

## Actually existing Silk Roads

Article (Accepted Version)

Marsden, Magnus (2017) Actually existing Silk Roads. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 8 (1). pp. 22-30. ISSN 1879-3665

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## Actually Existing Silk Roads<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract:

This article explores the relevance of the concept of Silk Road for understandings patterns of trade and exchange between China, Eurasia and the Middle East. It is based on ethnographic fieldwork in the city of Yiwu, in China's Zhejiang Province. Yiwu is a node in the global distribution of Chinese 'small commodities' and home to merchants and traders from across Asia and beyond. The article explores the role played by traders from Afghanistan in connecting the city of Yiwu to markets and trading posts in the world beyond. It seeks to bring attention to the diverse types of networks involved in such forms of trade, as well as their emergence and development over the past thirty years.

### Key Words:

New Silk Road; Afghanistan; trading networks; Yiwu; merchants; small commodities

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<sup>1</sup> The author confirm that there are no known conflicts of interest associated with this publication and there has been no significant financial support for this work that could have influenced its outcome.

## 1. Introduction

'Our country is at the heart of Asia', Zia, an Afghan trader in his mid-50s who works in St Petersburg's Apraksin Dvor market remarked to me in December 2015. 'Yet if the heart has all the qualities that allow the entire body to function, so too is the heart – as pressure increases and the veins block - the place where if one thing goes wrong the entire body fails'.

A succession of policy initiatives announced in recent years depict Afghanistan as a future regional hub on the 'New Silk Road'. Such initiatives, including the USA's New Silk Roads strategy launched by Hillary Clinton at the UN General Assembly in September 2011, are a marked improvement on depictions of Afghanistan that circulated in the international media in the 2000s as an isolated, backward and mediaeval state. Representing Afghanistan as a regional hub correctly brings attention to the country's historic place on long-distance trade routes, as well as to the critical significance of trade, exchange, and the wider world to Afghan culture and society.

Yet it is also undeniable that talk of Afghanistan reassuming its past status as a pivot between Europe and Asia is both utopian and politically cynical. Levels of violence in Afghanistan have never been as high over the past sixteen years of international intervention as they are today. New threats to Afghanistan's security, including the activities of ISIS in the east of the country, and the rise of international militant groups in the north, arise on a day-to-day basis. I have observed this at first hand: villages and districts in the north of Afghanistan that I used to visit at ease until four years ago are now in the hands of militants. Afghanistan's economy furthermore is palpitating in the wake of the withdrawal of international forces and funding and the rise of insecurity. One indication of this are the streams of educated and resourceful youth leaving the country in search of a better life. In spite of all of this, international opinion formers are confident enough to envisage a prosperous, stable, and globally connected Afghanistan.

If one thing remains stable in recent international efforts to engage with Afghanistan it is the disjunction between the worlds inhabited by policy makers and those by local people. The unwillingness to consult with, seek to understand, and learn from local actors is what stands in the path of a stable Afghanistan. The USA and its allies erred repeatedly in the way in which they engaged with Afghanistan's society during the long Taliban insurgency – seeing 'traditional tribal structures' where thirty years of war and conflict had in fact wreaked havoc and changed society irremediably, they armed the wrong partners, implemented the wrong policies, and traumatic violence was unleashed as a result (Marsden and Hopkins 2012).

The New Silk Road strategy is likely to have similarly negative consequences: utopian projects of international development that overlook on-the-ground realities frequently bring untold misery to those whose lives they were designed to improve (cf. Karrar 2016). There however are no shortage of actors on the ground who possess a great deal of insight about the possibilities of and barriers to sustainable forms of Eurasian trade. Afghan trader-refugees, men like Zia, are busy at work in markets and trading spaces across Eurasia: in Moscow, St Petersburg, and Krasnodar in Russia; Odessa, Kiev and Kharkiv in Ukraine; and Dushanbe, Bishkek, and Alma Ata in Central Asia, traders of Afghan background are leading players in the import and wholesale of commodities. Many of these commodities come from China – where Afghan traders are also an established feature of commercial cities such as Urumqi in the West, Guangzhou in the South, and Yiwu in the East. But Afghan traders are also experts in facilitating the import of Iranian, Pakistani, and Indian commodities to Central Asian markets thereby connecting, in a way that few others are able, this region's notoriously complex markets to West and South Asia.

Why sell the dream of a 'New Silk Road' when a multiplicity of silk – or perhaps more aptly nylon – roads already exist? Why impose a utopian vision of a connected world on people who are already familiar in sophisticated and intimate ways with the dynamics of a complex region? Why are communities that obviously have so much to offer into understanding the role played by trade in connecting Asia and Europe absent from the discourse of the New Silk Road? If the answer is because this category of actor is simplistically thought of as being either drug smugglers or people traffickers then the time has come to think again. As has been amply seen inside Afghanistan, the failure to consult actors on the basis of one-sided images – be such actors former Taliban ideologues or 'communist' officials – results only in negative consequences for the country as sources of experience and expertise are dismissed (Marsden and Hopkins 2012).

This article focuses on the role played by traders of Afghan background in facilitating commercial exchanges not only between China and Afghanistan but also a wide range of settings in Eurasia, the Middle East, and East Asia. It builds on an earlier work in which explored the importance of the Chinese city of Yiwu as a node for the activities of transregional Afghan merchants (Marsden 2016a). In this article, I shift my focus from the study of the node to the nature of the networks that emanate from the city and connect it to the wider world. An emerging body of scholarship exists on the importance of bringing to scholarly recognition that connections that exist between Asia settings (e.g. Amrith 2013), as well as the role played by newer and older types of networks in facilitating such forms of connection and circulation (e.g. Kotkin). Here I build on these developments in the wider literature in Asian studies, and seek to document that wide range of economic niches that Afghan niches occupy both in China and its connected markets, as well as analyse the character of the networks they form and sustain. In so doing the article seeks to bring attention to the diverse histories and experiences of commerce, mobility, and exchange that inform and underpin the activities of Afghan traders in what might be thought of as the countries of the New Silk Road.

## 2. Background and Setting

### 2.1 Trans-regional Afghan Merchants

A consideration of the biographies of individual Afghan traders who are commercially active in Yiwu reveals two broad sources of historical influence on the formation of the networks they form. On the one hand, Afghan traders emphasise that they are uniquely suited to being global commodity traders because of the role that people from the territories that currently make-up Afghanistan have played as trans-regional merchants between South and Central Asia (e.g. Hanifi 2011; Hopkins 2009). On the other hand, many of the traders also say that they have become traders because of their experience of conflict and dispersal resulting from the 'cold war' (*jang-i sard*) that 'turned hot' (*garm shud*) in Afghanistan.

Afghan traders do not form a homogeneous 'social group', but are differentiated according to markers of status, wealth, and position in trading hierarchies; such forms of difference also intersect with, yet are never simply defined by, the traders' 'ethnic' and linguistic identities. Traders do identify with particular 'ethnic groups' (e.g. Turkmen, Uzbek, Tajik, and Pashtun), yet most if not all traders have business partnerships with men who identify with communities different from their own. The past ideological and political affiliations of the traders also reflect Afghanistan's modern political history: some worked as state officials and were directly affiliated to the Afghan socialist movement (through membership of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan) and trained in 'Party Schools' in Central Asia, others fought on the side of anti-Soviet mujahidin organisations. More recently, many traders form commercial relations with people from political factions they once opposed.

The networks are therefore influenced both by the forms of modern cultural nationalism promoted by political organisations such as the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) and by the historic participation of Afghans in distinctively Muslim networks of commerce and intellectual exchange (e.g. Cooke and Lawrence 2005). The identities of those who make-up the networks are also informed by the past participation of many of the traders in the global 'socialist ecumene' (Bayly 2007). All of these varied influences are visible in the multi-dimensional nature of the traders' self-understandings.

## *2.2. Yiwu: Global Trade Node*

Yiwu, in China's Zhejiang province and about 2 hours by high-speed rail from Shanghai, is a city of approximately 2 million inhabitants that is home to the International Trade City or Yiwu Market, founded in 1982 and currently under the administration of the Zhejiang China Commodities City Group Co., Ltd. Yiwu has come to play a central role over the past decade in 'globalization from the bottom-up' (Mathews, Lins Ribeiro, and Alba Vega 2012), especially in relationships to its status as a hub for the worldwide trade in low-grade Chinese commodities (Marsden 2016a). Yiwu Market is made of a complex of two markets: Futian Market and Huangyuan Garment Market (opened in 2011). Futian market is divided into five 'districts' that hold a total of 70,000 shops selling 1,700,000 different types of Chinese-made 'small commodities' for the wholesale market. The commodities sold range from toys to bags and purses, souvenirs, hardware items, and jewellery. The market is organised spatially according to the different types of commodities traded there. Huangyuan Market hosts another 5700 shops selling exclusively jeans, sport wears and other types of garments. According to the market's website, these goods are exported to more than 200 countries across the world, and approximately 1500 containers leave the city each day. Most shops in the International Trade City either purchase the goods from factories located elsewhere in China, and store them in warehouses in the city, or are outlets for particular factories.

It might be assumed that the enormous global trade in low-grade commodities is overwhelmingly organised remotely through multi-national companies, on-line purchasing, and electronic money transfers. A visit to Yiwu, however, demonstrates just how far this neat vision of the ordered movement of goods lies from the real worlds inhabited by many commodity traders. Travelling to and being physically present in Yiwu is central to the practices of global commodity traders, who must contend with the risks of being sold faulty goods or seeing the arrival of these in their home ports delayed by the production process, customs officials, and port closures (e.g. Bodomo 2012). Traders from all over the world, especially Latin America, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, travel to Yiwu to provision goods and export these to the markets in which they work. Yiwu thus is a major meeting point for such trading networks, and itself a 'site of interaction' for traders (Amrith and Harper 2012).

In addition to the great range of foreign merchants active in the city, Yiwu is also home to communities of people of Muslim background from elsewhere in China, especially Hui Chinese-speaking Muslims (many being migrants from Yunnan), and Uyghurs from various locales across Xinjiang province (notably the ancient trans-Himalayan trading post of Yarkand).

Having introduced the general histories of trade and migration that inform the identities of traders from Afghanistan, and presented contextual material on the city of Yiwu and its importance to the world trade in 'small commodities' in the remainder of the article I focus on three particular types of Afghan trading networks that are active in China. I bring attention to the contrasting histories of these networks and highlight the varying ways in which these have played a critical role in connecting different world regions to one another.

### 3. Network 1: From Party School to Afghan Bazaar - Yiwu, Afghan Traders and the Former Soviet Union

Perhaps the most visible of the networks of Afghan traders in Yiwu is that which connects the city to the markets of the former Soviet Union. It is quite usual to hear traders of Afghan background in Yiwu talking about the costs of doing business in the Russian Federation or the difficulties that come with working in Ukraine in the present day. Indeed, a glance at the signboards of transport companies above the city's streets points to the important role that Afghan traders play in freighting commodities to the post-Soviet world: transport companies with clearly Afghan names advertise themselves as shipping agents for the ports of Moscow, St Petersburg and Odessa.

The basis of much of this commercial activity lies in the history of cooperation between the Soviet Union and Afghanistan in the 1970s and 1980s. Thousands of Afghans were educated and trained thanks to bursaries and other forms of assistance in universities, polytechnics, and technical centres in the 5 Central Asian republics, Ukraine, and Russia from the 1970s until the collapse of the PDPA (People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan) government. Some stayed there and married local women; others returned to Afghanistan, served in the country's state and security forces, and then returned to the towns in which they had studied after Afghanistan's civil war in the early 1990s – the precise moment at which there was considerable scope for trading opportunities in the countries of the former Soviet Union. As Caroline Humphrey has documented (2002), major opportunities for trade were created by the collapse of the Soviet Union. More particularly, the outbreak of a nearly decade-long civil war in Tajikistan after 1991 led to the formation of 'interstitial spaces within the larger economic structures' in which Afghans were able to 'carve their own niches of importance'. The continuing importance of Afghan traders to Tajikistan after the cessation of the war rested partly on the 'incumbency advantage' that they derived from having carved out niches earlier. Many traders who initially established themselves in Tajikistan used the profits they made in the country to move to settings elsewhere in the Soviet Union such as Moscow, Kiev, Odessa, and Minsk. They deemed these settings as being more secure locations both for their trading activities and for their families given ongoing conflict in Tajikistan (Marsden 2016b).

Afghans who turned to trade in Tajikistan and elsewhere in Central Asia, moreover, were not aliens to the unique conditions that the region presented to them. Many of the men who now work as traders in Tajikistan were educated in Soviet universities and professional training institutes, both in Dushanbe and elsewhere in the Soviet Union. As a result, they enjoyed ties and relations with local people and state officials; many additionally engaged in trading activities during their stays as students in the Soviet Union. Before the Soviet Union's collapse, these men consequently possessed detailed knowledge about Soviet markets, states, and consumer preferences, acquiring forms of entrepreneurial knowledge that were directly applicable to the context in which they were working. In later years, this access to flows of information and power-holders, 'insulated [them] from competition by the entry costs of potential rivals, the lower average cost afforded by its volume of business, the switching costs of its existing clients and suppliers, and obstacles to coordinating on an alternative network' (Kuran 2011: 267). Afghans were also perceived by local populations as being natural traders and merchants, not least because of the types of relations that local people held with them during the Soviet period. Local informants in Tajikistan, for example, often tell me that Afghan society accords such respect to traders that even warring parties cease their conflict if they see a trade convoy (*kafilah*) approaching the front line. It was in the context of all of these factors—economic, political, and cultural—that, in an otherwise 'poor market situation', Afghans in Tajikistan came to enjoy 'a degree of self-regulation and oligopolistic control' (Lovejoy 1982: 277).

A great deal of the trade in which Afghanistan were involved in Tajikistan concerned the important of food products from Pakistan on the one hand and Iran on the other. Afghan traders brought staple food products such as macaroni, tinned products, and confectionary to Tajikistan from Iran; traders working between Pakistan and Tajikistan imported wheat, sugar, and, in later years, tangerines, amongst other commodities. During this period, some of the traders also brought large quantities of goods from Europe, such as sugar from Poland and used cars from Germany. In the bazaars of the Russian Federation and Ukraine – contexts to which many Tajikistan-based traders moved after earning sufficient capital – however the traders earned a name for importing affordable Chinese ‘small commodities’. In the early 1990s, the traders initially travelled between Russia and Beijing by train, buying commodities in Harbin, and exporting them to the cities in which they worked using trucking and rail routes through Siberia. At the same time, traders also travelled to the city of Urumqi in Xinjiang Province, from where they purchased commodities, shipped them to Alma Ata in Kazakhstan from where they arranged their onward transportation. During this period some traders also travelled to Dubai in order to purchase Chinese made products which they then transported by aeroplane to the cities in which they worked, such as Odessa. By the late 1990s however Yiwu, with its expanding market in which small commodities were sold, as well as concentration of traders from South and West Asia who owned restaurants and trading companies increasingly became regarded as an attractive destination for these traders. Today, apart for traders dealing in clothing and leather products, who largely purchase commodities in Guangzhou, Yiwu is the favoured destination for Afghan traders in the former Soviet Union. A medium sized trader will visit the city approximately three times a year, while large scale traders frequently open trading offices in the city to which a friend or family member is permanently posted.

Of those who travelled to the newly independent states of the former USSR in the 1990s, many moved on to Europe and sought refugee status, especially in Germany, Holland and the UK. Yet, in spite of this significant movement of Afghans out of the former Soviet Union from the early 1990s onwards, communities of Afghans have continued to be a vital feature of urban life across this space. The size of such communities vary: in smaller towns, such as Rostov-on-Don and Stavropol in southern Russia, or Khujand in Tajikistan, populations often stand at around 300 souls; in the bigger cities that are known by Afghans across this world as being nodes for their activities as traders, notably Odessa in the Ukraine, Moscow and St Petersburg in Russia, and, Dushanbe in Tajikistan, communities are often much larger, frequently in the tens of thousands.

Over the three decades that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, migration between the former Soviet Union and Afghanistan continued: the territories of the *shurawi* (Soviet Union) continued to be associated and imagined by commercially able Afghans with access to capital (or *sarmaiyah*) through the lens of trading success. As a young Odessa-based Dari-speaking man from Kunduz in northern Afghanistan remarked to me and another of our friends (Aman, a Pashto-speaking Khalqi-aligned former police officer in his fifties from Jalalabad) ‘we lost the chance of being educated when we left Afghanistan, and have come here not to sit in a detention centre and wait for a passport but to make some money and become something’.

Men who left Afghanistan in the early 1990s and then established themselves as merchants in the *shuravi*, were frequently, although not always, joined by their family members. Afghans from very different backgrounds, notably those with a longer history of commercial life, such as the children of merchants who had been involved in the official barter economy between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union, also increasingly moved their capital and business operations to the region, considering it as being a good place to trade, work, and live. In much the same way as Caroline and Filippo Osella’s Kerala informants consider the Gulf as an extension of India (e.g. Osella and Osella

2007), movements across these contexts are of a thick and durable enough nature for some people to remark that they consider the territories of the former Soviet Union to be an extension of Afghanistan. 'I have never been abroad' (*ma kharij hich na raftim*), one woman in her late forties who currently sells women's clothing in a neighbourhood market on the outskirts of Odessa, remarked to me, only seconds after describing how she had traded alongside her husband in several Central Asian countries, two cities in Russia, and, now, in Odessa in the Ukraine.

A handful of these mobile Afghan merchants who travelled to the shurawi in the 1990s are known to have made very significant fortunes; they returned to Afghanistan with the commencement of the international intervention in 2001 in order to benefit from the economic opportunities that offered – these men now run banks and airlines in Afghanistan. Two of their ilk are currently under house arrest in Kabul for their role in the corrupt practices of The Kabul Bank. Other successful if less wealthy traders hedged their bets. Maintaining a business in Moscow or St Petersburg, they would send one brother back to Afghanistan to either seek employment in the state or an NGO, or, more likely, to start a construction or import company, and another to China in order to open a trading office or transport company connected to their family business interests in both Russia and Afghanistan. A key way for men such as these to register their success is to say to their compatriots whom they meet during the course of trading sorties, 'I have a life in both Moscow and Kabul'.

With the continuing instability in Afghanistan, communities of traders in the former Soviet Union are still being replenished with new migrants travelling to cities in the region both with the aim of trading there and of escaping Afghanistan. These include young men who were employed as translators for ISAF forces in the country, and had earned enough money doing so to establish a business in the shurawi. There are others who have connections of kin and friendship with established merchants living across the Commonwealth of Independent States who were willing to employ such trustworthy new-comers as sellers (*furishondah*) in their shops, or to give them goods on credit which could then be sold in retail markets. Those with significant amounts of capital might also have been invited to become a business partner (*sharik*) by an established merchant in Moscow, Kiev or Odessa. These new migrants are now found across the political space, and add another historical layer to the groups of Afghan communities living across it. The trading activities of such some individuals have been very successful, something that is often put down by more established Afghans in the region to the newcomers' experience of Afghanistan and subsequent fearlessness and capacity for and risk-taking. Yet new traders also often complain that because, unlike early waves of Soviet-sympathising Afghans, they are not formerly educated, speak poor Russian, and do not enjoy long standing ties with local officials and ministries, it is harder for them to establish durable businesses.

Importantly, in all the so-called 'Afghan markets' (*afghansky rynok; afghon bozor*) that I have visited in the former Soviet Union, I have also met men who have decided to leave their lives (and often families) in western Europe in order to return to being an independent trader in contexts where they had previously worked. Moving from Slough and Rotterdam to Odessa, from Toronto and Utrecht to Moscow and Dushanbe, and from Oslo to Rostov-on-Don, these traders all claim that the *shurawi-i sabiq* (former Soviet union) offers the possibility for a man to engage in free work (*kar-i azad*) in a manner that is impossible in the tightly controlled markets of western Europe and North America. Ali, for instance, is a Hazara from the dara-i Turkmen valley in Parwan. He worked as a taxi driver in Greenwich for five years; on earning British citizenship he travelled to Odessa to start a business in the sale of bags and suitcases that he purchases from a distant relative who imports them from China. The search for culturally acceptable forms of work and labour is not the only reason behind such moves; young Afghan men deported from countries in western Europe to 'home' in



Afghanistan, often prefer to return once more to the cities in which they, or other family members, had initially learned to trade than to stay in Afghanistan, 'after somebody has left Afghanistan and got used to life outside', it is often remarked to me, 'return is impossible'.

The networks of Afghan traders that connect China to the former Soviet Union are thus distinctive in that they are founded on the basis of students and state officials with a long and intimate history of experience in the region. These networks are dynamic in that the former Soviet Union is seen as a fruitful space for making money today, especially by men based in Afghanistan itself. Finally, many of these traders aspire to lead a life that bridges simultaneously Afghanistan, the former Soviet world, and the cities of China in which they work; in this sense, the traders think of themselves as being distinctively 'Eurasian' traders.

#### 4. Network 2: Purveyors of Precious Stones - Afghan Gemstone Dealers across East Asia

Another Afghan trading network that plays important if far less visible role in the commercial dynamics of Yiwu is made-up of traders from the north of the country who are involved in the transportation and sale of minerals, precious and semi-precious stones to Chinese and international markets. These traders are particularly active in the sale of stones that are mined within Afghanistan, such as rubies, tourmaline, emeralds, and, of course lapis lazuli. Many of them, however, also purchase stones from other regions, making yearly visits to nodes in the global market of gemstones, such as Bangkok, Hong Kong and Jaipur. Interestingly, the sourcing of precious and semi-precious stones in such locales is often undertaken by traders in possession of passports from either countries in Europe and America (e.g. Germany, USA, the UK) OR IN East Asia (e.g. Japan, Hong Kong): such passports make possible the flexible forms of mobility that are required of such types of commercial activity and that are constrained by the holders of Afghanistan passports. These traders locate themselves in Yiwu not because it is an important market for the goods in which they deal, but because the city's policies allow them to open trading offices and rent houses at more affordable rates than other Chinese cities where the trade in gems is more significant, such as Guangzhou.

The nature of Afghanistan's trade in precious and semi-precious stones has been a cause of much debate in Afghanistan, and this debate relevels aspects of the identities and activities of the country's China-based gemstone merchants. A recent Global Witness report has brought much-needed attention to the plight of Afghanistan's lapis lazuli and tourmaline mines, located in the country's north-eastern province of Badakhshan. The report highlights the ways in which the mines have become a focus of dispute between local 'strongmen' and the armed groups they control; it also claims that funds from the mines have been channelled to militant groups, including the Taliban, in return for these groups not seeking to directly capture these vital sources of revenue. According to the report, there is even a possibility that ISIS, who are purportedly active in Badakhshan, regard these mines as being a potential revenue source. Finally, the report also emphasises the role played by traders from Afghanistan, and especially the Panjshir valley, which borders Badakhshan, in the smuggling of lapis to markets across Asia, especially in Pakistan and China. Overall the report argues that lapis should be regarded as a 'conflict mineral' and that there is therefore an urgent need for further government regulation and control over the mines. The report quite rightly makes the case for Afghanistan developing laws relating to the mineral sector: doing so, would allow all of the country's people to benefit from its many precious national resources, including Badakhshan's lapis lazuli and tourmalines.

Firstly, and perhaps most seriously, the report argues that lapis lazuli mining is a source of conflict in the region without seeking to assess its relative significance in relationship to other flows of illegal or

illicit commodities. Most obviously, as Jonathan Goodhand (2009) has demonstrated on the basis of research conducted over several years, Badakhshan is an important locale for the production of opium and heroin. The region is also the home of individuals and groups involved in the transportation of these drugs to Tajikistan, and thence to Russia and the West. At the same time, Badakhshan's border with Afghanistan also means that it has been an important region through which Taliban fighters have passed - a journey, as Antonio Giustozzi and Dominique Orsini (2009) have demonstrated, that involves the payment of a fee (or tax) to local leaders. To isolate lapis as a source of conflict without exploring these other important revenue providers in the region, or the relationship of these to each other, renders impossible a fair assessment of the relative significance of the mines to the emergence of current levels of conflict in Badakhshan.

By focusing principally on the strategies and activities of individual commanders involved in battles for control over the mine, secondly, the report gives insufficient emphasis to the significance of the wider geopolitical processes affecting Badakhshan today. Badakhshan is located in a politically precarious region that cuts across not only the nation-states of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan, but also the wider regions of South and Central Asia. Badakhshan's site in this tense geopolitical environment has meant that its people have witnessed and played a role in varying and overlapping forms of conflict and dispute over the past decades. In today's context, for example, as the report notes, certain valleys, especially Jurm, have become the holdouts of international jihadi fighters, especially from Chechnya and the Central Asian states. These fighters, along with their families, were forced to leave Pakistan's Federally Associated Tribal Areas, after that country's government launched a military campaign against them in the wake of the attack on Karachi Jinnah International airport on June 8th 2014 (carried out by gunmen of Uzbek origin). For the region's people, however, these fighters' presence in their valleys and villages is often thought of as reflecting a more multidimensional 'political game' over which they have little or no control. An element of this game is what they talk about as being the opening by 'the West' of a southern front with Putin's Russia. Another element, according to traders from the region with whom I have spoken, arises from what they say is China's recognition of Badakhshan's potential importance for its 'New Silk Road' strategy. According to these traders, a road connecting Badakhshan to China would give the People's Republic speedy access to Afghanistan's markets, as well as those beyond. Yet, they say, this prospect is feared by commercial and political elites in the south of Afghanistan who regard the development of this route as threatening their control of the country's international trade. In this context, such traders argue, militant groups have risen in prominence in Badakhshan and northern Afghanistan. Regardless of whether or not evidence can be mustered that 'proves' such claims, the political agency of individuals in Badakhshan, as elsewhere in Afghanistan, are shaped in powerful ways by this broader, geopolitical context. As a trader from the region based in China told me in March 2016, conflict in Badakhshan is about territory (*jang-i mantiqawi*) not just about lapis. Assessments of the role played by the mines in generating conflict between these men and their groups, need to be analysed in this wider geopolitical context. Indeed, Robert Crews (Crews 2015) argues that a 'core feature' of Afghan nationalism is the commitment that the country will always have an 'immense impact on the world' and the fortune of humanity.

Thirdly, it is of critical significance that the report argues that traders involved in the sale of lapis should not be 'scapegoated' by the Afghan government. Yet the report also highlights the role played by 'Panjshiri' smugglers who transport lapis mined in Badakhshan out of the country. To the best of my knowledge, those involved in transporting lapis from Afghanistan and dealing in it globally are not 'Panjshiri' per se: they hail largely from a few villages in the upper reaches of the Panjshir valley (most notably Dasht-e Rewat and Safid Sheer). By labelling these traders collectively as 'Panjshiri', a regional group of Farsi speakers most commonly associated with the Jamiat party

and anti-Soviet jihadi leader Ahmad Shah Massoud, the report feeds into and simplistically builds off the ethnic discourses that are a feature of much political conflict in Afghanistan today.

Moreover, men from these villages have been trading in lapis for at least the past forty five years: they think of themselves as being traders as much as of 'Panjshiris' or the followers of one or another political faction. One trader aged about fifty five and currently based in Hong Kong, told me how he could remember going with his father to Badakhshan in pursuit of lapis in the mid-1970s. Another trader in Hong Kong, now in his seventies, reminisced that after the coming to power of the mujahidin in 1992 he had shunned the offer of a position in the government because he considered himself to be a trader first and foremost. Over the years in which men from the upper reaches of the Panjshir valley have been involved in the trade in lapis, they have transported the stone in the context of the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviets, and the control of the country by the Taliban. In these circumstances, the traders shifted the routes they use to move lapis— during the 1970s the stone was transported in the bottom of trucks full of wood to the Pakistani city of Peshawar by way of the border post at Landi Kotal; in the 1980s and 90s mule and donkey trains freighted the stone across multiple mountain passes to the Chitral district of northern Pakistan; in recent years the traders have taken steps to export the stone directly to China from Kabul in shipping containers.

These so-called 'smugglers' also have an intimate and in-depth knowledge of the global market for lapis: having established networks that connect all the world's nodes of the market in semi-precious and precious stones (Jaipur, Hong Kong, Bangkok, Kaifeng in China, and Kofu in Japan), they are also able to understand the shifting cultural value attached to lapis in varying parts of the world: when a popular musician in China wore a set of lapis jewellery, for example, they told me that the cost of the stone increased dramatically. Today, prices are so low (as a result of high levels of export in the 2000s, and a downturn in China's economy) that the traders are shutting up their warehouses in Hong Kong and moving their stocks to locations where rental prices are cheaper.

It is important to recognise that these traders have carried out their work in a great different range of political conditions, all of which have been characterised by a profound lack of security, an absence of the rule of law, and a failure of the government of Afghanistan to develop a coherent policy not merely towards lapis lazuli and minerals but to the country's commercial sector more generally. As the report correctly suggests, these traders should not be scapegoated. More crucially, perhaps, the significance of their knowledge and expertise for the future of the mineral sector in Afghanistan deserves greater recognition.

This brief consideration of the activities of Afghan gemstone dealers in China then reveals important contrasts with the case of the country's merchants based in the Soviet Union. Most obviously, the gemstone dealers relationships to one another are based less on the shared experience of education or state service, than on their being from specific villages in Afghanistan whose populations are known to have an expertise in understanding stones and the international trades associated with them. The networks therefore extend out from particular geographical points in Afghanistan and the traders have extensive knowledge of one another's personal and familial histories. Secondly, while the traders who move goods between China and the Soviet Union claim they do not have the skills to trade in Afghanistan, for gemstone traders, familiarity with the forms of local, national and geopolitical dynamics affecting Afghanistan is absolutely essential. A third major difference is that while the traders between China and the former Soviet Union have established paths and infrastructures for trade between these two contexts over many years, the gemstone traders in addition to acting in established nodes (such as in Kaifeng, Bangkok or Jaipur) are always simultaneously active in searching out new sources of stones and new markets for them. During my visits to Hong Kong, for instance, I had met traders who had travelled to Mexico and Peru in order to

purchase tourmalines, as well as to Zambia to explore the gold or diamond market. These networks are therefore rarely associated with establishing communities of merchants outside of Afghanistan, but characterised more by the ever-changing movements of individual merchants and their business companions.

#### 5. Network 3: Supplying the Hajjis - Afghan Turkmen and Uzbeks between Saudi Arabia and Yiwu

A final Afghan trading network that is often talked about by traders from Afghanistan based in Yiwu as being successful and established connects the markets of the Gulf, especially Jeddah in Saudi Arabia, with China. Traders of Afghan background are major exporters of clothing and also machine-made carpets from China to Saudi Arabia, and the sale of these commodities is mostly connected to the great hajj pilgrimage during which Muslim pilgrims purchase items such as these as gifts for their relatives and friends. From the perspective of Afghan traders based in Yiwu, their compatriots who work in Jeddah are some of the wealthiest and involved in the most stable and high scale trading activities: 'a small business in Jeddah', I was often told in Yiwu, 'means at least 10 containers of goods transported between China and Saudi per month'.

During four months of research in Yiwu in 2016, I met several traders from Afghanistan who told me of their work in Saudi Arabia. The majority of these traders identify themselves as being ethnically Uzbek and Turkmen, and as having been born in Afghanistan northern provinces, especially Balkh, Kunduz and Jowzjan. The family histories of these families however are also informed by migration and mobility. Most of them men I have spoken to have told me that their grandfathers came to what is currently Afghanistan from their homes and villages in Central Asia after the region was incorporated into the USSR in the 1920s. Trade was also important to the livelihoods of these families over the long term: before their migration to Afghanistan they were involved in animal husbandry and also the trade in pelts to Russia; after moving to Afghanistan they continued to be involved not merely in the trade of lamb pelt (*karakul*), but also of meat, carpets, and animal skins. Indeed, between the 1960s and 1980s some of Afghanistan's most well known traders came from families who had migrated to Afghanistan in the 1920s – they were respected for their production and distribution of carpets, the opening of transport companies that connected the cities of northern Afghanistan to Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey, as well as for establishing business and offices abroad, most especially in Hamburg and Istanbul.

Most of these families however left Afghanistan in the early 1980s, having been labelled as 'feudal' by the communist government and told that their property would be confiscated. Many also feared that anti-government mujahidin groups would compel their male children to fight. Most of the traders initially moved to Pakistan: hundreds of families stayed in cities (notably Peshawar and Lahore) and eventually established workshops in which carpets were produced. Other families were able to procure travel documents that allowed them to travel to Saudi Arabia on working visas. For large numbers of the traders, obtaining residency in Saudi Arabia was highly complex – many used their Pakistani passports to obtain residency, which resulted in difficulties in later years when they wished to travel for Afghanistan. Many others entered Saudi Arabia on specially designated hajj visas, and overstayed these, often for several years, until they were either deported or included in amnesties by the Saudi Arabian authorities. It was also normal for some family members to have entered on a working visa while others to be over-stayers on a hajj visa. Most of the traders say that they were initially involved in small scale commercial activities in Jeddah and other cities, buying, for example, inexpensive goods from commodity wholesalers based in Jeddah and then selling them at street stalls in the holy cities of Mecca or Medina. The more successful traders were able to rent

shops in Mecca to cover the period of the hajj pilgrimage season when profit margins are at their highest.

This community's specific migration history has clearly affected the nature of their relations with Afghanistan. Unlike in the other Afghan commercial communities and networks that I have explored in this article, the majority of the men I have spoken to say they have never returned to Afghanistan after they left in the early 80s. Those who theorise this say it is because they were already refugees in Afghanistan when they left, having been denied access to the Afghan national identity card (*tazkira*) until at some point in the 1960s. As a result, I am told, they felt little attachment to their homeland and instead sought to lead settled lives in the contexts to which they moved.

Nevertheless, life in Saudi Arabia has also provided the opportunity for these traders and the communities to which they belong to explore their histories of connectedness. Saudi Arabia, like the UAE, operates the *kafilah* system (a Saudi system is required to be a partner of the business activities of a resident foreigner): some of my informants have told me that their *kafilah* are third generation descendants of 1920 emigres from the Emirate of Bukhara (see Balci 2007). These people, they say, have 'become Arab' but are still more trustworthy partners than Saudi citizens without a shared Central Asian heritage.

The more successful traders in this community have increasingly fashioned the Zeytinburnu neighbourhood of Istanbul as a node for their commercial and affective lives. They come to Istanbul in the summer to escape the heat of Jeddah, as well as to order carpets and clothes that are made in Turkey to be delivered to Saudi Arabia on time for the great hajj pilgrimage. Many also attend or organise the weddings of relatives who were resettled in Turkey in the 1980s as part of official programmes organised by the Turkish government. Indeed, several of the Afghan traders I have talked with successfully sought to acquire Turkish citizenship in the 1990s and 2000s. Holding a Turkish passport they say, raises their status in Saudi Arabia: if they are to fall foul of the law they are likely to receive better treatment if they are Turkish citizens than if living in Saudi on a Pakistani residence permit. Turkish citizenship also gives them a national identity they believe is durable (many are from families who migrated from the former Emirate of Bukhara to Afghanistan in the 1920s and 30s and claim to have never been fully accepted as 'Afghan' citizens). Finally being Turkish also affords the children of these trading families access to higher education, something they say is very difficult in Saudi: 'when our children finish class 12, we have no choice but to bring them into the shop or warehouse and start them trading'. The community of northern Afghans in Istanbul is growing more and more complex by the day - on the one hand there are the new wave of commercial investors from Kabul entering the city, buying property and opening businesses; on the other hand, the significant communities of Turkmen who continued to reside in Pakistan (especially Peshawar and Lahore) - where they own carpet manufacturing and trading business - are increasingly shifting to Turkey as the Pakistan state has become increasingly hostile to refugees from Afghanistan.

The trading activities of Afghanistan's communities in Saudi Arabia and Istanbul are also varied: many bring tea shirts and Arab dresses from China to Saudi - 'hajjis buy lots of gifts for their relatives and they don't care about the quality only the price'. One man I have met in both Yiwu and Zeytinburnu for example exports to Jeddah Arab tunics that are made in Yiwu by a company that employs those interned in Chinese jails as tailors. These traders also export higher quality Turkish products to Saudi Arabia, especially clothing and carpets. Some run their own factories, especially in Zeytinburnu and towns in the Southeast of Turkey where there are established communities from northern Afghanistan. It has also been reported to me that until the onset of war, Afghan traders would travel from Jeddah to Aleppo in order to purchase machine-made carpets. The situated

choices in terms of whether to purchase in Turkey or in China or elsewhere in the Middle East is an important element of the traders' strategies.

As with the traders based in the former Soviet Union, merchants involved in the trade between China and the Middle East, are actively involved in the creation of diasporic community life in the settings in which they live and work. One such node of the affective and commercial life of this community is the old city in Jeddah, especially the Bukhari Street which has been home to communities of pilgrims, traders and migrants from Central Asia for over the past century. As we have already seen, another important neighbourhood in which commerce and familial life overlap for this community is the Zeytinburnu neighbourhood of Istanbul. Istanbul's Zeytinburnu neighbourhood has been home to Afghans of largely Uzbek and Turkmen background since the mid-1980s, but in the last four years the neighbourhood has become a vibrant site of Afghan sociability - not merely of Afghans seeking to travel to Europe. In the last four years Zeytinburnu has become a vibrant site of Afghan sociability - not only of those coming to Europe about whom one reads a great deal in the news: many have moved here to trade and do business and have come from all over Eurasia. During visits to Istanbul that I made in July and October 2016, I met in the streets of Zeytinburnu traders that I have known in Tajikistan and Ukraine, as well as Yiwu and Kabul. There is a veritable assortment of Afghan restaurants and '*watani*' handmade ice cream parlours to choose from. These are a real spectacle for Afghans and locals alike as the ice cream makers, who hail from northern Afghanistan, make their special delicacy by pounding cold cream in steel pots that are submerged in ice. Equally important are the community associations (*wakif*) that have been established by Jeddah-based traders in Istanbul. These are gathering spaces usually located in apartments or flats that have been officially registered with the Turkish state and that are used to hold community events, such as the funeral prayers for the deceased, wedding rituals, or meals organised as acts of charitable giving.

The distinctive element of the Afghan networks that facilitate the flows of commodities from China to Saudi Arabia is the extent to which the thinking and experiences of the people who make up these networks are clearly informed by several generations of mobility and migration associated with both trade as well as political displacement. As a result, these traders have played an active role in seeking to establish and sustain sites of familial and affective life that are less visible in the context of both the traders in the Soviet Union or the peripatetic gemstone dealers. It is also notable that for many of the traders in Saudi Arabia questions of identity and belonging, as well as strategic moves concerning how to find permanent homes for their families, are especially paramount and indeed addressed on a day-to-day level.

## 6. Conclusion

Any one of the hundreds of thousands of Afghans with experience of trading across the borders of Central Asia, China, the Middle East and Europe over the past thirty years will tell the architects of the New Silk Road strategy that the barriers to the types of trade that will have positive consequences for local people will not be dealt with through romantic visions of interconnectivity fashioned by elite politicians who gather at international hotels. It is in the markets and bazaars in which commerce and exchange actually takes place where the conditions for connectivity will be fashioned. Creating regional interdependence requires social work as much as narrowly economic policy. It requires the making of relationships of friendship and of commerce across the boundaries of ethnicity, language, nationality, religion, and political ideology. It requires the ability to compromise with the powerful and the corrupt. It requires the skills to learn multiple languages. It requires the capacity of individuals and groups to feel at home everywhere. As many of the traders themselves say, 'we are both traders and diplomats'.

The carefully managed and regulated flows of commodities, goods, products, and people envisaged in the New Silk Road strategy will constrain rather than facilitate the flourishing of the social, cultural and political skills that are necessary for durable forms of regional interconnectivity. A Eurasia without the forms of adaptability and flexibility amply demonstrated by Afghan traders will be a far bleaker space. The absence of the diplomatic yet socially valued capacities they display on a daily basis will also mean that conflicts across the region's multiple boundaries will be more not less likely to erupt.

The current fascination with grandiose plans such as the New Silk Road conceal the intricate networks that already do exist and that successfully connect different parts of Europe and Asia to one another. These Actually Existing Silk Roads should not be treated as informal and illegal and thereby inevitably a security threat or a risk. They are better thought of as monuments to the creative activity of people who have been poorly served by the nation-state and the international system over the past decades. It is in this context that they have built their own infrastructures, both for life and for commerce.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Boram Shin for playing such a critical role in organising the Silk Roads Again conference in Seoul at which an earlier draft of this paper was presented, as well as the participants at the conference for their helpful feedback and suggestions. The research upon which this article is based would not have been possible without funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme 669 132 – TRODITIES, 'Yiwu Trust, Global Traders and Commodities in a Chinese International City'. The author has also received funding from a British Academy Small Grant.

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