

**COMPILING A CONTEMPORARY “CENTRAL ASIAN” LITERARY CANON:  
PERSPECTIVES FROM NORTH AMERICAN SCHOLARSHIP**

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**Abstract.** This article seeks to outline the current state of North American scholarship on prose, poetry and theatre works from Central Asia. Firstly, it will explain how the term “Central Asia” is defined by various institutions and university departments: what languages is Central Asian literature written in, what territorial expanse does it describe? We will consider such questions with reference to contemporary theories of diaspora and linguistic deterritorialization as well as to historiography of the region. Next, the article will describe the historical trajectory of Central Asian cultural studies in the leading North American universities, and offer an overview of its current key players, as well as the supra-institutional academic societies that foster the study of Central Asian literature today. Finally, the growing importance of Central Asian literature to the broader disciplines of world literature and comparative literature will be assessed. The author highlights what scholars contributed to Central Asian literature studies. The theoretical significance based on a critical analysis of North American Central Asian literature studies will provide understanding what perspectives and problems occur in the field of Central Asian literature studies in North American universities. The practical significance is that the findings can be used in different courses related to the problem of Central Asian literature studies abroad.

**Keywords:** North American scholarship, Central Asian studies, literature, Central Asian literature, literature studies, academic, culture, art

**Basic provisions**

Nowadays some universities offer the courses related to studying Central Asian literature. The current situation and problems of studying Central Asian literature in North American universities are discussed in the present paper.

**Introduction**

In a 1994 critique of the discipline of area studies, the historian Vicente Rafael wrote that, for any given geographical “area” around which an academic institution might seek to establish a department or program, “there is [...] no way that one can conceive of the area outside of the politics of its designation” [1]. In the case of “Southeast Asia,” of which Rafael is considered a specialist, “where North American scholars might expect to see continuous wholes, they get fragmented and fragmentary polities,” the “unity” of such a geographical region is only “illusory,” and “in fact is historically -which is to say, politically- produced” [1]. The same might be said of “Central Asia,” and the at times interchangeably-used term “Eurasia”: whilst these designations are found in the titles of various university faculties or institutes, to which countries they refer exactly is never obvious; as one scholar has suggested, “Central Asia as a meta-geographical construct can be highly contingent, serving a particular purpose [...] at a particular moment – and with often

quite different implications” [2]. “Central Asia” may often refer to a grouping of the five sovereign states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, but elsewhere it may also include parts of western China, Afghanistan, Russia and even Mongolia. In this article, I hope to describe the current state of studies of Central Asian literature within the North American academy, in particular to situate this field within the broader context of Central Asian studies and at the same time to ask whether it is indeed a subset of Central Asian studies or of something else, namely of comparative literature or world literature. Moreover, I hope to outline how the formation of a Central Asian literary canon also interrogates the contours of “Slavic” literature departments and brings a new dimension to studies of postcolonial literatures.

### **Methods and materials**

The present paper is based on critical analysis to overview and assess the current state of Central Asian literature taught in North American institutions.

It is unsurprising to scholars of literary and artistic movements from Central Asia that attempts by social scientists and area studies specialists at precisely delimiting “Central Asia” as an area on a map should falter. Literary and art scholars are, after all, typically more invested in the entanglements of places, peoples, languages and their textual or artistic practices than at disentangling them from one another into neat territorial categories. If area studies is, as Rey Chow has argued, a process of “massive information retrieval” predicated on “traditional Eurocentric frameworks,” and Orientalist discourse, it serves more of a pragmatic diplomatic purpose than cultural studies [3]. The latter “offers modes of inquiry that require students to pay attention to the cultural politics of knowledge production” [3], such that they engage with not only the cultural materials from this or that country, but rather they situate them within a matrix of global cultural production and in parallel deconstruct the very institutions of art and literary criticism and their internal hegemonies. As such, when we write about books, films, art and music from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and their neighbouring regions, we must consider not only their content and form, but how they came into being and how they have circulated after their publication. Some scholars may seek to claim a kind of “regional” knowledge, due to the similarities between Turkic languages that have enabled them to read and interpret literary artefacts from several nations within Central Asia, as well as the wide availability of works translated into Russian. Nonetheless, the many differences in the cultural conditions of each of Central Asia’s constituent nations in the present day, and in their intellectual histories, make any claims to “specialism” in Central Asian studies *tout court* rather dubious. Instead, the best hope for Central Asian cultural and literary historians might be to work within a consortium of other highly individualized specialists, to find salient commonalities across diverse contexts. This is not to suggest, however, that the present-day borders of the five so-called Central Asian republics reflect the contours of earlier socio-political formations; especially because of the various histories of imperial projects in the region and its incorporation into the supra-national Soviet Union, there have been many cycles of

mapping, re-mapping and reassignment of certain territories. As the social anthropologist Madeleine Reeves has written, many stretches of national borders in Central Asia “are nonlinear, full of gaps, their precise geographical coordinates disputed or unknown;” a phenomenon that is perhaps generative of unique cultural exchange [4].

### **Results and discussion**

In the Soviet period, Almaty and Tashkent were arguably the two centers of multinational creative cooperation, and thus to study Soviet Central Asian literature, film and art is also to consider the contributions of other Soviet peoples who made Central Asia their home. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, many important national writers who had been forgotten or censured within the Central Asian republics have been rehabilitated and rediscovered by a new generation of students. Scholars seeking to study Central Asian literature as a distinct regional literature must balance an acknowledgement of the independence of each nation’s literary heritage with an understanding of the historical interdependence between Central Asia’s many peoples, enabled through trade, shared religious traditions and diplomatic collaborations over time.

At present, there are several North American universities with prominent programs focusing on Central Asian studies, and Canada and US-based students have many opportunities to gain linguistic proficiency in the languages of the region. At Harvard University, the creation of the Committee on Inner Asian and Altaic Studies allowed for PhD students to be admitted to specifically study “the history and cultures of the peoples in the steppe, mountain, forest, and oasis areas between China, Russia, western Iran, and Pakistan” [5]. Thus, whilst most of the Committee’s faculty are also concurrently affiliated to other departments, Harvard acknowledges the study of “Inner Asian” cultures as an autonomous academic discipline: students are required on admission to have command of a “relevant” foreign language, but it is not determined a-priori, as in the case, for example, of Slavic studies, in which Russian is nearly always a prerequisite. Similarly capacious is the scope of study within Indiana University Bloomington’s Department of Central Eurasian Studies (CEUS), whose stated focus is on “Central Eurasia, the home of some of the world’s greatest art, epic literature, and empires” [5]. CEUS defines Central Eurasia as “a vast region of Europe and Asia—extending from Northern and Central Europe to East Asia and from Lapland and Siberia to the Himalayas and Persian Gulf” [5]. Although this department offers a formidable range of courses in languages such as Kazakh, Uyghur, Uzbek and Kyrgyz, with some of its professors focusing on classical and contemporary literature, its graduate courses are much more focused on “politics and society,” than on philology or literary theory. Similar is the University of Wisconsin-Madison, whose Center for Russia, East Europe, and Central Asia offers summer courses in Kazakh, Tajik, Uzbek and Uyghur as part of its uniquely specialized Central Eurasian Studies Summer Institute; nevertheless, during the academic year several courses in literary studies are offered by the Kazakh philologist Gulnara Glowacki. At the University of California, Berkeley, the P.Y. and Kinmay W. Tang Center for Silk Road Studies (TCSRS) has brought

together faculty and graduate students from various disciplines, such as East Asian studies, Geography and Anthropology; it “concentrates its efforts primarily on the core of the overland Eurasian trading network in Central Asia, here defined as including western China, the former Soviet republics of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, as well as Afghanistan” [6]. In autumn of 2023, Berkeley’s Slavic Literatures department offered a class for undergraduate students in modern Central Asian literature and film in translation, taught by Robyn Jensen and Sabrina Jaszi, and featuring on the syllabus “Sadriiddin Aini, Abdulla Qahhor, Ali Khamrayev, Chinghiz Aitmatov, O'tkir Hoshimov, Hamid Ismailov, and Baqytgul Sarmekova.” That such a course is housed within a Slavic literatures department is not uncommon, and points in fact to one of the burgeoning problems of Central Asian studies currently: with the exception of Harvard, there are no American university departments dedicated to the study of literary and cultural artefacts from Central Asia primarily for their aesthetic rather than ethnographic value. The innovations, then, in iterating a canon of Central Asian literary studies in North America tend to come from individual scholars rather than schools.

Especially notable in encouraging the broader study of modern Central Asian literature and culture in the North American academy is Naomi Caffee, an Assistant Professor of Russian at Reed College, Oregon, who received her PhD from the Slavic Languages and Literatures department at UCLA. Caffee’s pathbreaking dissertation on “Russophonia” was influenced by the work of Dzhuanyshbekov and his concept of “marginal literature;” she offered close readings on the works of Valikhanov, Auezov, Aitmatov, Suleimenov and the Fergana School to iterate a formulation in English that could describe literature and discourse produced in the Russian language, regardless of its origin [7]. More recently, Caffee has published articles on intertextuality in Mukhtar Auezov’s *Abai Zholy*. Like UC Berkeley’s Harsha Ram, who was one of the first Anglophone scholars to publish an article on *Az I Ya*, Caffee has also written on the work of Olzhas Suleimenov [8].

Another important emergent scholar of Central Asian literature, both medieval and modern, is Yale University’s Samuel Hodgkin, who works within the department of Comparative Literature; he is fluent in Uzbek, Tajik, Russian and Chagatay, amongst others. His forthcoming book, *Persianate Verse and the Poetics of Eastern Internationalism*, focusses on the influence of early Persianate poets on World Communism, an innovative project that takes a diachronic approach to modern Central Asian literature. Yale has also recently welcomed as a tenure-track professor Nari Shelekpayev, who has written extensively on Kazakhstani cultural history, performance art and architecture. Shelekpayev and Hodgkin’s colleague at Yale, the Slavic Literatures department’s Clare Roosien, is also an influential figure, both as a translator and as a literary critic. In 2024 Roosien is set to publish her first monograph, *Socialism Mediated: Culture, Propaganda, and the Public in Early Soviet Uzbekistan*, as well as to publish her translations of poems by Abdulla Qahhor in the anthology *Tulips in Bloom: An Anthology of Modern Central Asian Literature* edited by Caffee and Nazarbayev University’s Gabriel McGuire. This anthology contains several contributions from North American scholars, amongst them the oral historian Ali Iğmen, who has shaped Anglophone research into Kyrgyz culture with

his 2012 book *Speaking Soviet with an Accent: Culture and Power in Kyrgyzstan*. Currently, there is scant academic research on Turkmenistan in English, and especially little work done by philologists, with few new articles published since Adrienne Edgar's 2004 *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan*.

Of film scholars, Canadian researcher Masha Salazina and New York University's Rossen Djagalov have produced especially significant histories of filmic internationalism; Djagalov's book *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism: Literature and Cinema between the Second and Third Worlds* described Tashkent as "the main Soviet showcase city for the Third World," the site of much cross-cultural collaboration [9]. Nariman Skakov of Harvard University, who was born in Kazakhstan and is best known for his scholarship on the cinema of Tarkovsky, is set in 2024 to release a new book, *Reorientalism: From Avant-Garde to National Form*, that embraces a number of different media sources to describe the turn of Soviet Modernist artists and intellectuals towards the "East" for inspiration. In 2011, a general scholarly introduction to Central Asian film was edited by Michael Rouland, Gulnara Abikeyeva and Birgit Beumers, entitled *Cinema in Central Asia: Rewriting Cultural Histories*.

Whilst much necessary research is continually being carried out within History departments, by such esteemed figures as Sarah Cameron, Adeeb Khalid, Togzhan Kassenova, Jeff Sahadeo and Marianne Kamp, or within Anthropology and Sociology departments, a large number of young academics whose primary focus is on literature and/or aesthetics have left North American academia for universities elsewhere. Examples include Christopher Fort, Masha Kirasirova, Diana Kudaibergenova and Dina Sharipova.

To encourage more specialists in Central Asian philology to remain in North American research institutions may require that universities offer their staff more opportunities to teach the main languages of the region, in order to build cohorts of future graduate students. They may also need to offer more introductory survey courses to undergraduate students about the literary, religious and philosophical currents within Central Asia over the past five hundred years, and make more emphasis on the role of Central Asia within Soviet history courses. Moreover, university publishing houses ought to be proactive in seeking Central Asian fiction to commission for English translation, such that these texts can be studied in undergraduate classrooms and be used by graduate students in Comparative Literature projects.

Scholars are lucky to be able to gather at such conferences as that of the Central Eurasian Studies Society, and they ought to submit their work to the eminent journals on Central Asian studies (notably *Central Asian Survey*, *Europe-Asia Studies*, *Central Asian Studies Review*) but also to journals with a more supra-regional reach, such as *The Journal of Asian Studies*, the PMLA, and to *Slavic Review*, which, despite its name, seeks to publish articles on materials from eastern Europe, Russia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia.

Whilst US Slavic Literature departments are rightly concerned to think about "diversifying" the canon of texts that they teach, often to include more texts written in Russian by authors from non-Russian former Soviet republics or to include

materials from other Slavic languages such as Ukrainian or Belarusian, the case of Central Asian literature presents a salient borderline case in that much of it was not in fact composed in a Slavic language. To account for the multilingualism of Central Asian literatures by integrating them only into Slavic Literature departments is surely incorrect. Instead, we might draw upon Franco Moretti's model of "world literature," to suggest that Central Asian literature as a proposed field shows up the limitations of "regional" literature departments, and that institutions must try to make spaces for the study of multilingual literatures, and in particular those of former colonies, so as to afford them their rightful autonomy as objects of academic study, and to analyze how they themselves have participated in the global exchanges of literary stylistics over time [10]. This very question was addressed by the Uzbek-British writer Hamid Ismailov in a talk during his recent tour of the US [11]. The creation of specialist departments of Central Asian literature may not be the solution to increasing the study of this literature, rather the solution may lie in graduate students interested in pursuing studies of this literature to be emboldened to apply for programs in many different disciplines, be they World Literature, Comparative Literature, Asian Studies or Slavic Studies.

### **Conclusion**

In sum, it is clear that the study of Central Asian literatures and film defies exact mapping, and that the methods of the more politically or economically-focussed initiatives in Central Asian studies as a whole are often incompatible with it. To bring Central Asian literature to US undergraduate and graduate syllabi, individual scholars have sought to trace its linkages with other literary movements whilst also using the techniques of close reading to demonstrate the richness and idiosyncrasies of many of its central works. How institutions resolve the question of where Central Asian texts 'belong' within the ecosystem of humanities departments will be demonstrative of how the broader critical debates on specificity and scale play out within literary studies as a whole.

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## **ҚАЗІРГІ "ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯ" ӘДЕБИ КАНОНЫН ҚҰРУ: СОЛТҮСТІК АМЕРИКА ҒЫЛЫМЫНЫҢ БОЛАШАҒЫ**

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**Андатпа.** Бұл мақалада Солтүстік Американың проза, поэзия және Орталық Азияның театр шығармаларын зерттеудің қазіргі жағдайына талдау жасауға тырысады. Біріншіден, "Орталық Азия" терминін университеттердің әртүрлі институттары мен кафедралары қалай анықтайтыны түсіндіріледі: Орта Азия әдебиеті қандай тілдерде жазылған, ол қандай аумақтық кеңістіктерді сипаттайды? Біз диаспора мен тілдік детерриториализацияның қазіргі теорияларына, сондай-ақ аймақтың тарихнамасына қатысты осындай мәселелерді қарастырамыз. Әрі қарай мақалада Солтүстік Американың жетекші университеттеріндегі Орталық Азияның мәдени зерттеулерінің Тарихи траекториясы сипатталып, олардың қазіргі негізгі ойыншыларына, сондай-ақ бүгінде Орталық Азия әдебиетін зерттеуге ықпал ететін институционалды емес академиялық қоғамдарға шолу жасалады. Ақырында, Орталық Азия әдебиетінің әлемдік әдебиеттің кеңірек пәндері мен салыстырмалы әдебиеттану үшін өсіп келе жатқан маңыздылығы бағаланады. Автор Орталық Азия әдебиетін зерттеуге қай ғалымдардың үлес қосқанын талдайды. Солтүстік Америкадағы Орталық Азия әдебиеттану ғылымын сыни талдауға негізделген теориялық өзектілігі Солтүстік Америка университеттеріндегі Орталық Азия әдебиеттану саласы алдында тұрған перспективалар мен міндеттер туралы түсінік береді.

Практикалық маңыздылығы мынада: алынған нәтижелер Орталық Азия әдебиетін шетелде оқу проблемасына байланысты әртүрлі курстарда қолданылуы мүмкін.

**Тірек сөздер:** Солтүстік Америка ғылымы, Орталық Азияны зерттеу институты, әдебиет, Орталық Азия әдебиеті, әдебиеттану, академиялық, мәдениет, өнер

## **СОСТАВ СОВРЕМЕННОГО «ЦЕНТРАЛЬНО-АЗИАТСКОГО» ЛИТЕРАТУРНОГО КАНОНА: ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ СЕВЕРО-АМЕРИКАНСКОЙ НАУКИ**

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**Аннотация.** В этой статье предпринята попытка провести анализ современного состояния исследований прозы, поэзии и театральных произведений Центральной Азии в Северной Америке. Во-первых, будет определено, как термин «Центральная Азия» определяется различными институтами и кафедрами университетов: на каких языках написана среднеазиатская литература, какие территориальные пространства она описывает? Мы рассмотрим подобные вопросы применительно к современным теориям диаспоры и языковой детерриториализации, а также к историографии региона. Далее, в статье будет описана историческая траектория исследований культуры Центральной Азии в ведущих университетах Северной Америки и предложен обзор их нынешних ключевых

институтов, а также на институциональных академических обществах, которые сегодня способствуют изучению центральноазиатской литературы. Наконец, будет оценена растущая важность литературы Центральной Азии для более широких дисциплин мировой литературы и сравнительного литературоведения. Автор анализирует работы ученых, которые внесли вклад в изучение литературы Центральной Азии. Теоретическая значимость, основанная на критическом анализе литературоведения Центральной Азии в Северной Америке, позволит понять, какие перспективы и проблемы возникают в области литературоведения Центральной Азии в университетах Северной Америки. Практическая значимость состоит в том, что полученные результаты могут быть использованы в различных курсах, связанных с проблемой изучения литературы Центральной Азии за рубежом.

**Ключевые слова:** наука Северной Америки, институт исследований Центральной Азии, литература, литература Центральной Азии, литературоведение, академический, культура, искусство

*Статья поступила 23.11.2023*