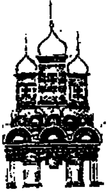
THE NEW SILK ROAD: MEDIATORS AND TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN CENTRAL ASIA



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Within the past century, international tourists have increasingly sought exotic destinations in their pursuit of relaxation, escape, and adventure. Recognizing the opportunity to earn valuable foreign currency, developing countries have catered to these desires by encouraging tourism development. The interplay between "hosts" and "guests" and the impact of tourism on host communities have been recurring themes in the anthropological literature on tourism, but scholars recognize that these categories have several limitations. The terms gloss over the wide variation that exists in the tourist experience for both guests and hosts, and ignore the important actors known as mediators. This article examines the role of mediators in two post-Soviet Central Asia states: Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Mediators there are particularly important because neither country is well known in Western countries, and neither country inherited a well-developed tourist infrastructure from the Soviet state. These mediators are cultivating a positive image of Central Asia as a new tourist destination, developing tourist accommodations, and lobbying government institutions to support and regulate tourism. However, the industry is rife with conflict and competition. (Tourism, development, Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan)

Within the past century, international tourists have increasingly sought distant, "exotic" destinations in their pursuit of relaxation, escape, and adventure. Recognizing the opportunity to earn valuable foreign currency, most developing countries have catered to these desires by encouraging international tourism development. Some countries, such as Nepal and Jamaica, have gone so far as to make international tourism a top priority in their national development strategy. The anthropology of tourism emerged in the 1970s as tourists started to appear in places "off the beaten path," such as Inuit communities in Alaska and Kuna communities in Costa Rica (Graburn 1976; Graburn 1983; Nash 1981; Smith 1989). The interplay between "hosts" (locals) and "guests" (tourists) and the impact of tourism on host communities have been recurring themes in this growing body of literature. While the twin concepts of hosts and guests are routinely cited, scholars recognize that these categories have several limitations. The use of these terms glosses over the variation that exists in the tourist experience for both guests and hosts, and unfortunately ignores an important group of actors, known as "mediators," who actively promote and develop tourist destinations. "Neither hosts nor guests in any tangible way," the category of mediators includes government officials, tourism planners, travel agents, tour guides, and travel writers (Chambers 2000:30).

This article examines the role of mediators in the development of international tourism in two post-Soviet Central Asia states: Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. As the former Soviet republics make the awkward transition from socialism to capitalism, tourism development stands as one possible solution for their cash-flow problems.

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Tourism is definitely at the forefront of development in the Kyrgyz Republic, a country with exceptional natural beauty but limited trade resources.[1] Tourism is also important in the Republic of Kazakhstan, a country with vast oil and mineral wealth but a need for a more diverse economy. The role of tourism mediators in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan is particularly important because neither country is very well known in the Western tourist-generating countries, and unlike neighboring Uzbekistan, neither country inherited a well-developed tourist infrastructure from the Soviet state. This study of tour operators, an understudied yet important group of mediators, provides a new angle for understanding what Nash (1981) refers to as the "touristic process." In addition to cultivating a positive image of a new tourist destination, tour operators in Central Asia work hard to develop adequate tourist accommodations, create tourist itineraries, and influence government institutions that support and regulate tourism. These mediators, however, interact with each other in an industry that is rife with conflict, competition, and co-operation.

HOSTS, GUESTS, AND MEDIATORS

Anthropologists did not start writing about tourism until the 1970s, when the discipline was transforming in new directions that no longer viewed cultures as discrete entities bound in time and space. This transformation in the field led anthropologists to consider more seriously the effect of historical processes (and foreign visitors) on local communities. Simultaneously, the tourist industry was experiencing phenomenal growth into regions of the world where anthropologists typically worked (Chambers 2000:2-3). A collection of essays published in a pioneering volume, *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism* (Smith 1989), critically analyzed the impact of guests on host communities. It established tourism as a valid subject for anthropological study and introduced a framework for understanding tourism development as a dichotomy between hosts and guests. One essay described tourism as a "form of imperialism" (Nash 1989), and the volume as a whole suggested that the negative aspects of tourism outweighed the positive.

Since then, an interdisciplinary literature on tourism has continued to emphasize the host/guest dichotomy and comparisons between benefits and costs. But studies of guests do not focus on the same aspects of tourism as studies of hosts (Stronza 2001). Studies of guests examine the historical origins of tourism (Enloe 1989), the motivations behind travel (Bruner 1996; Graburn 1989; MacCannell 1976; Urry 1995), the different types of tourists and tourism (Cohen 1972, 1985; Smith 1989), and the varying experiences of tourists (Bruner 1996; Pearce 1982; Ryan 1991). In contrast, studies of hosts, including the bulk of the anthropological literature on tourism, concentrate on the consequences of tourism. Rarely does the tourism literature consider the ways in which tourism affects tourists or the reasons why locals engage in tourism (Stronza 2001).

Anthropological studies of host communities have been biased by cultural anthropologists prone to conducting research among marginalized social groups in

developing countries because it is relatively easy to support an argument that members of a host community are the passive recipients of undesired processes (Chambers 2000; see also Kincaid 1988; McLaren 1998; Nash 1989; Young 1973). For example, Daltabuit and Pi-Sunyer's (1990) study of Cancun, Mexico, showed how tourism increased the economic dependency of the indigenous Mayan population on the outside world and fostered social and cultural dislocations. In this case, the Mayans have no voice in the political decisions that relate to tourism development, and they gain access to jobs only as unskilled laborers.

Tourism development in the tourism literature is generally described as a mixed blessing. It can create new service jobs, provide people with greater income, and help develop the local infrastructure. Some communities, such as the Sherpas of Nepal, have received significant economic gains from tourism development (Adams 1992; Ortner 1999). However, tourism can also have negative economic repercussions, especially when there are large numbers of tourists (Smith 1989). Freitag (1996), for example, demonstrates how tourism in the Dominican Republic brought an inflation of land and food prices, and Belisle (1983) argues that much of the potential profit from tourism in the Caribbean is "leaked" back to industrialized countries that export food for tourist consumption in hotels and resorts.

Tourism development affects local cultures in multiple and complex ways. Cultural authenticity is compromised when performances are staged for tourists (Greenwood 1989) and when artistic objects are created with tourist interests in mind (Graburn 1976). For these authors, the commoditization of culture is equated with cultural loss. Cultural disruptions may also occur when there are wealth disparities between tourists and their hosts; members of a host community may begin to resent their relative poverty and seek ways to emulate the lifestyles of the tourists (Gmelch and Gmelch 1997; Goering 1990; McLaren 1998). Goering (1990:21) explains how this affects the Ladakhis of northern India: "By observing foreign tourists on vacation, the Ladakhis—the young Ladakhis in particular—easily come to believe that all Westerners are rich, that they work very little, and that the West is a paradise of consumer goods. Young people begin to despise the thinking of their parents and rush to embrace whatever is seen as modern." In situations where there are also significant cultural differences between guests and hosts, tourism development can be humiliating for those who are sought by tourists for their "exotic" cultural practices. Intrigued by the film, *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, tourists in southern Africa want to see "real" Bushmen engage in "traditional" practices of hunting and gathering (Gordon 1990). Similarly, visitors to Thailand wish to see the Padaung "giraffe women," whose necks are elongated by brass spirals (Mirante 1990). In both cases, the tourists photograph but rarely interact with the locals, who are made to feel like curiosities.

Tourism has also been beneficial for local cultures. It is frequently associated with a revival of artistic traditions that were previously in decline, as well as the emergence of new forms of cultural expression. Zerner (1982), for example, describes how tourism has revitalized the production of several local crafts, including

ikat textiles and wood carvings, in southern Sulawesi. Tourist interest in a local culture can also bring a greater sense of social solidarity and ethnic pride, as Borman (1999) reports for the Cofan of Ecuador. Swiss Alps villagers are proud of the folkloric displays produced by locals for both local and tourist consumption because they demonstrate regional contributions to the national culture (Bendix 1989).

How tourism affects the environment also varies from case to case (Chambers 2000; Nash 1996). McLaren (1998:89-90), a harsh critic of the tourism industry, argues that tourism development often "diverts resources (energy, land, and water) away from the local population" and "puts heavy stress on the environment, since tourist sites require reconstruction of the landscape and increased use of petroleum products and toxics [*sic*] such as chemicals, fertilizers and pesticides." In Nepal, locals have depleted wide tracts of forested land in order to accommodate the growing number of hikers who demand wood for cooking, hot showers, campfires, and building materials. Further, the Nepalese environment is polluted with trash left behind by them and mountain climbers (Puntenney 1990). Tourism-related pollution in Jamaica is destroying coral reefs and harming local fish populations (Olsen 1997). On the other hand, environmentally friendly tourism, or ecotourism, contributes to local and global awareness of environmental problems and can provide a lucrative alternative to the destructive uses of the environment, such as logging (Honey 1999; Smith and Eadington 1992; Wearing and Neil 1999).

The dichotomy between guests and hosts is used ubiquitously as a conceptual framework for explaining the multifaceted effects of tourism. Several scholars, however, question whether these concepts help understanding the interaction between tourists and locals. The concepts do not correspond to the moral norms associated with customary hospitality (Aramberri 2001; Crick 1989:331). The concept of a host suggests a willingness to receive tourists and a degree of control over guests, which is not always the case (Mowforth and Munt 1998:237). Hosts and guests are not always discrete and homogenous groups. In some settings, tourists and residents may do the same things; and in others, those working in the tourist industry may originate from elsewhere and be considered as outsiders by locals (Chambers 2000:58-59).

An unintended consequence of the host/guest dichotomy is that tourists are often portrayed as the primary agents of social change; i.e., the tourists themselves are responsible for bringing either positive or negative change to local communities. This line of reasoning implies that "good" tourists are culturally sensitive, socially responsible, and more likely to bring benefits to local communities, while "bad" tourists are only interested in superficial encounters with locals and do not care about the environmental consequences of their activities. Although there might be some truth to these assumptions, this approach downplays the agency of hosts and mediators. Members of destination communities often have some control over the local development of tourism (Mowforth and Munt 1998). Locals, for example, often seek jobs in the tourist industry. Young men in Barbados prefer low-paying service jobs in the tourist industry over stigmatized jobs as laborers in the sugar-cane fields (Gmelch and Gmelch 1997). Despite these realities, the anthropological literature on

tourism tends to view host communities as relatively homogenous and often victimized.

Mediators are those whose actions further the development of the tourist industry and/or shape the tourist experience. This includes government officials, tourism planners, travel agents, tour guides, and travel writers. Mediators are therefore a diverse group whose interests and agendas are sometimes in conflict with each other. These actors play a significant role in shaping touristic processes, yet their role has been largely neglected by anthropologists who have devoted much more attention to hosts and guests. This article examines the ways in which tour operators in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan attempt to promote Central Asia as a new tourist destination and shape the tourist experience in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. The perspective for understanding the development and local effects of tourism taken here is, first, that mediators, not tourists, are regarded as the primary agents of tourism. Second, hosts, guests, and mediators are groups that have widely varying experiences with tourism. Third, mediators have interests in developing tourism that go beyond chasing the tourist dollar. In particular, they may hope to improve social conditions in order to promote national culture and to protect the environment.

KYRGYZSTAN AND KAZAKHSTAN

Field research on the development of international tourism in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan[2] was stimulated by an increasing presence of international tourists. During my initial visits to Kazakhstan, beginning in 1992, it seemed that the majority of foreign visitors were businessmen, government employees, and development workers. By the late 1990s, several new types of visitors were visible on international flights and in hotel lobbies: Christian missionaries, adoptive parents, and tourists. Central Asia can offer an adventurous tourist the romance of the ancient Silk Road trade, nomadic pastoral people, strikingly beautiful natural settings of snow-covered mountain peaks and endless steppes, hospitable people who proudly claim they would give their last scrap of food to a guest, tasty foods such as pilaf, *manti* (steamed dumplings), and *samsa* (stuffed pastries), interesting architectural monuments including blue-tiled mosques, colorful bazaars, brightly colored rugs and textiles, and exciting customs such as *buzkashi* (the polo-like sport that is played with a goat carcass). What is more, these experiences also fulfill one of the paradoxical wants of the sophisticated tourist: the desire to be where there are not many other tourists (Ryan 1991). This research sought to compare the development of tourism in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan by interviewing tour operators and government officials. It also investigated the role that mediators play in the development of international tourism, and whether they would try to maximize the positive aspects of tourism while minimizing the negative.

Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan provided an ideal case for comparison. On the one hand, the two countries share similarities, and thus seem equally likely to attract the same type and number of tourists. First, although the territory of Kazakhstan is much

larger and diverse in terms of its nature, both countries are dotted with beautiful mountains ideal for hikers, climbers, and skiers.[3] Second, both countries started with a limited tourist infrastructure inherited from the Soviet state. When independence was achieved in 1991, both countries had only a few hotels designated for foreign tourists. Kyrgyzstan also had a few spa resorts on Lake Issyq-kul for domestic (i.e., Soviet) tourists. Third, the dominant ethnic group in each country, the Kazakhs and the Kyrgyz, have similar customs, foods, dress, and arts. Despite these similarities, Kyrgyzstan has a greater need for tourism because it has few other alternatives for development. Kazakhstan has vast amounts of natural resources that can be exchanged for foreign currency, including oil and natural gas. In comparison, Kyrgyzstan has limited potential for exports.[4] By the year 2000, the overall economy of Kazakhstan, where gross national income per capita was US$1,260, was significantly stronger than the economy of Kyrgyzstan, where gross national income per capita was only US$270 (World Bank 2002).

Interviews were conducted with the leaders of tourist agencies specializing in foreign tourists, with government officials and NGOs that work on tourism-related issues, and with educators who prepare tourist industry professionals. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, there are hundreds of tourist firms that provide airline reservations and package trips for locals who want to go abroad for a vacation or "shopping tours" to destinations such as Thailand, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and Spain. Shopping tours provide the main source of income for many Central Asians, who buy goods in wholesale markets abroad which are then retailed in local markets, while vacations are a prestige activity for the nouveaux riche. Also, there is a growing number of tour operators who provide domestic tours for locals who can afford such trips. Although these firms are an important part of tourism in Central Asia, this article deals only with tour operators that provide at least some services for foreign tourists. For international tourists, Kyrgyzstan has a larger number of tour operators, a wider variety of tourist activities, and a larger share of the market.

My sample of 24 tour operators in Kyrgyzstan and sixteen in Kazakhstan includes the majority of competitive tourist agencies operating in each country that specialize in international tourists. About half of the companies are owned and operated by women. The majority of companies are run by the largest ethnic groups in these countries (Kyrgyz, Kazakh, and Russian), but a small number of firms are run by ethnic minorities (Uzbek and Uighur) and by British, Germans, and Americans. Most of the firms interviewed have headquarters either in the Kyrgyz Republic capital, Bishkek, or Kazakhstan's former capital, Almaty.[5] Seven interviews were conducted with tourist firms based in Karakol, a city in Kyrgyzstan that is favorably situated near the shores of Lake Issyq-kul and relatively close to the Khan Tengri and Pobeda mountain peaks. Two interviews were conducted with tourist firms based in Shymkent, the capital of Southern-Kazakhstan Oblast (province) which contains several important tourist sites.

Fieldwork also entailed visits to several tourist sites. In Kyrgyzstan, these excursions included a visit to a Soviet-era health spa on Lake Issyq-kul (in Cholpon-

Ata), a three-day trip to Tash-Rabat caravanserai and yurt camps on Lake Songkul and in a national park near Karakol, a visit to the Przhevalsky Museum (near Karakol), and a day-hike in the Ala-Archa National Park (near Bishkek). In Kazakhstan, these excursions included a visit to Charyn Canyon and Turgen Gorge (both near Almaty), Otyrar archaeological site (near Shymkent), and two mosques (both near Shymkent). At each site, I noted the presence of both international and local tourists, the quality of available accommodations, and the existence of various activities.

Before and after conducting fieldwork, I also collected travel guidebooks and newspaper articles on tourism to Central Asia written by an important group of tourism mediators: travel writers. The importance of any particular piece can be particularly strong for a place like Central Asia, where the availability of accurate travel information is limited. For example, the owner of the Celestial Mountains tour company in Kyrgyzstan complained that the Lonely Planet guidebook had seriously limited tourism development in Naryn, where he opened a hotel for foreign tourists. According to the Lonely Planet guidebook, Naryn is a "fairly dismal place," "full of officers and soldiers," "desperately poor" Kyrgyz, and "aggressive" drunks (King, Noble, and Humphreys 1996; Mayhew, Plunkett, and Richmond 2000). Given the popularity of the Lonely Planet guidebook, the hotel owner is correct to believe that such an unflattering depiction of Naryn has discouraged tourists from visiting there.

INTERNATIONAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

International tourism has changed dramatically in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan since the end of the Soviet period, when foreign tourists were strictly controlled. Since then, tourist options have expanded. Until the mid-1950s, tourist facilities in the USSR were primarily developed for domestic tourists who generally vacationed with workers from the same collective or trade union (Hall 1991:80). Throughout the Soviet period, health spas (*sanatoria*) and children's Pioneer camps were the most common destinations for domestic tourists. Within Central Asia, most of these health spas were concentrated in an eastern region around Lake Issyq-kul and Almaty city, and a central region around Tashkent and Shymkent (Shaw 1991). In contrast, foreign tourists, including those from socialist countries, generally went on sightseeing tours of cities. Over 70 per cent of foreign tourists were cultural tourists who were taken to approved sites to learn about the cultural, historical, and economic achievements of the Soviet peoples. The remaining 30 per cent of foreign tourists visited health spas, participated in sporting events, went on automobile tours, and attended conferences (Shaw 1991). Though Moscow and Leningrad were by far the most popular cities for foreign tourists, approximately 110 Soviet cities were "open" to foreign tourists in the 1960s (Felber 1965). This number increased to 150 by 1985 (Sitkina 1985), but only five cities (Almaty, Frunze [Bishkek], Zhambyl, Shymkent and Turkestan) were located within Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. There were strict

penalties for any foreign travelers who visited places that were off-limits to foreigners (Department of State 1990).

The Soviet state strictly controlled the activities of all foreign tourists, especially those arriving from capitalist countries. Through Intourist, the foreign tourism agency, and Sputnik, the international youth tourist agency, the Soviet state established itineraries for foreign tourists. The only way to obtain a tourist visa was to purchase an Intourist or Sputnik tour package (Felber 1965). All Soviet visas were issued with specific entry and exit dates, and a list of cities to be visited. Passports and visas were checked in every city, and usually held by the Intourist hotel management. Most tourists traveled in groups and stayed in designated Intourist hotels.

While it is difficult to find statistics on foreign tourists who visited Central Asia, English-language tourist guidebooks describe Central Asia as not "on the beaten path" for foreign tourists. Generally, tourists who visited Central Asia did so on a comprehensive tour of the Soviet Union, rather than a specific tour of Central Asia. Further, among the Central Asian republics, Uzbekistan was considered the crown jewel. The 1980 edition of *Fodor's Soviet Union* devotes half the chapter on Central Asian Republics to Uzbekistan, especially the ancient cities of Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva. Each of the other four republics of Soviet Central Asia receive only two to three pages of coverage (Fodor's Travel Publications 1980). According to one tour operator in Kyrgyzstan, travel by Western tourists to Kyrgyzstan was so limited due to the presence of Soviet military facilities that visitors could only stay one night in the republic capital. Although there are very few changes to the subsequent editions (Fodor's Travel Publications 1987, 1991), one source suggests that tours to Central Asia were on the rise in the 1980s (Sitkina 1985). The Lonely Planet series, which caters to independent travelers, did not publish a guide for the Soviet Union until 1991 (Noble and King 1991). In its coverage of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, the *Lonely Planet USSR* guidebook does not differ substantially from the Fodor's series. Only the "open" cities are covered in the guidebook, and the descriptions of travel to Central Asia are replete with statements about what Intourist does and does not allow.

After the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, each newly independent Central Asian state began to chart a separate path of tourism development. Uzbekistan, with its tourism infrastructure and architectural wonders, has maintained its position as the leading tourist destination in Central Asia. The conditions for tourism development have been least favorable in Turkmenistan, where the movements of foreign visitors are still monitored by an extremely authoritarian government. The development of tourism also lags in Tajikistan, where a brief civil war and weak economy discouraged investment capital for tourism. Starting with a very limited infrastructure for international tourists, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have managed to make impressive progress in the tourism sector. The economies of each country have been restructured toward a market economy and the development of foreign trade has acquired heightened importance. In western Kazakhstan, the discovery of vast oil

reserves has attracted international investors and raised expectations for the future development of the country. In the Kyrgyz Republic, where there are fewer natural resources and livestock production is still the dominant sector, the economic future is less certain. Both countries have taken steps to develop international tourism as a way to earn foreign currency. In the Kyrgyz Republic, this has become an urgent priority, as evidenced by the designation of 2001 as the "Year of Tourism." In addition to acquiring foreign currency, the leaders of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan hope that tourism development will help create jobs and income for many of those who have been displaced by the post-Soviet economy. Both governments have seriously reduced restrictions on travel, and local entrepreneurs have developed a variety of opportunities for adventure-oriented tourists.

The number of foreign visitors to Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan has increased in the post-Soviet period. Few are tourists, however. Businessmen, development workers, government employees, Peace Corps volunteers, students, researchers, missionaries, adoptive parents, and military personnel also visit and live in these countries. One tourism expert estimates that the number of foreign tourist arrivals to Kyrgyzstan increased from 7,000 in 1994 to between 30,000 and 40,000 in 2000. In comparison, Uzbekistan received approximately 370,000 foreign tourists in 2000, and Kazakhstan received between 12,000 and 15,000. It is hard to come up with reliable figures because officials do not clearly distinguish tourist arrivals from other nonbusiness arrivals, so some people are counted as tourists when they are not.[6]

As private tourism firms have replaced the rigid state tourism agency, the nature of tourism has changed dramatically in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. No longer constrained by a xenophobic government, these entrepreneurs, in co-operation with Western partners, have started to offer a variety of new experiences for adventure-minded travelers in regions that were formerly closed to foreign visitors. The international tourism industry is now segmented into the three general categories: Silk Road tours, adventure tours, and nature tours. With the exception of a few firms that specialize in one activity, such as hunting or horseback riding, most firms offer a variety of tourist packages. According to several tourist firm owners, the most popular form of tour is a Silk Road tour. Evoking the imagery of the ancient Silk Road, these tours are designed to introduce tourists to the rich history and culture of Central Asia. The Silk Road, a vast network of shifting trade routes, is famous for the exchange of goods, religions, and philosophies between East and West. Silk Road tour packages range from one to four weeks. The typical tour involves visits to multiple countries along the Silk Road. One sample itinerary includes three days in Kazakhstan, four days in China, five days in Kyrgyzstan, ten days in Uzbekistan, and two days in Turkmenistan. The itinerary is filled with sights for understanding the cultures of the Silk Road. For example, tourists visit the museum of national instruments in Almaty, the temples and monasteries of western China, and the mosques of Uzbekistan. As several informants pointed out, Kyrgyzstan has benefited more than Kazakhstan from the development of Silk Road tourism due to its location between China and Uzbekistan.

With the emphasis on culture, history, and stops in multiple cities, Silk Road tours resemble Soviet package tours. However, there are important differences. First, these tours focus exclusively on Central Asia, whereas Central Asian destinations were tacked onto Intourist tours of Russia and the other Soviet republics. Second, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan no longer apply Intourist policies that limit foreign visitors to Intourist-approved cities, hotels, and routes. Now the infrastructure, rather than the bureaucracy, is the main factor limiting where tourists can go. Both countries have regions where tourism infrastructure is developing more rapidly. In Kyrgyzstan, tourism development is centered in the north. In Kazakhstan, tourism development is based in the three southeastern provinces. Third, tourists are now encouraged to meet local people. Upon request, many tourist firms can arrange home stays for those who want to learn about daily life, and in Kyrgyzstan some agencies provide overnight accommodations in yurts with a family of nomadic herders.

Compared to Silk Road tours, adventure and extreme tourism in Central Asia represent a complete break from Soviet-era tourism. Eleven of the 40 tourist firms surveyed specialize in mountain-climbing or alpine tours. Most of the firms that specialize in alpine tours were founded by former Soviet alpinists, who were trained and employed as professional athletes. Now they serve as guides for foreign mountain climbers. These firms also provide Silk Road tours and other adventure activities, such as hiking, river rafting, horseback riding, heliskiing, bike tours, and hunting. A small number of firms also provide nature tours, focusing on the unique flora, fauna, and geology. Several companies provide bird-watching tours for amateur ornithologists.

THE ROLE OF MEDIATORS IN TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

The anthropological literature on tourism downplays the importance of mediators in tourism development. One group of mediators, tour operators, plays a very active role in shaping the development of tourism in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. They promote alternative images of their country, create new itineraries, help develop the tourist infrastructure, form associations to lobby government, and co-ordinate their efforts with international development agencies and companies.

The popular image of a place strongly influences whether people want to travel there. According to many tour operators in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, the image problem is the greatest obstacle to tourist development in these countries. Most tour operators feel that people know little about their countries. When the operators travel abroad to promote their companies, they regularly encounter educated people who have never even heard of Kyrgyzstan or Kazakhstan. One tour operator told me that a few potential clients have even confused Kyrgyzstan with Kurdistan. Many tour operators are concerned that potential tourists associate Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan with the conflict and Islamic fundamentalism found in other "stans," such as Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Pakistan. Unfortunately, in the case of Kyrgyzstan, this association with danger was realized when fundamentalist groups operating in

southern Kyrgyzstan kidnapped four Japanese geologists in 1999 and four American mountain climbers in 2000. Despite the fact that these incidents occurred in a remote region where there are few tourists, these events were publicized in the media and in government travel advisories. Finally, tour operators also believe that potential tourists from developed countries might hesitate to visit a former Soviet republic because the Soviet Union is associated with substandard conditions, dreadful service, and a strong bureaucracy. Acknowledging the effect of the last set of images, tour operators are taking steps to upgrade the tourist infrastructure and service quality, in addition to improving the image of their countries.

To counter negative images, tour operators in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, together with government officials and international development agencies, are promoting alternative images of their countries on their brochures and Web sites. These images stress 1) the picturesque landscapes of mountains and steppes, 2) the culture of Kyrgyz and Kazakh nomadic pastoralists, and 3) the history of Silk Road caravans in ancient Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.

Illustrations of snow-capped mountains, breathtaking mountain lakes, rolling steppes, and deserts often contain pictures of wildlife unique to Central Asia, such as the snow leopard and the Marco Polo sheep. Brochures from Kyrgyzstan frequently refer to the country as the "Switzerland of Central Asia." The images of nature are unaffected by humans, with the exception of nomadic herders and their livestock. Some photographs show adventure tourists hiking, biking, or rafting.

Images of traditional Kyrgyz and Kazakh nomadic life include pictures of shepherd families standing or sitting in front of a felt yurt, wearing traditional clothing, eating traditional foods, playing traditional musical instruments, making brightly colored textiles, milking horses, and hunting with falcons and eagles. Such images are believed to entice tourists to experience the nomadic lifestyle firsthand. Like much tourism marketing, the brochure pictures do not always reflect reality accurately. The fact is that most Kazakh and Kyrgyz no longer live this way.

There are no pictures of Central Asian families living in Soviet-era five-story apartment buildings in Bishkek or Almaty (the largest cities of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, respectively), or Kazakh men and women dressed in Western-style clothing, or Kyrgyz traders selling cigarettes and bread on the street corner. Such pictures would depict people using cars and buses, rather than horses, for transportation, and buying food from local shops, rather than consuming domestic livestock products and hunting with falcons. A realistic portrayal would also mention that most urban Kazakh and Kyrgyz might be interested in reviving some national traditions, but they are not particularly interested in trading what they consider to be a modern lifestyle for the traditional lifestyles portrayed in these brochures. Moreover, a realistic portrayal would include mention of other ethnic groups, such as the Russians who make up about 20 per cent of the population in Kyrgyzstan and about 35 per cent of the population in Kazakhstan. Only one tour operator interviewed for this project, an American, has programs that deal with ethnic groups other than the

Kyrgyz or Kazakh. This company offers programs that introduces tourists and foreign exchange students to cultures such as the Uighurs and Dungans.

While tour operators avoid depicting the present in their promotional materials, they frequently conjure up images of the past. In addition to suggesting that the nomadic past is timeless in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, tour operators present images that suggest that tourists today can experience what it might have been like to travel along the ancient Silk Road. The Silk Road has symbolized cultural and religious exchange between East and West from the second century B.C. to the sixteenth century A.D. Recognizing its allure, tour operators use promotional materials that explicitly draw on popular images of ancient travel along these routes. For example, brochures often contain pictures of Central Asian bazaars where local traders sell livestock and colorful produce. Brochures also use photos and illustrations of camel caravans to give potential tourists the sense that they will be going back in time during their visit to Central Asia. Tour operators also provide images of Silk Road monuments that can be found in their country. In Kyrgyzstan, brochures include pictures of the Tashrabat caravanserai where Silk Road caravans used to stay overnight, the Burana tower, an eleventh-century Karakhanid minaret, and the ancient petroglyphs of Cholpon-Ata. In Kazakhstan, brochures depict the Akhmed Yasawi and Arystan-bab mosques; the archaeological ruins of Otyrar, an ancient city along the Silk Road; and Tamgaly Tas, rocks painted with representations of Buddhist saints. Although they use the Silk Road concept to entice travelers, several tour operators regretfully admitted that there are actually very few historical monuments in these two countries that are connected to the Silk Road trade, and those that do exist are not in close proximity to each other.

In addition to publishing these images in their brochures and Web sites, many tour operators in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan regularly attend international tourism conferences, such as International Tourism Exchange Berlin (ITB), the lead conference in the industry, with over 9,000 exhibitors representing more than 170 countries. Some tour operators are able to receive financial assistance to attend ITB from international NGOs or their own government. Government and business representatives from each country occupy booths adjacent to each other in order to promote their country as a whole, as well as their individual businesses. In 2001, the delegation from Kyrgyzstan even brought an authentic shepherd's yurt to the conference to display alongside other objects of cultural significance. They use these opportunities to develop contacts and partnerships with foreign tour companies. As many tour operators point out, promoting their businesses at ITB is less expensive and more effective than many forms of advertising. Some tour operators even offer complimentary tours to travel brokers and travel writers they meet at ITB. By attending industry conferences and offering complimentary trips, tour operators from Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan hope that outsiders will begin to think of their country as a desirable and fulfilling tourist destination.

Tourism mediators also try to improve the tourist infrastructure and service quality by working with government officials, tourism academies, the international

development community, and international businesses. An improved infrastructure would include better roads, better airports, and better lodging. Potholes and narrow lanes on mountain roads prevent speedy transportation. Lodging improved in the 1990s. In Almaty, several five-star hotels have been built by foreign companies to accommodate foreign businessmen. The tourists that Kazakhstan is likely to attract, however, are more likely to stay in the less expensive, Soviet-era hotels. In Kyrgyzstan, new hotels have been built specifically with tourists in mind. In addition, several tour companies provide accommodations in private homes, guest lodges, and yurt camps. Tourists can even choose a yurt-camp for tourists where lodging and meals are provided by tour company employees, or a more "authentic" yurt-stay where they can experience daily life with a shepherd family.

The development of tourist sites and the preparation of tour guides are two other aspects that need to be improved. Tour operators pointed out that the existing tour sites do not have modern bathroom facilities, which can be off-putting for foreign tourists. There is a need for road signs (in multiple languages), and more plaques providing information about historical sites. These efforts are aided by international organizations, most notably the World Tourism Organization's Silk Road Program, which is sponsored in part by UNESCO. The Silk Road Program holds annual meetings to discuss co-operative strategies for marketing and promoting the Silk Road as a tourist destination. In connection with this, UNESCO has provided grants to tour operators. One grant recipient developed an "ethnographic village" for tourists to learn about traditional Kazakh culture. Another company, affiliated with the UNESCO program, uses profits from several partner companies (including a film studio, a magazine, and a health spa) to restore key historical monuments.

The lack of high-quality tourist guides is regarded as a serious problem in both countries. In the past, it was relatively prestigious to work as a guide for Intourist due to the opportunities to interact with Western visitors. After the Soviet Union fell apart, however, former Intourist guides were able to use their strong language skills to get lucrative positions as translators and office workers for international companies. Today there is a shortage of guides who have both language skills and knowledge of tourist attractions. Although both countries have tourism academies, their primary mission is to train managers, not guides.

Although tour operators compete with each other, many realize that the prospects for tourism development will be stronger if they work together on certain issues that affect the industry as a whole. The Kyrgyzstan Tour Operators Association (with 24 members) and the Kazakhstan Tour Operators Association (with 45 members) are the key organizations representing the interests of tour operators. Not all tour operators are members of these associations. In Kyrgyzstan, a small group of operators has formed the Silk Road Tour Operators Association, due to personal conflicts with the management of the KTA. In both countries, nonmembers believe that these associations do little more than promote member businesses. Members of these associations, however, insist that co-operation is important in order to pressure the government to do more to promote tourism development.

CONFLICTS AMONG MEDIATORS

Government officials in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan also have a vested interest in the development of tourism. They believe that tourism has the potential to provide new jobs and help develop their country's infrastructure, but on certain issues there is a great deal of tension. These include procedures to obtain tourist visas, tax policies that affect tour operators and tourists, the responsibility of tourism promotion, and licensing tour operators.

Tour operators in both countries complain that government procedures to obtain a tourist visa are too cumbersome and the cost of tourist visas is too high. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Soviet tourist visa policies remained in effect. Visas could only be obtained with a letter of invitation, approved by the Foreign Ministry, from an individual, company or state organization. All cities to be visited had to be listed on the visa. Upon arrival in each city, the visa had to be registered at the Office of Visas and Registration (OVIR). Visa policies have loosened a bit since then, yet new policies and practices have made it more difficult to go from one country to the next without obtaining multiple visas.

In general, visa policy changes have been slower in Kazakhstan than in Kyrgyzstan, and there is more tension between tour operators and government officials on this issue. In Kazakhstan, letters of invitation with Foreign Ministry approval are still required. Kazakhstan visas no longer list cities to be visited, though visas still require OVIR registration upon arrival. In addition to being more complicated, Kazakhstan visas are also more expensive than Kyrgyzstan visas. The cheapest tourist visa for Kazakhstan was $60, while the cheapest Kyrgyz visa is only $30 (Mayhew, Plunkett, and Richmond 2000). Recognizing the impact of these visa policies on tourism development, the Kazakhstan Tour Operators Association has been petitioning the government to loosen visa restrictions for travelers from tourist-generating countries. The tour operators in Kazakhstan, however, made it clear that they did not want to waive visa restrictions from some nations, such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, which represent a threat to the national security. In 2001, the association convinced the government to introduce an experimental policy that would allow nine leading tour operators to issue tourist visas to their clients at the airport.

In the Kyrgyz Republic, the changes have been more extreme, and tour operators are relatively satisfied with the government on the visa issue. At the time of my research (summer 2001), the Foreign Ministry no longer had to approve a letter of invitation, visas no longer listed specific cities, and many tour operators had the right to register a tourist visa on their premises. Despite these positive changes, many tour operators in Kyrgyzstan feel that government bureaucracy is a hindrance to tourism development. Tour operators are concerned that many government officials, including policemen and customs officers, harass tourists with arbitrary and outdated policies. For example, a group of tourists was stopped by police 27 times in Kazakhstan on the road from Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan to Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Tour operators are

concerned that negative publicity from such incidents might affect tourist demand. Responding to the concerns of tour operators, the government has introduced a new office for tourists to call and report any problems. In Kyrgyzstan, tour operators are also pressuring the government to find diplomatic paths for reducing visa costs for Silk Road tourists. Although Kyrgyz tourist visas are relatively inexpensive, the problem is that Silk Road tourists need multiple visas. Tour operators in Kyrgyzstan have suggested a number of possible solutions, including a Silk Road visa, a group visa for tourist groups, and a visa waiver for tourists from World Trade Organization countries. Tour operators in Kyrgyzstan are also hoping that diplomacy can help reduce the government fees and bureaucracy associated with the Chinese-Kyrgyz border crossing at the spectacular Torugart Pass.

A related area of conflict between tour operators and government officials concerns tax policies; i.e., business taxes for tour operators, fees that tourists must pay to enter the country (i.e., visas), to visit national parks, and to visit restricted areas (such as border zones). Working in a competitive global industry, tour operators know that taxing tourists increases the overall cost of tour packages and this can lower the number of tourist arrivals. Several tour operators complained that the fees for entering national parks, in particular, were unnecessarily high. In Kyrgyzstan, mountain climbers and trekkers must purchase one permit to enter the "alptourzone" (from $8 to $30, depending on number of days), a second permit to enter the border zone ($10), and a third permit to climb the peak ($100) (Mayhew, Plunkett, and Richmond 2000). The Altyn-Emel National Park in Kazakhstan charges $21 for the first day.

Several tour operators complained about tax policies that affected their businesses. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, the government considers tourism to be an "import" rather than an "export," and thus charges a 20 per cent value-added tax. The Kyrgyzstan Tour Operators Association wants tourism to be considered an export because it brings in foreign currency. The government also is criticized for not counting certain business expenses, such as the interest on a loan, as a tax deduction. In general, the government expects tour operators to give about 30 per cent of their profit to the state. In practice, some tour operators keep double books to avoid this. Both the Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan Tour Operators Associations urge their governments to reconsider the tax structure, and eliminate or reduce the bureaucratic hassle involved with the development of new tourist facilities.

Since Central Asia is not a well-known tourist destination, tourism promotion is crucial, and many operators want the government to do more to market local tourist opportunities in foreign countries. Further, tour operators want the government to promote tourism indirectly by ensuring that the foreign tourists who do visit return home and tell others about their positive experiences in Central Asia. In this regard, tour operators want the government to reduce bureaucratic hassles for tourists and to publicize the importance of tourism to locals. In both countries, the government promotes tourism by sending government officials to the ITB conference in Berlin. In Kyrgyzstan, the president designated the year 2001 as the "Year of Tourism" as

a way to educate the public about the importance of tourism. The government also announced plans to establish a National Tourism Foundation to co-ordinate interests between the government and the private sector, and a Kyrgyz Promotion Office to promote Kyrgyzstan as a tourist destination (Haberstroh 2001).

While licensing the tourist industry is an issue in both countries, there is no consensus as to whether licensing is desirable. In 2001, as part of the Year of Tourism, Kyrgyzstan dropped licensing as a way to foster competition and reduce bureaucracy associated with opening new companies. Previously, companies had to be approved and pay approximately $200 a year for a license. In the same year, Kazakhstan introduced a law that required tour operators to obtain a license and to purchase an insurance policy for a minimum of $52,000 coverage. In general, well-established companies favor the idea of licensing as it decreases the likelihood that unqualified and inexperienced people would operate a tourist company. Some add that licensing provides a measure of security for tourists, and that should help the reputation of the country. Companies that are less established tend to oppose licensing, saying it is too expensive and limits competition.

CONCLUSION

The anthropological literature on tourism has dealt extensively with how tourism affects local culture, economy, and environment through the use of the concepts of hosts and guests. One of the unintended consequences of this dichotomy is that there has not been adequate attention paid to those who actively mediate the touristic process. As a result, guests, rather than mediators, are often credited or blamed for changes that occur to a society. This article focused on tour operators who develop tourism in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. While hosts are typically portrayed in the literature as passive recipients of externally driven change, tour operators are actively working to develop tourism. In Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, tour operators are promoting alternative images of their country, creating new itineraries, developing the tourist infrastructure, forming associations to represent their interests, and co-ordinating their efforts with international organizations. Finally, although tour operators are in regular competition with each other, they also co-operate in alliance with and sometimes against another group of stakeholders and tourism mediators: government officials. In Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, the key conflicts between these two sets of mediators concern the procedure to obtain a tourist visa, tax policies that affect tourists and tour operators, the need for tourism promotion, and the licensing of tour operators.

NOTES

1. In Soviet times, this territory was officially known as the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic, and colloquially known as Kirghizia. In the post-Soviet period, the official name has become the Kyrgyz Republic, which is now colloquially referred to as Kyrgyzstan. According to several informants, one explanation for the official name change is to distance the Kyrgyz Republic from the other notorious and problematic "stans," such as Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

2. I have been doing fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan since 1992. Research for the most recent project was generously supported by a grant through the Program to Enhance Scholarly and Creative Activities at Texas A&M University. I thank my research assistant, Aigul Baituova, for her valuable help. A semester research leave provided by the Glasscock Center for Humanities Research at Texas A&M University provided me with the valuable time necessary to write this article.
3. Kazakhstan is approximately 2,725,000 square kilometers; Kyrgyzstan is only 200,000 square kilometers (World Bank 2002). While over 90 per cent of Kyrgyzstan is mountainous, Kazakhstan also contains wide tracts of steppe, desert, and forest. The mountainous regions in the south, however, are much more popular among international tourists.
4. Kyrgyzstan does have some coal, oil, gas, and gold, but their exploitation is constrained due to the lack of investment capital and a poor transportation infrastructure (Bauer, Green, and Kuehnast 1997).
5. In the mid-1990s, the capital of Kazakhstan moved from Almaty (formally spelled as Alma-Ata) to Astana. Almaty, however, has remained the cultural capital, and the arrival point for most international flights.
6. Interview with Max Haberstroh, Consultant to the President of Kyrgyz Republic on Tourism.

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