In his critically acclaimed book *Speaking Soviet with an Accent: Culture and Power in Kyrgyzstan*, Ali Igmen advances a nuanced approach to exploring the complex, micro-level discursive processes of creating and redefining Soviet Kyrgyz identity during the 1920s and 1930s. Focusing on the “Houses of Culture” (or workers’ clubs), theaters, and festivals as distinctive cultural and educational venues, Igmen demonstrates how pre-Soviet Kyrgyz traditions and values fused with Soviet modernity to “fashion ‘Kyrgyzness.’” (2012:6) In effect, Kyrgyz cultural cadres and *ail* (village) club administrators managed to accommodate Soviet cultural and ideological directives with traditional art forms of cultural expression, such as the recitation of the national epic *Manas* and the improvised performance of *akyns* (bards), resonating with rural Kyrgyz. For Igmen, the ensuing cultural symbiosis exemplifies a complex phenomenon, which may be analytically extended beyond the discourse of colonial “mimicry” or “hybridity.”

Organizationally, the book consists of six chapters, each based on a careful analysis and interpretation of findings. The first chapter proves extremely useful in contextualizing the processes of Soviet Kyrgyz identity making in the 1920s. Igmen particularly emphasizes the importance of “an analysis of imperial Russian definitions of so-called ‘Asiatic’ cultures” to examine “the Bolshevik understanding of Kyrgyz culture.” (2012:9) Thus, “a sense of Eurocentric superiority” based on categorizing “Asiatic” peoples in racial terms, held in the West, increasingly resonated with imperial Russian officials and elites in the late nineteenth century. Consequently, as reflected in official policies, the attitudes towards non-Russians underscored the discourse of promoting “culturalness”, assimilating Muslim population into a Russian society and enforcing sedentarization among Kyrgyz and Kazakh nomads. Later, Bolsheviks adopted and transformed the “civilizing projects of the imperial era” (2012:24) as frameworks for designing Soviet cultural policies.

Chapter 2 subsequently examines Soviet cultural policies of 1920s and 1930s, focusing on both continuities and changes. In addition to continually targeting Islam and nomadism, the expansion of mass education was widely regarded as critical for promoting Soviet ideology and constructing anti-colonial and post-revolutionary discourses. However, the relative remoteness of Kyrgyzstan and the shortage of educational and ideological materials rendered the cultural transformation a difficult task. Igmen also cites a report on Komsomol members, whose works had to “adapt… to the *ail* environment” to elicit participation and commitment among Kyrgyz nomads. (2012:32)

Following the same logic, Igmen demonstrates in Chapters 3, 4 and 5, how club and theater administrators manipulated “the Soviet system, within the limits it set for them, to
negotiate with the state about how the Kyrgyz cultural community should be defined.” (2012: 39) For example, Manas epic, an example of an oral history and folklore based on a narration of Manas’ life and his struggle against internal and foreign oppressors, which was identified in the 1920s by club administrators as a target for change, was later defended by scholars as echoing the ideals of a working class. In a similar vein, akyns, traditionally held in high esteem among Kyrgyz, alongside Manachy (Manas tellers), combined educational and ideological directives with entertainment, consequently contributing to the refashioning of Kyrgyzness. Meanwhile, theaters exposed Kyrgyz to “Western-style performing arts,” (2012:103) based on repertoires developed by both local and Western writers, and enabled Kyrgyz female actors and ballet dancers to rise to prominence. The last chapter examines official reports on cultural policies designed to promote the self-image of women in Kyrgyzstan. In doing so, it provides a perceptive analysis on how traditional images of Kyrgyz women, as members of nomadic communities, transformed and fused with Stalinist policies of promulgating women as Soviet heroines.

Overall, this book represents an important contribution to the literature on Soviet cultural history and identity formation in Soviet and post-Soviet Central Asia. It integrates a set of carefully and meticulously analyzed propositions based on a subtle interpretation of an impressive array of evidence, including official club documents and reports, regional directives, oral accounts, interviews, newspaper articles, memoirs, and protocols. Clearly, these multiple lines of evidence converge to produce a cogent thesis. Stylistically, the text is easy to follow and enjoyable to read, yet the analytical linkages between chapters could be clarified to ensure logical consistency. Furthermore, the notion of Kyrgyzness is repeatedly invoked across chapters – examining it in a separate chapter could perhaps set a tone for understanding how self-representations of Kyrgyz fused with Soviet cultural policies during the 1920s and 1930s. It would be equally interesting to trace variations in how northern and southern Kyrgyz infused Soviet cultural policies with Kyrgyzness. Meanwhile, this book would be most useful to scholars of Soviet cultural history and identity formation and nationalism in Central Asia and anyone who is interested in Kyrgyz (Soviet) history and traditions.