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# West-Central Asia: A comparative analysis of students' trajectories in Russia (Moscow) from the 1980s and China (Yiwu) from the 2000s

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Diana Ibañez Tirado

## Abstract

Through an exploration of oral history and ethnographic material, this article makes a comparative examination of the life-trajectories of students from Yemen, Iraq, and Afghanistan who studied in Russia (Moscow) during the late 1980s, and from Tajikistan, Iran, Azerbaijan and Saudi Arabia who studied in China in the 2000s. In contrast to the cohort of students in Moscow who were mainly men from places with relatively amicable relations with the USSR, the female students of Muslim background from West and Central Asia regarded China as a place where they could pursue fulfilling forms of economic and personal autonomy. By comparing these two groups of international students, this article sheds light into the nature of historical, geographical and geopolitical connections and disconnections between West-Central Asia, Eurasia (especially Russia) and East Asia (especially China). By centring its attention to the demise of Soviet/Russian education and the emergence of China as a figure of economic prosperity, the article theorises West-Central Asia as a particular arena of interaction suitable to comprehend the networks, 'third spaces' or zones of interaction (e.g. Moscow and Yiwu), and forms of connection fostered by these students' trajectories.

## Keywords

student trajectories, university, Moscow, Yiwu, China, West Asia, Central Asia, gender

## Introduction

Through an exploration of oral history and ethnographic material, this article makes a comparative examination of the life trajectories of students from connected parts of West-Central Asia who studied in Russia (Moscow) during the late 1980s, and China (based in Yiwu) in the 2000s. The fully funded students in Moscow, who are the focus of this article, arrived to the city from Yemen, Iraq, and Afghanistan. They studied at the Peoples' Friendship University "Patrice Lumumba" (PFU)—an institution that, at the height of the Cold War, aimed to develop Asian and African nations through the education of cadres from places with relatively amicable relations with the USSR. The collapse of the Soviet Union alongside instability and conflict in West-Central Asia in the aftermath of the Cold War meant that it was difficult for students who had graduated from the PFU to find employment in their home countries in the areas in which they had specialized. In

comparison, in the 2000s students from West-Central Asia have increasingly come to regard China as a leading student destination. They cite the availability of scholarships, possibility of studying in English while learning Chinese, and the potential of conducting business while being enrolled on formal courses as being the key reasons as to why China offers an attractive destination to students from their countries. In contrast to the cohort of students in Moscow who were mainly men, female students of Muslim background from West-Central Asia regard China as a place where they can also pursue fulfilling forms of

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Department of Anthropology, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK

### Corresponding author:

Diana Ibañez Tirado, Department of Anthropology, University of Sussex, Arts Building C, Arts Road, Falmer, Brighton BN1 9SJ, E Sussex, UK.

Email: di40@sussex.ac.uk



economic and personal autonomy. By comparing these two groups of international students, this article sheds light into the nature of historical, geographical, and geopolitical connections and disconnections between West-Central Asia, Eurasia (especially Russia), and East Asia (especially China), and theorizes West-Central Asia as a particular arena of interaction suitable to comprehend the networks and forms of connection fostered by these students' trajectories. As well, this work examines the importance of "third spaces" or zones of interaction such as Moscow and Yiwu to the transregional and enduring circulatory histories underpinning student mobilities and impasses, as well as the dispositions expressed by these students to diverse forms of internationalism, cosmopolitanism, and autonomy. Without aiming to coin West-Central Asia as a geographic category that is novel or useful for other case studies, my aim is to contribute to the recently emerging theoretical conversations, alternative historiographies, and empirical comparisons that crisscross the works of different area studies.

### **West-Central Asia: arenas of interaction**

Extensive discussions exist in area studies concerning the ways in which world regions (e.g., Europe, Asia, and Africa) and subregions (e.g., Central Asia, the Middle East, Eurasia and the Caucasus) are not givens. Instead, these are conceived as spatial configurations that arose in the context of the late 19th and 20th centuries, and within the powerful political, economic, and military agendas evident during this period in both world politics and the organization of academic knowledge (De Lombaerde & Söderbaum, 2013). The rise of such regions also contributed to the reinforcement of the exclusive borders that informed "culture areas" and shaped them as "spatial containers" (Mielke & Hornidge, 2014), the scholarly tendency to unthinkingly recreate methodological nationalism (Mostowlansky, 2014, 2018), the ongoing power of conventional temporal narratives and modes of periodization (Ibañez Tirado, 2015); the emergence of localizing strategies (cf. Fardon, 1990), and zones of theory (Abu-Lughod, 1989). In this article, I deploy "West-Central Asia" not as a new regional concept or as two discrete geographical regions but as a conceptual device that in relationship to the ethnographic material explored below is able to encompass the "flows" and forms of sociality and identity developed among networks of mobile students embedded in "circulatory histories." On one hand, "flows" are regarded as "sequences of exchange and interaction between physically disjointed positions held by social actors" (Mielke and Hornidge, 2014, p. 21); on the other hand, circulatory histories refers to the durable transregional flows of events and processes that supersede explanations framed within

national and linear histories (Duara, 2015). Both concepts are useful to think about the dynamic and complementary relation between mobile students trained in Russia and China, and the networks they have formed, as well as the ways in which these networks have been embedded in geopolitical processes that bred during the Cold War in Asia and that have continued to affect it subsequently. I center my attention to two interrelated processes: first, the end of the Soviet Union and the resulting demise of Soviet/Russian education as desirable by students of West-Central Asia, and, second, the emergence of China as a compelling figure of economic prosperity. The students with whom I worked in China regard the latter as a country offering good prospects for higher education: they are able to combine their studies with earning a living by embarking upon trade (Østbø Haugen, 2013). It is important to note that ideas of mobility also entail forms of immobility because of the socioeconomic hierarchies underpinning international education systems (Fog Olwig & Valentin, 2015; Jackson, 2017; Sachsenmaier, 2006). Hence, most students I spoke to in China have unsuccessfully attempted to obtain scholarships to fund their studies in the United States or Europe.

My ethnographic examples focus on students from Yemen, Iraq, and Afghanistan who studied in Moscow in the 1980s, and from Saudi Arabia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan who studied in different universities in China in the 2000s. Students from Chinese universities eventually established themselves as businesspeople or student-cum-traders in the commercial city of Yiwu, located in China's Zhejiang Province. Rather than providing a persistent geographical definition of "West-Central Asia" as clusters of nation-states and subregions from which these students come from, I use this category as overlapping and fluid "arenas" where these students originate, move through, and also recreate. Green's (2014) notion of "arenas" refers to a model of "interaction-based" fields that "not only intersect but also divide familiar national spaces," thus "unsettling nation-based framings" (p. 561). Arenas allows us to appreciate other spheres of interaction and movement shaping different geographical spaces and theoretical outlooks that might escape the "regions" rigidly conceived of as the Middle East, Central Asia, the Caucasus, or South Asia. There are important studies, for example, of the ways in which Central Asia intersects with historical, social, and political processes in West Asia, the Middle East, and East Asia (e.g., Balci, 2009; Ghazal, 2014; Ibañez Tirado, 2018a; Marsden, 2016a; Marsden & Henig, 2019; Mostowlansky, 2018; Yolacan, 2019). As Green (2014) suggests, however, we need a "conceptual pluralization" of the regions' geographies to understand such intersections, and to remember that, "geographies are in essence conceptual categories that scholars can adopt, adapt, or abandon. Different spatial

models suit different questions and methodologies, not to mention different periods” (p. 557).

In this article, I suggest that the region-based concepts of the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Caucasus as separated geographical spaces and/or fields of area studies from which the students originate do not allow enough conceptual space for recognizing and grappling with the fluid nature of the transregional intersections and overlying arenas of interaction. Such arenas, moreover, have been shaped as enduring circulatory histories related to the Cold War in Asia, the demise of the USSR, and the emergence of China as an economic and political power. Cross and transregional intersections are at the core of the mobile trajectories of the students I talked to, and at the center of how they come to see themselves as dynamic, adaptive, and cosmopolitan persons whose gender, religious, and national identities and modes of being shift through their exchanges with one another and in relationship to the heavily charged geopolitical contexts where they live. I locate these processes as happening in “third spaces” or zones of contact: Moscow and Yiwu—as I explain now.

### *‘Third spaces’ or zones of contact*

Ghazal (2014) suggests that the “Istanbul-Cairo-Beirut-Baghdad” axis has been traditionally the priority of the scholarship on the Middle East. By paying secondary attention to other multiple centers of interaction in the Arabian Peninsula or North Africa, scholars have shaped a distinctive historiography around these cities while diminishing other forms of connections formed along the Indian Ocean that are also extremely salient for the understanding of the history of networks in and across the Middle East. Similarly, Kirasirova (2011) has examined how in the 1950s, cities such as Tashkent, Dushanbe, and Baku rather than Moscow functioned as hosting spaces for Asian and African delegations in their official visits to the Soviet Union. These “Eastern” cities or third spaces of political and cultural interaction were of great importance for the diplomatic efforts of the USSR in finding allies in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East in a context of decolonization, Cold War, and “Third World” politics. Following the emphasis that these authors pay to alternative, multiple, and third centers of coaction, I suggest that to understand the long-lasting and circulatory connections cutting across Central and West Asia (evident in the student trajectories I analyze here), it is necessary to incorporate Russia (Moscow) and China (Yiwu) as “third” zones of interaction insofar as they are located outside of what is traditionally conceived as Central Asia and West Asia. As Kirasirova (2011) has shown, the interrelation of delegations of people from Central and West Asia in third spaces builds on the way in which Soviet leaders deployed Central Asians as vehicles with which to moderate USSR relations with Asia and Africa during the non-aligned

movement years (1955–1962) (see also Kalinovsky, 2013). In the more contemporary context of the Russian involvement in the Middle East (more particularly on the ongoing armed conflicts in Syria and Iraq), and the increasing fears of “radicalised” Central Asians operating in West Asia (and the other way around), this mode of organizing relations between West and Central Asia continues to be relevant to this day.

In a similar vein to Ghazal’s and Kirasirova’s notions of multiple centers or third spaces, Yeoh and Willies (2005a, p. 281) have examined the “contact zones” in China’s urban spaces. In these zones, foreign and Chinese nationals, who otherwise would not come together because of historical and geographic disjuncture, produce everyday encounters of sameness and difference and shape the routes of “transnational subjects as embodied beings, bearers of nationality, culture, ethnicity, gender and class.” Frequently, such zones of contact where the trajectories of mobile foreigners intersect highlight the relevance of “global cities” such as Shanghai, Beijing, and Hong Kong (and to a lesser degree Guangzhou) as sites of global connectedness (Chihye Kin, 2015; Findley Li, Jowett, & Skeldon, 1996; Tseng, 2011; Yeoh & Willies, 2005b). Theories about “global cities,” however, often infer the prominence of a duality producing diverse forms of inequality between, on one hand, highly skilled and professional personnel (“expats”), a great variety of financial services, numerous headquarters of big multinational companies, and high-quality educational and medical institutions; and, on the other, less skilled local and foreign labor migrants, inappropriate housing and infrastructure, and the alienation of low-income inner cities (e.g., Sassen, 1998). In this article, I show how the cities of Yiwu and Moscow operate as “contact zones” and “third spaces” for the flows of foreign students from elsewhere in West-Central Asia. I seek to contribute to rethinking the importance of multiple centers where transregional exchanges occur outside traditional understandings of “area studies,” and beyond the dichotomous outline embedded in the concept of “global cities”—not least because such a dichotomy provides the grounds for analyzing the work and lives of “smaller” actors such as petty traders or student-cum-traders as “globalization from below.”

Studies on the globalisation from below have mainly focused its attention to the analysis of the blurred boundaries between the legal and illegal practices of immigrants—frequently related to the commercialization of low-end commodities from China (Guangzhou) to Africa (Lan, 2017; Mathews, Dan Lin & Yang, 2017; Østbø Haugen, 2012). This approach is limited for the examination of the student trajectories in my work for several reasons. The students in China whom I spoke to are mainly located in Yiwu—a city famous for being the hub of the world’s small-commodity trade. The majority of these students from West-Central

Asia arrived to Yiwu with student visas aiming at establishing themselves as traders—attempt to combine both activities, or began their business enterprises once they had finished their degrees in universities elsewhere in China (cf. Østbø Haugen, 2013). The visa status and the combination of trade and education may render these students' activities or ways of staying in China illicit or semi-legal, yet they do not conceive themselves as marginal or illegal immigrants, and, in occasions, they have managed to amass considerable capital to run their profitable trading companies with the appropriate visas and registrations. Rather than focusing on student-cum-traders as actors of the “low end of globalization,” here I am more concerned about the exploration of apparently inconsequential cities such as Yiwu as also being implicated in the global production of diverse and sophisticated forms of cosmopolitan dispositions and gendered ways of understanding economic and individual autonomy. Such dispositions are habitually recognized as happening in the so-called Chinese “global cities” such as Beijing, Hong Kong, and Shanghai, but less so in cities where global transnational student-cum-traders from developing countries in Asia and the Middle East meet (cf. Belguidoum & Pliez, 2015; Marsden & Ibañez Tirado, 2018; see also Cheuk, 2016). The recognition of such type of cities as third spaces for the interaction of people from overlapping arenas in and from West-Central Asia reveals enduring Cold War–related geopolitical processes in Asia, the new nature of studentship and trade, and the processes of fashioning renewed forms of circulatory histories cutting across East and West Asia, as well as Eurasia. In this respect, now I turn to explore student life and mobile trajectories fostered in Moscow in the 1980s onward.

### **Moscow: the People's Friendship University (PFU)**

During a visit to Jakarta in 1960, the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev announced the opening of the PFU (*Universitet Druzby Narodov*) newly established in Moscow (Judge Kret, 2013; Seymour, 1973). The decision to announce in Indonesia the founding of this university was not an arbitrary choice: 5 years previously Indonesia had acted as a host to the Bandung Conference for the development of Afro-Asian economic and cultural cooperation in opposition to any forms of colonialism (cf. Kirasirova, 2011). Neither, for that matter, was it accidental the name for the PFU “Patrice Lumumba.” This Congolese politician had been a key player in achieving the independence of Congo (then the Democratic Republic of Congo) from Belgium, and after aligning his country to the Soviet Union as Prime Minister, he was subsequently imprisoned and murdered following a coup d'état that was led by Mobutu Sese

Seko and supported by Belgian forces. As Kalinovsky and Radchenko (2011) suggest, “Third World” politics included postcolonial conflicts; political, military, and economic interventions by the two superpowers; and a flow of arms often in the name of assistance for development. In the height of the Cold War characterized by such type of politics, the PFU sought to train students from disadvantaged backgrounds from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and who were willing to study in Moscow with fully funded scholarships. In contrast to the United States, which funded foreign students who hailed from the intellectual and political elites of their home countries, the PFU avowedly sought to attract not only students from the less developed countries of the “Third world” but also from sections of society that were disadvantaged within these countries (Judge Kret, 2013). The final goal of the PFU was to train teachers, engineers, agricultural experts, doctors, economists, and other specialists who would return to their home countries and contribute to their development.

In 1996, when I first arrived as a student of Russian language to the State Institute of Russian Language A. S. Pushkin in Moscow, located behind the campus of the PFU, I met Jamal and Ashraf.<sup>1</sup> Together with other students and graduates at the university who were mainly from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, and Egypt among other nationalities of the so-called “Third World,” Jamal and Ashraf had arrived to study in Moscow but had failed to fulfill the ambitious goal of contributing to the development of their home communities. Jamal and Ashraf had not returned to their home countries not least because these had been ravaged by conflict, insecurity, and violence. In addition, during the 1990s, many graduates from Moscow-based institutes were in possession of Soviet certificates of education that, as they put it to me, were “worthless” (*bezpoleznyi*) after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Jamal from Yemen, who had studied Law, told me how he had wasted years of his time memorizing Soviet legal codes that were rapidly becoming obsolete; Ashraf from Afghanistan cynically remarked that he was skilled in the repair of factory machinery that was no longer produced in the Soviet Union. Indeed, Ashraf told me, Soviet machinery had stopped being sent to Afghanistan as a form of technical assistance even years before he had commenced his training in Civil Engineering at the PFU.

Similar to the thousands of foreign students who graduated in Moscow institutions during the early 1990s, Jamal and Ashraf had received scholarships to study undergraduate courses at the PFU. Jamal, who hails from a family of intellectuals and political activists associated to Yemeni's socialist parties, left to Moscow from the then People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in 1986. Ashraf was originally from the northern Afghan city of Mazar-e-Sharif, a city in which his father had reared horses and cattle: he

traveled to Russia's capital as a student in 1983. Jamal and Ashraf graduated by 1992, when, according to them, everything in Russia as well as in their home countries was a mess (*bezporiadok*). Despite facing difficulties, they decided to stay in Moscow even if they could not find the types of employment that they had been trained to undertake. Jamal worked as a musician and singer in clubs and private parties until 2003, at which point he migrated from Moscow to the Netherlands. Ashraf worked as a trader in a Moscow market and later established himself as a wholesale importer of stationery from China. While Jamal worked with residence visas and remained single during his stay in Moscow, Ashraf obtained Russian citizenship after he married to a Russian woman whom he later divorced. Then Ashraf married in Afghanistan and, during the culmination of the pro-Soviet regime of Dr Najibullah's regime, he brought his wife and child to live in the university's residence hall in 1995.

Other students I knew in Moscow, including Hussain from Iraq, had arrived to the city to learn or improve their Russian language for a term, year, or sometimes longer. Having decided to remain in Russia, they rented low-priced rooms in the university's residence halls (*obshchезhitie*). Hussain was conducting military service in Iraq on the onset of the Gulf War (1990–1991) and, therefore, had unwillingly participated in active combat. The trauma of having been affected by chemicals used during the conflict, Hussain told me, was one of the reasons why he had decided to study something that lifted his spirits: Russian literature. Once he had finished his military service in Iraq, Hussain obtained a scholarship to study a BA in Moscow; when I met him in 1996, he had decided to continue his studies in a postgraduate program in Russian philology.

### *International student life in Moscow*

Having myself traveled to Moscow to study Russian language and culture, I also lived in a student residence hall located in the south-western suburbs of Moscow. There were several university campuses catering to foreign students, former students, and their families in the area known as *iugo-zapad*. Everyday sociality outside the classrooms, especially in canteens, common rooms, and the communal kitchens of the residence halls, was characterized by the visible presence of men from West-Central Asia and women from Russia and Eastern Europe (especially Poland). In addition to mainly men from West-Central Asia, there were both male and female students from African countries, Latin America, and Southeast Asia, especially Vietnam. Yet the patterns of sociality among students from West-Central Asia reflected certain affinity on the basis of language (e.g., Arabic, Persian), and discourses of food and commensality (e.g., consumption of lamb dishes, for some students also

halal meat, and notions of “hospitality”), and, to certain extent, also a shared knowledge of geopolitical processes affecting them (e.g., in the forms of news bulletins), as now I further illustrate.

Although Russian was the lingua franca used by people of disparate nationalities from West-Central Asia to communicate, Arabic and Persian (Dari and Tajik) were also languages that were important, especially to social life in the on-campus canteens opened throughout the 1990s by Egyptians, Syrians, or Afghan former students. Such canteens served the increasingly popular dishes of *kebab* and *shawarma*: in the late 1990s, these types of “fast-food” competed with the gradually fading “Russian” university canteens that had offered lukewarm *kotlety* (meatballs) with *kasha* (buckwheat) during the Soviet period and the early 1990s. If during the day many of us were required to recite Pushkin's poems and sing Russian folklore songs in the classrooms, during the night the discussions that animated the dormitories and cafes concerned the politics of the Middle East especially Palestine, and the sectarian divisions between the *shi'a* and *sunna Muslims* of Iraq and Iran. A further contentious issue that was often discussed concerned economic disparities among “Gulf Arabs” and those from the Maghreb. Comparative debates about how Muslims from different geographical and cultural backgrounds approached the practice of Islam were also frequently staged, especially among students from Chechnya and Central Asia; also self-defining communists from Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen; and wealthy Saudi Arabians who had started to avail themselves of higher education in Russia from 1991 onward. At times, alcohol consumption, unfounded accusations of being associated with an ethno-national “mafia” (e.g., Bulgarian, Afghan, Azeri), or of an inappropriate degree of intimacy with a “girlfriend” (*podruga*, *devushka*—usually from Russia or Eastern Europe) were common grounds for altercations and physical fights among students. The making of threats during such moments of conflict was not uncommon, although at times tension was lowered by dancing to the rhythms of “international” music such as Bob Marley or Papa Wemba and the exchange of tokens of friendship, especially handcrafts from Syria, paraphernalia of world ‘leaders’, Palestinian flags or Egyptian hieroglyphics on papyrus paper. At times, the exchange of such objects or the music chosen by students caused further accusations and skirmishes.

These objects and music styles are in themselves reminiscent of the charged geopolitical contexts in which flows of students intersected. Bob Marley was cited as revealing the injustices brought about by colonialism, imperialism, and slavery, and Papa Wemba as appealing, on one hand, to internationalism and friendship, and, on the other, to African aesthetics in the global stage. Che Guevara was popular among students when they appealed

to a sense of revolution, internationalism, socialism, and camaraderie among “Third World” nations; Gaddafi was also presented as a revolutionary and anti-colonialist, and for some, a socialist in an “Arabic” or “Muslim” style. Those who accused Gaddafi of expelling Palestinian refugees in 1995 usually rejected the latter narrative.

In such everyday settings affected by geopolitics related to earlier processes of decolonization and the enduring effects of the Cold War, Jamal used to say that only in a place such as a communal kitchen at the PFU in Moscow was it possible to find common grounds for “humanity” (*chelovechestvo*) between, for example, Yemenis, Afghans, and Iraqis. Such people, Jamal said, could not have encountered one another face-to-face otherwise. The rooms in the student residence halls were small and usually shared among several students. Each floor in the building had a shared kitchen and thus, these spaces fostered everyday encounters beyond the semi-privacy of one’s room or the solemnity of the classrooms. The grounds for humanity, however, were underpinned by disparate yet commonly found ideas among these students of socialism, internationalism, and justice for the populations of the “Third World.” In such interface of West and Central Asia as arenas of interaction, the networks of friendship these students formed throughout those years in Moscow have continued to be an important part of their social and affective lives to this date.

### *Arriving to Moscow from the ‘Third World’ and leaving it as a ‘black’ immigrant*

Today, connections among former students of the PFU are maintained through talking over the phone, chatting via social media, and, on rare occasions, meeting or facilitating the encounter of common friends from “university times” in different locations, mostly in Europe and Asia. In 2016, when I began to meet Jamal in London again after having last seen him in Moscow in 2002, he was a father of two children who had lived in the Netherlands for about 15 years. In the Netherlands, Jamal had worked in a bakery. He had moved out of Russia to Europe, he said, mainly because he found that Moscow in the 2000s had become increasingly racist: “xenophobia” and “classism” went together with the amassment of wealth among some sectors of the Russian and foreign population—including, he said, a few of his former classmates and associates. A Syrian friend of his, for example, had run a clothing factory in the outskirts of Moscow, and, while driving around his brand-new SUV car, this fellow had pretended not to have seen Jamal in the street to avoid having to greet him. To illustrate to me further how he had grown tired of Moscow, Jamal also told me in detail the tragic story of a section of the residence hall of the PFU: the building burnt to ashes in 2003, and this event

that led to the death of 35 foreign students. Although local authorities reported the tragedy to have been caused by an electric failure, Jamal was convinced that the fire and resulting loss of life had been caused by arson carried out with the specific aim of disrupting the lives of “black” (*chyornie*) foreigners who lived in Moscow.<sup>2</sup> Jamal concluded,

Before we were simply from the Third World (*trietego mira*). Now we are seen as either black (*chyornyi*) or extremist (*extremist*) or even worse, we have become both (*obo stali*).

In his emphasis on having become (*stali*), Jamal pointed out at how students like him have previously supported “revolutionary” and “socialist” causes. Now, however, he was classified by ‘others’, and thus became to regard himself as a “Muslim migrant” first in Russia and afterward in Europe. He also said that as a result he felt that others saw him as a potential terrorist. The type of “becoming” Jamal referred to can be seen as a collective affliction to some PFU students from West-Central Asia. Jamal went on to explain that in the 1980s many youth like him had dreamed about studying abroad and returning to their home countries to make a positive change. The change did not happen as expected, and war in Yemen, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine continued to be a reality; thus, today’s youth from West-Central Asia, Jamal explained, were indeed alienated and becoming “radicalised.” What is worst, Jamal concluded with a sarcastic tone, not only Chechens in the 1990s, but now “even Uzbeks” were blowing themselves up “everywhere” (*vzryvaiutsia vezde*).<sup>3</sup> Jamal also referred to the “hunting” techniques of Moscow police, and the anti-immigrant policies of the Russian government. More particularly, he talked about the search for terrorist networks blamed for several bombs and explosions in Russia in the context of the Chechen wars,<sup>4</sup> or the rise of the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq from 2015. The latter phenomenon had seen an increasing number of Central Asians (especially of Uzbek background) traveling to Syria to join the war there or becoming involved in terrorist attacks elsewhere in the world. Jamal also talked about the growing number of impoverished labor migrants from Central Asia to Russia in the 2000s, and the hostile remarks that many Russians made about these “foreigners.”

The aspects of life in Moscow that Jamal had come to find troubling (some of which he freely admitted to having previously embraced as forms of cosmopolitanism) stood in opposition to his socialist ideals concerning how to live a good life and how to build common grounds for “humanity.” The wistfulness with which Jamal remembered his university times in the late 1980s and early 1990s (as plural, international and aiming at social justice), combined

with what he saw as the downturn in the lives of foreign populations in Moscow in the 2000s, had led him to regard his future in Moscow as being unbearable. In contrast, our friend Ashraf had decided to stay in the city.

### *Moscow for West-Central Asia: enduring flows and networks*

In 2016, I bumped into Ashraf not in Moscow, but in the Chinese city of Yiwu. Yiwu is the global commercial hub par excellence of products of everyday use and home to 11,000 foreign traders running approximately 3,082 well-established trading and cargo companies (Jacobs, 2016; Marsden, 2016a; Pliez, 2012). In Yiwu, Ashraf told me that since we last met in Moscow in 1999, he had become a wealthy merchant in Russia and that he had numerous shops in the commercial complex “Sevastopol” located not far from the site of our former student residence hall. Moscow’s Sevastopol complex is the node of commercial activities of the nearly 8,000 Afghan traders who have worked in Russia from the 1980s (Marsden, 2016b). Together with his brothers, who had arrived from Afghanistan in the late 1990s to join him in his trading activities, Ashraf had accumulated a considerable fortune, and thus established an export/import company that arranged the purchase of commodities in Yiwu and the transportation of these to Russia and Canada—where one of his brothers also previously enrolled in the PFU was settled. With the exception of his first child, born in Afghanistan, the rest of his children had all been born in Russia and his entire family were Russian citizens. He also had relatives scattered in Afghanistan, Pakistan, the United States, and Canada. Ashraf did travel to Afghanistan, but he found life in Moscow fulfilling even if, at times, he was worried about his children’s future in a place that, after all, was not their own country but a country of “strangers” (*chuzhie*).

For his part, Hussain, the Iraqi former student, despite being the butt of jokes by his fellow students in Moscow who conceived his studies of Russian poetry and philology as being “useless,” had by 2017 become a translator and adviser to the government of Haidar Al Aabadi in his home country. Although now the jokes toward Hussain by former class fellows concerned him being *shi’a* and thus allegedly privileged under Al Abadi’s government, he and another Syrian former student of Russian language who also studied Moscow during the 1990s, were making use of their knowledge acquired there. In 2017, they were apparently involved in the diplomatic negotiations between Bagdad, Damascus, and Moscow concerning the repatriation of former “ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) families” to Russia. These families were mainly women from the Russian Caucasus whose husbands had fought with ISIS and had been killed or captured, as well as their children,

who have been born in Syria and Iraq. Indeed, similarly to Hussain, not few of our former Arab classmates and associates had become government advisors, translators and diplomats either in Russia or in their home-countries.

Existing works on foreign students in universities in the USSR including the PFU have aimed at assessing whether their experiences in the Soviet Union were positive or negative in terms of professional training and ideological indoctrination (e.g., Bilbin, 1984) and in relationship to racial discrimination and problems of integration (Hessler, 2006). Other scholars have focused on assessing the efforts of the USSR in offering scholarships and training to the working classes of the Third World during the Cold War in contexts of decolonization, military conflicts, and the geopolitics of the non-aligned movement (e.g., Judge Kret, 2013). Finally, some scholarship has assessed the extent to which institutions of higher education in Russia have passed through processes of reform after the end of the Soviet system especially concerning “decommunization” (the withdrawal from ideological driven courses) and “democratization” (the breaking of a top-down authoritarian approach to education and the acquisition of structural changes more in accordance to the market economy) (e.g., Deaver, 2001; cf. Azimbayeva, 2017). The stories of Jamal, Ashraf, and Hussain and their trajectories from the early 1990s to today reveal the important role that the experience of education in the Soviet Union has played in the emergence of transregional networks, incorporating men of Muslim background from West-Central Asia. An especially interesting element about such networks is that rather than being rooted in cities that have for long seen people from West-Central Asia interact—such as Bukhara, Istanbul, or Cairo—there were staged and developed in Soviet and post-Soviet Moscow (cf. Alavi, 2015; Ghazal, 2014).

In the next section, I compare the life trajectories of students in China in the 2000s with the case of students outlined above. Recent scholarship has focused on the role of education and universities in fashioning geopolitical subjects in Russia (Müller, 2009) and on the importance of offering funding to students as strategies of soft-power vis-à-vis geopolitical competition (Yang, 2010). China has emerged as an important player in such dynamics and is now recognized as a leading destination for foreign students, many of whom receive attractive government scholarships (Østbø Haugen, 2013; Shambaugh, 2013; Xuezhai, 2014). In this context, a comparative analysis between students in Russia in the 1980s and in China in the 2000s offers a glimpse to the geopolitics that permeate the carving of connections and disconnections in West-Central Asia, as well as the importance of “third spaces” in the encounters among students-cum-traders from these Asian arenas of interaction. Very importantly, the comparison will also reveal gendered aspects of student trajectories in both settings.



## Yiwu: education and trade

While conducting fieldwork in Yiwu in 2016, I discovered that a significant proportion of the young foreign traders that I came across in the city had been, or where at the time, enrolled as students in undergraduate and postgraduate courses at Chinese universities. These universities offered scholarships through their own internal funding bodies. Alternatively, the Chinese government scholarship program covered students' tuition fees, accommodation, and a monthly living allowance. In the office of a trading company in Yiwu, I met Tunar and Omar. Tunar was an Azeri trader from Baku who had established his company in Yiwu in association with his friend and former classmate Omar, a man in his early 30s who hailed from Riyadh in Saudi Arabia. Tunar and Omar had first met in 2006 in a university located in the northern Chinese province of Hebei where they studied a 4-year-long undergraduate course in Chinese language. Thus, both Tunar and Omar were fluent in Mandarin, and together had established a joint company that shipped goods to their clients, mainly in Azerbaijan, Russia, and Turkey, as well as the Middle East and North America. Omar told me that the advantage of their company was that they did not require a Chinese assistant to translate for them, and that by joining efforts they worked in Azeri, Russian, and Turkish languages spoken by Tunar, and Arabic and English spoken by Omar.

Omar described himself as unique in Yiwu; he knew that there were more companies shipping to Saudi Arabia, but they were mainly run by Yemenis and Afghans who had established their businesses long ago in his home country (see Balci, 2009; Ho, 2014; Marsden, 2017). In contrast, Omar described himself as an Arab who came from a relatively wealthy family in Riyadh and whose father had aimed for him to study medicine in an American university in California. Omar, indeed, had been sent to study at college in the United States to prepare for admission in a prestigious university. Omar spent 2 years in California, a time of his life that he described as being "wasted in parties" and hanging around with friends. For this reason, even before Omar applied to a medical school as his family in Riyadh expected, his father forced him to return home. Because Omar caused so much mischief in the United States, his father suggested that he commenced work in a prestigious hotel in Riyadh and married, despite his young age. Omar refused and stayed in Riyadh for nearly 2 years "doing nothing" but infuriating his father at home—a strategy he deployed to persuade his family to send him back to the United States (cf. Menoret, 2014). Finally, Omar's father met a friend whose son had studied in China. The family friend advised sending Omar to China where students were said to behave more appropriately than in the United States. Six months later, Omar was enrolled in a university in Hebei where he met Tunar. Five years later, they had established their trading company in Yiwu.

Tunar's story of coming to China was significantly different. He had sought to obtain funding to study in the United States where he said he had relatives, but had failed many times in his attempts to pass the TOEFL (Test of English as Foreign Language) examination or to get the grades necessary to compete for scholarships. Finally and through the advice of his classmates in Baku, he investigated the funding options in China and ended up winning a scholarship that paid his tuition fees and his accommodation in Hebei. "I wanted to go out from Azerbaijan, to explore the world, to live somewhere else," Tunar once told me, "and China offered me such opportunity." Stories of students who first aimed to establish themselves in the "West" but later found an opportunity to study and work in China are indeed common in Yiwu. At times, these students-cum-traders associated with classmates and fellows from different nationalities to expand the scope of their business and trading ventures.

### *"China is the future!": gender and student trajectories*

During a visit to Tajikistan in 2017, numerous students reported to me that they had better opportunities of winning a fully funded scholarship to study in a university in China than it was the case for Russia—even if most of them spoke Russian language fluently and were familiar with Russian "customs and culture." Surayo, a relatively wealthy student at the Slavonic University in Dushanbe, told me:

I started to study Chinese language as a third language. After 6 months, I was offered a paid trip to Beijing by the Chinese government to participate in a singing competition. I went there for 1 week. One year later, I competed again in Shanghai. They paid all my expenses. This year I applied for a year-abroad scholarship and if I succeed, the Chinese government will place me in a university there and pay all my expenses.

I asked Surayo why she had decided to study Chinese language and she explained to me that by studying at the prestigious Slavonic University in Dushanbe, students undertake all their courses in Russian language, rather than Tajik, and that afterward it is relatively easy for them to apply for a master's program in a university in Russia. However, Surayo continued, her brother had struggled to be accepted for a master's in economics in a university in Siberia only to discover that the scholarship offered was not even enough to cover the tuition fee, let alone his living expenses.

"Russia does not offer anything! If you want to study abroad, China is the future!" Surayo concluded.

Reports suggest that while the rapidly emerging Chinese middle class aspire to obtain university degrees abroad, the Chinese government tries to turn China into a major destination for foreign students with the target of 500,000 enrolled overseas students by 2020 (Schulmann & Ziyi,

2017). Surayo's last remark, however, does not point out only at China's emerging "soft diplomacy" in the area of education but also at Russia's becoming a less desirable place to study for people like her: a relatively well-off Tajik young woman who cannot envision herself being perceived by both Russians and Tajiks as part of the nearly 1 million Tajik labor migrants, most of them men, who travel to Russia to work (Ibañez Tirado, 2018b). Surayo then mentioned to me that in Russia there are many Tajik men "without education" (*neobrazovannie*) or manners (*nevospitanie*). She feared that had she enrolled in a Russian university, she had to encounter these men in the streets on a daily basis. Surayo's imaginaries of her potential life in Russia as a student were based on her previous two visits to her mother's relatives, indeed, working in Moscow. These relatives, Surayo told me, made inquisitorial comments toward her "unrestrained" freedoms that included harsh judgments against her wearing Western-style dresses, attending student parties at night, or traveling to China on her own. In China, Surayo told me, nobody bothered her with such nuances. In conditions similar to Surayo's, I met Gulnora, an Uzbek woman from Ferghana, and Arezoo, an Iranian woman from Tabriz living in Yiwu. They also were studying in a Chinese university while running their trading companies. These cases, as I will clarify below, point out at the gendered aspects of students' decisions on where to enroll to a university degree.

Gulnora, from Uzbekistan, had previously studied for 6 months in Seoul and had worked as a trader in Istanbul before receiving a 1-year scholarship to study Chinese language near Guangzhou. Although Gulnora was fluent in Russian language and had visited Russia accompanying his father (who ran a factory of plastics in Tashkent) in his business trips, she said that she did not want to study in a Russian university. One of the reasons was the heavily charged background of Central Asian populations living in Russia: on one hand, Gulnora said, Russians and Central Asians were very positively familiar with one another, as they could communicate in Russian language; on the other, such familiarity also led Russians to perceive most contemporary Central Asian women as uneducated villagers—a label from which Gulnora distanced herself. Likewise, Arezoo, a young Iranian woman who was friend of Gulnora, told me that having failed to secure a scholarship to study in Europe, she had enrolled in a postgraduate course in Hangzhou while conducting business between China, Iran, and Turkey—the latter a place where her father's brother had moved with his family. Gulnora and Arezoo, single women from West-Central Asia in their late 20s, had first gone to China to conduct business, and only after establishing their profitable companies in Yiwu and leaving them in the hands of their male relatives, had they moved from Yiwu to pursue their postgraduate education somewhere else in China. Yet all these cases signal the lack of opportunities for entrepreneurial women from West-Central Asia to aspire to continue their education in the competitive and

costly academic contexts of the United States and Europe. Chinese universities, they explained to me, in addition to offering high-quality education in both English and Chinese languages, also recognize that women have the priorities of fulfilling their courses as well as expanding their business ventures in China and abroad. Finally, they also highlighted to me that Chinese women were encouraged to be educated and trained to work and earn their own money, regardless of their marital status. Thus, Gulnora and Arezoo, both coming from families who had encouraged them to pursue autonomous lives despite of the patriarchal contexts in which they grew up, found in China a place where they could expand their economic and personal potentials with fewer recriminations for being single and independent Muslim women.<sup>5</sup>

### *Student-cum-traders in Yiwu: Muslim subjectivities and autonomy*

In the case of young men, as I now explore, it was not only these gendered-based complexities that played a role in their decision to study in China but also other complications related to their attitude to religion, more specifically their ways of being Muslim. Religious practices are also framed in the convoluted geopolitical processes affecting West-Central Asia in recent years. Most student-cum-traders from West-Central Asia whom I met in Yiwu had similar trajectories in the 2000s concerning how they had aimed at studying somewhere else, but found themselves in China for a great diversity of reasons. For example, Ferooz was an Uzbek student-cum-trader from Tajikistan in his late 20s. He had previously studied for 6 months in Al Azhar, Egypt, though abandoned his studies. Ferooz explained to me that he had achieved excellent marks as a student in Dushanbe, and for this reason his father decided to send him to Al Azhar. Ferooz's father had himself previously traveled on a regular basis between Tajikistan and Syria: he drove Tajik pilgrims and also conducted trade along the road—eventually he established a furniture and textiles business with a Syrian trader in Damascus. In the meantime, Ferooz's father learnt Arabic and taught this language to Ferooz in his home in Dushanbe. Ferooz's father, having undertaken the *haj*, also encouraged his children to learn Quran.

Ferooz told me that their familiarity with Syria and Arabic language were decisive factors that strengthened his father's decision to encourage Ferooz to study in Egypt. Indeed, Ferooz's father also had business associates living in Cairo. Ferooz had traveled to Syria as a child and later on to Egypt, and years afterward managed to secure admission and a scholarship to study in Al Azhar. Soon after he began his studies in 2010, Tajikistan's government call for the withdrawal of Tajik nationals from universities in Egypt and Pakistan, under allegations of them potentially becoming radicalized in Islamic universities in West-Central Asia.<sup>6</sup> Ferooz explained to me:

I returned to Tajikistan but felt bored there—with no future to study abroad. Europe is too expensive and a dream for us. *Arabistan* [the Middle East, Arab countries] is regarded as a place of terrorists. Russia does not offer many scholarships to Central Asians—anyway, they hate us! So, . . . what to do?

Similar to the case of Omar from Saudi Arabia, Ferooz's father played a role in the decision of sending him to study in China. The man had a friend in Dushanbe whose son was studying and working as a trader in Jinhua. He suggested to Ferooz to inquire in the Chinese embassy in Dushanbe about scholarships. Ferooz said,

It didn't take them long to offer me a scholarship to study here in Jinhua a BA in Chinese language and Pedagogy. The Chinese government is offering anybody who wants to take it a scholarship to learn Chinese and to become teachers of Chinese language for foreigners.

Ferooz was unhappy at the prospects of becoming a teacher of Chinese language for foreigners and said that such a degree curtailed his chances of continuing his studies somewhere else. Indeed, Ferooz had been inquiring about scholarships to study a master's in economics or business in Europe, but he could not apply if he did not have a related undergraduate degree. Ferooz concluded that his fate perhaps was to stay in China as a trader and to try to associate with classmates and traders from "Arabistan" and/or Russia. In both "places," he said, he felt some familiarity and thus could possibly expand his business activities. If becoming a teacher of Chinese language was the most undesirable aspect of his student trajectory, Ferooz also considered that during the years he had spent in China, more particularly in Jinhua and Yiwu, he had felt "free" to express his religiosity in a less cautious way than in his home country, Tajikistan. To demonstrate this, he showed me photos of himself with his companions praying in parks and other public spaces in China without being interrupted or questioned by local officers or people passing by.<sup>7</sup> The student-cum-traders from West-Central Asia whose experiences I had explored above considered their being Muslim as either an imperative part of their ongoing lives (Ferooz), as family heritage that raised certain expectations of morality and behavior (Arezo), or a simple label that nevertheless affected their working lives on a daily basis (Gulnora). Regardless of its numerous paradoxes concerning religious life, political positions, and gender policies, these student-cum-traders saw China as a place where they could enact their disparate, yet common visions of international cooperation, cosmopolitan life, and personal autonomy in ways that perhaps they could not foresee in their home countries.

This section has also demonstrated important connections occurring in West-Central Asia as an arena of interaction: women traders from Uzbekistan earned the capital they used to establishing their business in Istanbul, while

merchant families in Tajikistan entered the world of long-distance business by initially transporting pilgrims to Mecca by way of former overland routes that traversed Iran, Syria, and Iraq. As with the case of the students in Moscow, however, in relationship to the current dynamics of Central and West Asia, East Asian nodes, such as Yiwu, are playing an increasingly important role in maintaining connections between these two Asian regions.<sup>7</sup> There is scope for scholars to explore universities in Malaysia and Indonesia, for example, as important nodes fostering such type of connections (e.g. Altbach 2010). On one hand, Central Asia's governments have increasingly come to regard travel to West Asia for education and for trade as a dangerous source of radical Islam. On the other hand, conflict within West Asia itself, especially in Syria but also Egypt and Iraq, has meant that the type of socially embedded forms of networks and travel that connected these regions in the 1990s as they had in the nineteenth century have become increasingly harder. Against this backdrop, and the difficulty of traveling to Europe and North America, West-Central Asian relations are increasingly maintained and nurtured in "third spaces." Yiwu and other commercial cities in China provide a combination of government scholarships and trading opportunities and nurture a fertile ground for characters such as those discussed above to set up businesses, transregional relationships, and ways of lives valued for leading to forms of autonomy.

## Conclusion

The lives and mobile trajectories of students in China and former students in the Soviet Union who hailed from West-Central Asia highlight points of connection and disconnection between West, Central, Eurasia, and East Asia in ways that traditional approaches to area studies are unable to embrace. This is the reason why I have deployed the notion of West-Central Asia for its possibilities to convey the complexity of student flows and circulatory histories as they become evident in "third spaces" of interaction, in this case Moscow and Yiwu. These third zones are significant not only as centers of higher education but also as settings where networks of students, with their encompassing and gendered dispositions to internationalism, cosmopolitanism, and diverse forms of autonomy, shape in return West Asia, Eurasia, and East Asia as overlapping arenas of interaction.

I have also suggested that the connections and networks that these students form are intrinsically related to the politics of the Cold War and the enduring and localized geopolitical processes that emerged from it (some of which are ongoing, for example, in Yemen, Afghanistan, and Iraq). More recently, these connections have also been affected by the emergence of China as an economic power and a leading destination for international students. The trajectories of these students bring to light the importance of the real or imaginary danger of Islamic radicalization as factors

that threatened their multicultural and international lives in Moscow in the 1990s, or that have also shaped their life trajectories in the 2000s especially when students from Central Asia were withdrawn from universities in Pakistan and Egypt and rather found a haven to continue their studies in China. At the same time that “Third World” politics during the Cold War affected the life of students who did not return to their home countries, other contemporary geopolitical processes from the 2000s including the emergence of ISIS and the war in Syria and Iraq are factors that allow some former Moscow students to become translators and mediators in such ongoing conflicts and give impetus to students of West-Central Asia to seek scholarships in China.

If Soviet Russia was the accessible option for the cohort of students from West-Central Asia, for those living in China, especially the female students of Muslim background, the latter is regarded as the place where a better future lays for them. This is in part because many of these students have not succeeded in obtaining scholarships to study in the United States and Europe but also because China is experienced by them as a place where they can fulfill their lives with higher degrees of autonomy than those encountered in their home countries. By drawing the comparison between this type of students in Moscow and Yiwu, I showed the ways in which world and inter-Asian geopolitics can help us to draw more fluid and dynamic approaches to regional studies beyond the conventional area studies that divide Asia into Middle East, Russia and Eurasia, and East Asia, and the importance of “third spaces” as settings where such overlapping interactions take place. Finally, by using students and student networks as its prime empirical focus, this article has revealed the importance of both Eurasia and East Asia as proving significant nodes within which relations between Central and West Asia are mediated. In this sense, I conceive of the value of exploring transregional relations not just as a way of recognizing connections but also a mode of better understanding how such historical linkages appear from the point of view of those involved in their fashioning.

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### Notes

1. My encounters with students in Moscow in these residence halls are based on my staying there over a period of 11 months from 1996 to 2005. The fieldwork in Yiwu, China, was conducted over a period of 8 months in 2016 and 2018. I used Russian, Tajik and English languages in my conversations and interviews with students and interlocutors.

2. The word “black” in Russia denotes a racist remark against population who, according to certain aesthetic standards, are regarded as foreign. Regardless of their origin or skin color, these populations in the context of Moscow might include Muslims from the Caucasus and Central Asia, Africans, Arabs, and Vietnamese (cf. Roman, 2002; Sahadeo, 2016; Ziemer, 2011).
3. In this conversation, Jamal was making reference specifically to the terrorist attack in the discotheque Reina in Istanbul in January 2017 allegedly carried out by Abdulkadir Masharipov, also known as Abu Muhammad Khorasani. Masharipov is an Uzbek man apparently trained in Afghanistan and Pakistan and allied to ISIS at the time of the attack. Other Uzbek men have been accused of carrying out terrorist attacks in 2017 in Saint Petersburg and Stockholm (April), and in New York (October).
4. Chechen nationals have been accused of perpetrating terrorist attacks in a hospital in Budenovsk, Russia, in 1995 and in another hospital in Dagestan in 1996; in a Moscow theater in 2002, a train in 2004, and, in the same year, a school in Beslan.
5. The great majority students from West-Central Asia in Moscow, were men. I have not been able to establish whether this gendered aspect is related to the quantities of scholarships offered by the USSR to men from West Asia rather than to women. An alternative explanation given by male students themselves is that in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Yemen (the cases I treat in this article) and in the particular contexts where these students grew up, families discouraged women from traveling unaccompanied or pursuing higher education abroad.
6. For an analysis of Tajikistan’s policies concerning local practices that had become to be considered signs of “extremism” and “radicalization” by the current government, see Lemon (2015) and Ibañez Tirado (2016).
7. Ferooz showed me these photos in 2016 and that the situation on the ground may have changed since.

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### Author biography

Diana Ibañez Tirado is lecturer in Social Anthropology at the Department of Anthropology of the School of Global Studies at University of Sussex. She is author of numerous academic articles about the Kulob region of southern Tajikistan, as well as people's mobility and interactions cutting across Central Asia, Eurasia and China.