From September 2013 to August 2014, I conducted research in the national libraries and archives of Tashkent, Bishkek, and Moscow in order to investigate how the consumer culture that arose in postwar Soviet Central Asia created new opportunities for self-definition, reshaped social relationships, and drove cultural change in the region. Drawing on a combination of Soviet archival sources, articles and images from the local-language Soviet press, and oral histories, I examined how Central Asians utilized the consumer goods available through the Soviet planned economy to “perform” both new and old cultural affiliations and social distinctions. In my dissertation, I will argue that the expanded sphere of consumer choice that arose in Central Asia from 1945 to 1985 became one of the primary engines of cultural change in the region. However, the direction of this change was not determined by Soviet ideology or external homogenizing pressures, but instead by the ways that Central Asians incorporated the new kinds of consumer goods on offer into their own self-presentations, social contests, and cultural disputes. By engaging with cross-disciplinary theoretical literature on consumerism and globalization, my dissertation will both offer fresh insights into the interaction between local social dynamics and sweeping cultural change in the field of Soviet Central Asian history.
and present scholars across disciplines interested in cultural change with a case study in a profound but
voluntary and piecemeal cultural transformation of a historically Islamic society.

**Research Goals.**

In the history of the Soviet Union, the post-Stalin decades were marked not only by a
curtailment of political terror and a loosening of ideological control, but also by a growing focus on
improving the population’s standard of living and increasing the production of consumer goods. Under
the leadership of Nikita Khrushchev (1955-1964) and Leonid Brezhnev (1964-1982), Soviet society saw
the ascendance of a culture of consumerism, albeit one still plagued by shortages and subject to a
centrally planned rather than a market economy. While the features of this Soviet consumer culture,
and especially its shortcomings, have been studied in the cases of Russia and the East European Soviet
republics, the transformative effects of consumerism in the Central Asian republics – set apart by their
Turkic languages, Persianate cultural influences, and Islamic heritage – have yet to be investigated.
According to my preliminary research, Central Asian consumers variously sought out modern fashions
and traditional national costumes, the latest television models and old-style dowry chests, Russian film
comedies and movies imported from Japan and India – all of which were on offer in the constantly
expanding field of consumer choice that characterized the USSR after Stalin. The goal of my research in
Central Asia and Moscow in 2013-2014 was to examine the ways in which Central Asians leveraged
these available consumer choices in the service of self-presentations and social relationships, utilizing
the consumer goods at their disposal to formulate self-definitions, communicate cultural values, and
 provisionally sketch out the boundaries of communities, whether Soviet, national, or global; modern,
traditional, or subcultural.

Recently, a handful of historians have begun to make inroads into the investigation of postwar
Central Asia, pointing to the transformation of urban landscapes, the cultivation of a state-sponsored
Islam, and the flourishing of officially approved “national” identities as some of the keys to the region’s cultural transformation. Yet the micro-level dynamics of this cultural change, and above all the question of the social processes behind cultural transformation – the role of family relationships, local communities, and contests for public prestige and moral authority in both driving cultural change and placing structural constraints on it – has not yet been addressed. Because consumer culture in a multicultural context like postwar Central Asia can illustrate internal divisions, social segmentation, and contests for cultural authority in especially amplified form, my work is intended to suggest a reinterpretation of the region’s history that underscores intrasocietal disputes alongside state-society conflict and the role of individual agency alongside coercion in effecting cultural change.

I thus approached my work in Central Asia with three main research questions. First, what was the policy of the Soviet state toward the production and sale of Central Asian-style consumer goods? My preliminary research showed that the Soviet planned economy in Central Asia mass-produced “traditional” Central Asian items of clothing and home decoration, but additional archival research was required to determine how this production was carried out and what motivated it. Second, what kinds of discourses and debates about the consumption and use of goods existed in the Soviet Central Asian public sphere, and how did these either reflect or shape the internal divisions within Central Asian society? Finally, how did individual Central Asians navigate among official constraints, community norms, and personal preferences in making consumption choices? How did people utilize consumer goods to present themselves in particular ways or affiliate themselves with particular groups and values in Central Asia?

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Research Activities.

The first major component of my research consisted of the use of Soviet-era archival sources, which allowed me to examine questions of state policy regarding the production of consumer goods, and especially distinctively Central Asian clothing, furniture, and household objects. During the duration of my Title VIII grant, from June through August of 2014, I worked in the Central State Archive and the Political Archive of the Kyrgyz Republic (TsGA KR and TsGA PD KR). In total for my research year, beginning in September of 2013, I also worked at the Central State Archive of Uzbekistan (TsGA RUz) and three archives located in Moscow, Russia: the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), the Archive of Social and Political History (RGASPI), and the Archive of Economics (RGAE).

In my archival work, I consulted documents from a combination of political, economic, and artistic and cultural institutions, dating from the early period of Soviet rule in Central Asia in the 1920s through approximately 1985. In order to determine how the policy of producing Central Asian consumer goods changed over the course of the Soviet period and what motivated these changes, I examined the files of the Councils of Ministers (Sovet ministrov) for each republic as well as relevant economic institutions like the Ministry of Local Industry. In the Kyrgyz and Uzbek SSRs, until the end of the 1950s, the production of “national,” Central-Asian style goods was concentrated in producers’ cooperatives that integrated handicraft artisans into the Soviet planned economy but operated somewhat differently from state-owned factory industry. Later, beginning in approximately 1968, “national” goods production experienced a revitalization under a union-wide initiative to promote “folk artistic crafts,” and received a new institutional home in Artistic Production Unions (khudozhpromsoiuzy). Documents from all of these organizations allowed me to both reconstruct a chronology of Soviet policy and compile quantitative indicators of production, beginning from the relatively small-scale, export-oriented production of Central Asian goods (and especially oriental rugs) in
the 1920s, and eventually growing into the mass production of a wide array of traditional goods for use by Central Asian consumers.

Apart from these more expected resources within the archives, I also discovered unanticipated sources of insight into both state ideologies and consumer behavior. In the case of the former, I found that the major debates on Central Asian national goods and Soviet production of them tended to play out predominantly within artistic institutions, among a combination of policy-makers, producers, and professional artists and ethnographers. These debates provide insight into the motivations behind Soviet policy by highlighting disputes over how Central Asian art and culture were to be defined in the context of Soviet modernity. Of particular interest were letters from a number of Russian art historians interested in Central Asia who wrote to Soviet organs between approximately 1925 and 1935 to urge official attention to the preservation and restoration of the region’s artistic heritage. This advocacy on the part of academics and professionals appears to have been a significant factor in the emphasis that Soviet policy came to place on traditional forms of Central Asian craftsman ship. From a quite different perspective, I also was pleasantly surprised to discover republic-level institutions in the Kyrgyz and Uzbek archives for the study of consumer demand which, beginning in 1966, conducted research on consumer buying practices and ownership of various goods, providing some (imperfect, though still revealing) statistical data on consumption habits which I did not anticipate being able to find. This included a 1972 survey in which the sample population was asked to tabulate the number of specific articles of clothing they currently owned, including items of “European” clothing like wool suits and overcoats, but also traditional Kyrgyz velvet robes and “national dresses,” providing a rough indication of the quantitative scale of consumption of national clothing as compared to European-style clothing.

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2 See, for example, the letters from V.K. Rozvadovskii and A. Lamakina, TsGA RUz F. 837, Op. 5, d. 651; Op. 10, d. 416; and Op. 32, d. 2473.

Simultaneously with my archival research, I worked in the national libraries of each country to locate other kinds of primary source material, with a focus on the second half of the Soviet period. Most notably, as planned in my original proposal, I worked with Kyrgyz- and Uzbek-language Soviet-era journals, compiling the relevant articles, photographs, readers’ letters, and satirical cartoons printed in four journals (Kyrgyzstan’s Chalkan and Kyrgyzstan Aialdary and Uzbekistan’s Mushtum and Saodat) from approximately 1945 to 1985. As I had found in my preliminary research, these materials offer extensive insights into the interface between official and popular discourses and debates on acceptable consumption practices and the changes occurring in Central Asian culture during the post-war period. In the libraries of Tashkent, Bishkek, and Moscow, I also found copies of Soviet-era ethnographies of selected Central Asian populations – for instance, focusing on residents of a remote mountain village of Kyrgyz sheep herders or on factory workers in Uzbek cities – which often contained a wealth of detail about the material culture, buying habits, and daily life of these populations. Because Soviet ethnographers undertook a number of these studies ranging from the 1950s through the 1980s, they have proven to be an invaluable source for filling in some of the details in my narrative of how consumption habits changed over the course of the postwar period, as well as for underscoring the sometimes dramatic regional and urban-rural differences in consumer purchasing power, social norms of dress and décor, and cultural expectations and ideas of morality during this period.

Finally, I conducted oral history interviews both in Tashkent and during my time in Bishkek under the Title VIII grant in the summer of 2014. Working through interpersonal contacts, I conducted interviews of one to two hours in length with Kyrgyz and Uzbek informants who had grown up during the post-war Soviet period and who spoke about the availability of goods, typical consumer practices, and their own concerns and choices as consumers during this period. The oral histories I have collected have provided rich and lively supporting material for my discussion of consumer choice and the ways that individuals experienced social pressures to buy, dress, and act in a particular manner. Above all,
the addition of oral histories to my primary source base has heightened my attention to the intensely personal and affective elements of my topic – how specific goods or consumer practices could elicit a startling range of emotions among individuals or communities, from excitement and delight in novelty to disgust, embarrassment, and shame. These individual accounts have allowed me to begin to draw connections between the micro-level experiences and choices of Central Asians and the macro-level processes of social and cultural change that occurred under Soviet rule.

**Important Research Findings.**

My research has shown that the production of traditional Central Asian clothing, furniture, and household objects was a part of the Soviet planned economy in the region for essentially the entire span of Soviet history, from the 1920s through the 1980s. The two most significant challenges to this policy came at the beginning of the Second World War and under Khrushchev. In the first case, production predictably died back as institutions were reshuffled and resources redirected toward products of military significance at the outset of the war. But already by 1943, when the war had reached a turning point but was by no means over, artistic production of Uzbek national crafts was restored by a central decree of the Communist Party. In the second case, national goods production faced challenges simultaneously from Khrushchev's modernizing rhetoric and from the 1957 Sovnarkhoz reform, which seems to have diverted attention away from local industry and consumer goods production in favor of heavy industry in Central Asia. But lest these twin developments be interpreted as the elements of a concrete, deliberate policy shift away from national goods production, it is necessary to note that a steady stream of decrees calling for development of Central Asian crafts, rhetoric praising the unique national material culture in the region, and complaints from trade representatives about the Sovnarkhoz's neglect of the "specificities of national demand" in the region continued unabated.

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4 TsGA RUz F. 2329, Op. 1, d. 5, 56.
throughout the Khrushchev years. Both of these challenges, then, serve to underscore the fact that national goods production was not a top-priority Soviet goal and thus was subject to constricted attention and resources in the face of higher priorities, but also, paradoxically, the surprising durability and resilience of national goods production as theory and policy since its origin in the mid-1930s.

Much of the writing on ideas of nationality in Central Asia under Soviet rule (mostly focusing on the Stalin era) posits that the only opportunities for ethnic self-expression during this period constituted a kind of ethnic tokenism – wearing “national costume” at parades and public celebrations or featuring surface-level “local color” in works of Central Asian literature or film. The implication is that Stalinist nationality policy was predicated on quashing authentic, spontaneous expressions of ethnic difference and ethnic identification and replacing them with state-controlled tokens of nationality (or at least attempting to do so). This interpretation supposes that the popular ideas about national distinctiveness that were developed during the Soviet period were basically inauthentic and manufactured, promoted for purely instrumental political purposes, and that Central Asians themselves were either coerced or duped into accepting them. This understanding, however, fails to account for the power of these Soviet-era ideas about nationality among ordinary people and their durability up to the present day. In fact, Soviet policy in Central Asia, although severely restricting the practice of Islam and stigmatizing certain discrete elements of pre-revolutionary material culture, also provided considerable ground for individual and community ethnic self-expression, extending beyond what might be regarded as surface-level tokenism to include nationally distinctive mores and values, forms of sociability, and practices of daily life.

Not only did Soviet policy make ethnically distinctive goods available to Central Asian consumers, but the professional designers and architects who provided normative advice in the pages of official Soviet journals (and many of whom were Central Asians themselves) offered guidance on the use

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of both traditional and novel goods in accordance with specifically Central Asian cultural norms. Such features of Central Asian practice as ways of receiving guests and organizing space within the home, and even the traditionally high value placed on child-rearing and female modesty, were accepted and accommodated within Soviet Central Asian public discourse. Even in the wake of the Khrushchev era’s notorious initiatives to modernize the homes and domestic lives of Soviet citizens,\(^6\) articles in the Central Asian press nevertheless sought a compromise with traditionalism, providing advice on how to make the traditional low Uzbek dining table appear more bright and modern by keeping it clear of unnecessary clutter and hanging ceiling lights low over it in order to properly illuminate the diners’ faces (see Figure 1).

To some extent, this rapprochement between Soviet and Central Asian values reflected a broader tendency toward social conservatism in Soviet rhetoric about consumption during the Khrushchev and Brezhnev periods, which generally favored the stability of traditionalism over the disruptive possibilities of an increasingly Western-looking, consumerist youth culture. Modern youth consumption habits were associated with dissoluteness and loss of communal values everywhere in the Soviet Union in this period, but in Central Asia, this problem became embedded in specifically local concerns about the loss of cultural and ethnic identity. One example of this can be seen in a 1973 Kyrgyz satirical cartoon published in the journal *Chalkan*, in which an elderly, traditionally dressed Kyrgyz man is placed in juxtaposition to two fashionably dressed young men who display not only the degeneracy and tactlessness of which young people were accused in propaganda throughout the Soviet Union (drinking, smoking, and slouching insolently), but also a specific violation of Central Asian cultural values – one of them has carelessly dropped a piece of bread on the ground and is stepping on it (see Figure 2). The elderly man pleads with the young man that he should not trample the bread, in

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accompany with the respect and reverence conferred on bread in Central Asian cultures, but the young man flippantly replies, “Nobody goes hungry anymore, old man.” This narrative is in many ways highly conventional for the Brezhnev-era Soviet Union: the younger generation, over-satiated with the abundance of the post-war decades and disdainful of any notion of hardship or labor, engages in wasteful consumerism, while the older generation stands as a stronghold of the Soviet values of honesty, modesty, self-restraint, and hard work. But in this case, the representative of these “Soviet” values is also standing in for a specifically Central Asian set of values and is identified by an ethnically distinctive mode of dress and comportment in contrast to the more Europeanized youth.

Rather than being simply handed down from above, then, ideas of both ethnicity and modernity were developed and contested in the course of daily practice on the ground. Many Central Asians, whether in an official capacity, as professionals, or as private individuals, worked to question, modify, and push the limits of the officially sanctioned space for ethnic expression, and it was this dialogic, participatory process that generated the content of what it meant to be Kyrgyz or Uzbek under Soviet rule – notions which to a large extent continue to operate in the post-Soviet era. My research with oral histories and mass-circulation Soviet journals in Central Asian languages has demonstrated that Soviet concepts like “modernity,” “culturedness,” and “good taste” were not simply translated into local languages and then formulaically reproduced in a Central Asian context. Instead, they became embedded within a locally-specific mesh of associations, relationships, and sensory experiences that allowed them to acquire a deep, even visceral resonance among at least some members of the Central Asian population. A lack of “culturedness,” for instance, could be associated with the smell of a village woman’s hair washed in fermented mare’s milk, or with a family who would serve a guest tea from a worn and chipped teacup while accumulating masses of purely decorative china behind the glass doors of their cupboards. Far from being merely arbitrarily grafted onto Central Asian society, Soviet categories and values stepped into existing social divides, widening or reformulating them in the process...
of providing a new lens on Central Asian realities, and at the same time themselves underwent change as they were resituated within this new context.

**Policy Implications and Recommendations.**

In my investigation of the Soviet policy of producing Central Asian traditional goods, I have found that many of the elements of design and material culture that are today regarded as archetypically “national” in Central Asia were canonized as such during the Soviet period. Historians of the Soviet Union have long known that the present-day boundaries and ethnographic distinctions of the Central Asian republics were in many ways forged within Stalinist nationality policy – not entirely invented, but deliberately fostered by the Soviet state. Less well-known is the fact that a parallel process was taking place at the level of Central Asian folk art, material culture, and daily practice. Institutions of the Soviet state worked alongside professional artists and ethnographers to define “authentic” folk art for each Central Asian republic. In 1948, for instance, a guide to “Kyrgyz national design” was published in which a prominent Russian art historian, M.V. Ryndin, laid out in meticulous detail the various graphical elements of Kyrgyz design utilized in traditional embroideries, carvings, felt wall-hangings, and so on. Ryndin argued that “authentic” Kyrgyz design held an innate affinity with the state-approved aesthetic of “socialist realism” because, in spite of Islamic influences that had pushed it to mask its representational tendencies, it was “fundamentally realistic [realisticheskim v osnove],” with recurring ornamental motifs in fact representing real-world objects such as a ram, the sun, a boat, or a flower. For this reason, it is somewhat unsurprising that Ryndin’s album came to be regarded as definitive and authoritative during the Soviet period and was utilized as a model for true, authentic

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Kyrgyz design by artistic institutions and factories producing national-style goods alike. More curious, though, is the fact that Ryndin’s book continues to be referenced in the same way today. At an exhibition on Kyrgyz architecture that I attended in Bishkek in the fall of 2013, Kyrgyz architects who were seeking to find innovative ways to integrate national style with modern functions explicitly drew on Ryndin’s text as a reference (see Figure 3). The fact that contemporary Kyrgyz thinkers and designers not only continue to utilize this late Stalin-era reference as a guide to national design, but even displayed its title page at their exhibit as a mark of authenticity, shows the lasting influence and authority that Soviet formulations of the “national” carry in the region.

My oral history interviews have indicated an even more significant point of connection between the Soviet past and the post-Soviet present – the ways in which many of the categories of distinction and valuation that were established in Soviet discourses about consumption continue to be utilized by Central Asians today. As I mentioned above, Kyrgyz and Uzbeks seem to have to some degree internalized but also “localized” elements of Soviet rhetoric, transforming the dry, formulaic language of the Soviet press into something laced with affect, local associations, personal history, and individual experience. The people I spoke to typically did not view the questions of culturedness versus backwardness, traditionalism versus modernity, Europeanization versus ethnic identity as confined to the Soviet past, but rather continued to reference these categories to characterize different segments of Central Asian society in the present, to associate themselves with some while distancing themselves with others. Self-identified members of the “intelligentsia,” for example, working in academic fields in the Central Asian capitals, might define themselves in opposition both to the traditionalism of village life and to what they viewed as the excessive, vulgar consumption of wealthy business people.

In summary, my research demonstrates the mistakenness of the notion that because Central Asian national identities were in many respects “invented” during the Soviet era, this means that they are artificial, shallowly held, and preserved only through the influence of the republics’ current
nationalist governments. On the contrary, the experience of the Soviet period, despite its deracinating effect on elements of Central Asian identity such as Islam, in fact only heightened the extent to which ideas about ethnic distinctiveness were deeply woven into the daily lives, practices, and cultural values of Kyrgyz and Uzbek populations. To only focus on statist rhetoric and the instrumentalization of national identities by political actors would be to miss the way in which these concepts are very much alive and part of the texture of daily life for many Central Asians.

At the same time, however, it would be equally mistaken to conclude that because these national identities are in many cases deeply felt, even a taken-for-granted element of daily life among Central Asians, that this implies the inevitability either an insular nationalist outlook or interethnic conflict. While most of my oral history respondents did very much identify with the categories “Uzbek” or “Kyrgyz,” in many cases valuing the preservation of local traditions and proudly displaying markers of these identities in their dress, home décor, or cultural practice, these identifications were not necessarily seen as exclusive. Instead, they tend to exist alongside a whole array of other values and affiliations, many of which cut across national and ethnic boundaries. Even in Uzbekistan, with its government’s currently very strained relationship with the U.S. and the Western world, I found many Uzbek academics who continued to identify deeply with a modern, cosmopolitan European culture and expressed warm enthusiasm at the prospect of increased intellectual exchange and cooperation with American scholars. Although my research into the decades between the end of World War II and the collapse of the Soviet Union shows the possibility for intrasocietal conflict stemming from “globalizing” influences and the influx of Western consumer goods and practices, it also demonstrates the adaptable ways in which Central Asians have folded these influences into their lives without necessarily experiencing them as a loss of national culture and identity.
**Co-Curricular Activity.**

Because my project involves a recent historical period that is still within the living memory of many people in Central Asia, sharing my research and receiving feedback from local scholars as well as from non-academics was particularly necessary. In Bishkek, as part of my affiliation with the Central Asian Studies Institute at the American University of Central Asia (AUCA) in Fall of 2013, I gave a talk on my research findings in November of last year. This talk was attended by a combination of foreign researchers in Bishkek, Kyrgyz staff and students from the university, and interested members of the public. Encouragingly, I found that many peoples regarded my topic as interesting and worthy of research, particularly from the angle of the ways in which Central Asians balanced or negotiated between indigenous and “European” material culture during the Soviet period. In addition to this sort of positive feedback, I received a number of questions and comments about the goals of Soviet policy-makers and the issue of Kyrgyz cultural authenticity which clarified some of my own questions during this early stage of research. In Uzbekistan, I worked closely with the historians of the Uzbek Academy of Sciences to develop my topic and locate useful sources. Similarly, during my return trip to Bishkek in July-August of 2014, I consulted with the AUCA anthropologists Emil Nasritdinov and Cholpon Turdalieva to make contacts and develop a plan for conducting oral history interviews.

**Conclusions.**

The experience of seven decades of Soviet rule has undoubtedly shaped the lives, practices, and mentalities of Central Asians up to the present day, but in more subtle and complicated ways than is often appreciated. The current historiography of the region, which focuses on the traumatic events of the Stalin-era 1920s and 1930s and then is all but silent until the years surrounding the Soviet collapse in the 1980s and 1990s, provides a woefully incomplete view of this Soviet legacy. The period between the 1940s and the 1970s – when many members of Central Asia’s older generation of today, occupying key
positions in the state and intellectual life, were born and grew up – has been left comparatively
underexamined by historians, despite being the crux both of present-day memories of Soviet life and of
the development of some of the most enduring identities and social divisions in the region. This period
represented a shift away from the violent state-society conflicts of the Stalin era toward a more stable
and less constrained mode of Soviet governance in which debates about tradition, morality, and cultural
change flourished in the Central Asian public sphere. Young people, villagers, urban intellectuals, and
others developed a diverse repertoire of ways of balancing between local traditions and outside cultural
influences. In the process, they developed a vocabulary and a set of values (culturedness, authenticity,
good taste, modernity, national heritage) which they utilized to define themselves and critique the
practices of others. The result of these late Soviet-era debates was not consensus, but continued
conversation – a diverse set of ideas in dialogue with one another. In this sense, the legacies of the
Soviet period should be understood less in terms of a consistent set of ideas and assumptions held by
contemporary Central Asians and more as a shared ground for debate, a set of questions and points of
contestation that continue to be raised, disputed, and worked through in the region today.

Plans for Future Research Agenda, Presentations, and Publications.

On the basis of my research in 2013-2014, I have begun to write my Ph.D. dissertation, with
plans to complete it in the spring of 2016. This December, I will present a dissertation chapter to a
Harvard workshop of Central Asian scholars who approach the region through a variety of disciplinary
lenses – history, anthropology, political science, art history, and so on – which will allow me to continue
to practice my ability to speak to scholars in other fields and fold their unique perspectives and insights
into my work. In January, I will present at an additional two Harvard-based workshops. As my project
develops, I intend to present my work at conferences devoted to some of the key thematic issues with
which my dissertation is concerned, including “globalizing” cultural transformation, consumption and
consumer choice, and the constitution of national, community, and individual identities, with the hope that my research may not only benefit from the expertise of scholars in other fields, but also contribute something new to their understanding.
Bibliography

I. Relevant Historical Works on the Soviet Union


**II. Historical Works Soviet Central Asia**


**III. Theoretical and Comparative Works on Consumerism, Globalization, and Subjectivity**


Sketches accompanying an article in the Uzbek-language Soviet press offering advice on how to utilize traditional Central Asian goods – rugs, ceramics, the low dining table, and so on – while still maintaining a clean, modernist aesthetic.
Figure 2. *Chalkan*, No. 5, May 1973, p. 6.

Caption:

– “You shouldn’t trample on the bread, my child!”

– “Nobody goes hungry anymore, old man.”
Figure 3.
Photographs from an exhibition of modern Kyrgyz architects in Bishkek, October 2013, including the title page and sketches from Soviet art historian M.V. Ryndin’s 1948 album of Kyrgyz design, *Kirgizskii natsional’nyi uzor.*