

Music, Advocacy, and Social Change

Theodore Levin (Dartmouth College)

Music-making in Tuva was traditionally regarded as a form of offering or supplication to local spirits, and is part of an integrated complex of pastoralist technologies that include livestock herding, yurt-building, instrument-making, crafting of tools, tackle, and furniture, felt-making, and other artisan activities. Sustainable ecological practices related to herding are interlinked with all of these activities. All contribute to maintaining the economic viability of herding, which in turn provides social cohesion in a society riven by rapid change. Last April, Sholban Kara-ool was nominated by President Putin to serve as Chairman of the Republic of Tuva after 14 years under the administration of Sherig-ool Oorzhak. Under Oorzhak, the size of livestock herds in Tuva diminished, crime increased, the economy worsened, joblessness increased, and more people abandoned traditional ways of life and moved to the city. Kara-ool has publicly declared his dedication to the livestock economy, the center of traditional life, as well as to the celebration and support of Tuvan culture. For example, this year has been declared the “Year of Xöömei” in Tuva. Outsiders can play a constructive role in this revitalization process by helping the local intelligentsia establish NGOs that move Tuva toward positive social change. Such an NGO has recently been proposed by Sean Quirk, a young American who has lived in Tuva for five years, learned to speak Tuvan fluently, married into a Tuvan family, bought land and livestock, and proclaimed his desire to remain in Tuva and devote himself to its betterment. The NGO proposed by Quirk and his Tuvan partners would integrate economic, social, and cultural development activities into an overarching development strategy that would become a model for “best practices” in the particular conditions of the Altai region. Initial funding for the proposed NGO can very likely be secured from US-based foundations whose mandates include strengthening the autonomous cultural sector, cultural revitalization, and NGO capacity-building in regions of the former Soviet Union.