

TRANSLATING RUSSIAN LITERATURE IN THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

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Kazakhstan

Abai Kunanbaiuly and Russian Culture: Changing Paradigms in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan

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Introduction

The connection of Abai Kunanbaiuly, the Kazakh poet and writer (1845–1904), to Russian culture is complex and multifaceted. Just as the relationship between Kazakhstan and Russia evolves, so does Abai's image and his importance for both Kazakh and Russian readers.² If, in the Soviet period, Abai was seen as essentially a Soviet writer who fought against both the colonial policies of tsarist Russia and the 'backwardness' of traditional Kazakh lifestyle, then in the new independent Kazakhstan, from 1991 onwards, Abai's image changed to accommodate post-Soviet realities. Now Abai is a symbol of Kazakh nationalism and of the uniqueness of Kazakh culture, on one hand; on the other, he is a 'world' writer, who helps to integrate Kazakhstan into 'world literature'. The present essay investigates Abai's status in modern Kazakhstan,

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- 1 I would like to thank Aisulu Sailauovna Seisenbaeva, a specialist in Kazakh language employed at the ISL "Dostar" International School in Almaty, for her help locating Kazakh print and electronic editions of Abai's works. I also want to thank Gulnaz Abenovna Mashinbaeva, Senior Lecturer in Kazakh Language, Department of Language and General Education for International Students, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University in Almaty, for helping me elucidate some of the nuances of Abai's poetic language. Any errors are my own.
 - 2 A note on names: Abai is the accepted way to refer to Abai Kunanbaiuly. He is referred to as 'Abai' in both scholarly publications and popular discourse. His last name is spelled either as 'Kunanbaiuly' (Kazakh version) or as 'Kunanbayev' (Russian version).

especially his role as a mediator between Kazakh and Russian-speaking cultures in Kazakhstan. Following Pascale Casanova's insight that national literatures are "constructed through literary rivalries, which are always denied, and struggles, which are always international", I will show that Abai's status is constructed partly in opposition to Russian culture.³ The power relations between Kazakhstan and Russia and increasingly, between Kazakhstan and the West, play a key role in determining the shape of Kazakh national literature. In an article commemorating the 175-year anniversary of Abai's birth, celebrated in 2020, the then President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Zhomart Tokaev, proclaimed:

First of all, we must promote Abai as the cultural capital of our nation. Let's not forget that civilized countries value Kazakh identity, culture, literature and spirituality with the degree and popularity of outstanding personalities at the world level. Therefore, it is necessary to introduce Abai as the brand of the new Kazakhstan to the world community.⁴

Thus, Tokaev positions Abai as Kazakhstan's bid to enter Casanova's "world republic of letters", and in doing so, to distance Kazakhstan from its Russified, Soviet past. The present essay will trace Abai's status in Soviet and post-Soviet Kazakhstan, showing that the poet's value is inseparable from Kazakhstan's relationship with Russia and the West.

Abai was a poet and philosopher, most famous for his poems; for a collection of moral writings, *Words of Edification* (*Khara Sozder*, 1918; *Slova nazidaniia*, 1945) on how to live a good life; and for his translations of major Russian poets into Kazakh. Born in nomadic Kazakhstan in the mid-nineteenth century, Abai came from an aristocratic family of the Tobykty clan, where his father Kunanbai and grandfather Oskembai occupied important positions as political and administrative leaders.⁵ He received a Muslim education typical for boys of

3 Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. by M. B. DeBevoise (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 36.

4 Tokaev also refers to Abai as a "brand" (in the original Kazakh: "жаңа Қазақстанның бренд"). See Kassym-Zhomart Tokaev, 'Memleket baschysy Kasym-Zhomart Tokaevtyñ "Abai zhane XXI gasydady Kazakhstan" atty makalasy' (in Kazakh) ('Head of State Kassym-Zhomart Tokaev's article entitled "Abai and Kazakhstan in the 21st century"'), *Akorda*, 8 January 2020, https://www.akorda.kz/kz/events/akorda_news/press_conferences/memleket-baschysy-kasym-zhomart-tokaevtyñ-abai-zhane-hhi-gasyrdady-kazakstan-atty-makalasy. All translations from Kazakh and Russian are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

5 The following summary of Abai's biography comes from the following two sources: Peter Rollberg, 'Abai: A Poet for All Seasons', *Abaicenter.kz*, 24 February 2020, <https://www.abaicenter.org/abai-a-poet-for-all-seasons/>, and the East-Kazakhstan Regional Library of Abai, '170 years since the birth of the great Kazakh poet-educator Abai (Imbragim) Kunanbayev (1845–1904)' ('170 let so dnia rozhdeniia velikogo kazakhskogo poeta-prosvetitelia Abaia (Ibragima) Kunanbaieva (1845–1904)'), *Semeylib.kz*, n.p., https://semeylib.kz/?page_id=4495&lang=ru/.

his status: after initially studying at home with a mullah, he went to a Muslim boys' school (madrasa) for five years, while also briefly attending the Russian school in the Kazakh city of Semipalatinsk. As an adult, Abai followed in his father's footsteps by becoming an administrator for the tsarist government in the region. At the same time, he read classical poetry from the Eastern canon as well as Russian poets, including Aleksandr Pushkin, Mikhail Lermontov, and Ivan Krylov. He began writing his own poetry, including 'Summer', the first poem to be signed with his own name, although it was not published until 1886 when Abai was already forty. Given that it was a questionable honour to be a poet at this time, most of Abai's poems were collected and published posthumously by his friends and Kazakh intellectuals. He is best known as a 'poet of enlightenment' (in Russian, '*poet-prosvetitel*'), who translated major Russian and European poets for the Kazakh people; he is also remembered for his poetic portraits of the Kazakh nomadic life at the end of the nineteenth century. He is often compared to Pushkin in terms of his importance for the development of national Kazakh literature. Abai's connection to Russian culture has gained and lost prominence as the political relationship between Kazakhstan and Russia has evolved.

Soviet Abai

During the Soviet period, critics positioned Abai as a proto-Soviet writer who spoke up for the rights of the working-class Kazakh people, resisting both the whims of the oppressive Kazakh aristocracy and the colonial policies of the Russian tsarist government. This representation of Abai as a Kazakh writer served the Soviet project of uniting the international proletariat: the elevation of a 'minority writer' from the periphery of the Soviet Empire who defends Soviet values demonstrates the extent and the importance of Soviet values for all. Abai's life story is famously retold in the form of an epic novel in four books in *The Path of Abai* (*Abai Zholy*, published in instalments between 1942–56) by the prominent Kazakh writer Muktar Auezov (1897–1961), who did more than anyone to popularise the life and works of Abai during the Soviet period. Auezov's book, still required reading in secondary schools in Kazakhstan today, presents a romanticised version of Abai's life, a coming-of-age story that retraces his boyhood in the Kazakh steppe, surrounded by his loving grandmother Zere (who nicknamed him 'Abai', rather than his official name 'Ibragim'),⁶ his

6 There are different theories as to why Ibragim Kunanbaiuly was named 'Abai'. One reason is phonetic. Baurzhan Myrzakul, a modern Kazakh poet and writer, argues that the Arabic name 'Ibrahim' would be shortened, pronounced by ordinary Kazakh speakers 'Ibraim', without the 'h' sound, and further, that 'r' would be elided in conversation to 'Ibaim'. Additionally, since 'Ibrahim' is the name of a Muslim prophet, to say it aloud would be considered disrespectful to the prophet. Finally, the word 'Abai', in Kazakh, means 'careful' or 'perceptive' and it is possible that the name reflected Ibrahim's character

loving mother Ulzhan and his stern father Kunanbai; his first love interests, his passion for books and folk stories; his growth as a poet; his relationship with the wider Kazakh community, and so on. This important biography is responsible for popularising and consolidating Abai's status as a national celebrity and contributing to Abai's mythologisation in Kazakhstan. The first two volumes of Auezov's *Abai Zholy* received the Stalin Prize in 1948; when all four books were completed, they were awarded a 1959 Lenin Prize as an outstanding example of Socialist Realism. Yet traces of what was unsaid or suppressed in the official Soviet propaganda of *Abai Zholy* as an example of a Socialist Realist novel can be seen in its introductions and interpretations written by Soviet critics. Here, for example, I cite the words of Mukamedzhan Karataev (1910–95), a prominent Kazakh academic, author of many textbooks on Kazakh literature, and the main editor of the *Kazakh Soviet Encyclopedia* (the first Kazakh-language encyclopedia, in twelve volumes, published between 1972–81) in his 1959 introduction to *Abai Zholy*:

The Communist party and our Soviet society helped the writer [Mukhtar Auezov] overcome his ideological hesitancy, understand the essence of Socialist Realism, and thus contributed to his creative growth and development as a writer. [... Auezov] managed to create a vivid picture of a man who emerged from the exploitative class and then became a passionate defender of the common people—not an easy creative task.⁷

Karataev's reference to "overcoming ideological hesitancy" refers to Auezov's activism and his association with the Kazakh nationalist movement 'Alash Orda,' which lasted from 1917 to 1919. Auezov had repeatedly clashed with the Soviet authorities over important national issues, such as the Soviet collectivisation of privately owned Kazakh farmland, famine among formerly nomadic peoples, the marginalisation of the Kazakh language, and so on. Auezov, together with his colleague Zhusubpek Aimautov, briefly edited the journal *Abai*, which published many writers sympathetic to the Alash Orda movement—the journal was shut down after only eleven issues in November 1918.⁸ In 1922, Auezov was

when he was growing up. See Baurzhan Myrzakul, 'Abai esimi–Ibrahimnim kyskargan turi' (in Kazakh) ('The name 'Abai' is a shortened version of Ibrahim'), *Azan.kz*, 27 October 2019, <https://azan.kz/kz/maqalat/read/bauyirzhan-myirzaqul-abay-esimi-ibrahimnin-qyysqargan-tyri-11125>.

- 7 Mukhamedzhan Karataev, 'Pevets naroda' ('The People's Poet'), in Mukhtar Auezov, *Abai zholy* (in Kazakh) (*The Path of Abai*), trans. by Mukhamedzhan Karataev (Almaty: Zhazushy, 1977), pp. 5–22 (p. 6).
- 8 The journal *Abai* was published after Abai's death in order to honour the writer and his works; additionally, to publish works on contemporary Kazakh literature and society. It featured many important Kazakh intellectuals of its day, many of whom were affiliated with Alash Orda and published their texts under a pseudonym. The history of the journal is told by Aizhan Baitanova, a Kazakh researcher, here: "'Abai": Zhurnalynyn shygu tarikh' (in Kazakh) ('The History

expelled from the Communist Party for his involvement with Alash Orda and arrested in 1930. He then served two years in prison for activities summarised by his biographers as “conducting an underground struggle against the Soviet authorities, participating in preparations for the armed overthrow of the government; opposing the confiscation of property from the wealthy; helping form the national-bourgeois organization ‘Alka’; and writing works that praise the pre-revolutionary lifestyle of the Kazakh people”.⁹

The Soviet interpretation of Abai as a writer was largely based on Auezov’s biography. Its focus was predictably limited, certainly as expressed by critics like Mukhamedzhan Karataev, whose introduction to *Abai Zholy* I cited above. Karataev focused on the class struggle between the allegedly Soviet-minded Abai and his own father, which the critics saw as an embodiment of the ‘exploitative class.’ *Abai Zholy* was read as a Socialist Realist work, within the only state-endorsed mode of Soviet literature from 1934 on. Karataev also praises Abai’s “true fascination with the Russian people, with the Russia of Pushkin, Belinskii, Lermontov and Chernyshevskii” and the supposedly liberating role that Russian culture played for Kazakhstan, including “the building of cities and railroads in the Kazakh steppe” and the “collapse of the previous patriarchal structures of the nomadic auls or villages”.¹⁰ Just as Karataev’s evaluation of Auezov’s “ideological hesitancy” is a code phrase for disobeying Soviet authorities, Karataev’s depiction of Soviet Kazakhstan is simply a convenient Soviet propaganda story that hides the vast human cost of collectivisation and city-building in nomadic Kazakhstan. Unsurprisingly, the Soviet Abai is described as a translator of Russian classics and even the author of a canonical Socialist Realist novel in Kazakh, *Abai Zholy*. Naomi Caffee traces the consolidation of Abai’s status as the principal writer of Soviet Kazakhstan, an analogue of Russia’s Pushkin, by critics like Karataev and most of all, Auezov.

In 1937, at the height of the Stalinist purges as well as the Union-wide Pushkin jubilee celebration, Auezov brought his renewed efforts to the Soviet

of the Publication of the Journal “Abai”), *Abai.kz*, 19 May 2014, <https://abai.kz/post/37635>. *Abai.kz* is a portal dedicated to the study of the works of Abai.

9 Alash Orda was the first political party of Kazakhstan. It arose partly in opposition to the colonial Russian government and focused on prioritising Kazakh national autonomy. It formally became a party in November 1917. Alash Orda members opposed the Soviet government (‘Reds’) and supported the ‘Whites’ during the Civil War of 1918–21. Auezov worked closely with members of Alash Orda and founded the ‘Youth of Alash’ movement in the Kazakh city of Semipalatinsk. On Auezov, see ‘Auezov M. O.’, *East Kazakhstan: Famous Names*, East Kazakhstan Pushkin Regional Library, pushkinlibrary.kz, 26 August 2020, <http://imena.pushkinlibrary.kz/en/writers-and-poets/473-.html>. See also the ‘Alash Electronic Project’ at East Kazakhstan Regional Universal Library, created in 2017 to commemorate 100 years from the founding of Alash Orda party in 1917, https://alash.semeylib.kz/?page_id=254&lang=ru.

10 Mukhamedzhan Karataev, ‘Pevets naroda’, p. 8.

reading public with an article strikingly titled 'How Tatiana Sang in the Steppe,' which featured Abai's translations of excerpts from Pushkin's *Evgenii Onegin* into Kazakh song form. Auezov portrayed these translations as the awakening of Kazakh culture to the majestic potential and universal appeal of Russian literature, as well as a watershed moment in the development of the Kazakh literary tradition.¹¹

As Caffee notes here, besides the class struggle portrayed in Auezov's *Abai Zholy*, another feature commended by Soviet critics was Abai's translation of Russian literature. Between 1886 and 1898, Abai translated the Russian poets Pushkin, Lermontov, and Krylov, and European writers, such as Schiller, Goethe, Byron, Heine, and Adam Mickiewicz, into Kazakh. Soviet critics praised Abai's translations of Russian classics, while ignoring his far-ranging domestication and reworking of the original texts.

Changes to the Soviet Paradigm

Soviet critics were less apt to observe that Abai's translations of Russian poets served as a continuation of his own creative work, since he selectively translated only those poems (or excerpts from other poets' longer works) that resonated with his own sensibilities and allowed him to display his own talents and concerns. The continuity between Abai's satirical voice and his translation of the early nineteenth-century poet Ivan Krylov is telling. Ilyas Jansugorov, one of the founders of modern Kazakh literature and a member of Alash Orda, noted that the majority of Abai's poems are satirical and/or moralistic in their tone. Many of them teach readers correct social norms and attempt to point out and correct flaws in society through satire and ridicule.¹² Small wonder, then, that Abai decided to translate Krylov, famous for short parables that allegorise human failings. The moralistic satire of Krylov's poetry is consonant with Abai's own satirical tendency, fully exemplified in his own most famous prose work, *Words of Edification*, a collection of forty-five moral precepts and philosophical statements about the Kazakh people and their way of life.¹³ Although Abai probably translated Krylov's poems prior to writing *Words of Edification*, his

11 Naomi Caffee, 'How Tatiana's Voice Rang Across the Steppe: Russian Literature in The Life and Legend of Abai', *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 9 (2018), 12–19 (p. 14), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1016/j.euras.2017.12.002>.

12 Ilyas Jansugurov, 'Abaidyn syoz ornegi' (in Kazakh) ('Abai's Verbal Examples') (1934), in Ilyas Jansugurov, *Kop tomdyk shyghamalar zhinaghi* (Collected Works), ed. by M. Auezov, 10 vols (Almaty: Kazyghurt, 2004–19), IV (2005), page numbers unknown, <https://abaialemi.kz/post/view?id=101>.

13 Abai's satirical lines were recently translated into English and self-published by Simon Geoghegan as *Ghaklia: Words of Edification* (2022). The word 'Ghaklia' is the Arabic for 'word of wisdom' or 'proverb'.

preoccupation with satire and moral teaching is already evident in his Krylov translations.

For instance, one of Krylov's satirical poems, 'The Dragonfly and the Ant' (Krylov, 'Strekoza i muravei,' 1808; Abai, 'Shegirtke men Khumyrskha,' circa 1886–98) tells the story of a light-hearted "Dragonfly", who dances and plays all summer, and the hard-working "Ant" who works collecting food. When winter came, the Dragonfly begged the Ant for food and housing, but the Ant refused, pointing out that the Dragonfly had had all summer to prepare. Abai's translation exaggerates the Ant's role, apparently prefiguring the scourging voice of the narrator in the later *Words of Edification*. Abai adds sarcasm and irony absent from Krylov's original, as when the Ant mockingly pities the Dragonfly for being so busy during the summer that she had no time for work: "Poor one she had not time, / Being as she was a great poet and a great singer!" ("Kaitsyn, kholy timepti, / Olenshi, anshi esil er"). In Krylov's original lines, the Ant only makes a feeble reply upon discovering that the Dragonfly sang all summer, "Oh, and so you..." ("A, tak ty...").¹⁴ Abai sharpens the satire in his translation of Krylov, so that readers can discern his familiar voice as a satirist of Kazakh behaviour.

Written in 1890, towards the end of Abai's creative career, *Words of Edification* strikes readers with a long list of moral failings supposedly characteristic of the Kazakh people: for instance, the third maxim asks, "Why are Kazakhs so hostile to each other, do not listen to each other, do not speak the truth, are quarrelsome and lazy?"¹⁵ Recalling Krylov's emphasis on moral flaws, Abai devotes the majority of his treatise to explaining how the people fail and how they can learn to overcome their failings. In his sixth maxim, for example, he urges his people to devote themselves to "spirituality" over "material needs", asks people to care about education and knowledge (eighth maxim), learn science (eleventh maxim), seek constant self-improvement (twelfth maxim), and so on.¹⁶ There is a strong continuity between Abai's creative and translation activities, as the latter seems to continue the themes and the narrative voice of his own poetry and prose.

Abai's relationship with other translated poems is similar. For instance, Jansugorov says of Abai's affinity for the Russian poet Mikhail Lermontov: "Abai translated into Kazakh a number of lyrical poems by his favourite Russian poet Lermontov. He selectively translates the poems that are most in tune with

14 I cite Abai's Kazakh translation ('Shegirtke men Khumyrskha') of Ivan Krylov's original Russian 'Strekoza i muravei' ('The Dragonfly and the Ant'). The former is available on the Abai Institute website (in Kazakh), <https://abai.kaznu.kz/?p=750>. Krylov's Russian text is available at <https://rvb.ru/18vek/krylov/01text/vol3/01fables/070.htm>.

15 'Abaidyn kara sozderi' (in Kazakh) ('Abai's Words of Edification'), *Abaicenter.kz*, 8 June 2009, <https://abai.kz/post/6>.

16 Ibid.

his own poetry, as can be seen in Abai's poems/translations 'Oi' and 'Zhartas'".¹⁷ Abai's translations of Lermontov can be regarded as adaptations or even improvisations on the original theme. Nurghali Mahan, a contemporary Kazakh language teacher, compares Lermontov's originals against Abai's translations to argue that Abai re-works the source text in the context of the Kazakh steppe and Kazakh idioms. For example, Lermontov's poem 'The Cliff' ('Utes', 1841) describes a "golden cloud" ("*tuchka zolotaia*") that momentarily relieves the solitude of a lonely giant rock, but then "playfully" ("*veselo igraia*") sallies forth to continue her journey, abandoning the rock. Abai's translation is uniquely adapted to life in the Kazakh steppe, Mahan argues that the "golden" cloud, an unfamiliar trope in the Kazakh landscape, becomes "a young cloud"; the rock—an "old" or "elderly" rock (he uses "*kyari*", a respectful form of address to an older Kazakh), while the behaviour of the "young cloud" is conveyed through the Kazakh word "*oinaktap*", or "playful", connoting a young animal or child. Mahan remarks: "Only a young calf with a full stomach and no other space in his heart plays. Exactly the right word."¹⁸

In the final part of this chapter, I turn to Pushkin's *Evgenii Onegin*, which became one of Abai's most popular translations from Russian into Kazakh. Abai's method with Pushkin's text was far from systematic: he translated fragmentary extracts from *Evgenii Onegin*, usually the most emotional parts of the poem, which resonated with Abai's own love poetry. Abai translated eight excerpts, including Tatiana's famous letter to Onegin, Onegin's reply to Tatiana, and even (with respectful improvisation) Onegin's dying words. These love-themed sections from *Onegin* were translated by Abai as Petrarchan-style lyrics that discuss the alternating heat and cold of passion and focus on female beauty. Abai also embeds Tatiana in Kazakh culture. For example, Abai's version of Tatiana compares herself to a baby *saiga* (a type of steppe antelope native to Kazakhstan and parts of Central Asia) which barely survives its encounter with Onegin, whom she calls a wounded tiger.¹⁹ Since Kazakhstan became independent, critics looking for non-Russian influences have noted that in many excerpts from the poem, Abai uses Eastern poetic forms characteristic of Persian poetry, such as the *ghazal* (aabaca) and the *rubaiyat* (aaba). Sergei Fomichev has noted that "[i]f one takes a close look, Abai's translations are hybrid works

17 Ilyas Jansugurov, 'Abai's verbal examples.'

18 Nurghali Mahan, 'Abaidyn Lermantovtan zhasagan' (in Kazakh) ('Abai's translations from Lermontov'), *Abai.kz*, 2 June 2020, <https://abai.kz/post/113799>.

19 In Abai's translation, this passage reads: "Sen zharaly zholbarys en,/ Men kiyktyn lahy em./ Tiri khaldym, olmey yaren,/ Khatty batty tyrnahyn." ("You are a wounded tiger, I am a fawn. I barely survived, I almost died, Your claws are sharp."). Abai translates Tatiana's letter to Onegin, which is in Chapter 3 of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. Abai's text can be found at 'Abai Kunanbaev (Tat'iana sezi)' (in Kazakh) ('Abai Kunanbaiev (Tatiana's Word)'), *Zharar.com*, 18 June 2019, <https://www.zharar.com/kz/olen/26403-abay.html>.

that domesticate Pushkin's words in a multiplicity of contexts".²⁰ One of Abai's early poems 'Yuzi is a rose, her eyes are diamonds' ('Yuzi—raushan, kyozi—gauhar'), written in 1858–59, was inspired by medieval Eastern love poetry, such as the Persian poets Ferdowsi, Nizami Ganjavi, Saadi Shirazi, and Jami and the Turkic poet Navoi.²¹

With rising ethnic nationalism in independent Kazakhstan, critics have increasingly noted how Abai domesticated his translations and set them in the context of traditional nomadic Kazakh culture or incorporated Eastern and not simply European influences. For instance, Sheriazdan Eleukenov, a prominent Kazakh academic, shows that Abai's *Onegin* is a much more positive and sympathetic figure than Pushkin's. Moreover, Abai's depiction of the love story is more romantic and tragic, compared to the Russian tendency to praise Tatiana for rejecting the carefree and arrogant Onegin.²² In this sense, Abai's translation is closer to traditional Kazakh stories of unhappy love, such as the popular folktale 'Enlik Kebek', first published in 1892. 'Enlik Kebek,' a folk tale from the eighteenth century, which exists in several versions, is a story of unhappy love between two lovers, Enlik and her beloved Kebek, from opposing clans, 'naiman' and 'argyn' respectively. Enlik is already engaged to be married to an older relative when she meets Kebek; she refuses her fiancé, and the lovers run away to the mountains. There they have a son, but eventually they are captured by Enlik's vengeful relatives who put both of them and their young son to death. This tragic story of doomed love is often seen as the Kazakh version of *Romeo and Juliet*; Abai's translation of Pushkin's love story *Evgenii Onegin* is closer to this tradition than to Pushkin's original, which is rather ambivalent about the depth of Onegin's and Tatiana's love. (In Pushkin's story, Tatiana rejects Onegin after marrying an older man following Onegin's refusal of her love, confessed to him as a young village girl.)

It is still relatively new to suggest that Abai's *Evgenii Onegin* reflects the encounter of two or more equal cultures, since the Soviet tradition of valuing Abai's Russian sources above his own creative work of translation and interpretation still persists. For instance, the website of the East Kazakhstan Regional Universal Library, the very library where Abai once studied Russian classics, now a major centre of Abai studies, features both Russian- and Kazakh-language versions of the same article on 'Abai and Russian Literature'. Curiously, the Russian-language version is much more outspoken and positive about the

20 Sergei A. Fomichev, 'Pushkin i Abai' (in Russian) ('Pushkin and Abai'), *Abai.kaznu.kz*, May 2013, <https://abai.kaznu.kz/rus/?p=291>.

21 On the influence of Eastern poetry on Abai, see S.A. Fomichev, 'Pushkin i Abai' and Ilyas Jansugurov, 'Abai's verbal examples'.

22 'Tatiananyn khyrdahi yani' (in Kazakh) ('Tatiana's song on the ridge'), in *Egemen Qazaqstan* [*Egemen.kz*], 23 September 2016, <https://egemen.kz/article/105511-tatiananynh-qyrdaghy-ani>.

vital role of Russian culture for Abai's own development. It echoes earlier Soviet critics, such as Karataev:

He [Abai], the true spokesperson for the wishes of his people, saw the only correct way for the Kazakh steppe: the path of growing closer to Russia—the Russia of Lomonosov and Pushkin, Belinskii, Chernyshevskii, Tolstoy, and Shchedrin, the path of unification of the fortunes of Kazakh and Russian people. That is why Abai bravely entered into a single combat with everything that was inert, conservative, and reactionary, which hindered the social and cultural development of the region.²³

The Soviet tradition of portraying Russian literature as “the only correct way for the Kazakh steppe” still exists, but scholars now tend to discuss Abai's works on their own terms, no longer in the shadow of Russian as, purportedly, the only true original text.

Today, critics apologise for Abai's strong pro-Russian views and his scathing critique of fellow Kazakhs in his *Words of Edification*. Satimzhan Sanbaev, who translated *Words of Edification* from Kazakh into Russian in 1970, wrote a preface for the new (2013) edition which tries to soften Abai's ostensibly anti-Kazakh critique. Sanbaev writes that Abai's “true genius is not limited by national characteristics”; that his works appeal to “universal human values” and that his *Words* are written for “people of different nationalities”.²⁴ He even asserts that Abai “addresses himself to people through a code-word and in this case this code-word is ‘Kazakh’”.²⁵ Significantly, Sanbaev completely empties Abai's words of any ethnic referent, suggesting that the term ‘Kazakh’ is only a placeholder for individuals of any nationality. Indeed, Abai's critique of Kazakhs is scathing and difficult, despite Sanbaev's warnings, to separate from its historical context. The pendulum has swung back, as Kazakh writers try to purge Abai of his pro-Russian sentiment.

In *Words of Edification* Abai harshly criticises the Kazakh people, urging them to learn Russian. Thus, in his second maxim Abai writes that Kazakhs “used to laugh at others [he lists Kazakhs' ridicule of Tadzhiks, Tatars, and Russians], but we [Kazakhs] ourselves are worse than everyone, both in hard work, in faith, and in unity”. In his third maxim, Abai recommends that “regional judges should be chosen from those people who received education in the Russian

23 East-Kazakhstan Regional Library of Abai, ‘Abai i Russkaia literatura’ (in Russian), *Semeylib.kz*, n.d., https://semeylib.kz/?page_id=1006&lang=ru.

24 Satimzhan Sanbaev, ‘Predislovie’ (in Russian) (‘Introduction’), in Abai Kunanbayev, *Slova nazidaniia (Words of Edification)* (Almaty: Almatykytap, 2013), pp. 6–10 (p. 7), <http://nabr.kz/bookView/view/?brId=1117495&simple=true&green=1&lang=ru#>.

25 Cited by Sanbaev, ‘Introduction’, p. 10.

language"; and perhaps most famously, in the twenty-fifth maxim Abai writes the following:

One should learn the Russian language. Russian people have reason and wealth, progressive science, and high culture. The study of the Russian language, education in Russian schools, and mastery of Russian science will help us learn the best qualities of this nation and avoid its failings, because they, earlier than anyone, discovered the secrets of nature. To know the Russian language is to open one's eyes to the world.²⁶

Abai's high praise for Russian culture has led some people to argue that *Words of Edification* may have been secretly edited or even wholly composed by Soviet critics. Zauze Bataeva caused a sensation and a scandal in Internet circles with her long blog post 'The Unknown Abai' ('Neizvestnyi Abai'), in which she identifies many "anti-nomadic" and "anti-Kazakh" statements in Abai's work before querying the authenticity of his authorship. Bataeva questions how a person raised in the steppe could know so much about European literature and philosophy or read Russian so easily.²⁷ Drawing a parallel with the anti-Stratfordian theory, which doubts the authenticity of Shakespeare as the true author of his plays and poems, Bataeva speculates that Alikhan Bukeihanov (1866–1937), one of the great Kazakh intellectuals and a leader of the 'Alash Orda' movement, is a better candidate for the authorship of Abai's works than the person claimed to be Abai. Bataeva's blog elicited vehement responses from Kazakh academics, though some commended her for raising the question of how little we really know about Abai from first-hand sources.²⁸ The highly negative reaction of Kazakh academics can perhaps be compared to another incident, when in 2012, Aleksei Navalnyi, the Russian opposition leader, off-handedly suggested to his supporters to meet at the statue of Abai in central Moscow, without realising who this statue represented and referred to the poet as the "unknown Kazakh" ("непонятный Kazakh"). His tweet elicited negative feedback from the Kazakhstani public, many of whom felt that a part of their national identity had been compromised by this careless comment.²⁹

26 Ibid., p. 102.

27 Zauze Bataeva, 'Zagadka Abaiia: velichaishii neizvestnyi poet Kazakhstana (I)' (in Russian) ('The Mystery of Abai: Kazakhstan's Greatest Unknown Poet (I)'), *Zerge blog, Zauzebatayeva.blog*, 19 July 2020, <https://www.zauzebatayeva.blog/post/абай-кунанбаев-и-введение>.

28 See for instance, Sultan Khan Akkuly, "'Gerostratova slava" Zauze Bataevoi' (in Russian) ('Herostratus' fame of Zauze Bataeva'), *Abai.kz*, 30 November 2020, <https://www.abai.kz/post/124675>.

29 The incident is described in detail in Dinara Kudaibergenova's article 'Misunderstanding Abai and the Legacy of the Canon', *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 9 (2018), 20–29, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1016/j.euras.2017.12.007>.

What these examples cumulatively suggest is that since Kazakhstan's independence in 1991, Abai's dual role as an enlightenment figure for the Kazakh people (primarily by transmitting Russian literature) and as an ethnographer of the Kazakh lifestyle have shifted. Now, Abai is much more firmly identified as a Kazakh poet, while the influence of world literature on Abai's translations has been radically redefined. In 2020, Kazakhstan celebrated the 175th anniversary of Abai's birth, and the celebrations clearly indicated the nature of this shift. Perhaps the most revealing document was an article by the President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Zhomart Tokaev, composed for the anniversary and entitled 'Abai and Kazakhstan in the Twenty-First Century'.³⁰ Tokaev's article identifies a number of national priorities: for Kazakhstan to "occupy leading positions" in the world in education and science; the study of "foreign languages", especially English; the popularisation, especially among young people, of their "native language" (*"ana tili"*), that is, Kazakh; the development of social solidarity given the worldwide "crisis of capitalism", to name some key priorities. Abai is crucial for all of these, as Tokaev emphasises by referencing his works, especially precepts from *Words of Edification*, in connection with each goal.

Surprisingly, Tokaev uses the twenty-fifth maxim, cited above (where Abai urges his compatriots to study the Russian language to "open one's eyes to the world") as a justification for simply learning "foreign languages", in his own ambiguous phrasing. Without ever naming Russian, the main language Abai mentions, Tokaev suggests instead that "we [Kazakhs] should develop and popularise the native language and increase its status" and "simultaneously with that, we should give priority to the study of the English language". By omitting Russian entirely and elevating Kazakh, Tokaev makes Abai a herald not of Russian culture, but an ethnic Kazakh icon and simultaneously a window to the world of progress and science, now identified with the English language. Moreover, in order to elevate Kazakhstan's standing in the world, Tokaev unabashedly proposes promoting and consecrating Abai as a symbol of "cultural capital" (in Kazakh, *"ultymyzydyn myadeni kapitaly"*) while turning him into a national "brand" (*"Kazakhstannyn brandy"*). Tokaev writes that just as every Kazakh wants to have a *dombra* (*"Yar kazakhtyn tyorinde dombyra tursyn"*), the traditional Kazakh instrument, he also needs a volume of Abai's works and his biography (Auezov's *Abay Zholy*, discussed above). Abai's present reinvention as a powerful Kazakh icon with the power to bestow prestige and legitimacy on the newly post-Soviet Kazakh nation may recall Bourdieu's interpretation of the social capital of symbolic goods.³¹

30 Kassym-Zhomart Tokaev, 'Abai zhane XXI gasyrdagi Kazakhstan' (in Kazakh) ('Abai and Kazakhstan in the XXI century'), in *Egemen Qazaqstan* [Egemen.kz], 9 January 2020, <https://egemen.kz/article/217247-abay-dgane-xxi-ghasyrdaghy-qazaqstan>.

31 See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. by Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

Tokaev's slippage between identifying Abai as an ethnic Kazakh and as an ideal citizen of Kazakhstan indicates a larger national confusion: is Abai a Kazakh or a Kazakhstani writer? In other words, is the poet a symbol of Kazakh ethnicity and pride ('Kazakh'), or is he the property of all citizens who live in Kazakhstan ('Kazakhstani'), regardless of their ethnic category? Tokaev seems to conflate the two identities, by referring to the poet's "native language" (meaning Kazakh, although many ethnic Kazakhs speak Russian as their native language), associating Abai with the traditional Kazakh *dombra*, and alternating interchangeably between the terms "Kazakhs" and "citizens". Confusingly, Abai represents Kazakhstan to the world, while apparently only speaking for ethnic Kazakhs. In his study of Kazakh nationalism, the sociologist Serik Bersimbaev considers the instability of the current policy of nation-building in Kazakhstan.³² He discusses the weakening of the old Soviet paradigm of "double identification", by which a Soviet person belonged both to the nation and his ethnic group; he also notes the growth of an ethnic Kazakh identity in Kazakhstan. His conclusion is that 'Kazakh' identity remains mostly a birthright category lacking the kind of clear civic allegiance that could unite other ethnicities under a shared national heritage.

For many citizens of Kazakhstan, Abai remains an icon of traditional Kazakh culture. His music, such as the popular love song ('Kyzymnin Kharasy', literally, 'the eyes' blackness'), almost always features scenes from traditional nomadic life, such as Kazakh yurts, traditional Kazakh dresses, *dombiras*, horses, and so on. On the other hand, Tokaev's efforts to popularise Abai as a global classic are mostly directed towards audiences outside of the country. Thus, for example, for Abai's 175th anniversary, Tokaev proposed an online 'challenge', where people from different places in Kazakhstan and around the world would recite Abai's works under the hashtag #Abai175. Prominent diplomats and public figures, from the US ambassador to Kazakhstan to the Chinese actor Jackie Chan, recited Abai's poems online; many school children and universities in Kazakhstan participated in the challenge. There is a concerted state effort to promote the cult of Abai in Kazakhstan. Meanwhile, Abai's work as a translator of Russian literature has been sidelined by the government's determination to promote Abai as an ethnic Kazakh symbol and as a worldwide Kazakhstani brand. In modern Kazakhstan, Abai's identity as a bridge between Kazakh and Russian cultures remains largely unexplored.

32 Serik Bersimbayev, 'Fenomen kazakhskogo natsionalizma v kontekste segodniashnei politiki: ot otritsaniia k ponimaniu' (in Russian) ('The Phenomenon of Kazakh Nationalism in the Context of Today's Politics: from Denial to Understanding'), *Soros.kz*, https://www.soros.kz/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/kazakh_nationalism.pdf.

