Heritage sites and commemorative practices have become visual protagonists of a nationalist rhetoric in modern Central Asia. Central Asia is defined as the region encompassing the former-Soviet republics, in addition to Xinjiang, Afghanistan and Mongolia. This special issue analyses cultural memory practices used by former and current Central Asian elites as a tool for boosting ethno-nationalism.

Elena Paskaleva
Aside from the restoration of powerful historical figures as national heroes (Chinggis Khan, Tamerlane), the value of cultural memory practices lies in the transmission of beliefs, storytelling and collective acts of cultural remembering. These new cults have become instrumental for creating urban monumentalism on an unprecedented scale across the capitals of modern Central Asia. Heroic deeds represented in the historical epics of the region, such as the Manas and the Shahnama, or the performance of religious poetry in Badakhshan have been transformed into a powerful vehicle for expressing long-suppressed religious devotion. Multiple commemorative sites are deployed as visual representations of the past and are being used to foster a sense of belonging and national pride among the multi-ethnic population. How can these practices and local historical contingencies provide a better understanding of the search for national and religious identities in modern Central Asia?

**Heritage in Central Asia**

"There is, really, no such thing as heritage", states Laurajane Smith in her acclaimed book The Uses of Heritage (2006). According to Smith, heritage is an "inherently political and discordant" practice used by different interest-groups with varying degrees of legitimacy. The process of heritage-making entails various forms of conflict over the definition, ownership, and use of cultural attributes. Originally, a concept coined by the nation-state, heritage has become the object of intellectual reclamation by academics, activists and associations. Institutional and non-institutional social actors in Central Asia are increasingly involved in debating the legitimacy as well as the need to 'safeguard' different actors in Central Asia are increasingly involved in debating the legitimacy as well as the need to 'safeguard' different ownership, and use of cultural attributes. Originally, a concept coined by the nation-state, heritage has become the object of intellectual reclamation by academics, activists and associations. Institutional and non-institutional social actors in Central Asia are increasingly involved in debating the legitimacy as well as the need to 'safeguard' different ownership, and use of cultural attributes. Originally, a concept coined by the nation-state, heritage has become the object of intellectual reclamation by academics, activists and associations. Institutional and non-institutional social actors in Central Asia are increasingly involved in debating the legitimacy as well as the need to 'safeguard'

- By Jan van Belle. The study of folklore traditions was nuanced and mutable over time and space. That is why, during the Soviet period the study of folklore traditions was indispensable part of Soviet ideology. It was an attempt to create a set of notions and examples of idealized, original traditions deprived of any religious associations. Furthermore, the folklorists were agents of this ideological programme created by the state. Constructed by means of governmental texts and vocabulary, the perpetuation of epic images and their politically-attributed connotations have resulted in a pantheon of salient heroes. Some of their charismatic legacies have survived the pre-Islamic Persian civilization, the glory of Islam and the drastic banishment of religion during the Soviet period. The narratives associated with them have resulted in the elevation of places of national fame. In an attempt to maintain peaceful dynamic interaction between multi-ethnic communities, heritage has taken on new and sometimes unintended meanings in the midst of social change, asserting religious identity and political upheaval. Nowadays, their legacy is drawn from within an officially imposed narrative that is alien to the majority of the population. Even though the presence of the heroic figures is commemorated with large statues dominating the cityscapes, their presumed permanence is based on estranged politicized narratives that most people do not want to be part of.

**Commemoration practices across Central Asia**

This collection of essays offers a broader understanding of the concept of common heritage and multiple identities across Central Asia. The studies show how cultural memory practices are used by the Tsarist, Soviet and contemporary post-Soviet Central Asian elites as a tool for boosting ethno-nationalism. Yet, this process is far from smooth and straightforward. Rather than focusing on a single genre, medium or language of literary production, the selection of articles takes a comparative and connective perspective. The authors propose different approaches – historical, literary, anthropological, critical heritage studies. They show that memory is an intrinsic constituent of identity formation. In search of a historical identity based on shared languages and culture, the aim is to map the interaction between political, ideological, literary and artistic production in a diachronic and synchronic perspective, and to contextualize the process dynamics through textual and material analysis. The first contribution, by Zfa Auezova, discusses the painful legacy of the 1916 Revolt in Turkestan and the Steppie Regions of the Russian Empire, based on the 1928 novel Qly Zaman (The Time of Ordeal), written by the Kazakh author...
the Sufi memorial
Top: Pilgrimage at the Sufi memorial complex of Bahauddin Naqshbandi in the vicinity of Bukhara, photo by the author.

Mukhtar Auezov. The novel tells the story of a Kazakh clan in the Semirechye, which in 1916 had witnessed the violence of the Russian government to such an extent that fleeing from their land, from the realms of their ancestors, appeared to be the only solution. Drawing from the extensive family archive and her intimate knowledge of the author’s life, Auezova underlines the historical importance of the revolt. The uprising was a particularly sensitive issue for the Russian and Central Asian historians who had become Soviet citizens between 1917 and the 1930s and who had to maneuver within shared ideological frameworks defined by the new authorities.

The subsequent creation of national republics within the USSR necessitated the formation of nationalities policies, which resulted in constant appropriation and reterritorialization of historical sources and themes. Artemy Kalinovsky shows how the creation of the Tajik national opera and ballet was a symbolic centrepiece of the Soviet policies in the 1930s. By professionalizing ‘traditional’ music, rather than creating professionals for Soviet Tajik culture, the opera showcased the USSR’s commitment to blending egalitarianism with an integral part of the Soviet nationalities policy aiming at the diversification and gentrification in one of the oldest and best-preserved historic urban centres.

These contributions address many of the key issues related to memory and commemoration in Central Asia. The interpretations offered by the authors are based on their long-term fieldwork and personal experiences. However, many more questions remain open. What will be the impact of recent state policies and governmental interventions on the diverse cultural production of the region? How will the various legitimation projects in the Central Asian nation states resonate with the insecure political and economic situation in the post-Soviet realm? Will the promised prosperity and revival of the complex cultural exchanges vowed by the fabled Silk Road result in any democratic change? The purpose of this collection is to raise the visibility of this vibrant and still widely unknown region among the wider academic and non-academic audiences.

Elena Paskaleva is a lecturer in Critical Heritage Studies at Leiden University. Her current research focuses on the material culture of Central Asia and in particular on the history and socio-political importance of Timurid architecture in Uzbekistan. At present, she is also involved as a post-doctoral researcher in an initiative to strengthen the research cluster ‘Asian Modernities and Traditions’ created in a state-driven process of forgetting or remembering.

Tomás Skinner describes the recent processes of spatial cleansing and gentrification in one of the oldest and best-preserved historic urban centres. The Silk Road narrative to assert its economic role across Central Asia. Skinner concludes that the development of Xinjiang’s cities, supported by the globalising Silk Road discourse, is being used to assimilate the Uighur population into the Chinese nation, whereby Muslim ways of life and traditions are being disrupted. This has resulted in tight constraints on religious freedom, increased surveillance over Uighur communities, and the bulldozing of the region’s dense historic urban centres.

In order to promote Central Asian studies at Leiden University, the research cluster ‘Asian Modernities and Traditions’ created a platform for the study of Central Asia in its broadest sense, by uniting and consolidating existing expertise and initiating new international collaboration. Key issues are cultural space, identity formation, geopolitics and heritage. Two new core modules on Central Asia will start in September 2016 (www.centralasia.leiden.edu).