The Houses of Culture were created during the 1920s all over the Soviet Union. From the Stalinist era onward, the Soviet government and Communist ideologists paid attention to the organization of leisure time and entertainment for its populace. Through ideologically reliable forms of artistic entertainment, Soviet leaders tried to shape the aesthetic tastes and world view of Soviet cultural consumers. For them, the main place for a collective organization of leisure time and entertainment was a Soviet Palace (or House) of Culture. The Houses of Culture usually had libraries, special concert halls, movie theaters and rooms for various cultural activities of numerous associations of singers, musicians, dancers, artists, etc. According to the educational objectives of the Soviet government, these associations existed for amateurs who worked in collectives. Those who wanted to express themselves in any artistic or musical sphere had the opportunity to visit a House of Culture and participate. The Soviet state offered free education for amateur artists and musicians, providing them with the necessary musical instruments and artistic tools at the Houses of Culture. The dance floor was an important part of these Houses of Culture and usually occupied the central place in the building. In the cities, the Houses of Culture were surrounded by the parks of culture and relaxation, with outdoor dance grounds. Millions of Soviets spent their leisure time on these dance grounds, dancing to the music of local bands whose members either worked at the local House of Culture or were hired to play for dance parties. The Houses of Culture served very important communal and political functions as well: various parties and celebrations were organized on their premises; they also hosted various conferences and congresses of local divisions of the Communist party, Komsomol, trade unions, etc.

But the story of this Soviet institution, especially in non-Russian Soviet republics, was ignored until recently by Western historians and social scientists. Ali Iğmen has provided the first study in English of this institution in the Soviet Central Asian Republic of Kyrgyzstan. Using recently accessible archival documents and numerous interviews, Ali Iğmen explores the rise of this institution since the 1920s, showing how these Soviet culture clubs tremendously influenced the future of Kyrgyz national identity and fostered the work of many artists like the famous Soviet writer Chingiz Aitmatov. According to Ali Iğmen, Soviet citizens of Kyrgyzstan “who participated in the activites of the Soviet Houses of Culture ... helped forge the images and symbols of Kyrgyzness. In their functioning and in people’s memories of them, one may observe the
Soviet discourse and practice of ‘culturedness’ or cultural development, understood as cultural change or cultural revolution, as conveyed by the Soviet clubs and intellectuals in Kyrgyzstan.” (p. 2)

Ali Iğmen’s book summarizes the well known (to the readers of Russian) and now growing literature on the history of Soviet culture clubs. At the same time he attempts to analyze “the relationship between the clubs, the construction of Kyrgyz identity, and the negotiation required to fashion ‘Kyrgyzness.’” Ali Iğmen’s study “offers a view that reverses the depiction of Kyrgyzness as a somewhat static identity. It argues that those charged with putting official policies into action were active agents of contestation and influence. It examines the ways in which Russian colonial cultural policies influenced those of the Soviets and, in turn, led the Kyrgyz cultural elites to rediscover their own cultural forms.” (p. 6) As the author argues, “Soviet clubs offer a laboratory in which one may test Kyrgyz society’s cooperation with and resistance against the Soviet state as a modern phenomenon of cultural ‘mimicry.’ Although Kyrgyz intellectuals have adamantly rejected the notion that the Soviet state represented a colonial power, they imply that Soviet Kyrgyz identity was a fusion of both cultures. Soviet clubs were one of the institutions that established this fusion.” (p. 6)

Unfortunately, despite some interesting insights, this book demonstrates a typical ignorance of the outside observer, who never lived in this Soviet space and has only a working experience of the post-Soviet realities in Central Asia. Ali Iğmen writes about Chingiz Aitmatov’s story “The First Teacher” (p. 73), but ignores the role of the Soviet dissemination of ideas of cultural revolution through such Soviet movies as The First Teacher by Andrei Mikhalkov-Konchalovsky (1965). This movie was not only based on Aitmatov’s memoirs of his Kyrgyz childhood, but also featured such talented young Kyrgyz actors as Bolot Beyshenaliyev and Natalya Arinbasarova. All these actors grew up as active participants in Soviet Kyrgyz culture clubs, and their identities were shaped by this Soviet institution as well.

The new literature on cultural production, national identity formation and the House of Culture is also missing from this volume. Its author completely ignores much new historical research, including William Risch’s and my own on Soviet Ukraine, or recent anthropological studies such as Neringa Klumbute’s on Lithuania. Paradoxically, an engagement with this recent literature on the history of culture clubs in other non-Russian Soviet republics could strengthen Ali Iğmen’s main argument and make it more attractive to a wider audience.

Despite my critical remarks, overall, Ali Iğmen’s study is a good contribution to the new research on “culture and power” in Soviet Central Asia, and it will