

CLAIMING

BELONGING

DURDONA MELISOVA



ZiNe BY Vicky Zhang

intro

This exhibit explores the impact of migration on my family's life. I begin with my grandmother, Gulsara Boboyorova, and her experiences in Uzbekistan during the early 1990s; specifically, her lasting impact on my parents' and my initial travel to the United States. Then, I explore the profound effects this had on my family's life, as well as addressing issues revolving around racial identity and ethnicity surfacing from Uzbekistan's reconstruction after becoming an independent nation. I want to preface this by saying my story can relate to many other Uzbek migration stories. However, it is not the only Uzbek migration story that exists. As Uzbeks gain new social mobility, their desire for overseas migration may be impacted by their unique historical context and geographical situation.

For some context, my grandparents, Gulsara and Abduganev, and my mother, Madina Ibatova, lived in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, in the early 1990s. My mom and her two older sisters lived and went to university together. Like many other women in Uzbekistan at the time, my grandmother and mother both worked as teachers, specifically in English and mathematics. My grandfather was also a mathematics professor. My grandparents often struggled to make ends meet and to financially support their family. As a result, food, clothing, and social interactions were all sacred. Because of this, my parents and my mother's siblings shared a mutual desire to help in any way that would allow for increased economic security for the family. This often meant rich marriages, higher education, or immigration to a different country.



Uzbekistan

the UNION of Soviet socialist (USSR) republics

In the Soviet Union, all aspects of daily life were governed by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, a centralized communist economic party that enforced the state ideology of Marxism-Leninism. Marxism-Leninism is based on the writings and experiences of Vladimir Lenin, the political leader of the Bolshevik faction during the Russian Revolution.

★ MARXISM - LENINISM:

official state ideology adopted by the USSR
& later by other socialist parties
ex: Communist Party of China

This theory was first coined in the early 20th century when Lenin adopted Karl Marx's theories as the basis for the newly-formed USSR. Lenin's Bolshevik forces, through a long and bloody revolution, had replaced Russia's centuries-old system of monarchy with a government led by the Communist Party. Through this, he emphasized a need for a disciplined and "vanguard party"-like structure that would lead the working class towards a revolution.

Under Marxist-Leninist ideology, imperialism was seen as the latest stage of capitalism.



In the USSR, control over major industries was centralized within the state. For citizens, this meant everything was equal: food ratios, state-regulated wages and employment, and heavy surveillance.

The Soviet Union cared deeply about outrunning western, capitalist nations to be seen as the "outperformer."³ This meant that the Soviet military-industrial complex (the relationship between the military and the government) received a significant amount of national revenue to support its dictatorship and armed movements in "Third World" countries.

This often left the Soviet people's basic needs, like housing, food, clothing and medical care, to be disregarded and underfunded.

the UNION of Soviet

socialist (USSR) republics



young women seated in a classroom, in Tashkent, located at the time within the Uzbek SSR.

In the USSR, practicing religion was another restricted aspect of social life.

During Joseph Stalin's rule, organized religion was treated as the enemy of communism. The state enforced strictly anti-religious policies, imposing a period of state-mandated atheism, deporting or "purging" religious leaders, and suppressing the belief in any "God" or "Gods." These ideas persisted throughout different Soviet regimes, and were enforced by state officials during the late 1980s and early 1990s.⁴

Most individuals' relationships to religion were suppressed through restrictions to holy areas and books. For most Uzbeks, this meant Islam could not be practiced openly. Mosques were closed and the Qur'an was not made available to learn, pray, or study.

The first wave of Uzbek migration to the United States started in 1991 after *perestroika*, otherwise known as the restructuring of the Soviet Union's political and economic system during the 1980s.⁵

Uzbek migration was influenced by both push and pull factors:

- ★ experiencing low-life satisfaction
- ★ economic & job insecurity
- ★ social factors: desire for the "American Dream", support & challenges in a new nation, & social expectations

What drove my parents to immigrate was primarily the promise of economic security. My mother would hear stories from her neighbors talking about how migrating to the United States changed their lives. They talked about how, in America, they had the ability to provide themselves with economic security through simple labor jobs — jobs that even she could fulfill.

Life in SAMARKAND

Post-1991

After the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, the states formerly unified under the banner of the USSR were split into independent nations.¹

In Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov — the former First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic — declared the new state's independence, making himself president after the first official presidential election.

What this meant for my grandmother, Gulsara, and my mother, Madina, is that they would become — in theory — more recognized under Uzbek culture, rather than Soviet Union culture.

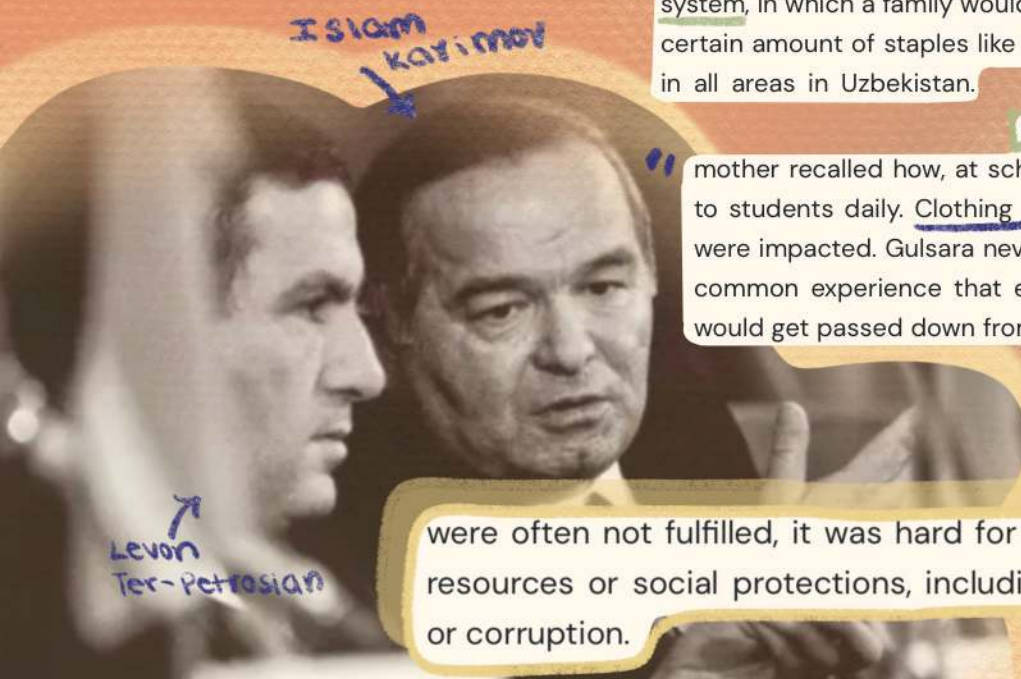
During this time, my grandmother and my mother were living in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. They lived in the Uzbekstanski neighborhood, an area of the city where teachers lived. Under Karimov's rule, they first started to experience upward social mobility as seen through differences in their consumerist behavior.

Pre-1991, most Soviet citizens, regardless of which republic they called home, had HARSH EXPERIENCES WITH FOOD & HUNGER.

Most parents, including Gulsara and her husband, Abduqani Ibatov, experienced the rationing system, in which a family would receive tickets for the month to purchase a certain amount of staples like flour or sugar. This experience was universal in all areas in Uzbekistan.

Children experienced this in schools, too, my mother recalled how, at school, singular portions of bread would be given to students daily. Clothing was also in limited supply, and citizens' styles were impacted. Gulsara never bought her children multiple outfits. It was a common experience that each household would have a few outfits that would get passed down from child to child.

Because basic needs like these were often not fulfilled, it was hard for citizens to advocate for additional resources or social protections, including against government oppression or corruption.



Life in SAMARKAND

Post-1991

However, socioeconomic conditions shifted under Karimov's regime in the 1990s.

The rationing system disappeared, and Gulsara's family was finally able to buy food that they wanted. Clothing became mass-produced, and cheaper, as imports increased drastically.

As basic needs were being fulfilled for many Uzbek families, a new emphasis on social mobility and individual expression emerged; one that was focused on addressing corruption and political turmoil. For families like Gulsara's, aspects of Karimov's rule did change their lives for the better.

After Karimov's first presidency, Karimov extended his own term in office and was soon reelected for another five years. This created tensions among the international political community, which led to Uzbekistan's "free and democratic" presidential elections coming under the review of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.²

Uzbekistan's government, now an independent nation, **REFUSED** to allow individual independent and opposition parties to exist.

?!

The sole candidate permitted to oppose Karimov was a public supporter of Karimov's policies and leadership.³

?! ?!

Left in the middle of another geopolitical conflict, Uzbek families simply could not interfere. Gulsara and thousands of other elderly citizens refused to speak in fear of their economic gains, seemingly impossible under Soviet Union rule, being taken away again.

↓
fear loomed!

the andijan Massacre



What my parents and other Uzbeks experienced post-1991 was a paradox:

although their lives improved in certain respects in the newly independent Uzbek nation, they also continued to face political, religious and social repression that limited their fundamental human rights.¹ In the past, economic factors had been the primary determinant of their quality of life.

Now, however, the discrimination and mistreatment that my family experienced was not inherently tied to economic stagnation during war, but to the corruption of their own government.

LIMITED SOCIAL MOBILITY UNDER KARIMOV'S REGIME

On May 13, 2005, the Uzbek government opened fire on thousands of protesters gathered at Babur Square in the city of Andijan, located in the Eastern area of Uzbekistan.² Around 200 individuals, including men, women and children, were killed for protesting against

- ★ gov't corruption
- ★ increasing levels of local poverty
- ★ injustices

"If you are alone, one or two, they will just arrest you, but we thought if we gathered all together and stated our complaints, the gov't would listen."

repression under the

Years after the Andijan Massacre, Uzbek authorities continued to use violence to suppress and detain human rights advocates, often including bystanders and legal observers throughout the Andijan area. The Andijan Massacre marked recognition of a broader issue based on government corruption: the government's fear of political parties and opposition.

Most imprisonments that occurred under Karimov's regime weren't due to acts of actual terrorism (such as the 1999 bombing of Tashkent), but rather acts that were deemed to be terrorism because they could cause some type of harm to the independent Islamic nation.¹

Events such as the Andijan Massacre showcase how even when other crimes were regularly occurring, particularly government corruption and white-collar crimes, those who were actually convicted were often categorized under the notion of "being a threat" to the single Uzbek Party.

ground shake and then saw a woman crying over the motionless body of a child.

EXTREMIST GROUPS

Uzbek authorities blame terrorist attacks and an explosion at a bombmaking factory Sunday and Monday on Islamic extremists, specifically followers of the Hizb ut-Tahrir party and the Wahhabi sect. Here is a look at the major militant groups in the region.

HIZB UT-TAHRIR, whose Arabic name means "the party that calls for freedom" in the Middle East. It disavows violence but its principles don't rule out violence to establish a Muslim state. The group is banned in many countries. Its most visible activity has previously been in Chechnya, ruled by sharia, or Islamic law.

WAHHABIS are adherents of the Wahhabi sect, which is believed to have inspired the Taliban. It is a literal translation of the Koran, Wahhabism is a Muslim sect or religion as atheists. It has many followers in formerly Soviet Central Asia, including Chechen rebels.

The ISLAMIC MOVEMENT OF UZBEKISTAN

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) is the secular government of the former Soviet republic. The group allegedly orchestrated a failed 1999 bombing attack on Uzbek President Islam Karimov that killed at least 16. It was declared a terrorist group by the United States in September 2000 after the kidnapping of four American mountain climbers in the Central Asian nation of Kyrgyzstan. However, it is believed to have been seriously weakened by U.S.-led antiterrorism operations in Afghanistan. The group's political leader, Tahir Yuldash, was reported to have been killed by Pakistani government forces near the Afghan border.

Source: Associated Press

religious oppression

The Uzbek government believed that these individuals were members of larger fundamentalist groups.² Citizens who attended mosques without government registration were frequently incarcerated, as were many imams (mosque leaders) and those who belonged to unauthorized religious organizations.³ As noted in the article above, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan was painted as a terrorist group who wanted to overthrow the government by killing Karimov. Framing them as terrorists and security threats justified the sweeps and crack-downs on other groups who were seen as political opponents.

The U.S. Embassy in Tashkent warned that "other terrorists are believed still at large and may be attempting additional attacks."

The violence began Sunday night with a blast that killed 10 at a house used by alleged terrorists in the central region of Bukhara, Kadyrov said.

A news article that lists "extremist groups" in Uzbekistan, c. 2004.

By adopting this notion, Uzbekistan on both a national and international level would reduce scrutiny of human rights abuses, uplifting political corruption and the suppression of innocent human beings without true accountability.

In the years after the Andijan Massacre, Uzbek society experienced two major changes:

★ increase in international diplomacy led by the Uzbek gov't

★ increase in state censorship

Karimov Gov't

repression under the

According to Reporters without Borders, even ten years after the Andijan Massacre, there was no evidence of the human rights situation in Uzbekistan improving.

The government never allowed for an independent investigation of the Andijan Massacre. Because of this, those who did raise concerns often faced incarceration or exile.⁴

My grandmother told me that this was because President Karimov's authoritarian rule had a tight grip on Uzbek society, causing many voices advocating for human rights to be silenced through harsh labor, incarceration, or censorship. Those who asked questions and stood up for justice were tortured; blue-collar workers and children aged 10-12 were exploited working in the cotton fields, and the media continued to be heavily censored.

"I always had to work extra, even years later. Being a teacher and raising three girls who started to have families of their own as a single mother was hard. It was hard for everyone. You just had to accept that there was nothing you could do and had to move on. Just get to the next day." (Gulsara Boboyorova)

impact with diplomatic ties w/ America

The Karimov government evaded responsibility for the Andijan Massacre by placing the blame for the initial agitation on new anti-Karimov groups, which were rumored to be funded by the United States. In turn, Uzbek authorities accused the American government of funding the Akramiya Gunmen — the men who were initially tried and incarcerated — who they claimed were responsible for the Andijan uprising. The Uzbek government used this as justification for removing the U.S. military from their air bases in places such as Karshi Khanabad, which is in southeastern Uzbekistan. In return, the United States also cut off their joint military cooperation with the Uzbek Army.⁵

Uzbekistan's relationship with government officials and diplomats within the European Union (EU) was also significantly impacted by their human rights abuses. After the massacre in 2005, the EU decided to impose sanctions, a direct response to no accountability being taken for the atrocities committed.⁶ The sanctions imposed the Arms Embargo Act, which prevented Uzbekistan from being able to sell and transfer military equipment. President Karimov refused to accept the legitimacy of the sanctions, and continued to claim that it was an attack by the EU on Uzbek sovereignty.⁷

The Andijan Massacre's effects were not limited to Uzbekistan, but extend onto an international level!

impact w/ EU

Karimov Gov't

These ongoing conflicts between the Uzbek government and its Western allies after the Andijan Massacre marked a time of growing Uzbek isolation. Conditions were not improving at home, and as a result, many Uzbeks sought out new opportunities: by going abroad. This was the beginning of another distinct wave of migration among Uzbek citizens.

MY FAMILY'S immigration

During the years described in the prior sections, as poverty grew and the Uzbek government continued to suppress religious minorities' rights, Uzbek immigration to other nations increased.¹ This is where my family's immigration story begins. In 2009, and for the two years following, my parents, Madina Ibatova and Aziz Kurakhmedov, had to move to Russia to support their family and escape President Karimov's regime.

WHY?

Like other immigration stories, my parents' initial move to Russia was based on a desire to give their children a better life compared to theirs. In Uzbekistan, they struggled to get jobs and a lasting education because of the heavy prevalence of corruption. Many Uzbek citizens' documents were faked and/or tweaked in favor of twisting their educational background for easier access to more technical, high-paying jobs.² To most people, including my parents, this was completely normalized because of President Karimov's and his family's scandals. Although his family's corruption does play an important role in my immigration story, I cannot expand into detail based on their accounts because of its lack of historical preservation.

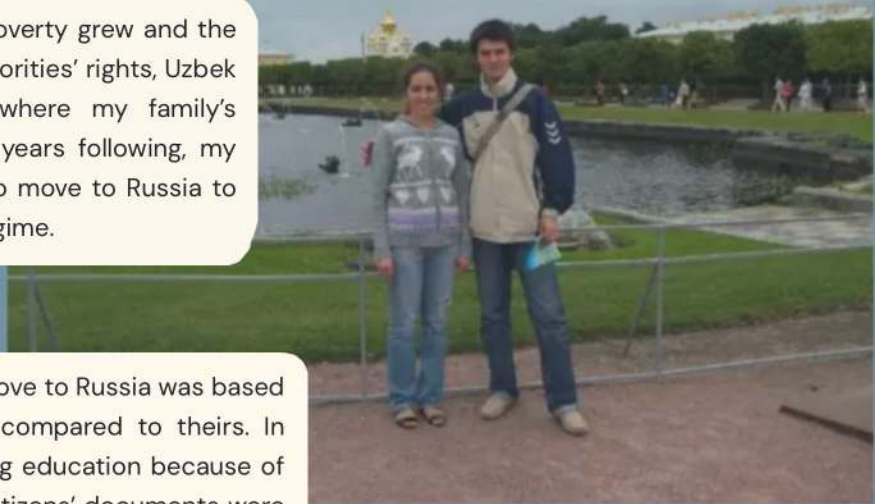
During these times, many Uzbeks moved to Russia for reasons similar to my family's. Russia was still the primary area to gain economic security without a visa, and many middle-aged and young men traveled there as low-wage workers.³ The bulk of their earnings were sent to their families who had been left behind in Uzbekistan, which often included both spouses and children. Both of my parents, being 27 and unable to feed their children, decided to follow suit.

CONDITIONS:

Even as moving to Russia offered the promise of economic stability, my parents worked under extremely dangerous conditions just to support their family.⁴

To start, they lived in a single room with five other individuals for three years while in Russia. Most low-wage workers worked in retail, construction or the meat industry. Their payment varied based on their bosses' whims, and there was no accountability when these wages changed. As my mother reflects on these moments, she often talks about being paid less than promised.

One significant moment that impacted her life was when she was given an entire sack of potatoes to peel and was told to mop the restaurant's floors. Although promised 100 rubles, she only got 30. She often reminisces about how this moment made her feel dehumanized.



The author's parents in Russia in the early 2000s.

terrible & 😞
inhumane
working
conditions!

MY FAMILY'S immigration

CONDITIONS:

Many other low-wage Uzbek workers experienced similar conditions — not simply due to their low economic status, but also because of the inherent xenophobia that existed in Russia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the notion of *"Rossiya dlya russkikh"* (*Russia for Russians*) gained traction with right-wing nationalist groups who were dealing with the severe identity crisis and ideological vacuum after the loss of their empire, the USSR.⁵ As covered in *The Index-Journal* in 2008, as xenophobia increased, organized groups and extremist nationalist movements rose in prominence.

These notably included racist, neo-Nazi "skinhead" groups.⁶ Such groups often targeted Black migrants from Africa and migrants from Central Asia. Central Asians with darker features, accents, and traditional clothing were especially vulnerable to their attacks.⁷ Between 2009 and 2010, approximately 500 people became victims of such strikes.⁸ My mom reflected on how the only reason she got out of certain tough situations was because of her hair color:

"One day I was coming home after a long day of work. Upon entering the underground subway station, I realized there were pepper bombs going off around me. In the next minutes I heard screaming and shots. Immediately, I ran out. People with guns and weapons started to circle me and hundreds of other people. The only way I was able to get out was by covering my face and allowing my prominent dyed blonde hair, a feature present in many Russian women, to be shown."

"I would often wait at the bus station for your father so we could go home together. During these moments, groups of men would pass by me with knives and ask my nationality. I always claimed I was Moldovan based on my facial features and because of this, I escaped being killed." (Madina Ibatova)



The author's parents in Russia in the early 2000s.

The moments were significant event in their mother's life that showed how xenophobia in Russia was violent & inescapable for most Uzbek migrants.

As factors like her race, hair color, and simply the way she carried herself impacted how she experienced the world, identity became something to conceal, rather than embrace. Community violence was normalized within the Russian community, as law enforcement continued to turn a blind eye to acts of racist street violence.

This reinforced the discriminatory notion of "Russia for Russians."

MY FAMILY'S immigration

Most Central Asians continue to experience discrimination in Russia to this day.⁹

Russians sentenced for 19 hate killings

MOSCOW — Seven young men who murdered 19 people in a series of hate crimes were sentenced to prison Monday amid a surge in racist assaults, xenophobia and neo-Nazism in Russia.

Fears of an explosion in violent racism were further heightened earlier this month with the gruesome beheading of a Tajik migrant worker near Moscow.

Prosecutors charged that the group sentenced Monday preyed on Central Asians, Caucasians and other non-Slavs with distinctly dark skin or Asian features, attacking them on the streets and in pedestrian tunnels with hammers and other weapons. The group videotaped many of the attacks and posted the clips online.

• On June 12, 2011, the Russian National Independence Day, thousands of Russian citizens stormed the streets to show pride for their nationality. Many were drunk and it was the biggest time when killings based on race occurred. A young Uzbek boy entered the store I was working at and asked for batteries. Unfortunately, my shop didn't sell batteries, so I recommended him to go to a Perekrestok magazine [a local grocery store] across the street. Seconds later, the child came back screaming for help while clutching his stomach. Without a second thought, I ran to help him on the street. As I held him in her arms while screaming for help, no one stopped. I stood there trying to help the young innocent child who had been stabbed by a Russian alcoholic on the street. Even as the ambulance approached us, the young boy died there in my arms.* (Madina Ibatova)

Inhumane treatment of poor, lower-class Central Asians who come to Russia in hopes of better opportunities remain deeply rooted within societal attitudes and practices, including racial profiling, labor exploitation, and police harassment.

This has forced many Uzbeks and Central Asians to shed or hide their identities out of self-protection. But in the process of minimizing their identities, for many, the fear that their culture is inferior to others seeps in.

This idea is reinforced by the majority of Americans being caucasian/white, & by the majority of Asian Americans in NYC being East Asian.

MOVING to the U.S.

While my parents worked under harsh conditions in Russia, my sister, Rukhshona Melisova, and I were under the care of my two grandmothers until the ages of three and five, respectively. We primarily moved between two cities, Samarkand and Tashkent. My mom's mother, Gulsara Boboyorova, acknowledged these struggles. It was often hard to sustain all of our lives, even with the money my parents made working in Russia. This was a key factor that drove Gulsara to apply for a Green Card through the Diversity Visa Program for my family.



First established by the Immigration Act of 1990, the Diversity Visa program fosters legal migration into the United States based on past migration factors.¹

→ caters towards nations with historically low rates of immigrations to the U.S. It is divided into 6 different sectors by region where their cumulative past rates of immigration are calculated.

Visas are then granted (or not) based on this regional information.

IN ORDER TO QUALIFY FOR A DV:

★ at least 1 family member must be a native citizen from the nation of application

(for ex. at least 1 of my parents had to be from Uzbekistan in order to apply.)

★ The applicant also must be admissible into the U.S. through the Immigration & Nationality Act

★ have at least a high school diploma OR
2 years of work experience

The applicant also must be admissible into the United States through the Immigration and Nationality Act and have at least a high school diploma or two years of work experience.³ The process of application, however, varies on a nation-to-nation basis.

MOVING to the U.S.

In Uzbekistan, specifically, you must apply for a visa through a private party.⁴ This often requires a lot of trust and money. My grandmother, Gulsara, ended up applying twice: once for my mother and once for my father.

In July of 2011, my parents officially came back to Uzbekistan, wanting to take me and my sister back to live in Russia with them. My parents believed that this was ultimately the best thing to do for our family. Even as living in Russia was a struggle, they knew that they simply could not make enough, even for food, to live in Uzbekistan.

However, on August 10, 2011, a few days before our departure to Russia, my grandmother and mother were headed to the store when my grandmother decided to check her DV status. She found that my dad's visa application had been successful, and my parents would get another chance to move — this time to America. My parents started to save up a few thousand dollars, working back in Uzbekistan with my grandmother, and on February 12, 2012, we came to the United States.

My parents ultimately chose to move to the United States for a multitude of reasons. Like many other individuals, they believed that America was the land of the great. My parents heard stories from their neighbors who had immigrated about how America was so amazing, and how the opportunities available were incomparable to what one could find in Uzbekistan. My mom's cousin, who went to America on a work and travel visa, was one of the people who told them stories of America. While working at an American McDonald's, he was able to pay off his tuition and still have enough to send funds back to his family. He often told my parents that if he had the chance to go back, he would take it, convincing my parents to ultimately move.

Like many others, this migration story dives into the unique push and pull factors for a singular family. Many other Uzbek immigrant families who also settled in New York City made their way there for similar reasons:

- ★ A desire for economic stability
- ★ upward social mobility
- ★ Better education!

Still, transporting an entire identity across oceans and borders is never easy. Uzbek immigrants now face new questions: how much of themselves could they keep, and how much did they have to inherently transform?

Other factors that many Uzbek families considered when deciding whether to immigrate included family reunification and political expression. As the restrictions of the Diversity Visa Program started to loosen, extended families sought to rebuild their own communities in a new land. For instance, there is a current rental building in Sheepshead Bay where multiple extended family relatives can be found living in one building. Others believed the promise of the "American Dream" and the "land of the free," which offered the possibility of both financial stability and freedom of expression.

"So many of them live in the same building. They all come out at the same time to take their children to the park and talk. I have never met a closer family. I could ask probably ask them to take care of you guys for days and they would do it with no hesitation." (Madina Ibatova)

FINDING & DEFINING UZBEK IDENTITY

in NYC

The author's grandparents and their companions pose for a Soviet portrait in Macclesfield, c. 1950s

Many Uzbek immigrants' struggle with identity continued even after their migration to New York. As most Uzbeks faced challenges with assimilation, it became harder to grapple with an identity fit to include Uzbeks.

Since the 1990s, the United States Census Bureau's definition of "Asian" has included Uzbeks and all individuals who identify as Central Asian.¹ The definitions of other races, including white, exclude Central Asians; the terms have been changed as of 2020. Individuals who identify as Central Asian inherently categorize themselves as "other," even while clearly being geographically Asian.

As this lack of acknowledgment continues to exist when filling out governmental forms, job applications, and school identification forms, Uzbeks cannot inherently find a community built off a broader racial identification like other ethnic groups.

"I remember when I was doing an application for a leadership conference in San Francisco. When I clicked 'Asian' and it led to a drop-down list with all the different types of Asian, I did not find a single Central Asian identification. When I explored more, I found Uzbekistani under the Caucasian section. I genuinely got a bit sad." (Rukhshona Melisova)

My story starts with a similar struggle with identity. Even as I grew up in a household that emphasized strong Uzbek cultural traditions, I struggled to connect my home narrative with my experiences outside my home.

In school, I would identify myself as Russian in hopes of fitting in with the rest of my classmates. I felt like I was Asian, but because so much of my identity was related distinctly to the Soviet national consciousness, like that of my grandmothers, I associated myself with those who identified as Russian — even though they were considered white. This continued to be something reinforced by Western ideology during my elementary and middle school years.

FINDING & DEFINING UZBEK IDENTITY

in NYC

One idea that significantly contributed to my identity crisis was the idea of a monolithic Asian identity.

Western society's idea of what the category of "Asian" means usually only includes East Asians. In ways both subtle and explicit, these ideas imply that those who don't look like them aren't inherently Asian, and also exclude most Central Asians with darker and different features.

My parents' instincts to conceal their identities also left me confused. As they grew up in conditions that forced them to limit their self-expression due to Russia's xenophobia, the Soviet Union's censorship of religion, and Karimov's social oppression, they were aware that proudly embracing cultural heritage could be inherently dangerous.

Growing up, hearing their stories, made me believe in the same idea. Even as we celebrated Uzbek holidays and traditions like Nowruz (Spring New Year) and Eid al-Fitr (Islamic festival), I consciously avoided situations where I had to talk about my cultural background. I feared I would not be accepted in the same way that my parents were not.



The author & her sister, Rukhshona, in Sheepshead Bay in the 2010s.

The Sheepshead Bay community still captures the duality that Uzbeks face: between being either Asian (a term I once thought only related to East and South Asians) or Russian.

This makes it almost feel like a social necessity to fit into only one of the two categories. I am not alone in this narrative. My sister, Rukhshona, who also grew up in the Sheepshead Bay area, also feels stuck between different racial categories.

In a larger sense, we struggle with the inherent duality between societal standards: those insisted upon by our parents to become the perfect Uzbek daughters, and those that encourage us to assimilate to become the perfect "American," often associated with the white race.

UZBEK COMMUNITY INSTITUTIONS



Picked veggies at the market in Uzbekistan.

Uzbek immigration into the Sheepshead Bay and Forest Hills areas continued throughout the 21st century, and new community institutions and businesses were established to serve the cultural needs of these growing neighborhood communities.

Uzbek culture's biggest cultural export is often considered its cuisine. The building of Tashkent Supermarkets, now an iconic local institution, was for many non-Uzbeks the first representation of Uzbek food and culture that they encountered in New York City. This helped establish Uzbek communities in NYC, and contributed to a new and increasing public recognition of Uzbeks as part of New York's Asian American community.

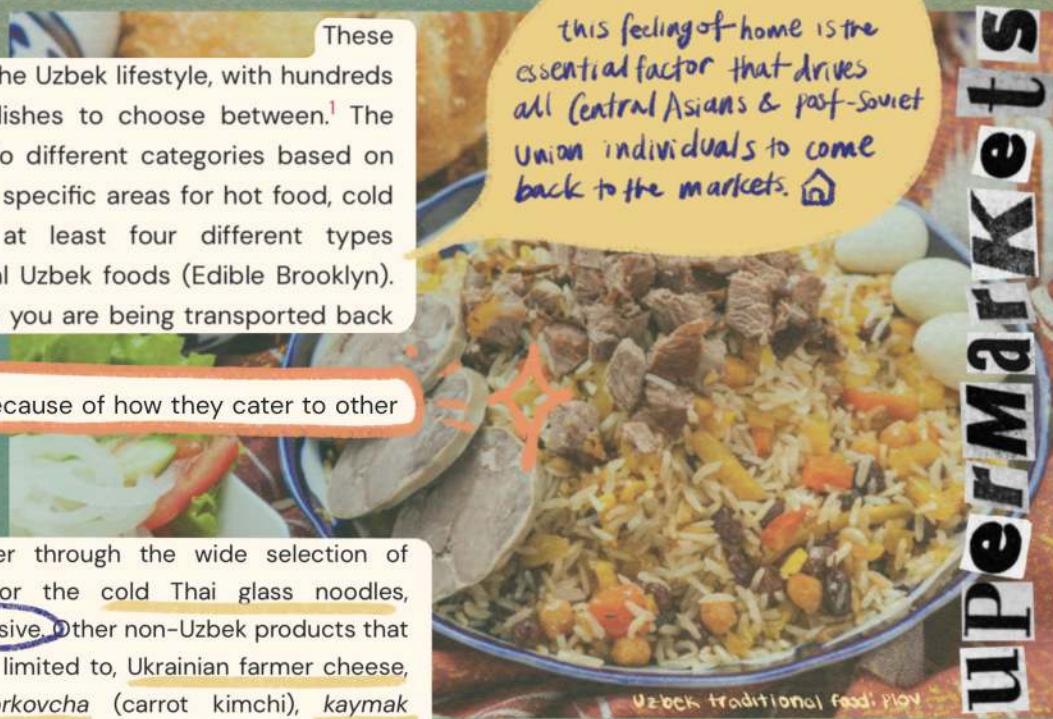
The first Tashkent Supermarket was opened in 2012 in Coney Island/Sheepshead Bay located on [Avenue Z and Coney Island Avenue](#). It soon expanded into Brighton Beach, otherwise known as "Little Odessa," where Russians, Eastern Europeans, and some Hispanic communities live ("Tashkent Supermarket Halal Food - Ave Z - Google Search").

These supermarkets offer a full immersion into the Uzbek lifestyle, with hundreds of different food items and prepared dishes to choose between.¹ The Tashkent supermarkets are organized into different categories based on food. The middle of every store contains specific areas for hot food, cold food, and salads. There are always at least four different types of *plov*, *somsas*, and *manty*, all traditional Uzbek foods (Edible Brooklyn). Walking into the store makes you feel like you are being transported back

Tashkent Supermarkets also stand out because of how they cater to other cultures and their cuisines.

Whether through the wide selection of mayonnaise-heavy Russian salads or the cold Thai glass noodles, Tashkent's offerings are culturally inclusive. Other non-Uzbek products that attract shoppers include, but are not limited to, Ukrainian farmer cheese, Balkan cheese, Turkish olives, *morkovcha* (carrot kimchi), *kaymak* (simmered milk), and even the Turkish brand of Ayran.² The reason why I call out these products is to just showcase how much inclusivity is included within a supermarket that is said to mainly cater to Uzbeks and Central Asians.

this feeling of home is the essential factor that drives all Central Asians & post-Soviet Union individuals to come back to the markets. 🏠



Uzbek traditional food: Plov

SuperMarkets

tashkent

uzBeK COMMUNITY institutions!

Because Uzbek stories have become so intertwined with Soviet Union narratives, they often go untold or are framed as simply another group to face consequences from the Soviet Union. It's critical to realize that even as other communities and nations have become divided from the Soviet Union, uplifting their stories is just as essential as uplifting Soviet and Uzbek stories.

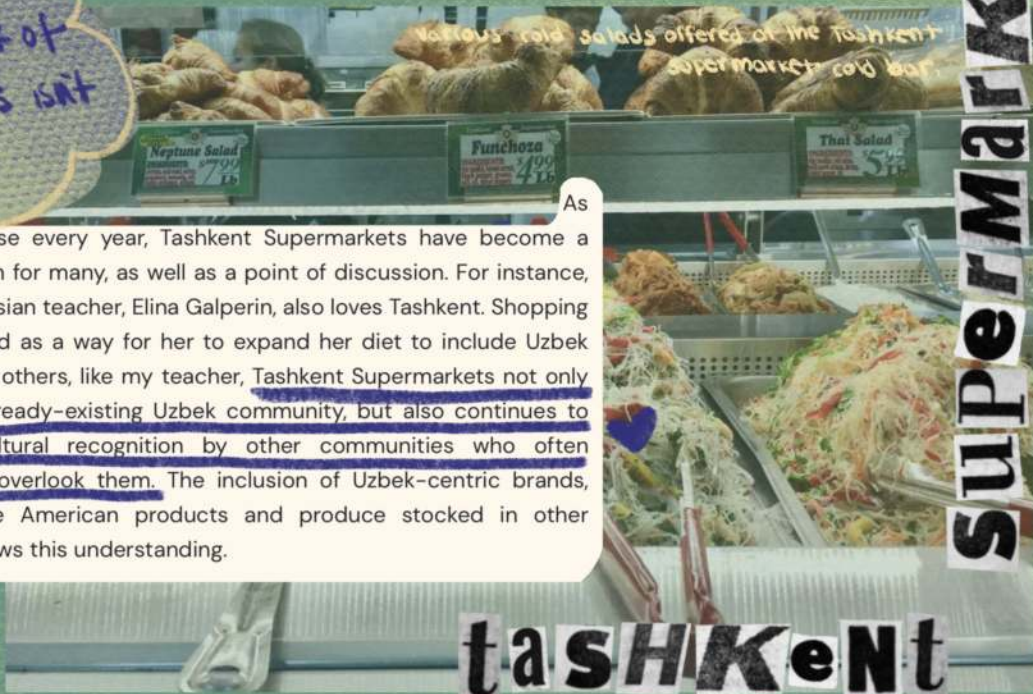
Tashkent Supermarkets play an essential role in the Uzbek immigration narrative because they show how my community established and rooted itself in New York City, even in times of misidentification and social upheavals.

Because Tashkent Supermarkets are located in neighborhoods with multi-racial and multi-ethnic communities, they show how identification with Uzbek culture is now recognizable to these other communities.

For me, finding a space where I can see individuals like myself shopping and I can feel comfortable taking on the role of a leader or manager not only makes me feel more connected, but also establishes that I have the power and capability to do the same. I believe the idea of security is an essential aspect for younger generations of Uzbeks and Central Asians to feel comfortable with who they are. It's important that we do not feel the need to conceal ourselves in a narrative, or to squeeze ourselves into imperfect and unrepresentative categories of identity. Going into a Tashkent Supermarket gives me a sense of hope that Uzbek culture can and will become more accepted and recognized as a part of Asian American culture, rather than forcing an incorrect identification with whiteness.

However! The importance of Tashkent supermarkets isn't just LOCAL!

As customers increase every year, Tashkent Supermarkets have become a beloved institution for many, as well as a point of discussion. For instance, my Jewish-Belarusian teacher, Elina Galperin, also loves Tashkent. Shopping at Tashkent served as a way for her to expand her diet to include Uzbek cuisine. For many others, like my teacher, Tashkent Supermarkets not only builds onto an already-existing Uzbek community, but also continues to expand their cultural recognition by other communities who often otherwise would overlook them. The inclusion of Uzbek-centric brands, compared to the American products and produce stocked in other supermarkets, grows this understanding.



uzBeK COMMUNITY institutions:

Based on the recent expansion into new boroughs, including Manhattan and Queens, it is clear that Tashkent Supermarkets are now known more broadly beyond Soviet and Uzbek communities alone, even if simply as a shopping location. For instance, in a recent interview with New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani, he mentions visiting and buying *manti* from a Tashkent Supermarket in South Brooklyn.³

West Village:
West 4th Avenue:
★ 378 6th Ave, New York, NY 10011

★ Forest Hills:
64-46 108th St, Forest Hills, NY 11375

★ Midwood:
4315 18th Ave, Brooklyn, NY 11218

★ Coney Island:
2828 Coney Island Ave, Brooklyn, NY 11235

★ Brighton Beach:
713 Brighton Beach Ave, Brooklyn, NY 11235

Taking Mamdani's recommendation into consideration, I hope that this story makes you want to visit a Tashkent near your neighborhood.



SuperMarkets

tashkent

CONCLUSION

Even as I grew up in a household that emphasized a strong sense of Asian culture, I often struggled to connect my home narrative with experiences to the outside world. In school, I would identify myself as white in hopes of fitting in with the rest of my classmates. I felt like I was Asian, but because so much of our family's struggle started from being Asian in the first place, I continued to associate myself with an identity that reinforced western ideals of white supremacy. I noted that being white — both inside and out — was what I should always strive for. Because other Asian family histories also involve navigating with xenophobia, discrimination and other harsh social climates when coming to the United States, ideas such as the model minority and identity concealing emerge.

These ideas are continued to be reinforced when Asian, and more specifically Central Asian, history is neglected in classrooms. When Uzbek students continue to see a lack of representation in school curricula, their identity becomes concealed because of the very few opportunities present to acknowledge their history. Failing to add Uzbek history becomes a sign of acceptance towards oppression of marginalized communities.

Teaching Uzbek history in schools ultimately allows students to confidently claim belonging and recognize that their familial stories of facing political turmoil, corruption and social change are what shape American history. Everyday, localized places are also a key part of this narrative: places like supermarkets, local bodegas, and even restaurants become a sign as to why Uzbek history must be uplifted.

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