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Misunderstanding Abai and the legacy of the canon: “Neponyatnii” and “Neponyatii” Abai in contemporary Kazakhstan

Diana T. Kudaibergenova

Lund University, Lund, Scania, Sweden

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ABSTRACT

The Soviet canonisation of Abai, the nineteenth-century Kazakh poet and enlightener became a problematic theme for local intellectuals in the 2010s after the Occupy Abai movement in Moscow raised concerns over the heritage of Abai as a Sovietised canon and as an independent non-Soviet thinker. In 2012 oppositional leaders in Russia occupied Abai monument in Moscow and the leader of the opposition Alexey Navalny, called for his supporters to gather around the monument to unknown strange Kazakh guy using the Russian slang word – *neponyatnii* Kazakh. Local audience in Kazakhstan at first responded with offensive comments and questions to the Russian opposition movement – how come Abai, the Kazakh version of Russian poet and a visionary Alexander Pushkin, the symbol and canon of Soviet Kazakh literature and the symbol of post-Soviet Kazakhness and its culture could be unknown and strange? From the celebrated writer of the Soviet decades and Leninist prizes for Mukhtar Auezov’s novel *The Path of Abai (Abai Zholy)* Abai turned into *neponyatnii* – incomprehensible, strange (in words of Russian Alexey Navalny) and *neponyatii* – misunderstood poet. These discussions on popular online Russophone as well as Kazakhophone platforms and blogs opened up a debate on the legacy and problematic canonisation of Abai. Is Abai misunderstood in contemporary Kazakhstani society? From short essays when famous writer Gerold Belger speaks to Abai’s monument in central Almaty to mobile phone applications featuring Abai’s *Qara Sozder*, to the famous anonymous Abai graffiti in central Almaty and Occupy Abai movement responses in Kazakh internet sphere, I trace the mutations of Abai’s canon. These discussions reveal the conflicting trends of young Kazakhs and Kazakhstanis who take their cultural criticisms online but continue using the “national” frameworks in their globalized discussions.

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1. Introduction

In 2012 Russian opposition informal leader and popular blogger Alexey Navalny called for his supporters to gather

around the monument to “*neponyatnii* Kazakh” – a strange, incomprehensible Kazakh leader Abai (for the monument in Moscow see Fig. 1). *Neponyatnii* has a double meaning in Russian since it translates as unknown and incomprehensible in its formal sense and as strange in slang so in both cases it sounded as offensive to many Kazakhs living in and outside of Kazakhstan. Many Kazakh nationalists and aspiring politicians such as Mukhtar Taizhan and Aidos

Lund University, Lund, Scania, Sweden.

E-mail address: diana.kudaibergenova@soclaw.lu.se.

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Fig. 1. Abai monument in Moscow. Photo courtesy: Olga Zeveleva.

Sarym questioned the choice of *neponyatnii Kazakh* – unknown strange Kazakh slogan addressed to Abai. The unfortunate choice of wording left many more Kazakhstani citizens rather offended, angry, and heartbroken. “How on Earth the Great Abai, the father of Kazakh modern literature and enlightenment can be called strange and *neponyatnii*?” was the widely accepted response in both Russian and Kazakh language online discussions about Navalny and Occupy Abai movement in Moscow.

The opposition movement around Abai monument in Moscow drew more and more attention in 2012 and the internet hashtag #occupyabai became the third most popular in the world and the first most popular in Russian mediascape¹. These changes in Russian society led to the unprecedented discussions in Kazakhstan – young urban intelligentsia started rethinking and re-reading Abai’s Soviet canon. There were numerous attempts to make Abai contemporary, less Soviet and more understandable (*ponyatnii* instead of *neponyatnii*) to the younger generation. As McGuire (2018)² mentions in his article featured in this issue, Abai was made into the “Soviet hero” through the production of the *Abai Zholy*, *Abai’s Path* novel that became the classical Socialist Realist novel in Soviet Kazakh literature. *Abai Zholy* is a seminal and celebrated work by Mukhtar Auevov that traces the life and development of Abai as an enlightener and a socialist writer (Kudaibergenova, 2017a, 2017b). *Abai Zholy* is a required item on the reading list for all school students in Kazakhstan and is one of the most famous novels from the country. The novel in itself is canonised and there were very few attempts to rethink or reconsider this canon or rethink Abai’s legacy before the Occupy Abai movement that triggered these discussions and re-reading of the canon.

¹ “*Neponyatnii Kazakh*” Abai Qunanbayev and Russian opposition – available at <http://www.aif.ru/society/33264>.

² McGuire, G. 2018. “Aqyn Agha? Abai Zholy as Socialist Realism and as Literary History,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 2018.



Fig. 2. Abai opera premiere poster in 2014. Courtesy: author's photo.

In this article I analyse the uses of the image of Abai, the nineteenth century canonical Kazakh writer and philosopher and the role of his image in the formation of new cultural and political discourse in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. Many of these discourses critically evaluate the use of Abai’s image and his canonisation and criticize the fact that Abai is used for the face value while his literary and philosophical heritage is less popularized, read or understood. In other words, the image of Abai is more popular than his works. Occupy Abai movement that started with Alexey Navalny’s rather impolite comment about unknown Kazakh, for which he later apologised and promised to study Abai’s texts, raised concerns over whether people actually were familiar with Abai’s own oeuvre rather than just *Abai Zholy* novel (written by Mukhtar Auevov). Many young bloggers in Kazakhstan asked their audiences “Do you really know what Abai is famous for?” and others demanded an “appropriate”, meaning non-Soviet translation of Abai’s *Qara Sozder* – *Words of Edification*. Local bookshops in Almaty, Astana and other major cities in Kazakhstan responded by publishing new volumes of *Qara Sozder* and flooded bookshelves with these glossy covers but old Soviet translations from Kazakh to Russian languages. Abai’s concerned face with traditional *taqiya* on his head – the canonical Socialist Realist image of the 1940s and 1950s was drawn or redesigned to represent and please contemporary Kazakhstani urban hipster taste but again sold the old Sovietized concepts and translations underneath the cover. These were particularly the pencil-drawn images of new book covers or the colourful pop-art posters advertising Abai opera (see Fig. 2) and highly criticized images of Abai 45 – mobile phone app that featured the same canonical image of Abai but with white headphones in his ears (see Fig. 3). For many the story of Abai and his legacy remained misunderstood – largely due to the absence of adequate translations for Russian speaking audiences and due to the absence of dialogues and critical re-readings for the Kazakh speaking audiences (on language policy in Kazakhstan see Fierman, 1998, 2009).

The questions that were raised during these debates crystallized the necessity for re-reading Abai. In this article I address the possibility of deconstructing Abai’s canon in

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