



UNIVERSITY
OF CENTRAL ASIA

Promoting Cultural Heritage and Humanities in Central Asia



University Vision

The University of Central Asia (UCA) is a not-for-profit, secular university established in 2000 through the signing of an international Treaty and Charter by the Presidents of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and His Highness the Aga Khan, ratified by the respective parliaments of each country and registered with the United Nations. UCA brings with it the broader commitment and partnership of the Aga Khan Development Network one of the largest private development agencies in the world.

The goal of UCA is to become an internationally renowned research university focused on promoting the social and economic development of Central Asia, particularly its mountain regions and communities in the context of the challenges (and opportunities) presented by climate change, economic development and the advent of artificial intelligence. UCA's active international partners include the University of Cambridge, University of Oxford, University College London, University of Toronto, and Humboldt University among many others.

Promoting Culture, Language and Literature

The Cultural Heritage and Humanities Unit (CHHU), of the UCA's Graduate School of Development (GSD), works to preserve the rich cultural traditions and heritages of the region as well as promoting ideas of identity, community, and pluralism through research, education, capacity building, and public outreach activities. GSD's Aga Khan Humanities Project (AKHP) promotes contemporary best practice in teaching humanities in Central Asia.

Research Outputs

CHHU, established in 2013, has published 28 original book titles and over 20 research papers as well as numerous film documentaries, museum exhibitions, musical performances and cultural festivals. Its fundamental works include *The Musical Arts of the Pamirs* in five volumes, *Kyrgyz Melodies* in two volumes, *Ancient Monuments of the Tian-Shan*, the *Archeological Maps of Western and Eastern Pamir*, and a celebration of the Music of Central Asia through a project combining 20 musicians from Mongolia, Khakassia, Buryatia, Republic of Altai, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan, working together to create new compositions culminating in a memorable musical performance, “The Sky Reflects Within Us,” in 2022.

AKHP, established in 1997, features a range of interdisciplinary humanities courses, informed by eight anthologies, developed by experts from the region and beyond and which explore societal challenges and promote critical thinking, academic writing, and constructive debate. A new anthology “Women in Central Asia: Past and Present” highlighting women’s key role in the socio-cultural development of the region, will be published in 2024. AKHP partners with 64 academic institutions in Kazakhstan (34), Kyrgyzstan (12), and Tajikistan (18) with over 305 faculty participating in training programmes and thousands of students benefitting from AKHP courses.



UCA publications

Cover photo: Kazakh performer of oral poetry



1



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1. AKHP faculty development training
2. CHHU's Central Asian Museum Development programme
3. CHHU cultural performance

Education and Capacity Building

AKHP's well-known Humanities in English (HiE) Programme is the only one in the region, and includes modules on academic reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The Programme aims to improve critical thinking, public speaking, research, linguistics, problem-solving, scenario building, and leadership skills of participants. HiE is offered to high school, undergraduate and postgraduate students and equips them with critical skills needed to succeed in the global labor market. To date over 2,000 students have successfully completed these courses.

In 2020, AKHP developed curriculum materials and a teacher's guide for an MA course on the "Central Asian Worldview: Past and Present," now offered at several universities in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan including the Chokan Valikhanov Institute of History and Ethnology in Kazakhstan, and Arabaev Kyrgyz State University. The course was further expanded by developing an Interactive Electronic Ethnographic Map for Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan in collaboration with the Institute of Geography of Kazakhstan.

CHHU's Central Asian Museum Development programme helps to build capacity of museum workers to create innovative museum content on cultural and historical heritages. In 2023, the First National Museum Festival supported by the Ministry of Culture of Kyrgyzstan was organized to create a platform for discussing topical issues of museum business, international and local trends, and professional networking.

From 2023, UCA has partnered with the University of Oxford in promoting the languages and cultures of Central Asia.

Cultural Production

CHHU engages with a creative youth network to address issues facing contemporary cultural production and practitioners while preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of Central Asia. Cultural production aims to

"The Cold Wind Valley," a film produced as part of the documentary series "Voices from the Roof of the World" programme by the Aga Khan University (a sister institution of UCA) addresses the issue of climate change and melting glaciers of Kyrgyzstan. This series was recently honored by the Columbia Journalism School with the prestigious 2023 John B Oakes Award for Distinguished Environmental Journalism.





UCA undergraduate students

promote cultural creativity, bio-cultural diversity, and eco-cultural tourism in the region. It presents cultural heritage to modern audiences in formats including creative texts, photo essays, films, animation, fashion, as well as theatrical and musical productions.

CHHU produced several original documentary films addressing cultural heritage preservation issues of mountain communities. The film “The Road of Hope and Heritage” supported by the UK’s Global Challenges Research Fund addresses the challenges facing the cultural heritage of mountain communities of Central Asia and northern Pakistan. “The Flying Horse” is dedicated to the role of native Kyrgyz horse and Kyrgyz herders.

Upcoming Events in 2024

- Film Release “Urbanism and visual traditions of Naryn. Naryn Art Residency for the Kazakh and Kyrgyz artists,” September.
- Film Release “A Soulful Strings of Central Asia” a documentary film on the musical instruments of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, September.
- Book Launch and Museum Exhibition “Piecing together History: Kyrgyz centuries-old textile art of Kurak,” October/November.
- Fourth Annual International Conference of the Aga Khan Humanities Project, Dushanbe, Tajikistan, November.
- Book Launch “Fairy Tales of Badakhshan,” Khorog, Tajikistan, March.
- International Conference “Central Asian History carved in Stone: Studying, preserving, and interpreting petroglyphs,” Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, April.
- Conference “Family, Music and Culture,” Dushanbe, Tajikistan, May.



Participants of the musical performance “The Sky Reflects Within Us”

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