Article

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Central Asia as a Rising Cinematic Power House
From Vostokkino to Findings Its own Identity

Recently I visited Kyrgyzstan for the 04th Bishkek International Film Festival. This was my first visit to any Central Asian country for a film festival. This was an eye opening experience for me. This is just the 4th edition, but the way the festival was organised is really commendable. With the segmentation like the Bars in progress, dedicated co-production and pitch market the film festival acts as an incubator for local cinema and talent. They already have everything that is required of a world class forum. Presently talent from neighbouring Central Asian Countries like Kazakhstan, Tajikistan increasingly leaving their footprints on international film festival circuits. Such well-organised film festivals would help them to get more attention and market worldwide.

Surrounded by this environment, I felt like studying the broader idea of Cinema of Central Asia. I have two questions to explore, firstly why are these Central Asian Cinema important in the global context & What needs to be done to make it more acceptable and accessible in the world film market. Conversation with the directors, producers and artists made one thing clear that Central Asia is well positioning itself as the next big thing in global cinema. It is ready to lead the Asian Film market in coming years.

In a world full of movies from big film industries, Central Asia still has many stories that most people have not seen. The five

countries — Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan — have a long and complex history. They were home to nomadic empires, the Silk Road, Russian and Soviet rule, and later independence. Today they are finding their place in a changing world. Cinema here is more than entertainment. It is a way to share real stories and build soft power — the power of attraction through culture.

Journey beyond Vostokkino - A brief History of Central Asian Cinema

Vostokkino means 'Eastern Cinema' or Oriental Cinema. It was a cinematic organization founded in 1926. Soviet officials alongside scholars from the Scientific Association of Oriental Studies launched this in Moscow. It emerged from a department within the State Committee for Cinematography - Sovkon. In 1929 Bashkira, Crimea, Daghesthan, Kazakhstan and many others controlled Vostokkino. Since its inception Vostokkino has served due to the Soviet Union's new nationalist politics and changing cultural politics. As the process began the film studios were established in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan in the 1920s. Kazakhstan and Tajikistan followed this.

Vostokkino did not last long. It operated only from 1928 to 1935. This was a very chaotic time in Soviet history. In March 1928, the first Party Cinema Conference was organised. This showed that the Communist Party wanted more control over the cinema and its industry. Cinema was added to the First Five-Year Plan. The government decided the Vostokkino's budget and schedules and the content or subjects of the film. By 1936, the Soviet government began closing semi-private companies like Vostokkino.

Moreover, Soviet officials accused Vostokkino of corruption and promoting regional nationalism. The government stopped celebrating differences and instead pushed for centralization and forcing everyone to assimilate. Because of this change, Vostokkino was no longer needed.

After World War II, the national cinema of Central Asian Countries grew much stronger. During this period many Soviet filmmakers relocated to Central Asia. It helped bring tech skills to the region.

Ali Khamraev, an actor-director from Uzbekistan made great Ostren films which are also called soviet westerns or red western. His movies show heroes riding the horses and fighting in the deserts of Central Asia. He took the western style and used it to tell the stories of his own countries. He is the combination of Fiction and Non Fiction films exploring the clash between modernization and tradition.

Legendary Shaken Aimanov became the founding father of Kazakh cinema. He is the one who combines folklore, literature and cinema to get Kazakhstan's identity in central Asia. Later in 1980 a group of young filmmakers from the country launched the Kazakh New Wave which kept the country ahead in the Central Asia region in terms of exploration of the subjects and connecting it to the daily life of the audiences from the region. Poverty and village life are the core themes explored during this time.

The stories from the Kyrgyzstan region beautifully mixed everyday family life and local nature with Soviet values.

After the fall of the USSR and the independence in 1991, the film industry from this region faced financial problems. New governments were still struggling to set up the new system. Film studios struggled to survive. Despite the economic issues, filmmakers like Ardak Amirkulov, Darezhan Omirbaev, Aktan Arym Kubat, Adilkhan Yerzhanov showcased their talents on the domestic and international front. They successfully reach international film festivals. Films from this period remain valuable. In the present day many of these films are in physically deteriorating condition and need restoration and archival care.

Why stories from Central Asia Matter

Modern Filmmakers from the region say that Central Asian Cinema is far more than just scenic landscapes, nomads and traditional clothes. Kyrgyz actress Ainura Kachkynbek Kyzy pointed out that the modern identity of the region is born from the collision of different historical layers within the region. That is why it reaches beyond the picturesque landscape, nomads and national colors of each country. “We can give the world stories about a person who is between the past and the future, between East and West, between tradition and modernity, between collective memory and personal choice. And in this, in my opinion, lies our uniqueness. Therefore, our stories can be very local in form, but universal in content.”

Stepan Burnashev, a director from the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), highlights that stories from Central Asia are specific and unique. The wider world outside the region does not know. That's why it remains a minority voice. He said “ cinema is the easiest and quickest way to tell stories about minorities.”

Bishkek-based film scholar and programmer Sultan Usuvaliev stated that the cultural diversity of the region is the biggest reason why the films from this region matter. “There is no such thing as an abstract human being. From climate to everyday rituals, the world appears to us in concrete form. The stories from Central Asia are important as they show the unique experience of people discovering and understanding themselves within the specific conditions of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Perhaps this can be seen most clearly through two major themes: society and the individual, and the human relationship with nature.”

Kyrgyz filmmaker Erke Dzhumakmatova argues that, “As one of the most ancient ethnic groups in Central Asia, we are not searching for our national identity — we know exactly who we are. But we are searching for our identity in cinema. Our stories are important because we are forging a new, authentic visual language to express this multifaceted reality, bringing our unique cultural DNA to the global screen. For a long time, our cinema was heavily shaped by Soviet influence, and our stories were often told through a foreign lens. Today, grounded in our own history of independence, independent filmmakers are reclaiming our true voice.

To reinforce this need for authenticity Kazakh filmmaker Dana Alimjanov explained that the region has a rich history but modern life is also important and interesting.“ We don’t need to copy European, American or Asian cinema. We should show who we

really are. I think this honesty and authenticity can make Central Asian cinema interesting to audiences around the world." She believes that the international audience loves these stories for their uniqueness. It gives a different perspective to the global audience.

Furthermore Asya Pavlovskaya, a producer from Kazakhstan, emphasizes that it deserves more global recognition. "Speaking specifically of Kazakhstan, our country was once a colony, and today Kazakhstanis are going through a profound decolonial period. People are striving to rediscover and redefine their identity, and cinema serves as one of the most powerful tools in this process."

Aruzhan Dossymkozha a young filmmaker from Kazakhstan said, "What makes Central Asia cinema important is that we are speaking about the things everyone recognizes; identity, family, belonging, displacement, love, faith and search for one's place in the world." She further claimed that the new generation is well connected with the outside world. They speak three languages and are spread worldwide. This gives the responsibility and opportunity to young filmmakers to spread the culture globally. "World is listening to us"

These industry perspectives give the ideas that Central Asian Cinema does not need to replicate the outside films especially Hollywood and European Films. The Localized intersection of identity, shared history and present modern life connecting central asia effectively. This will help them to create the region specific industry which can be used as soft power to promote the nomad culture.

What Support Is Needed

Since the inception and spread of the cinema, Central Asia has had an abundance of artistic talent and stories with the local flavor with a global perspective. But the main problem they face is institutional funding and other financial barriers. The region remains under-represented in terms of global funding and somewhat unrelated to the film festival circuits globally.

Erke Dzhumakmatova who is Head of International Relationship and Development of Bishkek International Film Festival and also serves as Chairman of the Board of "Kyrgyz Association of the film producers" claimed that the world has started recognizing the Cinema of Central Asia. "We need to build a robust infrastructure for international co-productions and expand our distribution networks. The creative potential is here, but bridging the gap to global audiences requires strategic institutional support. This is exactly why we place such a strong emphasis on the Industry Program at the Bishkek International Film Festival. By creating a dynamic film market, we are building a vital bridge that connects our local talents directly with international producers, sales agents, and festival programmers."

Ayana Nurdinova, a director from Kazakhstan who recently got the global recognition for her movie *Mugalim* (2026) claimed that the greater curiosity and

engagement with Central Asian cultural events, along with an open mindset and an active interest in international co-productions will help the film industry of the region .

Film scholar Sultan Usuvaliev raised a larger and fundamental question: are we considered part of Asia or not?. He said talented filmmakers, especially female directors, often struggle to access international film programs, labs and workshops. Central Asia is simply absent from the list of regions or countries, while Southeast Asia is represented well. The same applies to film funds and financing programmes, which rarely support projects from Central Asia. He emphasized global support for preserving and restoring the film heritage of central Asia.

To fix this problem, there should be a special need for financial support. Creating specific grant programs, special categories at prominent festivals across the globe and dedicated funds will help the film industry from the region. Film director from Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) Apollinariia Degtiareva noted that the support for distribution is crucial to ensure that more Central Asian films are picked up for screening and to facilitate broad export opportunities for film projects. Finally, co-productions must be actively developed at the government level in every country, accompanied by support from streaming services.

Aruzhan Dossymkozha argues that cinema of South Korea reached an entirely different level after significant investment began flowing into the industry in the early 2000s, eventually contributing to the remarkable international recognition Korean cinema achieved in the 2010s and early 2020s. Central Asia has its own distinct cinematic voice and stories, but we need the resources and international platforms to make that voice visible.

Tajikistan is lagged behind in the region when it comes to film making and its representation on the global market. But now filmmakers like Isabelle Kalandar are putting the country on a global map.

The efforts like Bars In Progress and Industry connect program like at Bishkek International Film Festival (Kyrgyzstan), Eurasia International Film Festival (Kazakhstan) Tashkent International Film Festival (Uzbekistan) and Didor International Film Festival (Tajikistan) and The Kazan International Film Festival officially known as the Altyn Minbar International Festival of Muslim Cinema offers a viable blueprint for integration.

By initiating the dedicated film market and connecting it to the local creator with foreign producer, sales agents and festival programmers, it will help the cinema of this region a lot,

Producer Asya Pavlovskaya stresses visibility to more festival and industry attention. “Better access to international funding structures, and sustained support for independent filmmakers’ She said. Whereas, filmmaker Ayana identifies the missing element; Cultivation of a genuine global curiosity and interest in the unique stories of Central Asia.

Conclusion

‘Kurak (2025)’, a Kyrgyzstani film directed by Erke Dzhumakmatova won two awards at Busan International Film Festival, South Korea, 2025 and it won Best Asian Film

Award at Dhaka International Film festival, 2025. Tajikistani film 'Another Birth (2025)' directed by Isabelle Kalanar won four Awards at Bishkek International Film Festival and Kazhan International Film Festival, Russia each. Other movies from Central Asian Filmmakers are making headlines at various film festivals. Also now Central Asia is developing its own film market which will help the local filmmakers to showcase their talent and connect with the Global Film Market. This means the future of Asian Cinema is viable.

Kazakh productions are more prominent in the region. They have secured international co-production funds. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and other countries are making headlines in the film festival market, thus will help the region to develop future film culture and market at the same time.

Long term sustainability will be required to keep the momentum. Coordinated efforts with the practical steps will be the region to institutionalise the investment model for the film industry. The establishment of cross border co-production treaties are essential to develop the market and cater larger audiences.

India has decreed with Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan since the last couple of years to be specific since 2019. Strong diplomatic efforts and establishing the market and better environment for film Central Asia cinema have potential to produce new waves in the global film market and Festival Circuit.

Cinema is considered a soft power. Apart from cultural legacy it connected the diaspora to the global state. It brings money to local filmmakers. Migration is one of the major problems of Central Asia. Due to lack of opportunities people from the region are taking shelters in the USA, Europe and Australia too. This helped local films to go there and showcased the talent and grab the financial opportunity.

The immediate focus should be building a sustainable eco-system for Central Asia's cinema. A planned distribution network and easy financial corridors necessary to

The immediate objective remains logistical: constructing the distribution and financing corridors necessary to boost these voices globally. This structural framework will definitely help the Central Asian Cinema. With colminative efforts it is ready to make the mark and come up as the icon of global cinema.

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