Oral legends are integrated into the history of early Kyrgyz culture. For example, a traditional explanation of the origin of the word *Kyrgyz* is explained thus: 40 girls (*kyrk* is “forty”; *kyz* is “girls”), magically and simultaneously impregnated by one wandering man, became the mothers of 40 sons. Each son founded one of the original 40 nomadic tribes.

Territorial divisions of central Asian nomads were blurred by invasions and migration, as well as Turkic, Mongol, and Persian cultural influences. The Chinese recorded evidence of the Kyrgyz nation in about 2000 BC. Various records indicate that the city of Osh was established in 13 BC. The first Kyrgyz language was developed around this time.

The Kyrgyz were one of the most powerful nomad tribes to persistently attack China, perhaps precipitating the building of China's Great Wall. Sunni Islam, adopted under the Karakhanid *Kaganat* (Kingdom), helped unify the various tribal and ethnic groups. In the 10th century, the Great Kyrgyz *Kaganat* developed and expanded because of its military prowess and ideal location on the Great Silk Road trade route.

However, in the 13th century, the last Kyrgyz *Kaganat* fell to Genghis Khan’s Mongol onslaughts. By the 18th century, the Kyrgyz were continually being attacked by other invaders. Russian forces responded to Kyrgyz appeals for help by occupying northern Kyrgyzstan in 1876. At the same time, other ethnic groups began migrating to the area.

Russian protection soon became domination. The Kyrgyz language was reestablished (written in Cyrillic), roads were built, schools were opened, and new industries were organized, but the Kyrgyz were dissatisfied with czarist rule. Russian troops suppressed a 1916 revolt. Famine ensued, and more than half a million Kyrgyz died; many others fled to China. Moscow claimed the area as the Kara-Kyrgyz Autonomous Region in 1924. In 1936, the Kirgizia Soviet Socialist Republic became part of the Soviet Union. Sporadic rebellions continued as Stalin’s forced collectivization and destruction of animal herds led to increased starvation. Forced to integrate into the Soviet system, the Kyrgyz people eventually acquiesced to much of the culture, as evidenced in urban architecture and many social customs. Yet the nomadic spirit remained strong, and some native traditions were revived after the fall of the Soviet Union.
History of Kyrgyzstan

When the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, Kyrgyzstan became an independent republic. Its intended transition to democracy and a free-market economy has been difficult and slow. The nation’s first president, Askar Akayev, won three successive elections amid allegations of corruption and the suppression of dissent. In February 2005, independent and opposition candidates were barred from running in parliamentary elections, sparking demonstrations. Protestors demanded new elections and Akayev’s resignation. When they took over government buildings, Akayev fled the country. A new president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, was elected in July 2005.

References: