«There are two different interpretations of the content of the same monument of the oral epic tradition in China and Kyrgyzstan. The polarity of the Kyrgyz and Chinese versions contributes to the conceptualization of the history of relations between the two nations in the spirit of conflict and rivalry,» – mentioned international affairs specialist Salamat Dzhybykeev in his article for CABAR.asia.

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Short overview of the article:

- The development of interstate relations between the People’s Republic of China and the countries of Central Asia, in particular the Kyrgyz Republic, is influenced by the level of cultural complementarity between their nations;
- Insufficient knowledge of the history and culture of each other by citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic and PRC does not help to strengthen mutual understanding and mutual trust between the two nations;
- A vivid example of this is the different interpretation and perception of the content of the Kyrgyz national epos “Manas” in two countries;
- The current Kyrgyz and Chinese interpretations of the epic contain significant inaccuracies caused by poor use of historical material and linguistic analysis.

The impetus for writing this article was a discussion at a recent meeting of representatives of the Kyrgyz and Chinese expert communities. During the meeting, issues of developing bilateral cooperation between Kyrgyzstan and China in the format of “people – people” were raised.

Analyzing the situation in Central Asia, one of the Chinese experts noted that anti-Chinese sentiments among the local population hinder the deepening of investment, trade, economic, cultural and humanitarian ties between China and the countries of the region. In his opinion, unjustified fears of the “Chinese threat” are caused, among other things, by a distorted perception of the history of relations between China and the nations of Central Asia.
Our Chinese colleague mentioned that in the case of Kyrgyzstan, the plot of the Kyrgyz national epos “Manas”, where the Chinese are called the main historical enemies of the Kyrgyz people, could serve as such a concrete example.

According to the official version adopted in China, the epic arose in the 15-17th centuries, during the so-called “Small Mongolian”, or Dzungarian invasion. Therefore, it is the Jungars who are the main adversary of the Kyrgyz people. The Chinese side adheres to this interpretation and consistently promotes it in various fields of culture. For example, it is reflected in the script of the world-famous opera Manas, staged by the Central Opera House of China.

A completely different perception of the epic “Manas” is present in the public and information space of Kyrgyzstan. Here, the main adversary of Manas and all Kyrgyz people are considered to be the Chinese (Han).

Thus, in China and Kyrgyzstan (and more broadly, in Central Asia) there are two different interpretations of the contents of the same monument of the oral epic tradition. The polarity of the Kyrgyz and Chinese versions contributes to the conceptualization of the history of relations between the two peoples in the spirit of conflict and rivalry.

On this occasion, the great German poet and thinker Johann Wolfgang Goethe once remarked: “they say that the truth lies between two opposing opinions. Wrong. There is a problem between them.”

In my opinion, both modern points of view – Chinese and Kyrgyz, need to be clarified. In this article, I would like to share my thoughts on the issue mentioned above. I hope that this material will not only increase the level of knowledge and interest in the epic itself, but also improve mutual understanding between the Kyrgyz and Chinese sides.

**Truth through the eyes of Chinese people**

The logic of the Chinese side and its interpretation of the plot content of the epic “Manas” is not difficult to understand.

First, Chinese historical sources that are openly available to date, do not contain data that provide grounds for asserting eternal enmity between Kyrgyz and Chinese (Han) people.

The historical chronicles of China published nowadays indicate the opposite – the absence of any fundamental contradictions or conflicts between the two nations.
From here, that concern and surprise expressed by the mentioned Chinese colleague becomes clear.

Secondly, Beijing is actively promoting its alternative global international agenda and world development model embodied in the “Belt and Road” initiative. Under these conditions, China’s growing interest in the culture of the surrounding peoples and countries is logical. Therefore, the Chinese side is carefully “stay relevant” about neighboring states, including the countries of Central Asia. The growth of sinophobia can be a serious factor limiting the security and development of the Middle Kingdom. Hence the desire of China to use its “soft power” to minimize such risks.

... and through the eyes of Kyrgyz people

To understand the position of the Kyrgyz side, the following considerations should be taken into account:

First, the main source of the Kyrgyz people in their history is the rich oral tradition of folk traditions and legends. If we turn to the text of the epic “Manas”, then its composite structure and style of both the historical narrative and the folklore creation immediately catches the eye.

Secondly, as a rule, most foreign researchers, including Chinese, study the epic in its Russian translation. However, in science there is an axiom that for a more complete and objective understanding of the content of any source, one should study it in the original language. So, in the original Kyrgyz version of Manas, the main opponents of the Kyrgyz are called “Kytaylar” or “Kara Kytaylar”.

... but the truth is somewhere nearby

There is no doubt in the presence of real historical foundation in the Kyrgyz epos “Manas”. At the same time, it should be noted that today there is no generally accepted opinion regarding the epic’s time of the appearance, which could shed light on the issue of interest to us.

Therefore, it is advisable to take the name of the enemies of Manas given in the original Kyrgyz version of the epos - “Kytay” or “Kara-Kytay” as a starting point. It is appropriate to recall R. Descartes, who loved to say “determining the exact meaning of words will save mankind from half of the errors.”

China’s self-name in Chinese sounds like Zhongguo, which means “Middle State”, while the
Chinese people are identifying themselves as Hanzheng (Han). Since the reunification of China under Qin Shi Huangdi in 221 BC, the Middle Kingdom has another name derived from the Qin dynasty – Chin. It is precisely because of this that the Kyrgyz, like other nomadic Turkic-speaking people, called China “the country of Chin” (or “Machin”). From here originates the English name for this country – China.

Along with the Chin country, the Kakan country also appears in the epic. Sometimes both countries unite in one area Kakanchin. It was in Kakan where the legendary city of Beijin was located, and it was from there that the main enemies of Manas- Kara-Kytai came.

Initially, the ethnonyms “China” was understood as a different ethnic group, not the same as ethnic Chinese. In antiquity and the Middle Ages, in the lands of north-east of the China’s Great Wall there were living a warlike semi-nomadic people of Mongolian origin, whose self-name was “Kitay”, or “Khitay.” The Chinese called them “tsidan,” or “kidan,” and in the dialects of the Turkic-speaking people, including the Kyrgyz, they were called Kytai. In the Russian-speaking tradition, the name Kidan was firmly entrenched by their side.

At the beginning of the 10th century, the Kidans conquered vast territories of modern eastern and central Mongolia, northeastern and northern China and northern Korea. The vast and powerful power they created went down in world history as the Liao Empire (“Iron Empire”), which lasted more than two hundred years (907-1125).

Kidas periodically made military campaigns against their western neighbors embodied in the Turkic-speaking peoples, including the Kyrgyz.

The Chinese historical chronicle “Liao Shi” (“The History of the Liao Dynasty”) tells that in 916 and 924 the Kidans made a number of conquest campaigns in the western direction to central Mongolia, where the Turkic-speaking tribes living there were submissive. Historians studying the history of the Yenisei Kyrgyz note that the era of the “Kyrgyz Great Power” ended precisely in the first quarter of the 10th century. It is possible that the Kyrgyz were defeated by the Kidans and driven out of the steppe back to the lands of Sayano-Altai. Most likely, such a landmark historical event was reflected in the epic “Manas” as the defeat of the Kyrgyz Khan Nogoy, the grandfather of the hero Manas, at the hands of the Kara-Kytai Khan Esen.

The second major Kidan invasion of the Kyrgyz lands of Sayano-Altai was the campaigns of the famous YelyuDasha in the first quarter of the 11th century. The struggle of the local population with the Kidan and their allied tribes lasted almost until the era of Genghis Khan. Such a long presence of the Kidan factor in the life of the Kyrgyz was reflected in the fact
that the image of the worst and eternal enemy in the people’s memory was fixed precisely – the Kidan (Kara-Kytai).

During the two centuries of the Kidan Empire, they created a new cultural and everyday lifestyle that combined both Kidan nomadic and Chinese elements. For example, the system of government, office work and religious rituals were borrowed from the Chinese (Han). The Kidans embraced Chinese culture, but retained their identity. This feature of the Kidan is noted by many Sinologists, in particular the prominent British historian-Sinologist C. Fitzgerald.

In everyday life, the Kidan retained their clothes, customs, hairstyles, etc. Let us give only one example. As you know, the wearing of long hair by men took place among representatives of the Mongol-speaking nomadic peoples – Kidan, Mongols, Kalmyks, and Manchus. Wearing long braids was not characteristic of ethnic Chinese (Han), who perceived this as an alien cultural phenomenon. It is noteworthy that after the overthrow of the Manchu Qing dynasty in China in 1911, a campaign was launched across the whole Celestial Empire to cut long braids as a symbol of foreign power. In the epic “Manas”, Kara-Ktyay heroes Konurbay, Jola, Neskara wear long hair with braids, and one of the closest associates of Manas- Almambet, a Kidanby origin, is called “Zolotokosy” (Golden Braids).
1. Khitan guardsman

2. Hairstyles of the Mongol warriors, 13-14 centuries

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**Epos “Manas” and Modern Kyrgyz-Chinese Relations**
As a result of the long domination of the Kidan in northern China, their ethnonym “china” (“hitay”) became a politonym, spreading to the peoples subject to them, including the ethnic Chinese (Han) themselves.

A similar practice in history is known quite often. For example, after formation of the Turcic Kaganate (552-657), the ethnonym “Turk” became a political name for all nomadic tribes of the Eurasian steppe conquered by the Turks. Iranians, Arabs, Chinese and Byzantines called the Turks all nomads, regardless of their actual ethnic and tribal affiliation. In the era of Ancient Rome, the ethnonym “Roman” initially belonged only to residents of the city of Rome, then it slowly spread to all residents of the Apennine Peninsula, and as a result, to the entire population of the empire. In the Soviet era closer to us, foreigners called all citizens of the USSR “Russians” or the “Soviets”.

Therefore, it is not surprising that neighboring peoples soon began to call Chinese all the Kidan subjects, and China the entire northern part of the Celestial Empire, where the Kidan
state was located. In the aftermath, the name “China” became a geographical toponym and entered into various languages, including Russian.

Paradoxically, modern China has actually acquired its present geographical outlines as a result of the conquests of foreigners – the Manchu Qing dynasty and the Mongol Yuan dynasty. Ethnic Han Chinese themselves have always been within the framework of the ethnocentric paradigm of the “Middle State”, according to which the world is clearly-geographically divided into a center – the Middle Kingdom and the “barbarian” periphery. The center and periphery had clearly defined physical limits that could not be changed. It was believed that outside the Middle Kingdom, Chinese culture was losing its effect, and the Chinese population was influenced by alien “barbaric” cultures. Therefore, from this point of view, China had no need and expediency in territorial expansion. However, due to the numerous conquests of non-Chinese origin, “barbarian” dynasties that ruled in the Middle Kingdom, the image of China as an expansionist, aggressive state was formed among neighboring peoples. Due to the aggressive policy of the Liao Empire, the nomads and the Chinese perceived the Kidan hostilely.

After the fall of the Liao Empire, the neighboring nomadic nations continued to call by inertial -China the Middle Kingdom. Along with the toponym “China”, the Middle State and its Han population, unfortunately, undeservedly inherited that sociocultural and historical perception of the Kidan, felt to the latter by other nomadic Turkic-speaking peoples, including the Kyrgyz. This circumstance is further enhanced by the fact that in traditional Chinese historiography it is customary to consider as Chinese dynasties, the ones that were founded on the territory of China by foreigners as well. In addition to the Kidan dynasty of Liao, these also include the Jurchen Jin, the Mongol Yuan, and the Manchu Qing.

Another confirmation of the correctness of the Kidan and Kara-Kytaï identity from the epic “Manas” is the presence in it, along with the Kara-Kytaï of the Mongols, also Manchu and Dzungars (Kalmaks). If, as the Chinese colleague claimed, the Dzungars were the main opponent of the Kyrgyz in this epic, then the epic would not have needed to distinguish and separately mention these two nations. And such a consistent arrangement and mention of the above-mentioned peoples can be explained by the sequence of their invasions and clashes with the Kyrgyz.

Ironically, it turned out that modern China and the Chinese got their name after the ethnos, which acted in relation to them as conquerors and enslavers.

Why did the substitution or, rather, the distortion of facts occur?
There is an opinion that this could be a consequence of the deterioration of Soviet-Chinese relations in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Proponents of this version believe that as part of the anti-Chinese information campaign in the Soviet Union, there could have been a deliberate reinterpretation of the primary content of the term “China.”

However, in my opinion, the main reason is still the linguistic factor.

The fact is that, as was shown above, at the time of the historical events described in the epic “Manas”, the Kyrgyz initially called the term “Kytay (China)” Kidan and their nation, and the Celestial Empire itself and its Han population were called the country and people of “Chin”.

By the time the translation of the epic into other languages, including Russian, had began, the toponym “China” was already firmly entrenched in the Middle State. Therefore, during the translation, the Kidan (Kara-Kytai) was replaced by the Chinese (Han) with all the ensuing consequences. Therefore, in all Russian-language editions of the epic “Manas,” Kidan people are called Chinese. Later generations of researchers and readers have studied the epic Manas in a translated version. Moreover, in the Russian language, both ethnic groups – Kidan and Chinese – are called by their names and are clearly distinguished. In modern Kyrgyz and other languages of the Turkic group, the name of Kidan-Kidan state and modern Chinese and China remain identical – Kytaylar and Kytay.

The problem is that today very few people know about the indicated etymological component and the initial belonging of the ethnonym “Kytay” and “Kitay (China).” This remains the property of only a narrow circle of historians-orientalists, linguists and does not go beyond the scientific community.

Based on the foregoing, a number of conclusions should be made.

Firstly, the Kyrgyz folk epos “Manas” has become one of the notable factors in bilateral Kyrgyz-Chinese relations, which is confirmed by the very formulation of the issue of identifying the main enemies of the hero Manas.

Secondly, the generally accepted perception of the enemies of the hero Manas in Kyrgyzstan (Chinese) and China (jungars) is incorrect and inaccurate. Today, there is a high need for knowledge and study of the true plot content of the Kyrgyz national epos “Manas” in the public, information and scientific space of Kyrgyzstan and China.

Thirdly, the occurrence of this problem was due to linguistic circumstances, as well as the
effect of inertial perception.

Fourth, the basis for speculation is provided by insufficient knowledge of the period of 10-11 centuries in the history of both nomads of Central Asia and northern China. It was during this period that the historical events that were described in the epic took place.

According to the well-known Russian nomad historians N. Kradin and A. Ivliev, in the early years of the empire, Liao Kidan did not constantly chronicle according to the Chinese model. Only after 991, a historiographical service was organized at the court of the Kidan emperors. Today, the main written source on Kidan history is Liao Shi (History of the Liao Dynasty), which is one of China’s 24 official dynasty chronicles. Moreover, Liao Shi was compiled in 1344, i.e. two hundred years after the dynasty itself.

Fifth, the study of the historical past is currently limited to the dominance of a materialistic approach in science. The continuing materialistic perception of culture as a secondary superstructure limits the use of new methods of historical research, for example, philosophical.

Sixth, the development of good-neighborly, partnership relations between Kyrgyzstan and China depends on a detailed mutual study of the culture and history of two nations and countries with the obligatory observance of the principles of mutual respect, historicism, objectivity and determinism. At the same time, one should refrain from reinterpreting objective facts in order to please one another.

With proper consideration of all these points, the epic “Manas” can objectively become another space for constructive cooperation between Kyrgyzstan and China. The scientists of both countries have great prospects in studying the Kyrgyz oral historical tradition, Chinese written sources, as well as conducting targeted archaeological research in the places where the Kidan state of Liao was located.

Otherwise, if the misreading of the plot of the epic “Manas” continues, as well as insufficient coverage of historical facts, there will always be room for mutual misunderstanding and suspicion in Kyrgyz-Chinese relations. Without trust, it is impossible to build reliable and long-term relations between the nations of Kyrgyzstan and China, which justifies the need for a thorough study of the culture and history of both peoples and countries for each of the parties.

Wisdom says that “history is the politics of the past, without which it is impossible to understand the politics of the present.” And the significance of this thought continues to be
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