

Epic Inside-Out: *Qız Jibek* and the Politics of Genre in Kazakh Oral Literature¹

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In spite of ourselves, epic absorbs us. And then we encounter issues that are more tangled than grass roots. For example, we have now identified two other versions of the adventures of Ajkuna, wife of Muj, and they give quite different explanations for what happened to her. It must have been the same thing for the rape of Helen in pre-Homeric poems—until Homer came along and chose one of the variants.

—Ismail Kadare, *The File on H*

Novel: A small tale, generally of love

—Samuel Johnson

In the introduction to the fifth volume of his *Proben der Volksliteratur der türkischen Stämme*, published in 1885, Wilhelm Radlov pauses to consider the differences between the oral literature of the “Kara-Kirgiz” (Kyrgyz) and the “Kirgiz-Kaisak” (Kazakh). The two peoples, Radlov wrote, “excel in eloquence and surpass all of their Turkic fellowmen in this respect,” but they differed in the kinds of orature at which they excelled. His earlier collection of Kazakh texts in the third volume of the *Proben der Volksliteratur* (1870) had shown the Kazakhs possessed “a rich lyrical poetry,” while “with the Kara-Kirgiz, however, epic poetry overpowered and suppressed all other folk-poetic creations,” swallowing within itself the lyric, the legend, and the folktale (Radloff 1990 [1885]:75-76).² Radlov’s introduction is now primarily famous for the ways in which his discussion of the creativity of the oral poet in the moment of performance

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²For a detailed discussion of Radlov’s work, see Sinor 1967; for Radlov’s influence on Milman Parry, see Tate 2011.

inspired Milman Parry and Albert Lord's theory of oral-formulaic composition, but his brief contrast of the "epic" of the Kyrgyz with the "lyric" tone of the Kazakhs foreshadowed a thesis that has long endured in later scholarship on Kazakh orature. This lyric tone is said to be most clearly shown through the stories of *Qozı Körpeş-Bayan Sülü* and *Qız Jibek*, which together exemplify a genre sometimes known simply as *ğasıqtıq jırlar*, or "love epics," also glossed as "lyric epics" or as "romances."³

The *ğasıqtıq jırlar* feature tales of divided lovers whose unhappy fates are often compared with those of Romeo and Juliet or Layla and Majnun. The epic of *Qız Jibek* tells the story of a doomed love between a young man named Tölegen and a young woman named Jibek, and the similarity of this plot to Nizami's *Layla and Majnun*—and hence to the broader genre of Persian verse romances—was noted in even the earliest scholarship on the epic. Yet the fit is an inexact one for the simple reason that while Tölegen, like Majnun, dies, Jibek, unlike Layla, survives and eventually even marries Tölegen's younger brother, Sansızbay, in accordance with the custom of *ämeñgerlik jesirlik* (levirate marriage). This is a narrative detail inconvenient to readings of the text as a religious allegory akin to Layla and Majnun, characters whose shared deaths modeled Sufi discourses in which human love is permissible as a ladder through which lovers might ascend (as Layla and Majnun do when they are reunited in Paradise after their deaths) to divine love.⁴ Yet Jibek's marriage with Sansızbay was equally inconvenient to Soviet-era attempts to read the text as a social-economic rather than a religious allegory, for the custom of levirate marriage was woven together with the payment of *qalın mal* (bride wealth), and the plot thus hinged on a practice that would be singled out during the Soviet era as the epitome of the feudal and the archaic.⁵ Though this did lead to denunciations of *Qız Jibek* as feudalistic, the epic was more often read as a narrative that had somehow anticipated Soviet values. The thwarted dreams and unhappy fates of the protagonists of *Qız Jibek*, so the story went, modeled an inchoate rejection of feudalism, and the genre of "lyric epic" thus encoded critiques of feudalism absent from the heroic epic.

The positioning of *Qız Jibek* as a lyric epic in turn blurred into arguments where literary scholars increasingly talked about it as though it were a realist novel. The Kazakh author and scholar Muxtar Äwezov (1897-1961) initially suggested this in his 1927 *Ädebîet Tarîxı* (*History of Literature*), writing that "of all the literature of our nation, it is *Qız Jibek* that most resembles the novel of written literature" (1985 [1927]:132). He would revisit and flesh out this thesis in a series of later publications. Äwezov's interest in *Qız Jibek* was shared by a who's who of the leading figures of early Kazakh Soviet literature, including the poet Säken Seifüllin (1894-1938),

³ This classification can be found in Chadwick and Zhirmunsky 1969 and in Shoolbraid 1975, though both sources treat the classification as largely self-explanatory. For a more detailed discussion of how such genres might be distinguished, see Chapter 5, "Genre," in Reichl 1992.

⁴ This argument is laid out in detail in Seyed-Gohrab 2003; but see also Meisami 1987 and her conclusion that Majnun's madness and death model the gap between earthly and divine love. Other Kazakh *ğasıqtıq jırlar* do feature shared deaths that carry religious overtones similar to Nizami; in some versions of *Qozı Körpeş-Bayan Sülü*, the titular characters are briefly brought back to life due to the interventions of either angels or Hajj pilgrims, a narrative resolution that hints at the motif of lovers who are reunited in heaven.

⁵ For an early account of Soviet campaigns against crimes of custom, see Massell 1974; for a discussion of similar campaigns among the Turkmen, see Edgar 2003.

the novelist Säbīt Muqanov (1900-1973), and the playwright and novelist Ğabīt Müsrepov (1902-1985), who through everything from critical essays, translations into Russian, adaptations of the epic into opera librettos and film scripts, and the inclusion of the epic in chrestomathies for high school students implicitly and sometimes explicitly defended *Qız Jibek*'s place in Kazakh literature.⁶ This work was buttressed by the critical contributions of major scholars of Kazakh literature, who followed Äwezov's lead in praising *Qız Jibek* for the "realism" with which it depicted both its characters' psychology and the lifeways of the steppe Kazakhs.⁷

At stake in these debates over genre was not just the legibility of *Qız Jibek* within Soviet literature but arguably the prestige of Kazakh oral literature in its entirety. Äwezov and the scholars who followed him had worked within a taxonomy of literary history that sought to correlate literary genres with a Marxist conception of the stages in the evolution of human society. This was a taxonomy that understood the epic to be a literary form that emerged in the earliest stages of history, while the novel form in contrast was associated, if not with socialism, at least with modernity. This logic can be found in the introduction to Äwezov's 1948 *Qazaq Ädebētiniñ Tarixı* (*History of Kazakh Literature*), with its careful reviews of Marx and Engels, of Lenin's remarks on oral epic, and of the contribution of N. Ia Marr to the Marxist study of language; it shaped Mälik Ğabdüllin's (2018 [1958]) contrast of the lyric epic and the heroic epic as well as his analysis of the "realism" of *Qız Jibek*; and it saw perhaps its most systematic deployment in Raxmanqul Berdibay's various histories of the genres of Kazakh literature, in which he assigned Kazakh oral literature to the categories of the archaic, heroic, and lyric epic, correlated each with a specific stage in a Morganian scheme of social evolution, and finally argued that *Qız Jibek* marked the transition from epic to novel. These scholars' elevation of *Qız Jibek* into a text akin to a novel relied on the detection of subterranean critiques of social class within the text, thereby redeeming not only *Qız Jibek* as Soviet but further creating a literary genealogy in which the novel form itself could be treated as a genre indigenous to the steppe. This was an intellectual history that promised to reposition the whole of Kazakh literature (and by implication, the Kazakhs themselves) vis-à-vis modernity. Yet these were also all scholars who wrote in the context of a still vibrant Kazakh tradition of oral improvisatory poetry, who were intimately familiar with the oral performer's ability to reshape narrative, and the literary

⁶ Äwezov, a tremendously prolific scholar and author, is arguably the most important figure in twentieth-century Kazakh literary history. As an author, he wrote short stories, plays, and novels, but is primarily famous for a four-volume historical novel, *Abay Jolu*, devoted to the life of the nineteenth-century Kazakh writer Abay Qunanbayuli (Caffee 2018; McGuire 2018). As a scholar, he was largely responsible for the institutionalization of Kazakh literary studies, authoring a series of influential studies, gathering and publishing original texts of Kazakh orature, and mentoring a generation of scholars (Kudaibergenova 2017). For details of the other authors and their place in Kazakh literary history, see Winner 1958 for Säken Seifüllin; Kudaibergenova 2017 for Muqanov; and Kundakbayeva and Rustem 2016 for Müsrepov. Advocacy for Kazakh literature came with considerable risk during the purges of Stalinism: Seifüllin was executed on charges of nationalism in 1938; Äwezov and Müsrepov were both forced to flee Kazakhstan for Moscow to avoid arrest.

⁷ A review of the voluminous literature on the form and history of the novel is outside the scope of this article, but see Auerbach 2003 for an influential account of the ways in which interiority and social realism mark the novel form as distinct from the epic. For a fascinating inversion of the claim that the Persian verse romance is akin to the realist novel, see Tahmasebian and Gould (n.d.) and their account of how translations of *Jane Eyre* into Persian involved claims that the novel resembled a Persian romance.

genealogies they proposed in turn often imagined oral narratives as inhabited by multiple and at times dissonant voices, undermining these taxonomies even as they constructed them.⁸

The task of this paper is to trace the logic of these chronologies of genre. What arguments were deployed to justify the claim that *Qız Jibek* was an epic of social alienation, where did these assumptions about genre and performance come from, and how effective were these analyses in revealing dynamics of character or plot? In answering these questions, the paper compares the canonical version of *Qız Jibek*, Jüsipbek Qoja Şayxıslamulı’s chapbook-style text from 1900, with a transcription of an 1887 performance by Musabay Jıraw, focusing on two of the most famous episodes in *Qız Jibek*: the death of Tölegen alone and surrounded by enemies in the desert, and Jibek’s subsequent flight from her natal home in the company of Sansızbay.

***Qız Jibek*: Textual History and Plot**

The earliest known written text of *Qız Jibek* was unearthed by Mälıke Ğumarova in a Moscow archive in 1959. Ğumarova (2012:134) concluded that it was a transcription of a performance the singer Musabay Jıraw had made for a Russian army officer, E. A. Alexandrov, near Fort Kazalinsk in south Kazakhstan in 1887. In 1894, a different version was printed by an Islamic publishing house in Kazan, and then reprinted multiple times over the next few years. Credited to an “unknown Noğay,” the 1894 text was likely the work of Valıolla Tüxvatüllın, a Tatar teacher working in the Zaısan region in east Kazakhstan (Ğabdüllın 2018 [1958]:124). The canonical text, however, is Jüsipbek Qoja Şayxıslamulı’s version, published in Qazan in 1900, and republished many times thereafter.⁹

Jüsipbek Qoja (c. 1857-1937) was a prolific but now largely forgotten figure in the story of the codification of Kazakh oral literature. Born in the village of Qojatoğay in south Kazakhstan, he studied at a *madrassa* in the town of Äwlıe-Ata (present-day Taraz), where he is said to have learned Arabic, Farsi, and Chaghatai (Älbekov 2015:4). After finishing his schooling, he made his way north to his matrilineal kin in the Jetisü region, a history he refers to in the first lines of one of his works, “Qız Şökeymen Aytısqanı” (Şayxıslamulı 2015:303):¹⁰

Aq sur attı jılqıdan ustap mindim
Nağası jurttarımdı köreyin dep edim

⁸ Similar tensions between pre-revolutionary transcripts and Soviet-era recordings shadowed the study of the *Manas* epic in Kyrgyzstan, as reviewed by Jacquesson (2021).

⁹ There have been multiple Cyrillic script editions of Jüsipbek Qoja’s text. I have relied on a transcription published as part of Volume 53 of the Babalar Sözi series (Qosan et al. 2009), as this version includes line numbers and does not omit sections of texts. In addition to Jüsipbek Qoja and Musabay Zhiraw’s versions, there are also multiple Soviet-era texts, including recordings of actual performances. Volume 53 includes transcriptions of two of the Soviet-era texts alongside those of Jüsipbek Qoja and Musabay Zhiraw. A discussion of the Soviet-era texts unfortunately lies outside the scope of this project, but see Sadırbayulı 2009:167, 172-82 for a detailed account of the variations between these narratives.

¹⁰ The full title of the work is “Xıkayat Jüsipbek Qojanıñ Wäzıpa Qız häm Qız Şökeymen Aytısqanı,” or “Tale of Jüsipbek Qoja’s *aytis* with Wäzıpa, or the girl Şökey”; Jüsipbek Qoja explains in a prose insert that the word *Şökey*, meaning “lamb-like,” was a nickname that referenced her small stature and delicate bones.

Jolğa tüsip Alla dep jürip kettim,
Arada neşe qabat tawdan öttim.

From the herd I took a grey horse as mount,
Saying I would see my mother's kin.
“Allah” I said, and took to the road,
How many mountain ridges I crossed.¹¹

There, he occupied himself with teaching the local children while also devoting himself to the project of gathering Kazakh oral literature and arranging for its printing by Islamic publishing houses in Kazan. From 1890 through the early years of the twentieth century, he published some thirty different works, an astonishingly prolific output that included many of the most famous texts of Kazakh oral literature. *Qız Jibek*, the *Birjan-Sara aytısı*, and a wealth of legendary and religious poems are all known primarily from Jüsipbek Qoja's works. Mukhtar Äwezov apparently met him in the Jetisü region in 1926 or 1927.¹² Jüsipbek Qoja fled Kazakhstan for present-day Xinjiang during the collectivization drives of the early 1930s and remained there until his death, a fact that Toqtar Älbekov (2015:12), the editor of a recent edition of his works, offers as partial explanation for the relative obscurity of Qoja in comparison to the fame of the texts he published. Notably, neither Äwezov in 1948, Ğabdullīn in 1958, nor Berdibay in 1982 explicitly acknowledge him as the source of the 1900 manuscript.¹³

Jüsipbek Qoja's own authorial relation to the texts he published is complex: he rarely recorded the names of the *aqıns* from whom he learned the works, and he sometimes positioned himself as merely the transcriber of others' words while at other times claiming the authority of authorship. The aforementioned tale of “Qız Şökey,” for example, is an *aytıs*, or oral duel, between him and a young woman singer whose *awıl* he visits as a wedding guest; he thus simultaneously stands externally as the author of the work as a whole and internally as the author of specific utterances within it.¹⁴ His description of the journey to join his matrilineal kin with which he begins the work is itself in many ways positioned as a claim to the identity of a singer (Şayxıslamulı 2015:303):

¹¹ All English-language translations are original. Romanization has been done in accordance with the system proposed by the Eesti Keeli Instituut, with the exception of using “j” rather than “c” for Cyrillic ж. In keeping with this, I have used “Qazaq” when transliterating citations and quoted text, but have preferred the standard English “Kazakh” for my own words.

¹² This meeting is commonly mentioned in discussions of *Qız Jibek*—see for example Muqanov 1974:136—but I have not been able to locate a publication in which Äwezov himself writes of the meeting.

¹³ Studies from the 1920s and 1930s, including those of Äwezov (1985 [1927] and Seifüllīn (1964 [1932]), do mention Jüsipbek Qoja by name, as do studies from the 1970s (for example, Düysenbaev 1973; Muqanov 1974)—Düysenbaev in fact expresses surprise that a 1964 edition of the epic had omitted the lines in which Jüsipbek Qoja identified himself as the author.

¹⁴ The *aytıs* was published in 1896 in Qazan (Şayxıslamulı 2015), but the oral duel itself would have taken place much earlier.

Tanısq, araladım nağaşım,
 Kormep edim ol jurttan men heş kimdi.
 “Jaña kelgen jien,” dep, äwes qılıp,
 Öleñmenen ötkizdim kündiz-tüni.
 Här qayıssı şaqyradı damıl bermey,
 Kün-tüni öleñ aytım uyqı kormey.

I met and mingled with my kin,
 No one there was I did not see.
 “Our nephew, newly-come,” they said in wonder,
 As I filled the days and nights with poetry.
 I was the guest of all, knew no peace;
 Declaimed poems day and night, knew no sleep.

This is an assertion of Jüsipbek Qoja’s performative competence, one ratified by the displays of verbal wit and cultural fluency he exhibits in his subsequent confrontation with Qız Şökey. The twist is that this claim to the identity of oral poet occurs in a written text that is Jüsipbek Qoja’s own much later reconstruction of the original competition: he did not publish “Qız Şökeymen Aytısqanı” until 1894, long after he would have ceased to be the brash young *madrassa* student whose knowledge of Islam was tested by Qız Şökey. The overlapping and blurred borders between oral and written found here reflect the complex poetic ecology of Central Asia: the texts printed in the Islamic publishing houses of Qazan were often versions of oral-literary texts; once printed, they then made their way back into the steppe communities, being read aloud at gatherings and even used by *aqıns* to expand their own repertory.¹⁵ As Ğumarova (2012) has shown, traces of Jüsipbek Qoja’s *Qız Jibek* can be found in Soviet-era recordings of other *aqıns* singing the epic.

Jüsipbek Qoja similarly begins *Qız Jibek* with an overt claim to the status of singer, yet here the claimed “communicative competence” (Bauman 1975:293) is at once that of an *aqın* singing to an audience and that of a scribe mastering a text. “I will speak,” he begins (Şayxıslamulı 2009:84, lines 7-12):

Qız Jibekti tıñdañız,
 Zamandas erkek, urğası,
 Aqsaqaldı şalıñız.
 Jüsipbek qoja jırlasa,
 Qız Jibektiñ sözine
 Endi äbden qanıñız.

Let the men, the women,
 The elders with their white-beards,

¹⁵ See Reichl 1992:54, 87-89 for a discussion of the relationship between printed text and oral performance in Central Asia and for the figure of the public performer of written texts.

All sit and listen to *Qız Jibek*.
 When Jüsipbek Qoja sings,
 You shall be more than filled
 With the words of *Qız Jibek*.

These words, he assures his listeners, will leave them weeping. He follows this appeal to an imagined audience with a meditation on the difference between his version and that of a written text whose author he does not know, but whose clumsy language moves him to neither tears nor laughter (85, lines 41-46):

Bir kúnderde qarasam,
 Baspa boptı bul Jibek,
 Qırsız ketip sözderi.
 Baspağa jazğan adamnıñ
 Är sözina qarasam,
 Noğalı eken özderi.

Then one day I looked
 Upon a print *Jibek*, a thing
 Of bent and twisted words.
 Wherever I looked, the words
 Of the one who wrote it out
 Were all together Noğay.

Despite Jüsipbek Qoja's criticism of the earlier print version (presumably the 1894 text with its "Unknown Noğay" author), his *Qız Jibek* roughly parallels the 1894 text in both plot and language, but with some of the exchanges between characters significantly expanded and sections earlier rendered in prose converted into poetry.

Jüsipbek Qoja's text was reprinted multiple times before the October Revolution, was included in Soviet-era compilations of Kazakh epics, served as the basis for Säken Seifüllin's Russian translation as well as for Ğabıt Müsrepov's opera libretto, and finally, according to Ğumarova, was used by multiple other *aqıns* as a resource when incorporating *Qız Jibek* into their own repertoires. In addition, Jüsipbek Qoja's *Qız Jibek* was the basis of Muxtar Äwezov's initial study of the epic in 1927 as well as of his more detailed analysis in 1948. Jüsipbek Qoja's overt claims of authorial authority over the form of his text unintentionally foreshadowed a central theme of this scholarship: that the narrative was a work "of the people," but one warped by the interventions of reactionary singers. This was an interpretive turn necessitated by the taboos and perils of the Stalin era, yet one that ironically also led to the temporary erasure of Jüsipbek Qoja's name from the history of the text he claimed.

***Qız Jibek* and the Idea of Epic in the Soviet Union**

Äwezov openly credited *Qız Jibek* to Jüsipbek Qoja in his *Ädebïet Tarïxi* of 1927, a foundational attempt to organize Kazakh oral literature into a history of genres and the work in which Äwezov first hinted that *Qız Jibek* bore more resemblance to written literary forms than it did to other Kazakh oral epics. Äwezov outlined a history in which he credited Jüsipbek Qoja with having fashioned something altogether new in the history of Kazakh orature. “The basis of *Qız Jibek* is one of the nation’s ancient vernacular prose narratives, one resembling the fairy tale in form,” Äwezov wrote, but as this tale was now lost the extent of the changes Jüsipbek Qoja had made could not be assessed. Still, he went on, “if we look at the text that is in our hands today, we can say one thing: of all the literature of our nation, it is *Qız Jibek* that most resembles the novel of written literature” (1985 [1927]:132).

Äwezov did not then significantly develop this suggestion, instead devoting much of his remaining analysis to arguing that the epic’s protagonists, however distinct they might seem from the heroes of other oral epics, were still recognizably the products of Kazakh history and culture. He would return to the idea that *Qız Jibek* resembled a novel in 1948 in the *Qazaq Ädebïetiniñ Tarïxi*, a massive and multi-volume history of Kazakh literature for which Äwezov edited the initial volume on folklore as well as contributing the section on lyric epics. In the intervening years, the place of orature in Soviet literary culture had become an increasingly vexed question, and the suggestion that *Qız Jibek* as a “psychological lyric epic” somehow anticipated the realist novel now became central to Äwezov’s defense of a narrative he clearly still considered as among the greatest works of Kazakh oral literature.

Early in the Stalin era, folklore and oral literature had suddenly become central to Soviet literary culture. The key event in this was a speech by Maxim Gorky at the 1934 All Union Writers Congress (Oinas 1985:135; Howell 1992:324-26). In looking for models for Soviet literature, Gorky had said, “I again call your attention, comrades, to the fact that folklore, i. e., the unwritten compositions of toiling man, has created the most profound, vivid and artistically perfect types of heroes,” and praised folklore for being the artistic creation of the people and for being grounded in the physical work of the laboring classes (1935:35). Gorky’s speech was reprinted in *Pravda*, and Stalin himself was quoted as telling the Red Army Ensemble, “you must supplement your repertoire with folk songs; use folk songs as extensively as possible” (Oinas 1973:47). At the 1934 Congress the Dagestani *ashuq* Suleiman Stal’skii had performed an original composition in praise of the Congress and had been praised in turn by Gorky as the “Homer of the twentieth century” (Schild 2010:121-22). In the years to come, expeditions to collect new material were launched, folktales were published in *Pravda*, new translations were made, and especially talented singers were commissioned to compose “news” songs, or *novinny*, in praise of the Soviet Union. In 1938, several folk narrators were elected to the Union of Soviet Writers and awarded the Order of Lenin (Oinas 1973:52). In Kazakhstan, the *aqın* Jambil Jabaev (1846-1945) became famous as a performer of supposedly extemporaneous oral compositions in praise of Soviet modernity (Witt 2011).

Gorky’s claim that folklore revealed the spirit of “toiling man” created a space in which certain kinds of folkloristics could be practiced and certain kinds of orature published but did not preclude attacks on other schools of folklore research or on specific examples of orature. The

scholars who collected new examples were also tasked with deciding which genres of oral literature could be considered “socialist” and with editing “bourgeois” themes from the store of orally circulated texts (Oinas 1985:136). In 1936, Vladimir Propp was obliged to disavow formalism at a meeting of the Academy of Sciences in Leningrad, and then to apologize yet again in 1948, when both he and Mark Azadovskii were taken to task for their reliance on the work of European and North American scholars (Oinas 1973:49, 54). In 1944, the Tatar Party Committee condemned the epic of *Edige* as a feudalistic text that glorified military campaigns against medieval Russia; other Central Asian republics soon followed suit, with the Kazakh writer Qasım Jumaliev’s stage adaptation cancelled on similar grounds in 1946.¹⁶ In the 1950s, a series of different epic texts were condemned on the grounds that they were feudalistic, or religious, or that, in their glorification of inter-ethnic violence, they were inimical to the ideals of *druzhba narodov*:¹⁷ first the *Dede Korkut Kitabı* in Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan in 1951, then the epic of *Alpamys* in Uzbekistan in 1952, and finally the epic of *Manas* in Kyrgyzstan in 1952 were all criticized in newspaper articles or at party committee meetings (Bennigsen 1975).

Qız Jibek too would come under fire as a text fundamentally at odds with the ideals of Soviet modernity. These denunciations were not confined to a particular time and place but rather flared up periodically from the 1930s onwards, though the criticisms never increased greatly in subtlety or substance. The historian Musatay Aqınjanov’s 1953 analysis exemplifies these critiques. *Qız Jibek*, Aqınjanov wrote, was not “of the people,” for it contained no images of class struggle and no dreams of a better life but rather propagandized for the nomadic way of life, for private property, and finally, “preached an archaic life in which women are bought and sold for cattle, and taken in levirate marriage” (Akhinzhanov 1953:11-12).¹⁸ Kamal Smayılov, the producer of the film version of *Qız Jibek*, similarly recalled that in 1986 a commission sent by the Central Committee in Moscow had quizzed him on the film, noting it “depicts the former life of the Kazakhs as one of wealth and luxury. . . . [H]ad they then no need for socialism?” (Smayılov 2015:26). These were not new ideas, nor were they foreign to those Kazakh writers who praised the epic—Seifullin in 1932 (1964 [1932]) had characterized the text as glorifying the sons and daughters of the steppe aristocracy and as extolling feudal marriage customs, as had Äwezov in 1927—but they had escalated into a claim that *Qız Jibek* had no place in the canon of Kazakh literature. These concerns shadowed the composition of the *Qazaq Ädebätiniñ Tarixı* in the late 1940s: the introduction to Volume 1 includes an extensive discussion of the changes that were made to the manuscript in light of a Central Committee commission’s criticism of the first draft, noting that the section on *ğasıqtıq jırlar* had been

¹⁶ The irony of this criticism is that although the historical Edige did lead campaigns through Russia and even laid siege to Moscow in 1408 CE, the various *Edige* epics concern themselves almost entirely with the struggle between Edige and Toqtamysh Khan for power over the Golden Horde. Details of the suppression of the epic together with a comparison of the different versions of *Edige* and a translation of a Karakalpak version may be found in Reichl 2007.

¹⁷ *Druzhba narodov*, or “the friendship of the peoples,” recast the relationship between the peoples of the Soviet Union as one of comity and aid; for the impact of this ideology on historical studies in Central Asia and the Caucasus, see Tillet 1969.

¹⁸ Ğabdullin (2018 [1958]:126-27) reviews Aqınjanov’s further conclusions on the dating of *Qız Jibek* in some detail and is largely dismissive, noting errors in both historiography and philology.

deemed the most problematic and error-ridden of all, necessitating extensive rethinking and revision (Äwezov 1948:9). This rethinking included a complete erasure of Jüsipbek Qoja's name: he is never mentioned, and though his opening words are quoted, the line in which he names himself is omitted. Yet the erasure coexisted with a series of increasingly subtle reflections on the role performer and genre played in shaping the text of *Qız Jibek*, reflections that paradoxically made the question of transmission one of ever greater import.

An awareness of the role of the performer in shaping the text was something Soviet scholars inherited from pre-revolutionary Russian folklore scholarship. It can be traced back to the insights of scholars associated with the Folk Song Commission of the Russian Geographical Society, which opened in St. Petersburg in 1884 (Krader 1967-68). The commission was dominated by scholars who utilized the historic-geographic method pioneered by the Finnish Folklorist Antti Aarne, building indexes of folktale plots in the belief that comparison of known versions could reveal the history of specific tales (Oinas 1973:46). The St. Petersburg scholars were distinguished from the broader European school of historic-geographic studies by virtue of their focus on the actual performance of the tale: Claus Oldenburg, the central figure in the Folktale Commission, wrote in 1916 that he had been surprised by the dearth of information on the performer in Aarne's work (Howell 1992:33). This interest in the performer culminated in 1925 with the publication of Mark Azadovskii's *A Siberian Tale-Teller*, a meticulous study of the ways in which individual singers leave their mark upon an oral text. Azadovskii himself cast his contribution as a reformulation of Aarne, writing, "his formula: 'Every folk imprints, so to speak, the tale with its own stamp,' must be considerably expanded: with each folk [group] the folktale receives its individual, local character, which is added by the individual narrator" (Azadovskii 1974:9). Echoes of this may be found in the introduction to the *Qazaq Ädebïetiniñ Tarïxı*, where Äwezov explains how oral literature is continually reimagined as it moves from mouth to mouth, with "those who tell and those who retell coming from every era, every tribe, every social class And each and every one of them reshaping the tale to flatter their own era and class" (1948:15). In order to disentangle the different voices within the text, he wrote, Soviet scholars were obliged to consider multiple variants and to not fall into the trap of those bourgeois scholars who mistakenly treated orature as the collective texts of nations. Yet this seeming awareness of the agency of the singer coexisted with an overarching belief that oral literature did indeed emerge from nations, and that the true singer was thus one who voiced the desires of the nation's popular class. In this regard, as Lauri Honko has observed, the Soviet Union was "one of the last bastions of Romantic attitudes toward folk poetry" (1996:30).

In his analysis of *Qız Jibek*, Äwezov would put this methodology into motion, arguing that those who critiqued the text as feudalistic aimed their fire at changes later "*üstem tap*" ("ruling-class") singers had introduced to the original "lyric epic."

The salience of positioning *Qız Jibek* as a "lyric epic" derived from the attempts of Soviet literary theorists to make gaps between genres index larger fissures in social and economic history. Äwezov's and, before him, Radlov's contrasts between epic and lyric both ultimately derived from the ways in which the German Romantics conceptualized links between poetry and nation. As Hegel mapped it out, the epic was the art of an early stage in history, a poetry expressing the "childlike consciousness" of a people only just "awakened," while lyric and dramatic poetry in contrast were the literary modes of an era in which the individual had been

“disentangled from the nation’s concrete whole,” and consequently “expresses *lyrically* its dwelling on self and its preoccupation with the inner life of the individual” (1975:1044-46). Soviet thinkers extended this idea by attempting to plot the supposed succession of literary genres onto Marxist schematizations of the evolution of economy and society, a project most famously articulated in Mikhail Bakhtin’s “Epic and Novel” (1981) and György Lukács’s *Theory of the Novel* (1971).¹⁹ These were theories that both praised the epic and buried it, suggesting the literary form (and, by extension, the people who possessed it) could be contemporaneous but never truly contemporary. Jambıl Jabaev, the example *par excellence* of the oral poet as a member of the Soviet community, embodied this logic: his illiteracy and age were central to his public image, and in his official appearances he was invariably clad not in suit and tie but in Kazakh national dress (Holt 2015:228).

The crux of Äwezov’s 1948 defense of *Qız Jibek* was that the genre of “lyric epic” was born from disenchantment with the archaic world epic poetry praised and from which Jambıl had seemed to come. Tölegen and Jibek’s marriage was read not as modeling the customs and norms of mobile pastoralists but rather as an incipient break, albeit one effaced by the later interventions of unnamed “*üstem tap*” singers, raising the question of to what extent Jüsıpbek Qoja’s narrative did differ from other variants.

“Lyric Epic” and the Marriage of Tölegen

Jüsıpbek Qoja’s narrative begins with a young man named Tölegen who goes in search of the perfect bride, eventually meeting and marrying the fantastically beautiful Jibek. After the marriage, Tölegen sets out on a journey to visit his own family, promising Jibek he will return with the geese in spring. When Tölegen’s father Bazarbay refuses to allow him to leave so soon, Tölegen slips away on his own and, in the final scene of the first half of the epic, is murdered by a rival suitor, Bekejan, as he travels alone through a desert waste. In the concluding scene of the narrative’s first half, the dying Tölegen looks up, sees a flock of geese in the sky, and sings a song in which he bids the geese carry word of his death back to his family.

Though the various scholars discussed in this paper never explicitly compared Jüsıpbek Qoja’s *Qız Jibek* with that of Musabay Jıraw (and Äwezov could not have done so, as it was not known in 1948), a comparison between the two is still useful in that it reveals the extent to which these scholars were indeed responding to details specific to Jüsıpbek Qoja’s version. The distinctions between Musabay Jıraw and Jüsıpbek Qoja’s versions begin with their framing of Tölegen’s search for a bride. Though Musabay Jıraw’s first lines do describe Tölegen as engaged in a fruitless hunt for a partner from among his own people, this immediately gives way to a description of how enmity broke out between the Kazakh *Kışı Jüz* and *Orta Jüz* and of the

¹⁹ For a discussion of the relationship between Bakhtin and Lukács and the literary politics of the Soviet Union, see Clark and Tihanov 2011.

retaliatory cattle raids, or *barımta*, that followed.²⁰ In one of these raids, the Qıpşaq tribe of the *Orta Jüz* seize five hundred horses from the Jaǵalbaylı, the tribe of Tölegen’s father, and the *Kişi Jüz* send a letter demanding their return (Musabay Jıraw 2009:38, lines 31-40):

Sonda Qıpşaq bolıp keñesti,
 Orta Jüz bolıp söylesti,
 Söyleskende ne desti:
 —Bılay barsaq, Qalmaq zhaw,
 Bılay barsaq, Qazaq zhaw,
 Ne qılıp kündi köremiz?
 Bazarbayǵa sälem de,
 Jibersin bizge xabardı,
 Bılǵı alǵan jılqını
 Izinen qaytıp beremiz.

Then the Qıpşaq took council,
 The *Orta Jüz* deliberated
 And they said:
 To one side, the Qalmaq enemy,
 In another, Kazakh foes,
 How then will we survive?
 Our *sälems* then to Bazarbay,
 If he will send a messenger,
 The horses seized last year
 We will make retrace their steps.

Bazarbay’s fifteen-year-old son Tölegen joins a group of 200 young men the Jaǵalbaylı send to retrieve Bazarbay’s horses. Tölegen has heard that one of the Qıpşaq *bays*, Alaşabay, has an astonishingly beautiful fifteen-year-old daughter named Jibek, and Tölegen’s own mother suggests that he offer the returned horses as a bride price for Jibek. In Musabay Jıraw’s version, then, Tölegen’s journey to Jibek’s home emerges from the collective concerns of the lineage to which he belongs, and his courtship of her is suggested and sanctioned by authority figures within his own family. That the marriage literally takes the place of peace achieved through the return of horses makes it an almost disconcertingly precise fit with Claude Lévi-Strauss’s (1969) paradigm of marriage exchange as a foundation of society.

Jüsipbek Qoja’s version omits any mention of the solemnity of *barımta* raids in favor of a narrative in which Tölegen’s quest for an appropriately beautiful bride possesses the tone of a

²⁰ The Kazakhs comprised three different tribal confederacies: the *Kişi Jüz* (“Little Hundred”) in the west, the *Orta Jüz* (“Middle Hundred”) in the east, and the *Ulı Jüz* (“Senior Hundred”) in the south. *Barımta*, or cattle-raiding, could be undertaken in pursuit of glory but could also, as seems to be the case here, be a way of settling disputes, with the seized horses returned to the original owners after an agreement was struck (Martin 2001:140-55). These raids were a frequent subject of Central Asian heroic epics—see in particular Prior 2013 for the translation of a Kyrgyz horse-raiding poem.

romantic comedy. Bazarbay, already eighty years of age when Tölegen is born, boasts that his son might choose whomever he pleases as bride, for his herds are vast enough to furnish the *qalın mal* (bride price) of even a Patsha's daughter. This then is what leads Tölegen to set out on a journey to the distant Aqjañıq, a trip that Jüsipbek Qoja depicts as a sort of slapstick beauty pageant—Tölegen announces that every potential bride will be given a horse as a gift; after he has seen 210 women, the young men who form his *comitatus* begin to hide him from potential brides out of fear he will give all their horses away and force them to go about on foot—which culminates in the arrival of Qarşığa, an *aqın* and the Vizier of Jibek's father, Sırlıbay Khan. Sırlıbay's people—here, not Qıpşaq but Altı Shekti—are migrating to summer pastures, and as Qarşığa and Tölegen ride after them they pass one young woman after another, each more beautiful than the next. Tölegen's headlong gallop across the steppe conjures a sense of effervescent adventure, as with each woman he passes he whips his horse to greater speed and as the horse itself takes the bit between its teeth, “foam dripping from its mouth” (*awzınan köbik şaşadı*) and “fire flashing in its eyes” (*közi ottay janadı*) (Jüsipbek Qoja Şayxıslamulı 2009:99, 102, lines 477 and 578).

The freedom and sense of adventure that characterized Jüsipbek Qoja's Tölegen are key to Äwezov's 1948 reading of the epic as, in his words, “the start of the psychological lyric epic.” As he explains it, “Tölegen refuses the bride his father had chosen for him, his desire for true love leads him to seek for a bride himself, and once on this path he meets Jibek, who just like him longs for freedom—the poem seems to include within itself the first thoughts of what more just laws and norms might be” (1948:195). Tölegen and Jibek, it seemed, were as incensed as any good party member at the idea of arranged marriages, and their rebellion against this institution was then read as a rebellion against the broader world of feudalism. This was a conclusion followed by generations of subsequent scholars: in the introduction to the edition of *Qız Jibek* used in this paper, for example, the folklorist Seyit Qasqabasov writes that Tölegen and Jibek represent a new kind of protagonist, one caused by “a change taking place in the mental life of people, as a new social ideal emerged. . . . Singers, storytellers, and others all began to turn their attention towards the question of the individual and their happiness and destiny, towards love and the struggles of family life” (2009:10-11).

The epic takes on overtones of tragedy only after Tölegen's marriage with Jibek. When Tölegen returns to his natal family, his father and mother arrange a huge *toñ* to celebrate his marriage, in the midst of which Tölegen says that he intends to return to Jibek in the spring. His father asks that Tölegen grant him one request, and when Tölegen heedlessly agrees, his father asks that Tölegen not depart again until a full year has passed. Tölegen angrily states that he returned without his bride's blessing and must similarly refuse his father. Bazarbay in reply prohibits any of his people from helping Tölegen, who is thus forced to make his preparations in secret and to travel alone through the desert, setting the stage for his later murder by Bekejan. Notably, this entire section is rendered as a brief prose narrative, in contrast to the elaborate songs and counter-songs that characterize other moments in the text. The scene does not appear at all in Musabay Jıraw's version, for the simple reason that in his text Tölegen is murdered by Bekejan on his initial journey home to his natal kin.

Äwezov's 1948 reading of *Qız Jibek* as a tale of social alienation begins from this defiance of the father. Äwezov writes that the narrative provides Tölegen with four distinct

challenges: the long and difficult road through the desert; the absence of his father and mother's blessing; Tölegen's own isolation and lack of allies; and finally, the enmity of Bekejan. Among these features, "Bazarbay's *teris batası* (curse) is no small barrier," and Äwezov notes that Sansızbay, who has his father's blessing when he departs in search of Tölegen and Jibek, reaches his goal. In this, Äwezov (1948:197) concludes, the ideology of the *aqın* can be seen, for the plot is the plot of:

a singer in whose mind the death of Tölegen is a fate that cannot be changed. . . . Tölegen may be given the dream of freedom, but this is to be a dream for which there is neither path nor place. In a poem so suffused with the tribalistic and the archaic, every fantasy or feeling must be subordinated to the rule that the blessing of the father is a necessity never to be forsaken.

In these lines, Äwezov hints at the idea of a dissonant text, one which reverberates with doubts and hopes that coexist uneasily with the singer's own apparent ideology.

Apparently neglected in this analysis is a consideration of a long series of other scenes in which Tölegen's death is foreshadowed by his indifference to the wishes and warnings of those around him. This pattern begins with Tölegen's first trip: as he prepares to set out for the Aqjayıq river, his mother comes and pleads with him not to depart, mixing warnings about Tölegen's death with appeals for him to stay and protect his parents. If he departs, she asks, who will be their guardian, for his younger brother Sansızbay is not yet of age to be a shield for his parents. When Tölegen replies that he is determined to leave in search of a bride, she commends her son to the care of a series of protectors, including Bibi Fatima, Zuleikha and Joseph, and Baba Tükti Şaştı Äziz. She begins, however, by asking protection from those "guardian spirits of love," Layli and Majnun (*Ğaşıqtardıñ piri ediñ / Lâyli-Mäjñün siz bar aw*), and in this way explicitly incorporates into the poem an allusion to what is one of the most commonly offered literary parallels for Jibek and Tölegen, Nizami's doomed lovers (Jüsipbek Qoja Şayxıslamulı 2009:92, lines 275-300).

This scene of leave-taking is repeated two more times over the course of Jüsipbek Qoja's version, in each of which Tölegen clearly rides towards his death but does not necessarily ride away from his natal kin. When Tölegen resolves to leave Jibek and return to his family, Jibek similarly prophesies Tölegen's death, and Tölegen similarly ignores this warning. As he prepares his horse for departure, Jibek sends one of her sisters-in-law with a message that she has seen a dream with portents of his death (121, lines 1145-55):

Aldımda jañgan şırağım
Birew ürlep öşirip,
Közimnen boldı sol ğayıp.
Qolımdağı tuyghınnıñ
Zawlap kelip aspannan
Jelkesin qıdı bıdayıq.

Before my eyes I saw,
A candle gutter and go dark,

Its flame cut by an unknown hand.
 From the sky a goshawk swooped
 And broke the wings and killed
 The white falcon perched upon my wrist.

Still later, this same scene plays out when Tölegen elects to leave his natal family and return to Jibek, with his younger brother Sansızbay now in the role of the one who warns Tölegen of the dangers of traveling alone across the steppe. Sansızbay concludes his appeal saying by saying, “If you do not return, / but choke on blood and sorrow, / I will grasp my *dombra*, / and pluck a song of lamentation” (*Bu barğannan kelmeseñ, / qayğımenen qan jutıp, / qobız alıp qolima, / tartamın sonda küi*) (126, lines 1290-95). In these scenes, Tölegen violates entreaties not to travel, but the act of travel itself does not always fit neatly into a pattern of departure or alienation from his patrilineal kin. Tölegen’s response to these pleas shifts from scene to scene, as he seemingly moves from being a young man who pursues his wishes at the expense of his family to one who views his own life as immaterial in comparison to the larger lineal group of which he is only a part. His mother’s appeal is met with Tölegen’s insistence on the necessity of his quest; in the words of Jüsipbek Qoja (92, lines 267-72):

Anası ğarıp jılaydı,
 Jılaydı da tolğaydı.
 Qoy dese de balası
 Oğan, sirä, bolmaydı.
 Bir sulū qız almay Tölegen
 Dünıege könili tolmaydı.

Let his mother be crippled with tears,
 Let her weep a funeral song.
 Leave it be, she says,
 but for him this cannot be.
 If Tölegen never finds his beauty
 This world holds nothing for him.

In the scene with Jibek, Tölegen both doubts the warning she sends—he tells her messenger, “dreams are but the shit of foxes” (*tüs—tülkiniñ boqı*)—but also argues for the insignificance of his own life, offering reasons both religious and lineal. If God wills his death, then God’s will be done, he sings, and goes on to tell her of his brother Sansızbay (123, lines 1207-13):

Jaman jaqsı bolsa da
 Allanıñ bolar Āmiri.
 Jalğız ağaş kesilse,
 Qūarıp qalar tamırı.
 Olay bulay bop ketsem,

Toğız jasar artımda
Jetkinşegim bar edi.

Whether grief or joy finds us,
Allah remains our lord.
If you hew a lone tree,
The roots wither, the tree yellows.
Yet if I should die,
After me there would be still
My younger brother, nine years old.

When Sansızbay appeals to Tölegen, Tölegen similarly replies by telling him of Jibek, enjoining him to travel to her should Tölegen himself not return.

Tölegen's speech as he dies similarly revolves around his natal family. After Tölegen's father prohibits him from leaving, Tölegen spends his days falconing. One day, two geese fly overhead cackling, and Tölegen is reminded of his promise to Jibek to return with the geese in spring. He sets out alone, but as the poem narrates, "of three months' journey / five- and forty-days' count / are desert wasteland" (*üş ayşılıq jerlerdiñ / qırq bes kündik ortası, / Atırabı şöl eken*) (129, lines 1413-15). In the midst of this desert, they reach Qosoba, the lake of the twin kurgans, where Bekejan, a suitor spurned by Jibek, lies in wait with a group of bandits. Tölegen, treacherously shot in the back by Bekejan, looks up and sees the geese who had flown alongside him on his journey circling overhead. In a long speech, he imagines the geese flying west and being greeted by his father, asking, "and if my old father should ask, / 'oh wild animals, and have you seen / my darling, my Tölegen,' / what shall be your answer?" (*Qartayğan äkem Bazarbay / Aldıñnan şığıp janūar / 'Qarağım meniñ Tölegen / Kördiñ be' dese ne deysiñ?*) (134, lines 1578-81). Tölegen repeats this motif two more times, imagining his mother and then his brother Sansızbay petitioning the geese for word of Tölegen, and each time answers his own question with an anguished recollection of his parents and his childhood. Finally, he tells the geese what message they might carry (135, lines 1620-28):

Öli ekenin bilmeymiz,
Tiri ekenin bilmeymiz,
Qosobanıñ jonında
Qosa ketti degeysin.
Mañdayınan aqqan qan
Josa ketti degeysiñ.
Altındı jabdıq kök jorğa at
Bir qaraqşı qolında.

We do not know if he has died
We do not know if he yet lives
But there by Qosoba
We have left him.

From his forehead blood flowed
 And soaked the ground.
 His grey pacer's gilt harness
 Grasped by a brigand's hands.

Tölegen may be physically distant from his family when he dies, but in his last words, as in his farewells to Jibek and Tölegen, he imagines himself as a part of this corporate unit.

The motif of a farewell message addressed to wild geese is also to be found in Musabay Jıraw's version, but Jüsipbek Qoja's version arguably places a greater emphasis on themes of familial loyalty. In Musabay Jıraw's version, the geese literally carry a message from Tölegen to Sansızbay, alighting before the younger brother, telling him how and where his kinsman has died, and thereby setting in motion the second half of the epic (Musabay Jıraw 2009:55-56, lines 661-76):

Sonda qazdar söyleydi:
 —Asa rudiñ elinde
 Tölegendi kördik, dep.
 Tölegen mingen jorğası
 Kekten ketken eken, dep.
 Jalğız ağañ Tölegen
 Tulap jatır eken, dep.
 Qara qanı mañdaydan
 Zulap jatır eken, dep.
 Alpıs böri bir qoydı
 Tosa ketken eken, dep.
 Tölegen atqan tal oğı
 Tasa ketken eken, dep.
 Qazdar uşıp jönedi,
 Tölegenniñ ölgenin
 Sansızbay sonda bileđi.

Then the geese replied:
 "Tölegen we have seen
 In the land of the Asa.
 And the horse of Tölegen
 Is lost to enemies.
 Tölegen, your elder brother,
 Has fallen," said the geese.
 His black blood spilling
 From his wounded head.
 As the flesh of a lone sheep
 Is torn by sixty wolves, they said.
 The willow-shafted arrows of Tölegen,

Have all been shot, they said.
 And then the geese flew on,
 And in this way Sansızbay
 Knew of the death of Tölegen.

In Jüsipbek Qoja's version, an element of the fantastic is transformed into a rhetorical question, as Tölegen only imagines what the geese might say if they could only speak. In twisting the motif in this manner, he positions it as a moment in which Tölegen reflects upon his own family and his place within it. Crucially, as he dies, he remembers his father not as an authoritarian who prohibits his journey but rather as the old man who carried his child uphill though his back ached and downhill though his knees ached (*töbege şıqsa, belim dep, / Oyğa tüsse, tizem dep*) (Jüsipbek Qoja Şayxıslamulı 2009:134, lines 1576-77).²¹

When Jüsipbek Qoja's version is read alongside Musabay Jıraw's, then, the comparison suggests that loyalty to natal family is a central theme of both texts, but that Jüsipbek Qoja's Tölegen only slowly grows to hold these values. Though this would seem to support the claim that his version indeed does distinguish itself through the complexity of his characters, the problem remains that the growth here takes the form not of rebellion but of acceptance. In addressing this, Äwezov, Ğabdüllin, and Berdibay all relied on some variation of the idea that this represented later interventions by an unnamed singer. In Äwezov's discussion of the death song of Tölegen, his earlier suggestion of gaps and discords within the text becomes explicit. He argues that the audience's sympathies throughout this section would be squarely on the side of Jibek and Tölegen, and by extension, therefore, in support of a character who "wrestles with the injustice of an archaic society" (Äwezov 1948:197). Tölegen's song is followed by the *aqın*'s own commentary on Tölegen's death (Jüsipbek Qoja Şayxıslamulı 2009:136, lines 1644-50):

Ayıp-aytpay nemene,
 Sol sekildi asyldar,
 Kebini joq, köri joq,
 İt penen qusqa jem bolıp,
 Muratına jete almay,
 Armanda bolıp ketipti.

What can be said,
 of nobles like these,
 with neither shroud nor tomb,
 no more than meat for dogs and crows,
 their journeys broken
 their dreams flown.

This is a commentary that Äwezov (1948:197) suggests expresses either coolness or indifference,

²¹ Though both Musabay Jıraw and Jüsipbek Qoja identify the geese as *qonır qaz*, or graylag geese (*Anser anser*), modern illustrations almost invariably use the more conventionally romantic imagery of swans.

pointing to the gap between the interpretation stressed by the singer and the one felt by the audience. Ğabdūllīn (2018 [1958]:133) likewise saw in this scene the voice of a later *aqın*, one who places words supporting customary law in the mouth of the dying Tölegen and in so doing violates the spirit of the original popular version. Berdibay also treated this scene as evidence that the singer himself was a supporter of customary law. He further argued that Jibek's dream, rather than warning Tölegen against a return to his natal kin, actually warned against his return to Jibek. In Berdibay's estimation, the dream had an "*astarlı*" ("hidden" or "allegorical") meaning, one that foreshadowed the gravity of Tölegen departing without his father's blessing (2013 [1982]:261).

The plot detail most obdurate to a socialist interpretation, Jibek's marriage to Sansızbay, was still to come, and with it would come the most ambitious explanations of how and where the "popular" version had been lost.

***Qız Jibek* and Levirate Marriage**

The second halves of Jüsipbek Qoja's and Musabay Jiraw's respective renditions of *Qız Jibek* both tell essentially the same story, one that mirrors the plot of the first half but replaces tragedy with victory. In both tales, Tölegen's younger brother Sansızbay goes in search of his lost brother, taking the *aqın* Şege with him as a companion. They arrive just as Jibek's father is arranging her marriage to the Qalmaq Khan, Koren. Jibek tricks Koren into giving her his horse, which she rides as she and Sansızbay elope together. They are pursued by Koren Khan, but when they meet in the desert, Sansızbay fights and, unlike Tölegen, kills his adversary. Both versions then end with Sansızbay driving the Qalmaq army from the land before marrying Jibek. As in the earlier sections, the two versions vary in details of names and clans. Jüsipbek Qoja offers more elaborate songs and counter-songs, while Musabay Jiraw offers hyperbolic and even fantastic details: his Sansızbay is no more than seven years old, and the arrow with which he kills Koren flies on to kill the forty Qalmaq soldiers ranged behind their Khan. Yet the two versions agree in their reliance on levirate marriage as the device that brings about the story's triumphant end.

The two versions also likewise rely on the introduction of an external foe, the Qalmaq Khan Koren, in place of Bekejan. "Qalmaq" was the Kazakh word for the Oirat, a nomadic people from the Inner Asian steppe who in the first half of the seventeenth century moved west into the territory of the lower Volga and the Aqjayıq (or Ural) river, where they came into repeated conflict with the Kazakh *Kişi Jüz*. This is the apparent setting of *Qız Jibek*, for Tölegen's family is described as making their home on the banks of the Caspian, and Jibek's is described as living along the banks of the Aqjayıq. In the east, the Oirat formed the Jünger tribal confederacy, eventually moving into east and south Kazakhstan, where they inflicted a series of crushing defeats on the Kazakhs and forced parts of the *Orta* and *Ulı Jüz* to flee south into present-day Uzbekistan in the early-eighteenth century. Long after these events, the Qalmaqs lingered in the oral literature of the Kazakhs and other Central Asian Turkic peoples as the

embodiment of enmity, an antagonism further colored by the Buddhist Oirat's status as a "heathen" other.²²

Jibek's betrothal to the Qalmaq Khan Koren is shadowed by these fears of violence and of religious betrayal. In Jüsipbek Qoja's version, Sansızbay and Şege go in search of the lost Tölegen—crucially, now with Bazarbay's blessing—and finally arrive at Jibek's *awıl*. As they look down upon the crowds of people gathered there, a shepherd tells them not only of the murder of Tölegen but also that the Qalmaq Khan had heard of Jibek's famed beauty and came in search of her with an army of 9,000 soldiers. When Sırlıbay is told he must either yield his daughter or see his people put to the sword, he agrees to the marriage, but Jibek herself says, "If you indeed intend to give me to this *käpir* (heathen), then at least grant me forty days of wedding feast, thirty days of wedding games" (*meni şınımnenen käpirge bermek bolsañız, tum bolmasa qırıq kün toy qılıp, otız kün oyın qılıp*) (Jüsipbek Qoja Şayxıslamulı 2009:143). Though Sansızbay is devastated by the news of his brother's death, he resolves to rescue Jibek. First he and then Şege slip into the encampment, where each hears Jibek singing songs of lamentation from inside her tent. Jibek appeals to God, asking why he has doomed her to marriage with "some Qalmaq of foul descent" (*Şınıñmen näsip qıldıñ ba, / Näsili jaman Qalmaqqa-ay?*) (147, lines 1971-72). In Musabay Jıraw's version, Jibek even threatens murder and suicide as preferable to marriage with a Qalmaq, promising to "take a steel blade / to stab Koren / then stab myself" (*Aq pısaqtı alayın, / Korenge de salayın, / Özime de salayın*) (2009:65, 988-90).

The flip side of Jibek's condemnation of marriage to a Qalmaq is her repeated questioning of why Tölegen's family never came for her. As Jibek sings in Jüsipbek Qoja's version (Şayxıslamulı 2009:148-49, lines 1998-2009):

Äweli bas qosqanıñ Jağalbaylı
 Jılcısın köptiginen bağa almaydı.
 Ölgeni Tölegenniñ ras bolsa,
 Qudayım Qız Jibekti nege almaydı?
 Tağı da bas qosqanıñ Jağalbaylı,
 Jılcısın köptiginen bağa almaydı.
 Sol elde seri jigıt joq pa, Täñiri-ay?
 Jesirin izdep kelip nege almaydı?
 Tağı da bas qosqanıñ Jağalbaylı,
 Jılcısın köptiginen bağa almaydı.
 Sol eldi özim izdep keter edim
 Jiñişke äyel jolı taba almaydı.

First I joined the Jağalbaylı,
 With their horse herds beyond count.
 If it was Tölegen's fate to die,

²² For details of the Qalmaqs in the lower Volga, see Khodarkovsky 2004:133-46; for the Jüngars and the Kazakhs, Holzwarth 2005:193-201. The image of the Qalmaqs in Turkic oral literature is reviewed in Kara 2010. The memorialization of the Jüngar wars in Soviet and post-Soviet Kazakh nationalist discourse is surveyed in Hancock-Parmer 2015.

Why, oh God, did you not take Jibek?
 And I joined the Jaǵalbaylı,
 With their horse herds beyond count.
 In that land are there no brave horsemen, oh God?
 Who would come in quest of their widow, bring her home?
 And I joined the Jaǵalbaylı,
 With their horse herds beyond count.
 I would myself set out and find this people,
 But how would a frail woman find a path?

Musabay Jıraw too matches Jibek's horror at the marriage with Koren Khan with lines in which she represents herself as properly a part of Tölegen's family. As Äwezov explained in his 1927 analysis, Jibek's "love was not the love of today, which takes as its object a single person," but was rather a love that embraced an entire lineal group, one of which Tölegen was only a part (1985 [1927]:131).

In his 1948 analysis, Äwezov replaced this romantic defense of virilocal residence with blunt denunciations. The custom of levirate, Äwezov now wrote (1948:196):

sprang from an archaic socio-economic system in which women were paid for with cattle and were then themselves treated as possessions. . . . Nor was a woman bought with *qalın mal* merely her husband's possession, for she was also counted as the property of his clan. "You may leave your husband, but never his clan," the saying went, and when a husband died the widow was held just as close as his flocks.

For good measure, Äwezov further added that "until the October Revolution, this law was a constant source of sorrow for Kazakh women, who suffered uncounted hardship from it" (1948:196). Yet these observations demonstrated only that the scholars studying the tale condemned these customs; they did not necessarily reimagine Jibek herself as a secret opponent of levirate marriage. To accomplish this, a second level of analysis was needed, one focused on the character of Jibek and on the situation in which she found herself. Jibek, Äwezov argued, viewed marriage with Sansızbay as simply the most acceptable among a series of bad choices: absent a defender from among the Şekti, she was obliged to turn to the Jaǵalbaylı and to Sansızbay. The song she sings lamenting that no one came for her from the Jaǵalbaylı isn't evidence of a "passion" for Sansızbay but rather of grief over the weakness of the Şekti. This interpretation of Jibek's character was followed by multiple other scholars, becoming key to the argument that *Qız Jibek* offers both psychological and social realism. Ğabdüllin described Koren as arriving at Jibek's *awıl* with his "sword dripping blood"; though he saw this as a moment where Jibek herself appears to switch from discontent to support of marriage customs, he wrote that this merely illustrated the essentially powerless status of women (2018 [1958]:136-37). Berdibay too characterized the marriage as a "wise and necessary solution," one that reflects not loyalty to Tölegen's family but rather the violence represented by the Qalmaqs, thereby illustrating the ways in which the epic gives us not just Jibek's appearance but also "the waves within her" (2013 [1982]:260, 262). These are explanations that, knowingly or not, mimic the

justifications for Russian colonization of the steppe that Tillett (1969) showed were dominant in the 1930s: yes, colonialism was bad, but colonialism by Russia was infinitely better than the “greater danger” of colonization by China (who, like the Qalmaqs, coincidentally represented a threat from the east).

Yet these conclusions were troubled by the narrative’s apparent reward to Jibek for her loyalty to the Jaǵalbaylı, granting her a husband, Sansızbay, whose heroic qualities seemingly surpass those of his older brother. As Äwezov himself noted, Tölegen falls short of the ideal of an epic hero in many ways, but above all through his lack of an equally heroic horse. In Jibek’s dream, Tölegen’s death is foretold through the image of his horse wandering riderless; in the climactic battle, his horse collapses from exhaustion; in the final scene, after Tölegen dies, “the grey horse of Tölegen / having drunk its fill, / bore a brigand on its back / as it went prancing off” (*Tölegen mingen kök jorǵa at / sū işip äbden qanǵan soñ, / bir qaraqşı astında / oynaqtay basıp jönedi*) (Jüsipbek Qoja Şayxıslamulı 2009:133, 1549-52). This is a far cry from the behavior of the classic horses of Central Asian oral epic, who in their more fantastic forms speak and even fly, and who even in their more workaday forms display a loyalty that extends past the death of the hero. Though Jüsipbek Qoja does not grant Sansızbay a heroic horse—it is Jibek who rides Sandalkök, the horse she tricks Koren into yielding her—he does grant him the type-scene of the hero arming himself and a battle scene replete with challenges and heroic displays of martial arts.²³ As Berdibay (2013 [1982]:263) remarks, in this final section, the “lyric epic” seems to have been transmuted into heroic epic.

The resolution of these interpretive dilemmas was to lay the blame at the feet of the singer. Both Äwezov and Berdibay argued that the final section reflected the embellishments of a singer who was a loyal ideologue of the feudal class, one who exaggerated the heroic parts of Sansızbay so as to subtly justify the institution of levirate marriage. Ğabdüllin went a step beyond this, arguing that the entire second half of *Qız Jibek* was a later and unfortunate elaboration. As Ğabdüllin (2018 [1958]:128-29, 137-39) explained, the original “popular” version of the epic would have ended with the death of Tölegen and would have expressed the people’s discontent with feudal law. Later, however, the *üstem tap* (“ruling class”) made use of the plot for their own ends, adding the story of Sansızbay, and in so doing grafting a moral onto it in which those who would embrace individualism and social alienation (Tölegen) perish, while those who model loyalty and deference to authority (Sansızbay) are rewarded with victory. In this reading, multiple details of the plot—the absence of a heroic horse by Tölegen’s side, his death at the hands of an ignominious foe, and Sansızbay’s defeat of an at least courageous adversary—have all been marshaled to elevate the character of Sansızbay over that of Tölegen.

This thesis mapped out an interpretive path that would be followed by perhaps the most influential Soviet-era interpretations of *Qız Jibek*, the 1970 film of the same title directed by Sultanaxmet Qojıqov on the basis of a script by Ğabıt Müsrepov. Müsrepov had first adapted the epic into an opera libretto in 1935, turning in a script that was largely faithful to the plot of

²³ Though this is not discussed in any of the scholarship I have reviewed, Bekejan’s use of a matchlock musket to kill Tölegen further underlines the difference between him and Koren. As Levi (2020:152-69) points out in his review of the introduction of gunpowder weaponry on the steppe, the mounted archer possessed a prestige lacked by those who fought with muskets, a weapon that required little skill to operate. Though epic heroes may be killed by guns—see, for example, the death of the Kyrgyz hero Manas (Hatto 1990)—they rarely fight with them.

Jüsipbek Qoja's version and which drew heavily upon his language, incorporating verbatim Tölegen's final words to the wild geese as well as Jibek's lament that no one had come for her from the Jaǵalbaylı. Like the epic, the opera culminates with Jibek facing a forced marriage to the Qalmaq Khan, Koren, but it ends on an ambiguous note: the final words are Şege's, crying out that he has come with Sansızbay, and the final action Jibek's, as she falls in confusion (Müsirepuli 1935:58). In the late 1960s, the film producer Kamal Smayılov received permission to produce a film version and, as he tells it, "Around September 7th, Sultan and I went to meet Ğabeñ at his dacha in the mountains. As soon as he saw we were serious about the project, Ğabeñ said, if you give me two or three months, I'll rewrite the whole scenario from start to finish." Once the script was ready, the author came to the studio and, "in his own soft warm voice read the script out loud to us. . . . [W]e all sat spellbound, barely taking a breath" (2015:25). The script became perhaps the most famous film of Soviet Kazakhstan, the source of most people's knowledge of the story, and a revision that has essentially replaced Müsrepov's own earlier libretto as the basis for operatic performances.

In this revision, Müsrepov chose a simple resolution to the interpretive challenges posed by Jibek's marriage to Sansızbay: he eliminated the entire second half of the narrative.²⁴ In the final scene of the film, Bekejan reveals to Jibek that he has killed Tölegen, and she flees into the steppe where, in a direct echo of Jüsipbek Qoja's account of her dream, she sees Tölegen's horse running with an empty saddle. The film's final image is of Jibek's wedding hat floating away on the waters of the Aqjayıq, suggesting that she has drowned herself in sorrow. The script thus returned the story to an ending that parallels the tale of Layla and Majnun, but also one that mimicked the plots of such pre-revolutionary novellas as Mirjaqip Dūlatov's *Baqıtsız Jamal* (2003 [1910]) and Beyimbet Maylın's *Şuǵanıñ Belgisi* (2009 [1915]), tales in which the inequities of Kazakh society were dramatized through the deaths of lovers divided by class. The cinematography, Peter Rollberg argues, similarly emphasizes themes of individualism rather than of national unity, with the camera's constant movement creating an atmosphere of "visual restlessness" that underlines the instability and isolation of Tölegen and Jibek (2021:222).

Conclusion

In reviewing the mix of Stalin-era debates over etymology, literary history, and Marxist theory in which Bakhtin's theories were rooted, Katerina Clark and Galin Tihanov point out that these things mattered because "theorizing genre amounted to tentatively drawing and redrawing the boundaries of modernity" (2011:143). The arguments of Äwezov, Ğabdūllın, Berdibay, and others, though never in explicit dialogue with Bakhtin or Lukács, similarly drew on the linguistic theories of N. Ia. Marr (1936), on concerns about the links between literary and economic history, and on an understanding of oral texts as polyphonies born from the dialogue between

²⁴ Dūysenbaev (1973:91) records that Musrepov himself claimed that the versions of *Qız Jibek* he had heard as a child completely omitted any mention of levirate marriage. Dūysenbaev himself reviews the text and largely concurs with the conclusions of Äwezov and other scholars about the differences between the first and second halves, but also notes that they possess a stylistic unity that mark both as the work of Jüsipbek Qoja, a source he does not hesitate to name.

emergent performance and inherited texts. For these scholars, however, what was at stake in drawing these boundaries was the question not just of *what* was modern but rather of *who* was modern.

The Soviet feting of oral literature and folklore as the literature of “the toiling masses” did create space for the emergence of literary figures like Jambul and for literary projects like Müsrepov’s adaptation of *Qız Jibek*, but it could also all too easily slide into a chauvinistic dismissal of Kazakh literature as somehow always something less than coeval. The Soviet project, so the story went, had made the Soviet people leapfrog all the way from the earlier stages of capitalism into the future of Socialism, but this story could also imply that some members of the Soviet community had started even further back, dragged from some distant twilight of feudalism into the sun of Socialist modernity. A desire to contest the place of the Kazakhs on these historical grids had elsewhere animated everything from scholarship on the history of Kazakh mobile pastoralism (Sneath 2007) to the themes of Kazakh Socialist Realist fiction (McGuire 2018), and here spilled into debates over how to understand the characters of Jibek and Tölegen. *Qız Jibek* came to be read as an epic turned inside-out, one in which the interior worlds of its characters mattered more than their actions. The “lyric epic” seemingly contained within itself the germs of genres yet to bloom, anticipating the realist novel thanks to plots driven by conflict with social customs and protagonists characterized by their alienation from their own communities. Yet these interpretations also imagined that the “lyric epic” had then been turned inside-out a second time, transformed back into the mold of a “heroic epic” by the interventions of reactionary singers.

This is a story of literary history that in many ways also flips the usual ways in which nations use epic texts to claim social capital. Rather than looking to a literary past for a sense of social and political unity impossible in the present (Bauman and Briggs 2003), the scholarship reviewed here sought prestige through reading the narratives as a story of alienation and social division. In doing so, the scholarship drew attention to the ways in which Jüsipbek Qoja’s text did indeed offer up complex characters who do indeed wrestle with their responsibilities to their families. The irony of this is that while these scholars succeeded in preserving *Qız Jibek*’s place at the center of the Kazakh literary canon, the consequence has been that the text is now often understood to offer, as national epics are so often thought to do, a bland endorsement of national unity, with Jibek read not as an iconoclastic breaker of norms but rather as a straightforward paragon of tradition. Thus it is that some universities now have “*Qız Jibek*” clubs which host conferences on the theme, “The upbringing of a single daughter is equal to the upbringing of an entire nation” (*bir qızdı tärbielew—bir ulttı tärbielew teñ*), and one university even organizes an annual “*Qız Jibek*” beauty pageant where contestants dress up like the Jibek of the film and compete in tests of their knowledge of Kazakh language and customs.²⁵

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²⁵ “Qız Jibek: Qazaq qızdarınıñ tağılımdı uyımı,” *Qazaqstan dauiri*, March 20, 2019 (<https://www.elana.kz/en/qyz-zhibek-qazaq-qyzdarynyng-taghyly/>); “‘Qız-ulttıñ aynası, ulıstıñ şamşırağı’ attı дәstürlı ‘Qız Jibek-2016’ bayqawınıñ iriktew sını ötti,” December 2, 2016 (<https://www.enu.kz/info/zhanalyktar/41534/>).

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