Like much of the nation, Soviet influence is evident in the names of streets and the statue of Lenin.⁴⁸

Karakol



Public square in Karakol
Flickr / Charles Roffey

Karakol has a population of 66,700. It was closed to foreigners during the Soviet era, but now, the town is a popular destination for foreign travelers who want to enjoy Lake Issyk-Kul and the surrounding outdoor scenery. Kyrgyzstan's only zoo is located in Karakol.^{49, 50} The city was founded as a garrison on the eastern side of Lake Issyk-Kul; today, a Russian naval research base is located in the area.^{51, 52} Karakol's Russian Orthodox cathedral is a prominent reminder of the influence the Soviet Union

had on Kyrgyzstan. During Soviet rule, the city's name was changed to Przhevalsky, after a Russian explorer who died in the town in 1888. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the city once again became Karakol.⁵³

History

Early History and Soviet Rule

The history of the nomadic Kyrgyz people, believed to be of Turkic descent from the western parts of Mongolia and Siberia, goes back to the 1st century BCE. Genghis Khan's Mongol armies conquered Central Asia in the 13th century and ruled over what would become Kyrgyzstan until the mid-17th century.⁵⁴



Illustration depicting Manas, father of Kyrgyzstan
Flickr / Journeys On Quest

The Uzbeks, a Turkic tribe from the west, filled the power vacuum left by the disintegration of the Mongol empire. The Uzbeks were divided into three powerful khanates—Khiva, Bukhara, and Kokand.⁵⁵ During the second half of the 18th century, the Khanate of Kokand expanded from the Fergana Valley to absorb most of modern-day Kyrgyzstan. In 1876, the Russians gained control of the region.⁵⁶

In 1916, the Kyrgyz, weary of Tsarist Russia's exploitation and plans to conscript their men to fight in World War I, rebelled in what is called The Great Urkun ("exodus" in Kyrgyz).⁵⁷ The Russian suppression of the rebellion, which led to the deaths of 150,000 people—some put the figure at 250,000—is remembered as the greatest tragedy in the history of the Kyrgyz people. Many were killed during punitive raids and by exposure to the elements while trying to flee Russian troops to China through the Tien Shan Mountains.^{58, 59}



*Soviet-era mosaic promoting Central Asian unity
Flickr / Journeys On Quest*

After the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the Kyrgyz lands were incorporated into the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. In 1924, the Kara-Kirgiz Autonomous Region was formed; the borders of the region later became Kyrgyzstan's modern borders. In 1936, Kyrgyzstan became a Soviet republic, known at the time as the Kirgiz Soviet Socialist Republic.⁶⁰

Under the Soviets, the Kyrgyz were forced to abandon their nomadic lifestyle and work on collective farms and factories. After World War II, the Soviets undertook infrastructure projects and integrated Kyrgyzstan into the Soviet Union's centrally planned economy, giving Kyrgyzstan export partnerships with the other Soviet republics. As the Soviet Union was crumbling, investments and interest in Kyrgyzstan waned, economic activities proved to be disastrous to the environment and the health of the people, and infrastructure crumbled.^{61, 62} In 1990, ethnic tensions between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz erupted into large scale clashes, known as the Osh Riots; hundreds were killed, and the Soviet Army was deployed to restore order.^{63, 64}

Independent Kyrgyzstan and the Tulip Revolution

On 31 August 1991, Kyrgyzstan gained its independence. Askar Akayev was elected president that same year, but his administration (1991-2005) was beset by corruption, political infighting, and accusations of voter fraud. Tensions grew, and 2002 saw the beginning of anti-government protests. When Akayev was elected to a third term in March 2005, protests broke out all over the country amid renewed allegations of corruption, nepotism, and voter fraud. On 24 March, the opposition protests became a full-scale revolution, named the Tulip Revolution, after the national flower of Kyrgyzstan.⁶⁵ Akayev fled to Russia and resigned. Former prime minister Kurmanbek Bakiyev, was installed as acting president and later was overwhelmingly elected president in July 2005.^{66, 67}

Bakiyev's tenure failed to restore confidence in the presidency as allegations of corruption, nepotism, and voter fraud continued. Discontent over his policies and a worsening economy led to violent protests in April 2010, which left 80 dead.^{68, 69} Following these protests, Roza Isakovna Otunbayeva became the interim leader and later president, and served until the new elections in 2011.⁷⁰ Bakiyev and his brother fled to Belarus, where they were given asylum; his son fled to the United Kingdom and faced extradition to the United States and Kyrgyzstan. Bakiyev, his brother, and his son have all been tried in absentia for crimes ranging from corruption to murder.^{71, 72, 73} In 2013, a federal court in New York dropped the extradition case against Bakiyev's due to lack of evidence. The decision left many people in Kyrgyzstan angry and disappointed.⁷⁴

Ethnic violence flared up occasionally between the Uzbeks and Kyrgyz, particularly in the south.⁷⁵ In June 2010, the tensions boiled over into a violent conflict that left nearly 500 people dead; other sources claim that the real death toll was much higher. Uzbeks were disproportionately affected by the rioting and have been disproportionately prosecuted. About 2,000 homes and businesses were burned, and more than 100,000 Uzbeks fled to Uzbekistan.^{76, 77}



President Atambayev at the European Union
Flickr / European External Action...

In December 2011, Almazbek Atambayev became Kyrgyzstan's president, marking the first peaceful transition of power in the nation's history.⁷⁸ President Atambayev has strengthened ties with Russia and joined the Eurasian Economic Union.⁷⁹ In 2014, under Atambayev, the Manas Transit Center, a base that the United States used to transport equipment and troops to and from Afghanistan, was closed. A 15-year agreement was reached with Russia, which allows four Russian bases to operate within Kyrgyzstan.⁸⁰

In April 2016, the prime minister, Tamir Sariyev, and his cabinet resigned after a parliamentary commission accused him of awarding a USD 100 million road construction tender to an unqualified Chinese company. The prime minister denied the accusations. Sariyev had taken office less than a year earlier, after his predecessor, Dجومart Otorbayev, resigned following a dispute over the Kumtor gold mine.^{81, 82} In 2017, Sariyev announced he would run for president in that year's election.⁸³

On December 2016, a constitutional referendum was passed by Kyrgyz voters, shifting power from the president and parliament to the prime minister. It also changed the

process to appoint and dismiss judges and tightened individual freedoms. During the debate over the constitutional amendments, it was discovered that the original copy of the nation's constitution was lost.^{84, 85}

Government



*Kyrgyzstan Government Seal
Flickr / OSCE Parliamentary Asse...*

Kyrgyzstan is a parliamentary republic with three branches of government. The executive branch is headed by the president, elected to a single six-year term. The president selects the prime minister based on the nomination of the majority party or a coalition of parties. The prime minister recommends cabinet officials, but all are appointed by the president.⁸⁶

The legislative branch consists of a 120-member unicameral parliament (called the Supreme Council or Jogorku Kenesh). Parliament members are elected to office for five years. Political parties are voted for in a nationwide election, and the number of seats a party receives in parliament is proportional to the percentage of the vote the party won.⁸⁷

The judicial branch is composed of the Supreme Court and local courts. The president recommends Supreme Court justices; they are confirmed by the parliament and appointed for 10 years. There are 25 judges on the Supreme Court, including nine judges on the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court. The court system also includes provincial and city courts.⁸⁸

Transparency International ranks Kyrgyzstan as the 123rd least corrupt of 168 countries surveyed. Corruption affects all levels of government. Though anti-bribery and anticorruption initiatives have been undertaken in recent years, corruption remains a serious problem.^{89, 90}

Media

Kyrgyzstan's constitution guarantees freedom of speech and freedom of the press, but these rights are passively protected. There are 25 TV channels and 26 radio stations; two radio and two TV stations are state-run. Kyrgyzstan's freedom of the press is categorized as "not free" by Freedom House. Laws limiting freedom of speech may be broadly interpreted and enforcement of those laws may be politically motivated; journalists have been fined and threatened with prison sentences for insulting public officials. The independence of state-run TV stations is often called into question. About 30% of the population has access to the internet. SIM cards need to be registered, which hinders online anonymity. As of 2017, there were over 7 million mobile phone subscriptions in the country.^{91, 92}



*Kyrgyz delegation at an international media summit
Flickr / USAID Kyrgyz Republic*

Economy



*Osh Bazaar
Flickr / Ronan Shenhav*

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the new government instituted land reforms and divested itself from business enterprises. Kyrgyzstan joined the World Trade Organization in 1998, the first former Soviet republic to do so. The sudden cessation of Soviet economic support after decades of integration within the Soviet Union was a shock to the economy. Economic policies, crumbling infrastructure, corruption, and political instability have impeded Kyrgyzstan's progress. Membership in the Moscow-centered Eurasian Economic Union and investment from China have brought economic benefits, but the slowing economies of regional powers leave the long-term benefits of those relationships in question.^{93, 94}

Roughly half of the population works in agriculture and about 35% lives in urban centers. The economy of Kyrgyzstan depends on remittances from exported labor.

About 20% of Kyrgyzstan's workforce is earning money abroad, mostly in Russia. Migrant workers generate about a quarter of Kyrgyzstan's gross domestic product (GDP).^{95, 96, 97} The rent paid by the United States for use of the Manas Transit Center was over \$60 million a year, plus additional aid incentives and fees for every takeoff and landing. Until the United States left in 2014, the transit center was the country's second biggest revenue source.⁹⁸

The biggest source of revenue for Kyrgyzstan is the Kumtor gold mine, located 350 km south-east of Bishkek. The mine accounts for about half of the nation's exports and 12% of GDP. The mine is owned by a Canadian company, Centerra Gold. The mine has been at the center of environmental and corruption scandals, and is a controversial political topic. The government has levied large punitive fines against Centerra Gold, demanded renegotiation of the contract, and threatened to nationalize the mine. Though Kyrgyzstan's mountains have extensive mineral and precious metal deposits, restrictive business and investment climate has staved off foreign investment.^{99, 100, 101}

Ethnic Groups

According to the 2009 census, more than 100 different nationalities live in Kyrgyzstan. Migration after the fall of the Soviet Union, international work opportunities, and civil unrest have caused demographic shifts. The ethnic Kyrgyz are the majority in the country, making up about 70% of the population. Uzbeks are the second largest group (14%), Russians third (8%), and Dungans make up about 1%. Smaller groups include Turks, Uighurs, Tajiks, Ukrainians, Tatars, Germans, and Kazaks.¹⁰²

Kyrgyz

The Kyrgyz historically were a nomadic people, traveling with their families and herds in search of lands for grazing. Even today, most Kyrgyz can trace their family line to one of the original 40 Kyrgyz tribes. The modern tribal networks provide jobs, social support, and political influence.¹⁰³ The Kyrgyz language comes from the Turkic group of languages. Russian settlement of the region and the establishment of the Soviet Union suppressed the traditional nomadic lifestyle. The Kyrgyz are Sunni



Kyrgyz woman
Flickr / Juan Alberto Casado

Muslims. Historically, the northern Kyrgyz have identified more with Russian culture, including atheism. The southern Kyrgyz are more devoted to Muslim traditions.^{104, 105, 106}

Uzbeks



*Uzbek man in Ferghana
Flickr / Blogtrotters*

The Uzbeks live mostly in the southwestern region of Kyrgyzstan. Their language is related to Turkish. They have long been a settled people rather than nomads, and are considered to have resisted Russian influences more than any other Central Asian nationality. The Uzbeks are Sunni Muslims.¹⁰⁷ Uzbeks claim that they are underrepresented in government positions, targeted by discriminatory hiring practices, and treated poorly by the police and the justice system. Uzbeks and Kyrgyz live in

separate neighborhoods and have few cultural links. Some Uzbeks have gone as far as to mask their ethnicity to avoid discrimination. Others have found that treatment by the police and government is better if they are partnered with a Kyrgyz.^{108, 109}

Russians

The Russians came to Kyrgyzstan in the 19th century; they are the third-largest ethnic group in the country. Most live in the capital, Bishkek, and northern Kyrgyzstan. Russian is an official language. Russians dominated the political life in the former Soviet republic until independence in 1991. The role of the Russian language and the influence of the Russian people on Kyrgyz life, government, and politics have diminished since the fall of the Soviet Union. Russian residents belong to the Russian Orthodox Church.¹¹⁰ The emigration of many Russians between 1991 and 2010 created a demographic and social shift. Economic stagnation, political instability, nationalist fervor, and social conditions in Kyrgyzstan have prompted many Russians to leave the country.^{111, 112, 113}



*Russian boys outside the Russian Orthodox Church in Ak-Su
Flickr / Charles Roffey*

Endnotes for Chapter 1: Profile

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Chapter 1 | Profile

Assessment

1. Kyrgyzstan is located between the Amu Darya and Syr Darya river valleys, and it is dominated by vast lowlands.
2. Tensions between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbek occasionally erupt into violent clashes.
3. Lake Issyk-Kul is an important source of irrigation for agricultural land.
4. Bishkek is the capital of Kyrgyzstan.
5. Most of Kyrgyzstan's crops are grown in the Fergana Valley.

Assessment Answers: 1. False; 2. True; 3. False; 4. True; 5. True



*Suleiman Too Mosque in Osh
Flickr / Timon91*

Chapter 2 | Kyrgyz Cultural Orientation

Religion

Introduction

The constitution defines Kyrgyzstan as a secular state. It established a precedent for the separation of religion and state and prohibits religious organizations from participating in the political process. Freedom of religion is protected and the incitement of religious hatred is illegal. There are laws and government practices that restrict the practice of religious minorities. Over 80% of the population is Sunni Muslim; 5% is Russian Orthodox, and the remaining 10% are all other religious minorities, including those not affiliated with a religion. Islam is widely observed in all regions of the country, but it is more strongly established in the south than in the

northern regions. The Russian Orthodox Church and minority religions are typically found only in the major cities.^{1, 2}

Major Religions

During the Soviet era, the state enforced atheism and most overt religious practices and observances were banned. For decades, religion did not play a big role in public life. The end of the Soviet Union brought the collapse of state dominance over private life, and Islam has filled the void that was left by the Soviets. A resurgence of Islam has taken place, especially in the south, as people search for a national identity, and religious fervor has been increasing.³



*Dungan Mosque in Karakol
Flickr / Charles Roffey*

Since independence in 1991, new mosques have been built and paid for by foreign donors, outpacing the number of schools being built.⁴ The most important religious site for Kyrgyz Muslims, often called the “second Mecca,” is the sacred mountain Sulaiman-Too (Throne of Suleiman) in Osh. The mountain is said to possess healing powers, and worship at this site predates the introduction of Islam. The age of the petroglyphs shows pilgrimages to the mountain have taken place for millennia. The Prophet Muhammad is said to have prayed on top of the mountain. A mosque, a cemetery, and a museum are located on the mountain.^{5, 6}

Islam



*Call to prayer from Dungan Mosque in Karakol
Flickr / Journeys On Quest*

Most Kyrgyz Muslims are adherents of the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam.^{7, 8, 9} All Muslims are expected to adhere to the five pillars of Islam. The first of these is the *shahada*, or the basic declaration of the faith, expressed by repeating the statement: “There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is his Prophet.” The second pillar, *salat*, requires ritual prayer. Five times a day at appointed hours—dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and

mid-evening—Muslims pray facing Mecca. The third pillar is zakat, or tithing and the giving of alms to the poor. The fourth pillar is *sawm*, or fasting during daylight hours in the month of Ramadan. The fifth pillar is performing a pilgrimage, or hajj, to Mecca, once in a lifetime for Muslims who are financially and physically able to do so.^{10, 11}



Mosque in Naryn
Wikimedia Commons / Ondřej Žváček

Islam, particularly in the north of the country, is not strictly observed.¹² Relatively few attend Friday mosque services. Half of all Kyrgyz Muslims say they have never attended a mosque, and only 14% say they pray five times a day. These numbers conceal gender differences: 18% of men report that they have never attended a mosque versus 83% of women. Only 53% of Kyrgyz say they observe Ramadan.¹³

Russian Orthodox



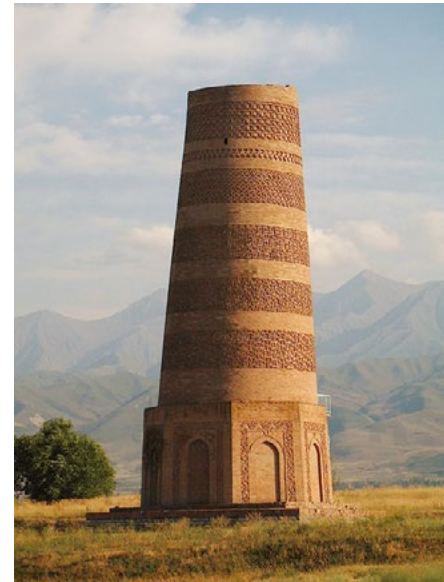
Russian Orthodox cathedral in Bishkek
Wikimedia / Petar Milošević

The Russian Orthodox Church is the primary religion of the Russian minority. Most Russian Orthodox live in the major cities. The Russian Orthodox Church was introduced to Kyrgyzstan when Russian settlers arrived in the region in the 19th century. The religion is observed by about 5% of the population. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Russian Orthodox Church faced competition from smaller churches that have been allowed to operate in the country. The church is headquartered in Moscow.^{14, 15}

Religion and Government

Kyrgyzstan is a secular republic and religion plays a limited role in government. The state does not recognize religious marriages, and recently proposed legislation would hold imams responsible for marriages performed in violation of Kyrgyz law. Although religious marriages are popular, a marriage certificate issued by the government is needed to receive state recognition, legal protections, and rights attached to marriage under the law.^{16, 17}

The Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan (SAMK), also known as the “Muftiate,” oversees all Islamic organizations, including schools and mosques. It is also responsible for producing, screening, and distributing Islamic educational material, and bans material that is substandard. The organization consists of 30 Islamic scholars.¹⁸



The Burana Tower, a large minaret in the Chuy Valley
Wikimedia / Firespeaker

The Kyrgyz State Committee for Religious Affairs (KSCRA) is the government body in charge of all religious matters. All religious organizations in the country are required to register with KSCRA; the registration process can take several years. Currently, there are a little over 3,000 registered religious groups, nearly 2,500 mosques, 380 Christian organizations that include Catholics and Protestants, and 41 Jehovah’s Witness centers.¹⁹

The government routinely restricts or bans the activities of religious organizations considered extremist or a threat to public order. The KSCRA also screens and can censor materials distributed by religious organizations. The authority to censor religious material increased under a 2012 amendment and applies mostly to material distributed by non-traditional Muslim and other minority religions.²⁰ In 2015, to counter the growing influence of Saudi-style Wahhabism, the government elevated the status of Hanafi Sunni Islam by allowing only Hanafi Muslims to act as clergy and religious judges.²¹

The constitution bans religious organizations from inciting religious or ethnic hatred, but occasionally officials ignore hate speech, such as comments made by imams or the Muslim Board against religious and ethnic minorities.²² The government of Kyrgyzstan has banned about 20 religious groups that are considered extremist or threats to the government. Muslim, non-Muslim, and political-religious organizations have been

subject to bans and restrictions by the government. Schools may offer classes that discuss religious history and the nature of religion, but no religion may be promoted.²³

Influence of Religion on Daily Life

The nomadic Kyrgyz adhere to a traditional religion, described as animism, paganism and shamanism-like beliefs, called Tengrism. Tengrism's roots are in the religious practices of the ancient nomadic Kyrgyz people, centered around worshipping one's ancestors and the sky. Although it is estimated that there are about 50,000 followers of Tengrism, the government refuses to recognize their faith as a legitimate religion.^{24, 25}



*Yurt ceiling
Flickr / Andreas Berg*

Though Kyrgyzstan is a secular nation, the role of religion, morality, and the influence of Islam on Kyrgyz life is a sensitive and often debated topic.^{26, 27} Since Kyrgyzstan's independence, Arab-influenced Islamic fashion has increased. The number of mosques and mosque attendees has also increased, and religious programming is played on the radio. The growth of religion after the collapse of the Soviet Union has polarized the secular and religious populations. When a prayer room was added to the parliament building in 2011, civic groups protested that the construction of the room violated the constitution. Wearing the hijab in public institutions has been a controversial issue.^{28, 29}



*Muslim cemetery near Lake Issyk-Kul
Flickr / Ronan Shenhav*

Forced conversions and violence against religious minorities still occur in the country. In 2015, a Jehovah's Witness meeting in Osh was broken up by law enforcement; worshipers were threatened, beaten, and arrested. In the same year, city officials in Osh did not allow a Protestant to bury her son in a local cemetery unless she renounced her faith.³⁰

Care and Treatment of the Quran

The Quran is a sacred book for Muslims and should be treated with respect. Do not touch the Quran with dirty hands. Keep the Quran off the floor. If sitting on the floor, hold the Quran above the lap or waist. When not in use, protect the Quran with a dustcover and do not place anything on top of it. Muslims keep the Quran on the highest shelf of a bookcase. Keep Qurans out of latrines.³¹ Old or damaged copies can be properly disposed of in two ways: burning is acceptable as long as the process is conducted with respect; texts should not be burned with trash or other items. The second method of disposal is burial. Before burying the text, it should be wrapped in something pure and buried in a location where people do not walk.³²



*Detail of a mosque in Karakol
Flickr / Matthias Buehler*

Religious Conventions and Gender Roles



*Woman in Urgen, Osh Region
Flickr / Maite Elorza*

Though Islam's popularity is growing, women are not required to adhere to Islamic dress norms in public. There is little gender segregation, and women are not as marginalized as in other countries in the region. Wearing the hijab is banned or discouraged in some workplaces and schools. Disagreements about the appropriateness of the hijab is a part of a larger debate about Islam's role in secular Kyrgyzstan. Advocates of secularism resent the growing influence of Islam, while Muslims see the wearing of the hijab as an expression of religion. Because of the hijab restrictions, some women have resigned from their jobs, others have quit school.^{33, 34, 35}

Religious Holidays



*Ala Too Square in Bishkek
Flickr / g-squared*

The government of Kyrgyzstan recognizes three major religious holidays. The first is Orthodox Christmas on 7 January. A popular tradition is to have a 12-course meal, representing the 12 apostles, on Christmas Eve with friends and relatives. The holiday is normally a relaxed affair. The holiday is not observed by Muslim Kyrgyz.

Public-religious holidays that are observed by Muslims are Orozo Ait and Kurban Ait. Orozo Ait (Eid al-Fitr) is the holiday that marks the end of Ramadan. Families celebrate with festive meals and gatherings; households that are able to do so give to those in need so that they can also celebrate the holiday. Kurban Ait (Eid al-Adha) commemorates Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son. The holiday is celebrated 70 days after the end of Ramadan.^{36, 37, 38}

Public-religious holidays that are observed by Muslims are Orozo Ait and Kurban

When does Ramadan start?		
Visitor:	Raamaazaan kaachaan baashtalaat?	When does Ramadan start?
Local:	eRteyng	Tomorrow.

Exchange 1

Buildings of Worship

Muslims worship in mosques. Many mosques were destroyed, closed, or converted to other uses during the Soviet era. Currently, there are almost 2,500 mosques in operation, most having been built since independence.³⁹ Foreign donors have spearheaded the construction of new mosques with the participation of local Muslim charity groups. Most of the mosques have been built in the more religiously observant southern Kyrgyzstan.⁴⁰



*Orthodox church in Karakol
Flickr / Journeys On Quest*

Although the specific design of mosques varies, all mosques normally include several elements. Most have four walls, with the qibla wall facing Mecca. In the qibla there is a small niche called the mihrab. To the right of the mihrab stands a pulpit, or minbar, where the imam stands while giving services. Mosques also have a minaret from which the calls to daily prayers are issued. Many mosques also have an ablution fountain in the center of the courtyard (*sahan*) at which Muslims may conduct ritual washing before prayers.^{41, 42}

Behavior in Buildings of Worship



*Muslim men praying at a mosque in Osh
Flickr / Journeys On Quest*

There are general rules concerning etiquette for mosque visitors. It is best to ask in advance for permission to visit. Ask if there are any local or specific rules that pertain to the mosque. Remove shoes before entering the mosque. Once inside, the basic rules of etiquette for attending most religious or sacred institutions apply: speak softly and respectfully and do not disturb or walk in front of those at prayer. Men and women do not engage in physical contact. If sitting on the floor, do not point

your feet toward the qibla. Men should wear loose-fitting pants, a loose shirt, and clean socks. Women should wear a long, loose-fitting skirt and a loose top with long sleeves. Women should also wear a scarf over their hair.^{43, 44}

May I enter the mosque?

Visitor:	mechitkeh keeRsem boloboo?	May I enter the mosque?
Local:	obaa	Yes.

Exchange 2

Do I need to cover my head? / Does a woman need to cover her head?

Visitor:	baash keemeem boloosh keRekpee?	Do I need to cover my head?
Local:	jawk	No.
Visitor:	aayaal keesheeneen baash keemeem boloosh keRekpee?	Does a woman need to cover her head?
Local:	obaa	Yes.

Exchange 3

Must I take off my shoes inside the mosque?

Visitor:	boot keeyimdee mecheetkeh keeRuedoæn mooRoön checheesheem keRekpee?	Must I take off my shoes inside the mosque?
Local:	obaa	Yes.

Exchange 4

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Kyrgyz Cultural Orientation

Chapter 2 | Religion

Assessment

1. The Kyrgyz are predominantly Sunni Muslims.
2. Kyrgyzstan is a secular state.
3. Muslim women in Kyrgyzstan must wear head coverings (hijab) in public.
4. Orthodox Christmas, which is celebrated on January 7, is an official holiday in Kyrgyzstan.
5. The most important religious site in Kyrgyzstan is the Central Mosque in the capital, Bishkek.

Assessment Answers: 1. True; 2. True; 3. True; 4. False; 5. False



*Nomad family near Chatyr Kul, At-Bashi District
Flickr / yuan.muye*

Chapter 3 | Kyrgyz Cultural Orientation

Traditions

Introduction

The Kyrgyz people represent about 70% of Kyrgyzstan's population; they primarily speak Kyrgyz, a language that belongs to the Turkic language family. Today, Kyrgyz uses the Cyrillic alphabet, which was introduced by the Russians in 1940, but it can also be written in Arabic and Turkic script. Ethnic Kyrgyz speak Kyrgyz throughout Central Asia and western China. Many Russian words entered the Kyrgyz language during the Soviet era.^{1, 2, 3}

Most Kyrgyz can trace their heritage back to one of 40 Kyrgyz tribes. The tribal ties outlasted the Soviet Union's unity initiatives. One's heritage is a social institution and

a source of pride, community, and aid. Although tribal organizations are supposed to be apolitical, some heritage organizations are effective at mobilizing voters and lobby on behalf of their tribe.⁴

How are you?		
Visitor:	kaandaaysiz?	How are you?
Local:	jaakshy, RaaKhmaat	Good, thanks.

Exchange 5

Codes of Politeness

Kyrgyz men often shake hands when meeting and departing, but it is considered bad luck to shake hands across a threshold. Spoken greetings vary by ethnic group. The standard greeting, *salamatsyzby*, is common, but Muslim men may use the greeting *al-salam alaykum* (peace be with you). *Zdravstvuyte* or *privyet* are frequently used among Russians. Women shake hands with other women, but handshakes across genders are uncommon. A nod between genders is acceptable. If women are good friends or family members, they may also kiss each other on the cheek. Remove shoes before entering a house or yurt.^{5, 6}



Conversation in Bishkek
Flickr / Adam Bowie

Hi, Mr. Ahmet. / Are you doing well?		
Visitor:	saalaam, aaKhmet baaykeh	Hi, Mr. Ahmet.
Local:	kaandaaysiz?	Hello!
Visitor:	jaakshy jueRoesuezbue?	Are you doing well?
Local:	obaa, RaaKhmaat	Yes. Thank you.

Exchange 6

Kyrgyz Greetings



Woman greeting with a platter of sweets
Flickr / United Nations Development
Programme in Europe and CIS

Greeting customs vary by ethnicity, the nature of the meeting, and how well the parties are acquainted with one another. People often address one another by their first name and patronymic, which is a modification of a father's name, in both semi-formal and informal settings. For men, "son of" has the suffix *-uulu*; for women, "daughter of" has the suffix *-kyzy*. The use of someone's first name is also a common practice. Etiquette practices from Russia were integrated into Kyrgyz society during Soviet rule. Middle Eastern cultural influences are also starting to take hold. Negotiations and business conversations are not typically conducted in a direct manner; it is very important to pay attention to hints and subtleties. Personal questions about one's career, lifestyle, or family may be asked in initial conversations.^{7, 8, 9}

The Use and Importance of Names

After Kyrgyzstan became independent, many Kyrgyz changed their Russified names to adopt more traditional Kyrgyz names, but that trend is now reversing. Kyrgyz adopt Russian names to sound more Russian. Economic opportunities abroad are driving this trend, especially for those who plan on supporting their family with remittance funds, which are vital to the Kyrgyz economy. Others are doing so because they believe they will be treated better in Russia, or they believe that having a Russian name will help them avoid Russian immigration restrictions. Among the Uzbek population, many are adopting Kyrgyz-sounding names, to boost their social standing, expand their economic opportunities, and evade discrimination.^{10, 11, 12}



Boys in the village of Arkit, in northwestern Kyrgyzstan
Flickr / Alex Keshavjee

Gender Issues

In recent years, the national government has made gender equality a priority. Kyrgyzstan recognizes a woman's right to inherit land. Because so many men travel abroad to seek employment, many women become head of household; as the head of the household, these women exercise a great degree of independence. Women's rights issues persist in Kyrgyzstan. Since independence, the percentage of Kyrgyzstan's women in the workplace has dropped by almost 10%. Bride kidnapping is a continuing problem, especially in rural Kyrgyzstan. The criminal code has strengthened penalties for forced marriages, polygamy, and underage marriages but only a few cases have been prosecuted. Religious or otherwise unrecognized marriages still take place, and those unions offer few legal rights to women. Although the government has enacted legislation to curb violence toward women, organized awareness campaigns, and established crisis centers, domestic violence remains a lingering issue in Kyrgyzstan's society. Nearly a quarter of women reported that they had been victims of physical violence.^{13, 14}



*Women attending a felt weaving workshop in the At-Bashy
Flickr / UN Women Europe and Central Asia*



*Woman entrepreneur raising livestock in the Naryn Region
Flickr / UN Women Europe and Central Asia*

The Gender Inequality Index measures inequality on a scale from 0-1; a score of 0 indicates the least inequality, and a score of 1 indicates the most inequality. Kyrgyzstan scored a .394, ranking the country as the 90th most equal in the world.¹⁵ Women make up 23% of Kyrgyzstan's parliament, yet are rarely selected by political parties to be among the top parliamentary candidates. Since 2004, the number of women serving in local government positions has declined by almost half. In 2010, Kyrgyzstan became the first country in Central Asia to have a female head of state. Roza Otunbayeva, a former minister of foreign affairs, became the interim president after the ouster of Kurmanbek Bakiyev.^{16, 17, 18}

Hospitality and Gift Giving

Gifts are exchanged between parties at the end of a business meeting. Refreshments such as beverages or a light snack are served during a formal gathering. Tea may be served in a small bowl rather than in a cup. When invited to a household, it is good manners to bring a gift for the host or hostess as a token of appreciation. Acceptable gifts are small and inexpensive, such as chocolates, a nice pen, a lapel pin, etc. Gifts are opened right away, so there is no need for elaborate wraps. Although Kyrgyzstan is a Muslim country, it is still fairly secular, and alcohol can be an acceptable gift that may be consumed during social functions.^{19, 20, 21}



*Traditional dolls depicting Kyrgyz girls
Flickr / Charles Roffey*

This gift is for you.		
Visitor:	bool belek seez uecuen	This gift is for you.
Local:	belek uechuen RaaKhmaat	Thank you for the gift.

Exchange 7

Thank you for your hospitality.		
Visitor:	meymaando-stoogoonguz uechuen RaaKhmaat	Thank you for your hospitality.
Local:	eych neRs em-es	It is nothing.

Exchange 8

The food tastes so good.		
Visitor:	taamaangynyiz aayaabay taatue	The food tastes so good.
Local:	RaaKhmaat	Thank you.

Exchange 9

Eating Habits and Types of Food



Meal inside a yurt in Bishkek
Flickr / Adam Bowie

Food in Kyrgyzstan is influenced by regional delicacies and is heavily meat centered. The most common types of meat are mutton, horse, and beef—pastoral animals that have been raised by the nomadic Kyrgyz for centuries. Many Kyrgyz follow the Islamic tradition and don't eat pork.²²

The national dish, *beshbarmak* (*besbarmack*), or “five fingers,” is made with noodles, horsemeat, and meat broth; sometimes beef or lamb are used as a basic

ingredient. When cooked with freshly slaughtered ram, the head will be served to the most honored guest. The dish is called “five fingers” because nomadic tribes eat it with their hands.²³

Regional dishes, such as *laghman* (noodles, meat, and vegetables) and *plov* (rice, meat, spices, and vegetables) are of Uzbek origin, but they are very popular in Kyrgyzstan. Russian dishes are also common. One of the most recognizable regional dishes, the kebab, is popular in Kyrgyzstan. Another common delicacy is *chuchuk*, which is a smoked horse meat sausage. Dairy is also common, and cheeses and milks are staples of the Kyrgyz diet. Bread is a common side dish. There are many varieties of bread and fried dough available in Kyrgyzstan. Bread is typically broken, not sliced with a knife, and never placed upside down. Honey is a popular ingredient in Kyrgyz food.²⁴



Laghman
Wikimedia / Армен Авакян

Common beverages include tea and coffee. Arak, Kyrgyz vodka, and *samagonka*, homemade vodka, are popular beverages. *Kumis*, a beverage made from fermented mare's milk, is valued for its medicinal properties. Other fermented malt and milk beverages are popular as well.^{25, 26, 27}

What kind of dish is this?		
Visitor:	bool ghaanday taamaak?	What kind of dish is this?
Local:	bool laagmaan	This is <i>laghman</i> .

Exchange 10

Dress Codes

Differences in dress are apparent by region and culture. Modest clothing that is worn in Western countries is worn throughout Kyrgyzstan. Western modern business attire is acceptable for formal meetings. Currently, there is a cultural debate that involves clothing. As the influence of Islam grows and conservative Islamic-inspired clothing becomes more widespread, there has been a backlash in Kyrgyz society.^{28, 29} President Atambayev has spoken out against Islamic attire on multiple occasions, and parliament has proposed a stricter dress code on its premises.^{30, 31}



Women wearing traditional clothes
Flickr/ Save the Dream

Is this acceptable to wear?		
Visitor:	bool keeyimdee keesem boloboo?	Is this acceptable to wear?
Local:	obaa	Yes.

Exchange 11

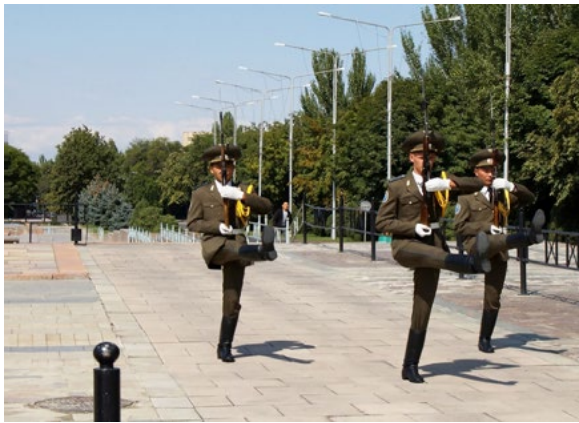
Traditional Kyrgyz clothing suited the needs of nomadic ancestors who covered long distances by foot or on horseback. The materials that clothes are made of—usually wool, furs, felt, and animal skins—preserve body heat in the winter. Summer clothes are made of cotton. Silk, brocade, and velvet are a sign of wealth. The clothes are simple to make and easy to repair while on the move.³²

The *chapan*, or outerwear, is a coat worn in layers which are added or removed according to the temperature. A *ton* or an *ichik* is a thick coat made of the skin and fur of animals. Men wear long pants, either a *chalbar* or *kandagay*; shirts, such as the *keynek*; or a felt robe, known as a *kementay*. The kalpak, also called *ak kalpak* (white

kalpak), is a traditional hat worn by males of all ages. It is regarded as a sacred part of the national clothing. People believe it has a mystic quality. Men wear a kalpak with black, white, or brown brim; boys' kalpaks have a blue or green brim. The taller the hat, the greater the status of the person wearing it.^{33, 34}

Women wear a dress and wide trousers, usually made of bright fabric. The *keynek*, a dress shirt, is worn with a sleeveless velvet jacket, known as a *chyptama*. A thigh-length skirt made of felt called *beldemchi* is worn after the birth of a first child over a dress.³⁵ Married women wear a traditional head cover called *elechek*. It is made of a long white fabric and wrapped around the head like a turban.^{36, 37}

Nonreligious Celebrations



Honor guard in Bishkek
Flickr / Adam Oxford

New Year's Day (1 January) begins a week-long celebration that precedes Orthodox Christmas (7 January). Fatherland Defenders Day (23 February) commemorates the formation and the first draft of the Red Army. International Women's Day (8 March) celebrates and honors women. The People's April Revolution Day commemorates the 2005 Tulip Revolution and the ouster of President Akayev.³⁸ International Workers Day, alternatively known as Labor Day or May Day (1 May), is a holiday that celebrates the working class. Constitution Day (5 May) celebrates the constitution of Kyrgyzstan and the rights of the people. Victory Day (9 May) celebrates the victory of the Soviet Union over Nazi Germany. Independence Day is celebrated on 31 August. The Day of the Great October Socialist Revolution commemorates the 1917 Russian Revolution; the holiday is celebrated on 7 November.^{39, 40}

One of the most popular and festive holidays is *Nooruz (Nowruz)*, celebrated on 21 March. The translation of *nooruz* is "new day." Originally a pagan holiday, Nooruz has been held for thousands of years, and it is a celebration of the new spring. The holiday is a big community event and is celebrated with festivals, food, and traditional nomadic Kyrgyz games.

Popular games played on horseback include *kok-boru* and *oodarysh*; these games require both physical strength and horsemanship.

Kok-boru (blue wolf in Kyrgyz) is played by riders on two teams. The object of the game is to carry/drag a decapitated calf or goat carcass across a goal line or into a goal. Variations of this game are played across Central Asia and include *kokpar* in Kazakhstan and *buzkashi* in Afghanistan. *Oodarysh* is a horseback wrestling match between two competitors.⁴¹



*Traditional nomadic Kyrgyz games
Flickr / Save the Dream*

Dos and Don'ts

Do's

- **Do** accept food and drink with the right hand or with both hands.
- **Do** remove shoes before entering a Kyrgyz home or place of worship.
- **Do** refuse an offer of food three times before accepting when you are a guest.
- **Do** give or receive a business card with the right hand or with both hands but never with the left alone.

Don'ts

- **Don't** cut bread. Always break it apart by hand.
- **Don't** beckon someone with a single finger. Instead, use the whole hand palm up, curling and uncurling the fingers.
- **Don't** use the left hand when eating food.
- **Don't** engage in public displays of affection.
- **Don't** use a finger to point or indicate a direction. Kyrgyz use their whole hand or point with the nose.

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Chapter 3 | Traditions

Assessment

1. One of the most popular and festive holidays in Kyrgyzstan is Nooruz.
2. Beshbarmak is a popular beverage made from fermented mare's milk and valued for its medicinal properties.
3. Bride kidnapping is an old tradition that has disappeared from the region.
4. Kyrgyz address one another by their first name.
5. The kalpak is a thick wool blanket adorned with traditional patterns, which nomads use during the winter.

Assessment Answers: 1. True; 2. True; 3. False; 4. True; 5. False



*Public newspapers posted on stands in Bishkek
Flickr / M.*

Chapter 4 | Kyrgyz Cultural Orientation

Urban Life

Introduction

Kyrgyzstan has a population of approximately 5.7 million, but only about 35% of the population resides in urban centers. The highest population density is in the north, around Bishkek, which has a population of approximately 865,000. Kyrgyzstan's portion of the Fergana Valley is another major population center, containing large cities such as Osh and Jalal-abad. About 60% of the urban population lives in Bishkek and Osh.¹

Kyrgyzstan has 25 cities and 28 "settlements of urban type;" 90% of the urban population lives in the cities, and the remaining urban population lives in the urban settlements. Urban growth is under 1% a year and the growth of the rural population outpaces

urban population growth. After Kyrgyzstan gained independence, emigration out of the country led to population decline in urban centers.^{2, 3} In 2015, urban poverty was estimated at a little under 30%.⁴

Urbanization

Infrastructural Problems



*Solar water heating system in Osh
Flickr / Tatiana Vedeneva*

Kyrgyzstan's urban centers suffer from aging infrastructure. An estimated 70% of the urban infrastructure is obsolete or deteriorating. Water and gas lines frequently break and leak; sewage treatment lines and facilities are inadequate, raising the risk of waterborne illnesses. An estimated 20% of natural gas and 20-50% of water is lost in transit. Insufficient local government budgets and a lack of infrastructure funding from the central government have prevented aging infrastructure problems from being addressed. Ethnic Uzbeks have complained that road and infrastructure projects have been initiated without public input and that these projects have caused disruption in their neighborhoods and destruction of their homes.⁵ Although nearly all of the urban population has access to drinking water, water quality is generally poor.^{6, 7, 8}

Housing

Kyrgyz law states that each citizen is to be allocated a plot of land, but the slow, corrupt, bureaucratic process largely prevents this promise from being fulfilled. The health of the housing market relies on remittance money sent from relatives working abroad; prices for houses have been tied to the US dollar, and the decline of the Russian ruble and the Kyrgyz som have hurt Kyrgyz citizens' ability to afford purchasing homes. Affordable housing



*Apartment buildings in Bishkek
Flickr / Matthias Buehler*

has been a political issue, and politicians have proposed subsidizing the cost of mortgages. Bishkek and Osh have large, informal settlements of makeshift houses on their outskirts. Residents of these informal settlements lack access to utilities or other public services; some seek government recognition and public services for their settlements, but that has proven to be a lengthy process.^{9, 10}

Urban Employment Issues



*Workers on a break in Bishkek
Flickr / Matthias Buehler*

The Soviet planned economy didn't consider the needs of local markets, and many industries in Kyrgyzstan collapsed after the disintegration of the Soviet Union because there was not sufficient demand to support those industries, and forging import/export partnerships was a lengthy and complicated process. This led to massive employment losses and a decline in the population of many urban centers. Only Bishkek and Osh have seen substantial growth.¹¹ Kyrgyz citizens have

sought employment abroad because of the poor domestic employment market.¹² The government claims the unemployment rate is just above 2%, but other estimates have concluded the rate is closer to 7%.^{13, 14}

Although the government mandates occupational safety standards, enforcement is rare. Infrastructure projects backed by China reserve 30% of their jobs for residents of Kyrgyzstan, but residents employed to work on these projects complain about low wages and harsh working conditions. It is estimated that around 20% of Kyrgyzstan's workforce is working abroad due to limited job opportunities in the country. Sluggish economic conditions in Russia have caused remittances to drop, and migrant workers returning to Kyrgyzstan could drive up unemployment rates.^{15, 16, 17}

Health Issues

The health care system in Kyrgyzstan is considerably below Western standards, but government reforms have provided some improvements.¹⁸ The government provides healthcare via universal health insurance, but a lack of funding and poor administration of the program have led to significant shortcomings throughout the system.^{19, 20} Hospitals and physicians often expect payment up front before providing medical services. Prescription medication and medical supplies are scarce.²¹ Wait times at local clinics are long, physicians request unofficial payments or turn away those who cannot pay, the elderly are underserved, and the quality of physicians has decreased since the Soviet era. Supplemental insurance to cover emergency medical care is recommended for travelers to Kyrgyzstan.^{22, 23}



*Doctor examining a patient in Naryn Province
Flickr / United Nations Development Programme*

Tuberculosis (TB) is a problem in Kyrgyzstan, especially multi-drug resistant TB, but since the year 2000, the rate of infection has dropped from about 350 per 100,000 to 200 per 100,000.^{24, 25} Infant mortality rate is another prominent issue; Kyrgyzstan has the 67th-highest infant mortality rate in the world. About 37% of urban residents have a connection to a central sewage system, and that percentage has fallen over the course of a decade; substandard water and sanitation have led to increasing numbers of intestinal infections.^{26, 27, 28}

Do you know what is wrong?		
Visitor:	emneh tooRa emestigin beeleseezbi?	Do you know what is wrong?
Local:	jawk	No.

Exchange 12

Is there a hospital nearby?		
Visitor:	jaakyn aaRada oRookana baaRby?	Is there a hospital nearby?
Local:	obaa, shaaRdyn tsentRindeh	Yes, in the center of town.

Exchange 13

Education



Elementary school children in Bishkek
Flickr / USAID Kyrgyz Republic

Children enter Kyrgyzstan’s school system at the age of seven and attend four years of primary school. Lower secondary school lasts for five years, and upper secondary school is two years. The school year begins in September and ends in May. The country spends 5.5% of its GDP on education, and both genders have a literacy rate above 99%. Primary school graduation is near 100%, and nearly 80% of both genders enroll in secondary school. Urban and wealthy pupils are more likely to stay in school.

There are 54 institutions of higher education in Kyrgyzstan; women enroll in higher education at a 12% higher rate than men. The country’s higher education system has been criticized for low standards of faculty recruitment and retention, poor scientific research, a lack of preparing students for the needs of the labor market, and curricula that do not adequately prepare graduates to compete against graduates of universities throughout the region.^{29, 30, 31}

Is there a school nearby?	
Visitor:	jaalkyn aaRada mektep baaRby?
Local:	obaa

Is there a school nearby?
Yes.

Exchange 14

Restaurants

Urban Kyrgyzstan offers a wide variety of dining options that cater to a diverse palate. Meal prices range anywhere from USD 1 to 25. The word “restaurant” in Kyrgyzstan typically refers to upscale dining establishments that are popular with Western visitors; Italian, Chinese, and American food is easily found in Bishkek. A “cafe” is a less expensive choice, and it usually serves local and regional dishes.^{32, 33}



Dumplings served at a restaurant in Karakol
Flickr / J.D. and Jamie Hollis

Although Islam is Kyrgyzstan’s predominant religion, bars and pubs operate in the country; these establishments serve food and alcohol; some have a nightclub type of atmosphere, and others have live bands or low-key music.³⁴

Put this all in one bill, please.		
Visitor:	moonoon baaRdygyn meneen es- ebeemeh jaasaanyz sooRaanych	Put this all on one bill, please.
Local:	jaakshy	Okay.

Exchange 15

What type of meat is this?		
Visitor:	bool ghaanday et?	What type of meat is this?
Local:	bool koy etee	It’s lamb.

Exchange 16

Marketplace and Street Vendors



*Bazaar in Osh
Flickr / Matthias Buehler*

Bazaars are large marketplaces where vendors set up their shops in small storefronts, booths, and shipping containers; bazaars have been a magnet for Kyrgyzstan’s entrepreneurs and small business owners. A wide variety of goods are found in bazaars, such as clothing, produce, meat, household goods, and even vehicles. The bazaar in Osh suffered significant damage during the 2010 ethnic violence. The Dordoi Bazaar (also spelled as Dordoy), located right outside of Bishkek, is one of the largest markets in Central Asia.^{35, 36}

The Dordoi Bazaar flourished due to Kyrgyzstan’s geographic location and trade policies. The bazaar has been a center for re-exporting—goods brought from China and Turkey to Kyrgyzstan were then exported to international markets throughout the region. This role as a middleman has been very lucrative for merchants and the national government. The World Bank estimates that at its peak, USD 3.5 billion of trade passed through the Dordoi Bazaar. In August 2015, Kyrgyzstan joined the Eurasian Economic Union, and while the agreement opened trade between other

union members, Kyrgyzstan’s competitive advantage as a re-exporter was hurt. Even though the Dordoi Bazaar remains very large, it has seen a decrease in the volume of trade and traffic.^{37, 38}

Please, buy something from me.		
Visitor:	menden beeR neRseh saatyp aal-yngyzchy, sooRaanych	Please, buy something from me.
Local:	kecheeResiz aakchaam kaalbady	Sorry, I have no money left.

Exchange 17



100 som banknote
Wikipedia / National Bank of the Kyrgyz Republic

The currency used in the country is the Kyrgyz som. Currency can be exchanged and there are ATMs located in the major cities. Credit cards are not usually accepted outside of large establishments in major cities. Up to USD 3,000 can be brought into or taken out of Kyrgyzstan at a time.^{39, 40, 41} As of the summer of 2017, one US dollar was equivalent to approximately 70 Kyrgyzstan soms.⁴²

Can you give me change for this?		
Visitor:	maaghaa moonoo maayda aakcha kylp beReh alaasyzby?	Can you give me change for this?
Local:	jawk	No.

Exchange 18

Transportation and Traffic

Cars

Streets in Bishkek are in poor condition and not well lit; roads are not well maintained. Aggressive and reckless driving is common in urban areas. Driving with a camera mounted to the dashboard is highly recommended. Driving at night is not recommended outside of major cities.



*Traffic in Bishkek
Flickr / Darren and Sandy Van Soye*

Hit-and-run accidents and traffic fatalities are common occurrences; if involved in an accident, one should not move the vehicle, but wait patiently for the police to arrive. Some criminals will purposely cause an accident in order to demand payment. Corrupt law enforcement officials pull motorists over or operate checkpoints to demand fines or bribes. In Kyrgyzstan, cars drive on the right side of the road.⁴³

Is there a gas station nearby?	
Visitor:	jaakyn aRada aavtozapRavka baaRby
Local:	obaa

Is there a gas station nearby?
Yes.

Exchange 19

Public Transportation



Bus on the streets of Bishkek
Flickr / kvitlauk

Buses are typically unsafe, unreliable, and overcrowded; using public transportation after dark is another potential safety hazard. Riding a privately-owned minibus—known locally as *marshrutka*—should be avoided. Threats to personal safety, dangerous driving, and theft are some of the hazards that passengers on *marshrutkas* may experience. Do not use a private or unmarked taxi. Only use clearly marked, radio-dispatched taxis; state the destination and route, and negotiate the fare before entering the taxi. Do not enter the taxi if it already has a passenger. Taxis can be arranged through a hotel, and it is best to avoid taxis that do not have seatbelts. There are no commercial flights between the United States and Kyrgyzstan.^{44, 45}

The bus will be here soon, right?	
Visitor:	aavtoboos tez eleh kelip kaalsa keRek bool jeRgeh, tueRaaby?
Local:	obaa

The bus will be here soon, right?
Yes.

Exchange 20

Street Crime and Solicitations

Foreigners have been the victims of muggings and violent assaults in urban areas. In 2016, there were 77 investigations of crimes against foreign nationals. Foreigners are targeted because they are perceived as having more money; foreigners have also reported that their drinks have been drugged at nightclubs. Petty theft is common in public areas. Criminals impersonate police officers, and some police officers abuse their position to supplement their income. The police rarely speak English. If detained by the police, contact the US embassy. Security services may subject foreigners to electronic and physical surveillance. Travelers should assume that communications are being monitored and trade secrets or sensitive information may be compromised.⁴⁶



*Vehicle used by Kyrgyz security forces for riot control
Flickr / Etienne Combiar*

Give me money.	
Visitor:	maaghaa aakcha beR
Local:	mendeh aakcha jawk

Give me money.
I don't have any.

Exchange 21

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Kyrgyz Cultural Orientation

Chapter 4 | Urban Life

Assessment

1. Nearly 30% of the urban population in Kyrgyzstan lives in poverty.
2. It is illegal to sell or buy alcohol in bars and restaurants.
3. The Dordoi Bazaar, located on the outskirts of Bishkek, is the largest public market in Central Asia.
4. Public transportation is efficient, comfortable, and safe in the big cities.
5. Women in Kyrgyzstan are not encouraged to enroll in institutions of higher education.

Assessment Answers: 1. True; 2. True; 3. False; 4. False; 5. False



*Rural scene in Sary-Tash, Osh Region
Flickr / Timon91*

Chapter 5 | Kyrgyz Cultural Orientation

Rural Life

Introduction

The mountainous nation of Kyrgyzstan is the second smallest of the Central Asian republics and among the poorest countries in the world. Unlike the populations of the other Central Asian republics, the Kyrgyz continue their nomadic lifestyle as cattle breeders and herders, particularly in the remote mountain regions of northern Kyrgyzstan. In 2016, Kyrgyzstan was the 184th most wealthy, out of 230 ranked countries, and the GDP per capita (PPP) was USD 3,500.^{1, 2}

Nearly two-thirds of Kyrgyzstan's population lives in rural areas, and 40% of these rural dwellers live in poverty.^{3, 4}

During the Soviet era, many Kyrgyz were forced to abandon their nomadic lifestyle and work on collective farms or settle in cities to work in state enterprises. After independence, many Kyrgyz attempted to return to their lives as nomadic herders. But harsh economic realities led many herders to become semi-nomadic and rely partially on subsistence farming, moving their livestock to spring and summer pastures and settling down during the fall and winter months.^{5, 6}

The rural Kyrgyz continue many nomadic traditions. Yurts, portable round tents covered with animal skin or felt, are still used as summer dwellings. The word yurt, means “gray house” because of the color of the felts. Traditional nomadic hospitality is valued and practiced. Rural Kyrgyz maintain a close relationship with nature and play the traditional sports of their ancestors.^{7, 8}

Tribal Distribution

The 40 Kyrgyz tribes are clustered into northern and southern regional groups.^{9, 10} The northern region includes the capital Bishkek (which is the most Russified, urbanized, and industrialized area of the country) and the Talas, Chuy, Issyk-Kul, and Naryn regions. The southern group, which is more agrarian, consists of the provinces of Osh, Jalal-Abad, and Batken.¹¹ Another important difference is that the southern tribes have historically been more sedentary, while the northern tribes retained many of their nomadic traditions.¹² The tribes in these regions can be grouped into two larger categories: the northern Tagai, who are more Russified and secular, and the southern Ichkilik, who tend to be devout Muslim and similar to Uzbeks.¹³ The largest northern tribal group can be further subdivided into the Bugu, Sary Bagysh, Solto, Adigine, Dungans, and Saruu groups. The major southern tribes include the Munduz, Kalmak, and Döölös.^{14, 15, 16}



*Elders near Cholpon Ata, Issyk-Kul District
Flickr / Ronan Shenhav*

During the 1920s and 1930s, the Soviet Union attempted to settle the nomadic Kyrgyz by creating administrative-territorial units that integrated the existing tribes into the state. During the 1960s and 1970s, these existing clan-based units played a significant role in the distribution of state resources. The clan networks fueled competition between the northern and southern tribal confederations as each clan attempted to gain power and resources. Competition for territory and resources between regional

tribes impeded the Soviets from developing a united Kyrgyzstan. Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev tried to weaken the clan networks, which became even more important as Kyrgyz nationalism began to spread. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, tribal relations have become even stronger, partly because of the harsh economic times. Tribal affiliation played a key role in national and local elections, since people tended to vote along tribal lines.^{17, 18, 19, 20}

Land Distribution

During the Soviet era, all the land in Kyrgyzstan belonged to the state.²¹ In the mid-1990s, the Kyrgyz government began a series of land reforms aimed at dismantling Soviet



*Harvesting barley in Suusamyr Valley, Jayyl District
Flickr / United Nations Development Programme*

collectives and establishing individual farms. Within a short time, about 75% of all agricultural lands had been allocated to eligible residents, with plots averaging about 0.1 hectare (.247 acre) in size. The size of the plots depended on the number of people living on or near the old state farms, the size of the former state farm, and the experience of the workers. Farmers in the more densely populated areas received smaller plots. The state retained ownership of the remaining 25%

of the land, which is managed by the ministry of agriculture.^{22, 23}

At first, farmers did not own the land allocated to them, but were granted land use rights certificates, which entitled them to use the land for 99 years. They could transfer, sell, or lease the land. In 1998, a constitutional amendment granted rights of private ownership to all certificate holders. Any resident who is 18 or older has the right to own land if the person has resided in the location for at least two years. The land may be leased, sold, or donated, but all land is designated solely for agricultural use.^{24, 25}

In 2009, Kyrgyzstan passed the Pastures Law of the Kyrgyz Republic, categorizing all pasture lands as a national treasure, never to be transferred to private ownership. The National Public Pasture Users Association and local pasture committees manage the pastureland. The pasture committees receive training in sustainable pasture management and support from the Pasture Department of the Ministry of Agriculture and nongovernmental organizations.²⁶

Economy

Agriculture remains the pillar of Kyrgyzstan's economy. In 2015, 30% of the labor force was employed in agriculture, and agriculture accounts for 20% of Kyrgyzstan's gross domestic product (GDP).^{27, 28} Livestock breeding and ranching is the most significant part of the agricultural sector because the mountainous landscape is more suited for livestock such as cattle, sheep, and goats than for cultivation. Approximately 55% of the land can be used for agriculture, but only 7% is suitable for crop cultivation, while 48% is pastureland.^{29, 30, 31} The main crops cultivated for export are tobacco and cotton. Other important crops include potatoes, vegetables, and berries.³²



*Livestock market in Karakol
Flickr / Charles Roffey*

Kyrgyzstan's transition to a market economy devastated the rural economy.^{33, 34, 35} Government efforts are focused on improving crop yields and maximizing production, in order to alleviate unemployment and poverty.³⁶ But Kyrgyzstan faces several problems that impede these efforts. Much of the agricultural land is poorly managed, resulting in severe land degradation. Water resource management is inadequate and many farm plots are too small for modern farm equipment.^{37, 38, 39}

Diversifying Income in Rural Areas



*Family in the mountains near Lake Issyk-Kul
Flickr / Ivan Pechorin*

Approximately 74% of Kyrgyzstan's poor live in rural areas.^{40, 41} But poverty is uneven. In the most remote regions, more than 50% are poor, compared to 26% of those living on the plains.⁴² The high poverty rates have pushed many rural Kyrgyz to supplement their incomes with non-agricultural related sources, including transportation, communications, and trading. One in five non-agricultural jobs is in education. Non-agricultural income now constitutes three-quarters of rural incomes.^{43, 44} Ecotourism provides a supplementary source of income for some of the remaining Kyrgyz nomads.^{45, 46}

Transportation

Kyrgyzstan's transportation and road infrastructure is severely underdeveloped and conditions in rural areas are dangerous. Limited investment in road construction and repair, severe winter weather, and mountainous terrain are all factors that make Kyrgyzstan's rural roads dangerous. All roads, highways, railways, and airports are owned and maintained by the state. Approximately 80% of cargo and passengers are transported by motorized vehicles.⁴⁷ Public transportation is often limited to buses and minibuses (marshrutkas), which are crowded and should be avoided because of safety concerns.^{48, 49} According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN, 800,000 people have no access to rural transport.⁵⁰



*Bus attempting to cross a narrow bridge
Flickr / shirtpants*



*Rural road in southern Kyrgyzstan
Flickr / Timon91*

Most of the roads in Kyrgyzstan are two lanes and are frequently in poor condition. It is not advisable to drive at night because roads and traffic signs are not illuminated. Snow and ice on the roads create hazardous conditions during the winter months. Mountain roads are frequently narrow, contain hairpin turns, and may be closed because of avalanches or rock slides. Towing and other emergency road services are not available anywhere. There are few mechanics in rural areas and rest areas are rare. Gas stations are difficult to find outside cities. The road between Bishkek and the Kazakh city of Almaty is restricted after dark for US embassy personnel because of safety concerns.^{51, 52}

There are two international airports in the country: Manas International Airport in Bishkek and Osh International Airport. About two dozen airports handle domestic flights.^{53, 54}

Healthcare



Health clinic in Naryn Province
 Flickr / United Nations Development Programme in Europe
 and CIS

Kyrgyzstan introduced reforms designed to fix the Soviet-established healthcare system. In rural areas, the lack of healthcare professionals reduces access to care and overburdens doctors.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, there is an increase in the use of primary care facilities and pharmacies.⁵⁶ Yet the nation’s health indicators remain low. Life expectancy for men has decreased since independence. Infant and maternal mortality rates are high, as are tuberculosis rates, and the number of HIV infections is growing.^{57, 58}

Remote villages, hazardous road conditions, and nonexistent media make healthcare delivery difficult. Few health professionals, particularly doctors, are willing to work in rural areas. Facilities are inadequate to treat many conditions, prompting the government to shift the emphasis to health education.⁵⁹ Women and healthcare providers have a limited understanding of maternal care and childbirth.⁶⁰ Although the government mandates rural assignments to some medical school graduates, only about 20% of doctors take the assignments.⁶¹

Is there a medical clinic nearby?		
Visitor:	jawkyn aaRada medpoonkt baaRby?	Is there a medical clinic nearby?
Local:	obaa, teegee jawktaa	Yes, over there.

Exchange 22

In the most remote parts of the nation, territorial hospitals and family medical centers (FMCs) are not viable. Instead, the Ministry of Health provides general practice centers with the same services as family medical centers and small hospitals. The first points of contact for rural patients in the most remote areas are feldsher-midwifery posts (FAPs), which were instituted during the Soviet era. There are 1,600 FAPs around the country, staffed with at least one paramedic. FAPs provide only the most rudimentary care and vaccination. According to the health ministry, 96% of the population is covered by immunization.⁶² Family group practices (FGPs) are available in villages with over 500 residents. The size of the staff depends on the size of the village, but there is always at least one doctor, a nurse, and a midwife. FGPs offer primary medical care

for an entire family within a single facility rather than separate facilities for adults, reproductive women’s care, and children.⁶³ Rural hospitals are small and can provide only the most basic care. They often lack electricity and running water.⁶⁴

In 2013, when suspicion of bubonic plague rose after a boy from a small village in northeastern Kyrgyzstan was believed to be possibly infected by the disease, the government disinfected and vaccinated local residents, erected checkpoints in the district, and stopped all movements by humans and livestock in and out of the affected area. The authorities also quarantined more than 100 people and medical workers who had contact with the boy.^{65, 66}



Healthcare facility in Naryn Province
Flickr / United Nations Development Programme in Europe and CIS

My arm is broken, can you help me?		
Visitor:	menin koloom synyp kaalghan maga jaaRdam beReh aalaasyzby?	My arm is broken, can you help me?
Local:	obaa seezgeh jaaRdam beReh aalam	Yes, I can help you.

Exchange 23

Education



Children riding to school in Uchkun, Naryn Region
Flickr / United Nations Development Programme

Education and its infrastructure have been affected by the nation’s poor economy. Because of Kyrgyzstan’s extremely remote rural areas, it is difficult to provide children with an education of similar quality to that of urban children. In rural areas, children have less access to both primary and secondary schools.⁶⁷ Rural classes are larger, forcing schools to operate in shifts. Many school buildings lack basic sanitation, such as indoor toilets and running water.^{68, 69} There are few rural teachers

due to the preference to work in urban areas. Rural children lag behind their urban counterparts in achievement, a gap that is likely to widen unless more qualified teachers move to rural areas.⁷⁰

Absenteeism and Quranic Schools

Official data shows that nearly all school-age children are enrolled in school, but rates of attendance are higher in urban areas.⁷¹ Dropout rates in rural schools are nearly double those in urban schools.⁷² Absenteeism is highest during the harvest season (September-October) and the planting months (April-May). Rural children often stay out of school to help their parents in the fields.⁷³ Nearly 40% of absenteeism is explained by farm work and a lack of money to buy shoes, school uniforms, or supplies—conditions that are more likely to affect children in poor rural areas.^{74, 75}



*Main entrance to Issyk-Kul Secondary School
in Isfana, Batken Region
Wikimedia / Nataev*

Quranic schools, or madrassas, provide instruction on the Quran and the Arabic language; these schools have become increasingly popular. State schools offer free education, but the associated expenses place education out of reach for many families. Parents turn to the madrassas, where everything is provided without any cost. Graduates of madrassas are not eligible to attend institutes of higher education because they lack the proper education certifications.⁷⁶

Village Life

Local government is divided into three levels. The primary territorial level is composed of small villages and towns. The basic territorial level includes larger cities, and the oblast territorial level is similar to a provincial or state level. The legal entity that carries out the functions of government, called *kenesh*, is accountable to the higher levels of government and the local people. Members of the *kenesh* are called deputies, and they are directly elected by the people. Small village *keneshes* usually have between 9 and 15 deputies. The chair, deputy chair, and secretary of the *kenesh* are elected in the first session.⁷⁷



Repairing a sheep yard in the village of Kyzyl-Oj, Naryn
Flickr / UNDP in Europe and Central Asia

Several administrative reforms have been implemented to decentralize governance. In 2008, locally appointed bodies known as the *ayil okmotu* (village government) took responsibility for village development and planning, keeping statistical data, and issuing land certificates. They also carry out decisions made by elected village councils or legislative bodies known as the *ayil kenesh*. The *keneshes* have the authority to review and approve local budgets. In the smallest rural areas, the chair of the *ayil okmotu* and *kenesh* serves

as the head of the local state administrative body.⁷⁸ Local *keneshes* appoint the mayor from a list of candidates nominated by the state government or by the president.⁷⁹

To date, efforts to decentralize local government have met with some success, and the federal government is considering a law that would outline local responsibilities.^{80, 81} However, laws designed to protect decentralized governments are not always enforced, and conditions necessary for effective governance are not always in place.^{82, 83}

Border Crossings and Checkpoints

Kyrgyzstan shares borders with Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, China, and Tajikistan.^{84, 85} In 2010, Kazakhstan closed the border with Kyrgyzstan at Tegen-Karkara, due to unrest and smuggling. In 2015, after Kyrgyzstan became a member of the Eurasian Economic Union, the border crossing re-opened.⁸⁶



Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border crossing
Flickr / We Overland

There are two border crossings with China over the Tien Shan Mountains: Irkeshtam (Erkech-Tam) Pass and Torugart Pass, which are often closed in winter because of road conditions.^{87, 88} In 2017, Chinese and Kyrgyz border security forces held joint exercises to improve security and halt weapons smuggling by militants from the Muslim Uighur ethnic minority.⁸⁹ Border crossings with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan close unpredictably due to incidents of violence.^{90, 91, 92}

Where is the nearest checkpoint?		
Visitor:	eng jawkin teksheRue poonktoo kaaysyl jeRdeh?	Where is the nearest checkpoint?
Local:	bool jeRden ekee keelometR aalystyktaa	It's two kilometers.

Exchange 24

Traffic police commonly harass foreigners in order to extort money. If stopped by the police, ask to see the officer's identification. If officers are unable or unwilling to show proper official identification, do not get out of the car and do not get into a police car. Drivers should be prepared to show all papers, registration, and passports.^{93, 94}

Show us the car registration.		
Visitor:	beezgeh maasheenaany RegeestRaatseeYaadan œtkœRue jeRdin kœRsoetsœnguez	Show us the car registration.
Local:	bool jawkta	Right away.

Exchange 25

Landmines

Is this area mined?		
Visitor:	bool jeR meenaalaashty-Rylghanby?	Is this area mined?
Local:	jawk	No.

Exchange 26



Kyrgyz soldiers train to sweep for landmines
Wikimedia / Senior Airman Brett Clashman

Kyrgyzstan has not signed the Mine Ban Treaty or the Convention on Cluster Munitions because the government uses mines as a border security measure. Although the nation has never produced or exported antipersonnel mines, it did inherit a weapons stockpile from the Soviet Union.⁹⁵

Kyrgyzstan's landmines are concentrated in the southern Batken Region. Unexploded ordnance is found in the Fergana Valley.⁹⁶ There have been several casualties,

including women and children, between 1999 and 2010. There are no specific services for survivors of landmine explosions.⁹⁷ In 1999 and 2000, Kyrgyzstan deployed mines along some of its borders, but the government contends that those mines were later removed and destroyed. A 2011 declaration by the government stated that Kyrgyzstan has no minefields inside its borders.

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Kyrgyz Cultural Orientation

Chapter 5 | Rural Life

Assessment

1. Ethnic Kyrgyz live predominantly in rural areas.
2. Kyrgyzstan signed the Mine Ban Treaty or the Convention on Cluster Munitions because of growing pressure from the international community.
3. Rural residents have access to basic medical care all over the country.
4. Only men over the age of 21 can legally own land in Kyrgyzstan.
5. Ranching and breeding of livestock is the most important part of agriculture in Kyrgyzstan.

Assessment Answers: 1. True; 2. True; 3. False; 4. False; 5. True



*Kyrgyz couple wearing traditional clothes
Flickr / Katie Putz*

Chapter 6 | Kyrgyz Cultural Orientation

Family Life

Introduction

Kyrgyz families embody the often uneasy coexistence of age-old traditions and the harsh requirements of life after the country's independence. Economic migration has shifted the focus of family life from the extended family to the nuclear family and has left many children vulnerable and impoverished. Despite laws protecting women, there are high rates of domestic violence and bride kidnapping. Legal protections, financial support, and inheritance rights are degraded by unlawful marriages. Neglect of older adults is on the rise, and the population as a whole is getting older. Despite challenges and inequalities, the Kyrgyz people derive great

meaning and fulfillment from elaborate customs surrounding weddings, childbirth, funerals, and rites of passage.

Migration’s Impact on Family Life

The phenomenon of migration has created new realities that are changing the power dynamics in the traditional Kyrgyz family.¹ The nuclear family has superseded the traditional extended family as the primary household.^{2,3} There has been an increase in the number of households that are headed by grandparents.⁴ Some Kyrgyz families send their children to work abroad. These children take care of other migrants’ children or work in agriculture, markets, and kitchens. Children who remain behind in Kyrgyzstan because their parents cannot afford to migrate with them are either left with relatives or placed in state-run institutions where they are subject to mistreatment.^{5, 6, 7}



Family near the Too-Ashuu Pass in the Tien Shan Mountain
Flickr / yuan.muye

Typical Household and Family Structure



Family near Lake Issyk-Kul
Wikimedia / Hardscarf

Individuals usually live with their parents until they marry. By tradition, the youngest son in the family is responsible for the care of his parents. Approximately 26% of families live in extended households, which frequently contain as many as three generations. Extended family members sometimes live with relatives for several months at a time.⁸

How many people live in this house?		
Visitor:	bool uy-deh kaanchaa aadam jaashayt?	How many people live in this house?
Local:	aalty	Six.

Exchange 27

According to a 2012 demographic survey, the average size of a household in Kyrgyzstan is 4.2 people. Rural households tend to be larger than urban households (4.6 vs. 3.5). Though the size of the rural family has decreased since the late 1990s, rural families remain larger than urban families.⁹

The Status of Women

Even though the constitution prohibits discrimination based on gender, violence against women and institutional gender discrimination are on the rise. Women spend more time on child rearing and domestic tasks, and their wages are significantly lower than men's.¹⁰ The kidnapping of women for the purpose of marriage is on the rise. Some claim bride kidnapping is a traditional practice, even though it became more prevalent after Kyrgyzstan's independence from the Soviet Union.^{11, 12, 13}



*Woman fishing in a mountain stream using traditional methods
Flickr / Mountain Partnership at FAO*

The nation's family code recognizes gender equality in family relations, but women are not protected against male-dominated family decisions. Law enforcement officials often ignore discrimination complaints, or they are unaware that discriminatory practices are illegal.¹⁴



*Kyrgyz family
Flickr / Charles Roffey*

Domestic violence is widespread in Kyrgyzstan, affecting about a third of women and girls between the ages of 15 to 49. Despite a 2003 domestic violence prevention law, the police often do not enforce protection orders, register complaints, or investigate domestic violence cases. According to government data, in 2013, only 7% of domestic abuse complaints reached the courts. Pressure to keep families together, economic dependence, a lack of services for victims

of domestic violence, and fear of retaliation stop many women from seeking help.¹⁵

In order to strengthen protections for victims of domestic violence, President Almazbek Atambayev signed a new domestic violence prevention bill in 2017. The

Law on the Prevention and Protection against Family Violence requires the police to register domestic abuse complaints by anyone, not just victims. These complaints can address not only physical and psychological abuse but also economic threats that translate into restrictions on access to financial resources and property.¹⁶ The law also gives victims of domestic violence access to social and psychological assistance and domestic violence shelters.¹⁷

Status of Children and the Elderly



*Children in traditional dress
Flickr / Katie Putz*

Poverty has forced many children to work outside the home. Children in rural areas generally work in agriculture and coal mines. In the cities, boys work as street vendors, shoe polishers, meat cutters, and porters; girls work as waitresses, garbage collectors, cleaners, and sellers of produce.¹⁸ Child labor, childhood poverty, and early marriages are of concern to the government, which has vowed to protect children against exploitation, forced marriages, and human trafficking.^{19, 20, 21}

Due to migration and poverty, 11% of children under 18 do not live with their parents and are considered by the government as foster children.²² Children who lack a birth certificate cannot enroll in schools or receive government healthcare.²³

Historically, the elderly were highly respected and cared for by their children, but increasingly, the elderly find themselves with no one to care for them.²⁴ A 2012 survey found widespread abuse, neglect, and isolation of the elderly. Reliable statistics of elder abuse are not available, and the perception is that the topics of elder care and abuse are private family matters.²⁵ Pensions are insufficient to cover the most basic needs, and many nursing centers offer inadequate care.^{26, 27}



*Elderly woman in Bishkek
Flickr / Malcolm Williams*

Currently, 7% of the population is over 60 years old, but the share of the population over 60 is expected to grow to 23% by 2050.²⁸

Married Life, Divorce, and Birth

Marriage

According to a 2012 demographics and health survey, approximately 64% of women and 60% of men ages 15 to 49 are married. Only 9% of women and 4% of men are divorced, separated, or widowed.²⁹

To be recognized as a legal union, all marriage ceremonies must be state sanctioned. Religious ceremonies are permitted but must be accompanied by a civil service and marriage registration.³⁰ Unregistered unions are becoming increasingly popular because the process of registering a marriage can be cumbersome. Acquiring a marriage certificate involves a long bureaucratic process, and people who live in rural areas have the additional expense and inconvenience of the long trip to the city.³¹



Father and child in northeast Kyrgyzstan
Flickr / michele molinari

Polygamy is not legal under current Kyrgyz law, but the practice is on the rise, especially in rural areas. Those who marry an additional wife can only marry in a religious ceremony (*nikah* in Kyrgyz). Women who marry in a religious ceremony have no rights regarding land and property ownership, alimony, child support, and inheritance.^{32, 33}

Are you married?	
Visitor:	uy-løengøen-suezbue?
Local:	obaa
	Are you married?
	Yes.

Exchange 28

Arranged marriages are more prevalent in rural areas than in urban areas. In arranged marriages, families pledge agreement when sons are between 12 and 15 years of age. Girls tend to be slightly younger.³⁴ In some marriages, the prospective bride and groom usually know each other for only a few months before they marry.³⁵

Child marriage is a serious concern even though Kyrgyzstan is a signatory to the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage, and Registration of Marriages.³⁶ A 2014 government survey, in conjunction with UNICEF, found that 13% of women aged



Children at a yurt camp in the Naryn Region
Flickr / Darren and Sandy Van Soye

20-49 had married or entered into an unregistered marriage before the age of 18 and 0.5% had married before the age of 15.^{37, 38} Girls are sometimes forced into marriage by their parents. Sometimes the girl might agree to marry out of respect for her parents or to ease the family's financial hardship.³⁹ The daily lives of young women are mainly controlled by other women in the household, especially the mother-in-law.⁴⁰

Bride kidnapping (*ala kachu* in Kyrgyz) is a custom in which young women are abducted from their homes against their will and forced to marry. While official statistics on bride kidnapping vary, government officials and experts agree that the practice has been on the rise since Kyrgyzstan became independent.⁴¹ As many as 8,000 girls a year are victims of this practice.⁴² Some studies show that 40% of urban Kyrgyz women were kidnapped and married against their will; 60% of Kyrgyz women who live in rural villages were kidnapped. In some regions, more than 80% of marriages were the result of an abduction. Many of these marriages are informally blessed by a religious figure and are not registered with the state, leaving these kidnapped brides with few legal protections.^{43, 44, 45, 46}



Woman in Bokonabayevo, Tong District
Flickr / Charles Roffey

In 2013, President Almazbek Atambayev signed legislation that increased the penalty for bride kidnapping to up to 10 years in prison. A 2016 bill sought to protect adolescent girls from forced and early marriages. The bill introduced of up to five years in prison for parents who allowed their underage children to marry, and for religious leaders who officiate over unlawful marriages.⁴⁷

Is this your wife?	
Visitor:	bool seezdin aayaalyngzyby?
Local:	obaa

Is this your wife?
Yes.

Exchange 29

Divorce

In spite of the heavy stigma attached to a failed marriage, approximately one in every six marriages ends in divorce.⁴⁸ A failed marriage can bring shame on the entire family. Children raised in a single-parent household by the mother are often regarded as orphans.⁴⁹

Are these your children?		
Visitor:	boolaaR seezdin baaldaRyngyzyby?	Are these your children?
Local:	obaa	Yes.

Exchange 30



Men playing chess in Bishkek
Flickr / Andreas Berg

Either party has the right to initiate divorce in a legally registered marriage, but if one party objects, judges are allowed to impose up to a three-month waiting period. Judges can impose a one-month waiting period even in cases of uncontested divorce. In some situations, judges insist that women must wait for up to six months before the divorce is granted.⁵⁰ In unregistered marriages, women have no recourse and no right to inheritance, custodial rights of children, or any financial support.⁵¹

According to the law, a divorced father must pay a quarter of his monthly salary in child support if he has one child, and if there are two children, he must pay half of his wage until the children turn 18. However, many men do not pay child support or alimony, and tracking them down is difficult. Some men go to Russia or Kazakhstan to work, where they marry other women and start new families.⁵²

Birth

The Kyrgyz believe that when a baby is born no one but family members should see the baby for the first 40 days, to ward off the evil eye. On the 40th day, the baby is presented to the community in a large party (*beshik-toi*).⁵³ The child's name is announced in a ritual known as *asan chakyrUU*. Children born out of wedlock or to parents in an unlawful marriage are considered illegitimate, and these children take the mother's

last name and a patronymic chosen by the mother. Such children do have a right to paternal financial support, but they do not have paternal inheritance rights. The child's paternity may be registered if both parents submit a joint application to the appropriate authorities.⁵⁴



*Nomad woman with a baby near Lake Issyk-Kul
Flickr / Béatrice BDM*

Family Social Events

Weddings

When a young man decides to marry, he and his family pay a visit to the home of the prospective bride and announce his intentions. The two families begin negotiating the required *kalim* (dowry). The *kalim* consists of a cash payment and several animals, which may be eaten at the wedding party. After the sum is agreed upon, the groom presents a pair of gold earrings to his bride-to-be, and the couple is formally engaged. The wedding usually takes place soon after that. Older brothers are expected to marry before their younger brothers, and younger brothers are expected to wait for their turn.^{55, 56}



*Wedding party releasing doves at Victory Square in Bishkek
Flickr / Babak Fakhamzadeh*

Weddings are often three-day affairs. On the first day, the new couple travels to a nearby city to register their marriage and have the marriage license signed. The second day is filled with celebrations. The bride and groom hold separate parties, feasting and dancing late into the night with their respective friends and families. The bride and her immediate family travel to the family home of the groom on the third day. The bride is expected to cry out of sadness for leaving her family and

childhood home. More celebrations and games follow, including an exchange of gifts among the new parents-in-law.⁵⁷ Some weddings include a staged “kidnapping” or *arkan tosuu*, in which the bride is “ransomed.”⁵⁸

Are these people your relatives?		
Visitor:	bool aadamdaaR seezdin toogaandaRyngyzyby?	Are these people your relatives?
Local:	jawk	No.

Exchange 31

Funerals



Traditional Muslim cemetery
Flickr / Darren and Sandy Van Soye

The Kyrgyz spare no expense when it comes to funerals. Ceremonies often last 10 days. The family constructs two yurts outside the home: one for female mourners and one to house the body. Men are not allowed to enter the yurts; they must mourn outside and also carry out ritual weeping (*okuruk*). Wives and daughters of the deceased may sit with the body and sing mourning songs (*koshok*). The wife wears black mourning clothes, but daughters wear dark blue. Contrary to Islamic custom, the body

remains on display for up to three days before being buried.^{59, 60, 61}

For Muslims, an imam offers a final prayer (*janaza*), and men carry the body to the cemetery for burial. Only men are permitted to attend the burial. Women go to the gravesite early the following morning.

After the burial, friends and family gather to share a meal. Some families slaughter a horse if they can afford it, in the belief that the horse will carry the soul of the deceased to the afterlife.^{62, 63, 64} After 40 days, the guests are invited to the home of the deceased to grieve. A year after the burial, elaborate headstones are erected and decorated with tiles, often with a turret or a dome. Scraps of cloth are tied to trees or gates near the cemetery as symbols of prayers for the deceased.^{65, 66}



A headstone at a cemetery near Chayek
Flickr / Alex Keshavjee

Rites of Passage

On a child's first birthday, the parents hold a party, and guests wish the child a bright future. According to custom, the guests share a meal and give the child a blessing, or *bata*. Then the parents tie the child's legs with a white and black striped wool cord. The children at the party have a race, and the first two finishers win the privilege of cutting the cord and walking with the child, supporting the toddler by the arms.⁶⁷



Boy showing off his riding skills near Lake Song-Kul
Flickr / eatswords

Circumcision (*balany otorguzuu*) is an important rite of passage for boys. The ritual is conducted by an imam or a doctor when the boy is three to five years old. A party (*sunnot toi*), including the ritual slaughter of a sheep, is held to celebrate the event.^{68, 69, 70}

Naming Conventions

There are several naming conventions in Kyrgyzstan. The different forms follow the traditional Kyrgyz style or the Russian style.⁷¹



Mother and child in Bishkek
Flickr / Michael Cariaso

Kyrgyz surnames are based on the father's name. People can inherit either their father's surname or the surname can be the first name of the father followed by *uulu* (for males) or *kyzy* (for females). Therefore, Ulan Akayev's son, Aidar, could be Aidar (personal first name) Akayev (father's surname) or Aidar Ulan *uulu* (son of Ulan). The daughter, Anargul, could be Anargul (personal first name) Akayeva (father's surname) or Anargul Ulan *kyzy* (daughter of Ulan). The suffix signifies

national and cultural heritage to many Kyrgyz who migrate abroad.^{72, 73, 74}

Some Kyrgyz choose to Russify their names by adding *ova*, *ov*, *ev*, or *eva* to the surname.⁷⁵ For example, the Russified version of the female name Begayim Kubanychbek *kyzy* is Begayim Kubanychbekova, without the suffix, which many Kyrgyz omit. Russian

middle names are formed by attaching the suffix *vich* or *ovich* for boys or *ovna* for girls to the father's personal name. For example, the middle name of Vladimir's son would be Vladimirovich, and his daughter's name would be Vladimirovna.⁷⁶

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Chapter 6 | Family Life

Assessment

1. The majority of families live in extended family households.
2. The government does not recognize religious weddings.
3. Although domestic violence is a big problem, there is no law against it.
4. Some Kyrgyz men start a second family when they travel abroad for work.
5. Child poverty is a serious concern for the government.

Assessment Answers: 1. False; 2. True; 3. False; 4. True; 5. True

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Further Reading

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Final Assessment

1. Forced settlement and collectivization during the Soviet era destroyed the tribal lifestyle of the Kyrgyz people beyond repair.
2. There are only two border crossings between China and Kyrgyzstan.
3. The kenesh is a local council of elected representatives.
4. Most nomadic Kyrgyz practice Shi'a Islam.
5. Kok-boru is a popular game played on horseback.
6. Roza Otunbayeva is a famous Kyrgyz artist.
7. Religious organizations are required to register with the state.
8. The biggest sources of revenue for Kyrgyzstan are cotton and sheep wool.
9. The Great Urkun was an uprising by the Kyrgyz people against Tsarist Russia.
10. Two large mountain ranges dominate Kyrgyzstan's landscape.

11. The town of Karakol was a popular destination for foreign mountaineers before the collapse of the Soviet Union.
12. Women in Kyrgyzstan are not allowed to inherit land.
13. Most Kyrgyz are not particularly devout or conservative Muslims.
14. Child marriage is a serious concern in Kyrgyzstan.
15. Kyrgyz family tradition stipulates that the responsibility to care for the parents in their old age falls on the eldest son.
16. Kyrgyz funeral rituals follow Islamic traditions.
17. The Tulip Revolution was a short period in which Kyrgyzstan experienced an economic boom.
18. Approximately one-third of the population resides in urban areas.
19. Marshrutka is a simple device used by nomads to trap wild animals.
20. Most of the agricultural land is privately owned.
21. Illiteracy is still high in Kyrgyzstan, especially in rural areas.

22. Some Kyrgyz are changing their names to sound more Russian.
23. Most of the mosques in Kyrgyzstan were built after Kyrgyzstan became independent.
24. Alcoholic beverages should not be offered as a gift in Kyrgyzstan, a country with a Muslim majority.
25. A large part of the economy depends on remittance from exported labor.
26. Parents send their sons to Quranic schools because they provide better education and increase their chance of acceptance into institutions of higher education.
27. Uzbeks and Kyrgyz live in separate neighborhoods and have few cultural links.
28. A yurt is a stone fountain located at the courtyard of every mosque in which Muslims conduct ritual washing before prayers.
29. Kyrgyzstan has universal health insurance.
30. Some of the most volatile hotspots in Kyrgyzstan are located in the Fergana Valley, near the Tajik and Uzbek borders and enclaves.

30. True

20. True; 21. False; 22. True; 23. True; 24. False; 25. True; 26. False; 27. True; 28. False; 29. True; 10. True; 11. False; 12. False; 13. True; 14. True; 15. False; 16. False; 17. False; 18. True; 19. False; Assessment Answers: 1. False; 2. True; 3. True; 4. False; 5. True; 6. False; 7. True; 8. False; 9. True;