A Late Career Central Asian Trajectory: Close Encounters of the First and Second Kind

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Multiple professional development opportunities come to members of scholarly communities throughout their lives. They may arise when in graduate school, while in their first professional positions, in mid-career or much later. These opportunities may spring from others supporting our ventures, or derive from unexpected sources and at unexpected times. Such opportunities in personal, family or professional life usually involve some risks. While they cannot be avoided, what is important is how we respond. We may accept them or delay accepting them or reject them outright, for reasons legitimate or perhaps unsound. What I am addressing in this paper is how opportunities opened up in a region I was not trained for or expecting, but they came with some unintended consequences that have been of fundamental and transformative importance in my personal and professional life.

The subtitle is a variation of a popular 1977 US movie by Steven Spielberg that featured an earthling’s encounters with an ET. The first encounter here is learning about something from books; the second encounter is one highly personal. I will describe how these “worlds” emerged and merged late in my professional life and have become an important part of my persona. Much I share here is highly personal, but I was invited to write this narrative because the editor considered it important for others to know how we respond to both new career opportunities and challenges.

Central Asia Before and After

Central Asia is a new region in the lexicon of geographers and others in the social sciences and humanities. It was a part of the world I had only vague knowledge about until the mid-1990s. Most of my knowledge came from teaching world regional geography and the USSR/Russia chapters in Cities of the World editions I co-edited. I began teaching geography of the Soviet Union at the University of Kentucky following my first trip to the SU in the autumn of 1989. I was one of some thirty US geographers whom George Demko, Director, Office of the Geographer at the US Department of State, took for three weeks to western Russia, Lithuania and Estonia. The purpose of this venture was to introduce members of the
US geography community to their Soviet counterparts; there were formal lectures and dinners as well as field trips in and around Moscow and also to the two Baltic republics mentioned above. A collaborated Soviet-American authored on-line book, *Beyond Borders: Comparing USSR and US Regions*, emerged from this initiative, edited by Kathy Braden. This experience was a watershed in my professional life as I had never been to this part of the world and knew very few geographers who had. Texts and articles used in classes were often written by specialists who had studied the USSR from afar and had little first-hand knowledge in this region. Texts and articles by Ted Shabad, Jim Bater, Paul Lydolph, Leslie Dienes, Chauncy Harris, Roland Fuchs, Michael Bradshaw and John Cole were major resources I used, along with articles in *Soviet Geography: Review and Translation* now called *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, the top journal covering this vast region. In 1990 I traveled by train to Moscow, St. Petersburg and Murmansk with John Florin and Alexi Novokov, and then to Kiev, Ukraine (where, inter alia, we encountered difficulties in finding bread in the shops). We also ate lunch (a hearty cabbage soup) with miners in Kirovsk. One could easily observe that there was much happening and “in the air” in the USSR in late 1989 and early 1990. It was about this same time that Samuel Huntington’s much-discussed *The Clash of Civilizations* was published in 1993. As I read the book, I was not convinced that the “clashes” portrayed really did exist or would come to pass, a sentiment I have retained after traveling and living in the region multiple times over the subsequent 20 years. Dramatic titles sometimes sell books but do not reveal true realities on closer inspection.

While these trips to the USSR offered no opportunities to travel to Central Asia, I knew it was a large desert landscape that produced oil and coal in some regions; it had a rich history, a shrinking Aral Sea and extreme ethnic diversity in some places. I thought that it would certainly be worth visiting if the chance arose, which it did. That opportunity came in 1996 with the founding of the Kazakh-American Studies Center at the University of Kentucky. This DoS-funded teacher-exchange multiyear program provided options for faculty in various fields to travel to Kazakhstan for several weeks and teach classes in English to professors in the social sciences and humanities. I volunteered and was among the first U of Kentucky faculty to journey to Alma Ata (renamed Almaty in 1993) to teach human geography. Since I had been teaching a summer class for future geography teachers, this assignment did not call for massive extra preparation. To prepare for the trip, I began listening to Kazakh language tapes so I could at least pick up some phrases to use with new friends, in the marketplace and with students. That background proved very beneficial. During this first trip I traveled to a few localities outside Almaty and also managed a brief trip to Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.
The University of Kentucky program enabled me to return to Almaty a second time in 1997 and also to begin working with teachers in Kyrgyzstan, where I taught at two universities in 2004, 2005 and 2006. These experiences also provided opportunities to visit Issyk-Kul and other towns in the northern parts of Kyrgyzstan. Another early teaching venture into Central Asia was in 2000 when I learned that an NGO in the Netherlands was looking for English-speaking faculty to teach a class in International Relations at the University of Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan. This NGO supported my summer teaching classes on environmental geography at the University of Tuzla, Bosnia in 1997 and the University of Pristina, Kosovo in 2001. Both experiences were intellectually and professionally rewarding, not only working with teachers and students, but especially through the chance to observe first-hand the wartime destruction in these former Yugoslav republics and listen to local voices on the ground.

Teaching multiple times in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan whetted my appetite to learn more about this region, then emerging as a new region in geography texts and as a focus for new conferences, journals and research opportunities. I learned quickly that there were very few geographers in the English-speaking world with any first-hand regional experience. The main experts included Phil Micklin, Reuel Hanks, Bob Kaiser and Alex Diener.

Personal Experiences and Learning

My next formal encounter with the region was applying as an U.S. election observer, under EU auspices, for the presidential elections in Kazakhstan in September 2004. I thought this would be a good opportunity to see more of the country and also become familiar with other groups and institutions outside Almaty. After passing the DoS on-line examination for candidates, I was selected as one of approximately 30 Americans. We first met in Almaty for a day where I also learned I had been assigned to Ust-Kamenogorsk, a city (renamed Oskemen) I knew nothing whatsoever about, located in northeastern Kazakhstan. After I disembarked from the plane, I spied a woman holding aloft a sign # 1; which was the number I had been assigned and told to look for. She was an attractive young woman, and after thanking her for waiting to intercept me, I then learned that she would be my translator; Natasha was a teacher of English at East Kazakhstan State University in the city. During the rest of the day and on into the evening, when the observers met to discuss our tasks and where we would be traveling in and out of the city, my translator was always with me. She took me the following day to visit some polling sites and also several parks and other sites in the city.
The next two days were election days. Our task was to observe the elections to determine if they were open, transparent and fair. They were not, as many other observers saw blatant evidence of voter intimidation by police officers watching people vote, and police standing at entrances to polling stations, perhaps by their presence intimidating voters. Observers also reported seeing some individuals carrying small piles of ballots they placed in secure and transparent ballot boxes. Of course, OECD reported the elections had been unfair. Sunday evening my translator and I watched the ballots being counted. We had had many conversations in those previous three days about numerous subjects, not just elections and Kazakh society. To make a long story very short, we fell in love and eventually got married in Kentucky in February 2006. I could write more about those days in Ust-Kamenogorsk, but that would require a lengthy book. Suffice it to say that her life changed as did mine.

I returned to Kazakhstan to visit Natasha in a cold December in 2004 as we spent time getting to know one another better. And I began to study Russian and to prepare for another short-term teaching assignment in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan in the summer of 2005. After that teaching experience, I returned to Kazakhstan to visit Natasha. During the 18 months (from our first meeting to eventually seeing her land on US soil and later become an American citizen), I learned much about Kazakhstan and also Central Asia from Natasha, as well as from a number of Central Asian teachers studying for a semester at the University of Kentucky.

Following our marriage, I returned as an election observer to Tajikistan in September 2006. I applied for this position since I had never been in Tajikistan, although there were some Tajik faculty studying at the University of Kentucky whom I had met. In my application, I requested to be sent to some other part of the country than Dushanbe, the capital city. That request was granted and I was dispatched to Kulob, a small city five hours southeast of Dushanbe in a very rural and isolated area. My counterpart from Germany and I visited a school in a rural village and I was told I was the first American to visit their village. This experience also proved invaluable in learning about the extreme ethnic diversity in the country and those living in certain quite impoverished and inaccessible areas.

While I was slowly accumulating more knowledge about Central Asia from the observer assignments and learned much from my wife who came from the region, I wanted to learn more. So I applied for a Fulbright posting at Semey (formerly Semipalatinsk) State University in northeastern Kazakhstan. This large, old heavy-industrial and polluted city was known to Russians, Soviets and others worldwide as the epicenter for Soviet above- and below-ground nuclear testing at the Semipalatinsk
Test Site. Some of my colleagues and close friends, both in geography and beyond, thought it was a crazy idea to want to live in this supposedly “dangerous” city in the middle of a Siberian winter. But I was undaunted. I was also the first American professor to teach in Semey, a town immediately adjacent to “The Polygon” (as it was called) where testing was done. The city lies about two hours west of Ust-Kamenogorsk, so this provided a nice chance for Natasha to visit her family on weekends. Semey is on the Irtysh River is in southern Siberia, where temperatures were below -40C in December, where everyone wore multiple layers of clothing, and on occasion even the apartment was cold. I remember once riding very fast in a three-vehicle convey during a heavy blizzard when you could barely see the car in front of us. The Semey classes and experiences provided many options for additional personal ‘close encounters of the second kind,’” as it were, with other teachers, students and personnel in the arts, and local cultural history and nuclear testing museums.

Learning Beyond the Book

While textbooks, scholarly articles and the internet furnished useful background information in learning about Central Asia, nothing can compare with learning first-hand from someone who is from and is curious about the region, and knows it well. Nor can an outsider gain much knowledge by traveling alone. Solo travel is not the best way to learn what you observe and witness en route. There are many ways that I can acknowledge where first-hand knowledge was enhanced by Natasha assisting in the learning process. She was helpful not only in conversations I had with professors and students, but with museum operators, public officials, tourist guides and other NGO personnel from Europe and North America. I listened to more than one story about the “transition” from Soviet to post-Soviet times. These were not pleasant experiences, since people went without pay, foods were scarce, the health care system was in a shambles, winter heating non-existent, and universities were often in administrative and instructional disarray.

We traveled by air, bus and train to visit Aktrau and Atrau on the Caspian Sea, to Shymkent and Teraz in southern Kazakhstan and to Astana, the new “Disneyland architecture capital city” in north-central Kazakhstan. We traveled across the “nuclear polygon” where radiation levels are still high and observed open-border checkpoints now in derelict condition. I gave lectures at universities in all these cities. Aside from traveling with Natasha, my travels in Kyrgyzstan were with other teachers and also students. Osh, a 3,000-year-old city on the Silk Road in southern Kyrgyzstan and in the Fergana Valley, was one of the most interesting places I have ever visited anywhere. One cannot walk the
streets of Osh listening to multiple languages and not think about all the traders, herders, scientists, military leaders, tourists and pilgrims who walked these same streets or saw the same verdant cultural mixture and diversity in the Fergana Valley two and even three millennia ago. Or think about the changes in the rural landscape that accompanied Soviet organization of political and economic spaces, the complex and manipulated demarcating of ethnic borders in the Fergana Valley, or how today the wealth of Kazakhstan has solidified it as the major economic and political power in the Central Sian region.

In all places where I’ve lived and taught, I’ve always asked colleagues and/or students to accompany me to city cemeteries, to public and private fruit and vegetable and livestock markets and bazaars, various kinds of museums in oblast centers, and monuments and memorials. I have celebrated national holidays and festivals, concerts, sporting events and religious services, even if I could understand what was being said. I have ridden marshrutkas (mini-buses not operated by public transport firms) and local buses and trains without incident, observed mafia transactions in parking lots, crossed political boundaries where border guards made written entries about visitors in paper notebooks, and I have observed political protests in a range of places. I also attended church services (including playing piano for old familiar hymns sung in a rural Christian church outside Almaty where American missionaries were serving on staff), and been present at numerous weddings, family gatherings and picnics. I have learned to eat some new foods, including lepiska (delicious crusty flatbread), bishparmak (or horse meet), new fruits and vegetables, smetana and other dairy products.

In many places where I lived between one and four months, I carried out research projects with university professors and students. In Semey, I studied the impact of Soviet nuclear testing on the landscape and people, using (with Natasha’s help) the archives of the local newspaper to find out what was reported on the days before, during and after nuclear testing: answer – nothing, it was kept classified. This research became a chapter in my Engineering Earth: The Impacts of Megaengineering Projects. I asked students in Semey where Siberia ended on their mental map and young art students about their images of living in a city known for its nuclear testing history. I studied bazaar vendors in Central Asian bazaars for the variety of vendors and their products. And I went to many craft fairs and was invited into the homes of some professors, a rarity in Central Asian society.

And I took many photographs of weddings, religious holidays (Christian and Moslem), national festivals, rural and urban housing, abandoned industrial plants and collective farm settings, new suburban
developments, ugly suburban Stalinesque high-rise apartment blocks, popular tourist sites, music concerts, and craft shows. I also photographed children playing, workers in fields, storefronts, monuments and memorials, religious events, soccer games and horse races. I took numerous photos of the rich ethnic landscape diversities in southern Kyrgyzstan, Almaty and northern Kazakhstan, Astana, abandoned nuclear polygon border posts and structures in “The Polygon” itself, and of photo, craft and model displays in oblast museums, along with a number of pictures during election observer assignments.

This learning in close and less-close encounters of the first and second kind was accompanied by a lifelong personal hobby. As a philatelist, I began collecting stamps of the five Central Asian states once they became new entities on the world political map in the early 1990s. I have a complete collection of postage stamps of all these countries and utilized some in a 2001 article in GeoJournal about the new stamps of new states.

Five Memorable Encounters

While there are many unexpected close encounters, let me share five that had an enduring impression on me. Each of these came unexpected, but when traveling in a region for the first or second time, happenings are likely to occur that no one suggested you should or would anticipate. Such encounters can be pleasant or unpleasant, but how you deal with them is important. They often form lasting impressions of a people and society and both toughen you while making you sensitive to risk situations. Traveling to a new region and not expecting any risk or “new sense of place” should leave one with some disappointment.

The first, completely unexpected, was an invitation to play hymns on an old piano in a German-Kazakh church one Sunday in 1996. My U.S. missionary friends, whom I knew only via email, were serving in a church outside Almaty; they invited me to attend. At the end of the service, they asked me to play a several hymns, which I then did from memory: “When the roll is called up yonder” and “Leaning on the everlasting arms.” All sung with such conviction, vigor and happiness. I was happy to be in the midst of such a group of kindred strangers, soul-seekers and enthusiastic singers, singing in German. A second encounter was when arriving at the Osh, Kyrgyzstan airport in the summer of 2000. Someone was supposed to meet me, but was not on hand when I landed; no one was there. I had no cell phone and knew no one in the city, nor did I know where to go. So I just waited patiently, watching other airline passengers happily entering awaiting taxis. After some 30 or 40 minutes of uncertainty, a young woman arrived. She introduced herself and said she was associated with the summer program I would be an instructor at, and apologized for
being late. I was greatly relieved. We took a cab to the city center and met others. What else can one do? Nothing, except wait to see what transpires in such a situation. A third encounter involved being an election observer in rural Tajikistan in 2006. As noted above, this was in a very poor, rural and isolated area where I felt out of touch, not only distant from my family in Kentucky, but from most people on the planet. Observing the election process in this rural area meant traveling to villages and schools in localities laden with deep snow, mud, where road conditions were virtually impassable, but also being close, too close sometimes, to stern-looking military officials with AK-47s standing next to where citizens were voting. It was apparent that we were not wanted or welcomed there by local officials, as we stood idly by and watched men blatantly stuffing ballots into glass ballot boxes while military personnel looked on with evident satisfaction. I was not afraid, but think the armed personnel and some other persons (mainly male) were not pleased with our presence. Inquiring about the interference of armed police did not seem to deter the process. A fourth encounter, which I had more than once, involved riding in marstrutkas or minibus taxis in urban Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. US State Department guidelines strongly recommended not doing this, for reasons of security. However, on several occasions, I had no other choice, and sat in a packed small bus transporting a dozen or more other locals over unmarked streets and roads to their destinations. Also riding in the bus were children, professionals smartly dressed smartly, youth and elderly in dirty working or street clothes, a motley group of passengers. This was Central Asian society taking advantage of cheap available public transportation when other choices were non-existent. The fifth and final Encounter of the second kind was crossing parts of the Nuclear Polygon south of Semipalatinsk, acknowledged to be a hazardous journey because radiation levels were still high in some places. I knew from friends beforehand that it was likely dangerous to travel across some areas; nonetheless I decide to risk it, because I wanted to have a short-term (one-hour) on-the-ground genuine ‘grassroots’ traveling experience crossing this sparse landscape where shepherds and farmers still live and work daily. I was forewarned about likely hazards, but went accompanied by those who knew and shared some of my same apprehensions. And we all survived in one piece. The message in all these close encounters is that if you want to have intimate contacts with some cultures and their environment, you have to go beyond staying in capital city hotels and university dorms. You will simply not have experiences like these arranged by a tourist agency or probably in many university geography field classes.
Learning Continues to This Day

Many other geographers in the US and Europe have been invaluable in my continued learning about the Central Asian region over the past twenty years. These include not only Phil Micklin, Reuel Harris, and Alex Diener but also Shannon O’Lear, Holly Barcus, Stan Toops and Stan Openshaw. They are all part of the small Central Asian geography community. And I have learned much from some close friends in Central Asia; these include Balzhan Suzhikova, Andrew and Hilola Rouholiman and Venera Umetalieva.

Central Asia has achieved the status of a legitimate region for scholarly inquiry. The shift has emerged not only with more North American and European scholars and students studying in the region, but Central Asian governments providing their talented students with scholarships to study abroad and work on advanced degrees. We now have two new major professional journals, the Central Asian Survey and Central Asian Studies, which publish articles and book reviews by those living in and outside the region. And we have a Central Asian listserv and an active Central Eurasian Studies Society. There are some universities now specializing on Central Asia in the US, including Oklahoma State University and Indiana University. We also have more applicants for senior and junior scholars wishing to study in this region. This I know from serving as a member of a Fulbright committee selecting scholars for research in Central Asia. All these developments bode well for a region that is increasing in political, economic and cultural importance, not only in Eurasia, but along the Russia/India/China axes. I am also pleased that Stan Toops, Dick Gilbreath (cartographer in our department at the University of Kentucky) and I were able to publish an Atlas of Central Eurasia Affairs in 2012, which is proving to be a very useful resource for junior and senior scholars.

Sometimes I am asked where I would like to travel in Central Asia and what topics I would like to study in the future or would encourage others to study. I feel I have a good knowledge of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, but no first-hand experience with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, which are difficult for an American to enter without formal invitations. And I would like to travel south-north or north-south by bus or train across Kazakhstan and also visit Tashkent, Samarkand and Ashgabat to observe urban and rural dynamics at play. I would very much like to visit the “empty” places, of which there are many, in Central Asia and in my mental map of the region. And I would like to study those places and environments that are “silent” in the academic literature and that beg for in-depth first- and second-hand experiences and encounters. I give high marks to those who undertake fieldwork in a region and those
who approach topics through a different battery of lenses: environmental, political, social, cultural and economic, and also through less-studied learning languages. In retrospect I have less professional support for those Marxist geographers who operated in the 1980s and 1990s, and even today “in the clouds,” and think they have a good basis regarding what is transpiring at the grassroots. They often do not. Much of their early work on post-Soviet Eastern Europe and the USSR revealed their knowledge of Marxism lacked first-hand grassroots experience in connection with human rights violations, environmental inequality and freedom of expression and spiritual-religious yearnings, all aspects of knowledge that could have been gained by visits for personal research, professional conferences and faculty exchanges.

As for research topics, let me mention ten. First, after my first visit to Kyrgyzstan, and before I met Natasha, I seriously considered traveling with nomadic horse herders to the summer pastures (jailoo) in Kyrgyzstan. This would be a fun-filled and challenging learning experience. Second, I would like to study the immobility of youth and the elderly; many are unable to move and relocate, even over short distances, because they lack the financial resources necessary. In short, they are “prisoners of space,” a concept coined by my University of Kentucky colleague, Graham Rowles, used to describe the West Virginia rural elderly who could not move anywhere. Their memoryscapes are also worth mapping and studying. Third, it would be interesting to observe, analyze and map the de-Russification in the region’s culture. The end of the USSR brought the end of Soviet and Russian privilege and created a basis for ethnically dominant groups to enter into positions of influence and power. The extent to which this has been implemented and realized needs further study. The process may not be the same in Kazakhstan as in Tajikistan. Fourth, I think it would be important to study the region’s changing religious mixture, its diversity and sentiments. The existing diversity encompasses traditional and evangelical (new) Christians, persons very secular (who drink and smoke) and very conservative Moslems, new missionaries, new mosques (paid for by wealthy donors from Saudi Arabia and Iran), new Orthodox churches, believers in shamanism and many agnostics and atheists who are holdovers from Communist days, as well as many who may wear religious clothing and jewelry but do not attend religious services. Fifth, it would be interesting to compare the increased role and influence of China in the region (the massive Silk Road project, goods in markets, investments, etc.) with those of Russia. Sixth, the role of NGOs in society merits closer scrutiny, especially those concerned with gender empowerment, the rights of children and ethnic minorities, the protection of endangered plant and
animal species and environments, developing a society with increased technology (internet access, English language training, etc.); this also includes NGOs concerned with reform practices in schools and the workplace, political party formation and open society initiatives, as well as greater use of the media, press freedom and human rights protection. 

Seventh, there is need to study the new visible architectural “faces” of the region, post-modern shopping centers and improved infrastructure and also the derelict farmland, abandoned collective farms and farm buildings, village and rural depopulation, rural poverty and new poverty in the emerging cities. Eighth, we need studies on the growing emphasis on tourism for national and international audiences; this involves looking at regional pilgrimages and sporting events, new recreation sites for camping and hiking. Ninth, it would be worth studying the emergence of social media in rural and urban Central Asia, a phenomenon that is not only changing the face of youth and the elderly, but also those with limited written communication skills. The region still includes some minority groups living in isolated areas which are not connected to major cities or “metropolitan” life. Tenth, the emergence of a high-end consumer culture alongside urban deprivation illustrates the huge “social equality/inequality gaps” that persist in the region. One can observe these gaps simply while walking in the streets, traveling near bus and rail stations and seeing villas and dachas constructed next to the shabby, sometimes makeshift dwellings and onerous labor conditions of new rural migrants.

Where Do We Go from Here?

With simultaneous learning, relearning and unlearning taking place about many cultures, economics, and political systems, a perspective is needed where intellectual growth is considered a lifelong process. For some this process will continue throughout a lifetime studying the same region, such as Europe or Latin America. For others, opportunities will arise for some to gain some new geographic learning experiences. This has certainly been my case in learning about Central Asia. It is a region that continues to fascinate me; what I am grateful for is knowing that other “new regionalists” share the same sentiment. There are many more questions I have about this region’s past, present and future than I have answers. It is those geographies of perpetual exploration and discovery that I find tantalizing. The true experience as a geographer is knowing there are intellectual and personal risks or encounters one is willing to make in order to grow in ways never dreamed. Learning about place, region and landscape never really ends, there are only new encounters that beckon.
The article first develops the concept of "clan" conceptually. It then develops several propositions about clan politics and explores them empirically in the context of the post-Soviet Central Asian cases. The aim of this paper is to take stock of microfinance in Central Asia; to review recent developments in the context of the global development in the sector; to assess the regulatory and supervisory environment; and to identify untapped potential with respect to the future development of the industry. Cooley and Heathershaw's investigation of four Central Asian states shows the centrality of family and blood ties in Central Asia confirming earlier research on the importance of clan-based networks.

Crisis States Research Centre. Close Encounters of an Inner Asian Kind: Tibetan-Muslim co-existence and conflict in Tibet past and present1. Andrew Martin Fischer, Crisis States Research Centre. Abstract. The analysis is divided into two sections. The first sketches a broad historical overview of Tibetan relations with Muslims since initial contact in the seventh century. Conversion to Buddhism, so central to Tibetan identity in later centuries, played a key role in the early construction of collective identity, alongside its role as a tool of state-craft and ideology. However, contact with Arabs and Islam was also clearly evident in this earlier period.

Meanwhile, Andie's pursuit for an advanced admissions interview leads her to some inspirational advice from an unlikely source: a career secretary. Also, Jack takes a risk and explores the local gay community. Written by Anonymous. Plot Summary | Add Synopsis.