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THE LEGENDARY AND CULTURAL TRACES CONNECTED TO THE ORAL EPIC *MANAS*: ON THE BASIS OF JUSUP MAMAY'S VERSION

Abstract. *Manas* has been orally transmitted in Kyrgyz for more than a thousand years. There are hundreds of variants of *Manas* in which legendary and cultural traces are on full display. The connection between such legendary traces and the figures' heroic feats are discussed in this paper, mainly limited to the version of Jusup Mamay. The tens of legendary and cultural sites and monuments described in *Manas* are scattered across a vast area which stretches from West Asia to Central Asia, north and south of the Tianshan Mountains, from southern Siberia through to Northeast China and provide spiritual meaning for later generations. These legendary traces, cultural sites and monuments are divided into two types in this paper. One is concerned with a number of important places that are mentioned in the texts and have already become organic elements of the epic in the course of the manaschi's performance, such as the mausoleum of the heroes. The other type comprises mainly man-made traces, including large-size groups of memorial buildings, sculptures of the epic personages and of well-known epic performers, and even the tombs of such performers. All of these legendary traces and cultural sites constitute the most precious treasure in the culture and knowledge system of the Kyrgyz people. They come from different historical periods and never cease to bring to life the emotions, experiences, past events, destinies, weal and woes, happiness and sorrows (of the figures to this ethnic group of the characters of the Kyrgyz epic). Furthermore, these cultural traces also continue to play an important role in modern Kyrgyz society (social life). The following discussion is focused on a few typical examples that highlight their cultural significance. The main version discussed Jusup Mamay's variant, one of the classical version recorded in China. Other versions, especially the versions from Kyrgyzstan, will also be referred to.

Keywords: epic, *Manas*, Kyrgyz, legendary site, culture monuments, oral tradition, Jusup Mamay, Akqi County, China, Xinjiang.

Адил Джуматурду

Легендарные и культурные следы, связанные с эпосом «Манас»: на основе версии Жусупа Мамая

Аннотация. «Манас» передавался устно в Киргизии более тысячи лет. Существуют сотни вариантов «Манаса», в которых обнаруживаются легендарные и культурные следы. Связь между такими легендарными следами и героическими подвигами персонажей обсуждается в этой статье, в основном ограничиваясь версией Жусупа Мамая. Десятки легендарных и культурных памятников и достопримечательностей, описанных в «Манасе», разбросаны по обширной территории, которая простирается от Западной Азии до Центральной Азии, к северу и югу от гор Тянь-Шань, от южной Сибири до северо-восточного Китая и имеет духовное значение для последующих поколений. В данной статье эти легендарные следы, культурные объекты и памятники делятся на два типа. Один из них связан с рядом важных мест, упомянутых в текстах и уже ставших органическими элементами эпоса в ходе исполнения *манасчи*, таких как мавзолей

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героев. Другой тип состоит в основном из рукотворных следов, включая большие группы мемориальных зданий, скульптуры эпических персонажей и известных эпических исполнителей, и даже могилы таких исполнителей. Все эти легендарные следы и культурные объекты представляют собой самое ценное сокровище в системе культуры и знаний кыргызского народа. Они происходят из разных исторических периодов и никогда не перестают воплощать в жизнь эмоции, переживания, прошлые события, судьбы, богатство и горе, счастье и печали персонажей кыргызского эпоса. Кроме того, эти культурные следы также продолжают играть важную роль в современном кыргызском обществе. Следующий вопрос сосредоточен на нескольких типичных примерах, которые подчеркивают их культурную значимость. В статье в основном речь пойдет о варианте Жусупа Мамай, одного из классических версий, записанных в Китае. Другие версии, особенно версии из Кыргызстана, также будут упомянуты.

Ключевые слова: эпос, Манас, кыргызы, легендарный памятник, памятники культуры, устная традиция, Жусуп Мамай, местность Акки, Китай, Синьцзян.

Introduction

According to the study of V. M. Zhirmunski, M. Avezov, A. N. Berinshtam, and B. M. Unusaliev, the epic *Manas* appeared during the 9-10th century when the ancestors of Kyrgyz lived in the upper regions of the Yenisei river [1, p. 84; 2, pp. 330-373; 3, pp. 374-400; 4, pp. 401-424; 5, pp. 425-442]. The ancestors of today's Kyrgyz established a rather strong steppe culture in the second half of 9th century [6, pp. 31-35; 7, pp. 90-120; 8, pp. 541-554]. Although *Manas* has been passed on among the Kyrgyz people orally for more than 1000 years¹, it was not recorded into manuscripts until the latter half of the 18th century². The printed versions were first produced in the early 1900s³, and gradually evolved into the final written form. Today, *Manas* is still being transmitted orally in various Kyrgyz communities across Kyrgyzstan and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in China. The epic performers called *manaschi* still actively perform this ancient heroic epic for local people⁴. Currently, in China, there are a total of 56 senior, middle-aged and young manaschis who have been recorded and are still capable of performing the epic [9, pp. 172-189]. Jusup Mamay [10, pp. 82-87; 11, pp. 222-239], an outstanding and perhaps the most famous manaschi in China, well-known both at home and abroad, born in Akqi County of the Xinjiang Province, passed away in 2014 when he was 96 years old. He used to be considered by both Chinese and foreign scholars as a "living Homer" or "Homer of modern times". Manaschis, such as Sartakun Kadir (1941-2014) from Uluuchat (Wuqia) County, and Manbetali Alaman (1937-2013) from Akqi County, used to be very active, performing the epic *Manas* with their unique styles and were highly recognizable by their audience. They passed away one by one in the second decade of the 21st century. Although there are various printed versions for contemporary readers, vivid, live performances by the manaschis themselves are still the most important way for transmitting this epic. The performers and the audience are the two most important elements of *Manas*. When performing the epic, manaschis effectively use their excellent language skills and their outstanding performance talent to tell heroic stories, present breathtaking and bloody battle scenes and create various heroic characters while revealing the monologues and dialogues of the characters. The audience listening to and enjoying the performance, constantly encourages the performers and the audience even participates in the construction of the epic through cheering and rounds of applause [12, pp. 197-207; 13, pp. 117-137; 14, pp. 73-90]. Nowadays, it is the performers and the audiences jointly that preserve this ancient tradition through their interaction during the performance in a specific context.

¹ UNESCO previously determined 1995 as the world's year of *Manas* and the Kyrgyz government, with the support of UNESCO, invited foreign dignitaries and scholars to the ceremony for celebrating the 1,000th anniversary of the epic *Manas* and the related academic symposium.

² Chokan Valikhanov (1853-1865), a military officer and an ethnologist of the Kazak ethnic group in Russia, and V. V. Radloff (1837-1918), a German-Russian Turkologist, recorded parts of the epic *Manas* in 1856 and 1862 respectively.

³ In 1925, a part of the epic *Manas* performed by Tinibek Japi, a renowned manaschi in Kyrgyzstan of the former Soviet Union, was published in Moscow.

⁴ Currently, there are a total of approximately 200,000 Kyrgyz people living in Xinjiang, largely in the Kizilsu Kyrgyz Autonomous Prefecture and places such as Yili, Aksu, Kashgar, Hotan, and Urumchi etc.



Pic. 1. Manbetali Alaman, a well-known manaschi in China (photo by Adil Jumaturdu).

As mentioned, the Kyrgyz people started to play an active role in the history of Central Asia in the second half of the 9th century. *Manas* depicts a narrative in which the Kyrgyz people migrated, went to war, and had nomadic lives across the upper reaches of the Yenisei River, regions to the north of the Gobi Desert, Central Asia, and regions to the north and south of the Tianshan Mountains [6, pp. 5-8; 7, pp. 121-199]. All the footprints they have made through history were recorded in the epic via heroic actions by epic personages. There are dozens of historical and cultural sites and places illustrated in the epic scattered across Xinjiang in China and Central Asia. Many of these locations are still places of sacrifice, worship or special sites for cultural activity today and legends related to these places are still very popular among the local people [15, pp. 12-19]. According to the statistics gathered by C. Aliev and T. Kulmatov, there are more than 70 legendary and cultural sites and places connected to *Manas* in different regions in Kyrgyzstan [16, pp. 213-221]. In China, especially in the Kizilsuu Kyrgyz autonomous prefecture in Xinjiang, there are also a number of historical sites connected to the heroic deeds of Manas per Jusup Mamay's version of the epic, and a number of other various cultural places [9, pp. 172-189; 15, pp. 12-19; 17, pp. 39-45; 18, pp. 477-487].

Rome was not built in a day, nor is a great epic produced overnight. It took a long time for *Manas* to evolve from its birth and development through to today's scale. With its basis in historical events, the epic reflects the fate of the Kyrgyz people and reveals the development of this ethnic group by depicting its heroic feats [19, pp. 142-159]. Connections between real historical events and to the heroic figures in this epic can be easily found. These two are apparently similar to each other. Of course, it is difficult to match the images of the epic to the real world due to the ambiguity of history and literature. Still a large number of legendary sites can be found in the text of *Manas*. These sites, together with relevant regional folk and cultural activities, already constitute a cultural space unique to *Manas*. Such cultural space is an organic part of the tradition of oral epics which is capable of demonstrating and enhancing the cultural vitality of oral heritage as well as facilitating its popularization and preservation.

Legendary Traces and Cultural Sites Arising from the Epic

Legendary places which appear in *Manas* are scattered across a vast land which stretches across Central Asia, West Asia, regions to the north and south of the Tianshan Mountains, southern Siberia through to Northeast China, with the most notable ones in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and Central Asia. For example, the birthplace of the hero Manas and the location of his royal palace after he established his Khanate are clearly stated in various texts of *Manas*. In almost all the variants of the epic, Manas was born in the southern foothills of the Altai Mountains, except for Jusup Mamay's variant, a renowned manaschi in Xinjiang China. In his version, Manas was born in Burultohai, which

was in the south of Altay or today's Fuhai County in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in China. The imperial palace of Manas was located in Talas in the northeast part of Kyrgyzstan. The mausoleum was built by order of Kanikey, the wife of the hero Manas, and today is still a place of worship for later generations [20, pp. 436-437].

There are many places in Xinjiang whose names have obviously originated from the epic. For example, places such as Manas and Hutubi counties in the north of Xinjiang were named after the characters in Manas. According to Jusup Mamay's version of the epic, not only the Kyrgyz people took the first place in competitions such as wrestling and archery but also Ak-kula, the horse of Manas, won the racing championship at the ceremony commemorating Khan Keketey. Kongurbay of the Qalmaq people, feeling ashamed and enraged by such defeat, took away the prize for the horse and the horses of the Kyrgyz people by force. He then tried everything to harm Manas, with the latter severely injured by an arrow shot by Kokqokoz, a sharpshooter sent by Kongurbay. Under the protection of his horse and the help of his wife Kanikey, Manas narrowly escaped death. Later, knowing that Kokqokoz had fled back home and defected to Ay-jiangjun, a general who was based in the city of Bexbalik¹, Manas decided to mount a military expedition to the city and kill his enemy for revenge. Then, a war was started between the two sides, with the defeated Ay-jiangjun fleeing to Hangay and Kokqokoz escaping in the chaos. Manas appointed his warrior Kutunay as his Bi official to take over the city of Kokqokoz. Since then, the city was called Kutunay, which is today's Hutubi County. Moreover, a city named after the hero Manas was also built upon his order, and it is actually today's Manas County [21, pp. 203-211].

In the Kakshaal Valley where Akqi County of the Kizilsu Kyrgyz Autonomous Prefecture in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, there are many historical sites related to *Manas*, such as the tomb of Almanbet, the white shoulder bag of Almanbet, the tomb of Sirgak, the hitching post of Akkula, the sacred tree of Bakay, the tomb of Muzburqak, and the 40 trees (*kirik terek*) planted by the 40 warriors led by Manas [15, pp. 12-191; 20, pp. 486-500]. Over time, these sites have become sacred places and spiritual sustenance for the Kyrgyz people who worship them. In the Kirgiz language and other Turkic languages, tombs of well-known ancient figures or things such as springs, trees, and mountains which people consider as sacred are called Mazar, and are also places for people to worship and perform rituals [20, p. 389].

The variant of *Manas* written down from Jusup Mamay's performance, mentions that Manas was severely injured during an expedition and his generals including Almanbet, Chubak, Sirgak, and Muzburqak were killed by enemies in the battle. His troop's morale sank quickly and everyone looked gloomy. Manas and his advisor Bakay, after head counting, decided to bring the troop back home. The dead warriors were carried by horses. Almanbet's force was temporarily led by Boz-uul and Chubak's was under Irchi-uul. Jakip's men and horses were led by warriors such as Serek and Bakay's soldiers were deployed into different barracks. The main force, led by Manas, marched in the front with the other forces marching toward the west one after another and exchanged intelligence every three days. One day, when the troop stopped somewhere, Manas, who rode on horseback with eyes closed for six days, asked a man to remove the cloth covering his eyes. Looking around, he found that they had been on the wrong path which led them to the bank of the Tetir-suu River. Then, he said to his people: "Have we been foolish since our warriors died? Instead of going this way, we should bypass Turpan, cross the Barkol Mountains and the Daban Mountains via Kumul and cross the Yili Valley. That will save us lots of time. However, if we bypass the Baltanin Toosu Mountains in the lower reaches of the Tetir-suu River and cross the Qilan salty desert like we are doing now, we could never reach our home Talas. We must turn to the west so that we can always see the North Star to our right and move along the bank of the Tetir-suu River". His men marched forward as he had ordered and all four forces safely arrived back at Talas. From this story, we can see that the "Tetir-suu River" mentioned here is definitely the Kakshaal River [21, pp. 486-500]. Moreover, the description in the epic highly matches with the folklore that is passed on in the Kakshaal region, thus provides a valuable reference for determining the year in which the epic originated.

¹ Then Beiting and currently Jimusar County.

At the northern (the side of the mountain where sunlight is rare) foothills of the Kokboktor Mountain in Jaman-suu, in a Kirgiz ethnic township under today's Wushi (Uch-turpan) County in the lower reach of the Kakshaal River, there is a pile of rocks which the locals call "the Tomb of Almanbet". Upstream and close to this rock tomb, there lies a stone serving as a sign which is the same size as a yurt. The tomb is a Mazar (sacred place) for the locals to pray and perform rituals. To the north of the Mazar, there is a steep cliff with a giant crack by which, according to the locals, the horse of Almanbet took rest at night. On the cliff wall 20 meters away from the crack to the ground, there protrudes a white rock resembling the shape of a shoulder bag (Kurjun) with a cord fastener that can be seen clearly. This rock is called by the Kyrgyz people the "shoulder bag (Kurjun) of Almanbet" [15, pp. 12-19].

There is a section in *Manas* describing how Serek led his force along the bank of the Tetir-suu River and crossed the Teshik cliff. He buried the body of the warrior Sirgak by the banks of the river and asked his men to make a pile of stones as a marker for the tomb. Today, at the foot of the Akbulong Mountain near Merkech Village in the northwest mountainous area of the Kakshaal Valley, there is a large tomb piled with stones which is called "the tomb of Sirgak". The cobblestones on the tomb are still smooth and colorful, with various shapes resembling things like hearts, soaps, dough, melons, cattle hoofs, pieces of jewelry, and vessels. Local Kyrgyz people consider these stones to have magical power to cure diseases. When feeling sick or constant pains, they come here to pray and pick a suitable cobblestone to rub the painful area, trying to remove the disease and pain. These cobblestones are peculiar in that similar stones cannot be found anywhere else within a radius of miles from the tomb and it is said that they were transported by Sirgak's men from far away [15, pp. 12-19; 21, pp. 486-500].



Pic. 2. The cobblestone tomb of Sirgak (photo by Adil Jumaturdu).

In the mountainous area about 20 kilometers northwest to the tomb, there is open land which was shaped by the running river. In this land, there are three triangle stones all the same size as a yurt. Between two of the three there is a distance of 150 meters and a distance 300 meters from them to the third stone. The three are all encompassed by thick *achnatherum splendens* which can still be seen clearly from the top of the surrounding mountains. Local legend says that Manas once took a rest here and hitched his horse to the three stones [15, pp. 12-19].

The "tomb of Muzburqak" in the eastern part of Akqi County is another historical site which is linked to *Manas*. The tomb is clearly described in the Jusup Mamay's text [21, p. 502]. It is located in Kokonixik in Saparbay Township, surrounded by black mountains and valleys. On the cliff of a mountain which is in the south of Kokonixik stands a tree which is more than 1,000 years old. Supported by a trunk as big as two meters in diameter, this tree is lush with leaves and branches with its crown soaring into the clouds. Under the tree, one can hear the sound of a spring flowing. Local people say that the water in this spring is the "sacred water" which will eradicate one's troubles and diseases once consumed. Therefore, people crowd into this place to fetch its water. To the east of the

tomb, there is a wild rose bush and some apricot trees which live on the spring and which no one harms, therefore, they are growing luxuriantly [15, pp. 12-19].

To the east of Akqi County, there is a torrential river running further east. Among the rocks by the river bank, there is a row of ancient trees. Local people call these giant willows “the 40 trees of Manas” or “the 40 trees of the 40 warriors led by Manas”. Legend says that they were planted by the 40 warriors who had followed Manas on various expeditions. Standing quietly on one bank of the roaring river, they look like fighters who are defending their home, firm and unyielding [15, pp. 12-19].

Monuments Injected with the Essence of the Epic

There are hundreds of thousands of verses in every complete variant of *Manas* [1, pp. 68-76; 22, pp. 130-140]. Such a magnificent epic provides later generations with rich cultural space and inspires numerous monuments related to the epic. These monuments include large groups of memorial buildings, sculptures of heroes in the epic, sculptures of well-known performers of the epic, and tombs of such performers, etc.

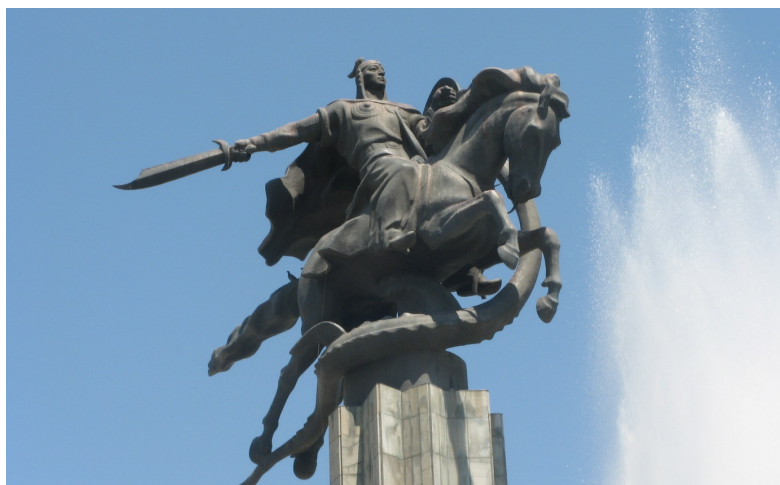
The most eminent monuments include the tomb and the museum of Manas in the mountainous area of Talas within Kyrgyzstan, the Manas Cultural Square built in the downtown area of Bishkek City, the Manas Village in the east suburb of the city, and the Manas cultural Square and museum in Fuyu county in Heilongjiang province [17, pp. 39-45; 18, pp. 486-490].

The epic includes a clear description of the death of Manas and the construction of his mausoleum. According to Jusup Mamay's version, Manas was assaulted by his old enemy Kongurbay. His head and neck were cut by a poisonous axe, and Manas died soon after returning home. His wife Kanikey, after consulting his advisor Bakay, buried our hero's body in a tomb underneath the riverbed which was capable of accommodating 500 people based on the convention of the Kyrgyz people and then rerouted the river so that Manas could rest with the running river as a companion. Later, they ordered people to build a magnificent mausoleum somewhere else. According to the epic, the bricks used were made of special materials blended with the fat of 80,000 rams during the firing. Hence, they were durable and resistant to wind erosion. Inside, there was a mural of Manas and the warriors fighting side by side and recording the warrior life of Manas [21, pp. 501-520]. Historians and archaeologists of later generations, through painstaking work, have confirmed that a tall and grand mausoleum located in Talas of Kyrgyzstan is indeed the one dedicated to the hero Manas described in the epic. This mausoleum still stands today in the wilderness after thousands of years of wind and rain, telling of the story of the hero. It was restored by archaeologists of the former Soviet Union during the first half of the 20th century and now has been designated, together with its surrounding area, by the Kyrgyz government as a key protected area, with a museum built by its side in 1995 for tourists [20, pp. 436-437].



Pic. 3. The mausoleum of Manas in Talas of Kyrgyzstan (photo by Adil Jumaturdu).

The Manas Cultural Square in the downtown area of Bishkek City was built in 1981. In its center stands a bronze statue of the hero Manas riding on the horseback with a sword in his hand, measuring 21 meters in height. It is encircled by granite statues of other heroes in the epic such as Kanikey, Manas's wife, and Bakay, the advisor. In the course of more than a hundred years, there have been a group of excellent manaschis including Tinibek Japi (1846-1902), Naymanbay Balik (1801-1887), Saginbay Orozbekov (1867-1930), and Sayakbay Karalaev (1894-1971) [23, pp. 288-296] whose statues also stand on the square.



Pic. 4. The statue of Manas in Bishkek City, Kyrgyzstan (photo by Adil Jumaturdu).

The Manas Village is a large group of buildings established for celebrating the 1,000th anniversary of *Manas*. The entire “Village” is constructed based on the description of the Manas imperial palace in the epic. In the center of the village, there is a tall platform on which stands a two-story yurt capable of accommodating 100 people. It is said that this yurt is a one-to-one copy of the royal yurt that Manas used to interview envoys and hold meetings. The yurt is surrounded by a fence with a unique Kyrgyz style and on both sides of the fence there are lines of eagles, lions, and rams made of metal or rocks, all looking spectacular. Today, the Manas Village is a place for people to visit, have gatherings, and hold wedding ceremonies.

The Manas cultural Square and museum in Qi-jiazi village Fuyu county Heilongjiang province in northeast China also contains a group of stone sculptures including the sculptures of Manas and his generals well as Jusup Mamay, a well-known manaschi in China. A museum is also constructed beside the square, which is the only museum located in inner China.



Pic. 5. The square in Qi-jiazi village Fuyu county Heilongjiang province, China (photo by Adil Jumaturdu).

There are also tombs of some well-known manaschis which are sacred places for people, especially young manaschis, to pay homage. For example, the tombs of Jusuvakun Apay (1881-1920) and Eshmat Manbetjusup (1880-1963) in Haraqı Township of Akqi County and Wuqia County respectively, are frequently visited by later generations. The two renowned manaschis were among the top epic storytellers in China during the 20th century and have played a decisive role in the spreading and the performance of *Manas*. The variant performed by Jusuvakun Apay was collected by Balvay Mamay and served as the main inspiration of the variant performed by his younger brother, Jusup Mamay, the "Homer of modern times". Eshmat Manbetjusup's variant was collected by folk litterateurs during the 1960s and was published in 2003¹.



Pic. 6. The tomb of Jusuvakun Apay in Akqi County (photo by Adil Jumaturdu).

Currently, there are ongoing efforts to preserve historical sites related to *Manas* in China. For example, the government of Akqi County has already started the renovation of important sites such as the tombs of Sirgak and Muzburqak, adding ancillary facilities for effective protection. Meanwhile, relevant monuments such as the tomb of Jusup Mamay in Akqi county, the tomb of Eshmat Manbetjusup in Wuqia County, have been constructed. A museum in relation to the epic and outstanding manaschi Jusup Mamay in Akqi county is currently under construction.

Conclusion

The epic *Manas* is arguably an encyclopedia of the Kyrgyz ethnic group as well as an historical record transmitted orally by the Kyrgyz people. It is embedded with this ethnic group's strong passion and its memories of the past [24, pp. 5-66; 25, pp. 30-50]. Through *Manas*, we can see and hear the emotion, experiences, and the past of Kyrgyz people and their fates, the joys and woes, the happiness and sorrow of figures in different historical periods. The oral and written inheritance of *Manas*, related legendary sites and monuments, and various cultural activities centering on the epic together constitute the most precious treasure in the culture and knowledge system of Kyrgyz people.

At the ceremony celebrating the 1,000th anniversary of the epic held in Talas Kyrgyzstan in 1995, thousands of people rode on the horseback and waved swords and spears to restage spectacular scenes depicted in the epic. The author of this paper has witnessed during a field survey that people in Karabulak Township and Saparbay Township under Akqi County killed white horses as sacrifices before the tombs of Sirgak and Muzburqak to pay respect to the spirits of the heroes. The *Manas* Festival of Tourism and Culture and the Cultural Festival of Falcons are held each year in Akqi County have become local cultural brands. During these events, people not only enjoy the improvisational

¹ Eshmat Manbetjusup: *Semetey*, Toktobubu Isak ed., Artux, Xinjiang Kizilsu Kyrgyz Publishing House, 2003.

performance of the epic by renowned manaschis, sweet songs presented by folk singers from various places, and the beautiful sounds of Kumuzi lyre, but also appreciate the exquisite craftsmanship of the folk artists and traditional competitions loved by the Kyrgyz people such as scrambling for sheep, horse racing, and wrestling. People gather at the tomb of the heroes during the events to pray for their blessing.

In 2006, the epic *Manas* was listed as one of the First National Intangible Cultural Heritages of China. In 2009, it was listed by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. In 2013, the *Manas* trilogy of Kyrgyzstan was also listed by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of Intangible Cultural Heritages of Humanity.

Currently, the interaction between the government and the people enables further expansion of the cultural space created by the epic and revitalizes the tradition of performing the epic that is gradually declining, creating an excellent foundation for preserving and promoting the epic culture.

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