

YOUTH CULTURE IN *Asia*

WEEK FOUR

As you read through Youth Culture in Asia, try to imagine what it would be like to live in these other lands. This Newspapers In Education series is in partnership with the University of Washington Jackson School of International Studies and runs Tuesdays through March 20.

Photo courtesy of The University of Washington.



Photo: Schoolboys in Bukhara.

New and Old Connections in Central Asia

by Allison Dvaladze and Odina Salibbaeva

Dawn stretches across Samarkand, illuminating Tamerlane's mausoleum, grey Soviet-era apartment blocks, and the turquoise tiles of Registan Square. Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan and Tamerlane (Timur the Lame) all came through here. It was in 1370 that Tamerlane made this city the capital of his growing empire which eventually stretched from eastern Turkey to India. But today, the 2,500-year-old city is the second largest city of the country of Uzbekistan, and home to 12-year-old Timur, named for the great ruler. Timur dreams of working with computers, and while he would rather be playing soccer with his cousin Sardor (who he spent the summer with in Sador's village), he must go to school. Timur doesn't have a home computer like his cousin Mirzo who lives in the capital, Tashkent, but his family pays for him to take private computer classes after school. In addition to his native Uzbek language, he is studying Russian and English. Meanwhile, Sardor is working with his family in the cotton fields and has never used a computer.

Uzbekistan is in Central Asia, a culturally and linguistically diverse land-locked region between Europe and Asia, famous for its location on the Silk Road. Central Asia commonly refers to five countries that were once part of the Soviet Union: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Since 1991, these countries, with varying results, have experienced political and economic transition following 70 years of communism. The 60 million people of Central Asia inhabit five countries covering a territory about the same size as the European Union, but with only about one-seventh as many people. Computer technology and Internet availability are sparse, but the slow spread of computers and the Internet is creating new opportunities

for students like Timur and other Central Asians to socialize, to exchange information and to participate in public debate – a sort of virtual Silk Road.

In Uzbekistan, more than half of the population is under 25 years of age. Even with so many young people, very few use the Internet, but those who use it the most tend to be part of the "independence generation" like Timur and his friends. Internet usage varies in the region from a low of less than 1% of the population in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan to roughly 5% in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Internet providers are often owned by the government and usage is monitored and controlled in all of the countries, especially in Turkmenistan. However, last month, just days after coming to power, Turkmenistan's new president Gurbanguli Berdimukhamedov opened the nation's first Internet cafés. While usage fees are prohibitively expensive for the average citizen, this act gives hope that more positive changes will come.

Russian, though not an indigenous local language, is the most widely used language in Internet forums and chats after more than two centuries of Russian and Soviet rule in Central Asia. In Kazakhstan, English, rather than the local language, is the second most commonly used language. In Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, users often communicate in their respective local languages. These are Tajik, which is related to Persian, and Kyrgyz, which is a Turkic language; both use the Cyrillic alphabet. Still, many kids in Central Asia do not have access to a computer, especially those in rural areas like Timur's cousin Sardor. In villages and small cities, computer access is usually limited to an Internet café where kids and adults pay an hourly fee to log on. Some smaller cities are lucky enough to have computer centers in a local school or library, but these are rare. Only families in larger cities can afford computers and Internet at home. Despite the tensions in the region and the pains of transition, Timur and his "independence generation" are optimistic and excited about the prospects for the future.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

- 1) What country were Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan part of until 1991?
- 2) Why are so many different languages used in these countries?
- 3) Why are computers more common in cities than they are in the countryside?

MORE TO EXPLORE

After reading this week's article on Central Asia, think about all of the daily things that you use technology to do — imagine what it would be like if you did not have these conveniences available to you. Next, go through The Seattle Times and find examples of stories or images about technology that would not have appeared in the paper 10 or 20 years ago. Finally, write a short essay about how you think technology will change our lives, and the whole world, in the next 20 years.

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