

INTRODUCTION: A CITY FOR THOUGHT

THE TALE OF one city can tell a story about a society, a region, and a historical moment. The story told here is about how an urban community responded to a political dilemma for two decades and how the community's response offers broader insight on Central Asia after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Since then, ethnic Uzbeks in the city of Osh have lived as citizens of independent Kyrgyzstan, the post-Soviet republic dominated by ethnic Kyrgyz in both numbers and power. The political predicament that Osh Uzbeks have faced is linked to the following questions: What kind of city is Osh to be? Could it become a more cosmopolitan city, where the many ethnicities, most notably the Kyrgyz and the Uzbeks, would coexist productively and share a flourishing of the city? Or would it disintegrate irretrievably into a place of barely mutual tolerance between ethnic groups and cyclical confrontation amid the dreadful economic conditions and recurring moments of political instability in the country?

The record is not promising. Osh has become infamous for two citywide incidents of armed violence and property destruction between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks that together have claimed hundreds of lives. The first occurred in June 1990, triggered by a land dispute on the eve of the Soviet collapse, and

the second in June 2010, exactly twenty years later, during a political crisis that ousted Kyrgyzstan's president. The future of the city is acutely uncertain and is likely to remain so for a long time because the damage done in the second deadly eruption of violence was far worse in terms of lives, homes, and trust. What may come as a surprise, then, is the spectrum of attitudes and responses that Osh Uzbeks entertained during the two decades *between* those two calamitous events. In the context of tight constraints regarding what they could achieve politically in a Kyrgyz-dominated republic, Uzbeks in Osh never ceased to yearn for a good life in urban society, and many worked to build a viable place for Uzbeks in independent Kyrgyzstan.

This book gives an account of the ways in which Osh Uzbeks made sense of the post-Soviet Central Asian order and their place in it during the initial two decades of independence. The stakes of this study involve the very future of Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia, because the issues that have been playing out in Osh—massive unemployment, social injustice, Islamic revival, strident nationalism, ethnic misunderstanding—go to the heart of trends that affect the stability and prosperity of the entire region. The intent is to render a portrait of this city that would then shed more light on Central Asia.

TOURING A REALM OF DISTINCT MANNERS

Yo'lbuvi was one of my first Uzbek acquaintances in Osh when I arrived at Osh State University in the spring of 1994. A highly educated woman in her fifties, Yo'lbuvi spoke to me in Russian, as I knew no Uzbek at the time. She was immediately aware that I had no contact with the Uzbek community in Osh, because I had come to Kyrgyzstan through Kyrgyz institutions, with Kyrgyz government permission, studying the Kyrgyz language, and associating mostly with Kyrgyz academics and students. I spent all of my time in the multiethnic parts of the city: the university, dormitories, provincial library, bazaar, theater, apartment complexes, and the main streets. My experience of Osh worried Yo'lbuvi. Osh had come under sovereign Kyrgyz rule little more than two years previously, after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and following the traumatic 1990 riots between Osh's ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbek residents. She did not want me to learn the city from a Kyrgyz point of view. Knowing my intention to study "culture," Yo'lbuvi talked to me about the contrast between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the area of manners. She told me of the Uzbeks' civilized, refined, town-settled past by describing the elaborate steps that Uzbeks use in food preparation and presentation.¹ By contrast, the Kyrgyz, who she said had led a rough, nomadic existence, had an "uncultured" cuisine; for a meal, they just plunked down a hunk of meat in front of you. "Nomads do not know culture," she explained. "Throughout history, they have only known how to destroy culture. *You* should know this yourself. You're Chinese. You built the Great Wall! What was the Great Wall for, after all? To

keep out the barbarians, the nomads!”² She went on to characterize the Chinese and Uzbeks as two great ancient civilizations who were trading partners on the Silk Road.

Yo’lbuvi’s attempt to cement our relationship and peel me away from my Kyrgyz colleagues with this discussion did not escape me. She took it upon herself to be my guide to Uzbek civilization and the “real” Osh because I was an anthropologist (a researcher of culture), because I was Chinese (a representative of a “great ancient civilization”), because I was American (a consequential outside observer), and because I needed to understand that Osh was “actually an Uzbek city.” The only way I could understand the city and culture, she insisted, was to spend time in a distinctive kind of Uzbek-majority urban neighborhood called a *mahalla*. Mahallas occupied half of the city’s land area, housed most of its ethnic majority Uzbek population, and were the places where many of its residents spent most of their time.³ They were dense spaces of intense social interaction that would reveal much about what it meant to be Uzbek in Osh.

Yo’lbuvi was by no means the first to suggest this notion of Uzbek neighborhoods to me. While I was studying at Kyrgyz State University in Bishkek (the capital of post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan) during the fall of 1993, one of my teachers was a Russian woman who had grown up in an Osh mahalla during the 1950s. One of the few Russians I have met anywhere in Central Asia who could speak a Central Asian language to any degree, she described her mahalla as a place of garrulous sociality and meticulous hospitality, where manners mattered to an extent not found in Kyrgyz or Russian households, or even among Uzbeks living outside of mahallas. She said, for example, that Uzbek hosts entertained their guests by pouring water from a brass decanter (*obdasta*) onto the guests’ hands, held over an exquisitely crafted catch basin (*chilopchin* or *dashsha*), then carefully slicing fruit, arranging foods and tea on the low tables (*khontakhta*), and serving the guests. Trays of prearranged candies and nuts would be taken out and later put back into cabinets, as these were not for the family’s own consumption. After I transferred to Osh State University in 1994, Uzbeks in Osh waxed eloquent to me about the cultured way of life of Uzbeks in the city’s mahallas, underscoring what they called the great ancient culture of the Uzbek people, who have lived in Central Asian cities like Osh for many centuries. They described to me their house courtyards as veritable gardens, adorned with magnificent carved wooden panels and grapevines. It was as if Uzbeks lived in their own separate city within the city. Yo’lbuvi herself took me on my first tour of this purported realm of distinct manners, an experience that inspired my subsequent research focus on Osh’s mahallas. Her desire to influence me proved successful after all.

The mahalla that we visited was located literally across the street from the university dormitory where I was living in 1994, yet it seemed a world away.



Figure 1. Women on a *mahalla* street. Photograph by the author, 2003.

Large social distances can be spanned within small geometric distances in an urban landscape, as a city dweller anywhere could attest. My dormitory was at the foot of Solomon Mountain, near the intersection of two main thoroughfares, Navoi and Kurmanjan Datka, but as busy as these streets were, they carved out a number of old, quiet Uzbek residential neighborhoods on Osh's northeast flank. Yo'lbuvi and I crossed to the north side of Navoi Street from my dormitory and worked our way behind the Avtotrans building (its Soviet institutional name, still in use today). The moment we turned onto the mahalla's narrow street, the visual, audio, tactile, and olfactory cues of the built environment shifted. I had the sense of entering a microcosm, even though the main street was just behind us and around the corner (fig. 1).⁴ Unlike the rational, deliberate look of the rectilinear Soviet sector streets, the mahalla's narrow and sometimes unpaved and winding streets (*ko'cha*) had an improvised, lived-in look. Leading from the thoroughfares, they were internally connected, though there were dead ends in older streets not restructured by Soviet-era city planning. Uzbek houses (*uy*) showed little of themselves to the street; windows were kept barred and draped, if they were present at all on the plain exterior walls of mud or factory brick. Metal gates (*eshik*) of various designs and colors along the street front the passage into each house, which actually consists of an integrated ensemble of separate structures arranged around an outdoor central courtyard. Each house is inhabited by one multi-generational household, different generations usually living in different struc-

tures that all open to the courtyard, which acts as a common area for domestic activities. The single-story courtyard house (*yer uy* or *yer maydoni uy*) is what made mahallas distinctive compared to other kinds of residential zones in Osh and other former Soviet Central Asian cities. As Yo'lbuvi and I walked by some gates that lay tantalizingly open, I wanted to have a look at a house. It was a hot midday, when street activity was usually low, so there was no one in sight to ask.⁵ An elderly woman happened to emerge from a gate as we passed. Although Yo'lbuvi did not know this woman, she introduced me to her and explained that I was a foreign ethnographer interested in Uzbek ways of life. The woman warmly invited us into her house.

We walked through the gate and a short, covered passage and emerged in the still deeper microcosm of a small courtyard called a *hovli*. In contrast to the dusty street and rough, blind walls behind me, the *hovli* seemed blooming with life and human connection. Fruit trees provided shade and coolness and flowers, the colors and scent. In the cool shadow of the tree canopy lay a *so'ri*, a low wooden platform used for sitting and eating. Three goats tied to a post filled the air around us with their sound and smell. Surrounding the *hovli* on three sides were the intricately carved wooden faces of the connected structures that housed the various living spaces, their windows and doors all facing the courtyard. Yo'lbuvi proudly explained each of these elements to me, making sure that I took note of the artistry and refinement. The variegated irregularities of *hovli* space seemed to make possible a variety of simultaneous activities, all taking place side by side—a compact world of involved activity. Edward Hall (1966) noted that walking in a Japanese garden gave one a sense of the space being larger than it was, because irregularly spaced stepping stones exaggerated one's kinesthetic involvement. Similarly, a mahalla house, like the police box of Dr. Who in the science fiction TV series, seemed larger on the inside than when viewed from the outside. I was smitten with "topophilia," a hyper-aestheticization of place (Tuan 1990). It was not only the beauty of individual elements but also the ensemble effect that created the entire atmosphere or sense of place. Tony Hiss (1990, 20) wrote elegantly about human experience of place via "simultaneous perception," a continuous awareness of surroundings via all senses that pays "equal attention to everything at once, omitting nothing and at the same time emphasizing nothing" and that includes not just sights and sounds but smells, temperature, humidity, ground textures, and kinesthesia (the sense of one's own bodily movement). The gestalt of the multichannel experience through simultaneous awareness produces the distinctive, emergent "look and feel" of a place. When Yo'lbuvi and I finally said our thanks to our serendipitous hostess, she handed me a bag of candies and peanuts as a parting gift. "See how hospitable we Uzbeks are," Yo'lbuvi proclaimed with glee, never missing a chance to impress me with the excellence of Uzbek national character.

ETHNIC TERRITORIES IN A CITY

Why do I begin with this vignette of the spontaneous invitation to an Uzbek home? It recounts how I got started in researching the city of Osh and how its residents initially related to me as a Chinese American anthropologist, and it injects a measure of what the discipline calls reflexivity, the awareness of the researcher's position in fieldwork. The account preserves the xenophilic enthusiasm of a rookie ethnographer who, imbibing the tour guide's constant spin, finds the "real" Central Asia after months in Kyrgyzstan's very Soviet-style capital city. Such an account also provides a first taste of a very prevalent and potent narrative that conjoins people, place, and culture. During my 1994 stay in Osh, mahalla residents and outsiders talked to me about these neighborhoods as the primary site of "traditional Uzbek culture," the only place where one could live properly according to "Uzbek ways of life" (*O'zbek turmush tarzi* or, in Russian, *Uzbekskii obraz zhizni*), which encompassed practices from child rearing and fruit cultivation to wedding celebrations and mutual aid (*hashar*).⁶ Both the distinct look and feel that emerge from the style of houses and configurations of the streets indexed for the mahalla residents a particular, ethnically marked mentality—intensely community oriented, conservative, and religious. The mahalla was Uzbek ethnic authenticity made concrete.

Narratives of authenticity, however, are always circulated within specific social contexts, political coordinates, and tactical agendas. The politics implicit in my encounter with Yo'lbuvi is another reason for beginning with the mahalla tour. Yo'lbuvi's evangelistic posture toward me emerged from a conjuncture of her Soviet education (with its notions of reified civilizations and ahistorical ethnicities), the new post-Soviet moment (with its exuberant nationalisms and heady fragrance of possibility after Russian and Soviet rule), and the political predicament of Uzbeks in Osh (with me as a Western witness to its felt injustice). I was for her a particularly enticing tabula rasa, knowing nothing but eager to learn. I represented a consequential observer, coming from the United States, from a prestigious academic institution, and preparing to write books about Central Asia. To be sure, my Uzbek contacts in Osh assumed a less didactic posture toward me after I returned to the city in 1997, no longer an ignorant outsider who needed lecturing but one who could now speak the Uzbek language and who had research experience in Uzbekistan.⁷ They nonetheless continued to characterize the mahalla as the site of "Uzbek traditions." Their persistence in this tack grew more urgent whenever they perceived that the mahalla was under some threat, such as during the two major episodes of interethnic conflict within the city; the postwar reconstruction boom, when mahalla residents were displaced as factories and apartment blocks rose on the razed ruins of mahallas; or the Kyrgyzstani government's

gerrymandering of the city's limits to increase the percentage of Kyrgyz counted.

In such moments, the mahalla was treated as a manifestation of Uzbek territoriality. Those moments foregrounded the sentiment that those neighborhoods collectively belonged to the city's Uzbeks but were also subject to a Russian-Soviet or Kyrgyz state. Although a small but sizable number of Russians and other ethnicities (Kyrgyz, Meskhetian Turks, Tajiks, Azeris, Roma, and in periods past, Jews and Chechens) had lived in Osh's newer mahallas (built after World War II), most vacated their homes and left for Russia or elsewhere in the early 1990s.⁸ And Kyrgyz, whose minimal numbers in Osh started to grow only in the postwar period, mostly resided in Soviet-built apartment complexes to which rural Kyrgyz migrants flocked after independence in 1991.⁹ Today one rarely finds a non-Uzbek on most of Osh's mahalla streets, and thus the mahalla is excluded from the urban experience of the city's more than one hundred thousand Kyrgyz (both lifelong residents and recent rural migrants), Russians, and others (including expatriates)—a sizable portion of the city's population.¹⁰

This is why it took an Uzbek guide like Yo'lbuvi to bring me into a mahalla in 1994. Frankly, I had found them intimidating. Urban places are never socially neutral; they carry tacit understandings about who belongs, when, and why. My Kyrgyz friends warned me, "Don't wander into a mahalla, especially in the evenings. You may be mistaken for a Kyrgyz and get into trouble," referring to my East Asian facial features that resemble Kyrgyz ones. Years later, when I presented a paper about mahalla life at an Osh State University conference, one Kyrgyz man remarked that, despite more than a decade of residency in Osh, he had never actually set foot in a mahalla beyond a major street like Kalinin (where car repair shops line the street and a bus line runs).¹¹ One Kyrgyz teenager recounted the tensions he felt when, in the mid-1990s, he visited an Uzbek friend one evening in Uzgen, a nearby Kyrgyzstani city that also had an Uzbek majority.¹² "At night, no Kyrgyz are to be found in town," he said, because Kyrgyz live outside the Uzbek core of Uzgen. "If a Kyrgyz is caught walking, he is accosted and asked, 'What are you doing here?'" This teenager also described how groups of male Uzbek youth routinely picked fights with Kyrgyz youth (unless they are outnumbered) in the Oshskii micro-district, the multiethnic neighborhood of Soviet-built apartment blocks bordering Osh's oldest mahallas. In the male teenage world of toughness and turf, apartment neighborhoods were considered more contestable ground, while mahallas were clearly Uzbek territory.¹³

Two explosive events in the city's recent history escalated the idea of Uzbek territoriality into the literal armed defense of barricaded streets. The massive Kyrgyz-Uzbek killings of June 2010 in the key cities of southern Kyrgyzstan, Osh and Jalalabat, followed the political crisis that erupted when President

Kurmanbek Bakiev was ousted from power. It led to the targeted burning of mahalla houses and Uzbek businesses, 120,000 displaced across southern Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbek men stationed behind jackknifed buses and debris to block off entrances to their mahallas.¹⁴ The multiple forces at work in the interethnic violence are not entirely clear at the time of this writing.¹⁵ Such events in Central Asia today are always shrouded with a generosity of rumor and paucity of fact, which can be adjudicated only by a rigorous independent inquiry, something not forthcoming in Kyrgyzstan's current political climate. It is certain, though, that once triggered and enabled, the undercurrent of resentment and misunderstandings that flows beneath everyday urban life in Osh rapidly found destructive expression, especially among the numerous unemployed youth, who were highly susceptible to rumor and rhetoric.

This kind of event, unfortunately, was not Osh's first. Twenty years before the 2010 outbreak, to the month, the Osh riots of June 1990 began as a land dispute between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks and quickly escalated into armed interethnic violence throughout the city and nearby region. More than three hundred persons may have died in the violence. The sense of foreboding was palpable in Osh during the early 1990s. People of all ethnicities with whom I talked at that time would drop their voices to hushed tones when talking about the horror of the riots, the rift in the city's social fabric, and the uneasy peace settling over the city. Showing me scars on his arm, one man of mixed Kyrgyz-Uzbek parentage told me how families like his huddled in their homes, wishing only for the violence on both sides to stop. When armed youth gangs of one ethnicity raged through the street, knocking on every door and killing those of the other group, the mixed families would send the Kyrgyz parent to answer the door if Kyrgyz were knocking and the Uzbek parent, if Uzbeks were knocking.¹⁶ Then, too, Uzbeks posted themselves along barricades at the entrances to their mahallas, literally defending their territory.¹⁷ Kyrgyz occupied certain locations in the apartment complexes, major streets, and squares. For those days in June 1990 and June 2010, the ethnicized territoriality of Osh and other predominantly Uzbek areas in southern Kyrgyzstan became a shifting tactical battlefield, and that "military geography" became horribly layered onto the cityscape after each incident, inscribed in the painful memories, scarring, and bodily routines of its residents, such as which places they would choose to walk or try to avoid.

In light of what was to happen in 2010, it is a pity to note that, despite lingering mutual misunderstandings and general lack of deep social relations between ethnicities, public life in Osh was calm and workable in the later 1990s and as the twenty-first century began. The immediacy of the animosity from the 1990 riots had mostly waned by the 2000s, and new routines of normal life got woven in the urban fabric, helping to mend it for two decades. Wealth accumulated for some Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in southern Kyrgyzstan, and with

repressions happening next door in Uzbekistan (culminating in a massacre in 2005), many Osh Uzbeks had begun to value being citizens of Kyrgyzstan and worked to build a viable future within its framework (Liu unpublished). The 2010 events ended what had promised to be a sustainable trajectory of peaceful coexistence. Yet that promise was perhaps always illusory in the long term, given the continuing poor economy, the seemingly periodic overturning of national governments, the interests of the powerful business–politics–crime triumvirate in southern Kyrgyzstan, and the lack of intercommunal discourse about the proper place of non-Kyrgyz in a Kyrgyz-centered republic.

This is a bleak picture. This book, however, offers a rather positive portrait. It shows how Osh Uzbeks saw and coped with their difficult political dilemma during the first twenty years of independence with a deeply rooted optimism. While it is not clear how the trauma of 2010 will affect their enduring attitudes, this study does reveal something about the resilience and creativity of Kyrgyzstani Uzbek communities in envisioning and laboring for a constructive niche under great political constraint, for a while at least. The fact that, in retrospect, two major riots form the bookends to this project does not diminish the import of what the Uzbek communities attempted to achieve in the period between 1990 and 2010. Yo'lbuvi's tour of the Uzbek neighborhood provided some hints, for example, opening a window into the high value that Uzbeks invested in their mahallas because these neighborhoods somehow distilled the essence of what it meant to be Uzbek in this Kyrgyzstani city. Urban place was central to Uzbeks' conceptions of who they are and where they fit in an often contradictory and troubled post-Soviet political order. However, the mahalla was not merely about ethnic territory or cultural authenticity in contrast to a Kyrgyz other (or, earlier, to a Soviet other). One important lesson expounded in these pages is that, riots notwithstanding, the significance of the city to Osh Uzbeks does *not* primarily concern ethnicized claims to land. They came to see the mahalla as a key to making a society marked by human flourishing rather than recurrent crises. The mahalla became a figure of thought implicated in how they made sense of what Soviet rule in Central Asia was about and what post-Soviet Central Asian society ought to be like. Urban place was something to *think* with.

THINKING WITH A CITY

A city is good not just for living but for pondering. Sometimes it takes an outsider to recognize the interpretive potential of a city, as the late Tony Judt (2005, 2) does concerning Vienna in 1989, which he describes as “a good place from which to ‘think’ [postwar] Europe,” because by the time that the Berlin Wall fell, it was a “palimpsest of Europe’s complicated, overlapping pasts,” which he reads in the city’s built environment. In other times, it is the city dwellers themselves who look at the urban transformations that they are expe-

riencing as indexing the spirit of the times. Urban inhabitants can treat their city as an interpretive frame with which to think about the world. They can take its spaces, material conditions, characteristic lifestyles, historical reputation, or imputed ideals as a lived site through which to understand the times, because the city somehow captures or plays out a crucial dilemma.

This book tells the story of one city in today's Central Asia, whose streets, bazaars, landmarks, and neighborhoods tell a broader story. It is an urban ethnography that uses detailed, on-the-ground accounts of city life to illuminate critical questions about post-Soviet Central Asian realities: the effects of marketization, intense economic hardships, mounting inequalities, desire for Soviet-era stability and state control, the "revival" of ethnic traditions, and the Islamization of social life. The city of Osh since 1991 is a felicitous place from which to *think* post-Soviet Central Asia.¹⁸ Located today inside the borders of Kyrgyzstan, Osh is an ancient Silk Road city with a population of more than a quarter million, and it has harbored a majority ethnic Uzbek population for centuries (Galitskii and Ploskikh 1987; Sulaimanov and Liu 1997).¹⁹ After the dissolution of the Soviet Union into its constituent republics in 1991, Uzbeks living in Osh became citizens of an independent Kyrgyzstan, where political power is held predominantly by ethnic Kyrgyz. Osh is Kyrgyzstan's second-largest city, a provincial capital in the country's populous south, and it was declared in 2000 to be the republic's "second capital." Yet the city is located on the border with Uzbekistan, and, because of its location on the edge of the Fergana Valley, it is geographically and historically more connected to population centers that lie within the valley in independent Uzbekistan. The position of the city and its large Uzbek population at the nexus between these two post-Soviet states is what makes it a particularly productive site for pondering.

Osh is good to think with because it exemplifies the postcolonial contradictions within Central Asian nation-states today. The "nation-state" concept is a poor fit for Osh Uzbeks, who look to Uzbekistan for their ethnic identification and to Kyrgyzstan for their citizenship. The predicament of Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan is that they are caught between these two republics yet excluded from meaningfully belonging to either. This is a predicament that began with the early Soviet creation of the ethnoterritorial republics that put Osh under the newly created Kyrgyz territorial jurisdiction and then grew even more complicated under a nationalities policy that advanced Kyrgyz into leadership positions with Russians, since the Soviet Union was the world's first "affirmative action empire," one that politically promoted the "titular nationality" (the ethnic group for which the territory is named) within the erstwhile Kirgiz Soviet Socialist Republic.²⁰ The Osh Uzbek predicament deepened with Osh's postwar industrialization and the resulting massive Kyrgyz rural migration into the city, and it intensified when the Soviet ethnic territories became sovereign nation-states. The post-Soviet Kyrgyzstani government's stated com-

mitment to building a common future for all its ethnicities notwithstanding (notably for its economically significant Uzbeks and Russians), it has clearly promoted Kyrgyz in most positions of power.²¹ Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan are disempowered because they live in a state that, since independence, has been nationalizing around ideas of Kyrgyz distinctiveness and the fact of Kyrgyz dominance in most positions of influence. What is Kyrgyzstan today but the fulfillment of the Kyrgyz people's historical destiny in sovereign self-rule and collective material/cultural development according to a proud Kyrgyz heritage? Though debated in its particulars among Kyrgyz politicians and intellectuals, this basic premise of the national ideology locates ethnic minorities as structurally secondary to the core purpose of the republic. On the other hand, because Osh Uzbeks are Kyrgyzstani citizens, they are shut out of the "land of the Uzbeks" (the meaning of Uzbekistan) by the adjacent international border that became progressively impassable due to the post-Soviet Uzbekistani state's obsession with security and control. The notion of ethnic affinity has done nothing to alter Uzbekistan's priorities regarding the Uzbek "diaspora" just beyond its state borders.

This problematic situation of Osh Uzbeks exemplifies one dilemma characterizing post-Soviet Central Asia more broadly. Because ethnoterritorial notions inherited from Soviet ideology, policy, and institutions constitute the very *raison d'être* of these successor states, the question is how far minority communities can advance their collective interests if state power is foundationally premised on promoting the welfare of the titular nationality. The Osh Uzbek situation, however, is not adequately captured by the usual notion of ethnic minority, with its implied assumptions about the naturalness of the nation-state's compact, bounded territory. "Don't call us a minority!" one Osh Uzbek told me once. "We are a *majority* in Osh, and in cities like Jalal-Abad and Uzgen. Don't call us a diaspora, either. Diaspora means separation from an original homeland. We've been here in these cities for centuries! It is the Kyrgyz who came recently."²² But despite Osh Uzbeks' claims of the originary "Uzbek" character of Osh and the political fantasy of many during the 1990s, *sotto voce*, that the city should be annexed to Uzbekistan, their troubled post-Soviet position is ultimately not a matter of the border falling in the "wrong" place, any more than interethnic troubles in Bosnia after Yugoslavia's dissolution could be solved with "smart maps" that sought to partition relatively mono-ethnic enclaves within enclaves.²³ Rather, it points to the conceit of modern political imaginaries that state borders could ever partition conceptually coherent "nations" out of premodern cultural-linguistic hybridities and coexisting diversities that were never previously understood in modern ethnic or national-territorial terms.

Differences in culture, language, and ecological adaptation were of course recognized between Central Asian peoples before Soviet rule, but they were

not seen according to the package of concepts involving fixed sets of characteristics that are now so widely asserted and taken for granted. That set of notions came to Central Asia with a Soviet nationalities policy that defined and affirmed the social reality and political value of “nationality” and a hierarchy of ethnic categories.²⁴ Ethnicities, though not invented out of thin air, were standardized by state ethnographers in the 1920s and 1930s: formerly fluid hybridities and contextual identifications were stabilized, naturalized, and set into a particular mold that gave each group a definitive history, physiognomy, mentality, material culture, customs, language, and territory. These definitions were then institutionalized into ethnically coded territorial-administrative structures (the fifteen republics of the Soviet Union) and routinized into everyday life over seven decades. It is in that sense that Central Asian ethnicities are (recent) sociopolitical constructions and that the categories of “Uzbek” and “Kyrgyz” (and others), as they are currently assumed to exist, were invented by the Soviet state.²⁵ Because those labels do designate relatively coherent and stable groups of people today, I employ them without scare quotation marks, but it should be kept in mind that they do not necessarily entail the entire set of imputed characteristics that the people themselves tend to assume. In particular, Kyrgyz or Uzbek claims about the naturalness of connections between ethnic group and territory, whether on the scale of republic or neighborhood, need to be viewed instead as political stances in particular circumstances.

The Osh Uzbeks’ predicament of double exclusion points straight to the inherent contradictions in the package of concepts that constitute the postcolonial nation-state, which are painfully familiar elsewhere in the world record. This study is partly about how Osh Uzbeks responded during the first two decades of independence to the political constraints set by this particular postcolonial order. The tragic incidents of interethnic killings in 1990 and 2010 remind us of the human stakes involved in this corner of the world when nation and state are constituted in exclusionary terms and the resulting contradictions are left unresolved.

Osh is also “good to think” because the city presents a unique vantage point from which to *think* comparative postsocialisms. It sits at a juncture deeply affected by both Kyrgyzstan’s relatively liberal reforms and Uzbekistan’s rigid state paternalism, which continues much of the Soviet-style control over society and the economy. Consider how Osh Uzbeks conceive of good government after state socialism, when they are confronted daily with two contrasting models of post-Soviet reform. This is a profound question for them, one intimately bound up with their predicament of exclusion from Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan’s draconian economic policies and obsession with security have meant it has enforced strict border security. Though Osh lies at the border with Uzbekistan and the city’s Uzbeks have since the Soviet period

(when the border was mostly formal) many ties across it, controls have made it increasingly difficult to cross. Living at the troubled border has made Osh Uzbeks confront weighty questions about what constitutes viable community and society in Central Asia today and whether there is a specifically Central Asian model for the postsocialist state amid the assertive claims of neoliberalism and Islamism that have been bearing down on the region. Osh thus serves as a site in which to disclose local ways of envisioning a viable place for Central Asia in the post-cold war, post-9/11 global order. One must ask how multiple histories are layered into the present as Central Asians mobilize and reiterate “ethnic traditions,” Soviet assumptions, Inner Asian sensibilities, and Islamic knowledge in the service of transforming society toward stability and prosperity, toward even globally circulating ideals of “democracy” and “capitalism.” The results reveal vernacular idioms of understanding—decidedly Central Asian ways of looking at the world today.

Because *thinking* with Osh yields a spectrum of insights about Central Asia today, this book seeks to leverage the city as much as possible. Outside observers can use the city to help explain a complex geographical region and fluid historical moment. But residents of Osh themselves leverage the city. Uzbeks living in Osh treat urban places as frameworks for making sense of the world and potentially for acting on it. They *think with their city* in certain moments to make sense of their perplexing post-Soviet situation, characterized by their uncertain place in the world. They interpret their predicament through the concrete spaces of everyday urban life. They also see certain city places as instrumental to a *solution*, because those places are believed to create the conditions of possibility for societal renewal.

Thinking with a city, the city as an interpretive frame: what these notions concern at heart is the significance of place in how people conceive of the world. The assumptions, conceptions, attitudes, and sensibilities about a sociopolitical situation—which I will collectively call an *imaginary*—can be intimately rooted in everyday urban life. What may be surprising about the connection is that the very spatial characteristics of bodily activity in the city can condition the qualities of imaginaries, as will be discussed later. In other words, how we dwell in space matters in how we conceive of the world. Since the discussion has turned conceptual, the term *imaginary*, as used in this sense, must be defined.

IMAGINARIES AND IDIOMS

By an imaginary, I do not mean something fictitious or fanciful but, rather, tacitly held models of the social and political world. In Charles Taylor’s (2004, 23) formulation, the term refers to “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper norma-

tive notions and images that underlie these expectations.”²⁶ A sociopolitical imaginary is the grasp people have of the conventional actors, groups, actions, places, contexts, times, meanings, and interests involved in their collective life and how all those are expected to work within an open-ended yet graded scale of possibility.²⁷ An imaginary encompasses not only explicit ideologies about society but also embodied social practice and the “fluid middle ground” between them (Gaonkar 2002, 11). It includes what philosophers since Wittgenstein in his later years as well as the early phenomenologists have called the background, that is, the “largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation within which particular features of our world show up for us in the sense they have” (Taylor 2004, 25). Imaginaries thus make social existence possible and make discourse-practice meaningful within their frames.

The sociopolitical imaginaries articulated in the post-Soviet Osh Uzbek community, as I will show, are condensed around several identifiable idioms connected variously with urban places of Osh. By *idiom* I mean a vernacular configuration of ideas, practices, sentiments, and dispositions that are circulated in a discursive community at a certain period with a power to organize thought, experience, talk, and action. An idiom is a particular conjuncture of ways of thinking, saying, and doing that are influential in the social life of a collectivity for a time. An idiom can be thought of as a point in the space of an imaginary. These analytical constructions are useful in illuminating how Osh Uzbeks are making sense of their post-Soviet situations in a way that acknowledges inertias from the past but avoids the essentialisms of ethnized mentalities. When an Uzbek man advocates “authoritarian” state rule or patriarchal social relations, it is not because of his “traditional Uzbek mindset,” “Islamic ways of thinking,” or even simply because of “Soviet nostalgia,” despite the ubiquity of such essentialist claims. More complex and more dynamic conjunctions of factors are at play, factors that come together in recognizable configurations—idioms—that are manifest in narrative and everyday life practice. The concepts of imaginary and idiom provide purchase on the problem of interpreting post-Soviet Central Asia because they place discourse and practice on a unified analytical field. This placement enables creative explorations of the sometimes surprising connections between them, potentially divulging aspects of subjectivities that may otherwise be missed.²⁸

One intriguing idiom organizing Osh Uzbeks’ urban experience is one I will call *Osh as an idiom of exchange*.²⁹ By this I mean that Osh is treated as a city characterized by exchanges of various kinds: economic, social, cultural, political, and conceptual. The idiom refers not merely to the city’s historical role in Eurasian land trade (commonly, though misleadingly, called the Silk Road) or to the explosive post-Soviet growth of its vast bazaar.³⁰ The term ultimately refers to Osh as encapsulating, in our subjects’ conceptions, a particu-

lar configuration of mediation between differences. The city exemplifies the negotiated contact between mountain and valley, nomad and town dweller, Kyrgyz and Uzbek; between Central Asian, Russian-Soviet, and newly available global connections; between order and chaos, the control of the state and possibilities of the market; between the so-called good “Islam of our forefathers” and the extremist Islam of foreigners. Taken together, such moments of contact form a multifaceted modality of urban experience in which the city’s sites of convergence and juxtaposition serve as the literal home ground upon which to cope and live with the array of pressures that Osh Uzbeks face. Thus, by seeing the give and take of exchange as embedded in the very nature of Osh, its Uzbek inhabitants have in their city a paradigm that naturalizes or tames the presence of apparent contradiction, enabling them to potentially find points of accommodation and to confront better the dilemmas of their Soviet and post-Soviet existence.

While rooted in locality, Osh as an idiom of exchange resonates with wider Central Asian moves to employ the Silk Road as a metaphor of premodern Eurasian continental connectivity for post-Soviet political, economic, or cultural projects.³¹ The idiom rallies a proud ancient history into the service of helping Osh Uzbeks contend with powerful and disruptive global and regional pulls—the inflation, unemployment, labor emigration, interstate tensions, drugs, and corruption. It makes a virtue out of necessity and potential agents out of those who would otherwise be victims of grand forces. It promises a means for Osh Uzbeks to reach, on their own terms and from a putatively great historic past, beyond Soviet connections toward the daunting new world after the cold war. This idiom of exchange thus includes seeds of manageable change. Mediation enables the hope of transformation.

Osh Uzbeks “think with their city” to make sense of their post-Soviet dilemma of exclusion and uncertainty and to imagine ways out of that dilemma. This is the central argument of the book. They treat the city itself as an *explanatory* framework with which to interpret Soviet and post-Soviet life and as an *emancipatory* framework with which to create conditions that would ameliorate their predicament. They regard Osh through various idioms that capture their understandings of problems and solutions. The book’s chapters are expositions of how these idioms—figures of thought and practice—organize what Osh Uzbeks think and do. Because the idioms are anchored in actual urban space, the book is structured with respect to specific places of the city that are paired with an issue or idea being pondered through that site.

The chapters approach the city’s places and idioms in a way that is similar to Yo’lbuvi’s opening tour of a mahalla. This kind of approach is not only a mode of ethnographic exposition that lends local flavor, but it is also an analytic approach that insists on the indispensability of the “ground-level” view in fully understanding important social, economic, and political trends. This

approach constitutes a critical response to the kinds of analysis prevalent in scholarship about post-Soviet Central Asia. Indeed, this book has a conceptual agenda within Central Asian studies.

RETHINKING CENTRAL ASIA

Central Asia is a curiously overdetermined yet understudied region of the world. Located at the heart of the Eurasian continental landmass at the interstice between the more scrutinized Middle East, China, Russia, and South Asia, Central Asia has been a neglected hole in the map. When the region is written about at all, it tends to be treated in terms of something other than itself—as an Islamic periphery to be compared against the Middle Eastern heartland; as a subject of Soviet, Russian, or Chinese imperial projects; as a geopolitical chessboard for the European Great Powers; as a promising, underdeveloped source of hydrocarbons for the post-cold war global economy; as a needy recipient of neoliberal assistance in loans, technocratic expertise, and democratic practices; and as a strategic battleground in what the George W. Bush administration considered its worldwide “war on terror.” Central Asia has indeed been each of these things.³² But it is much more than what outside interests would make it.

When scholarly writing, policy briefing papers, organizational reports, or the news media view post-Soviet Central Asia, they often collapse the region’s multiplicity into tidy one-dimensional representations in an evolutionary frame with Western ideals as the endpoint, such as “the transition to democracy and free markets,” “the growth of civil society,” or “the integration into the world economy.”³³ Post-Soviet developments in Central Asian societies, politics, and economies that instead betray a diversity of alternative directions and processes are cast as aberrant regressions on the canonical timeline, such as a so-called slide back to authoritarianism (or tribalism or ethnic particularism) or as a resurgence of Islam. To be sure, many analyses framed in this way have yielded valuable insights that support well-intentioned and desperately needed assistance to the region. But what is underrepresented in the literature is consideration of how the various consequences of post-Soviet transformation will actually play out amid local contingencies and what those consequences may mean to Central Asians themselves according to their vernacular frames of reference.³⁴ The challenge is to study Central Asians without seeing them as being deluded rational actors or repressed liberal subjects at their core, that is, to acknowledge that culture really does matter in how people make sense of and act in the world.³⁵ The issue is thus the underdeveloped state of post-Soviet Central Asian studies as a whole.

This book represents an appeal for more creative inquiry and theoretical reflection on this part of the contemporary world. It marks one attempt to divulge more of the rhapsodic richness of a place that has sat for centuries at the

confluence of Turko-Mongol, Arab, Islamo-Persian, Indian, Chinese, Russian, Soviet socialist, and now global neoliberal and transnational Islamic currents. While nearly every spot on the globe can be shown to have fascinating histories of cultural confluence and hybridity, there is something particularly noteworthy about the continental reach, “civilizational” diversity, time depth, and density of Central Asia’s layered histories in how they manifest themselves today to constitute a complex present. Anthropology’s task, some have recently argued, is to divulge the “history of the present”—the legacies of the past as they are now embedded in all sorts of ethnographically available sites: rituals and mundane existence, documents and novels, dress and architecture, maps and museums, all variously revealing stratified archaeologies of knowledges, dispositions, comportments, and sentiments. This approach acknowledges that multiple pasts are always somehow present in how people understand their current situations, imagine their possibilities, and make claims for their futures.³⁶ It treats history as a nonlinear presence in social imaginaries and social action because specific legacies can articulate in surprisingly nondeterministic ways, here partially erasing each another, there coexisting in tension, here mutually reinforcing, and there reinterpreting one other. Anthropology needs to reckon with a history as thickly sedimented and widely connected as Central Asia’s in attempting to describe the region ethnographically. This book by no means claims to be an authoritative statement on the anthropology of Central Asia, nor a fulfillment of the tall order for the field outlined here. Rather, it aspires to be one opening move that is suggestive of new possibilities in approaching this corner of the world. This work approaches Central Asia’s sedimented complexity by applying analytic attention to social imaginaries and spatiality. Imaginaries are layered by a rich variety of discourses and practices with enduring and reiterated circulations—an interplay of the old, the new, and the recycled. Urban spaces are layered with histories of production and appropriation and corporeal histories of habitual comportment and sensation—an interplay of state, neighborhood, and body.

In order to divulge this layered complexity, the book sometimes presents its materials and reflections by moving through Osh’s urban landscape, divulging the thick groundedness of local inhabited worlds and revealing the city’s mediation of contrasts. The expository strategy of spatially guiding readers through the city comes from the great amount of time I spent treading the often winding and hidden paths of the city, mapping out spatial relations and their connections to conjunctures of power, wealth, sociality, and ideas. This strategy involves not so much “reading” the cityscape as an abstract text but sounding it out as a living, engaged field of lifeworlds.³⁷ What is lost in systematicity would be compensated by valuable glimpses of how forces and trends intersect with lives and subjectivities. This ground-level engagement with the cityscape works from an ethnographic “aesthetic of excess”—the re-

alization that no attempt to represent the social can capture its fullness, that there always exists an irreducible remainder not neatly taken into account by any given analytic scheme.³⁸ This is not to eschew analysis and its necessary generalizations but rather to *situate* the analysis with respect to a never fully tamable reality. This approach operates as a sensibility in that it informs a kind of writing that, while striving for leveraged understanding and summarizing commentary, is not embarrassed by divulging ethnographic details that may appear not to contribute to the arguments at hand (to a measured degree—herein lie the aesthetics), if only to show that there is always more to these human lives than our analyses of them.³⁹ The people depicted here have to live. Being willing to step into the “excessive” plenitude of local worlds, even in the token manner of scholarly analysis, can serve to acknowledge more fully the humanity of our subjects.

Structuring the exposition as a spatial tour highlights in particular the multiple dependencies between the micro scale of situated social worlds and the macro levels of national and transnational orders (to use the convenient but problematic language of scale).⁴⁰ “Local knowledge,” observes John Peters (1997, 81), “is constantly discredited as a guide to living in the modern world for being too concrete, too mired in immediacy.” Peters writes that, “in its beginnings, ethnography focused on local worlds that were seen . . . as dangerously delicate in contrast to the scale and power of engulfing cosmopolitan orders” (1997, 80). He argues that, nevertheless, “localities . . . still govern the lives of most humans, even the rapidly increasing numbers with access to global, regional, national, and local media” (1997, 91). On the other hand, “the apparently immediate experience of community is in fact inevitably constituted by a wider set of social and spatial relations” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997b, 7). Because a dialectic synthesis is needed, Peters argues for a “bifocal” approach to place that dialectically combines attention to large-scale structures on one hand and small-scale interpretive activity on the other. The grounded expository approach of this book adopts a bifocal vision by bringing out crucial post-Soviet Central Asian economic, political, and social trends as they are experienced on a daily basis by the residents of Osh.

When it comes to analyses of post-Soviet Central Asia, however, the scholarly approaches apparent in the literature are decidedly biased toward the macro scale. They have tended to interpret the complex postsocialist transformations through a grand narrative of transition toward democracy and the free market.⁴¹ Such analyses tend to miss the actual processes of change playing out on the small scales of communities and individuals. There is little theorization about the unintended consequences and emergent phenomena that can arise from contestations over ways of interpreting political and economic situations and imagining alternative possibilities (Berdahl 2000; Burawoy and Verdery 1999, 6–7). The lack of analytic attention to the small scale can have a

bearing on understanding the large scale. How democratic or capitalistic ideas and practices might actually take hold (or fail to do so) in post-Soviet Central Asian societies occurs in the sphere of everyday life, not national politics. Research investigating these ideas and practices must therefore be sited not only at the commanding heights of political and economic elites or the “frictionless” realm of ideal models but also on the messy ground where ordinary people live (Liu 2003).⁴² Wittgenstein (1972, §107) issued a famous warning about the limitations of ideal analytical models: “We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need friction. Back to the rough ground!”

Literally grounding our analysis is particularly crucial in understanding the city, as Michel de Certeau has shown, because situated pedestrian views of a city offer insights into the urban condition missed in abstracted eagle-eye perspectives from above (Certeau 1980/1984). This book directs our steps back to Wittgenstein’s rough ground, where city dwellers encounter the macro issues that affect them during their daily routines in the city. Attention to the spaces of urban activity provides unique access into lived Central Asian realities.