

Central Asia in Context

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All of life—its constraints and opportunities—is lived in relation to surroundings. It is within a particular environment that relationships unfold and meaning gets formed. That experience is tied to context is, to no small extent, obvious. Nonetheless, in trying to analytically make sense of experience and of that which emerges from the social worlds tied to it, we make moves to simplify, to find the explanatory essence of what leads people to do what they do. This is what David Hume captures in a dictum attributed to him that “explanation is where the mind rests.” Most often, however, the answers to questions are neither simple nor short; as Rafik Schami poetically notes in *The Dark Side of Love*, “olive trees and answers both need time.” Implicit here is the incompleteness of knowledge and an acceptance that knowing—that having something close to answers—takes effort.

Such constraints—that work is required to understand a people and their place, for example—seem at odds with how knowledge gets generalized and acted upon, shared across media platforms in sound bites that are at times more intriguing than they are accurate. In the case of Central Asia (though I would argue, not only here), gaps in knowledge are filled in by the prejudices and assumptions of one’s own experience of the world, wherein one may underappreciate the role of extended family, religion, economic struggle, and so on in meaning-making for the interlocutors in question. There is no reason to assume, of course, that behaviors are irrational if they look different from what is considered “rational” in a different cultural environment; it is simply more likely that we do not know enough to appreciate the context in which the other is making decisions.

It is thus a generalized claim that we need to be cognizant of different

visions of the experience of others, to be self-reflective on the limits of what we know about the environment in which others live. This book is a collective reflection on how to understand a place. We accept as its premise that an understanding of any region must be gained through an appreciation of the context in which people live, and that context is multivocal, filled with different dialects—at times, even languages—of experience.

The aim in this book is to facilitate such an understanding by thematically exploring various contexts in which Central Asians encounter, experience, and frame their world. The assumption is that context informs meaning, and although chapter themes are presented as distinct topics, life is not so neat and the events that define it seldom, if ever, emerge in isolation. Rather, events are always only part of the causal explanation of social behavior. Moving from singular explanations to appreciating more complicated, interconnected explanations is an underlying goal of this work.

Contextualizing as an Approach to the Region

As we see across this book, what constitutes “Central Asia,” is not as neatly bounded as it seems at first. Generally, we focus on the spaces characterized as the five former Soviet Muslim Central Asian republics: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Even here, however, the characterization is uneven, given, for example, the difficulty of conducting research in Turkmenistan. Despite this general focus on the “Five Stans,” what could be considered part of Central Asia can be framed more broadly to also encompass—in different contexts with varied rationales—Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Xinjiang (East Turkestan), Mongolia, Tartarstan, parts of Siberia, and even parts of Iran (Persia). Boundaries are seldom exact; context allows us a sense of the fluidity in meanings—and experience—they can convey.

To complicate the boundaries of Central Asia, some chapters in the volume reach outside the “post-Soviet Central Asian” space. Various political transitions brought about the borders of the contemporary states, but these boundaries also belie a more fluid, differently bounded sense of territory that most of history knew. Thus, in our thinking about any one place, we also need to consider place in relation to what surrounds it and what impacted differentiation across other ways of demarcating boundaries—whether khanate, tribal, Soviet, or independent; whether mountain or valley, rural or urban, language or ethnicity, and so on. Although there is a lot that made the region and the five ‘stans seem coherent following the collapse of the Soviet Union, after three decades of independence the various countries have developed characteristics that are unique to their distinct trajectories. Yet, in looking to present relationships, we must also recognize where more underlies what made them than what can be neatly contained on a map.

Thus, our very aim of suggesting Central Asia *in context* forces us to look broadly, to look beyond confined spaces, and to consider relationships that exist within, across, between, in relation to, and in opposition with multiple

experiences. This pushes us to consider not only disciplinary approaches to specific questions but multidisciplinary contributions to addressing problems. Although there are pressures within university departments to reify disciplinaryity, area studies such as those we see in Central Asian Studies offer a space where the breadth of connections associated with place can be explored, and where multiple disciplinary approaches offer multiple ways of seeing places. And it is these collaborative, multidisciplinary, and interdisciplinary approaches—fostered in areas such as Central Asian Studies—that can offer us hope in our efforts to address the complex problems that people face.

The contributors to this volume come from diverse backgrounds—anthropology, environmental studies, geography, history, linguistics, literature, musicology, political science, religious studies, sociology—and yet represent the best of collaboration that can emerge in area studies broadly. The end of the Soviet Union created new opportunities for research in the region, and it is during this post-Soviet period that many of the relationships developed between our contributors and their interlocutors in the field. Because of the paucity of literature previously available, people read each other's work, independent of the disciplinary approach, and it is this type of multidisciplinary conversation about the region that is advanced in this volume. With so many authorial voices present, we must recognize that there are at least that many approaches to the region being offered, but the diversity of the region is more poignantly (and pragmatically) represented in the quotidian spaces where people socially navigate their worlds. It is the environment where people navigate across micro, meso, and macro levels of the social world that fluidity of place and diversity of analysis have the most purchase.

Structuring Context

All context is structured, though there is variation in how it is structured. Text is no different, and thus a word on the book's layout is appropriate. It is assumed that people will read the volume in multiple ways, but the overall vision is one where thematic chapters give a topical focus, and case studies complicate those chapters by showing the interconnectedness of life across a multitude of themes. Therein the contributors seek to both focus and expand thinking about the region.

The book is divided into eight parts, each beginning with a short overview followed by four thematic chapters. Each section also contains three case studies, which offer complexity for thinking through the themes and drawing upon not only the themes of the section chapters but other themes across the book. The book begins with a part on general approaches to seeing the region in context, offering perspectives on the region as global, local, place, and story, with each thematic approach demonstrating a particular way of prioritizing and valuing. We see at the offset how the way we frame context impacts the issues viewed as most salient for understanding. Usually introductory texts begin with history, but here we begin with ways

of seeing the present, before we shift in the second part to exploring the historical context.

Underlying this progression is the notion that the varied ways of framing contexts will influence perspectives all the way through—and, more important, that history is not an isolated series of events with scant contemporary relevance. On the contrary, in chapters moving from the precolonial era through the colonial, Soviet, and post-Soviet eras, we see the significance of history to any understanding of the contemporary, whether in the differently constructed experience of boundaries or in the nature of how pasts frame the environment of present behavior and the references to which people point for legitimacy. Here, the very frames provided by the themes in the early sections are open to critique, with the corresponding cases providing further context to the nature of contextualization and the role that history continues to play.

The next six parts of the book set forth to overview the Contemporary Context, to include the contexts of living, structure, transformation, work, vision, and aesthetics. Within the Contexts of Living section, chapters on rural, urban, migratory, and diaspora life provide a sense of the varied environments in which people live and the implications of such experiences. In the Contexts of Structure section, the focus of the chapters is on family, social, moral, and gender structures, to show the varied relational forces that shape individual and communal behavior in the region. Likewise, themes that fundamentally shape how people interact with their world through religion, politics, law, and education are the focus of the Contexts of Transformation chapters. Within the Contexts of Work section, authors discuss resources, economics, property, and labor, to give a sense of the material environment in which people live and its implications for work. The Contexts of Vision section has as its focus the idea that there are varied ways of thinking through what society should look like, including media messaging, identities constructed around nations, the natural environment, and development agendas. And lastly, chapters in the Contexts of Aesthetics section explore the role of music, art, literature, and film in Central Asia, showing the active and creative role played in translating experience and imagination that meaningfully and intimately weaves its way into daily life. In all of these parts, the cases touch upon the broader thematic category of the constituent sections in order to facilitate dynamic thinking across the chapters of the book.

The focus at the end of the book is on how contexts are translated and applied. While it is reasonable to assume that the volume will be used in the classroom, this last chapter is intended to give guidance in how people working on and with the region could more thoughtfully engage with the area. The purpose here is to help translate information into practice. In some respects, this reflects the very task of engaging with context: most professional engagements in life require us to apply knowledge to an end that is most efficiently met if the contextual environment is understood—which is to say that, while the book offers direct utility to those who are

professionally engaged with the region, students could also benefit from its pedagogic approach to the importance of contextualized knowledge.



Although this is a large volume with thematic diversity, the chapters covered are not an exhaustive taxonomy of everyday decision-making in practice. Rather, there are many other views that could have been included, and a number of very good researchers working on the region whose absence here was constrained by space and availability. The conversations carried out across the book, and the online bibliography on which it rests, point to important contributions beyond what is contained in this volume, and thus it represents a starting rather than an ending point for thinking about the region. Contexts, after all, are open discussions that start somewhere but do not always end in the same place.

The process of putting the book together was uniquely collaborative, reflecting the spirit in which many of the contributors and scholars of the region work. Throughout the process contributors were given the opportunity to offer feedback on each other's work; many did so across the sections in which their contributions were placed, and a number of others reviewed the entire volume. This highlights something quite important about the generosity of the community and how others contribute to both understanding and the experience of sociality itself. In learning about Central Asia in context, we should always be mindful that it is such generosity of sociality that yields meaning to experience and makes any place a reference for home, purpose, and value.

No doubt those using the book will do so in multiple ways, pulling out the various themes and supplementing them with other resources and discussions to fill in the gaps. People will adapt the book to their own teaching and reading styles, picking and choosing in relation to what people are seeking to better understand. Such a selective and nonlinear way of working through the text is itself reflective of how people socially navigate their worlds—in nonlinear ways. But to understand the context of life in Central Asia, the chapters contained herein reveal issues we need to appreciate if we are to have something closer to understanding. Short of experiencing the tastes, sounds, smells, and vistas of the region as our own, this is the minimum of what we can expect needs to be considered.

Mapping Context

Julien Thorez and Emmanuel Giraudet

It is important to appreciate that the cartographic imagination is a way of consolidating data that shape the context for making sense of problems. Since the work of Henri Lefebvre, space has been commonly considered as a social product, a social construction. Space is one of the main objects of geographic studies and has become a significant dimension of social science publications, notably thanks to the “spatial turn.” The implication is that maps have become among the main tools used to describe and interpret the spatial organization of environments, people, and places.

There is a wide array of maps, appropriate to format, projection, scale, generalization, semiology, and theme. As representations of localized phenomena and objects, they reveal scientific choices on the nature of the data represented or on the scale of the territories mapped. The maps are also the result of graphic (and aesthetic) biases (e.g., the “semiology of graphics”). One cannot ignore that maps are particularly powerful in disseminating knowledge and visions of the societies and territories represented. Mapping the national territory gives substance to the state. Mapping a phenomenon (ethnic distribution, social inequalities, health system, etc.) can create and legitimize political demands. Because of these instrumental functions, the production and dissemination of maps are subject to political control in many countries and circumstances, especially since maps can “lie.”

The corpus of maps contained here offers a vision of contemporary Central Asia that is dependent on constraints related to data, their access, and their quality. Some data are available in one country but impossible to obtain in another. In Turkmenistan, for example, statistical data publication is strictly controlled and limited. Some data can be available at the

national level but then not accessible by region or by district. In addition, data quality is uneven. Aware of frequent discussions on the reliability of demographic and economic data (such as population size, population growth, migrations, or economic growth, etc.), we knowingly use data published by the statistics committees of each country, including data from population censuses, when they are available.

In this map collection, we do not aim to present an exhaustive atlas of contemporary Central Asia. No map has been made at the scale of a city or a village. Several issues are missing (decollectivization of agriculture, urban transformations, civil war in Tajikistan, military activities, tourism, trade, education, standard of living, social inequalities, electoral geography, etc.) and others are only partially presented (environment, industry, migration, etc.). Nevertheless, these maps shed light on several major features of contemporary Central Asian societies and spaces. These features include the shaping of the current political map with the emergence, in the twentieth century, of “Nation-States-Territories”; the unequal geographical distribution of the population; the tribal and ethnic diversity with an increase in the share of “Central Asian” populations to the detriment of “Russian-speaking” populations; agricultural systems (on irrigated areas in oases, on deserts, steppes, or mountain pastures, in Virgin Lands); transport networks (air and rail networks, which play a key role in the territorial integration of the region globally); and oil production and export in Kazakhstan.

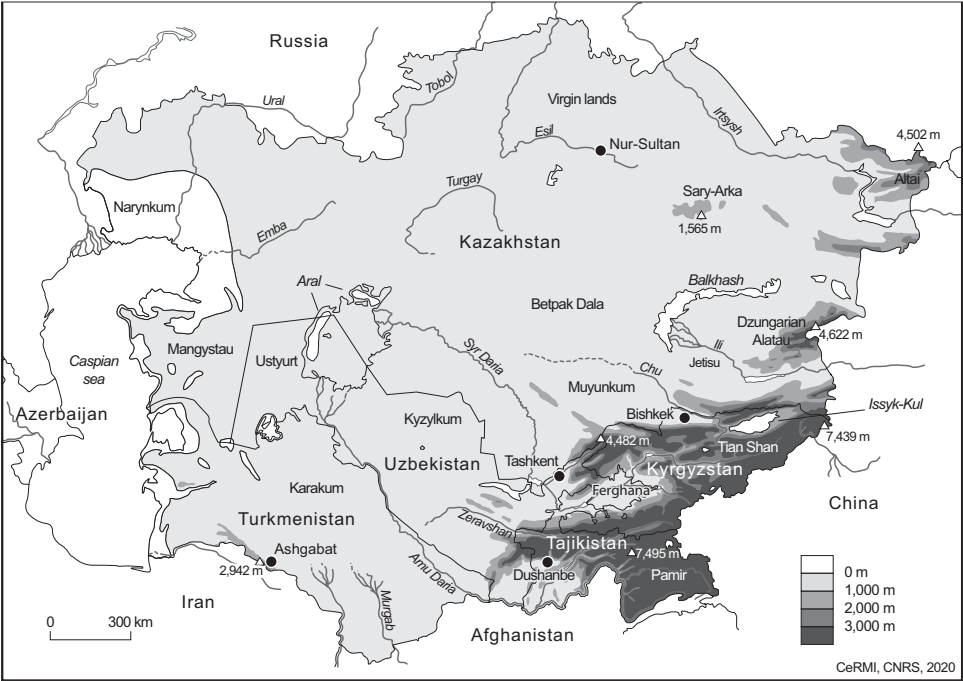
These maps emerge out of a long history of cartographic production on Central Asia, which was initially characterized by the predominance of Western productions. The first map that mentioned “Central Asia” was published in Paris by the German orientalist Julius Klaproth in 1828. Then, during the tsarist period, colonial geographers and cartographers developed an important cartographic corpus, symbolized by the 1914 publication of the *Atlas of Asiatic Russia*, published by the Resettlement Department of the Land Regulation and Agriculture Administration.

During the Soviet period, map production increased significantly. In every Soviet region, a meticulous cartographic investigation was conducted, but many maps were deliberately distorted in order to not divulge information (false localization, lack of mention, distortion of the territory represented by the use of several scales on the same map, etc.). In addition to numerous topographic and thematic maps whose distribution was strictly reserved for administrative and military use, several atlases were published by Soviet cartographers and geographers, often relying on collaborations between Central Asian and Russian institutions. From the 1960s to the end of the Soviet period, the first national atlases of the Central Asian republics were issued, as well as regional ones (such as the *Atlas of the North Kazakhstan* and the *Atlas of the Kustanay Region*, etc.) and urban ones (such as the *Tashkent: Geographical Atlas*).

Cartographic production on Central Asia has diversified since 1991,

corresponding with the widespread dissemination of cartographic studies across many regions of the world. Foreign institutions and international organizations such as the UN Specialized Agencies, the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank have contributed to the development of maps and atlases by their financial support, technical collaboration, or even publication. Unsurprisingly, young sovereign states ordered new national atlases. Some atlases rely on a scientific approach, whereas most recent atlases are designed for teachers and students, and thus to territorialize a particular vision of the state. Several prestigious atlases have also been issued for a lay but wealthy audience in Kazakhstan. These coffee-table books describe the Kazakh national culture, history, or geography and advance a nationalist narrative.

From a thematic point of view, the corpus of maps on the region has been notably enriched by more recent works, such as Yuri Bregel's remarkable *Historical Atlas of Central Asia*. Published in 2003, Bregel's atlas presents the political and military history of Central Asia from the time of Alexander the Great to the twentieth century through the use of maps and historical texts connected to the maps. In an effort both to expand access to the rich cartographic history of the region and to diffuse cartographical studies on Central Asia, digital libraries and contemporary online platforms such as CartOrient have also come to provide an invaluable service to those trying to think through maps. Across the varied presentations and motives underlying maps, we find utility and an appreciation for what maps can accomplish, all of which is rooted in how maps map context.



Map 1 Physical map of Central Asia



Map 2 Political map of Central Asia in 1900