Kyrgyz Minorities in China

PETR KOKAISL

Czech University of Life Sciences, Prague, Czech Republic
pkokaisl@seznam.cz

Keywords: Kyrgyz, ethnic minorities, China, Kyrgyzstan, Tarbagatai, Kizilsu

INTRODUCTION

The main aim of this paper is to show the cultural specificity of the Kyrgyz minority living as an indigenous population in China. The materials are based primarily on long-term field research conducted in 2007–09 in Kyrgyzstan, China, Tajikistan and Afghanistan, along with previous research from 2000–06. The focus in China was on two areas of compact Kyrgyz settlement in Xinjiang: the Tarbagatai mountains in the Ili-Kazakh Autonomous Region, and Kizilsu, near Kashgar/Kashi, in the Kyrgyz Autonomous Region. Research was conducted in the Kyrgyz language. Inhabitants of Kizilsu use the local Kyrgyz language, which is relatively well understood and similar to codified Kyrgyz. The Kyrgyz in the Ili-Kazakh Autonomous Region speak Kazakh, but because the Kyrgyz and Kazakh languages are close to each other, it was also possible to conduct research in Kyrgyz.

There is a dearth of professional literature concerning the Kyrgyz minority in China. The reason is that, for many decades, it was not possible to do any field research in this sphere and even today the possibility of research is greatly limited in some places (in cities and villages closed to foreigners).

From the historical literature concerning Chinese Kyrgyz, there are available only some older, mainly historically focused, publications by Soviet authors – for example A. Baytur, S. Zakirov and A. Turdueva – and the seven-volume work Manas published by Zhusul Mamaj, the Chinese (Kyrgyz) manaschi (diseur of the Manas epic). Kyrgyz authors have not yet published on this topic. As for more recent Russian authors, we can mention M.A. Chertykov from the State University of Khakasia, who conducted short-term research in the Tarbagatai Mountains in 2005. There exist only a few English publications related to this topic – for example, China’s Last Nomads: the History and Culture of China’s Kazaks by Linda Benson and Ingvar Svanberg (1998), which concerns a close ethnic group (Kazaks) in western China. Chinese authors address the topic of the Kyrgyz in China only in brief, providing not very detailed historical data – for example, Yu Xue Bin’s Heilongjiang Kirghiz (2003), describing the Kyrgyz in
Manchukuo/Manchuria. Since 2000, there have been only a few other Chinese academic articles devoted to Kyrgyz culture in China.

Using ethnographic methods, this report serves to introduce some of the cultural practices of the Kyrgyz in China in an attempt to begin to fill this gap in the literature.

Kyrgyz living in China represent approximately 5% of global Kyrgyz, and China is the second (after Uzbekistan) of the states with a large Kyrgyz minority. The Kyrgyz ethnic group is most populous in Kyrgyzstan, where the 2009 census reported the Kyrgyz population to be 3.8 million people (71% of the country’s population). The vast majority (99.8%) of these identified Kyrgyz ethnicity with the Kyrgyz language (Statisticheskie perepisi 2009). Kyrgyzstan has the largest distribution of Kyrgyz people (87%). Six per cent of the world’s Kyrgyz live in Uzbekistan (the total number of Kyrgyz in Uzbekistan is 160,000–370,000); China has 5% (160,823, according to the 2000 census); Tajikistan 2% (approximately 70,000); and Kazakhstan 0.3%. A compact Kyrgyz group of about 30,000 also lives in northern Afghanistan (Kokaisl 2008: 107).

Chinese Kyrgyz are one of the 56 officially recognised nationalities of China. In just one decade, 2000–2010, their number increased by one third, to 200,000 people (the data from the year 2010 are estimated). This increase was not caused by migration of Kyrgyz from Kyrgyzstan, but almost exclusively by a relatively high birth rate. The main region of compact settlements in China is the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Within this region, Kyrgyz live in two relatively distant areas (see Figure 1a). Although many Kyrgyz moved into this region from today’s Kyrgyzstan in the first half of the twentieth century, we can consider the Chinese Kyrgyz as an autochthonic population, since allied Kyrgyz clans helped one another and accepted relatives across the regions of today’s China and today’s Kyrgyzstan, no matter where the state border actually went.

The Kyrgyz SSR – the only autonomous Kyrgyz political entity – was created in the USSR in 1936, shaping that population of Kyrgyz into a ‘socialist nation’. Kyrgyz living in other former Soviet republics have, in many respects, a similar way of life. By contrast, the Chinese Kyrgyz have a rather different lifestyle. Nevertheless, when tracing the origin of Kyrgyz families in China, it is not possible to discern which are native to the areas that are today Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and China. Individual families in the past travelled in a given territory. Only the creation of boundaries determined where individual Kyrgyz families stayed.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE KYRGYZ SETTLEMENT IN CHINA

A large part of the Central Asian territory was under Russian administration in the nineteenth century. What is today Kyrgyzstan was annexed by Russia around 1860. Most of this territory had belonged to the Khanate of Kokand, which became a vassal state of Russia until 1876, when it was abolished. The Khanate