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## THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN KYRGYZSTAN

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## РАЗВИТИЕ ДЕТСКОЙ ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ В КЫРГЫЗСТАНЕ

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*Abstract.* The evolution of children's literature in Kyrgyzstan represents a dynamic journey from ancient oral traditions to a sophisticated, multifaceted written genre. This study explores the historical trajectory of the field, beginning with its roots in the preservation of indigenous folklore by early pioneers such as J. Mukambaev. During the Soviet era, Kyrgyz youth literature underwent significant formalization under the framework of socialist realism, guided by the profound influence of literary figures like Chingiz Aitmatov, who integrated universal humanism with national motifs. Following the declaration of independence in 1991, the literary landscape experienced a critical shift toward reclaiming national cultural heritage and reinforcing ethnic identity. Contemporary authors, notably T. Samudinov and S. Rysbaev, continue this legacy by synthesizing pedagogical innovations with traditional motifs to engage modern audiences. However, despite this rich historical evolution, the sector currently faces formidable challenges, including the rise of digital competition, shifting media consumption habits among youth, and a concerning decline in literacy rates. This paper argues that while the transition from oral to written forms has been successful, the future of the genre depends on the synergy between traditional values and modern storytelling techniques. Furthermore, it highlights that sustained government initiatives and the establishment of national literary prizes remain essential for fostering high-quality, modern literature. By analyzing the intersection of tradition and transformation, this research underscores the vital role of children's literature in preserving the linguistic and cultural sovereignty of Kyrgyzstan in a globalized era.

*Аннотация.* Эволюция детской литературы в Кыргызстане представляет собой динамичный путь от древних устных традиций до сложного, многогранного письменного жанра. В данном исследовании рассматривается историческая траектория этой области, начиная с её истоков в сохранении коренного фольклора такими первопроходцами, как Дж. Мукамбаев. В советскую эпоху детская и юношеская литература Кыргызстана прошла процесс значительной формализации в рамках социалистического реализма под глубоким влиянием таких литературных деятелей, как Ч. Айтматов, который интегрировал универсальный гуманизм с национальными мотивами. После провозглашения независимости в 1991 году литературный ландшафт претерпел критический сдвиг в сторону возрождения национального культурного наследия и укрепления этнической идентичности. Современные авторы, в частности Т. Самудинов и С. Рысбаев, продолжают это наследие, синтезируя педагогические инновации с традиционными мотивами для привлечения современной аудитории. Однако, несмотря на богатую историческую эволюцию, сектор в настоящее время сталкивается с серьезными вызовами, включая цифровую конкуренцию, изменение привычек медиапотребления среди молодежи и вызывающее тревогу снижение уровня грамотности. В статье утверждается, что, хотя переход от устных к письменным формам прошел успешно, будущее жанра зависит от синергии традиционных ценностей и современных техник сторителлинга. Кроме того, подчеркивается, что устойчивые государственные инициативы и

учреждение национальных литературных премий остаются необходимыми условиями для развития высококачественной современной литературы. Анализируя пересечение традиций и трансформаций, данное исследование подчеркивает жизненно важную роль детской литературы в сохранении языкового и культурного суверенитета Кыргызстана в эпоху глобализации.

*Keywords:* children's literature, Pre-Soviet Era, Soviet Era, Post Independence, literary evolution, oral tradition, socialist realism.

*Ключевые слова:* детская литература, досоветская эпоха, советская эпоха, постсоветский период, литературная эволюция, устная традиция, социалистический реализм.

Children's literature in Kyrgyzstan is a rich and complex tapestry, woven from the threads of ancient oral tradition, shaped by the ideological currents of the Soviet era, and revitalized by the pursuit of national identity in the post-independence period. It stands as a vital cultural force, essential for shaping moral and aesthetic values, preserving the Kyrgyz language, and connecting new generations to their heritage. This literature provides a unique window into the nation's soul, mirroring its history, values, and aspirations. The journey from nomadic storytelling to modern digital narratives is a testament to the resilience and adaptability of Kyrgyz culture. The methodology employed to study the development of Children's Literature in Kyrgyzstan is primarily a Qualitative Research approach, relying heavily on Historical and Archival Research to chronologically trace the genre's evolution through the Pre-Soviet, Soviet, and Post-Independence eras. This is supplemented by Literary Analysis to critically examine the shifting themes, from the “orphan theme” and socialist realism to national identity. Furthermore, the method includes a Review of Academic Literature to acknowledge the foundational work of scholars, and a Socio-Contextual Analysis to assess current challenges, such as the decline in reading culture and the urgent need for Kyrgyz-language content, thereby providing a comprehensive, descriptive, and interpretive account of the genre's trajectory and current status.

The formal study and collection of this literature began in earnest with scholars who recognized the immense value of the oral tradition. Bakirova G. S. who studied formation of children's literature marks Jeenbai Mukambaev as undoubtedly the pioneer who made a massive contribution by systematically collecting and reworking the oral heritage, even from remote areas like the Pamirs. He applied a scientific method to folklore collection, and his numerous publications, including *My Tales* (1980), *Ak Bulak* (1980), *El Ichi-Önör Kenchi* (1982, 1990), and *Ene – Nur* (1983), are considered foundational landmarks that solidified the groundwork for the genre's formation. This foundational work was later formalized and emphasized in the academic monograph *Kyrgyz children's literature* (2012) by scholars A. Muratov and K. Isakov [1].

The academic field saw significant growth with contributors like M. Sulaimanov, who defended a master's thesis on Modern Kyrgyz children's prose in 1971 and a doctoral thesis on the history of Kyrgyz children's literature in 1980. Sulaimanov regularly presented reports at all-Union conferences and published articles on the literature's status in the famous Moscow journal *Children's Literature*. The fundamental textbook, *The History of Kyrgyz Children's Literature* (1992) written by him stands as a significant work in this field [2].

Other key scholarly efforts, such as those by M. Tülögabylov (*Kyrgyz Children's Literature*, 1963) and the Soviet-era analyses by V. Vakulenko and I. Motyashov, provided early frameworks for understanding the literature's distinctive features within the broader Soviet context. K. Abakirov contributed with his thesis on the Genre Specificity of Kyrgyz Soviet Children's Literature [1].

Post-independence, the academic focus shifted toward integrating folklore and pedagogy. This was championed by scholars like Sulaiman Rysbaev, who not only authored the foundational Kyrgyz ABC Alippe but also defended two pedagogical science degrees, writing nine core textbooks and numerous art collections. The first volume of the book 'Kyrgyz Poets and Writers for Children: A Reading Anthology for Children, compiled under the guidance of S. Rysbaev, included poetry, and the second volume included prose. These same books were expanded and republished in two volumes in 2016 [3].

Gülbara Orozova rigorously analyzed the genre composition of Kyrgyz children's folklore, compiling Children folklore [2].

Modern scholars like Iskenderova and Maatazimova continue to detail the genre's history and its crucial role in spiritual education and cultural transmission, underscoring the genre's necessity in adapting to modern psychological and social changes [1].

The extensive list of critical articles by scholars like K. Ukaev, T. Chotbaeva, and U. Kultaeva provides rich resources for new researchers entering the field. The evolution of Kyrgyz children's literature can be segmented into three distinct periods: Pre-Soviet, Soviet, and Post-Independence.

*Pre-Soviet Era.* According to the information given in Encyclopaedia of Kirgiz SSR the earliest form of children's literature was dominated by oral literature, where *akyns* (poets) and *manaschis* (epic tellers) transmitted culture, history, and moral philosophy through fairy tales, riddles, and the great epics. This literature was the primary vehicle for character-building and preserving the general world map of the Kyrgyz people. The poet Togolok Moldo stands out as the founding figure of written children's literature during this transitional period. He skillfully adapted traditional tales (like *The Crane and the Fox*) and used original satirical poems, such as *Kemchontoi* and *Telibay Tentek*, to instill lessons of education, good behavior, and well-manner. The characters he created remain enduring symbols in Kyrgyz popular education, serving as immediate, recognizable role models (both positive and negative) for children [4].

*Soviet Era.* The Soviet Era brought formal development under the banner of socialist realism. This period saw a systematic effort to create a written literature for children in the Kyrgyz language.

— The Early Years (1920s–1930s): Early authors like A. Tokombayev (*Orphan*) and K. Bayalinov (*The Death of an Orphan, Happy Orphan*) heavily focused on the “orphan theme”, which contrasted the difficult lives of children in the past with the “happy, new life” promised by the socialist state, thus serving an ideological purpose. The 1930s saw thematic expansion toward labor education and communist morality, featuring stories about children's participation in socialist construction (S. Sasykbaev, K. Malikov). This decade also saw the emergence of science fiction in Kyrgyz children's literature with works by K. Esenkodzhoyev (*The Boy Traveler, The Third Ball*).

— Wartime and Postwar Development: During the Great Patriotic War, literature shifted its focus to patriotism, courage, and the defense of the homeland, with poets like J. Bokonbaev and A. Toktomushev celebrating Soviet bravery. The postwar decade allowed for a broader range of topics, exploring the inner lives of characters and reflecting the labor heroism of the rear.

— Later Soviet Period: Spurred by a 1969 resolution, the 1970s saw the publication of mature works that solidified socialist realism. This period includes pieces by M. Dzhangaziyev and the influential Shükürbek Beishenaliev, whose works emphasized hard work and spiritual education. Beishenaliev's achievements were recognized globally when he received a special Hans Christian Andersen Prize in 1978. Crucially, the body of literature was enriched through translations of world classics from other Soviet republics and foreign countries (e.g., Leo Tolstoy, Hans Christian Andersen), widening the literary scope for young readers [4].

*Post Independence Period.* Following the independence of Kyrgyzstan in 1991, the literature pivoted toward themes of national identity, cultural heritage, and modern social realities, moving

away from Soviet ideology. New authors began blending traditional folklore with contemporary stories to strengthen a sense of national pride and cultural awareness. Authors like T. Samudinov, A. Kydyrov, B. Asanaliev, K. Zhunushev, Zh. Abdyldaev, Y. Kadyrov, and I. Toktogulov have been instrumental in reviving and preserving Kyrgyz traditions through their work [5].

— Foremost among the pioneers of this era is Toktosun Samudinov, who developed a unique intellectual approach to children's poetry, moving away from purely sentimental themes. Samudinov's work e.g., *Flowers from Different Gardens*, (2012) aims to nurture a child's comprehensive development, logic, and mastery of the native language, often using humor and irony [5].

His innovative methods, including his role as editor-in-chief of the magazine *Baychechekey*, led to the formation of the influential *Samudinov School*, inspiring a generation of poets.

— Rysbaev excelled in both literature and pedagogy, creating imaginative fairy tales and using his academic work *Pedagogy of Kyrgyz Children's Folklore* to integrate ethnopedagogical culture into the national educational system. His stories, such as *Silver Spring*, emphasize moral and ethical lessons, blending romantic ideas with real-life issues. Latest Efforts to Foster Children's Literature in Kyrgyzstan. Despite its rich legacy, the sector today faces critical modern challenges. Rapid technological change and a diminished reading culture mean children often prefer digital screens over books. Experts emphasize that modern books must be artistically rich, visually appealing, and relevant to the digital age, suggesting a move toward interactive and multimedia content online. This issue is compounded by a lack of dedicated publishing infrastructure and a critical shortage of high-quality Kyrgyz-language content, which threatens the transmission of the native language as children are increasingly exposed to Russian-language media (as discussed at the *Kyrgyz content for my child* conference) [6].

Compounding the issue, authors like Nurgazy Akhmedulin have described the state of the literature as “terrible” and stagnant due to a scarcity of new, young voices entering the field, underscoring the high standards required to write authentically for children (<https://707.su/FECV>).

The government has attempted to counter this decline by establishing the Kyrgyz Government Prize for Children's Literature in 2008 to promote the Kyrgyz language and support excellence. Since the first state awards in 2009 (honoring Sulaiman Ryspaev and Abdykerim Muratov, among others), the prize continues to recognize contemporary authors like Baytemir Asanaliev, Japarali Osmonkulov, and Aman Namatov in categories for poetry, prose, and translation (<https://707.su/vpaO>).

To secure the future of this vital genre, a coordinated effort is needed: writers must create authentic, modern works that reflect a child's worldview; publishers must increase the production and distribution of high-quality Kyrgyz content; and schools must ensure that the curriculum remains dynamic by integrating the works of contemporary, award-winning authors. This collective action is essential to cultivate a vibrant reading culture and serve the spiritual and moral growth of Kyrgyz children.

The analysis conducted through historical, literary, and socio-contextual methods yielded several significant outcomes regarding Children's Literature in Kyrgyzstan. Firstly, the genre successfully transitioned from an oral tradition to a formalized, written body of work, largely due to the efforts of collectors like Jeenbai Mukambaev, which secured the preservation of valuable folklore. This formalization was academically validated by scholars such as M. Sulaimanov and was successfully integrated into national education by figures like Sulaiman Rysbaev, who utilized ethnopedagogical principles in core textbooks. Secondly, the literature exhibited a crucial thematic and stylistic evolution, demonstrating its ability to mirror national history by shifting from the early Soviet “orphan theme” and socialist realism to a strong focus on national identity post-1991. Stylistically, the genre was matured by the satirical work of Togolok Moldo and achieved innovative heights with Toktosun Samudinov's development of an intellectual, humor-driven approach to

children's poetry, a maturity acknowledged internationally by the Hans Christian Andersen Prize awarded to Shukurbek Beishenaliev.

However, the third key finding identifies critical contemporary challenges: a pervasive, diminished reading culture is being driven by the widespread consumption of digital media, leading to a critical shortage of both high-quality Kyrgyz-language content and new authors. In response, the establishment of the Kyrgyz Government Prize for Children's Literature serves as a vital, ongoing mechanism for supporting and rewarding creative output, even as the field struggles against modern pressures.

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