

*A Women Leader and Kyrgyz Nomadic Society:  
Ethnographic Re-consideration of Life of Kurmanjan Datka in the 19th-Century Silk Road*

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The Asian Conference on Asian Studies 2023  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

Kurmanjan Datka (1811-1907) is the most famous woman leader in Kyrgyz history who was dubbed “the Queen of the Alai Mountains” in the 19th century. Kurmanjan Datka was born in 1811 in a nomadic Muslim family in the Alai region, southern Kyrgyzstan. She left her first husband breaking Kyrgyz traditions and fled back to her family. Afterward, she married Alymbek Datka (1800-1863), a ruler of the Alai Kyrgyz tribes. After his assassination, she succeeded him as the first women leader of southern Kyrgyz tribes. She played a significant role in building diplomacy to protect her people from the Russian Empire's colonization of the Kyrgyz territories. The research explores not only her life history and political career but also contemporary consciousness about Kurmanjan Datka from three different aspects below; 1. Ethnographic analysis of the uniqueness of her life, figure, and socio-political roles from the nomadic animal pastoralists’ context. 2. Oral history documentation from her direct descendants in Osh, and the southern Kyrgyz. 3. Reevaluation of youth consciousness and her influences in contemporary Kyrgyz society, especially for women. Then, the research tries to re-evaluate her strong mind, will, and decision as implications for the solution of today’s gender issue and women empowerment in Silk Road societies. The presence of Kurmanjan Datka, the woman leader in the late 19th century, is very implicative as if an inserting light that will potentially bring about a socio-historical turn of the gender minds and old traditions in the Islamic and nomadic society across the Silk Road.

Keywords: Kyrgyz Pastoralist Society, Women Leader, Kurmanjan Datka

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# 1. Introduction: Women and Silk Road

## 1.1. Kurmanjan-Datka as a Heroic Women

**Kurmanjan-Datka** (Курманжан датка) (1811-1907) is a very much well-known figure in Kyrgyz, who became an ethnic leader in the southern Kyrgyz region, in a traditional nomadic society. She lived during the time of male dominance based on Islamic principles and managed to rule southern Kyrgyz tribes during the invasion of Russians. She could maintain half a century of “peace-building” in a very difficult region of ethnic diversion and political turbulences in the mid of “the great game” and/or “Pre-Socialist” era (АБЫТОВ 2011). She received the title of “*Datka*” (the ruler) from the Emir of Bukhara Muzaffar and Khudoyar Khan. Russian military officials also gave her the title of colonel, and later called Kurmanjan “*The Queen of Alai*”, and admired her intelligence and courage. Her presence still greatly influences Kyrgyz society and can serve as a driving force to advance gender modernity among other CIS countries. A recent example is Roza Otunbaeva, the ex-president of Kyrgyzstan in 2010, who was the first and only female president among CIS countries (see Appendix 1: Timeline). Kurmanjan Datka deserves a special mention in view of the fact that the world is still in preparation to achieve gender equality in every corner of social status. According to UN Women’s latest report (as of 1 January 2023), there are 31 countries where 34 women serve as Heads of State and/or Government; 11.3% of women heads of state (17 out of n=151), and 9.8% women heads of government (19 out of n=193) in this world. This is a reason said that gender equality in the highest positions of power will not be reached for another 130 years at the current rate (UN Women 2023a). Especially, as to women cabinet ministers, the religious affairs division is the lowest sector of women shared (7%, only 3 posts out of n=43) in 190 countries (UN Women 2023b). Although nowadays gender inequality is still a significant issue around the globe, the Kyrgyz nomadic community produced a superb women leader, Kurmanjan-Datka during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## 1.2. Project design

This short paper focuses on the uniqueness of Kurmanjan Datka’s life course. This paper introduces her life and her unique leadership. The aim of the work is to announce this unique women leader out of Silkroad territory, then encourage Muslim women to re-think the meaning and significance of her life and presence. This research carries out three tasks below:

1. Ethnographic analysis of the uniqueness of her life, figure, and socio-political roles from the nomadic pastoralists’ context.
2. Oral history documentation from her direct descendants in Osh, and the southern Kyrgyz region.
3. Reevaluation of youth consciousness and her influences in contemporary Kyrgyz society, especially for women.

Then, the research tries to re-evaluate her strong mind, will, and decision-making as implications for solutions to today’s gender issues and women empowerment in Silk Road societies. The presence of Kurmanjan Datka, the woman leader in the late 19th century, is very implicative as a good example of a role model that will potentially bring about a socio-historical turn of the gender minds and old traditions in the Islamic and nomadic society across the Silk Road.

The research is designed as a part of a whole **Women Empowerment Project in Silk Road** (WEPS), newly embarked in my laboratory (Dr. SOMA Lab) at Kyoto University. Across the Silk Road territory, in regards to the idea of gender equality and perception, we never feel sufficient and rarely found socio-communal backups yet. The project consists of 4 parts of categories related to women's studies in Silk Road [(i) Women Livelihood Studies in Silk Road/ (ii) Kurmanjan Datka's Life Researches/ (iii) Muslim Women Empowerment Project in Japan (Kyoto)/ (iv) Women depiction by Film, Photo, Manga-art]. The project is not only academic research-oriented, but also actual social contribution activities and media output such as film-making are included. This article reports a preliminary research activity and some potential results about Kurmanjan Datka. The topic will reconsider how the historic figure of Kurmanjan Datka can encourage women's participation in the society as a role model. We expected to create solidarity based on the more liberal view of gender perceptions, which Muslim women have, then crossing the boundary of "nationality" and "ethnicity."

## 2. Image and Imaginary of Kurmanjan Datka as a women leader

### 2.1. Life of Kurmanjan Datka

Future *datka*, **Kurmanjan Mamatbai** (1811-1907) was born in Orok (Orke) village in the Alai mountains near the city of Osh, in a family of Kyrgyz nomads from the Mungush tribe. When Kurmanjan was 18 years old, her parents arranged to marry her to a 21-year-old man. But she destructed her marriage by running away from her husband and returning to her father's house. Three years later, she married again to **Alymbek Datka** (1800-1863), a local feudal lord, the head of the Alai tribes. In the 29 years of their marriage, they had five sons and two daughters. In 1862, Alymbek was assassinated, and soon after she succeeded his position as the first women leader of southern Kyrgyz tribes. She played a significant role in a difficult period and peacefully ruled Kyrgyz tribes for a half-century during the Russian Empire's colonization of the Kyrgyz territories.

### 2.2. Kurmanjan Datka in visual images

One of the few very famous photos of Kurmanjan Datka for the Kyrgyz nation was taken in 1906 by Carl G.E. Mannerheim (1867-1951), a future president of Finland. The image still captures people's attention. Kurmanjan Datka was unnoticed in the era of the USSR. She was mentioned as a figure who was simply too cozy with the hated Russian tsarist regime and too much of a traditional aristocratic leader for Soviet tastes (Wachtel 2016: 11). As a counter-reaction, Kurmanjan's life history was immediately symbolized as a historic figure after the collapse of the USSR in the 1990s. After 2000, Kurmanjan Datka became a governmentally designated heroic figure, and related events were intensively held in 2011 (KNEWS 2011). Several monuments of Kurmanjan Datka were erected in the village of Gulcha in the Osh region and in the center of Bishkek. There are streets named after her in Osh City and Bishkek cities. "The Queen of Alai" is also depicted on a banknote of 50 Kyrgyz currency (KGS). Her life is also described in the novel "*Kelkel* (Келкел)" (1986) by **Tologon Kasymbekov** (Төлөгөн Касымбеков, 1931-2011) and collaboration with the play "Курманжан датка" by **Kochkon Saktanov**. After the collapse of the USSR, **Sooronbai Zhusuev** (Сооронбай Жусуев, 1925-2016) wrote a novel "*Kurmanjan Datka* (Курманжан датка: Ыр менен жазылган роман)" in 1994 (Жусуев 1994) which is also one of post-socialist literature to reevaluate Kyrgyz ethnic history.

The latest film “*Kurmanjan Datka: Queen of the Mountains*” (2014) directed by **Sadyk Sher-Niyaz** and produced by **Zhyldyzkan, Dzholdoshova**, became the first governmentally-oriented film of Kurmanjan’s life. The film also successfully promotes a gender-oriented narrative, prompting reflection on women’s role in the national processes (Anatova 2021: 106). The film is very implicative to analyze a process and a means for the “nation-branding” aspect of what the Kyrgyz nation wants to be regarded as, to try to escape involuntary outer image. Award-winning status (Best Feature Film at the 2014 Eurasian Film Festival) is also accelerating both internal and external nation-branding as the first successful case.

### ***2.3. Student’s Images Survey of Kurmanjan Datka***

To understand Kurmanjan Datka’s images held by young generations, we preliminary carried out a conditional survey to collect an impression of Kurmanjan Datka subjecting for students at the American University of Central Asia (AUCA) (conducted in February 2023). The survey was to let students watch the latest film “*Kurmanjan Datka – Queen of the Mountains*” (2014), then collect an impression report with a maximum of 1000 words in English (specifics are below).

[Subject] Students at the American University of Central Asia. (n=29)

[Data] An impression report from students after watching the film. Collected 29 papers, summed up a total of 29,723 words.

[Analysis] AI text-mining Tool by User Local website. (<https://textmining.userlocal.jp/>)

Students wrote a report in English, which was not their native language. As a result, not so many adjectives expressing their views about Kurmanjan Datka appeared in their papers. But, the word “strong” was often mentioned by the students in the survey. The term is the 3rd highest usage in the whole text, except “Kyrgyz”. When calculating the correlative dendrogram cluster, the word “strong” is in the same group as “woman”, and “leader”. This means that the film presents Kurmanjan Datka as “the strong women leader” for young students. However, due to the participant’s mother tongue issue, not many adjectives appear in the impression texts. This was a short conditional survey in which only one visual film source was given, and therefore difficult to reach the deeper “substantial” perception although implicative in some points for further survey.

## **3. Ethnographic Considerations of Three Events in Kurmanjan’s Life Course**

When we reconsider the life of Kurmanjan Datka, it reminds us of three distinctive events in her whole life course, mostly characterized by “escape” as a keyword. On the one hand, escape from the first marriage sounds unusual; on the other hand, she also took a step backward from the political stage and dedicated sincere support to Alymbek Datka behind. During the conflict with Russian troops in 1871, she guided subordinate clan groups to evacuate from Alai territory which seems to fit well to the nomadic way of context.

### ***(1) Escape from her first husband***

Kurmanjan’s first escape was from her first husband which was apparently considered as an unusual attitude in the nomadic herders’ context. It is thought that strong influences from local shamanistic views, make a conventional Islamic marriage rule soften to avoid severe punishment (Плоских, Ж. Джолдошова 2011). Perhaps, the frequently happened bride-kidnapping custom (compared to the 20<sup>th</sup> century) also might be affected by her decision to

“escape.” In most societies observed, bride-kidnapping is a rule-governed practice, an alternative to more acceptable forms of marriage, such as arrangement (Bates et al: 1974). In fact, strong interest in bride-kidnapping (bride abduction) in the early 2000s deteriorated the gender modernity of the Kyrgyz community (see Human Rights Watch 2006). We fully understand the violent side of bride-kidnapping, nonetheless, a certain number of males and even females who experienced kidnapping surely affirm the positiveness of bride-kidnapping even nowadays. The contrary to the male-dominant marriage system such as bride-kidnapping or parental arrangement in the old days, the marriage custom might allow women a potential right to escape or choose their husband on the female side. If such a certain kind of systematic flexibility was acknowledged, her escape was bound to happen. Her strong will and energy were indeed the reason why Alymbek Datka had deep attention at the glance. As discussed by Borbieva (2012), an escape from the kidnap is not only a bride's side issue but rather a family issue that must be perseverance for embarrassment and ignominy.

### *(2) Leadership from behind her husband*

The second escape was that she supported her husband Alymbek Datka dedicatedly for 30 years of her life from behind. According to nomadic animal pastoralists' context, both males and females need to dedicate so much to animal herding, livestock care, mating management, food production, and survival in the steppe land. Both males and females need to commit their own work, males normally do daily grazing, livestock care, and hunting (even war affairs), then females do daily milking, food production, child care, and elders' nursing, etc. Females' daily calorie expenditure is easily in excess of 3,000cal/day even in contemporary Mongolian nomad families (Soma 2022). This work style should be a basis of mutual respectfulness between males and females. Therefore, elder women have been highly respected in nomadic pastoralist communities on Silk Road. Islamic conventionalism would not positively affect to the emergence of a women political leader such as Kurmanjan Datka.

### *(3) Evacuation from Alai during the conflict of 1875*

The third escape happened during the conflict in 1876 when the Russian Empire invaded the Kokand Khanate, and reached the Alai valley. Kurmanjan Datka, and her sons, reacted rebelliously against Russian troops and escaped to Kashgar about 400 km. Later, on the way to Afghanistan, she was caught and brought by Russian military troops to General **Mikhail Skobelev** (Михаил Дмитриевич Скобелев, 1843-1882), the future hero of the Turkish War of 1877. During the meeting with Skobelev, Kurmanjan Datka expressed her obedience to cease fire to Russians and made a promise not to persecute her sons and her Kyrgyz people (Плюских, Ж. Джолдошова 2011: 105).

Such long-distance mobility is quite common in a nomadic herding way of life as seasonal mobility and separate grazing “*otar*.” The mobility distance of seasonal transhumance in the Tianshan and Altai Mountains normally reaches more than 130km from the foothill to the higher pastureland. A traditional nomadic seasonal mobility carried out by nomadic families in Uvs Province reached up to 138km in a year and the annual moving frequency is summed up 15 times (Soma 2022). Mobility is also used as a means of evacuation from severe environmental conditions. Such a brave evacuation, not escape, is a very nomadic way of strategy even facing military affairs. Of course, accession of the Alai to the Russian Empire was not easy for her. But as a result, her decision might be highly possible that the capture of Kurmanjan Datka brought about a better “peaceful” result than an impromptu fighting reaction against the Russian army at the Alai Valley.

#### 4. Gender and the Nation-Branding

While violence against women is reaching emergency levels in Kyrgyz, on the other hand, women's participation as leaders of civil society is also extremely high (Handrahan 2001: 73). As a part, higher women's status in the pastoralist community might ascribe to the mythological <The beast-motherhood legend> of Silk Road nomads widely accepted by Kyrgyz people. As to the ethnogenesis of Turkish tribes, "A sky-color maned female wolf Asena helped a wounded boy. The boy had got 10 children between Asena wolf, then became the leading family Asena, the founder of the Göktürk Empire" (Sima Qian, *Siji*). The beast-motherhood legend is widely seen in the formation of ethnic tribal origin of nomadic people along the Silk Road. "Wūsūn nomads ruled around Ili River to Issyk-kul during 1~5<sup>th</sup> century, the founder Kummo was saved his life with meat brought by a hawk and milk given by a female wolf" (Sima Qian, *Siji*; Han Shu, Bangu). Similarly, the meaning of the term "Kyrgyz" ascribes to "kırk kız (кырк кыз)" which means forty girls who are the first progenitors of Kyrgyz tribes. A well-known beast-motherhood folktale < *The Deer Mother Legend* > "Bugu-ene (Бугу-Эне)" also implicates women's position in the local herder's community. In a sense, the gender-oriented beast-motherhood legend may be one ethnographic evidence that the Kyrgyz pastoralist community has a philosophical and ideological basis to accept the leader's motherhood.

For the recent 30 years of the post-soviet era, all CIS countries including Kyrgyz try to find a concept of "nation", not only the solidarity of ethnic groups but, the unity of the "Kyrgyzstan people". This was a very new discovery for the Kyrgyz people. The breakup of the Soviet Union has led to greater openness of the region to Western cultural and social influences (Agadjanian and Dommaraju 2011). These parallel, even if conflicting, processes have resulted in a unique mix of modernity and tradition in the region (Nedoluzhko and Agadjanian 2015: 862). Therefore, Kurmanjan Datka is not only a historic women leader, but rather now has become a necessary heroic figure for Kyrgyz national unity. On the one hand, the ethnic hero "Manas" provides a highly masculine, aggressive portrait of a national unifier, while Kurmanjan Datka lends pragmatism and statesmanship to the national imaginary (Wachtel 2016: 12). This suggests that the Kyrgyz nation still needs to look for a heroic figure to unite national identity that is (mis)considered as a rigid and fixed notion. However, the figure of Kurmanjan Datka makes such identity soften as a powerful and knowledgeable woman, and as a unique women leader in Muslim nomadic society. A widely known gendering the Deer Mother legend also made Kyrgyz people easy to accept the legendary Kurmanjan Datka figure as the nation-motherhood. Concepts of democracy, citizenship, and civil society are highly gendered, to the disadvantage of women, and all the more difficult in Islamic and classical nomadic societies (Handrahan 2001: 76). Nevertheless, Kurmanjan Datka tried to obey and break the traditional rule of the nomad's context at the same time with flexibility. Even though women are more communal and less agentic, that is reflected in their leadership style (Goethals and Hoyt 2017: xi). Therefore, in some parts, Kurmanjan Datka could decide to subordinate to the Russian Empire without unnecessary bloodshed or tragedy. Nowadays, her decisions regarding the flexibility to follow the rules and break them at the same time appeals a lot to the direction of the Kyrgyz people and nation proceeds.

According to women's participation as leaders of civil society, gender is more of a primary identity than ethnicity, and men view ethnicity more as a primary identity than gender (Kuehnast et al. 1997), and further women's sense of identity is bound up more with their gender than with their ethnicity (Handrahan 2001: 73). In the Silk Road area, Muslim women have their own solidarity beyond national or ethnic boundaries, rather to aware similarity of

femininity under the same situation in Muslim society. In their fellowships, Central Asian women draw on their own values and experiences to negotiate alternative and intermediate responses (Borbieva 2012: 307). If mutual influence brings about the solidarity of Muslim women, Kurmanjan Datka's life and figure will be accepted across ethnic and national boundaries.

## **Conclusion**

Even though Kurmanjan Datka passed away in 1907 at the age of 96, her life and figure are still so much attracting attention to gender issues, women's leadership, Muslim women empowerment, and so on. Today, it has been already difficult to search her words and emotions, however, her deep love for her sons and her people is clearly expressed in the poems she wrote in her later years (Aphorisme.ru 2007). Russian Orientalist writer and explorer Boris Tagaev (Борис Тареев) who was present during a conversation between Kurmanjan Datka and General M. Skobelev in 1876 as an army officer, later described her figure as "*a Kirghiz woman of short stature, though not young, but beautiful, dressed in a brocade coat trimmed with some fur...*" (Dronov 2016).

From an ethnographic point of view, Kurmanjan Datka's life story is summarized in three points below:

- She would not refuse to be a tribal leader of Southern Kyrgyz society but rather she decided to accept her status even in the classical nomadic social context.
- She performed both opposite sides of "rule-breaking" and "defending the honor" of nomads during her life.
- She still deeply contributes and keeps committing to the formation of the modern Kyrgyz view of "the women" over the ages.

Muslim women's goals vary depending on their cultural and historical contexts and do not always conform to the ideal of female empowerment articulated in Western feminist literature, which prioritizes freedom, agency, and economic and political power (Borbieva 2012: 294). In such a case, Kurmanjan's life and figure will turn into the Central Asian-made role model for social participation by Muslim Kyrgyz women. One important difference is consistent with women being more communal, more democratic, and participative, and perhaps somewhat more socio-emotional in their orientation to group roles (Goethals and Hoyt 2017: xi). Reference to such a women's social attitude brings a hypothetical sense that the emergence of women leaders may be highly probably correlated with the presence of those "role models" who can lead the women followers. The presence of a role model will provide a potential continuum to produce new female leaders in the future. If the Kyrgyz nations, especially Muslim women, keep finding value in Kurmanjan Datka's life and figure, her legend will continue further.

## **Appendix 1: TimeLine**

**1811:** Born in Torogul-biya, Kulseyita

**1829** (18- years old): She was married to Kulseit at the age of 18. But contrary to all the canons of Islam and the traditions of the East, Kurmanjan left her husband

**1832** (21- years old): Alymbek Datka married with Kurmanjan- Kurmanjan and Alymbek Datka had five sons and two daughters

- Kurmanjan had been involved in the political life of the Fergana state since 1840.

**1862** (51- years old): Alymbek Datka was assassinated.

**1863** (52- years old): Kurmanjan received the title of “*Datka*” from the Emir of Bukhara Muzaffar and Khudoyar Khan.

**1876** (65- years old): In 1876 Russian troops invaded the Kokand Khanate. Kurmanjan Datka, along with her sons, reacted negatively to the appearance of "White Tsar" troops in the Alai region, setting out to resist them.

**1893** (82- years old): In 1893, Kurmanjan Datka's two sons and two grandsons were accused of smuggling and murdering customs officers. For two years, they stayed in prison. A total of 21 people were arrested in the case.

**1895** (84- years old): Kurmanjan Datka witnessed the moment of death of her youngest son, Kamchybek who was sentenced to death.

- For her services, she was awarded a gold medal on a St. Andrew's ribbon and an annual pension of 300 rubles for life.

- Soon after Kurmanjan Datka became a recluse, she was reported to Emperor Nicholas II, who decided to give her a special royal gift - a gold ladies' watch with the image of the Empire's State Emblem, with a chain and a brooch, decorated with diamonds and roses. The best Russian jewelry masters worked on the watch. Accompanied by many mounted guards, the Osh district governor arrived in the village of Mady and solemnly presented the "Queen of the South" with the emperor's gift.

- She composed poems and signed them with the name of Zyinat.

**1907** (96- years old): On February 1, 1907, in the village of Mady the 96-year-old Kurmanjan Datka “The Queen of Alai” died.

After her death:

**1991:** The first national celebration after the proclamation of Kyrgyz sovereignty was the 180<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kurmanjan Datka in the summer of 1991.

**1994:** Kurmanjan Datka's portrait was depicted on the newly issued 50-som bill.



- Kurmanjan Datka's portrait is visible on the front side of Kyrgyz 50 som of all three issues

**1995:** The Kurmanjan Datka Charitable Foundation was founded in 1995.

**2002:** A book about the Alai Queen was published in three languages.

**2004:** A monument to Kurmanjan Datka was erected on Erkindik Avenue in Bishkek city, and later in Osh city.

**2011:** During the presidency of Roza Otunbaeva, a "year of Kurmanjan Datka" was proclaimed, and numerous events were held in her honor.

**2014:** The historical epic film "*Kurmanjan Datka*" premiered on Kyrgyzstan's Independence Day on August 31.

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