

Ad Lane



Class of 2018
Holly Springs, NC

At 7:00pm, June 29th, 2017, I boarded a plane departing Raleigh, North Carolina. Twenty-four hours later, the dawn broke over the steppe of Kazakhstan from 20,000 miles in the air: a piercing orange-red, highlighted by the vastness of the landscape's unending horizon. It was a color I would come to know well during my seven weeks in the country. My project, possible only through the Burch Fellowship, saw me enter the 'land of the Kazakhs' to explore the evolving relationship between traditional artisanship and national identity movements. In doing so, I hoped to understand how, in a country defined by a century of Soviet colonization and a newfound, uncertain autonomy, heritage of the past works to forge a new future.

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THE ART OF BRANDING: NARRATIVES OF IDENTITY AND HERITAGE AT THE CROSSROADS OF MODERN KAZAKHSTAN

In the summer of 2017, the project proved more timely than ever. Day by day, Kazakhstan approaches a crossroads. Their first and only president is nearing the end of his time in office, and the future direction of the nation remains unknown. Kazakhstan is in greater need of one strong voice than ever. Guided by the will of state leaders, events like the 2017 World Expo showcase attempts by the country to forge one voice, part of a process known as nation-branding. Amidst the pavilions and grand exhibits, visitors were exposed to



Kazakhstan's distinctive heritage and the promising aspirations pursued during its ongoing push for modernity.

Upon arrival in Kazakhstan, I was awed by the diversity not only of the people but of the locations. Across malls, museums, public events, and private businesses, my travels documented how symbols of Kazakh culture are used to preserve historical connections and to portray the state brand. Interviews with craftmakers, vendors, and public officials accessed the minds of those behind the scenes, exposing the direction of Kazakhstan's identity and the value of heritage within. In total, my time in-country was split between three large cities: Astana, Shymkent, and Almaty; two mid-sized cities: Karagandy



and Taraz; and one small city: Sayram. The unique characterization of each city - traditional vs. modern or Russian vs. Uzbek - provided an opportunity to examine a unique perspective or question at each site, which allowed my project to be well-rounded in ways I didn't expect at the onset.

This isn't to say the project was without its hitches. My Russian skills



were sufficient for day-to-day operation, but not much more. The demands of my interactions meant I had to tailor my investigations around the

limitations of my linguistic abilities. While this closed some doors, it simultaneously opened others. Being limited to cities meant that I could translate the language instantly, enhancing my conversations



with artisans about strategies, motivations, and values. Engaging with city clubs and schools led to excursions with young, informed Kazakh contemporaries. From an evening of Kazakh nightlife to a memorable sit-in at a Mormon English class, the glimpses of daily life I experienced with them showed me sides of the country I wouldn't have seen as a common tourist. They were invaluable escapes from

the loneliness of research.

Ultimately, my project proved more relevant and useful than I imagined going in. I bore witness to a Kazakhstan at the height of nation-building, populated by a revitalized artisan community tasked with connecting citizens to their traditional roots. Circles of government and craftwork overlap often in public life, where cooperation benefits both parties to beautiful and progressive results. Still, my travels demonstrated this was the exception to the rule. Each group focused on its own goals

and used the other's only when it was beneficial. The result: a general separation of iconography, converging only on occasion. With my findings I returned to North Carolina anew, emboldened by a greater appreciation for my own resourcefulness. My confidence is greater than

ever before, but I'm also left restless. I reminisce about the dimly-light workshops and stretching skylines and dream of moving on from school and experiencing the lives of those separated by tongue and trade and tradition. Through my time in Kazakhstan, enabled by the Burch Fellowship and the generosity of Mr. Burch, I've encountered an uncovered and formative passion. I'm ready to get back into the world and the wonders that lie just beyond comfort. No matter what, and thanks to this experience, one thing is for sure: more adventures are to come.