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The Study of Cultural Life Under the Chaghatai Ulus in 21st-Century Historiography: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

Objective: *This article systematically reviews 21st-century historiography on the cultural life of Mawarannahr under the Chaghatai Ulus (13th–14th centuries), a topic that, despite a measurable revival of scholarly interest, still lacks an integrated treatment as a coherent civilizational object.* ***Method:*** *Drawing on a comparative survey of Western, Russian, Eastern (Turkish, Mongolian, and broader Asian) and Central Asian / Uzbek scholarship, the study (i) maps the institutional and methodological landscape of contemporary research, (ii) classifies the existing corpus into four scholarly traditions and seven thematic clusters, and (iii) identifies the gaps that prevent a synthetic cultural history of the period.* ***Results:*** *The findings show that political and religious history dominate the literature (≈60% of attention combined), while material culture, music, language, and gender remain peripheral; crucially, no work to date treats cultural life as an integrated civilizational system.* ***Novelty:*** *The article proposes a five-pillar agenda — religion and spirituality, knowledge and education, material and artistic culture, language and literature, and society and everyday life — anchored in comparative source criticism, interdisciplinarity, and a civilizational framing. The principal contribution is a structured roadmap that reframes Chaghatai-Ulus studies from a fragmented set of monographs into a coherent research programme.*

INTRODUCTION

The *Chaghatai Ulus* — the central appanage of the Mongol Empire that comprised Mawarannahr, eastern Turkestan, and adjacent steppe territories between the 1220s and the late 14th century — occupies a singular place in the cultural history of Central Asia. Founded in the wake of Chinggis Khan's conquest and gradually transformed by the religious, social, and intellectual forces of the region, it served as the crucible in which post-conquest urban civilisation, Sufi spirituality, Turko-Mongol political culture, and the Persianate scholarly tradition were recombined into something distinctively new (Fig. 5). Yet the cultural dimension of this transformation has been studied far less systematically than its political and military history [1].

The earliest European engagement with the topic dates to the early 18th century, when the French Orientalist François Pétis de la Croix published his Histoire du Grand Genghizcan (1710) on the basis of Arabic and Persian sources, including the first commentary on the "Great Yasa" (Fig. 3, top). His treatment, however, reduced the Chaghatai narrative to a list of khans and reign dates. Antoine Gaubil's use of Chinese sources (1739), Claude de Visdelou's Histoire des Tartares (1749), and the works of R. D. Orléans and M. Manucci followed soon after, but lacked critical engagement with the primary materials and remained largely compilations of Near Eastern and Chinese

accounts. A full account of subsequent 19th- and 20th-century scholarship is reserved for a separate study by the present author [2].

The present article addresses a narrower but conceptually urgent question: how has the cultural life of the Chaghatai Ulus been represented in 21st-century scholarship, and what does the structure of that scholarship tell us about the gaps that remain? Three considerations motivate the inquiry. First, the early 21st century has witnessed a measurable "revival" of Chaghatai studies, with major works such as Starr's *Lost Enlightenment* (2013), Orta's study of Tarmashirin (2019), the doctoral programme of Uzbek historians (Achilova 2019; Ulashova 2022, 2026; Bekmuradov 2025), and renewed Kazakh and Russian work on Islamisation and material culture (Nurtazina 2023; Demin 2000) significantly expanding the empirical base. Second, this revival is methodologically uneven: it has produced strong work on political administration and on Islamic religious history, but has rarely treated cultural life as an integrated whole [3]. Third, the existing literature is fragmented across four linguistic and institutional traditions whose findings have rarely been brought into dialogue (Fig. 1).

Accordingly, this article pursues three objectives:

a) To map the four scholarly traditions currently active in the field and to characterise each by language, institutional base, sources, and methodological orientation;
b) To identify the thematic distribution of 21st-century scholarship and to locate the principal interpretive points of contention; and
c) To articulate a research agenda capable of moving the field from fragmented topical studies to a synthetic cultural history.

The article is organised in the IMRAD format. Section 2 specifies materials and methods. Section 3 reports the results of the historiographical review, organised by school and by theme. Section 4 discusses the implications of the findings, with particular attention to the interpretive disputes surrounding Starr's reading of Sufism. Section 5 concludes with the proposed research agenda [4].

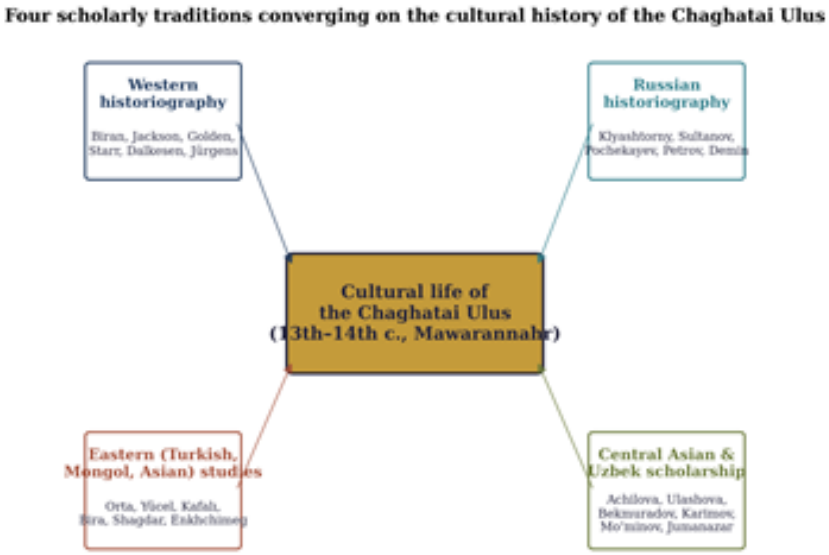

Figure 1. Four scholarly traditions converging on the cultural history of the Chaghatai Ulus (Mawarannahr, 13th–14th centuries). Source: compiled by the author.

RESEARCH METHOD

The study is a structured historiographical review of scholarly works published predominantly in the first quarter of the 21st century (2000–2026) on the cultural life of the Chaghatai Ulus. The corpus was assembled through targeted bibliographic search in four languages (English, Russian, Turkish, and Uzbek) and was supplemented by Kazakh, Tajik, and Mongolian works of demonstrable relevance. Earlier foundational scholarship was included only where 21st-century authors explicitly engaged with it.

The analytical pipeline (Fig. 2) proceeds in five steps. **Step 1** assembled the corpus through bibliographic and citation tracing. **Step 2** classified each work into one of four scholarly traditions on the basis of language of publication, institutional affiliation, and methodological lineage. **Step 3** applied thematic coding using a seven-category scheme covering political history, religious life, law and legitimacy, economy and numismatics, education, music and material culture, and integrated cultural history. **Step 4** performed cross-school comparative analysis of claims, source bases, and interpretive frameworks. **Step 5** identified thematic and methodological gaps that motivate the agenda proposed in Section 5.

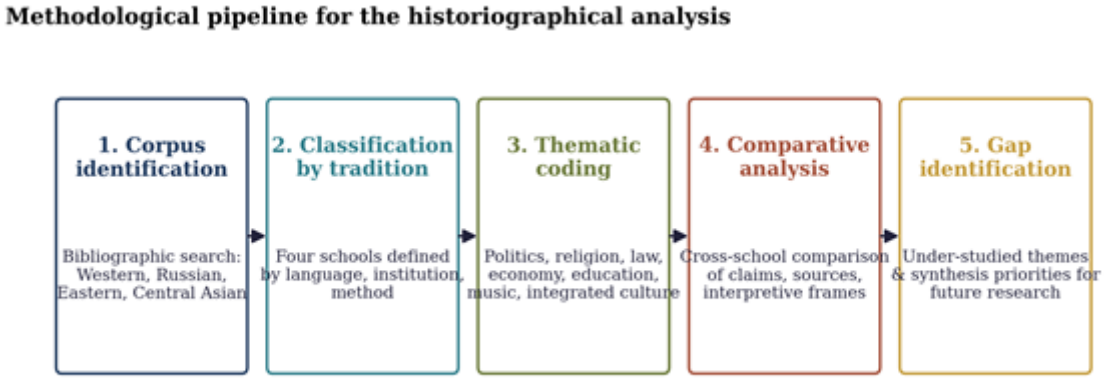

Figure 2. Methodological pipeline of the present study, from corpus identification to gap-driven research agenda formulation.

The classification framework is summarised schematically in Figure 1, which shows the four scholarly traditions converging on a single empirical object — the cultural life of the Chaghatai Ulus in 13th–14th-century Mawarannahr. Each tradition contributes distinctive source materials and interpretive habits, and each is anchored institutionally in a different region of the global academy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

3.1 Four scholarly traditions: an institutional map

The 21st-century literature on the Chaghatai Ulus can be partitioned without significant remainder into the four traditions shown in Figure 1: Western (European and North American), Russian / Russophone, Eastern (encompassing Turkish, Mongolian,

and selected other Asian scholarship), and Central Asian (Kazakh, Tajik, and Uzbek). Table 1 summarises each tradition along five comparative dimensions [5].

Table 1. The four scholarly traditions of 21st-century Chaghatai-Ulus studies, compared along five dimensions.

School	Period of activity	Key authors	Methodological emphasis	Main thematic focus
Western (Europe / North America)	18th c. → 21st c. (revival)	Pétis de la Croix, Gaubil, Allsen, Biran, Jackson, Golden, Starr, Dalkesen, Jürgens	Comparative imperial history; civilizational framing; Persian / Arabic / Chinese source criticism	Religion, Sufism, gender, law; long-term cultural transformation
Russian / Russophone	19th c. → 21st c.	Bartol'd, Klyashtorny, Sultanov, Yurchenko, Petrov, Fedorov, Pochekayev, Ulanov, Demin	Source criticism; numismatics; legal-historical analysis; ethnomusicology	State formation, law, coinage, religious aspects, musical material culture
Eastern (Turkey, Mongolia, neighbouring Asia)	20th c. → 21st c.	Orta, Yücel, Kafalı, Çınar, Tahtalı, Bektemir, Tosun, Buğra, Bira, Shagdar, Enkhchimeg	Ottoman / Turkic philological tradition; biographical and religious-historical method	Islamisation, fiqh, Sufi networks; political biographies (e.g. Kebek Khan, Tarmaşirin)
Central Asian (Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan)	Late 20th c. → 21st c.	Nurtazina, Boymatov, Achilova, Ulashova, Bekmuradov, Karimov, Mo'minov, Nasrullayev,	National historiography; source-based reconstruction in Persian, Arabic, Chaghatai Turkic	State administration, ethnic processes, Islamisation, Sufism, madrasa

School	Period of activity	Key authors	Methodological emphasis	Main thematic focus
		Umaraliyev, Jumanazar, Izbullayeva		education, pedagogy

3.2. Periodisation: from the 18th-century pioneers to the 21st-century revival

Figure 3 places the contemporary literature within the long arc of scholarship that began with Pétis de la Croix and Gaubil and continued through the Russian Orientalist tradition associated with Bartol'd. The "revival" of the 21st century, visible in the lower panel, is concentrated in the years following Karimov's UNESCO contribution (2000) and intensifies markedly after the publication of Starr's Lost Enlightenment in 2013 [6].

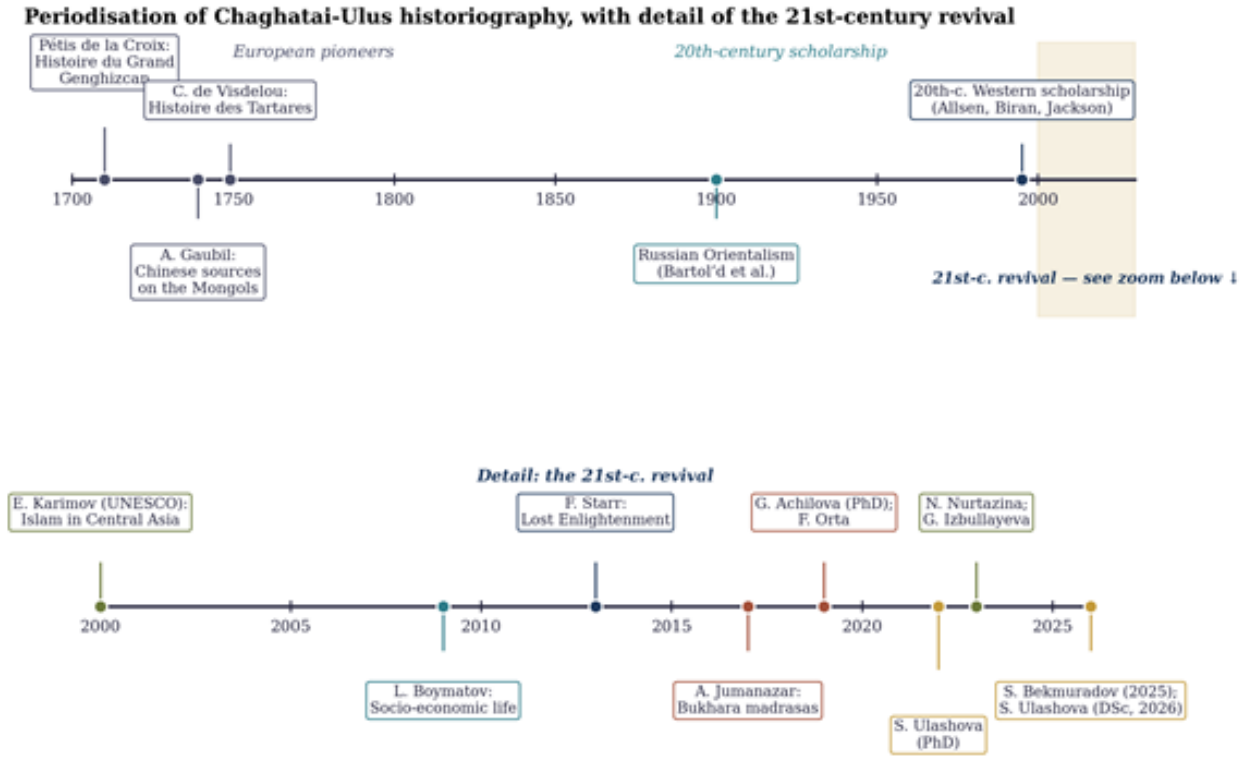

Figure 3. Periodisation of Chaghatai-Ulus historiography (top: 18th–20th centuries; bottom: detail of the 21st-century revival).

3.3. Western historiography: cultural transformation as the central problem

In 21st-century Western scholarship, work on the legal, religious, and gender dimensions of the Chaghatai Ulus has been pursued by M. Biran, N. Dalkesen, P. Jackson, P. Jürgens, P. Golden, and S. F. Starr, among others. Among these, the synthesis offered by **Frederick Starr (2013)** in Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane stands out for its scope and for the volume of recent debate it has generated [7].

Starr devotes his thirteenth chapter, "Culture under Mongol Rule", to the cultural condition of Mawarannahr in the second half of the 13th century. Although the work is written in an accessible, partly literary register, it draws extensively on primary sources alongside earlier Western and Eastern scholarship, and treats the political histories of the Ma'munid Khwarazmshahs, Samanids, Saljuqids, Ghaznavids, Ilkhanids, and Chaghatai Ulus as the institutional backdrop against which the more important story — the rise, decline, and partial recovery of learning, culture, and Enlightenment-bearing centres — is told [8].

A particularly suggestive line in Starr's argument concerns the relationship between folk traditions and Sufi practice. Drawing on archaeological evidence from a 1334 mausoleum on a tributary of the Talas River — locally identified as the "Manas Mausoleum" — Starr proposes that the structure marks not merely a Kyrgyz nomadic burial but the early crystallisation of the *Manas* epic itself. He further suggests that the mausoleum may have been built to deflect Mongol attention from the actual resting place of a Kyrgyz leader or saint [9]. Whether or not the specific identification holds, the broader analytical move is significant: Starr treats material culture, oral epic, and religious practice as a single field of cultural production.

Starr's account of the religious transformation is summarised schematically in Figure 4. The Mongol conquest, on his reading, produced a demographic and cultural trauma deep enough to drive a search for *spiritual consolation ("ma'naviy malham")*; this search was met by an already-vigorous Sufi tradition — Yassaviyya and Kubrawiyya orders that had begun spreading among the Turkic-speaking population well before Sayfaddin Bākharzi [10]. Sufi teaching, in Starr's view, was congenial to the customs and worldview of the Turko-Mongol nomads precisely because it could absorb and reframe their oral and epic traditions; this congruence accelerated mass conversion [11]. In a later phase, the same Sufi networks gained influence at court, became instruments of governance, and — Starr argues — contributed to a regional disposition of *"passivity"* that persisted for centuries [12].

This last claim is contested below (Section 4). For the moment we note only that Starr also offers brief but suggestive remarks on material culture: the administrative-military buildings of Uzgend, which functioned as a Chaghatai headquarters without ever becoming a major commercial or cultural centre, and, drawing on Ibn Battūta, the ruined state of many Bukharan buildings during the Mongol period [13]. Thus Starr offers an exemplary case of how cultural history can be reconstructed from fragmentary evidence — but also of the interpretive risks that accompany such reconstructions.

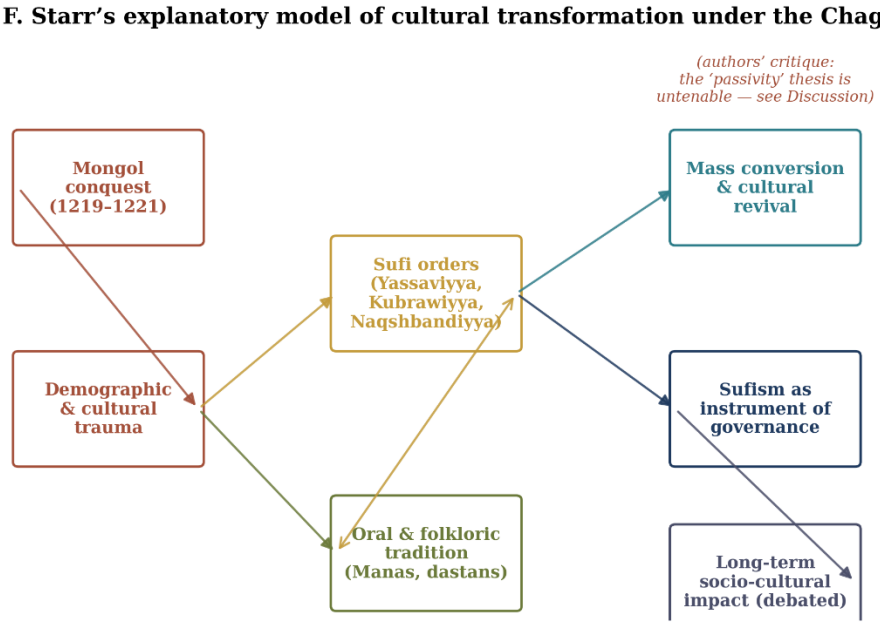

Figure 4. F. Starr's explanatory model of cultural transformation under the Chaghatai Ulus. The right-hand "passivity" claim is critiqued in Section 4.1.

3.4. Russian historiography: numismatics, law, music

The Russian-language literature concentrates on three areas where its source-critical tradition is strongest: legal and institutional history (S. G. Klyashtorny, T. I. Sultanov, A. G. Yurchenko, R. Yu. Pochekayev, S. M. Ulanov), numismatics (P. N. Petrov, M. N. Fedorov), and ethnomusicology. The last category is exemplified by **A. G. Demin's** study of Mongol bowed instruments, which treats the diffusion of these instruments from Inner to Central Asia as evidence of musical exchange between nomadic and sedentary populations. Demin demonstrates that Mongol-speaking craftsmen functioned as the principal distributors of bowed string instruments in Central and East Asia, while a parallel manufacturing tradition existed within Mawarannahr itself. The finding is doubly important: it brings material and artistic culture into the analytic frame, and it documents the kind of nomadic–sedentary cultural exchange that purely textual sources tend to obscure.

3.5. Eastern historiography: religion, biography, and the politics of Islamisation

In Turkish scholarship, **Fatih Orta's** Çağatay Hanlığı'nda Gelenek ve Değişim: Tarmaşirin Han Dönemi (2019) reconstructs the Ulus's changing relationship to Islam during the reign of Tarmashirin Khan. Orta identifies four factors that drove Islamisation in the Chaghatai state: Sufi teaching, the role of Muslim administrators, political and commercial connections, and the deep-rooted Islamic infrastructure of Mawarannahr. Further Turkish contributions — by Mülla Uydu Yücel, M. Kafalı, O. Çınar, S. Tahtalı — and the religious-history work of S. Bektemir, N. Tosun, and A. Buğra extend the analysis of fiqh and the biographies of individual scholars. Mongolian scholarship by S. Bira, X. Shagdar, and S. S. Enkhchimeg has focused chiefly on the political life of the Kebek-Khan period.

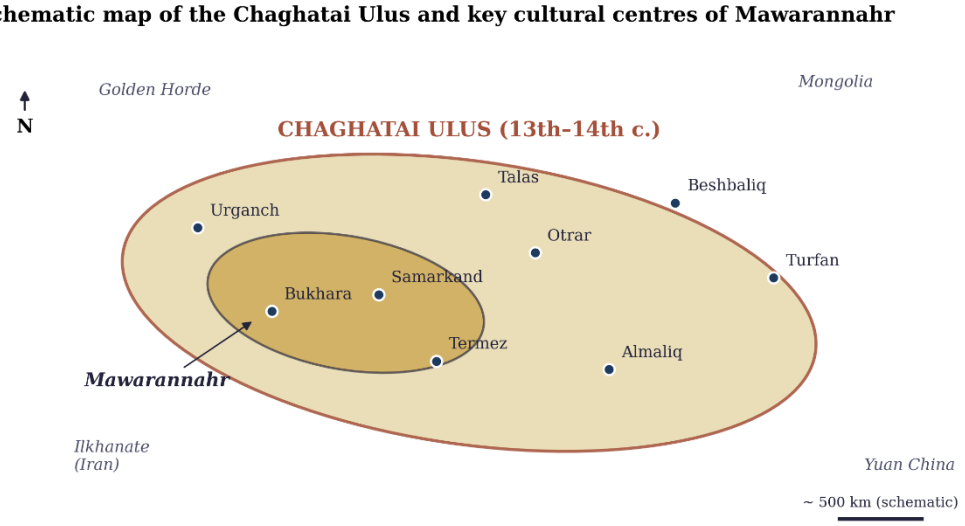

Figure 5. Schematic map of the Chaghatai Ulus and key cultural centres of Mawarannahr (Bukhara, Samarkand, Termez, Urganch, Otrar, Almaliq, Talas).

3.6. Central Asian and Uzbek scholarship: two dominant trajectories

The Central Asian literature divides cleanly into two trajectories (Fig. 6). **Trajectory A** addresses the polity, ethnic structure, and administrative apparatus of the Chaghatai Ulus. Kazakh historian N. D. Nurtazina's comparative work on the Islamisation of nomadic populations situates the Mawarannahr experience within a broader regional history that extends into Mughulistan; she identifies Sufism as the principal mechanism by which nomadic peoples were integrated with the sedentary Muslim population. Tajik historian L. Boymatov has produced a survey of the socio-economic and administrative aspects of Mongol rule in Central Asia. Within Uzbek scholarship, N. Toshev's candidate dissertation on Juvaynī's Tarikh-i Jahāngushā provided early access to Persian-language source material; G. Achilova (2019) produced the first dedicated dissertation on the political and socio-economic life of the Chaghatai Ulus, although without systematic comparison of primary sources and later scholarship. S. U. Ulashova's PhD (2022) and DSc (2026) dissertations advance the analysis substantially: the PhD examines ethnic processes in Persian sources and the DSc the rulers and their reforms regarding Islam and Muslim populations across the 13th–16th centuries. S. T. Bekmuradov's recent dissertation (2025) on the governance system of the Chaghatai Ulus argues persuasively that religion functioned within a triangle of legitimacy, governance, and cultural integration. Yet, as Bekmuradov's own framing concedes, religion is treated chiefly as a component of the legal-political order; its place in cultural life as such is not the object of analysis.

Trajectory B concentrates on religion, education, and learning. E. Karimov demonstrated in his UNESCO contribution that Sufism's development in Chaghatai-period Bukhara proceeded through two distinct lineages — the descendants of Sayfaddin Bākharzī and those of Burhān al-Dīn al-Marghīnānī. A. K. Mo'minov, N. H. Nasrullayev, and Sh. A. Umaraliyev have reconstructed the Hanafi fiqh scholarship of the period; N.

Muhammad and N. Muhamedov's biographical work, particularly the compendium *Uzbekistan: Land of Great Scholars* (Uvatov 2010), traces the scholarly genealogies that span the 9th–17th centuries and includes 13th–14th-century figures. A. Jumanazar has produced systematic histories of the madrasa networks of Bukhara and Samarkand, mobilising sources, archival material, and prior historiography. G. V. Izbullayeva's monograph (2023) interprets the period through the lens of didactic theory, locating the educational achievements of the 12th–14th centuries within the development of Central Asian pedagogical thought [14].

The juxtaposition of Trajectories A and B clarifies a structural feature of the field: cultural history is investigated obliquely, as a by-product of work on either polity or religion, but is not yet the dedicated object of an integrated study (Fig. 6, base).

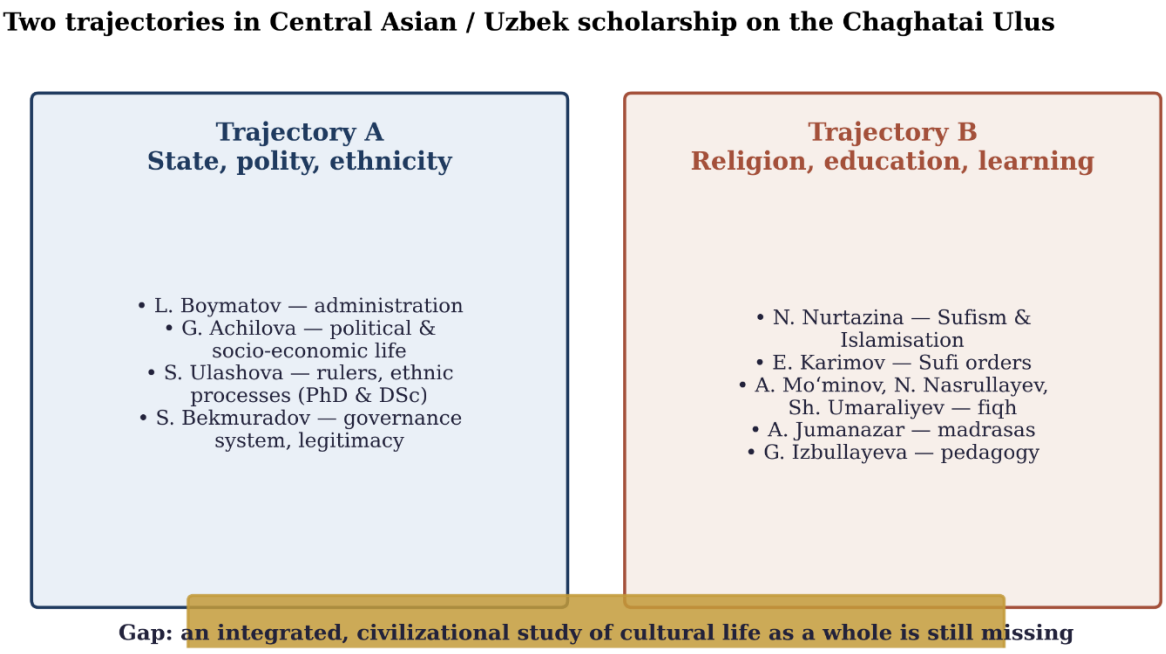

Figure 6. Two trajectories in Central Asian and Uzbek scholarship on the Chaghatai Ulus, with the identified gap.

3.7. Thematic distribution and identified gaps

Figure 7 quantifies the qualitative observations above by estimating the share of scholarly attention received by each thematic domain. Politics and religion together account for approximately 60% of the corpus; legal, economic, and educational themes occupy a middle band; music and material culture sit at the periphery; and **integrated cultural history — the object that the present study identifies as a research gap — receives the smallest share (≈5%)**. Table 2 disaggregates this distribution by scholarly tradition, providing a coverage matrix that allows specific gaps to be located precisely.

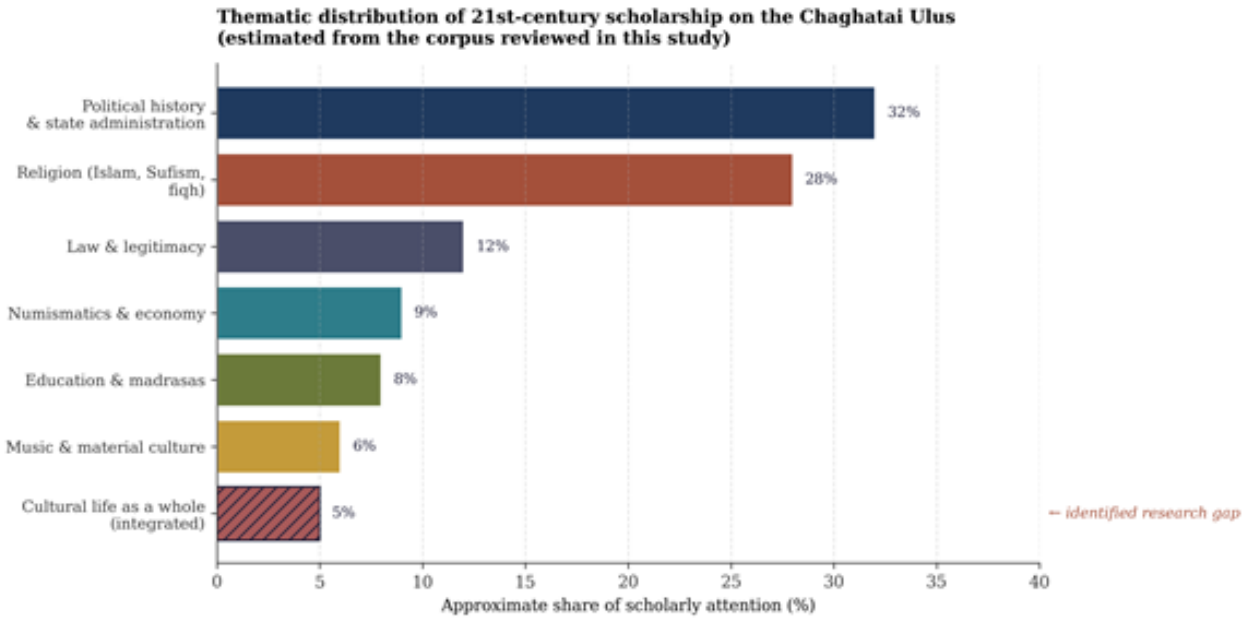

Figure 7. Thematic distribution of 21st-century scholarship on the Chaghatai Ulus (estimated from the corpus reviewed). The hatched bar marks the principal identified research gap.

Table 2. Coverage matrix: thematic domains × scholarly traditions. ●●● = substantial coverage; ●● = moderate; ● = limited; ○ = essentially absent.

Thematic domain	Western	Russian	Eastern	Central Asian
Political history & state administration	●●●	●●●	●●	●●●
Religious life (Islam, Sufism)	●●●	●●	●●●	●●●
Fiqh & legal scholarship	●	●	●●	●●●
Madrasa & education system	○	○	●	●●
Architecture & material culture	●●	●	●	●
Music & artistic culture	○	●●	○	○
Language & literature (Chaghatai)	●●	●●	●●	●
Gender & social life	●●	○	●	○
Integrated cultural history	●	○	○	○

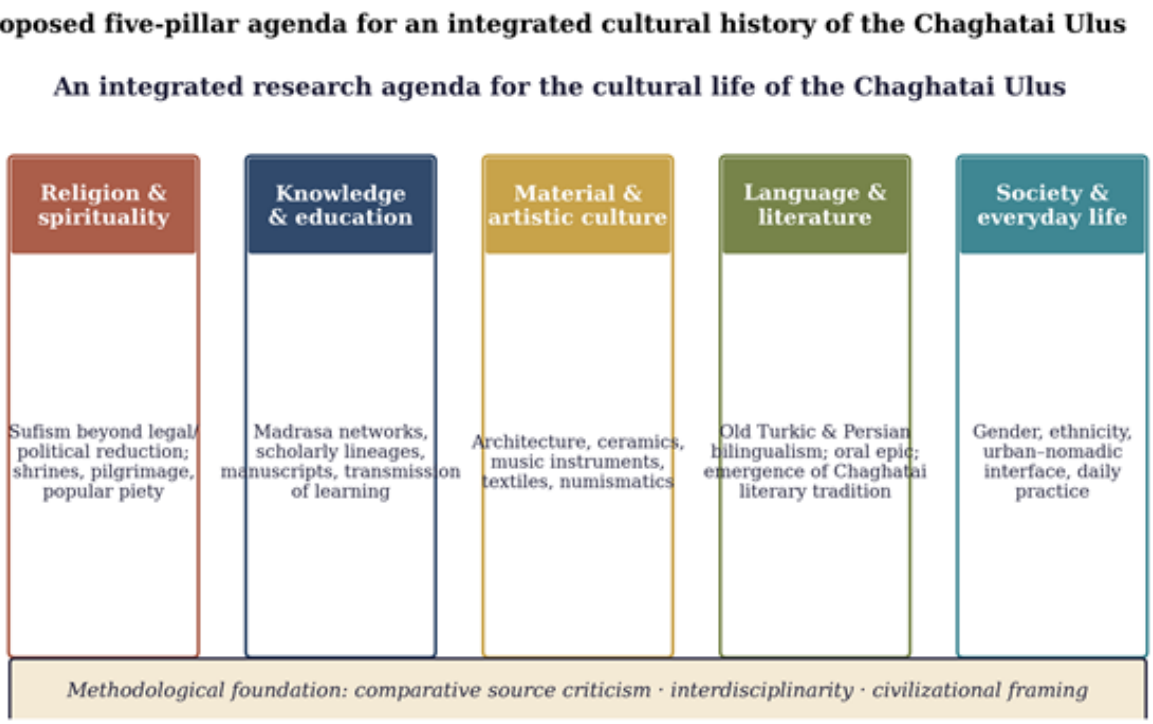

Figure 8. Proposed five-pillar agenda for an integrated cultural history of the Chaghatai Ulus, anchored in comparative source criticism, interdisciplinarity, and civilizational framing.

Discussion

4.1. ***The "passivity" thesis and its limits.*** Among the substantive interpretive claims advanced in the 21st-century literature, Starr's suggestion that Sufism, having become an instrument of governance, generated a long-term regional disposition toward passivity is the most consequential — and, in our judgement, the least sustainable. The thesis cannot be reconciled with the empirical record of the post-Chaghatai period. Under the Timurids, Shaybanids, Ashtarkhanids, Manghits, Qungrats, and Mings, Mawarannahr produced major historical and literary works, sustained an active madrasa system, and witnessed repeated popular revolts and dynastic challenges. A disposition of passivity is incompatible with these facts.

A more defensible reading would distinguish *institutionalisation* from *pacification*. The Sufi networks did indeed become entangled with state power — Karimov's two-lineage analysis establishes the institutional pathway clearly. But entanglement with power produces complex and ambivalent effects: it can stabilise the established order, but it can also licence dissent, fund learning, and generate the cross-regional networks that sustain Mawarannahr's post-Mongol cultural flourishing. The passivity reading collapses this complexity into a single, undifferentiated outcome.

4.2. ***Religion as cultural infrastructure, not as a closed domain.*** Both the legal-administrative reading (Bekmuradov; Pochekayev) and the doctrinal reading (Karimov; Mo'minov; Tosun) treat religion as an enclosed sphere whose contact with cultural life is mediated, respectively, by governance or by formal doctrine. The historiographical record suggests a third option. Religion under the Chaghatai Ulus operated as *cultural*

infrastructure — the institutional ground on which madrasa education, manuscript transmission, architectural commissioning, music in ritual contexts, and the formation of literary tastes proceeded together. Treating religion as infrastructure rather than as a separate domain is, in our view, the methodological move that the next phase of scholarship should make.

4.3. ***The nomadic–sedentary interface.*** Demin's work on bowed instruments and Nurtazina's analysis of Sufi-mediated Islamisation point to a research front that the wider literature has not yet exploited: the everyday interface between nomadic Turko-Mongol groups and the sedentary population of Mawarannahr. Folklore, music, dress, dietary practice, urban planning, and architectural patronage all bear traces of this interface, and none has yet received a dedicated integrated study [15].

4.4. ***Source-critical asymmetries.*** The four scholarly traditions are not equally equipped to address each thematic domain. Western scholarship's comparative reach and its access to Persian, Arabic, and Chinese sources gives it interpretive breadth but sometimes thin engagement with locally produced texts. Russian scholarship's strength in numismatics and source criticism is matched by uneven engagement with Sufi literature. Eastern (especially Turkish) scholarship benefits from continuity with the Ottoman scholarly tradition but is constrained by access to Persian materials. Central Asian / Uzbek scholarship has the deepest access to local sources and to the Chaghatai Turkic linguistic substrate, but has historically lacked sustained comparative dialogue with the other traditions. An integrated cultural history will require deliberate cross-tradition collaboration — a point to which Section 5 returns.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding : The historiographical revival of Chaghatai-Ulus studies in the 21st century has produced significant new work on political administration, religious life, law, and education. It has not yet produced an integrated cultural history. The structural reasons are now clearer than before: the field is partitioned across four scholarly traditions whose dialogue is intermittent (Section 3.1; Table 1); its thematic distribution is heavily skewed toward politics and religion (Fig. 7; Table 2); and its dominant analytical habit — visible in both Trajectories A and B of the Central Asian literature (Fig. 6) — treats cultural life as a residual of either polity or doctrine. **Implication :** If pursued together, these five pillars and three foundations would convert the present condition of Chaghatai-Ulus studies — a productive but fragmented set of monographs — into a coherent research programme capable of locating Mawarannahr's 13th–14th-century cultural life within the wider history of Eurasian civilisations. The principal contribution of this article is to make that conversion both visible and methodologically tractable. **Limitation :** The four scholarly traditions are not equally equipped to address each thematic domain. Western scholarships comparative reach and its access to Persian, Arabic, and Chinese sources gives it interpretive breadth but sometimes thin engagement with locally produced texts. Russian scholarships strength in numismatics and source criticism is matched by uneven engagement with Sufi

literature. Eastern (especially Turkish) scholarship benefits from continuity with the Ottoman scholarly tradition but is constrained by access to Persian materials. Central Asian / Uzbek scholarship has the deepest access to local sources and to the Chaghatai Turkic linguistic substrate, but has historically lacked sustained comparative dialogue with the other traditions. **Future Research :** Building on the findings of Section 3 and the analysis of Section 4, we propose a five-pillar research agenda (Fig. 8): (i) religion and spirituality approached as cultural infrastructure rather than as a closed legal or doctrinal domain; (ii) knowledge and education through madrasa networks, scholarly genealogies, and the transmission and circulation of manuscripts; (iii) material and artistic culture, including architecture, ceramics, music instruments (extending Demin's analysis), textiles, and numismatics; (iv) language and literature, with particular attention to the Old Turkic / Persian bilingual condition and to the early emergence of the Chaghatai literary tradition; and (v) society and everyday life, addressing gender, ethnicity, the urban–nomadic interface, and daily practice. This agenda is to be pursued on three methodological foundations: comparative source criticism that integrates Persian, Arabic, Chaghatai Turkic, Mongolian, and Chinese materials; deliberate interdisciplinarity that brings archaeology, numismatics, ethnomusicology, and architectural history into a single explanatory frame; and a civilizational rather than dynastic framing that reads the 13th–14th centuries as a phase of substantive cultural transformation in its own right, not as an interregnum between the Karakhanids and the Timurids.

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