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The nation in bronze and granite: Creating national monuments in post-Soviet Bishkek

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Abstract

Scholars of nationalism have long looked to material forms of symbolic power to understand the politics and cultures of nations, and national monuments specifically have been studied as reflections of ideological programmes of political regimes. However, these approaches have paid insufficient attention to processes of creation. Given the importance of material symbols as sites through which the nation is understood, I argue that analysing the dynamics of creation expands our understanding of symbolic nation making. Using the case of Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, and focusing on moments of creation and the actors involved in them, I build a conceptual framework for understanding the construction of national symbols on the ground based on three interconnected and co-constituting dynamics: spatial, temporal and aesthetic/semiotic. Using this framework, I demonstrate how meaning and materiality are related to one another both as component and consequent in the creation of national monuments and how it is their very imperfection as material representations that provides the context for the nation to emerge as a category of discourse.

KEYWORDS
cultural nationalism, Kyrgyzstan, material culture, monuments, visual culture

1 | INTRODUCTION

On 31 August 2004, a monument to Kurmanzhan Datka, a 19th century political figure in Central Asia, was unveiled in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, to much fanfare. Not only were important political figures present, such as the President of the Kyrgyz Republic, the Prime Minister, members of parliament and the Secretary of State, but also in attendance were cultural leaders such as Chingiz Aitmatov. In his remarks, President Akayev stated,

> Today, in the most beautiful place in the capital, a wonderful monument rose up to one of the outstanding daughters of the Kyrgyz people, famous for her wisdom and noble intentions—Kurmanzhan Datka. And I will not be mistaken if I say that there is deep symbolism in the fact that this unveiling of the monument to our mother-leader happens on the day when we mark our biggest national holiday—Independence Day. (Shepelenko, 2004)[1]

Like many of the monuments that stand today in the centre of Bishkek, the opening of the monument to Kurmanzhan Datka coincided with a major holiday, and the president underscored symbolic connections between the monument itself as a physical object, the person it represents and the history of the country, treating the monument as a national symbol *fait accomplis*. However, the project to build the monument to Kurmanzhan Datka was originally to be completed 3 years earlier in a different location and with a different sculptural composition; it was only after numerous changes to proposed locations, appeals to various bodies of government, petitions by community leaders and amendments to the design of the monument itself that it was at last erected in 2004.

We have long understood from literature on nationalism that the material and ritualistic environment of the nation strengthens the understanding and imagination of the nation itself (Anderson, 2006 [1983]; Connerton, 1989; Durkheim, 1995 [1912]; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1992), and recent scholarship has demonstrated how ritual and material forms of symbolic power are interpreted and reinterpreted in diverse and sometimes unexpected ways over time (Brubaker, 2004; Rohava, 2020; Rose-Greenland, 2013; Zahra, 2010; Zubrzycki, 2016). In scholarship on nationalism and culture, the physical and symbolic transformations of urban spaces and national rites have been of particular interest.[2] Studying the efforts of elites, scholars have understood national symbols as reflective of national narratives and ideologies, demonstrating how changing urban landscapes and national rituals reflect new and sometimes competing conceptions of national culture and identity (Adams, 2010; Cummings, 2013; Diener & Hagen, 2013a, 2013b; de Freitas & Carvalho, 2022). Another line of scholarship has argued for the necessity of understanding the nation 'from below', illustrating the myriad ways the nation and its symbols are understood and contested (Güçler & Gür, 2021; Kosmarskaya et al., 2017; Liu, 2012; Rohava, 2020). While scholars have sought to bridge this epistemological divide by studying how national symbols are discursively constructed from above and below (e.g., Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008; Fox & Van Ginderachter, 2018; Liu, 2012; Nora, 1989; Sakki & Hakokõngäs, 2020), the processes that go into the production of national symbols are often left obscured. Leveraging insights from literature on visual and material culture, this paper builds on these lines of scholarship, elucidating the processes involved in the creation of national monuments as objects that occupy a liminal space between the elites and government officials who commission their creation and the public that interprets and re-interprets their meaning over time. In so doing, I offer a conceptual framework for understanding the creation of national symbols on the ground.

As a subset of national symbols, monuments have been understood as objects of political and semiotic import, making visible particular political, historical and cultural norms.[3] As objects of public art, they are open to diverse interpretations and claims-making practices by the public (e.g., Zebracki & Leitner, 2022). However, studied after they have been created, the fact that monuments (or other national symbols) are the outcomes of complex and contingent processes in which multiple parties take part is neglected; bureaucrats, sculptors, architects and private citizens all participate in creating what comes to be seen as part of the face of the nation. Furthermore, as hinted above, the creation of monuments is no simple task: material, political and aesthetic decisions all come to bear and contribute to a final, particular monument, which is utilised in specific ways and interpreted and re-interpreted by the public as

a national symbol. In this article, I therefore ask: How are monuments that are considered national symbols created? Second, how do the processes of their creation form the contexts in which they are deployed and understood as national symbols?

Drawing on archival and ethnographic research conducted from 2017 to 2019, I analyse three geographically central monuments in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, that have been erected in the post-Soviet period. They honour Kurmanzhan Datka[4] (1811–1907), a ruler during the annexation of parts of Central Asia by the Russian Empire in the 1800s credited with keeping the Kyrgyz people unified in this process; Chingiz Aitmatov (1928–2008), a major figure in Kyrgyz and Soviet literature and a Kyrgyz statesman and diplomat after independence; and Manas, the hero of an oral epic that is said to be over 1,000 years old, who united the 40 tribes of the Kyrgyz people, and whose story is considered a source of information about ancient Kyrgyz history and culture.

In this analysis, I demonstrate how monuments meant to reflect stability, unity and the legitimacy of regimes are themselves the outcome of complex, contested and contingent processes. Attention to the details of these processes reveals three interconnected and co-constituting dynamics that emerged inductively in my research: spatial, temporal and aesthetic/semiotic. In creating monuments, sculptors and architects balance elite desires with material and spatial concerns on one hand and aesthetic orientations with the future reception of the public on the other, all while working under sometimes unenviable time constraints. The result of these negotiations—both material and semiotic—are the monuments themselves, which are subsequently deployed and (re)interpreted as symbols of the nation.

This research deepens our understanding of nation-building processes in three respects. First, it provides a conceptual framework—consisting of the three dynamics mentioned above—that allows for a structured understanding of the processes that underlie the production of national symbols on the ground. Second, it demonstrates that, in the creation of national symbols, meaning making and materiality are related to one another both as component and consequent *before* and *after* the monument has been created. This connects and builds on literature that views national monuments as outcomes of ideological agendas of the elite (Cummings, 2013) or as sites through which non-elites participate in an active discursive construction (Güçler & Gür, 2021; Kosmarskaya et al., 2017) by illustrating how meaning making and materiality are intimately linked. Finally, it suggests that a critical aspect of these material symbols is that they are necessarily *incomplete* representations and that it is the particularity and 'imperfection' of the material representation that provide a context for the nation as a category of discourse to emerge. Literature on nationalism and material and visual culture will frame the following section.

2 | THEORETICAL ORIENTATIONS, METHODS AND DATA

Social scientists studying nationalism and national identity have shown how rulers utilise symbol and performance to simultaneously create an image of the nation and impose an ontology of the nation upon the public (Berezin, 1994; Bonnell, 1997; Falasca-Zamponi, 1997; Geertz, 1980; Kligman, 1988; Lane, 1981); in these works, the idea of 'the nation' is abstract. In sociology, Victoria Bonnell's (1997) work on political posters has shown how changing images of Lenin and Stalin in the early Soviet period reflected evolving power structures while simultaneously borrowing the form of orthodox iconography to make these images both legible and powerful. Zubrzycki (2011) has coined the term 'national sensorium', arguing that diverse embodied symbols of the nation not only bring the idea of the nation experientially close but also make the imagination of the nation stronger as they multiply in number. These examples illustrate how visual and material culture and nationalism are connected: Objects and performances serve as touchstones for the nation, creating the idea of the nation in reality. Following these authors, I take certain kinds of material objects and performances as participating in the creation of an ontology of a social world. In the bronze or granite of monuments, the heroes and histories that are dear to the nation become part of the tangible experience of the spaces the monuments inhabit.

In the last decades, social scientists in numerous disciplines have centred materiality in the study of culture. In this 'material turn', scholars of art, material culture and actor-network theory have moved beyond the idea of cultural objects as representations of meaning to a consideration of their material and spatial properties (Dominguez Rubio & Benzecry, 2018; Griswold et al., 2013; Keane, 2005; Latour, 2002; Miller, 2005). In attempting to unify an analytical

split between symbolic meaning and the material world, these studies attend to the ways in which physical objects not only embody systems of meaning but also shape our interactions with them. For example, context and location have been shown to impact how we understand pieces of art (Griswold et al., 2013), and material construction and form additionally mediate how art objects are classified, moved and worked with (Dominguez Rubio, 2014). Negotiating between cultural objects as embodied meaning and as material objects has led some social scientists to attribute a kind of agency to objects (Gell, 1998), often through the idea of *affordances* (see Gibson, 1986). This idea has been utilised to examine how material objects are open to multiple but not infinite interpretations and how this interpretive capacity is informed by the materiality of the object itself (Acord & DeNora, 2008; Griswold et al., 2013; Zubrzycki, 2013). In a study on the creation of the Spiral Jetty, Dominguez Rubio (2012) demonstrates that material outcomes of art objects are not reflections of artists' intentions but rather the results of complex material and spatial processes. I take two insights from this literature: first, that space and materiality mediate meaning making and, second, that material outcomes are not always direct reflections of artists' desires. Applying these insights to the case at hand, I will show that monuments are neither straightforward reflections of the will of elites who commission them nor the sculptors and architects who create them and that meaning and materiality are linked both in the contested processes of creation and in the ways monuments are understood and interpreted as national symbols.

As a part of the symbolic nation, monuments have often been studied as public reflections of mnemonic practices and collective memories (Cherry, 2013; Schwartz, 1982; Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991; Young, 1994), national identity (Forest & Johnson, 2002; Schwartz, 1991) or political programmes and ideologies (Cummings, 2013). Focusing on the changing interpretations of monuments over time, or how they may be used to promote or legitimate political regimes, these studies often consider monuments after they have been created.[5] This analysis takes these studies both as a framework and as a point of departure. Once monuments or national symbols exist, their semiotic, material and spatial properties all play a role in how they are understood as national symbols. If an understanding of the nation is predicated on its representation in symbolic and ritual objects, and this understanding is influenced and even amended by changes to the materiality of the objects themselves, it then serves to question the material and symbolic creation of these objects and whether these processes impact the possibilities for understanding them. The task at hand is therefore to illustrate the dynamics that go into the creation of monuments and how they contribute to the final form of monuments in concrete ways. Finally, it will be necessary to connect these processes to back to how the nation is understood, thereby demonstrating how these dynamics form the context for diverse imaginations of the nation in meaningful ways.

While Kyrgyzstan is not unique in the creation of material and performative symbols, it is a rich site in which to study these topics due to the robust construction of monuments post-independence and the pluralistic nature of nationalism. Most post-Soviet capital cities have seen central Soviet monuments replaced with 'new' national heroes such as Timur in Tashkent, Uzbekistan (Adams, 2010) or Ismoil Somoni in Dushanbe, Tajikistan (Najibullah, 2007). However, Laruelle (2021, p. 93) has argued that more than its Central Asian neighbours, nationalism in Kyrgyzstan can be characterised as an 'open market shaped by multiple actors and narratives', particularly since the early 2000s. This article explores the actors and narratives within one arena (monuments) and demonstrates the connection between the actions of social actors creating monuments and the understandings of monuments after they are erected. Therefore, while this article puts forward a generalizable conceptual framework for understanding cultural nation building on the ground, it additionally adds to new work on nationalism in Kyrgyzstan by elucidating the actors and structures that contribute to an important mode of nation building: the creation of national monuments.

2.1 | Methods and data

The data in this article are part of a larger study on cultural forms of nationalism in contemporary Kyrgyzstan conducted over 18 months of fieldwork in 2017–2019. In this article, I take the cases of three monuments in

post-Soviet Bishkek. Examining processes of nation building through monuments meant recreating their 'biographies' (Young, 1994), and I aimed to understand both the conditions of their creation and how they were understood by residents of Bishkek. This necessitated a multi-method research approach including archival, ethnographic and interview methods. This allowed me to triangulate data for each of the monuments, understand differently situated knowledge about them and check the quality of my findings (Bailey, 2007). I approach these monuments as cases that offer an opportunity to understand the interrelation between diverse social actors and the temporal, political and geographical contexts in which they operate (see Ragin & Becker, 1992) and to build from the specifics of these cases to theoretical insight through analytic generalisation by identifying 'concepts and social processes that have significance beyond the specific setting' (Bailey, 2007, p. 183).

To understand the monuments' creation, I sought to understand the conditions under which they were erected: the elites or government officials who supported the building of the monuments, when and why they were built, and the material and aesthetic concerns of artists and architects who designed them. Archival documents from the Central State Archives of the Kyrgyz Republic (TsGA KR) shed light on the creation of the monument to Kurmanzhan Datka, but I was unable to access archival documents for the monuments to Chingiz Aitmatov or Manas due to an embargo period, which was still active when I conducted research. This limited my ability to triangulate interview data for these monuments with archival data; however, documents downloaded from Toktom.kg, a non-governmental informational portal that provides access to legal codes and laws of the Kyrgyz Republic, as well as the Centralized Data Bank of Legal Information of the Kyrgyz Republic mitigated this difficulty.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with participants involved in the creation of each of the three monuments enriched and supplemented document evidence, providing first-hand accounts of the hopes, desires and frustrations of the sculptors and architects who designed them. Interviews were conducted with the three sculptors who created the monuments in this paper, four architects who participated in two of the projects and one government official.

To shed light on national understandings, I conducted 133 in-depth semi-structured interviews between 2017 and 2019 with residents of Bishkek as part of the larger study. I attempted to find respondents who represented a diversity of age groups, gender and educational attainment utilising snowball sampling via university contacts and colleagues in the arts and purposive sampling at three bazaars in Bishkek. Interviews utilised photo elicitation, which has been shown to be evocative of intimate memories, to connect individuals to times and places outside of their individual lives and to help them think about dimensions of social groups (Harper, 2002). Respondents were given nine photographs (including the three monuments in this paper) in a random order and asked to interpret and comment on them, explaining their subjective meaning. Putting the creation of the narrative of the interview in the hands of the respondents allowed me to decentre myself from the interview process. Most respondents, but not all, immediately identified these monuments. Interviews selected for this paper reflect the ways in which monuments become sites for conversations about the nation and are not meant as a representative sample of the views of residents of Bishkek. Interviews were conducted in Russian and recorded with permission after informed consent. All personal data for non-public actors is confidential, and names have been anonymised.[6] I coded interviews as well as ethnographic field notes using open coding (Emerson et al., 1995; Saldaña, 2013) and developed analytic themes interpretively (Abbott, 2004).

Ethnographic observations supplemented interviews and archival work. In addition to often walking by these monuments in daily life, I spent time specifically observing each of the monuments and its surrounds. By attending three national festivals that encompassed the spaces around the monuments to Manas and Kurmanzhan Datka, three cultural events held around the Kurmanzhan Datka monument, and spending hours sitting near each monument outside of special events, I was able to observe how residents of Bishkek interacted with each during ritualised occasions and in their every-day lives.

As a Russian-speaking, US-passport holding woman pursuing an advanced degree at the time of this research, my identity was a common topic of interest during interviews and impacted both my access in the field and the nature of my interviews (Adams, 1999). During fieldwork and analysis, I took account of how my knowledge is situated and that

the information I gathered was a product of the relationship between me and my informants (see Adams, 1999, 2009; Seidman, 2006) through reflexive writing, triangulating sources and peer debriefing (Bailey, 2007). As a sociologist working in ethnographic and historical methods, I am aligned with interpretivist traditions in qualitative social inquiry (see Abbott, 2004; Adams, 1999, 2009; Geertz, 1973; Glaeser, 2005).

3 | CREATING NATIONAL MONUMENTS

Like many countries of the former Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan has been engaged in a process of nation building in the years since independence. This can be seen in changes to public spaces, national branding, the building and re-building of museums, and through political and cultural performances, particularly in the capital city. As Erica Marat (2008, 2010) and Murzakulova and Schoeberlein (2010) have shown, the early years of independence saw several attempts to create ideologies that drew from the pre-Soviet nomadic past to legitimise and unify the nation. Alongside these ideological efforts, changes to the physical landscape also occurred. In 2003, the central monument to Lenin was removed from its position in the centre of Ala-Too Square—the central square in Bishkek—and a monument to *Erkindik* (Freedom) was put in its place. As will be discussed, this movement was critical for the Kurmanzhan Datka monument. For many, this change was seen as a signal that Kyrgyzstan was moving beyond its Soviet past (Cummings, 2013). A revolution in 2005 toppled the first president, Akayev, and the second president, Bakiyev, was less engaged in large-scale ideological projects (Marat, 2006, 2008). Just 5 years later, Kyrgyzstan experienced its second revolution, which rocked the country with ethnic violence in the south and riots in the capital city and led to the ousting of Kyrgyzstan's second president.[7] With the return to calm during the interim presidency of Rosa Otunbayeva, it was decided that the country needed new symbols to assist in a return to peace and unity and the transformation from a presidential to a parliamentary republic. In a presidential decree signed by then Prime Minister Atambayev, this connection was made explicit:

> In recent years, Kyrgyzstan has experienced a number of events, which not only significantly changed the social-political situation in the country, but also sharply identified questions of unity and internationalism before the people. In order to spread amongst the citizens of Kyrgyzstan, especially among young people, the high ideals of unity of the people, the mark of unconditional spiritual guidelines, which contribute to the dynamic progress of the country toward prosperity and progress [we will establish monuments to Manas and Chingiz Aitmatov].[8]

In the wake of a second revolution, monuments were considered tools to help unify a nation, and, as can be seen in Figure 1, they were only the latest in a long line of manipulations of the symbolic landscape of the city.

In the following sections, I discuss the spatial, temporal and aesthetic/semiotic dynamics seen in the process of creating the monuments to Kurmanzhan Datka, Manas and Chingiz Aitmatov. While each dynamic is taken separately for the purpose of analysis, the interconnection and co-constitution of each will be apparent. After analysing these dynamics, illustrating how each contributes to particular material outcomes, I bring the discussion back to questions of representation, demonstrating how the processes discussed form the material and semiotic context for interpretations of these national symbols.

3.1 | Spatial dynamics and the monument to Kurmanzhan Datka

Where monuments are placed, how they fit into the greater symbolic landscape of the city and the nation, and their design and form all contribute to the ways in which they are interpreted after they are built (Young, 1994). However,

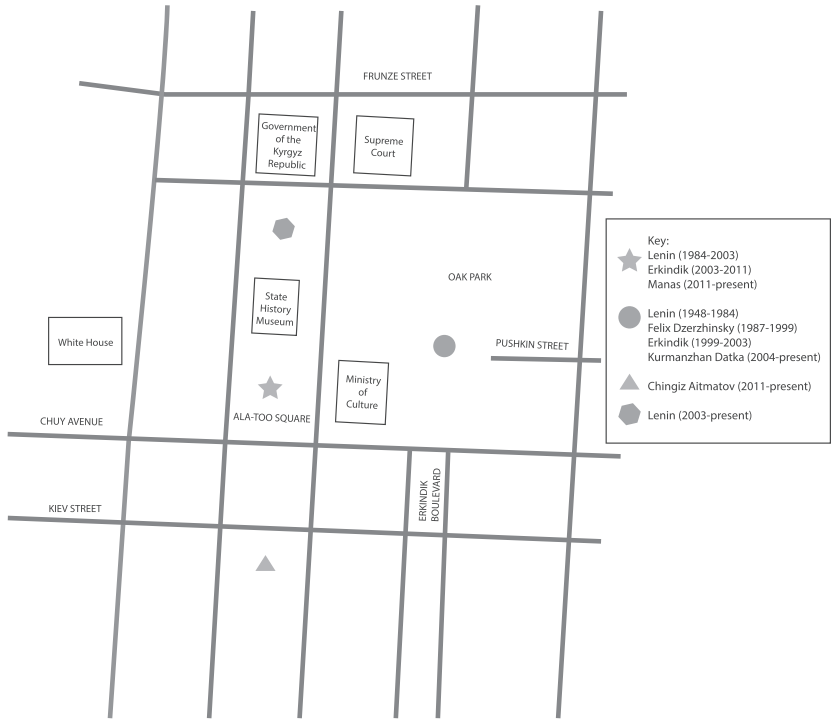

FIGURE 1 Abstract map of the centre of Bishkek showing dates and locations of central monuments. Illustration by author

these aspects emerge only as a result of complex processes. In this section, I will show how dynamics of and contestations over placement influenced the final form of the monument to Kurmanzhan Datka as well as the role it plays in the life of the city.

Kurmanzhan Datka is perhaps Kyrgyzstan's most famous woman. She is known as the mother of Kyrgyzstan, having kept the north and the south together during the annexation of the territory by the Russian Empire, and for promoting peace and tolerance. However, she is famous not only for her political acumen but for having run away from an arranged marriage and eventually marrying for love, for becoming the ruler-general of part of the Kokand-Khanate after the assassination of her spouse and, perhaps most of all, for choosing her country over her son when he was executed by the Russian Empire. In 1995, the Kurmanzhan Datka Foundation was created with the idea to fulfil seven projects in her honour, including the building of a monument in Bishkek (Zhyldyz Dzholdoshova, in-person interview 11 June 2019).

In May 2001, the head of the Kurmanzhan Datka foundation, Zhyldyz Dzholdoshova, wrote to then president of Kyrgyzstan, Askar Akayev, with a proposal to erect a monument to Kurmanzhan Datka in honour of the 190th anniversary of her birth. Over the course of that year, letters back and forth between the mayor's office of Bishkek, the Secretary of State and the foundation illustrate a struggle to find an appropriate place for the monument. Five possible locations were proposed,[9] and by the summer of 2001, there are indications that it was to be erected in front of the Humanities University[10]; however, the rector seemed to object to this placement.[11] Felicitously, by the end of that year, it was decided that the monument would be built in a small park near the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic building just north of the main square of Bishkek.[12]

The vicinity of the park to the government building lent it symbolic importance given Kurmanzhan's contribution to the political life of Kyrgyzstan. However, earlier that year, the square had been named for a famous Kyrgyz actress, Tattybübü Tursunbayeva. As a foundation had been created to honour Kurmanzhan Datka, so too had a

foundation been established to honour Tattybübü Tursunbayeva, and there was a desire to build a monument in her honour in the park that bears her name (Osorov, 2003). In the words of the sculptor of the Kurmanzhan Datka monument,

> A place was allocated, a not-so-big park, but the park bore the name of a famous Kyrgyz actress—Tattybübü Tursunbayeva. A fine, beautiful actress, talented, who departed life very early [...] And when it came up, that there would be a monument to Kurmanzhan Datka, alternate opinions of the issue arose, there were those who were against it, because [in this place] there should be a monument to Tattybübü.
>
> (Victor Shestopal, in-person interview, 13 March 2019)

Although the place for the monument was contested, the building of the monument continued. Various designs were submitted with Kurmanzhan Datka in different positions, sometimes sitting and sometimes standing, and, according to Zhyldyz Dzholdoshova, five submissions were considered seriously (in-person interview, 11 June 2019). In the end, Victor Shestopal and Ravil Muksinov won with their design of a standing Kurmanzhan Datka, and the construction began.[13]

By the end of 2003, the monument had been partially constructed, but the question of its placement was still unresolved. Making the problem still more pressing was the fact that the monument had to be built according to the specifications for the square. Shestopal described the problem in the following way:

> I was creating the size of the monument for ... this park, I already determined the sizes based on that area, how tall were the trees there, you understand, it goes together, and then – that was it, there was no space, but I had already moulded, formed [the monument], it stood in plaster, and more than that, for this monument three blocks of granite had been delivered, in three parts, all cut up, that is the problem became like this, very acute, [because] in another place it [would be] necessary to make [a differently] proportioned figure.
>
> (In-person interview, 13 March 2019)

However, a fortuitous turn of events led to a solution. In 2003, the monument to Lenin was moved from the main square of Bishkek to the old square and was replaced with a larger version of a monument to Erkindik that stood on Erkindik Boulevard (Figure 1). This movement opened a new space for consideration that was, in many ways, superior to the previous proposals in terms of its location in a more prominent place in the city; however, a change in location necessitated a change in design.

Having been initially designed for a smaller square, the location on Erkindik Boulevard would have overwhelmed the monument, making the space inappropriate for a national symbol. Shestopal described the problem:

> We went to that area and looked around—it is an enormous space. I thought out the proportions in my mind and [realized that the statue] would have been lost. I began to think—it would be necessary to conquer the space, to organize it [...] The idea [to organize the space] bore, so to speak, the decision to build this colonnade. The colonnade captures the space [...] such a move, it justified itself.
>
> (In-person interview, 13 March 2019)

For the monument to not be lost in the space, or appear, in the words of the architect, 'like a candle' (Ravil Muksinov, in-person interview, 12 March 2019), it was necessary to change the composition of the monument and add the arches and colonnade that frame the monument today (Figure 2).

Thus, in this short history of one monument, it is possible to begin to see how the monument was formed not only by the sculptor and architect who created the physical object itself but how the desires of initiators and

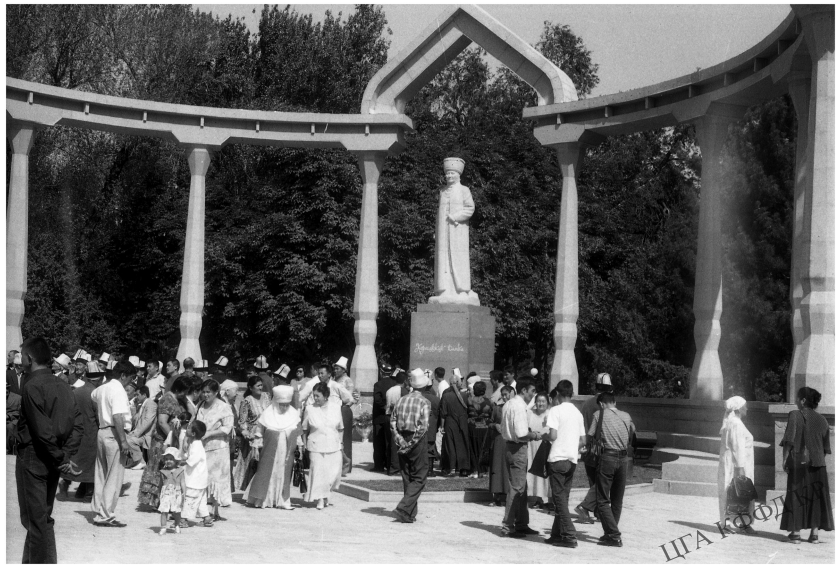

FIGURE 2 Unveiling of the Kurmanzhan Datka monument showing the monument and a gathering of people; 31 August 2004; TsGA KFFD KR 0-63004

supporters of the Kurmanzhan Datka Foundation came into conflict over questions of location with supporters of the actress Tattybübü Tursunbayeva and the rector of the Humanities University, all of whom had their own ideas about the appropriate use of specific spaces, and how finally it was the movement of another monument that created the possibility for the placement of the Kurmanzhan Datka monument in the 'zero kilometre' of Bishkek, or the very centre of the city.

Turning back to the words of the then president, Askar Akayev, the monument indeed could be said to be symbolically connected with Kyrgyz independence and the celebration of Independence Day; however, it also took its final form over the course of 3 years in which the symbolism of its final place and composition changed in response to demands of practicality and ideology. Each of the multiple proposed locations for the monument might have changed the monument in a different way, just as the placement at the intersection of Erkindik Boulevard and Pushkin Street necessitated adding the colonnade and arches (Figure 2), which recall the form of a yurt (Zhyldyz Dzholdoshova in-person interview, 11 June 2019), thereby creating symbolic connections between Kurmanzhan Datka and a symbol of home and country, which also figures prominently on the national flag.

As a node within a complex topography of symbols (Young, 1994, p. 7), the Kurmanzhan Datka monument gained prominence through the contingent processes that led to its creation and now occupies an important geographical and semiotic space in the urban landscape in a form that is inexorably linked to its location. The location in the centre of the city and nearby the central square lends the monument importance, as, with monuments, we understand geographical centrality to indicate semiotic centrality. The monument looks out over a plaza where festivals and events often take place and which is bounded by places of cultural significance; geographic context and location are known to play a critical role in the understanding of and interaction with monuments and public art (e.g., Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991). In this position, the monument to Kurmanzhan Datka is incorporated into the life of the city in specific ways as handicraft fairs, museum events and other festivities are organised around it.

Taking the monument as a reflection of meaning, we might see what Akayev expressed—a monument to a great historical figure placed in a prominent location and opened on Independence Day. Shifting the gaze, however, illuminates another side of this object, one in which stakeholders vie to have their vision of the symbolic landscape of the city made in reality.

3.2 | Temporal dynamics and the monuments to Aitmatov and Manas

As I have shown, the building of the Kurmanzhan Datka monument was beset by conflicting ideas of the appropriate use of space; in the case of the monuments to Manas and Chingiz Aitmatov built in 2011 by the decree of the prime minister,[14] *place* was not an issue, but *time* was. The political context and ideological goals surrounding the creation of these monuments led to an expedited construction and specific orientation of the monuments. As with the Kurmanzhan Datka monument, these dynamics will be shown to have concrete outcomes for the monuments themselves.

Manas and Chingiz Aitmatov loom large in the pantheon of honoured Kyrgyz figures. In 2013, the Manas Epic Trilogy was inscribed in the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity for Kyrgyzstan. Consisting of approximately 500,000 lines, it tells the story of Manas, his son and grandson and is still retold today as part of a rich oral tradition. Embodied in this tale are not only the deeds of an epic hero but also information about the history and traditions of the Kyrgyz people (UNESCO, 2013). Just as the Manas epic is a valuable source of information about ancient Kyrgyz life and traditions, the literary works of Aitmatov introduced Soviet and post-Soviet Central Asia to much of the world. He was also a diplomat, statesman and strong proponent of the elevation of Kyrgyz language after Kyrgyz independence.

Six years after the unveiling of the monument to Kurmanzhan Datka and 1 year after the 2010 revolution, it was decided that a new monument to Manas, designed by Bazarbek Sydykov, should grace the main square of Bishkek and another monument to Chingiz Aitmatov, designed by Sadabek Azhiev, should be built at the same time and placed on the other side of the square facing the Manas monument. The new monument to Manas would replace the monument to Erkindik. Even though the Erkindik monument could be interpreted as having universal appeal in that it was meant to symbolise freedom, there was a sense, among some, that it did not represent the unity of the Kyrgyz people. Explaining the removal of the Erkindik monument, a member of the Social Democratic Party (which led at that time) explained: 'The current statue does not in any way personify the unity of the nation, but Manas, a hero who fought for the independence of the Kyrgyz all the years, called for unity and solidarity' (Dzhamankulova, 2011). In creating two monuments to Manas and Aitmatov, which, like the monument to Kurmanzhan Datka, were scheduled to be unveiled on the day before Independence Day (Aitmatov) and Independence Day (Manas), unity was to be symbolically restored in the wake of the 2010 revolution and in time to celebrate the twin anniversaries of 20 years of Kyrgyz independence and the 200th anniversary of Kurmanzhan Datka's birth.

This left approximately 2 months for the building of these two monuments. Speaking with the architects of the Aitmatov monument, conflicting emotions were expressed:

> And these monuments were placed in two months […] And for these kinds of monuments, somewhere [else] in the world they are done in about a year. For example, in some city in America maybe [it would take] around six years […] But we erected them in two months, and therefore [there were] some shortcomings, some points were missed. And one such point is that [our] monument on the square, turned out slightly smaller.
>
> (Beishenbaev Group, in-person interview, 18 May 2019)

On the one hand, the group is proud of the work that they have done, specifically in being able to complete the kind of task that takes others generally 1–6 years. On the other hand, there is a recognition that things did not go according to plan.

Like the monument to Aitmatov, the Manas monument was also impacted by the expedited nature of the project. The red granite pedestal, which was chosen to contrast with the colour of the bronze, was meant to include a white marble decoration near the top in the form of the nearby Ala-Too mountains (after which the central square is named), but the marble was not available on time. Similarly, Sydykov wished that the pedestal

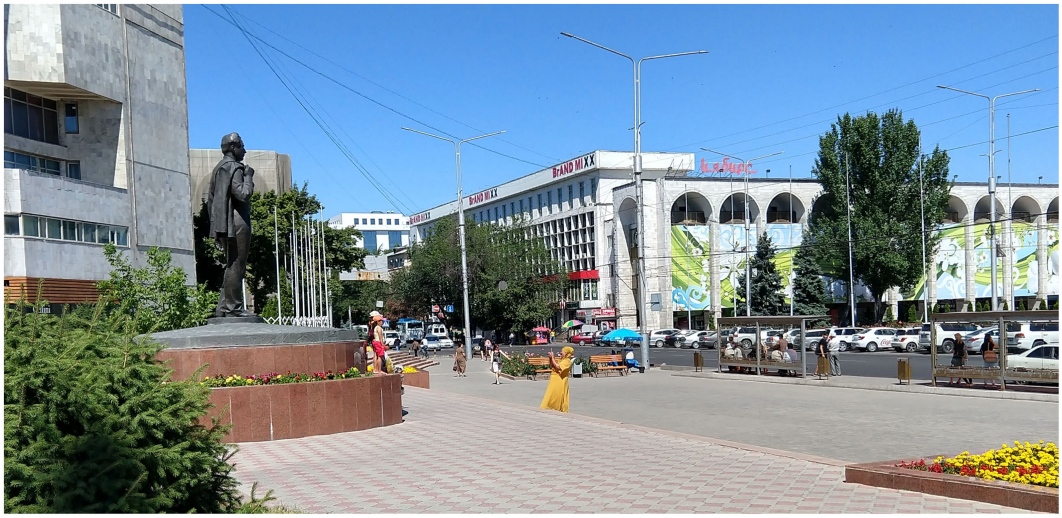

FIGURE 3 Statue of Chingiz Aitmatov with a family taking photographs. June 2019. Photo by author

had not been built quite so high so that the monument would be closer to the viewer and thus appear bigger to those who might stand beneath it (in-person interview, 11 June 2019). However, it was clear that the monuments had to be erected on time. According to the sculptor of the Aitmatov monument, Prime Minister Atambayev said, 'if it is not standing on the 31st [Independence Day], then I don't need it' (Sadabek Azhiev, in-person interview, 25 May 2019).

The desire to create a symbolic unity in monumental form with the Manas and Aitmatov monuments facing one another does create a kind of pantheon of Kyrgyz heroes. However, in contrast to the monument to Kurmanzhan Datka, which landed in a prominent position where the monument became the centre of city events, the desire to create a symbolic unity through Aitmatov and Manas led to the Aitmatov monument being placed in a less desirable location. Just off one of the main streets in Bishkek, it is easily lost in the bustle of daily urban life. Furthermore, interactions with the monument itself become awkward because of its surroundings (Griswold et al., 2013); even taking a photo in front of the monument is made more difficult because of the difference in height between the sidewalk and the plaza on which the monument stands (Figure 3).

As with many forms of public art, the authors of these monuments had to contend with political, spatial, material and temporal forces outside of their control; as a result, their art has not emerged quite as originally planned (see Dominguez Rubio, 2012; Zebracki et al., 2010); yet this does not detract from pride in having built them. Like the Kurmanzhan Datka monument, the Manas and Aitmatov monuments are influenced by the forces that impacted their creation. Manas now stands on the central square in a position of prominence, at the centre of city life and events (Figure 4), but aspects of the composition were changed. The monument to Aitmatov came out smaller than intended and was placed on the other side of Ala-Too Square, to create a symbolic pantheon. While its propinquity to the centre and the Manas monument lends the Aitmatov monument symbolic import, the surrounding area does not invite the monument into the life of the city by being integrated into celebrations and other events. Attention to the processes of creation illustrates that even initiatives of the central government are not able to actualise monuments as reflections of their ideological programmes in unproblematic ways. Just as scholars advocating for bottom-up approaches have complicated understandings of symbolic state power (e.g., Scott, 1998) by demonstrating the diverse understandings of national symbols (e.g., Kosmarskaya et al., 2017), this discussion of the dynamics impacting the final material forms of national monuments demonstrates how processes of construction are contested and contingent and do not straightforwardly reflect elite ideologies.

FIGURE 4 Ala-Too Square with Manas monument. July 2019. Photo by author

3.3 | Aesthetics and semiosis

Making a monument is certainly no easy task, but it is surely exacerbated by the knowledge that it may not turn out as expected and that it will be open to the critiques of the populace. At times, the knowledge that monuments are the subject of sharp critique has led to a hesitation to create them. As Sadabek Azhiev explained, 'no one dared to begin because [Aitmatov] is such a great person, everyone was scared that they'll say that [the monument] is not right' (in-person interview, 25 May 2019). In the preceding sections, I have shown how diverse actors contribute to the construction of monuments and how the desires of the elite are at times stymied by the wishes of others, the constraints of time and the availability of materials. However, no account of the processes of creation would be complete without attending to the hopes and desires of the sculptors and architects who created the monuments themselves. In this section, I discuss the third dimension of monument-creation—that of aesthetics and semiosis.

In building a national monument to a historical figure, sculptors and architects must balance the representation of universal or national themes with the specific representation of a real person in their aesthetically driven design process. This tension will be seen in the monuments to Aitmatov and Kurmanzhan Datka. For Manas, as a figure whose existence is debated and whose image does not exist in any historical record, questions of aesthetics and semiosis arise in a more abstract manner.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Karl Mannerheim, who would later become the sixth president of Finland, was on an expedition in Central Asia and met Kurmanzhan Datka toward the end of her life (Ploskikh & Dzholdoshova, 2011). His photographs and others taken around that time inform our understanding of what Kurmanzhan Datka looked like in life (Figure 5).

In creating the design for the monument to Kurmanzhan, Shestopal began with this and other historical evidence, explaining

> When I began to work on her I tried to […] take Kurmanzhan Datka as she is in portraits, in photographs, you know, [but] the sculpture wasn't working […] a 92-year-old woman […] that [didn't look right]. [Then] I understood it was the wrong move and I carefully read the address of President Akayev

FIGURE 5 Photo of Kurmanzhan Datka on horseback. Photo taken by Carl Gustaf Mannerheim, 1906-1908 (Picture Collection of the Finno-Ugrian Society, Picture Collection of the Finnish Heritage Agency, VKK269:87).

> at the unveiling of the Kurmanzhan Datka monument in Osh City. And he said that for us, Kurmanzhan Datka is the mother of the Kyrgyz people. And I was hooked on this idea, that Kurmanzhan Datka should be not just a southerner […] but carry in herself traits of a general Kyrgyz nationality. Therefore, I thought out everything, from the clothes, [to] the headdress, and I refused to borrow the image itself from her photograph […] I understood it was necessary to make her younger, the thing is, she became Kurmanzhan Datka, I think, at around 52 years old, when her husband Almanbek perished. So, a 52 [year-old] woman seems to look quite normal for a sculpture […] and you know, they agreed with it, they accepted it.
>
> (In-person interview, 13 March 2019)

Shestopal's commitment to an appropriate representation of Kurmanzhan Datka is clear; however, for Shestopal, Kurmanzhan Datka was more than a historic person; she was the mother of the nation. To faithfully represent that idea, it was necessary to represent her in a more general way and to represent her in her prime, when she assumed power after the death of her husband. In this sense, the faithfulness of representation is tied to the meaning she carries in the present—as a unifying mother of the nation—and not to a reproduction of existing photographs in sculptural form.

In the case of the Aitmatov monument, a desire to represent the subject at his height also led to a depiction of a younger man. In a conversation with the architects of this monument, the group explicitly addressed this issue:

> We made Aitmatov at the time of his creative height. Young […] And people said, but he is so old, why did you show him [as] so young? Because we didn't want an old Aitmatov, because he is, for us, always the ideal, we think he is the ideal of a person. […] Therefore, we made [him] young, energetic, lively […] Well we want for Aitmatov always to be young, lively, [and] strong. And why make [him] an old man? As an old man, many monuments were made of him […] But we did it so that Aitmatov is a free man […] He looks at the world with free eyes […] Well, there was a dispute and many supported us, [saying] that we did right.
>
> (In-person interview, 18 May 2019)

Wanting to portray Aitmatov in his 'creative height' and as a 'free man', the group chose to show him in mid-stride, with his jacket thrown over one shoulder as if going out to meet the world. However, this view of Aitmatov does not coincide with a common depiction of Aitmatov as an older man and diplomat (Figure 6).

Because Aitmatov passed away in 2008, many residents of Bishkek would have been able to see him in the last years of his life. However, Azhiev, the sculptor, averred, 'many knowledgeable people said "why not make him young? They made Lenin young also."' Azhiev explained that portraying Aitmatov as a young man corresponded with the time when he wrote his best works, when his vision and feeling emerged directly from his soul (in-person interview, 25 May 2019).

In the design of the Aitmatov and Kurmanzhan Datka monuments, sculptors and architects necessarily chose specific representations of their historical subjects, choosing to privilege representations that spoke to freedom and strength in the case of Aitmatov, and unity and strength in the case of Kurmanzhan Datka. In creating the monument to Manas, Sydykov spoke of designing Manas and his horse as if in motion: not riding to war in a suit of armour with sword drawn but as a citizen of the past with a sheathed sword as if riding to meet his *dzhigits*[15] (in-person interview, 11 June 2019). By departing from the representation of Manas as a warrior, Sydykov also privileged a peaceful and unifying image.

At the end of these processes, the result is, of course, a particular representation in stone or bronze that is open to interpretation. In the following section, I will show how these specific outcomes of the creative processes give shape to conversations about the monuments themselves, thereby demonstrating how the diverse and complex processes of creation create the specific material contexts for interpretations and imaginations of the nation.

FIGURE 6 Public photo exhibit celebrating the 90th anniversary of Aitmatov. The photo in the foreground shows Aitmatov later in life and is common in many contemporary depictions. Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. August 2018. Photo by author

3.4 | Material matters

Reifying the image of a complex human being in stone or bronze will always result in a particular form that leaves some more satisfied with the representation and others less so. For sculptors and architects creating national monuments, the knowledge of their unknown future reception is evidenced by the quotes above in which they express relief that in the end, their projects were supported. In this section, I provide examples of responses to these monuments, not as representative of the interpretations of residents of Bishkek in general but rather to illustrate the way in which the dimensions discussed above create the context for responses to these national symbols.

Aida, a third-year college student at one of Bishkek's universities, admired the Kurmanzhan Datka monument: 'For me personally she not only personifies a historical figure, [who] greatly helped Kyrgyzstan, who helped unite the Kyrgyz tribes, but in the sense that she is a woman who inspires, an independent woman, she was the first woman to be a leader' (in-person interview, 17 April 2017). In this interpretation, the material form of the monument represents a powerful and uniting figure, as Shestopal intended. However, this tendency toward a generalised representation is also grounds for critique. Another resident of Bishkek, Azamat, explained that he interprets the monument through a historical understanding of Kurmanzhan herself: 'Well, here, for example, she is dressed as a northern woman, although she is from the South'. When I asked how it was related to her dress, he explained:

> In particular, the headdress. Well, on account of the portrait resemblance, they say that it is more like the initiator, [...] than Kurmanzhan Datka herself. I don't know, well the fact is that [the monument to] Kurmanzhan Datka, because there is a photograph of her, does not look like her.
>
> (In-person interview, 29 April 2019)

Referencing historical evidence, knowledge about traditions of dress and contemporary commentary, Azamat critiques the monument precisely because the representation is not sufficiently specific and true to the historical record.

In the case of the Aitmatov monument, the knowledge of Aitmatov as a living figure adds to the complexity of responses. While the sculptor and architects wanted to show him at his creative height, others wondered why he is portrayed as a younger man. Accuracy of representation, as in the Kurmanzhan Datka monument, is an issue, as is location. Yet, whereas the location of the monument to Kurmanzhan Datka seems to enhance her importance, in the case of Aitmatov, the location is seen as unfitting. Emil, an architect, explained:

> [T]he most illiterate mistake is that they put him here, where he is absolutely out of place, absolutely. The background, and that he is oriented to the north, so that he is practically not lit. […] So they said, there Manas looks from there, from here Aitmatov looks at Manas. And they chat with one another. […] A monument to Aitmatov should be, I don't know, somehow symbolically [located] somewhere near a library, some small park, some kind of not large area […] But one has to search, one does not have to be in such a hurry. Well, we don't know, a president comes and wants to quickly put something [up] in his memory.
>
> (In-person interview, 10 May 2019)

Alluding to the placement of the monument itself as well as the rush to erect it, Emil interprets the monument along the dimensions that contributed to the creation of the monument itself. Others, however, approved of the symbolic meaning of the placement of the monuments. Asel, a museum professional, explained the monuments in the following way:

> Ala-Too is our mountains […] Therefore, on this square there should be some kind of symbol that unifies everyone. Because the country underwent two revolutions—2005, 2010—it was necessary to unite people in spirit, a strong image was needed. Well, like Manas, who united and maybe inspired, on the one hand. And across the road, across the square they erected the monument of Aitmatov. Why? This is associated, this [Manas] is ancient history, this [Aitmatov] is our modern contemporary history.
>
> (In-person interview, 21 April 2017)

Because there is no evidence of what Manas may have looked like, his specific representation is not critiqued in the same way as the monuments to Kurmanzhan Datka and Chingiz Aitmatov. Aida, the third-year university student mentioned above, picked up the photo of the Manas on Ala-Too Square, saying that it was the most important as it 'carries the idea in itself that all the tribes when they lived before, and all the nations that live in Kyrgyzstan now, should unite and live together amicably' (in-person interview, 4/17/2017). However, as the central monument in Bishkek, the presence of the monument is questioned, and because there are two monuments to Manas in Bishkek, divergent versions simultaneously exist in the public space. Speaking to Gulzada, a retiree, I was told: 'But this is what I think—why are there two statues to Manas? When there were lots of [statues of] Lenin we didn't ask why there were so many Lenins, and now here I think why two statues to Manas?' (in-person interview, 20 April 2017). Thus, while Aida approved of the monument, Gulzada objected to the proliferation of the monuments to Manas.

In each of these three monuments, ideas of nation and national history are discerned by residents of Bishkek. In the cases of monuments to Kurmanzhan Datka and Chingiz Aitmatov, *how* and *where* they are portrayed are at issue. As has been demonstrated in the case of national holidays, a sense of authenticity is critical (Rohava, 2020); however, authenticity of representation is complicated by the materiality of monuments, which can only represent a historical figure in one way (old or young, regional or national). This material limitation creates opportunities for different understandings of authenticity to conflict. In the case of Manas, the monument is understood to promote a multicultural unity; however, as the symbolically and geographically central monument, its multiplication is questioned. Through the interpretations of these monuments, denizens of Bishkek participate in legitimating or questioning the import and status of national heroes and symbols. In each case, the materiality and embodiment of meaning do not lead to a specific interpretation of the monument. Rather, the particularity of representation in material form becomes a springboard for discourse on what these figures represent, what is perhaps missing and what is hoped for.

4 | CONCLUSION

For social scientists concerned with nation-building and national understandings, monuments provide a rich site for study as they are a prominent means of articulating state ideology when they stand and can serve as a synecdoche for change when they are removed. Leveraging insights from the study of material and visual culture creates theoretical space to demonstrate how the materiality of national symbols is not only an embodiment of meaning or a reflection of elite motivations and ideologies but the context for diverse understanding of the nation. This suggests that if the nation is created as an ontological reality through works of national symbolism, it is the material particularity of those embodied symbols that allows for precisely the kind of dialogue that legitimates the symbolic nation. It is therefore the disagreement as much as the agreement that solidifies these symbols as *national*.

Through an examination of the 'lives' of the monuments to Kurmanzhan Datka, Manas and Chingiz Aitmatov, the dynamics of space, time and aesthetics/semiosis and their influence on the creation of national monuments becomes clear. For politicians and initiators of monumental projects, geographical location near the centre and ideological fit are of great importance, as having one's monument near the centre of the city confers upon it a place in the ideological pantheon of the nation. In the case of Kurmanzhan Datka, supporters of the monument struggled for 3 years to find an appropriate place, ultimately being aided by the movement of another monument, which left a vacancy very near the centre that Kurmanzhan Datka could fill. The sculptors and architects charged with building the physical monuments themselves have a clear understanding that they are creating a material record of history that will be read by future generations. Yet they too cannot work without constraints; changing locations impact the final form that a monument or monument complex can take and the necessity of fulfilling monumental projects on time leads to changes in design as can be seen in the examples of the addition of an arched colonnade buttressing Kurmanzhan Datka, the changes to the size of the Chingiz Aitmatov monument or the lack of a decorative motif referencing the mountains that surround Bishkek in the case of the Manas monument.

The results of these processes are the physical form and placement of the monument itself, which are interpreted by the public as they interact with the monuments in ways materially impacted by their construction. Thus, a discussion of the dynamics of creation leads to a more nuanced understanding of the creation of national symbols, demonstrating how they are created on the ground and how these dynamics result in material outcomes, which provide the context for interpretation. In the study of national symbols, attending to the processes of creation allows us to see that objects like monuments are not only embodiments of representations but are material outcomes of pragmatic, aesthetic and semiotic practices. They are therefore in liminal positions between meaning and materiality, which are co-constitutive in the creative processes of construction and in the interpretation of monuments once they have been built.

It should be noted that monuments and particularly figurative monuments are only a subset of the possible ways to represent the nation in shared public space. It may be the case, for example, that the results of imperfect representation, seen here to be critical to discourse on the nation, would play out in a different way in the case of non-figurative or abstract monuments.[16] Carrying forward Soviet traditions of venerating national heroes in central public spaces, the central national monuments in Bishkek and many post-Soviet capitals are figurative; however, further research into the use of non-figurative or abstract monuments in national settings and their potentially varied reception would add to our understandings of meaning-making in national symbols.

Studying monuments or other national symbols after they have been constructed causes us to miss the rich processes that attend their construction as well as the diversity of those who are involved. Through this discussion of three monuments, the decentred and discursive nature of symbolic nation building comes to the fore, and while the three dynamics of spatiality, temporality and aesthetics/semiotics are perhaps particular to the creation of monuments, attending to the creative processes of other kinds of national symbols will surely lead to the uncovering of other dynamics in which social actors must negotiate between diverse ideas of what the symbolic nation should be. This is not to say that these processes are simply characterised by disorder and chance; instead, it is an invitation to consider how myriad groups contribute to the creation of national symbols in different, but intersecting spheres of

action; how the creative practices of production are contingent upon complex dynamics; and how these symbols, which are then read, re-read, honoured, rejected or ignored, provide a context for the expression of diverse understandings of the nation.

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ENDNOTES

[1] All translations are the work of the author. In the transliteration of names and records, I have used the BGN/PCGN romanization system.

[2] This has been especially the case in scholarship on the post-Soviet and post-socialist space. See Bekus and Medeuova (2017), Darieva et al. (2011), Diener and Hagen (2013a, 2013b) and Paskaleva (2015).

[3] There is a substantial literature on monuments. See Agnew (1998), Michalski (1998), Nora (1989) or Schwartz (1991); for counter approaches to monuments, see Young (1992) or Zebracki and Leitner (2022).

[4] Datka is a title meaning 'ruler' or 'general'.

[5] Three studies stand out as exceptions: studies of the creation of monuments to Abraham Lincoln (Schwartz, 1991), the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991) and Holocaust memorials (Young 1993).

[6] This research has been approved by the IRB at University of Chicago (IRB17-0001-CR006).

[7] For more on the 2010 revolution, see Laruelle (2012), Marat (2016) or Wachtel, 2013.

[8] Order of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 286-r 7.18.2011.

[9] Central State Archive of the Kyrgyz Republic (TsGA KR) F.1341 Op.1 D.3776 L.110.

[10] TsGA KR F.1341 Op.1 D.3776 L.111.

[11] TsGA KR F1341 Op.1 D.3776 L.108.

[12] TsGA KR F.1341 Op.1 D.3776 L.106.

[13] V. Shestopal and R. Muksinov have worked together on numerous projects and are both very accomplished in their fields. V. Shestopal is a sculptor and has created numerous monuments. R. Muksinov is the Dean of the Faculty of Architecture, Design, and Construction of the Kyrgyz-Russian Slavonic University.

[14] Order of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 286-r 7.18.2011.

[15] Dzhigit is a term used for young men in Kyrgyzstan who are courageous and skilled horsemen.

[16] I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for encouraging me to think about the potential differences between figurative and abstract monuments.

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