

Introduction to the special issue: after trust

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Introduction to the special issue: after trust

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Abstract ‘Trust’ has long been seen as critical to the success and durability of trading networks, and conceptualized as a positive moral sentiment that is embedded in shared kinship, ethnicity or friendship, or in shared frameworks of morality. Other recent studies of business communities suggest that the ability to work in settings characterized by pervasive mistrust is a key factor in the development of commercial acumen and a determinant of success. Here, the authors argue that a focus on trust and mistrust, and an underlying concern with ethics and morality, can obscure equally critical factors that inform the durability of trading networks. They offer ethnographic accounts of different inter-Asian trading networks active in the city of Yiwu, which is one of China’s most dynamic and diverse ‘international trade cities’. Yiwu is home to the largest wholesale market of small commodities in the world, and attracts traders and merchants from across the planet; more than 12,000 foreign traders are also resident in the city. The authors of the articles presented here analyse the durability of these networks in relation to broader geopolitical processes and contexts. They argue that success often depends on the ability to negotiate geopolitical shifts and the fault lines of political identity. They trace traders’ efforts to create institutions that allow them to withstand geopolitical transformations. They also document the ability of trading networks to operate flexibly across different social fields, showing that resilience often depends on the ability to navigate and profit from shifting relations between economic, political and familial domains.

Keywords COMMERCE, GEOPOLITICS, INSTITUTIONS, MARKETS, TRADING NETWORKS, TRUST, YIWU

The authors of this collection of articles provide in-depth analyses of ethnographic material gathered in Yiwu – one of China’s most dynamic and diverse ‘international trade cities’ – to evaluate and critically assess the conventional modes of analysing

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trading networks and diasporas in the social sciences and humanities. As a city of two million inhabitants in China's eastern Zhejiang province, Yiwu offers a unique vantage point from which to make an intervention into long-standing interdisciplinary debates about trading networks. The city is home to the largest wholesale market of 'commodities of everyday use' in the world and attracts traders and merchants from across the planet: more than 12,000 foreign traders are also resident in the city. Some of the trading networks active in Yiwu – for example, those of the Yemenis, Hindus from varying diasporic backgrounds, and Armenians – trace connections to networks that are of historic importance to long-distance trade and to the forms of global connectivity with which it is associated. Others, including many of the Russians and Ukrainians in the city, are from communities that have only turned to long-distance trade in more recent years. Yiwu thus provides an ideal and unique backdrop against which to identify networks involved in long-distance trade in the world today, and to reevaluate the range of factors that most helpfully explain the durability of such networks across space, time, and geopolitical context.

Through in-depth examinations of Yiwu-based from Syria (Anderson), Afghanistan (Marsden), the Caucasus (Skvirskaja), Vietnam (Marouda), as well as a rare consideration of the perspectives of Chinese women who marry foreign traders (often from a Muslim background) who belong to such networks (Sha), the articles collected here bring together rich empirical material about communities that anthropologists and other scholars across the humanities and social sciences have found notoriously difficult to study first hand (Falzon 2004). The barriers to gaining in-depth ethnographic insights into the workings of such networks arise to a substantial degree out of their scattered and dispersed nature. While anthropologists have successfully undertaken studies on the importance of particular nodes or commercial centres to such networks (Carrier 2016), ethnographic work on the manner in which trade networks connect such nodes to one another is much rarer. This is mainly because of the practical difficulties associated with working not merely across different sites but also with mobile actors who frequently move between nodes. Undertaking such ethnographic work requires both flexibility on the part of ethnographers and the time to develop long-term and established relations with informants. As many studies have recognized, the participants of trading networks often treat their professional activities in a closely guarded way, partly because of anxieties surrounding the implications that sharing information about their commercial practices might have for their ability to compete with other trading groups and organizations. Also, given such networks, and the fact that the commercial personnel, capital and commodities in which they deal criss-cross highly complex settings, spaces, and boundaries, they are often regarded suspiciously by multiple authorities and, indeed, are widely engaged in activities that contravene the laws of one or several states. To confront these issues, the articles in this themed issue are based on multi-sited research conducted in key trading nodes important for the networks being studied. The ethnographers whose findings are presented here, moreover, often have long-term fieldwork experiences in the country of origin of the varying networks they study. They are thus building on a deep contextual knowledge of the individuals and groups they are studying. Along with having undertaken research on

the networks themselves over an extended period, these methodological strategies have made it possible for the researchers working in Yiwu to understand aspects of the networks that are harder to achieve if fieldwork is focused on one particular node alone.

The analyses of the different trading networks active in the city of Yiwu all point to a need to go beyond the conventional tendency to explain the durability of trading networks and relationships in terms of forms of trustworthiness and cohesiveness that are supposedly embedded in shared ethnicity, kinship, friendship or expectations of moral practice (Aghassian and Kevonian 1999; Chaudhuri 1985; Chaudhuri 2002; Cohen 1971; Curtin 1984; Mauro 1990). The tendency to place trust and ethnic cohesiveness at the centre of the analysis rightly arises from the observation that, since such networks work across multiple legal regimes, and also often in contexts in which the writ of the state is only partially present, they have developed and deployed their own mechanisms for shaping, negotiating and controlling the form taken by internal commercial relationships. The nature of such mechanisms varies from network to network: in some contexts, the threat of exclusion from a network – sometimes through the sanction of violence – on the basis of contravening shared values is clearly articulated (Monsutti 2013); in others, the development of shared standards of accounting is more clearly apparent (Aslanian 2014). Nevertheless, across these different studies, notions of ‘trust’ are widely treated in the scholarship as underlying the structure and functioning of trading networks. Given the widespread conceptualization of trust as a moral sentiment fashioned in and through social relationships, it is unsurprising that scholars have turned to the role of culture (especially religion), kinship and identity (often through the lens of ethnicity) in their attempts to isolate the core foundations of trading networks (Carrier 2016; Cohen 1971; Werbner 1999, 2004).

In other fields of anthropology, however, the notions of trust and of trust-based relationships more generally have come under increasingly critical scrutiny. Several studies of business communities have suggested that it is the ability to work in settings characterized by pervasive mistrust – rather than the capacity to create trusting relations per se – that is a key factor in the development of commercial acumen and in determining success (Marsden 2016). Theoretically, anthropologists also argue that, given the inherent opacity of human minds (Robins and Rumsey 2008), the starting point for treatments of trust should actually arise from the inherent importance of the underlying mistrust to social interaction and relations (Carey 2017). Ethnographically, recent considerations of trust have thus explored the types of practices and modes through which individuals and communities address mistrust in their attempts to forge social relationships with others (Humphrey 2018).

The articles gathered in this themed issue reflect and build on this important and expanding body of work in multiple ways. They collectively suggest, however, that the emphasis on trust and mistrust, and, indeed, on the wider field of ethics and morality from which this concern arises theoretically, has tended to obscure equally critical aspects that inform the durability of trading networks. Several of the authors focus on the need to take into account the broader geopolitical processes and contexts in which trading networks are formed, rather than dwell on the centrality of kinship and ethnicity to their underlying composition. Anderson and Marouda, for example, both show how

the trading networks in their research – Syrian and Vietnamese respectively – can only be understood in relation to successive geopolitical projects. In the case of the Syrian traders with whom Anderson worked in China, Syria, Turkey and the Gulf states, for example, the ability to negotiate between Eurasian projects with varying ideological aims and on different geographical scales has lain at the heart of Syrian trading activities for the past forty years. These traders not only played an active role in the commercial life of the Soviet Union and its successor states, but also negotiated the rising regional significance of Russia and the ways in which it has fashioned new webs of inter-regional connectivity in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Anderson also charts the important role of Turkey in the activities of Syrian traders today, and shows how the ability of traders to ride the waves of expanding forms of Turkish regional influence is so vital to their commercial interests. Importantly, Anderson's research questions rather old and static models that depict trading networks as simply performing the role of 'middlemen minorities' for powerful states and imperial formations (Bonacich 1973). Syria, rather, has been marginal both in the Soviet Union and in the contemporary rise of Turkey in wider Eurasian politics. The traders have, however, been able to capitalize on this marginality.¹ They have assumed important brokerage roles between successive Eurasian formations, including, most recently, China's increasing emphasis on its ties with this expansive transregional space embodied initially in the 'Look West' (Li 2016) policy and most recently the 'Belt and Road Project' (Clarke 2017; Ferdinand 2016; Ploberger 2017; Sidaway and Woon 2017).

In her analysis of the Vietnamese trading networks that connect markets in China, Poland and Ukraine to one another, Marina Marouda also emphasizes how her informants astutely navigate changing geopolitical conditions and orders. The history of Vietnamese commercial personnel in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc lies in North Vietnam's place in the wider socialist ecumene (Bayly 2007). Northern Vietnamese citizens sought education in the Soviet Union and its allied states in Eastern Europe, often with the help of government bursaries. Against the backdrop of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of post-socialist capitalism (Humphrey 2002), Vietnamese students and professionals turned to trade as a mode of securing a livelihood in the context of increasingly racialized societies in which barriers to formal employment in the state bureaucracy were rigid. In the years since, however, these communities and their networks responded to newer geopolitical developments, especially the incorporation of formerly socialist countries into the EU, and the rise of Chinese economic influence in this geopolitical space. Marouda highlights the ways in which traders from predominantly immigrant backgrounds carved out 'exceptional' legal spaces that allowed them to maintain important commercial niches in the context of new forms of regulation and surveillance of international commerce. In addition, Vietnamese traders also established relations with powerful economic and political players, especially Chinese investors who, as part of China's export-led economic growth and political expansion into Eurasia, bought into and redeveloped markets in EU countries. Marouda shows how Chinese investors also required Vietnamese connections and experience of working in such contexts, especially in the field of money

transfer and exchange. Marouda is careful to avoid painting an overly celebratory picture of the status of Vietnamese networks. In Ukraine, where the markets in which Vietnamese people work as commodity and money transfer agents have been squeezed both by the expansion of the EU and by geopolitical tensions and conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the future of these Vietnamese networks is unpredictable and precarious.

Vera Skvirskaja's contribution also seeks to comprehend the stability of transnational trading formations after the demise of the Soviet Union, but from a different empirical perspective. While it has been common to focus on expansive trading formations characterized as diasporas, cohesive networks, moral communities or partial or mobile societies, her analysis focuses on traders from the Caucasus who form loose groups rather than 'tight-knit collectivist networks'. While the individuals she documents, who identify variously as Azeri, Armenian and Georgian, play a critical role in moving goods between Yiwu and wholesale markets in Tblisi and Yerevan, they are not bound by obligations of mutual recognition and aid, and their trading strategies are diverse and not formed in relation to notions of common belonging. They regard traders who share the same ethnic or national identity as potential competitors (see Marsden, this issue) rather than as members of a closed network that will provide credit and hold their reputation to account, as in notable studies of spatially dispersed merchant communities (Aslanian 2014; Greif 2006). Skvirskaja locates the origin of these transnational trading formations not in a foundational 'diasporic' moment of national dispersal, but in exposure to the post-Soviet conditions of precarity that forced individuals to seek alternative sources of income (see Anderson, this issue). While recognizing the significance of kinship networks to the ways in which these small traders have sought to locate labour and financing, and to develop sources of livelihood under such conditions, Skvirskaja also observes that the usual relationship that scholars have often assumed between kinship and trust is in practice often reversed in these settings: rather than treating obligations inhering in kinship relations as a basis for commercial partnerships, the Armenian and Azeri traders she describes often prefer to accept kinship-like obligations only as the result of successful commercial partnerships.

Such traders forge stable trading partnerships under precarious conditions, not by appealing to shared ethnicity or to bonds of kinship, but rather by skilfully managing the relations between economic and political domains. In the Caucasus region, where collective memories of conflict and historical injustices are continually sustained by nation-state rhetoric, and divisive political emotions can easily be rehearsed in everyday encounters between Georgian Azeris and Armenians, or Armenian traders and their Turkish wholesalers, Skvirskaja draws attention to the 'cosmopolitan pragmatism' – the ability to suspend temporarily or indeed violate cultural norms or political feelings – that traders deploy to maintain commercial relations across potentially fraught cracks. She draws attention both to the diplomatic and sentimental labour required to insulate the 'economic' from the 'political', and to the institutions developed over time to overcome ethnic and religious tension, such as the institution of 'godparenthood' whereby Muslim Azeris invite Orthodox Christians in Georgia to participate in circumcision rituals. At the same time, Skvirskaja notes that ideas of shared ethnicity play an

important part in fashioning commercial relationships in the Caucasus and beyond. She argues that while notions of shared ethnic identity may not underpin bounded communities of trust, they do inform stereotypical understandings of collective reputation, which in turn makes it easier for some groups of traders to enter transnational trade than others. Thus, Samegrelos are commonly seen by others within Georgia as ambitious and not to be trusted, whereas Megrelians are seen as pragmatic, able even to ‘love Russians’. Reputation emerges here not as a quality of the individual person, an achieved credit that is noted within a closed network, but as a quality of the collective, an attributed identity that is evaluated as much outside the group as within it.

The ability to negotiate geopolitical shifts and the fault lines of political identity and emotion – what we might think of in terms of the critical responsiveness of traders to geopolitics and its diplomatic agency – is central to the durability of several of the trading networks explored here and elsewhere. Yet, durability is also reflected in more than just the human skills required to inhabit, navigate and negotiate highly complex circumstances. Those making up trading networks also work hard to create institutions that allow them to withstand geopolitical transformations (Aslanian 2014). In his article, Anderson draws attention to the importance of neighbourhood institutions that foster durable networks because they build shared sensibilities and familiarity, pool reputations, and facilitate dispute resolution. Such institutions are visible across all the articles. They appear in a multiplicity of forms, including market places, office blocks, and housing areas, but also as restaurants and community organizations (Ibañez-Tirado 2018). It is a mistake to see such institutions as simply built on either a common culture or a shared orientation to a homeland: they owe their existence to, and can be located within, distinct political geographies and histories. Marouda, for example, draws attention to the ways in which Vietnamese companies in the Eastern European countries in which she has conducted research have invested capital and effort in building offices, trade halls and commercial spaces that have enabled them to expand their emergent trading network and draw in wholesalers and customers. Building stable institutions – as much as underlying factors such as committing to an ethnic or kinship-based identity, or, indeed orienting towards a set of religious values or collective political goals – is critical to ensuring the durability of trading networks and their role in the world today for Vietnamese and Syrian traders alike.

Navigating geopolitics and building institutions, however, are collective activities undertaken by trading networks that also play a powerful role in shaping individual lives and the forms of interpersonal relationships central to them. Recognizing this, the articles assembled here also seek to provide ethnographic insight into the lived experience and make-up of trading networks, and their collective and individual modes of navigating geopolitical transformations.

At one level, the ethnographic studies presented within suggest the need for greater nuance in scholarly attempts to typify trading networks. As the discussion on Syrian and Vietnamese traders and money exchange agents illustrates, commercial networks combine economic and political activities and functions. Marsden’s contribution on Afghan networks in the former Soviet Union extends this point further by demonstrating how trading networks also switch between political and commercial activities over

time. The traders discussed in Marsden's article initially established connections with one another while working as state officials and security agents for Afghanistan's pro-Soviet government. When that government collapsed in 1992, these officials collectively switched their principal activities from politics to commerce, deploying the connections they had developed with Soviet officials over the previous two decades for commercial purposes in the post-Soviet settings in which they now worked and with which they were familiar from having studied in them as students. Rather than identifying such networks in terms of the extent to which they match conventional categories (such as commercial, political or labour diasporas), Marsden focuses instead on the networks' structure and geography. He highlights their 'poly-stranded' and 'multi-nodal' form, suggesting that this also explains aspects of the collective behaviour of those who form them, including, for example, in terms of their ability to expand into new domains and build relationships with individuals outside the immediate networks themselves.

The articles also suggest that a focus on the ways in which trading networks engage in multiple activities raises broader questions about the tendency to see such engagement in terms of what some sociologists refer to as pluri-activity, understood as a livelihood strategy that is risk-spreading in nature (Efstratoglou-Todoulou 1990). We deploy the concept to highlight instead that the durability of trading networks depends on individuals who are active in more than one social field: the collected articles evidence this in the mixture of labouring, entrepreneurialism, and politicking that are simultaneously visible in the activities of the trading networks under study.

At another level, rather than reverting to abstract ideas about trust and the foundations on which trust-based relationships are formed, several articles in the volume address the experiential aspects of life in a trading network by addressing the specific practices deployed by traders to negotiate the shifting worlds they inhabit. The individuals who make up trading networks must not merely navigate shifts in geopolitical dynamics but must also operate across political spaces that are characterized by contrasting legal characters.² Exploring the effects of mobility across legal orders on traders' self-understandings as well as on the nature of their commercial activities draws attention to the importance of individual flexibility in the durability of trading networks. In his article, Marsden introduces the reader to a seasoned Afghan trader who left post-Soviet settings for Western Europe with the specific ambition of securing a stable future for his daughters. While ultimately successful in terms of realizing his familial ambitions, the trader also had to contend with being categorized a 'refugee' under European law and with the attendant loss in status this brought him within wider Afghan trading networks.

In their contributions to this themed collection of articles, both Marsden and Sha directly address the ways in which traders navigate the inherent contingency of their everyday lives. Focusing on traders from Afghanistan who work across a range of former Soviet settings, and who are also increasingly extending their commercial activities into Western Europe, Marsden documents the importance of specific 'practices of entrustment' that are pragmatically 'deployed by actors ... [to] entrust commodities, persons, and capital to one another'. Doing so, allows him to question the extent to which factors such as shared kinship and length of acquaintance are as central to the

fortunes of trading relationships as social scientists have long suggested. Afghan traders who work in informal markets in post-Soviet settings, which function as reputational pools, regularly make hasty and impromptu arrangements to share capital and commodities with one another, even when they lead extraordinarily precarious lives. Indeed, reflecting on past experiences of broken deals, the traders with whom Marsden works are sceptical about the relative benefits of working with their fellow Afghans: many express a desire to build their business lives through relationships with individuals from different communities – including Vietnamese money lenders and Chinese commercial agents – rather than rely on the unpredictable behaviour of their compatriots. One such specific practice of entrustment that is of importance to these traders is giving a fellow Afghan trader cash for safekeeping, a practice often undertaken by traders on the move. While such cash is entrusted by the giver for the purpose of safekeeping, the receiving party often also uses it for a commercial purpose, such as buying commodities. Traders make careful judgements about to whom to entrust their precious savings. Yet, such judgements are based on knowledge gathered about individuals in a specific context as much as they are on the basis of assumptions concerning the role that pre-existing ties play in enabling individuals to make assessments about the future behaviour of a partner to such an exchange.

The focus of Sha's article is on a practice of long importance in the study of trading networks, namely marriage into local communities. Whereas the scholarship has tended to focus on such marriages as having an anchoring effect on mobile trading communities, Sha brings ethnographic attention to the inherently unstable nature of such unions in Yiwu. She identifies how such instability arises out of the specific legal environment in Yiwu in which foreign traders are unable to secure access to either long-term residency or citizenship. Indeed, the children of such unions face considerable barriers in securing access to schooling by living away from the settlement in which their Chinese mothers are legally domiciled. Against this backdrop, Sha explores how cultural differences – especially those surrounding different attitudes towards accountancy practices and the distribution of savings among extended kin networks – regularly become invested with emotional significance and assume an increasingly rigid form. Tensions over such differences and the degree of mistrust they furnish not only result in the dissolution of such unions but also create instability in the businesses they underpin.

Conclusion

Scholars have advanced a variety of models to explain the dynamics and durability of geographically expansive mobile social formations, which range from 'trade diasporas' (Cohen 1971; Curtin 1984) and 'diaspora entrepreneurial networks' (Baghdiantz-McCabe et al. 2005) to 'circulation societies' (Markovits 2000) and 'partial societies' (Ho 2014, 2017). The category of diaspora, which has done much to challenge 'methodological nationalism' and liberate the study of social formations from putative national boundaries, has tended to emphasize relations between diasporas and their host societies; these often emphasize the separateness and distinctiveness of the 'culture',

values, or economic functions of the social formation in question (Bonacich 1973; Cohen 2008; Fallers 1962). While scholarly understandings of diaspora are broad and diverse (Brubaker 2005), scholars working on trading diasporas have discussed their cohesiveness over time by referring to relations with host societies that incentivize the maintenance of social boundaries, the trust that operates within these boundaries, and the ability of individual members and communities to engage in effective 'cross-cultural' brokerage.

By contrast, the more recent emphasis on circulation societies has focused less on boundaries and brokerage and more on highlighting the dynamic qualities of networks and their interplay with more permanent structures (Ho 2017; Markovits et al. 2006). Thus, this work has located the durability and vitality of such formations not in their cultural distinctiveness or their relationship to particular host societies, but in the broader, translocal configuration of the network. A particularly productive focus has been on the interplay between sedentary structures and mobile flows, and the ability of dominant nodes and their characteristic institutions to regulate the flow of reputational and financial credit throughout the broader network. The contributors to this themed section build on this approach to the study of circulation by focusing on the inter-relationship between nodes, their institutions, and the various flows of people, commodities and credit that these both constrain and enable. They follow the lead of classic social network analysis in challenging the assumptions of reified communities, and highlighting connections that cut across aggregate constructs such as nation, class and kinship groups (see Hannerz 1980; Vertovec 2003).

There is a danger nevertheless in reifying networks, taking them for granted as aggregates that determine behaviour, rather than seeing how the networks in question are not fixed but constantly constructed and altered. Several of the articles in this themed issue therefore emphasize the contingency and ever-negotiable nature of trading networks. Marsden locates the vitality of Afghan trading networks in their heterogenous, pluri-active and shifting nature, while noting that they are frequently impermanent and prone to forms of mistrust; Marouda highlights the rapidity with which cooperative alliances between Vietnamese traders and Chinese holding companies can morph into relations of antagonism and protest; Sha shows the fragility of marital unions in trading contexts, where lack of access to long-term residency and schooling in China incentivizes strategies of impermanence; and Anderson discusses the shifting and unpredictable geographical relations that Syrian and Yemeni traders must negotiate over the course of their lives. It is the recognition that networks are not given, durable or geographically stable structures, that leads these contributors to seek to identify what factors *do* enable particular networks to remain functional amid flux and uncertainty. They share a common approach in seeking to move beyond trust and the assumption that identity or ethics are 'the most suitable vehicle for understanding the relationship between trust and commerce' (Marsden, this issue). Instead, they document how members of trans-Asian networks seek individually and collectively to create and inhabit institutions that enable and regulate connections between nodes; and how they understand and adapt to broader geopolitical processes in ways that enable them to mediate between different political moments and emerging geographies in Eurasia.

Notes

1. For a critical discussion of marginality, see Day et al. (1999).
2. See Stephens (2014) on the importance of navigating plural legal systems in for trading networks in the nineteenth century.

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