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Beyond Bukhara: Trade, Identity and Interregional Exchange across Asia

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Abstract

This article explores the nature of inter-Asian trade dynamics through a consideration of the role played by traders from northern Afghanistan's Central Asian borderlands. It explores the role that traders from this region have played in commercial exchanges involving China, the Arabian Peninsula and a range of settings in West Asia. In addition to documenting the inter-Asian scope of these traders' activities, the article also addresses the shifting nature of their identity formations in relationship to successive waves of migration. The traders often identify themselves in relationship to ethno-national identity categories (Turkmen, Uzbek and Tajik) that are politically salient in Central Asia and Afghanistan today. At the same time, the traders also emphasise their being from families that migrated from the territories of the Emirate of Bukhara during the early years of communist rule in the 1920s and 1930s. In the context of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, many of these families moved from Afghanistan to Saudi Arabia, often staying for several years in cities and towns in Pakistan. Over the past three decades, Central Asian émigré families have increasingly established their businesses and communities in the Arabian Peninsula and Turkey; they also run offices in the trading cities of maritime China.

Keywords

Trade; Afghanistan; Bukhara; Turkey; Saudi Arabia; China; Inter-Asia; Identity

Introduction

This article focuses on the role played by traders from northern Afghanistan's Central Asian borderlands in facilitating commercial exchanges between China, the Arabian Peninsula and a range of settings in West Asia. It explores in particular the activities across these contexts of traders who both identify themselves in relationship to a range of ethnic categories salient in Afghanistan and Central Asia today – especially Turkmen, Uzbek and Tajik – as well as the descendants of families from Bukhara (*az Bukhara*) who emigrated from the Soviet Union to Afghanistan in the 1920s and 1930s. In the context of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, these families moved from Afghanistan to Saudi Arabia in the early 1980s, often staying for several years in cities and towns in Pakistan.

Over the past three decades, such Central Asian émigré families (who mostly hold Afghan, Pakistani and increasingly Turkish nationality/travel documents) have established themselves as significant actors in the import to the Arabian Peninsula of commodities made in China.¹

The article builds on and seeks to contribute towards two bodies of literature that cross the boundaries of history and anthropology and fall within the study of 'Inter-Asian' connections and circulations. An expanding body of work has sought to shed light on the dynamic relations between adjacent parts of Asia through a focused consideration of changes and continuities in the movement of people, ideas, and things, as well as the 'nodes', 'way-stations' and 'choke points' that such forms of movement also produce and require (e.g. Ho 2006; Tagliacozzo 2013). This scholarship has brought recognition to the significance of connections between geographical Asian settings that had previously been obscured because of the 'sub-regional' frame of analysis (e.g. Amrith 2013). This body of work has focused on the role played by newer and older types of networks in facilitating transregional connections and circulations across adjacent contexts. While such contexts had been historically connected to one another, they came to be thought of as belonging to distinct world regions as a result of the development of area studies in the Cold War context (e.g. Henig 2016; Kotkin 2007). Scholarship in this vein has done a great deal to challenge the notion that the nation-state and the sub-region are always the most relevant geographical scales of analysis.

A second body of literature that I have found helpful in the analysis of the ethnographic material presented in this article concerns the complex nature of Muslim networks that criss-crossed the borders of the Ottoman, British and Russian Empire at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. This literature has complicated the assumption earlier that such connections inevitably constituted a step towards the emergence of international identity formation, such as Pan-Turkism, Pan Turanism, or Pan-Asian thinking (e.g. Brophy 2016; Meyer 2014; Reynolds 2009). Instead, scholarship demonstrates how the individuals involved in such forms of border-crossing mobility were as much concerned with the pragmatic concerns of trade and political stability as they were with ideologies or identity projects. There is also growing recognition of the ways in which such networks were viewed from the perspective of empires and government officials. While Russian imperial officials did see long-distance networks made-up of Muslims as a potential source of subversive religious thought and action, they also recognised the ways in which such networks could be harnessed to further the stretch imperial power beyond territorial borders (Kane 2005). Networks were indeed exploited as a source of revenue and of modern trading practices, not least because Russian merchants were regarded as being less adaptable and capable of risk-taking trade than Muslim merchants in this period (Monahan 2015).

This article seeks to make a contribution to these parallel developments in the field of inter-Asian studies in two ways. It aims, firstly, to analytically extend the understanding of Inter-Asian dynamics by exploring not merely transregional connections forged by networks operating across adjacent regions, but, additionally, the connective role being played by 'mobile societies' from one Asian sub-region (Central Asia) in two further Asian settings (West and East Asia). The study of inter-Asian dynamics brings to light connections between regions. But it also requires scholars to disassemble assumed relationships between different Asian contexts, and to reassemble these from the point-of-view of the actors under study. This process of reassembling requires a rethinking of the role played by polities in such processes : something widely demonstrated by the ubiquitous use of the term

¹ I use the term émigré in this article in convention with other literature on Afghanistan's Central Asians (e.g. Shahrani 2001) because of the recognition it gives to the multifaceted aspects of their various stages of movement and dispersals in a manner that more one-dimensional terms used in migration studies (such as emigrant and refugee) do not afford.

‘transnationalism’ in the analysis of long-distance networks, and the rise of scholarship contesting ‘methodological nationalism’. As Engseng Ho has recently argued, however, a fuller understanding of transregional dynamics also requires a model of society that can embrace the type of ‘small, mobile, and less integrated’ social formations that have largely not been encompassed by the study of the social science-based study of large scale social aggregates (Ho 2017). In what follows, I respond to Engseng Ho’s call for ‘thick transregionalism’ – ‘a spatially expansive, integrative account of a mobile society’ - by presenting an account of multiple ‘partial communities’ that are connected to each other in the context of an Asia-wide arena of circulation and interaction (Ho 2017; cf. Ho 2014).

The second contribution of this article relates to my interest in the activities of Central Asian inland merchants in the maritime nodes of Arabia (Jeddah) and the Mediterranean (Istanbul). An analysis of this brings to light a specific type of node that is of particular value for anthropologists and historians concerned by the Inter-Asian dynamics. There has been a tendency in much of existing literature in anthropology on Inter-Asian dynamics to focus on one of multiple geographical axes of inter-Asian interaction (e.g. Eurasian/Indian Ocean/West-East Asia dynamics). Yet the traders who are the focus of this article bring sharply into focus nodes such as Yiwu, Jeddah, Istanbul at which different axes of Inter-Asian interaction collide. Such nodes offer a privileged site for tracking shifts in the identity formations of established trading networks, the ways in which such shifts relate to the strategies of states in relationship to such mobile societies, and the transforming circumstances of the traders themselves.

Afghan Traders in Yiwu

I first became aware of the significance of Yiwu as a node for the activity of Afghan merchants in relationship to research I conducted into the commercial activities of Afghanistan in the former Soviet Union, especially Russia and Ukraine (Marsden 2016a, 2016b). During research in Yiwu in 2016, however, I came to recognise that Yiwu was a significant node not merely for traders involved in the sale of Chinese-made ‘small commodities’ (especially toys, hardware items, and souvenirs) in the former Soviet Union and Afghanistan, but also across a range of world regions. During many evenings spent chatting with the traders in restaurants, cafes and shisha parlours, I was introduced to merchants purchasing commodities in Yiwu who were visiting the city from Pakistan, Iran, Malaysia, the UAE, the USA and Canada, and Western Europe.

I also met several traders from Afghanistan in Yiwu who told me of their businesses in Saudi Arabia – a country in which the port city of Jeddah was described as being a base both for Afghan merchants and community life more generally. One of the restaurants I visited most frequently was owned by traders from northern Afghanistan who had lived intermittently in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE since having left Afghanistan in 1983. The owner of the establishment had recently moved his family to India, where he said the cost of life was cheaper and the standard of education higher than in the UAE. Furthermore, many of the merchants who gathered in this restaurant to eat, drink green tea, and chat while relaxing in the Afghan-style carpeted floor seating area told me that either they or their families owned homes in Turkey, most especially Istanbul.

The majority of these traders identify themselves as being ethnically Turkmen, and as having been born in Afghanistan’s northern provinces, especially Balkh, Kunduz and Jowzjan. Turkmen-speakers constitute a very small minority in modern day Afghanistan, and these provinces are, indeed, ethnically mixed regions that are home to populations of Farsi and Uzbek -speaking Muslims, as well as to substantial communities of Pashtuns, most of which were relocated to northern Afghanistan by Pashtun state officials at the turn of the twentieth century (e.g. Tapper 1978; cf. Fuori 2017). Thus, while traders who identify themselves as being Turkmen are most visible in the trade between China

and Saudi Arabia, Uzbek and Farsi-speaking merchants also play a critical role in such activities. There is also frequent interaction across the social and economic spheres between traders who identify with these distinct identity registers. Several traders informed me that they are from 'mixed' backgrounds, being descended from a Farsi-speaking 'Tajik' mother and Uzbek-speaking father, for instance.

The activities of northern Afghan traders active in Saudi are widely known by Yiwu-based Afghans who work in different world regions. Indeed, from the perspective of Afghan traders based in Yiwu, their compatriots who run businesses in Jeddah are said to be some of the wealthiest Afghans abroad 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'. Traders of Afghan background are major exporters of clothing and machine-made carpets from China to Saudi Arabia. The sale of these commodities in Saudi Arabia is connected to the annual hajj pilgrimage, during which Muslim pilgrims from across the world purchase these items as gifts to take home to their relatives and friends (Erin 2007). Given the importance of northern Afghanistan for the worldwide trade in carpets (Spooner 1986), traders have a long history of being involved in the supply of prayer mats and carpets more generally both to hajj pilgrims and to the markets of the Gulf. During fieldwork in Jeddah I was told how until the 1970s hajjis coming from Afghanistan to the Holy Cities would bring hand-knotted carpets with them in the overland convoys (*carawan*) in which they travelled, and sell these in Jeddah, Mecca, and Madina, both to pilgrims and also buyers from Yemen. By the 1990s much of this trade appears to have shifted toward the import of machine-made carpets from Turkey, especially the eastern city of Gaziantep, a commercial activity in which traders from northern Afghanistan based in both Jeddah and Istanbul played an active role. In the last decade, an increasing proportion of the prayer mats are imported from China.

Bukhara: from Trading node to Regional periphery

The traders whose activities are documented below largely identify their homes in Afghanistan as being in the country's north-west and north east. Today, these Afghan provinces all lie on the border with the former Soviet Republics of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Until the consolidation of the Afghan state this region was made-up of various dynasties involved in tributary relationships both with the Emirate of Bukhara as well as with polities to the east and the south (Lee 1996). After the delineation of an international boundary by the Afghan Boundary Commission in the mid-nineteenth century (Fuori 2017), the region formed Afghan Turkestan, which shared a border with the Emirate of Bukhara/Russian Turkistan. Most of the traders described below are from families that moved permanently to Afghan Turkestan in the late 1920s in the wake of Stalinist purges of notables, wealthy peasants, and religious authorities in Central Asia (Khalid 2014). This period also saw the progressive rigidification of the border between Soviet Central Asia and Afghanistan (e.g. Marsden and Hopkins 2012). Many of my informants inform me that their families had been merchants and craftsmen ever since moving to Afghanistan. Some of the families appear to have turned to trading after leaving their home villages and towns in Central Asia; others talk about their families as having been merchants before leaving Central Asia (Jalallar 2011).

Bukhara was a historic site of transregional Asian trade that involved merchants from the region travelling to Iran, Muscovy, Siberia, China and India. Audrey Burton (1993) documented the wide range of contexts that were important to the activities of Bukharan merchants between 1558 and 1718. Merchants from Bukhara made trading sorties across this period to Iran, Muscovy, Siberia, China and India. On the course of these sorties they both transported goods from Bukhara for sale (especially the region's high-quality cotton materials, and furs largely made from sheepskin), and

purchased goods for sale either in Bukhara or another region in which Bukharan merchants were active: rhubarb purchased in China and Siberia was thus sold in Iran, where it was regarded as an essential medicinal ingredient.² Officials frequently imposed barriers on the ability of Bukharan merchants to operate across these contexts. In the wake of the Turkish invasion of Vienna, Muscovy's Tsars imposed restrictions on the movement of Bukharan Muslim merchants. Not all Bukharan merchants operated in this mobile manner. Burton also identifies the role played by individual merchants who were permanently settled outside of the Emirate to the activities of merchants based in the Emirate. In Siberia, for example, settled Bukhara merchants both owned land and ran businesses (see Monahan 2015). In addition to dealing with far away people and their rulers, Bukhara's merchants also engaged in close trading relations with the communities surrounding the urban centres in which they were based: they collected fur and carpets from Turkmen tribes and provided Bukhara's elite with fermented mare's milk.³

Over the nineteenth century the Emirate of Bukhara was gradually incorporated into the Russian Empire and in later years the Soviet Union: this led to the demise of the city's historic status as an urban commercial centre (Humphrey et al. 2009). In the wake of the establishment of the Soviet Union, however, a proportion of Bukhara's commercial community left Central Asia, moving into present-day Iran, Afghanistan, Chinese Turkestan, and India (e.g. Nasiri and Khalili 2013). Having left Central Asia, some of the Central Asian émigrés settled in the contexts to which they had initially moved: northern Afghanistan continues to be home to substantial communities of Central Asian émigrés (Shahrani 2001). Other émigré families, however, migrated out of these neighbouring regions, most frequently to the holy cities of the Hejaz, Mecca and Madinah. In the Hejaz, there were pre-existent communities of Central Asians who had initially travelled to Arabia with the intention of making the hajj pilgrimage, but later stayed on either because they lacked the funds to return home or sought to benefit from the opportunities offered by acting as middleman between Arab guides and Central Asian pilgrims.⁴ In later years, these communities were joined by émigrés from Chinese Turkestan fled who either fled after the collapse of the Turkistan state in 1949 or found themselves conducting pilgrimage in Arabia as the events in China unfolded.

Bukharan émigrés who remained in northern Afghanistan adapted to a new set of circumstances in Afghan Turkestan.⁵ After moving to Afghanistan, the trade of lamb pelt (karakul) continued to be of importance to members of the community, which also became active in related commercial fields, such as the sale of meat and skins.⁶ Northern Afghanistan's fur trade had also attracted Farsi-speaking Afghan Jewish traders and financiers based in the cities of Kabul and Herat, as well as Ashkenazi and Bukharan Jews who had fled the violence that affected their lives and commercial

² Such forms of commercial activity were also of critical importance to the development of other of Central Asia's polities: see Levi (2017) for a discussion of the role played by Xinjiang merchants in the fortunes of Khoqand.

³ Turkmen tribes traded slaves in Russia and Central Asia (e.g. Eden 2016), though this is not an aspect of their commercial pasts which has been broached with me.

⁴ Kane (2016) refers to a Russian official who visited the Hejaz in 1895 referring to a 'tight-knit Turkestani émigré community living and working in Jeddah, Mecca and Medina' (Kane 2016: 79).

⁵ According to Spooner (1986: 216) the production of 'Bukharan' carpets for Western markets 'ceased' between 1930 and the 1960s. The fate of the fur trade during these years is unclear.

⁶ These families themselves make distinctions between Turkmen families who moved to Afghanistan after the 1920s, and those who have been based in the country since before the migrations of the early twentieth century. In the context of Afghanistan's contemporary politics, in which ethnicised debates about which communities might refer to themselves as 'truly' Afghan, the making of such distinctions is invested with considerable political potency (Shahrani 2001; Shalinsky 1994).

activities in Baku, Bukhara, Samarqand, and Tashkent from 1918 onwards.⁷ Afghan government officials argued that Bolshevik agents were working in Afghanistan under the guise of being Jewish traders, resulting in the expulsion of Jewish Central Asian émigrés from Afghanistan, and, eventually, the departure of a significant proportion of the country's sizeable Jewish community to Palestine (Koplik 2013). Against this backdrop, it is unsurprising that traders today intermittently suggest that some members of their community are 'originally' (*asli*) Bukharan Jews who converted to Islam only after having moved to Afghanistan from the Soviet Union.

The modern trade in 'Bukharan' carpets to European and American markets stretches to the eighteenth century (Spooner 1986). From 1960s to the present day some of Afghanistan's most well-known merchants came from families that had crossed the Amu Darya and migrated to Afghanistan in the late 1920s and 1930s. Such merchants were especially respected for the role they played in innovating the production and distribution of carpets, most especially by 'establishing small factories in northern Afghanistan that employed men and children to weave cheap carpets specifically for the Western market' (Spooner 1986: 216-17), opening transport companies that connected the cities of northern Afghanistan to Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and Germany, as well as for creating international business networks, most especially in the centres of the carpet trade, Hamburg and Istanbul.

The case of Agha Qilich and his family is a good example of a 'mobile family' that operates across different political regimes and negotiates both multiple historical ruptures and more gradual transformations. A brief consideration of Qilich Agha's life history highlights the ways in which individual merchant have been as much concerned with the pragmatic concerns of trade in an overall context of political flux as with adherence to specific identity projects. Qilich Agha is renowned by merchants across Afghanistan and its diasporas for having created an international distribution market for Turkmen carpets made in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Qilich Agha opened warehouses in Istanbul and later Hamburg (a historic centre for the carpet trade in Western Europe); he also financed the construction of a market complex in Kabul, the Qilich Agha market: this market now houses the wholesale shops and offices of carpet dealers from across northern Afghanistan. In addition to being a significant player in the carpet industry and trade, Qilich is also said to be been successful in his trading operations in Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan was created in 1924 as a constituent Republic of the Soviet Union in 1924, before becoming an independent Republic after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.⁸ After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Qilich Agha exported petrol and oil from Turkmenistan to Afghanistan, navigating the country's complex political dynamics and mediating between its government and the Taliban government who controlled much after Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001. Qilich Agha is said to have made some less profitable investments during this period in Turkey, seeking to open carpet producing factories in the town of Tokat – a town in the mid-Black Sea region of Anatolia to which dozens of Turkmen families were resettled by the Turkish government in the 1980s. He is often said to have passed his final years consigned to a care home in Germany, while his offspring failed to demonstrate the commercial acumen of their father.

Oil, Wheat, and Chinese-made Vodka Bottles: Afghan Turkmen traders in Central Asia

Understanding the growing significance of ethnically Turkmen traders to Afghanistan's international trading connections after the 1980s requires a brief consideration of their activities in Central Asia before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. After 1991, thousands of Afghans who identified themselves as being Turkmen, moved to Turkmenistan in order to escape civil war in

⁷ On Afghanistan's Jewish communities, see Koplik 2003.

⁸ See Edgar 2004.

Afghanistan. For those who had served in the pro-Soviet government, and had connections through politics and education to the governments of countries in the former Soviet Union there were also clear opportunities for trade (Marsden 2016b). In the case of Turkmenistan, these opportunities arose in relationship to the export of Turkmen oil – a source of international interest at the time, hence the visit by Taliban officials and American oil dealers to the country in the mid-1990s. Afghan Turkmen were significant to the Turkmen government because of their ability to organise the transport of the commodity to Afghanistan, as well as its sale. Indeed, during these years the Turkmen government itself supported attempts to fashion a global Turkmen diasporic identity and through this loyalty to the newly independent Turkmen state. It organised for example an annual World Turkmen Congress meeting to which individuals identified as ethnically Turkmen and resident in various countries within and beyond Asia were invited. By the mid-2000s the Turkmenistan state appeared however to have adopted more restrictive policy on the activities of Turkmen-identifying Afghans within its boundaries. During the mid-2000s, most of the established Turkmen traders of Afghan citizenship who were based in Turkmenistan were deported from the country to Afghanistan. Deportations were often framed by the government of Turkmenistan as accusations of involvement in narcotic smuggling. The Turkmen state also expelled Afghan Turkmen who had cooperated with its intelligence agency in the surveillance of Afghan traders formerly based in the country.

The restriction of access to Turkmenistan by traders from Afghanistan came at a historical juncture during which new commercial opportunities were opening in Afghanistan, largely as a result of the post 2001 September 11th intervention by the USA and its NATO allies. Traders previously based in Turkmenistan were in a unique position to supply NATO forces with precious resources, such as petrol and aeroplane fuel. Others used their contacts with government officials, customs offices, intelligence agents, merchants, and bazaar-owners in Turkmenistan and Central Asia more generally to facilitate the transportation of NATO goods along the so-called Northern Supply Lines. These routes involved the transportation of goods from the Baltic port of Riga, through the Russian Federation, and then along a series of routes through the Muslim-majority states of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kirghizstan, and Tajikistan). The ability of transporters to move goods through these locales quickly and sustaining limited losses to thieves and corrupt officials en route were highly valued by the international logistic companies contracted by NATO. At the time of the withdrawal of the bulk of NATO forces stationed in Afghanistan in 2014, these transporters once again facilitated the international organisation by assisting in the transport of their hardware out of the country. In addition to engaging in such logistical activities, some traders who had made money in Turkmenistan in the 1990s opened banks in Afghanistan; many others took the capital they had earned in Turkmenistan out of Afghanistan and to the UAE.

As is the case with many other present-day Asian trading networks in the contemporary era (e.g. Ho2017; Stephan-Emmrich 2017), the importance of the UAE to the internationalisation of the activities of Afghanistan's Central Asian émigré families cannot be underestimated. Furthermore, even outside of Central Asia, the traders recognised that it was pragmatically expedient to emphasise ethnic identities that reflected the political dynamics of post-Soviet Central Asia. The nature of Afghan Turkmen trading practices in the city are noteworthy in that they combined the traditional role of commission agent/transporter with that of service provider/*mehmon saray* (guesthouse) manager for visiting merchants from the post-Soviet Republic of Turkmenistan. From the mid-2000s onwards, ethnically Turkmen traders from Afghanistan opened offices in the Emirate of Sharjah that facilitated the trading visits of customers from Turkmenistan. According to most Turkmen of Afghan citizenship, Turkmen from Turkmenistan are not naturally gifted traders, thanks to the influence of years of Soviet rule, and so therefore need the assistance of expert traders during their purchasing trips to the UAE. Afghan Turkmen could play this role naturally because

both of their ability to communicate in Turkmen, and their expertise in the field of trade. Thus, the Afghan Turkmens established a 'system': Turkmenistan visitors were received at airports in the UAE, before being taken to the trading offices or *mehrmon saray* (guesthouses) of the Afghan Turkmens (mostly in Sharjah where housing is cheaper than neighbouring Dubai), where they were fed and accommodated. The Afghan Turkmens also provided their professional services as purchasers of commodities, as well as the transporters of these goods to Turkmenistan (mostly overland using the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan border posts of Turghundi and/or Aqinah). From the way in which the Afghan Turkmen traders describe the system it was both comprehensive (the visitors from Turkmenistan placed themselves in the hands of their hosts from arrival to departure) and also profitable. Profits were so good indeed that Turkmen Afghan families based in Pakistan (mostly in the cities of Lahore and Peshawar where they were involved in the manufacture and trade of Turkmen carpets) decided to move to the UAE during this period to open 'trading offices'.

The UAE's status as a sustainable site of trade for these families was relatively short-lived. This type of trading activity faced a major setback in or around 2012 when the government of Turkmenistan imposed new duties on imported vehicles, the commodity that most people from the country had travelled to the UAE in order to purchase. As a result, the trading activities of Turkmen in Dubai quickly dried up. In the face of these changes several traders moved their operations from the UAE to Yiwu. In Yiwu they opened transport companies that once again sought to attract custom from their co-ethnics from across the border in Turkmenistan. In the face of rising costs in Dubai and the easy access in Yiwu to 'commodities of daily use' (souvenirs, gifts, kitchenware, electrical items, hardware, bags and suitcases, etc.), more traders and shopkeepers from Turkmenistan had started to travel to the city to purchase goods from 2010 onwards (according to a senior Yiwu municipal government official with whom I have spoken there was an unexpected surge in the trade between Yiwu and Turkmenistan in 2016).

There are Turkmen citizens who run transport agencies in Yiwu. Yet during fieldwork I saw how traders from the country regularly employ Afghan Turkmens during their business activities in the city. Why do traders from Turkmenistan use the 'services' of Afghan Turkmens in China as they had done preciously in Dubai? It was now in the interest of visiting traders from Turkmenistan to work with Afghan Turkmens for two reasons. Firstly, traders from Turkmenistan are frequently said to 'encounter problems' from their government and its security agencies if they are out of the country for substantial periods of time, thus making it difficult for Turkmenistan nationals to establish shipping companies in China. Secondly, building partnerships with émigré Turkmens from Afghanistan resolved some of the issues that traders from Turkmenistan faced in terms of international cash transfers. In 2016, in the face of growing financial insecurity caused by international sanctions on the Russia Federation and the falling price of oil globally, the Turkmenistan government enforced strict controls on currency exchange, especially the movement of US dollars out of the country. In the face of these controls, suppliers in China, as well as transporters and trading companies, complained in the spring of 2016 that the bills of their Turkmenistan customers went unpaid for months. In northern Afghanistan in October 2016, I met émigré Turkmen traders (based in Afghanistan) who were seeking to send relatives to Ashgabat (Turkmenistan's capital) to open 'trading offices'. One of the traders' brother was working for a company in Yiwu: the companies sent commodities on credit to Turkmenistan from China (my friend had recently exported a container load of glass bottles for vodka) yet rather than being paid in

dollars, oil would be exported to Afghanistan from Turkmenistan.⁹ The importance of barter for trading relations during the early post-Soviet period is widely documented (e.g. Seabright 2000). Its significance to the economies of countries such as Turkmenistan today suggest that far from being a trading modus operandi that is turned to in hard times, barter is a durable element of the region's economies as well as of its people's modes of maintaining cross-border relations and inter-Asian connections (cf. Humphrey and Hugh Jones 1992).

Supplying the Hajjis - Northern Afghan Merchants in Saudi Arabia and Turkey

Many of the traders explored above remained in Afghanistan throughout the 1980s, and, indeed, were aligned to the pro-Soviet People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA): the positions they occupied in the PDPA and the Afghan state in the 1980s afforded them access to networks and actors critical for their commercial activities in Turkmenistan during the 1990s and early 2000s. By contrast, many of the traders explored in what follows left Afghanistan in the early 1980s and assiduously cultivate themselves as being merchants with no interest in Afghanistan's politics or indeed in the commercial opportunities it offers. Most of these families left Afghanistan having been labelled 'feudal' by the communist government and told that their property would be confiscated. Many also simultaneously feared that anti-government mujahidin groups would compel their male children to fight against the invading Red Army. These traders initially moved from Afghanistan to Pakistan: hundreds of families established homes in cities (notably Peshawar and Lahore), eventually establishing workshops in which carpets with Turkmen designs were produced, and then sold to Pakistani, Afghan, and international carpet dealers. Other families - shortly after their arrival in Pakistan in the 1980s - procured Pakistani travel documents that allowed them to travel to Saudi Arabia on working visas. For all such people, the lengthy process of obtaining residency in Saudi Arabia was expensive, complex and drawn out – most Central Asian émigrés in the 1980s who travelled to Saudi Arabia used the documents that they had acquired in Pakistan to obtain residency. In later years this posed major problems when they wished to travel between Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan or if they required Afghan documents for processing visas and residency in third countries (especially Turkey). Those who did not enter Saudi Arabia on Pakistani passports tended to hold specially designated hajj visas; they then overstayed these, often for several years, until they were deported to Afghanistan or found a 'route' to gaining access to Saudi residency documents. Normally, some family members have entered the country on a working visa while others are 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 and then selling them at street stalls in the holy cities of Mecca or Medina. Successful traders rented shops in Mecca and Madinah to cover the period of the hajj pilgrimage season when profit margins are at their highest. The Central Asian émigré traders from Afghanistan also successfully entered the restaurant market in Saudi Arabia, opening cafes and eateries selling a version of Turkmen palaw referred to in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Countries more generally as Bukhary rice. They also filled other niches, such as the gathering, packaging and transportation of dates.

As with the Afghan Turkmen traders who mediated Turkmenistan's relationship with the UAE and then China, traders from northern Afghanistan in Saudi Arabia increasingly positioned themselves as middleman agents between Saudi Arabia and other Asian regions. On the one hand, this wave of migrants to Saudi Arabia publicly emphasised the Bukharan aspects of their identities, branding the

⁹ Rogers 2014 discusses 'petrobarter' and the insights this offers into understanding 'universalising imaginaries' of monetized exchange.

goods they brought from China with names such as 'Bukhara' and 'Turkistan'. In so doing, the traders aligned themselves with historic migrants from Central Asia to Saudi Arabia who now mostly hold Saudi citizenship. On the other hand, the traders actively built on their existing relationships and commercial activities. From the mid-1980s onwards, increasing numbers of Muslims from Central Asian and the Caucasus began to travel to Saudi Arabia for hajj. During the hajj season, Central Asian émigrés from northern Afghanistan who were based in Jeddah, as well as Mecca and Madinah, sourced valuable antiques (e.g. embroidered cloth, carpet fragments, and jewellery) from the visiting pilgrims. These items were then sold in shops they owned in the Kingdom, and that were popular amongst wealthy Saudi families, as well as the country's international expatriate community. Émigré Central Asians, moreover, are also active in the global antique market, owning retail and wholesale businesses in Istanbul's Grand Bazaar, for instance: valuable items sourced in Saudi Arabia were also moved internationally.

A second source of such international relationships was the presence of a commercially active community of families from northern Afghanistan in Turkey. The Turkish government resettled thousands of Turkic-speaking Afghans (mostly from Pakistan's refugee camps) in the mid-1980s.¹⁰ These refugees were settled across the country, but especially in the South-east (e.g. in Hatay, Gaziantep, Shahliurfa), east (Van), and north (Tokat) and in Istanbul (Zeytinburnu). Ethno-linguistic identity was an important criterion used by the Turkish authorities to identify families considerable suitable for relocation in Turkey. Against this backdrop, most communities of Afghans in Turkey identify themselves as Uzbek, Turkmen, Kazakh or Kirghiz, have established community associations (*anjoman*, *karnak*, *dernigi*) in relationship to such categories, and have also sought to form broader collective identities around the notion of 'Afghan Turk'. Today, men who migrated to Turkey as teenage boys during openly reflect on the shift's in their personal and collective identities, as well as the language preferences of their families underwent during this period. One man, now in his early forties, told me that while he identified himself as being an Uzbek his family had spoken Farsi with one another in their home region of Takhar in northern Afghanistan: it was only having migrated to Turkey that his Uzbek language improved (*Uzbek qawi shud*).

These communities initially found employment in Turkish owned stitching and clothing sweatshops and factories, but eventually used skills they had acquired in Afghanistan and Pakistan's refugee camps – the making of suede clothing and carpets in particular – to produce goods for international export. The clothes they produced supplied the markets of the former Soviet Union, while prayer mats were predominantly produced for sale in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The Bukharan émigré traders who were based in Saudi Arabia having initially made their money in trading goods purchased within the Kingdom from the 1990s increasingly sourced commodities in Turkey. During the 1990s and early 2000s, a handful of Saudi-based traders opened factories and sweatshops in Turkey. Traders based in Saudi Arabia have additionally told me that until the onset of the war in Syria, they would also travel from Jeddah to Aleppo to purchase machine-made carpets. One Jeddah-based trader that I met in Istanbul in July 2016 told me that he now travels to Jordan to buy carpets from a merchant he knew in Aleppo who moved his carpet-weaving machines out of Syria. Afghan émigré Turkmens working in Istanbul's Grand Bazaar have also forged business partnerships with Syrian jewellers who have relocated to Istanbul: Turkmen traders provide semi-precious stones, and direct market in their shops for the jewellery produced by their Syrian partners.

¹⁰Afghan itinerants (mostly pilgrims and merchants) claimed multiple forms of imperial jurisdictional subjecthood, including of the Ottomans, the Russian Empire, and British India. See Ahmed 2016; Can 2012, 2016; Stephens 2016.

Finally, in the early 2000s several traders closed their factories in Turkey in the context of rising costs and competition from Chinese machine-made carpets (including *joy namaz* or prayer mats). By the time of my fieldwork in Yiwu in 2016, not only were traders exporting to Jeddah deemed to be amongst the most successful Afghan merchants in the city, several Jeddah-based trading families had established themselves in Yiwu, running transport companies, commissioning agent services, as well as owning restaurants. In addition to carpets and prayer mats, the traders also export t-shirts and Arab-style clothing from China to Saudi Arabia. In 2017 in Istanbul, I also met a Jeddah-based trader who exported children's toys from China to Saudi Arabia yet who was in the process of opening an office and shop in Istanbul's Istoc wholesale market.

Hajji Abdullah, for example, is a trader in his late forties who is the son of a Central Asian émigré family that were based in the northern town of Aqchah from the 1920s until 1983, when they moved to Pakistan, before eventually shifting to Jeddah in the late 1980s. Over the course of 2016 I met Hajji Abdullah in Yiwu (during the course of a purchasing trip he made in mid-June), Zeytinburnu (during a visit he made to the city connected to his attending a relative's wedding party in July), and Jeddah (the city in which he is 'permanently' based and was awaiting a shipment of goods to arrive from China in December). Hajji Abdullah owned a yarn factory in Turkey for some years in the 2000s but this closed (at a considerable financial loss) and he turned his attention instead to importing goods to Saudi Arabia from China. The Hajji recognises that there are benefits to purchasing goods in China: 'hajjis buy lots of gifts for their relatives and they don't care about the quality only the price'. Importantly, then the specific nature of the business activities of traders in the Arabian Peninsula, and the clientele whom they serve, means that they do not face the same difficulties that are faced by merchants working in other settings, and caused by the supply of sub-standard commodities. Indeed, Hajji Abdullah, exports to Jeddah Arab-style tunics (*thobe*) that are made in Yiwu by a company that employs men interned in Chinese jails as tailors. Like other traders, he also exports higher quality Turkish products to Saudi Arabia, especially clothing and carpets, from Turkey, and, increasingly from China. Traders based in Jeddah involved in these activities talk openly about the other merchant groups with whom they compete and the factors that have enabled them to achieve the success they have. In December 2016, for example, I was told by several traders that their fiercest competitors were traders from Yemen, who also travel to Yiwu to purchase small commodities. It was also remarked to me that an opening had been created for Afghan traders in Jeddah because of a downturn of relations between Saudi Arabia and Yemen during the first Gulf War (Yemen opposed the US-led intervention), and it was this rift that opened a niche for Afghan/Central Asian émigré merchants.

Importantly, the shift to Chinese production has not led traders to remove their capital from Turkey – those with citizenship or residency instead have become increasingly active in the real estate trade, sourcing property most especially for wealthy and middle-class Afghans who buy houses in Istanbul with the aim of securing residency permits for their families. This path to Turkish residency and even citizenship is deployed by many Afghans who made money in Afghanistan during the 2000s and fear for the security of the country and the families, especially after the 2014 withdrawal of NATO forces.

Perpetual Nomads?

The history of this mobile society made-up of long-term Central Asian émigré s who trade across West, Central and East Asia, and have established centres of community life in two of the historic 'choke points' of the Ottoman Empire (Jeddah and Istanbul), positions itself in complex ways to Afghanistan. Unlike in the traders who travelled backwards and forwards between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan, a substantial majority of the Saudi-based men I have spoken to say they have never

returned to Afghanistan after having left in the early 80s. They explain this by saying it is because they were already refugees in Afghanistan when they left the country for Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. There is also the general perception that officials in the Afghan state were ambiguous in the ways in which they treated the Central Asian emigres: if many elders appreciate the land afforded them by Afghan officials, others claim emigres faced difficulties in the country because of delays they faced in receiving Afghan national identity documents (*tazkira*) (e.g. Nasiri and Khalili 2012: 231). As a result, I am told, while they felt attachment to northern Afghanistan as a homeland (*watan*) that arose from its status as their place of birth (*joy-e tawallud*), then their political commitments to the state were more contested.

Life in Saudi Arabia has also provided the opportunity for these traders and the communities to which they belong to explore their own histories of transregional connectedness. Saudi Arabia, operates the *kafil* system (a Saudi citizen is required to be a partner of the business activities of a resident foreigner): some of my informants have told me that their *kafil* are third generation descendants of 1920 émigré s from the Emirate of Bukhara.¹¹ These people, they say, have ‘become Arab’ but are still more trustworthy partners than Saudi citizens without a shared Central Asian heritage. One trader, a Farsi-speaker originally from the Samangan province in northern Afghanistan, told me that he owns a house in Istanbul, and that in the summer of 2016 he had allowed his originally Kashgari *kafil* to use for two weeks. Four weeks later, when we met, the trader and his family was staying in a hotel because the *kafil* had decided to prolong his stay in Turkey. Following Engseng Ho, it is helpful to think of these dispersed traders as forming a ‘partial grouping’ (Ho 2013, 2014, forthcoming). Ho uses the concept of ‘partial grouping’ to refer to a group which is geographically dispersed, connected to counterpart communities across long distances, and formed in relationship to ongoing circulations and exchanges over time. The case of Afghanistan’s Turkmen traders in Jeddah and Turkey brings attention to the ways in which the scattering of these traders has also facilitated circulations of people, ideas, and things over extended periods of time.

The more successful traders 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, preferring to organise such events in Turkey as opposed to either Jeddah or their home towns in Afghanistan. Indeed, several of the Afghan traders I have talked with successfully sought to acquire Turkish citizenship in the 1990s and 2000s often purchasing property in Turkey to assist their cases.¹² 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 Arabia solely on a residency permit connected to a Pakistani or Afghan document.

For some traders, Turkish citizenship confers a national identity that better reflects their collective histories than that of ‘Afghan’. Perhaps more importantly, though, possessing Turkish citizenship

¹¹ See (Balci 2007) on Saudi Arabia’s Central Asian émigré community.

¹² Statistics suggest that Afghans fall within the top four list of countries in terms of acquisition of property in Istanbul after Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Russia (Ashar Al-Awsat 28th August, 2016). Afghan Central Asian émigré traders in Jeddah are aware of the extent to which their community’s capital is tied up in Istanbul. After being informed of a bomb blast that killed several people in Istanbul, a trader in a shop I was visiting in Jeddah left to go home and follow events on the TV. A further trader said to me, ‘don’t worry about him, he’s just bought a property in Istanbul and is worried if its value will fall. If there is a bomb attack in his country of birth – Afghanistan – he doesn’t so much as batter an eyelid’.

affords the children of these trading families access to higher education in Turkey, something such families face severe barriers to in Saudi Arabia: 'when our children finish class 12', it is often remarked to me, 'we have no choice but to bring them into the shop or warehouse and start them trading'. For many others, indeed, the role played by Turkey in their personal and collective political affiliations and identities is a sensitive topic that is best approached in the pragmatic manner that has characterised their earlier migratory experiences. There is plenty of discussion in and amongst these families about the extent to which being Turkish genuinely assures them of an 'authentic' identity. In one house in which I stayed in Mazar-i Sharif in 2016 and again in 2017 for example I saw a lively debate between a Turkmen Afghan who had moved his family to Istanbul in 2011 and a Turkmen trader who lived in Afghanistan with his family though frequently travelled to the Central Asian countries for commercial purposes. The Afghanistan-based trader was opposed to Turkmen families leaving Afghanistan on the grounds that they were buying into an exclusive form of Turkish national identity. He argued, instead, that Afghanistan's Turkmen's should be committed to protecting their people's role and history in lands that had been of importance to Turkmen identity for centuries. During an evening of hospitality at the household of a Turkmen merchant in Riyadh, I witnessed a similar debate between elders in the community who argued that their people naturally belonged to Turkey and others who were suspicious of Turkish policy towards Central Asia's Turkic-language speakers. A cause of this suspicion lies in a sense that while Turkish officials might speak of Central Asians as their 'brothers' they continue to treat such groups as sources of cheap labour or hard capital.

The networks that facilitate the flows of commodities from China to Saudi Arabia, as well as between Saudi Arabia and Turkey, are informed by several generations of mobility that is connected to both trade and political displacement. These traders have thus played an active role in seeking to establish and sustain sites of familial and affective life that are less visible in the other 'Afghan' trading networks emanating from Yiwu, such as Dari-speaking traders from north eastern Afghanistan involved in the sale of counterfeit up-market mountain clothing brands, as well as gemstones, or the ethnically mixed former socialist officials pivotal to the trade in small commodities between China and the former Soviet Union (Marsden 2017). For many of the traders who are active across Saudi Arabia, China and Turkey questions of identity and belonging, as well as strategic moves concerning how to find permanent homes for their families, co-habit with pragmatic commercial considerations and are addressed on a day-to-day level. Ho's concept of 'mobile society' is helpful in the analysis of this particular group of traders because of the sustained forms of mobility that characterise their social dynamics across a range of historical periods.

Conclusion

Anthropologists and scholars in related disciplines have for long been aware of the role that Afghans play in the Gulf's labour market (e.g. Nichols 2008). There has been less recognition however of the role that the country's people have played in the commercial dynamics of the region. Nor have scholars sufficiently recognised the critical role that traders from Afghanistan are playing in connecting the markets of the Gulf to other Asian settings, ranging from Istanbul in Turkey, to Ashgabat in Turkmenistan, and Yiwu in China. Future work in the field of Inter-Asian connections might seek similarly therefore to not merely identify and describe transregional axes of interaction (e.g. the Indian Ocean, West East-Central-West Asian connections) but also theorise the dynamics whereby these coalesce, such as in Istanbul and Jeddah. If, indeed, much of the literature on the nature of inter-Asian has focused on the ways in which oceans do or do not foster universalisms and religion as the cultural-moral ground of exchange and interaction, my consideration in this article of the ways in which Afghan overland routes interact both with pan-Turkic ideals and provisioning the

hajj with religious commodities suggest the possibility for more studies of the role played by territorial trading groups in the emergence of expansive identities (see Anderson this volume).

By focusing on specific, multiple, mobile 'partial communities' that are distributed across Asia yet interconnected with one another across both space and time, I have also suggested the form of an account of thick trans-regionalism. Analytically, the concept of partial societies is helpful for such an endeavour because it disaggregates the phenomenon under investigation into a series of movements, adjustments and sites of interaction. Building on a parallel body of literature that brings attention to the pragmatic concerns of border-crossing intellectuals in early twentieth century West Asia, I have also sought to describe shifts in the identity formations of this mobile society and assess how these relate to transforming geopolitical initiatives and circumstances. Rather than having to assume a single site or moment of dispersion as necessitated by the concept of diaspora, the notion of partial community enables an exploration of how mobile actors identify their backgrounds, identities and collective histories in changing ways according to the varying circumstances in which they find themselves. As a trader in his late thirties who identified himself as Turkmen born in Afghanistan to the children of émigré s from Central Asia, raised in Saudi Arabia, and a frequent visitor to Turkey, remarked to me after dropping me at Riyadh International Airport, 'let's see what happens next, we are basically a nomadic people, and while my elders are now putting their faith in Erdogan and describing themselves as the original Turks, when things inevitably change in Turkey, especially in the field of business, I'm sure we'll start moving elsewhere, just God knows where!'.

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