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## CONTEMPORARY YOUTH IDENTITY IN THE REPUBLIC OF TUVA, RUSSIA\*

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Youth of ethnic Tuvan heritage within the Tuvan Republic (part of the Russian Federation) aged 6 to 24 represent a dynamic force which has been shaped by two factors. One is the ancient Turkic heritage of Tuvan culture. Contemporary Tuvans, including youth, display both Russian and Tuvan nationalist feelings, admire martial culture and explore their cultural uniqueness. They hold in high esteem contact sports, especially martial arts such as sambo or judo. Tuvan athletes successfully compete for Russia at international events, including the Olympics. The current Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation is half-Tuvan and extremely popular in the republic, where people see him as nothing short of a national hero.

At the same time, young multi-lingual Tuvans, who also speak Russian, and, with access to foreign language education, Korean and English, are being



## АСПЕКТЫ СОВРЕМЕННОЙ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТИ МОЛОДЕЖИ РЕСПУБЛИКИ ТУВА, РОССИЯ

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Молодежь в возрасте от 6 до 24 лет, проживающая в Республике Тува (в составе Российской Федерации), представляет собой динамическую силу под влиянием двух основных источников. Одним из них является происхождение тувинской культуры от древнетюркского культурного мира, вследствие чего современные тувинцы, в том числе молодые люди поддерживают элементы национализма, восхищение военной культурой, осознают свою культурную уникальность и самобытность. В республике традиционно почитаются контактные виды спорта, в том числе боевые (самбо, дзюдо). Тувинские спортсмены прославляют Туву на международных соревнованиях, в том числе Олимпийских играх. Нынешний министр обороны России — тувинец по национальности — чрезвычайно популярен на малой Родине, считается здесь национальным героем.

Одновременно автор отмечает влияние на тувинскую молодежь Юго-Восточной поп-культуры, в частности южнокорейской, вследствие чего молодые люди проявляют интерес

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*influenced by mediums and through technologies that are international like never before. A special focus is made on the impact of East Asian pop-culture, specifically that of South Korea. Tuva is located in Asia's geographical center, and is a place where for many centuries Tibetan Buddhism coexisted with Shamanism. Thus, Tuvans strongly identify themselves with Asian culture. They tend to believe in metempsychosis and often tell those who take interest in Tuvan culture that they were Tuvans in their past lives. In their view, Tuvan language has preserved the features of "original" Turkic. These and many other ideas and beliefs show that historical facts and myths are closely intertwined within Tuvan identity.*

*Studying and speaking foreign languages helps prioritize the positive outlook in Tuvan youth, who eagerly study both English and Eastern languages.*

*In working with Tuvan youth, I was able to teach through games and informal conversation. I was able to meet community leaders who use language to foster lasting change in children's perception of themselves, as an attempt to spread culture globally and to increase opportunities for the future of Tuvan youth. All my field work was conducted through informal interviews with students through VK messaging and in person during Access Summer Camp of June 2015 and a Korean language study abroad trip to South Korea in July 2015.*

*Keywords: youth; youth of Tuva; Tuva; Tuvan culture; ethnic identity; Tuvan language*

*к путешествиям и изучению корейского языка. Тува находится в географическом центре Азии, где на протяжении веков сосуществовали тибетский буддизм и шаманизм и поэтому представления тувинцев о себе как о представителях азиатской культуры очень сильны. Тувинцы верят в перерождения и считают многих интересующихся Тувой тувинцами в прошлой жизни. Они верят в древность и «первоначальность» своего тувинского языка как тюркского. В этих и других представлениях тесно переплетаются исторические реалии и легенды.*

*Изучение и активное использование тувинского языка способствует усилению позитивных черт характера детей тувинцев, которые с легкостью и интересом активно готовы осваивать и иностранные языки: английский, восточные.*

*Автор неформально общалась с представителями тувинской молодежи в социальных сетях, а также встречалась и беседовала во время работы летнего лагеря в Туве в июне 2015 г., а также сопровождая делегацию учащихся из Тувы в Южную Корею в июле 2015 года.*

*Ключевые слова: молодежь; молодежь Тувы; Тува; тувинская культура; этническая идентичность; тувинский язык*

## **Introduction**

The Republic of Tuva is a federated state of the Russian Federation. It was formally adopted into the Russian Federation in 1993. Diplomatic relations between the Russian Empire and the nomadic Tuvan tribes date back to the early seventeenth century. The Tuvan People's Army fought alongside the Red Army in the October Revolution of 1917 against Chinese and Tsarist forces. The Red Army received skis, coats, gloves, boots, wool, meat, butter, flour, and numerous medicinal supplies from Tuva during this time. The area that is now the Republic of Tuva was known as a sovereign nation, the Tuvan's People's Republic from 1921 to 1944, recognized only by the Soviet Union and Mongolian People's Republic. It joined the Soviet Union in 1944. During World War II it exported nearly 750 thousand heads of cattle and provided up to 70 million rubles worth of financial assistance in Soviet wartime efforts (Chichkin, 2009). Tuva provided more than eight thousand soldiers for the Soviet Army in World War II. More than five thousand received awards and twenty soldiers were granted the title Knights in the Order of Glory.



It did not seek independence after the fall of the Soviet Union. Tuvan-Russian relations through history have been generally received as mutually beneficial, save for a brief period of interethnic tension in the 1990's and ongoing land right disputes.

Tuvan youths' perception of self is formed from the choices they make and influences they are exposed to, as they contend with the duality of their culture. Students are proud to be Russian in nationality, and enjoy the privileges and norms typical to Russian students — access to a wide range of movies and media, a unified schooling system, involvement in sports and active participation on Vkontakte social network. Many young people are tech-savvy as well as multi-lingual, with foreign language study seen as a highlight of their schooling.

Education in a foreign language is required in all levels across the Russian education system, but is especially popular in Tuva. While English, French and German are typically offered at any Russian school or gymnasium, many Tuvan youth are also offered Mongolian, Chinese and Korean classes. They learn through direct instruction, technology, social media and travel. Most are already bilingual in Tuvan and Russian, and adding another compulsory learned language brings a key dimension to their Tuvan-Russian-Asian identity.

Despite strongly identifying as Russian, most students in Tuva do not show much interest in traveling to other parts of Russia and are more likely to go to the U. S. or South Korea. Unlike many of their western Russian counterparts in Moscow or St. Petersburg, they show a particular interest in East Asian culture and it is reflected in their language curriculum. There isn't that conflicted romanticization of the West that is commonly seen in Western Russian youth. Tuvan youth enjoy Korean television dramas, listen to famous Korean bands like Big Bang and idolize Korean stars. Tuvans actively take part in the broader Asian identity, though not without alterations on conventional approaches of what it means to be "Asian."

Much of my fieldwork has been conducted with youth in various parts of Russia. I have been an English teacher and camp counselor for students of all ages in various cities in Russia including Samara, Ufa, Ulan-Ude and Nakhodka. In Tuva, I worked as a camp counselor at an English summer camp, conducted informal interviews with youth in-person and online and also spoke to large groups of Tuvan graduate level university students and staff. I wrote curriculum for the camp and assisted in field trips with campers to local museums and to the pool. I also helped lead a cultural study abroad group of eight Tuvan high school age students in South Korea.

In order to examine youth culture, it is necessary to examine recent interpretations of Russian and East Asian culture and how they affect young people. They live in the geographical center of Asia but the inhabitants are reinventing what it means to be "Asian" in a way that is unlike their Eastern counterparts. The relationship between Tuvan youth culture, when it has been considered at all, has been described in the context of family and traditional structures – under incomplete and primitive



lenses. Tuva cannot be simply defined by its provincial, rural nature that some Western academics may view it as. It is not an impoverished nation characterized by its problems as many Russian texts have defined it. It is a republic of dynamic individuals, with a robust population of multicultural youth. Tuvan youth are affected by multiple influences, not merely their nomadic past. Their multi-faceted approach to self-identifying comes from being proud Russian nationalists paired with their own take on what it means to be Asian.

In working with Tuvan youth, I was able to teach through games and informal conversation. I was able to meet community leaders who use language to foster lasting change in children's perception of themselves, as an attempt to spread culture globally and to increase opportunities for the future of Tuvan youth. All my field work was conducted through informal interviews with students through VK messaging and in person during Access Summer Camp of June 2015 and a Korean language study abroad trip to South Korea in July 2015.

### ***Identity as tied to geography***

Tuvan youth speak about their republic with varying levels of pride on how remote it is. As a minority within the world's largest geographical country, they are aware of their size within their country. There are more than 143 million inhabitants in Russia and only about 313000 people in the Republic of Tuva, of whom 270000 are ethnic Tuvans. Some youth have mentioned how long a journey is simply to leave Tuva and then Russia to travel abroad, but it has not stopped them.

The most well-known method in getting to Kyzyl is by taking a daily flight (or a long-distance train, also scheduled every day) from Moscow to Abakan, the capital of a neighboring Republic, Khakassia, 242 miles (390 km) away. As Tuvans are familiar with the flight schedule, upon arrival, individuals with vans are at the airport looking for Tuvans to take back to Kyzyl. Frankly, this is done through ethnic profiling and the "feeling," which will be described later. This is the typical and usual route that Tuvans take to travel back home after spending time in Moscow. The vans are run by private contractors who make the five-hour trip from Abakan to Kyzyl along highway M54 also called the "Yenisei". The M54 passes through steppe and mountain landscape, often snow-laden. Mountains and rivers along the way have individual names, all first-hand knowledge to many Tuvans.

Kyzyl has its own airport, but is used mostly for charter flights within the republic. There are plans to renovate the airport and include flights from Moscow and even international destinations, but deadlines of the construction project have been pushed back. Overall, travel to and from the republic is long and expensive. Long-term emigration out of the republic is not common. Despite the obstacles, youth have managed to travel abroad frequently and often. Through the use of vans, city buses, planes and trains, they are mobile like never before.



Inga\*, 22-year-old student in her fourth year at the Tuvan State University studying English philology, has traveled to the US and Mongolia.

*Dolaana\**, a 10-year-old girl has traveled to Mongolia and China with her family multiple times.

*Chingis\**, a 12-year-old boy travels frequently by car to the neighboring Republic of Buryatia, where one of his parents is from.

*Alexandra\**, an 11-year-old girl has traveled to Kazakhstan.

Most transportation within the Russian Federation is conducted through train. The nearest railway station currently is also in Abakan. The railway lines are historical and well cited, dating back to lines that Tsar Nicholas I drew (Pittman). In 2009, President Vladimir Putin and the President of the Tuvan Republic, Sholban Valeryevich Karaool signed an agreement that they would create the Kyzyl-Kuragino line, a brand new railway that would connect Tuva with the rest of Russia via train lines. On December 2011, there was a first-spike ceremony and a monument that still stands in that very place. President Putin himself nailed the silver spike down as a symbol of progress and a completed project to come. Due to the financial and economic crisis in Russia, construction has not yet begun, to many Tuvans' relief.

Many of the young Tuvans that I've spoken to take pride in being located in a remote region of Russia and do not want there to be a railway running through Kyzyl because they believe it would bring an influx of Muslim workers. Despite linguistic similarities, Tuvans have a negative attitude towards Central Asian cultures that practice Islam. This is affiliated with Russian nationalism and could be an idea that children have due to hearing their parents talk about it. Much of Russian military efforts have been concentrated in the Muslim republics of Chechnya and Dagestan and more recently, in Syria and against the Islamic State. Tuvan anti-Islam sentiment may also be linked to the republic's aggressive attempts at Buddhist revival being conducted by the Republic's leaders.

*Olchei\**, an 11-year-old girl warned me to stay away from the market, where there are migrant workers. She offered to send her dad to accompany me. While the market was nothing of what they made it seem like, the resentment is clear.

*Diana\**, a 7-year-old girl was asked if she had any friends who are Muslim, she said no, only Buddhist and Russian Orthodox.

*Mergen\**, 22-year-old university graduate shared that he has heard that there are kidnappings of Tuvan women to be brides of ISIS.

Youth in Kyzyl carry this weariness and fear in conjunction with their Russian nationalism. While anti-Muslim sentiment not an aspect of their culture historically, their Eastern Asian influenced ideas and myths about self may provide a more thorough explanation.



## *Identity through the lens of Russian Pride*

Tuvans go through school learning both about their own ethnic history and Russian history. Like any other student in the country, they can name the presidents, important figures and dates from the Soviet Union and know about the czars. Tuvans celebrate Russian holidays along with Buddhist holidays. They celebrate New Year's, Victory Day and Russia Day. During Russia Day, which is June 12, all the children in my camp wore Russian flag colors and painted a Russian flag on their face with a themed costume chalk.

Victory Day is celebrated May 9 and is just as important in Tuva as it is to the rest of Russia. Many Tuvan men served in the army, at what seems like a larger percentage than that of other regions. In the Tuvan State National Museum, there is an entire room dedicated to WWII Tuvan volunteers, who chose to join the army of an allied state (the Soviet Union, which Tuva was not a part of until 1944) in its fight against fascism, also showcasing Tuvans that were later involved in special missions. Some Tuvan youth that I have spoken with shared that within the army; they often encounter Russians who have never heard of their nationality. They take pride in educating fellow soldiers about their republic and culture. They also have the reputation of being the most aggressive fighters. It is said that Tuvans get riled up easily and enjoy brawls. This is a stereotype held by Russians about Tuvans and the many that I spoke to do not deny it. Lastly, many of the veterans I have spoken to say that within the army, they find brethren with other Asiatic recruits, who are Buryat or Kalmyk. Tuvans were stationed in Chechnya and Dagestan when the Russian army conducted security and peacekeeping missions there.

All the children that I spoke to highly regarded President Putin, widely praising him for being a good leader. When asked about nostalgia for being a sovereign nation, nobody I spoke to wished Tuva to be independent of Russia. Such ideas may be held by older Tuvans. In 2014, President Putin visited Tuva and this visit is still widely and fondly spoken about by Tuvan youth. He came to discuss the plans for the new railway and while in Kyzyl, he attended a Greco-Roman wrestling festival, visited Aldyn-Bulak, the Tuvan tourism-complex, and celebrated the centenary of unification of Tuva and Russia. The hotel room which he stayed, which is a new-age yurt complete with showers and a king-sized bed is open for visitors to explore and see what luxurious accommodations President Putin stayed in while in Kyzyl.

During the centenary celebration, President Putin had kind words for the Tuvan people, which all the youth I've interviewed are proud of and remember fondly:

*Here are some amazing, kind-hearted people, talented people. We will never forget Tuva's contribution in the victory over fascism in the Great Patriotic War. And, of course, we will always remember those who have revived our country and your republic after the war years. Tuva is a wonderful region, with amazing, wonderful, unique natural wonders.*



Another source of pride for Tuvan youth is that Russia's Minister of Defense is Tuvan. Sergey Kuzhugetovich Shoygu has been minister since 2012, serving as Minister of Emergency Situations prior. Shoygu served as Military General and also is the current president of the International Sport Federation of Firefighters and Rescuers. Shoygu's father is Tuvan and his mother is Russian – all youth that I've met were quick to tell me this fact. Youth have also reported to me that he does not speak Tuvan. However, coupled with the overall general admiration of the Russian government and reverence for anyone who is from the small republic, he is highly regarded by young Tuvans. Photos of him, along with other portraits of young Tuvans were displayed in the Tuvan Cultural Center in 2015, at the Monument of the Center of Asia. The exhibit was named "I am Tuvan," aimed at showcasing Tuvans in different occupations. Photos of Shoygu alongside Putin are in almost every schoolroom and school bus. The practice of idolizing portraits of President Vladimir Putin is seen in virtually every classroom across Russia but in Tuva, they have added a portrait of Shoygu at every shrine. Politics and policy are new careers Tuvan children can look forward to. Shoygu's role in the rise of the Russian military presence internationally is a positive role model children can admire.

Tuvans have also achieved fame throughout Russia for supplying many of its Olympic athletes. They also place highly in contact sports all around the world, continually upping the Olympic medal count for Russia. As President Putin is a known avid Judo fan, Judokas are treated with respect both in and outside of the Republic of Tuva. The first Tuvan wrestler in the Olympic games with Chechen-ool Mongush in the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta. The second Tuvan wrestler was Loris Oorzhak at the 2004 Olympic games in Greece (Chambal-ool, 2016) and since then, the Russian Olympic wrestling and judo team usually contains a few athletes from Tuva. The 2016 Russian champions of Judo included five young Tuvans (Tuvinskie sportsmeny ... , 2016). Many young Tuvan athletes attend university in Novosibirsk or Krasnoyarsk where they can concentrate full-time in contact sports. Wrestling, boxing and judo are popular pastimes in Tuva, all with striking similarities to their traditional sport, Huresh. Huresh is an inseparable part from Tuvan family, national and religious holidays.

In interacting with youth at the camps in Kyzyl that I worked at, every student knew a boxer, wrestler or Judoka personally. Many have family members who are professional athletes who train full-time. Unlike the average general Russian population, the youth of Kyzyl was saturated in contact sports. Sports are tied in ancient traditions that came with a nomadic lifestyle. Tuva's well-deserved prestige in world rankings and in the Olympics elevates their positive feelings about living in Russia. In Tuva, sports are not only for entertainment – they are an expression of culture. Economically and through positive media, they support the small but proud nation of Tuva. Young Tuvans are making a profound contribution to modern-day Russia.



## *Identity through their ideas about language*

In reference to Minister of Defense Sergey Shoigu, many of the youth that I interacted with knew his name immediately and were also quick to inform me that he didn't speak Tuvan. While simply a fact about someone who is of celebrity status, it reveals much about Tuvan youth perception of themselves and others. Tuvan youth undergo much of the same transformations that youth who are speakers of minority languages are experiencing. In Kyzyl, the capital of Tuva, all schooling and administrative tasks are conducted in Russian. The national curriculum is written in Russian. Also, when Tuvan youth seek entertainment, they only have access to Russian language films and books. Very few books and movies are written in Tuvan. There is only one Tuvan language news channel available. Children from Tuvan speaking families must learn Russian, the language of the dominant society in order to take full advantage of the entertainment, lifestyle and education opportunities offered by the society.

Tuvan communities are no stranger to linguistic diversity. Many Tuvans intermarry, and their spouses can be, for instance, Mongolian, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Altai, Sakha, Kalmyk or Buryat. These are other Central Asian cultures and languages that have affected modern Tuvan culture. All of these are reported to be languages of the tribes of Genghis Khan. Many of the students that I worked with were also of mixed Russian and Tuvan heritage.

*Mandukhay\**, a 7-year-old girl's dad is Mongolian. Mandukhay says that her name is a Mongolian word. She understands Mongolian, does not like speaking Tuvan and speaks Russian in daily life.

*Timur\**, a 14-year-old boy, is part Russian and part Tuvan. He only speaks Tuvan, does not like to answer teachers in Russian.

*Ayran\**, a 13-year-old boy speaks Russian and Tuvan. He says that it's funny when he brings his Russian friends home because his parents speak only Tuvan.

In interacting with Tuvan youth by speaking only Russian and English, there were few overarching ideas that they shared. One was that the diversity in preference was so varied that no definitive statements can be made about youth preference. Young students, such as 7-year-old Mandukhay\*, were ashamed of speaking Tuvan and adamant about speaking Russian. She even scolded her parents at time for having accents when speaking Russian. However, there were numerous students that I met that spoke solely in Tuvan, took teachers' orders in Russian, but never responding in Russian. Some students were fluent in Russian, Tuvan and English and switched freely between the three.

In the study abroad trip when I accompanied eight Tuvan high school students to a university in South Korea, communication between the students and three administrators





and chaperones were in two languages — Russian and Tuvan. Despite the all-Russian schooling, youth can bypass the linguistic norms and interact however they wish.

An aspect of schooling that contributes to the widespread Tuvan speaking that I observed is that there is no strict “Russian Only” rule being enforced in schools. Schoolteachers come from both ethnic Russian and Tuvan backgrounds, as are the classrooms a mixing pot of Tuvan and other culture representation. Frequently, I saw ethnic Russians speaking Tuvan to the delight of their friends, showing that they picked up words and phrases by simply living their entire lives in the Republic. Russians have been living in the area since the 1800s, first as gold miners.

Tuvan is in the Turkic language family and is mutually intelligible with Kazakh, Turkish, Turkmen and other Turkic languages that might be heard around the republic. This makes travel between other Eurasian states possible. Despite that mutual intelligibility, most young Tuvans still prefer traveling to East Asia. South Korea is the number one destination for travel. Local schoolteacher Sholban\* has started an after-school Korean academy, aimed at preparing students for a summer cross-cultural exchange with Inje University in Gimhae, South Korea. The program is successful, with increases in program participation every year. Korean language summer camps are held at two different institutions for school children in Kyzyl.

In an interview with 29-year-old Sholban\*, who last year hosted eight high school students in a two-week long trip to South Korea, he talked about how studying Korean is pathway for Tuvan success abroad. Sholban\* is also a Tuvan historian, speaks multiple Turkic languages and works in Tuvan language archives when not teaching Korean. He says that he is glad that Tuvan youth are interested in Eastern cultures, not only Western ones, despite the oversaturation of Western influences in modern culture. He is aware that South Korea is a leader in technological innovation, medicine and pop culture and wishes for his students to learn from them and hopefully bring new ideas back to the republic. He also looks to his students to spread Tuvan culture to foreigners – about the cuisine, throat singing, sports and history. Despite his tireless work in archiving ancient Tuvan language, he understands that learning Korean is part of a bigger picture in revitalizing Tuva. He does not think that learning Korean diminishes interest in learning Tuvan.

Bilingual and trilingual development outcomes in Tuvan youth can be overall positive, supportive of academic endeavors. They promote travel, language exchange and a positive outlook about life in the republic. With more options come more programming for youth, and hope for a promising future. Despite all the multilingual learning I observed while teaching and conducting fieldwork in Kyzyl, Tuvan is an example of a well-maintained language seeking for recognition, thriving among more-widely spoken languages.



## *Tuvan youth abroad*

The Republic of Tuva is one of Russia's poorest regions. Youth in other parts of Russia informed me of this when they found out I was going to work at a camp in Kyzyl. In terms of GDP, Tuva was ranked at #79 out of 85 total regions, barely ahead of war-torn Republic of Ingushetia and Chechnya in 2015 (Valovyi regional'nyi product ... , online). However, Tuvan families rank #37 in Russia out of 85 total regions in terms of money left after minimum expenses. In 2016, it was reported that households with one child had an average of 16,706 rubles of spending money per month after minimum expenses (Bogatye i bednye sem'i ... , 2016). While this is only a fourth of what Muscovites have at the end of the month in spending money, life for Tuvan youth does not imply poverty.

Even so, the money they have left for spending after monthly minimal expenses is far greater than republics with similar GDP, both higher and lower. The Republic of Kalmykia and Karachay-Cherkessia have a higher GDP but much less spending money after minimal expenses. This could be due to a multitude of reasons including a lower cost of living in Tuva, higher wages or less wage inequality.

It could also explain why Tuvans are so mobile. The youth I was able to speak with in Tuva were exposed to many resources, many of which they were confidently going forth and pursuing. Yulia\*, a 40-year-old university lecturer who was the coordinator of the camp I taught at had received continuing education courses in the US. She received grant money from the US Department of State to hold these English camps and also received formal training and instructional materials from ESL teachers in Virginia, USA. She is working on grant proposals to bring her students for short trips to the US to further their English studies as well. Ayana\*, her 22-year-old student and assistant at the camp, just spent a few months promoting Tuvan culture in Ohio, in a US Department of State multi-cultural exchange project.

Tuvan students may also be more likely to travel abroad than within Russia because they may think that in order for their culture to be spread and persevere, it must be known worldwide. Sean, a father, musician and resident of Tuva, came on a 2003 Fulbright grant to study Tuvan throat-singing. He has since then started a family and become a community leader. He now spends most of the year touring the world with his band, Alash Ensemble, as a translator, giving talks and raising awareness for throat singing. He has spoken about the cultural appropriation that is happening — that throat singing has been misattributed as Mongolian in origin, not Tuvan. He actively combats that by touring with Alash Ensemble and promoting Tuvan culture wherever he can. He has five kids, all school age, who have traveled with him and the band.

Sean's five children are testament of how mobile and linguistically diverse youth in Tuva can be.



*Once, my family, as we are dual nationals, lived in the US for nine months. Shoncholay and Chochagay went to kindergarten – and at first they were silent, but then after a month were absolutely fluent speaking English. They got their language practice simply by playing with friends. I used to only speak English to my children and my wife would speak Tuvan. But now, we’ve changed. We thought they would get confused by being exposed to too many different languages, but that’s not the case. Our older kids speak Tuvan, English and Russian. Shoncholay, my oldest at 8-years-old – is now teaching me Spanish.*

### ***Tuvan beliefs about self***

In every experience working with a student, I heard spiritual explanations of life and relationships from children. As an accepted foreigner in Tuva, I was constantly told that I must have been Tuvan in a past life. Lots of assumptions followed this, including that only a special kind of people can take the long journey into Tuva, so therefore I may feel a spiritual connection to the land. Or that since I was there, it was destiny and therefore I must have been Tuvan in the past life. Or that I give off a “feeling” of Tuvan-ness. Older Tuvans were more likely to make such assumptions, but revenant language was not unusual from young Tuvans as well. 8-year-old Nastya\* from the camp asked me on numerous occasions if I was sure that I wasn’t Tuvan. Children enjoyed discussing, that if I wasn’t Tuvan, then what was I? In interacting with Sean, the musician who is referenced in an earlier section, he was constantly told by Tuvans, young and old alike that he must have been Tuvan in the past life. Such comments as these are Tuvans’ explanation of friendship and connections with people outside their ethnicity. Tuvans are unique in that when they come across a positive relationship with someone outside of their ethnicity, they use that as an explanation to why they like that person so much. This may also characterize their view on positive friendships overall, that friends are only to be made with people within the group and should they occur when conducting relations with individuals outside of their group, that they may somehow be spiritually linked. Perhaps, Tuvan view on friendship and relations with trusted outsiders is seen with such honor that only divine explanations suffice. Humorously, this sentiment is also expressed online, through social media. On Vkontakte, in a news article about Sean, Vkontakte user Inga wrote “he was Tuvan in the past life, ONE HUNDRED PERCENT.”

Throughout all of Tuva, there are both Tibetan Buddhist and Shamanistic relics. On the side of roads, there are colorful shrines. At every holy water site within the Republic, relics of both beliefs are present. The presence of overarching spiritual belief is everywhere, part of the landscape that children play, interact learn and live on.

The tribes of Tuva have always practiced some form of paganism, but they first came in contact with Buddhism in the ninth century when they were under the



Uyгур Khanate and again when they became part of the China's Qing dynasty in the nineteenth century. In the Soviet period, both were repressed, but not without clever attempts to hide them in more remote parts of the republic, away from the authorities. Nowadays, the beliefs are so interconnected; Tuvans cannot practice one without practicing the other. Both are accessible to all and don't compete for dominance in the mainstream. Special healing events in Tuva invite both lamas and shamans to give a blessing. Lamas approach shamans with requests to drive evil spirits out of their yurts. Shamans are continually invited to Buddhist temples to make sacrifices. Both medicines are used by Tuvan interchangeably (Mongush, 2014).

*Ayana\**, the 22-year-old student who was mentioned in previous sections, said her family got both advice from a Buddhist monk and from a shaman prior to the birth of her baby. She said it was normal and both sources are seen with equal amounts of credibility and prestige.

Another recurring narrative I heard from Tuvan youth was that long ago, all Tuvans were giant blonde-haired, radiant creatures of the sun. I was unable to find any articles about this topic to support the statements the children made. Three different children in my time working at the camp told me this. This may have to do with the almost 9,300 decorative gold pieces of Scythian Gold that was found in Tuva, some permanently on display at the Tuvan State Museum (Gertcyk, 2016). A Scythian burial mound for important leaders and warriors, called a kurgan, was unearthed not far from Kyzyl. Scythians were a large group of Iranian Eurasian nomads with a recurring cult belief that they were magical beings. Children's narratives about these ancient people are filled with golden light imagery and powerful, god-like strength. They may be confusing the two origin stories or perhaps projecting themselves onto the Scythian myths. In Kyzyl, Tuvans with blonde hair are visible, but are not common.

*Lera\**, a 17-year-old girl used that explanation to why there were blonde-haired Tuvans.

*Orlana\**, a 17-year-old girl expressed that she wished that she had blonde hair like the few that she knows have.

It's unclear if this is a Eurocentric view or simply an extension for Tuvan's spiritual-leaning explanation of self. Tuvans are indeed connected to the royal Scythian lineage, but there is no explanation for the ethereal perception of the Scythians (Abaev, 2012). It may be an aspect of the folktales that have been passed down, with little or no written record.

An unrelated explanation that I came across was that every Tuvan is one of "Genghis Khan's children." This I heard more frequently than the myth about golden hair. Much research in genealogy has been conducted about this topic, confirming that Tuvans are connected to the royal Scythian lineage through intermarriage, but can more directly be linked to Genghis Khan. Some sources cite specifically that Tuvans talk about being the "brave injured soldiers of Genghis Khan." They believed that once the



injured soldiers recovered, they were amazed by the beauty of the Tuvan landscape and never left (Sarangerel, 2014). It reveals how Tuvan youth feel empowered by this decorated past. It also shows that modern youth identity is interwoven with stories of legendary grandeur. The children of Tuva are unique in that they cannot contemplate who they are without a backdrop of fantasy and otherworldly strength.

An added element of pride is that the earliest records of modern day Turkic language was found near Tuva. The Orkhon alphabet, also known as Old Turkic inscriptions were found not far from Kyzyl. Because of this, many Tuvans believe that they are speaking the purest form of modern day Turkish.

*Chingis\**, a 19-year-old boy shared that it is well known that Tuvan is closer to the “original” Turkish language. He wonders why not more Central Asians speak Tuvan.

The unearthing of ancient Orkhon inscriptions in Tuva isn't direct proof that modern day Tuvan is the “purest” form of all Turkic languages, rather, that it reveals an old migratory pattern. Nevertheless, this ties in with many ideals that Tuvan youth share that are previously mentioned in the article. One is that they have a transcendental view of their collective past and history. It may also explain the anti-Muslim sentiment as mostly Muslims speak the other modern day Turkic languages. Tuvans may believe that since their language is closer to the original, that they have an enlightened sense of self. Coupled with the fact that Tuvans believe other non-Tuvans could have been Tuvan in the past life, this assigning of privilege when it comes to individuals that they take a liking to, can show that they can also project their own feelings of greatness, or in some cases, inferiority upon others.

The unearthing of the Scythian treasures happened in 2009, within young people's lifetimes and collective memory. The Orkhon inscriptions were unearthed in the early 1900s but new research is still being done worldwide by Turkic language researchers on those very manuscripts. I am certainly not the only foreigner Tuvan children have met who had come to do research on their language or culture. Modern day Tuvans and the language they speak are continually being researched for archival and linguistic purposes. Tuvan youth may feel as if they are living history. This could explain their reverence for tradition. Even so, the youth that I encountered were mobile and technologically advanced. They are surrounded by opportunities to grow and advance themselves.

### ***Educational opportunities available to Tuvan Youth***

The students that I met during my time in Tuva were unforgettable. Never before had I worked with a group that had such limited behavior problems. In a formal classroom setting and during play, they were always helping one another. I rarely saw a child feel isolated. Unlike the youth that I worked with in other parts of Russia, they sat on one another's laps on the bus and dutifully and happily performed lunchtime



and cleanup duties. It was extremely common to see groups of children all drinking from the same water bottle. Their ideas of self were expressed in how they interacted, too. They were respectful and a classroom management anomaly.

The camp that I worked at was known as Access English Camp. These camps are conducted in over 20 cities all over Russia, three of which I was able to work. Access is an ongoing project of the American organization PH International, as a micro-scholarship program. Access meets for two weeks in the summer, followed by yearlong study. It empowers economically disadvantaged youth with scholarships to make the study of English as accessible as possible. During the year, there are weekly to monthly meetings with a coordinator for small-group English lessons. The coordinator from each of these sites had to apply for funding from PH International and the US Department of State to hold these camps. They meet frequently throughout Russia and abroad to collaborate with English Language Officers in the US Embassy in Moscow. The children that are “alumni” of the camp are offered many opportunities for education, jobs and leadership summits. Other students who are not receiving the scholarship are present at the summer camps, though may have to pay a fee. The camps are well planned, with themed weeks and planned interactive lessons on American culture mirroring the interests and activities that actual American children regularly participate in.

In Kyzyl, I taught a multitude of games. I saw four groups of students for about an hour each. The ages ranged from 5 to 14-years-old. The games I taught included: Charades, Taboo, Simon Says, Crab Soccer, Telephone, Telephone with drawing, Association, Red Light Green Light, What Time is it Mr. Fox, Freeze Tag, Blob Tag, Refrigerator Tag, Sharks and Minnows, Big Booty, Pulse, Screaming Vikings, Steal the Bacon, Capture the Flag, Musical Chairs, Marco Polo, Scattergories and different relay races and obstacle courses. All games involved speaking English. The youth also taught me one game: “Yakuza” which is their name for the popular children’s game Mafia. In Tuva, that popular game has a Japanese inspired name. In teaching English games, there was a harmonious balance of Tuvan, Russian and English being spoken. Their childlike willingness to participate and communicate made for a memorable camp for students but a successful, smoothly run project for the administrators.

## **Conclusion**

A modern Tuvan youth identity needs to be understood as a syncretic blend of contemporary Russian and East Asian cultural influences. East Asian influences most notably from South Korea, in terms of language study and travel. Asian cultural influences highlight the importance of Buddhism in Tuvan culture and the use of oral histories and fables to promote national identity. As a semi-autonomous republic still under the jurisdiction of the Russian Federation, youth are exposed to nationalistic ideals and hero-worship. Russian militarism helps elevate many instances of pride



they have for themselves. Their interest in sports and anti-Muslim sentiment may be a union of both sides of their identity. Even so, revisions to how they perceive themselves are continually being processed.

The children in Tuva have global leadership, which better guide their development. Community leaders that are internationally minded have proven to be effective in leading all the youth that I interacted with. There were individuals like Korean teacher Sholban\*, who was trying to use the language for advancement of Tuvan culture. There was university lecturer and Access camp coordinator Yulia\* providing subsidized opportunities to study English. Community leaders aim to both represent their community and invest in its long-term change, thus directly reinforcing positive behavior among youth. Summer camps, study abroad groups and extra language classes promote positive behaviors in youth. It mirrors the classic model of education and empowerment seen in many other model communities. Such examples are to be celebrated and praised for being long term and sustainable community empowerment initiatives with proven results.

### *Endnotes*

\* Indicates that names have been changed.

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