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Commodities, merchants, and refugees: inter-Asian circulations and Afghan mobility

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Abstract *This article consists of an analysis of ethnographic material on Afghan trading networks involved in both the export of commodities from China to a variety of settings across Eurasia and the movement of ‘refugees’ from Afghanistan to Europe. Much recent work on trading networks has deployed the concept of trust to understand the functioning of such social formations. By contrast, in this article I assess the durability of Afghan networks in three ways. First, recognition of how they are polycentric and multi-nodal. Second, how they are successful in transforming their collective aims and projects in changing shifting political and economic circumstances. Third, how they are made up of individuals able to switch their statuses and activities within trading networks over time. Furthermore, I argue that a focus on the precise ways in which traders entrust capital, people and commodities to one another, reveals the extent to which social and commercial relationships inside trading networks are frequently impermanent and pregnant with concerns about mistrust and contingency. Recognition of this suggests that scholars should focus on practices of entrustment rather than abstract notions of trust in their analyses of trading networks per se, as well as seek to understand the ways in which these practices enable actors to handle and address questions of contingency.*

Keywords AFGHANISTAN, EURASIA, MERCHANTS, REFUGEES, TRADING NETWORKS, TRUST AND ENTRUSTMENT

The European Union’s so-called ‘refugee crisis’ in 2015/16 formed an important backdrop to the eight months I spent conducting fieldwork between 2016 and 2018 with Afghan traders operating in the Chinese international trading city of Yiwu, located two hours by train from Shanghai. Afghan traders based in Yiwu regularly distinguished themselves from their compatriots (*watandar*) who had left Afghanistan or the countries in which they lived in Asia (usually Iran or Pakistan) to apply for asylum in the EU. By contrast, as there is no provision for refugee status in China, those living in the country cannot apply for asylum there.¹ In fact, Yiwu’s Afghans have no hope of acquiring

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Chinese citizenship: neither a long period of legal residence in the country nor marriage to a Chinese citizen qualifies China-based foreigners for Chinese citizenship. Against this backdrop, Afghans in China refer to themselves as traders (*taajirha*) and contrast their lives with those of their compatriots who have sought asylum in Western Europe and North America. Afghans in China must work hard for a living, I was often told, rather than sit at home, eating ‘free money’ (*paisa-e mufti*) handed to them from the social security systems (*sociaal*) of the Western countries in which they were based.

Afghans in China often emphasize that their mode of making a living is highly precarious. Yet, they also regularly remark that leading such a life is positive because they do not have to endure the social stigma of being an officially designated refugee (Ingvars and Gíslason 2018). A handful of Yiwu-based Afghans have left China, returned to Afghanistan and travelled by way of Iran and Turkey to seek asylum in Europe. Traders in Yiwu tend to talk about those of their compatriots who have sought asylum in Europe in this manner with incredulity. One man in his mid-twenties from a wealthy family that owns several businesses in Yiwu, as well as a wholesale shop in Kabul, for example, left his job in the family business in Yiwu to travel from Kabul to Turkey. He paid a ‘smuggler’ to arrange his passage over a dangerous route across the Iran–Turkey border, but after entering Turkish territory, the vehicle in which he was travelling was involved in a serious accident. Hearing about the incident and being unable to reach the young man by telephone, his elder brother, who divides his time between Yiwu and Kabul, immediately flew to Istanbul: he was able to locate his badly injured brother, and offer him care and support until the Turkish authorities deported him to Afghanistan. Traders in both Yiwu and Kabul commented that the young man had led a good life in China: his brothers had given him a share of the family business; he lived in a flat for which his brothers paid the rent; and he performed a relatively straightforward job. Yet, they unanimously remarked, he was not happy in either Yiwu or Kabul: it was therefore his temperament (*taabiyat*) to be dissatisfied with his daily life, regardless of where it might be.

Yiwu is connected to the world by multiple trading networks, which are often established on the basis of national and ethno-linguistic identity; their precise geographies, however, vary according to the contexts in which traders from different backgrounds live and work. As explored elsewhere and in this special issue, such geographies are powerfully influenced by historic and ongoing geopolitical processes played out across Eurasia (Anderson 2018; Anderson this issue; Marsden and Skrivskja 2018). The Afghans based in Yiwu export commodities to several world regions and are influenced by and respond to multiple geopolitical dynamics (Marsden 2017). The focus of this article, however, is on trading networks made up of Afghans operating across Eurasia, specifically in the markets of the former Soviet Union (Marsden 2016a).

The ethnographic material presented in this article demonstrates that it is important to resist the temptation of classifying Afghan merchants who travel to Yiwu and beyond as one-dimensional ‘elites’ who inhabit a world apart from those of the country’s refugees. The movement of people, things and capital, rather, are mutually entangled: refugees can be an important force behind economic development (Carrier 2017). Based on eight months of fieldwork conducted with Afghan traders in Yiwu, as well as extensive research conducted over a decade with traders from Afghanistan who

deal in commodities procured in China, I seek to contribute in two broad ways to understanding the entangled nature of such global networks.

First, I am concerned by the ways in which commercial actors play a central role in shaping, directing, and channelling refugee mobility: merchants, I suggest, play a critical role in the circulation not only of commercial personnel and labourers, but also of refugees and asylum seekers. Second, in this article I seek to nuance our understandings of the economic geographies associated with such entangled forms of mobility. Far from being a context from which Afghans merely ‘migrate’, Afghanistan is critical to the interconnected geographical trajectories of both merchants and migrants. A consideration of the entangled trajectories of commercial actors and refugees reveals limitations to the analytical value of conventional economic geographies that depict settings such as Afghanistan as peripheral to the global economy. Afghanistan, rather, plays a central role in inter-Asian circulations of goods and people

At one level, I build on an expanding body of interdisciplinary work that has sought to illuminate the importance of circulatory mobility to inter-regional relationships (Ho 2017; Markovits et al. 2006). At another, as I address in detail below, a key aspect of scholarly work on trading networks pertains to the forms of trust on which geographically dispersed social formations are dependent. This body of work contains analyses of the role that kinship, ethnicity and religion play in forging bonds of trust in long-distance trade networks (Carrier 2017; Falzon 2004). The scholarship on such networks has contributed to the development of over-arching theories on the importance of trusts to economic activity (Gambetta 2000; Greif 2006). Other scholars have emphasized that the ways in which such actors work in a general climate of ‘mistrust’ requires closer scholarly attention (Carey 2017; Humphrey 2018). In this article, I enrich these positions by exploring the specific practices that are deployed by actors who make up trading networks and who pragmatically entrust commodities, persons, and capital to one another. The outcomes of such ‘practices of entrustment’ (Shipton 2007) are not necessarily, however, enduring bonds or ties of trust. Such outcomes are more helpfully understood as reflecting, rather, the roles and activities of individuals and networks at specific temporal junctures. In this sense, the role that practices of entrustment play in forging the social relationships on which trading networks are based are contingent on multiple factors (Mathew 2019): a change in a person’s role or activity in a network also leads to transformations in their relationships with others. Such contingency is recognized and reflected upon by the traders who often remarked to me during the course of my fieldwork that, ‘there can never be such a thing as one hundred percent trust or reliability – we are humans and therefore we can always change our mind.’ The ways in which the traders handle and manage underlying contingency adds a further layer in understanding the durability of commercial networks.

Afghan trading networks: multi-nodal and poly-stranded

Afghans have been active in the sale of Chinese-made commodities across many different contexts of the former Soviet Union for much of the last four decades (Marsden 2015). In the past two decades, traders once active in the former Soviet

Union have extended their activities to markets in western Europe (Marsden 2016b). The individuals involved in the trade in low-grade Chinese commodities are almost entirely men, though many live with their families in the countries in which they are based. They identify with a multiplicity of ethno-linguistic and regional backgrounds; indeed, the capillary-like networks through which they work are frequently (if not exclusively) based on sub-national identity markers. At significant nodes, such as Yiwu, however, networks based on familial, regional and ethno-linguistic, and less frequently religious identity, intersect with one another. In the context of such interactions, the identity marker ‘Afghan’ (Hanifi 2013) is also activated in the traders’ collective self-identities (Marsden 2016b). The traders do not generally refer to their commercial activities and distribution in space as trading networks, although the Farsi term *shabaqa-e tijorati* is widely used in the country’s media and by policy makers. Instead, traders often say ‘we Afghans are globally dispersed’ (*dar duniya teet shudim*). They frequently emphasize the extent to which Afghans live and work in unexpected settings. During a meeting in Kabul, for example, one trader in his late thirties told me that he even knew of traders from Afghanistan based in Columbia and Venezuela. If the concept of network is not widely used by the traders to describe their global dispersal, they at least consciously recognize the importance of this to their collective commercial activities. A Yiwu-based trader in his late twenties who had recently returned from a business trip to Moscow told a gathering of his compatriots based in Yiwu that Afghans living in Ukraine and Russia were among the most successful ‘trading groups’ (*gruh-e tijorati*) in the former Soviet settings. Indeed, the degree to which traders associate their geographic dispersal with success in trade was emphasized by a trader based in the Ukrainian city of Odessa: ‘Odessa used to be a Jewish city’, he remarked to me, ‘if you think about it, we have taken their place – Afghans are dispersed all over the world, and wherever they live, they are busy in trade.’

Historians working on long-distance trade have identified two especially significant types of trading network, namely monocentric and polycentric. In his study of the Armenian merchant community of New Julfa, Aslanian argues that Armenians constituted a ‘multinodal monocentric network’. Multiple nodes were critical to the activities of New Julfa’s Armenians, yet both the objects and credit necessary for commerce and the women and priests central to the network’s social and cultural reproduction had their origins in New Julfa. In this sense, New Julfa formed a single dominant ‘nodal center’, which ‘defines and regulates the identity and economic vitality of the network as a whole’ (Aslanian 2014: 15). By contrast, ‘multinodal polycentric’ trading networks are characterized by having had no single ‘nodal center that dominated most aspects of ... the lives of merchants and members of the same community’ (Aslanian 2014: 15; cf. Trivellato 2009). Multinodal polycentric networks, however, operated from numerous centres, each of which was important for the activities of the trading network as whole (Trivellato 2009).

Differences in the structure of historic trading networks had significant implications for the types of commercial ventures upon which the traders embarked. Mononodal networks privileged partnerships with individuals internal to their

network. Traders active across polycentric networks regularly developed relationships with individuals external to the network they formed; doing so was essential to the expansion of networks into new contexts (Markovits 2000; cf. Anderson this issue).

Afghanistan's long-distance merchants in Eurasia organize their commercial activities in relation to multiple trading nodes. A handful of such nodes are of special significance to the collective activities of Afghans across the expansive Eurasian arena (including, for example, Yiwu, Moscow and Odessa). None of these nodes, however, assumes a position of overwhelming importance over any others in the network. Furthermore, while kin- and ethnicity-based contacts help to shape the commercial relationships of Afghan traders, traders also collectively value the capacity to develop ties to persons external to their networks (Marsden and Ibañez-Tirado 2015).

Historical work also suggests that whether a network is multinodal or mononodal has implications for its ability to withstand transformation in the contexts across which it operates. Aslanian focuses on the decline of Armenian trading networks in the wake of the calamity that beset its central node of New Julfa after the invasion of the city by Nadir Shah in the mid-eighteenth century. His work also illustrates that a network's durability is not merely determined by its mononodal or multimodal structure. Durability is also conferred by a network's ability to switch between and connect the fields of economic and political agency. The collective trading activities of New Julfa's Armenians suffered irrevocably in the wake of the decline of their central node, yet merchants subsequently played a major role in creating new forms of political identity and institutions by reinventing themselves as members of an Armenian nation and calling for the establishment of a nation-state (Aslanian 2014: 214).

The interactions of Afghan traders with politics and the state have, in a comparable though distinct way, differed from those of New Julfa's Armenians. Afghan traders currently active in the former Soviet Union mostly embarked on their careers as officials in the pro-Soviet Kabul-based government. They formed a political grouping that lost authority in 1992 over what had been its nodal centre, Kabul, as well as of Afghanistan's state institutions more generally. In the wake of these losses, relationships cultivated in the field of politics re-emerged in the form of an economic network. The individuals making up the network were familiar with formerly Soviet Eurasia, for they had been educated and undergone training in the Soviet Union (Ibañez-Tirado 2019). After 1992, thousands of mid-ranking government officials and army officers moved from Afghanistan to the cities in which they had studied in the former Soviet Union, including Moscow, St Petersburg, Kharkov, Dushanbe, Odessa, and Minsk. These cities had played an affective and ideological role in the life trajectories of Afghans. In addition, many married local women whom they had met during their years as students and officials. Having returned, they rapidly began to earn a living and to generate capital through trading in the informal markets and bazaars. These had surfaced across former Soviet space in the context of the collapse of the command economy (Humphrey 2002) and a range of diasporic organizations, including those run by Afghans, played a critical role in establishing these institutions (cf. Marouda this issue).

A significant proportion of the first wave of Afghan officials who started to trade in cities such as Moscow and Kiev, eventually left the former Soviet Union: some

sought asylum in Western countries and a smaller proportion returned to Afghanistan to take up positions in the government established after the military defeat of the Taliban in 2001/2. Afghan trading networks in the former Soviet Union were able to recruit from a substantial pool of labour and commercial acumen, which granted them the chance of ‘diversification, expansion and longevity’ (Aslanian 2014: 224). Contacts between Afghan traders and officials in the post-Soviet countries in which they traded made this movement of commercial personnel possible: Afghan officials-cum-merchants developed routes used by Afghans to travel formally and informally to formerly Soviet countries.

Most Afghans moving into post-Soviet space from the late 1990s onwards arrived there either as students in the region’s universities (often supported by government bursaries) or as migrants (both legal and illegal) who then applied for refugee status after having entered the country to which they were travelling. In the countries of the former Soviet Union, seeking permanent leave-to-remain documents by means of an asylum claim is widely regarded by Afghans as also allowing a person to establish a small business. Students (*maasilin*) and refugees (*muhajir*) provided a supply of labour for established traders. Informal migratory routes provided the low-cost labour upon which commercial networks depend: ‘new arrivals’ were employed as labourers (*juwaligar*), drivers, and retail sellers (*furishonda*). Simultaneously, wealthier migrants established business partnerships with settled Afghan merchants and brought capital from Afghanistan to such relationships.

The movement of commercially able personnel from Afghanistan to former Soviet countries helped the networks extend into Western Europe. Established merchants were able to leave the Soviet Union for Western Europe by entrusting the activities of their businesses to new arrivals. Having done so, they embarked on the time-consuming course of opening businesses in the European countries in which they sought asylum. As a result, nodes within Eurasian networks were injected with economic and geographic vitality as established merchants moved between post-Soviet Eurasia and Western Europe.

Yiwu: a dominant node in a multi-modal network

If one node in Eurasia’s Afghan networks has a relatively greater significance than others it is Yiwu.² A significant proportion of the approximately 100,000 Afghan traders working across the former Soviet Union either directly purchase the products in which they deal in Yiwu or procure them from either Afghan or other merchants. Yiwu earned a reputation within China in the 1980s for being a trading centre where the authorities ignored forms of trade that were penalized elsewhere in the country on the grounds being illegal. In the early 1990s, the city began to attract a small number of international traders (mostly from Afghanistan and Pakistan): in the context of this development, its municipal authorities adopted policies that were specifically designed to attract ‘foreign merchants’. Such policies eventually came to include the provision of a two-year business visa/work permit and a simplified taxation system (Rui 2018). *Hawala* currency dealers have also reported to me that they were able to transfer cash

from Afghanistan to Yiwu with ease. Such capital – often identified by the merchants themselves as ‘black money’ (*pul-e siyah*) – played a major role in allowing Afghan trading offices based in Yiwu to provide goods on credit to Afghan customers, including visitors to Yiwu from Eurasian cities. By the late 2000s, the city had become a major centre for the global trade in ‘small commodities’ and a hub for business communities from the Muslim-majority countries of South and West Asia, as well as Africa.³ From 2016 onwards, however, the changing nature of China’s economy began to raise questions about Yiwu’s status as a global trading node. In particular, the stricter regulation of currency flows, a growing emphasis on e-commerce rather than traditional trade, as well as the rising costs of daily life, business expenses and labour, have resulted in fewer traders basing themselves in the city. Indeed, some traders (including those of Afghan background) have moved both their businesses and their families out of the city, mostly to Istanbul.⁴

Discussions among groups of traders in Yiwu often revolve around how far the city has become a dominant infrastructural node for their collective commercial activities. Yet, these traders also recognize that Yiwu’s influence is limited in terms of its capacity to facilitate the cultural and sociological reproduction of Afghan networks. On the one hand, Afghans based in Yiwu often reflect on Yiwu’s importance to their commercial activities. In fact, ever since my first visit to the city in 2013, I have increasingly frequently been hearing about their attempts to offset the risks entailed by their network’s gradual transition to a monocentric network. Steps taken include establishing trading offices in other Chinese cities (notably Beijing, Guangzhou and Hong Kong), and purchasing products in countries other than China (especially in Vietnam, India, Malaysia and Indonesia). Yet, most remark that no cities are able to compete with Yiwu in terms of its well-developed and efficient trading infrastructure.

On the other hand, Afghan and other foreign traders based in Yiwu are themselves aware of the extent to which policy in China renders Yiwu an inherently transitory site for them. Over the past three decades, the city has become an infrastructural node for Afghan trading networks as a result of policies adopted by the city’s authorities in the context of China joining the World Trade Organization. Yet, development policy in China denies it the forms of social and cultural significance enjoyed by other nodes in Afghan networks, such as Moscow and Odessa – both of which act as affective and commercial centres for Afghans. Chinese law prevents the traders from securing citizenship or access to long-term residency documents: traders with substantial business interests must both reapply for their visas and residency documents every two years and undergo taxation audits and medical checks; those in more tenuous circumstances must often do so biannually. Traders of 60 or more years report difficulties in securing Chinese business visas and residency permits. They also report that organizing the type of cultural events, such as musical performances involving well-known Afghan artists, which are a critical aspect of the cultural life of Afghan trading communities elsewhere in Eurasia, is not a type of activity supported by Yiwu’s municipal authorities. Furthermore, as Sha (in this issue) shows, a major issue facing traders living with their families in Yiwu is the legal and financial implications of sending

their children to school: legal restrictions largely prevent the admission of foreign children to Chinese government schools.

Furthermore, Yiwu's situation in relation to broader political, economic and technological processes enhances its status as a node for trade infrastructure but not for social and cultural reproduction. Policy-makers in Yiwu are increasingly favouring internet commerce over 'traditional' forms of trade that rely on resident foreign brokers occupying a central role in their city's future development. Yiwu's authorities also promote policies that are intended to result in Yiwu's 'upgrading', meaning that it will be able to conform to a higher margin 'created in China' development model advocated in Beijing (Marsden and Skvirskaja 2018; Rui 2018).

Because they recognize that Yiwu is an influential centre in terms of trading infrastructure but not in relation to social and cultural reproduction, Afghan traders there are rarely if ever complacent about its permanence as a node in their networks. Indeed, relatively few traders from Afghanistan living in Yiwu have invested their capital in homes, property, or industrial ventures such as joint ownership of factories. One trader in his late twenties who runs a trading company that ships goods from Yiwu to Dubai, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and Belarus told me that 'Afghan traders have much experience of investing in a country only to see legislation change or for them to be indiscriminately deported – that's why they're not going to make the mistake again and start investing in major business here.' Prior to moving to Yiwu, this trader had worked for three years in a trading office in Sharjah, a commercial centre to several hundred traders from Afghanistan, most of whom import cars and vehicle spare parts to the UAE from Japan, China and South Korea and re-export these globally. In 2015, the UAE revoked the visas of approximately 100 traders from the community.⁵

The handful of Afghan traders who have bought property in Yiwu have done so in the context of being married to Chinese women.⁶ Afghans who have invested in the city (especially in restaurants, cafes, hotels and gyms) are said by their compatriots to have done so only because they have reliable contacts in the local government. Such contacts are said to be able to offer reliable advice about changing municipal policy relating to foreigners in general and Afghans in particular. In addition to being sites of commercial and cultural exchange (Ibañez-Tirado 2018), restaurants also signify the close ties of their owners to the local authorities, thereby acting as an important indicator of a trader's ability to conduct business and play a wider mediating role between traders and the state.

Against the backdrop of living in an inherently transitory node, settled Afghan traders in China aspire to send their children abroad for education, especially to countries where they believe they might secure a document either for residency or citizenship. The countries that Afghans most widely visited during the period of my research were Russia, India, Ukraine, and Turkey. A substantial cross-section of the 200 or so Afghan traders with whom I regularly interacted in Yiwu had either travelled to these countries with a view to admitting their children to schools or to securing residency documents for themselves and their family members.

Afghan traders are well positioned to adapt to an abrupt shift in Yiwu's capacity to continue to serve as a significant node for their commercial networks. Yiwu's Afghans

have fashioned wide-ranging trading activities over the past two decades; they have built multifarious channels of communication with Yiwu's authorities, and their commercial activities span myriads of geographically dispersed networks made up of family members and business associates.

Contingency, entrustment and economic geography: tied-up cash, Chinese-made scooters, and the Kabul property market

If historians have sought to analyse trading networks in terms of their structure and internal dynamics, sociological work on diasporas often focuses on the nature of their collective activities. Scholars have drawn contrasts between diasporas as 'settler' versus 'mobile', 'labour' versus 'entrepreneurial' (Esmán 2009), and 'traditional' versus 'modernizing elite' (Safran 1999). Ethnography relating to the life histories of individual Afghans active in China and Eurasia suggests the importance of activities that cut-across such typologies to the durability of the networks. Having documented how Afghan traders in the former Soviet Union switched their collective activities from politics to trade, I now explore the contingent ways in which individuals move across various statuses (for example, of trader, labourer and refugee) during their lives. Doing so reveals the importance of practices of entrustment (rather than abstract forms of trust) and of alternative economic geographies to their commercial networks. These interconnecting themes are addressed through a consideration of the relationship between a trader based in Odessa (Dil Agha), and a man (Yama) who is currently a 'refugee' in Europe but who had previously worked as a trader in Eurasia for two decades.

Yama (whom I first met in Tajikistan in 2009) is from a province in southern Afghanistan. He left Afghanistan as a teenager in the early 1990s after the collapse of the pro-Soviet government in Kabul. Today he is in his early forties and living in the Netherlands. Between 1992 and 1998, Yama lived with his brothers in Pakistan. In 1999, the family moved to Uzbekistan, where they lived and worked until 2009. Between 2009 and 2015, Yama was based – along with his elder brother – in Tajikistan. In all the settings in which he has lived since 1992, Yama and his family have made a living through trade: they owned a music store in Pakistan and dealt in products sourced in Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

Yama had become increasingly exasperated by the conditions of life in Tajikistan when I spent time with him in 2013 in Dushanbe, Tajikistan's capital. During our previous interactions between 2009 and 2013, he had talked with me freely about his trading activities (especially the wholesale trade in Pakistani tangerines and Iranian citrus fruits). Yet, in 2012, Yama complained that the country's authorities were making life ever more difficult for Afghan trader-refugees such as himself.⁷ Official legislation forbade Afghans registered as refugees in Tajikistan from residing in Dushanbe; those who did, he told me, were made to pay frequent bribes (*pora*; *rishwat*) by the city's police force. Furthermore, new legislation meant that Afghans living in Dushanbe were required to pay a substantial sum of money each year to extend their official refugee permits. In addition, Afghanistan received repeated visits from

Dushanbe's intelligence services requesting 'road money' (*rah puli*) to cover the cost of the officials' travel to and from work and 'guest money' (*mehmon puli*) to allow the officers to treat their guests according to local standards of hospitality. In addition, the weakening Tajik currency (Somoni), alongside the tightening by the country's authorities from 2015 onwards of the activities of unofficial currency dealers (*saraaf*; *hawaladar*), also restricted the business activities of Afghans in the country. Traders from Afghanistan are accustomed to being treated as revenue sources by the authorities of Central Asian states (cf. Marsden 2012, 2016b). Against the backdrop of a worsening Tajik economy, however, additional and repeated payments made life for Afghan traders and refugees in the country such as Yama unsustainable.

From trader to sojourner: Central Asia's steppes to the Black Sea

In 2015, Yama travelled from Tajikistan to Ukraine, where he spent six months in the Black Sea port city of Odessa. During that period, he stayed in multiple apartments – one of which was made available to him by an Afghan 'smuggler' (*qochogbar*) to whom he had paid \$3000 to arrange a Ukraine entry visa. After having been burgled, Yama decided to rent a flat of his own. Yama assumed that the smuggler had told the burglar that Yama was carrying a substantial amount of cash. Yama was accompanied to Ukraine by his two young children and needed to arrange for them to go to a school in Odessa: he was determined that they would not fall behind in their education as he had in Afghanistan and Pakistan in the 1990s.

During his six-month stay in Odessa, Yama would make intermittent visits to the Seven-Kilometre market, an enormous wholesale market located on the city's periphery. Most of the approximately 4000 Afghans based in Odessa either run wholesale businesses in the market (purveying commodities they import to Ukraine from China) or are employed in it by their compatriots (as sellers, labourers and warehouse keepers).⁸

Afghan asylum seekers in Odessa tend to invest the cash with which they travel to Ukraine in a shop in the Seven-Kilometre market. Yama decided not to invest any of the capital (*sarmaiya*) he had brought with him from Tajikistan in a commercial operation in the market. Yama had carried on his person some of the cash that he had brought to Ukraine from Tajikistan. He had transferred more using the services of a Dushanbe-based money exchange agent (*saraafi*) from northern Afghanistan. Yama explained to me that he did not set up a shop dealing in Chinese goods in the market because his priority was to travel – along with his two young children – to Western Europe. If he invested some of the approximately \$100,000 at his disposal in a commercial operation in Odessa, he told me, his money would have become 'stuck' (*band maand*) and his ability to move constrained. Yama's transition from a trader (*taajir*) to an officially designated refugee (*muhajir*) involved resisting the temptation to invest capital in a commercial operation.

Yama had also arrived in Ukraine with considerably less capital at his disposal than he had initially hoped. He had entrusted (*amaanat kardan*) a sizeable proportion of the money he had saved in Tajikistan to a Tajikistani trader called Shahid. The two had

known one another for nearly twenty years since their initial meeting in Uzbekistan. Shahid had fled from Tajikistan during of the country's bloody civil war (1992–97) and the two had established a trading partnership (*sharokat*); they also worked together in Dushanbe after Shahid returned to Tajikistan from Uzbekistan when conditions improved in the early 2000s.

In Dushanbe, the men spent much time together and their business activities (*marmaalah*) became increasingly intertwined. Yama sent Shahid to the Khujand with consignments of tangerines to sell, and Shahid was a regular guest in Yama's flat in Dushanbe. In addition, since Yama was a registered refugee in Tajikistan, he was unable to travel outside the country, so he entrusted his capital to Shahid, as a Tajikistan citizen could travel visa-free to Iran to source products (especially citrus fruit) in Mashhad.

Despite the length of their relationship and the clear ties of friendship (*dusti; rafoqat*), shared experiences (*taajrubah*) and commensality that bound them, Shahid failed to answer Yama's telephone calls from the day he left Tajikistan. As a result, Yama could not retrieve the savings that he had entrusted to him.

Yama faced a similar dilemma with one of his Afghan relatives, his brother's brother-in-law (*Aziz*). When he was in his mid-thirties, Aziz was based in Kabul where he and his brothers ran a medium-sized business selling construction materials. He had also traded in tangerines with Yama in Tajikistan. Aziz's business in Kabul had decreased in size as a result of the withdrawal of significant numbers of NATO forces in 2014 and a decline in new infrastructure projects in the country. Against this backdrop, he and his brothers had borrowed money from relatives and friends, including Yama, to keep their business afloat. As with Shahid, Yama told me that Aziz had also failed to return his phone calls in the days leading up to his departure for Ukraine.

Yama's difficulty recovering debts from his transnational network of business associates, friends, and kin, emphasizes the importance of both recognizing underlying mistrust and of building trust to our understanding of the dynamics of long-distance trading networks. Alessandro Monsutti notes that for many Afghans 'relatives are not so much people one can trust as people one knows; this makes it possible to take vengeance in case of defection, either by locating them and resorting to physical violence, or by ruining their reputation in a shared social milieu' (Monsutti 2013: 152). Yama's attempts to gather debts (*qarz jam kuni*) from his close relatives and friends reveals the extent to which the threat of physical or reputational vengeance loses its power in contexts characterized by flux, mobility and uncertainty.

Trusted friends or unexpected partners?

Understanding the calculations that individuals like Yama make about to whom to entrust their capital, in terms of calculated evaluations of long-term relationships of friendship and kinship alone, deflects attention from the contingent ways in which the circulation of people and things takes place across expansive spaces such as the Eurasian arena. In Odessa, for example, Yama chose to entrust (*amaanat kardan*) his money to Dil Agha, a man with whom he had neither worked nor enjoyed close (*qarib*)

ties of friendship or kinship. Associates (*ashnaaha*) whom Yama had come to know in Odessa had told him that Dil Agha was reliable and trustworthy. Yama sought to verify these assessments and told me how he ‘spent time with him on three or four occasions and it appeared he was good’. Far from handing over his cash for safe-keeping to a person known to him over a prolonged period or to a close relative, Yama entrusted the cash to Dil Agha after only a brief acquaintance. His ability to do so was enhanced by the existence of an institution – in this case the market – that served as a pool of reliable information about commerce and about the personal reputations of Afghan traders (see Anderson this issue).

Given the impromptu nature of Yama’s ties to Dil Agha, it is relevant to consider in detail the relationship between the two men. Dil Agha was formerly a mid-ranking state official in the Soviet-aligned government of Afghanistan. After the collapse of the regime in 1992, Dil Agha initially moved to a Soviet successor state in the Caucasus, where he worked for a company that sourced hazel nuts for export to Ukraine. In the Caucasus, he married a local woman before the couple moved to Ukraine with their newly born child. In Ukraine, Dil Agha initially sold goods that he took on a credit basis (*qarz*) from an Afghan trader.⁹ After four years, Dil Agha earned enough credit working in this manner to rent his own shop; eventually, he began to import goods from Yiwu by himself. His prudence and credit worthiness were reflected both in the capital he had earned over the years and in his reputation in the bazaar as a trustworthy person.

As the years passed, Dil Agha made enough profit to buy the shops (shipping containers) in which he sold his goods; he was later also able to purchase warehouse space (*gudaam; anbaar*) in a building close to the market. He then bought shops next to his own to prevent his competitors doing so and weakening his business. By 2015, Dil Agha was comfortable in terms of the living standards of Afghan traders in Odessa but by no means regarded by the community as ‘rich’ (*puldaar*). In addition to three containers and a warehouse, Dil Agha also owned a renovated Soviet-era flat, as well as a smaller two-bedroom apartment in a newly built residential complex. Despite being able to accumulate successfully and to invest capital in Odessa over a period of 20 years, the decline in the value of Ukraine’s currency that occurred in the wake of Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, alongside increasingly cut-throat levels of competition between traders from Afghanistan in the market, meant that Dil Agha was always seeking to cut his daily costs.

A consideration of the sources of competition that Dil Agha regarded in 2016 as making the scooter trade in Odessa especially fierce, reveals further conceptual issues that arise when trust is regarded as the fundamental tissue that binds trading networks together. According to Dil Agha, an Afghan who had been based in Canada for many years and had moved with his family to Ukraine in the mid-2000s, this incomer had started a business selling children’s bicycles. His business was substantial: the trader imported scooters from China bearing the logo of his own company, which meant that he had entered into a contract (*qaradaad*) with a supplier to buy a specified number of products each year. Indeed, this trader also exported the branded scooters from China to Russia, where he owned warehouses and shops in markets in St Petersburg and

Moscow. Furthermore, the trader's brother had recently emigrated to Odessa from London, bringing with him savings generated from working in the city first as a waiter and then as a taxi driver: these savings were also invested in the brother's scooter business. For Dil Agha, the two brothers were attempting to dominate and control the Odessa's market in scooters. Yet, trying to do this by using money transferred from London and Canada gave them an unfair advantage over the Afghan traders who had spent years building up their businesses in the Seventh-Kilometre Market.

Rivals from beyond what Dil Agha and others regarded as being the moral community of Odessa's established Afghan traders, meant that cut-throat competition was not confined to the market. As with the case of Yama, Dil Agha told me that his business had suffered on several occasions from the skulduggery of his own Afghan friends. Dil Agha is part of a circle of friends who all identify themselves as being from northern Afghanistan; the men making up the friendship background are roughly of the same age and political background. The friends socialize in all-male group gatherings, as well as together with their families; indeed, they have exchanged daughters and sons in marriage with one another and their wider kinship networks as well. The four men refer to their friendship circle as constituting a *kollektif*. One of the friends in the *kollektif* is Haji Karim, a trader from an ethnically Uzbek family in northern Afghanistan, who had studied in a military institute in Ukraine in the early 1980s and served in the Afghan Army until the collapse of the regime in 1992. Dil Agha told me how, two years previously, Haji Karim had imported a large quantity of scooters from Yiwu; at the same time, he had arranged a shipment of the same items for Dil Agha. Having apparently assisted Dil Agha in bringing a larger number of scooters to Ukraine than he would have been otherwise able, Haji Karim went on to sell his proportion of the goods at such a low profit margin that Dil Agha was unable to sell the goods at the rate he needed to make a reasonable return. At the end of the season, Dil Agha ended up with many more scooters in his warehouse than anticipated. After this experience, Dil Agha told me that he stayed clear of Afghans in Yiwu, preferring to pay Chinese companies to arrange the export of his goods to Ukraine.

'Gift by the donkey load; account in ounces!': calculation, trust and serendipity

In the context of such competition, Dil Agha had bought a consignment of scooters from Yiwu using the cash (approximately \$20,000) that Yama had entrusted to him; he was sure the scooters would sell well: they were a new design hitherto unavailable in the market. The purchase and arrival of the scooters was also perfectly timed: they would arrive in early spring, a time of year punctuated by a series of public holidays in Ukraine, when parents buy scooters as presents for their children.

A couple of months after having entrusted the money to Dil Agha, however, Yama approached him to say that he had found a smuggler (*qaachaaqbaar*) who had agreed to take him and his two children to Europe. Dil Agha told Yama that he should not rush to leave Ukraine: it would be wise to wait for a more reliable smuggler who was better known to them before embarking on the dangerous route to 'Europe' with his children. Yama told Dil Agha, however, that he had made up his mind: he asked Dil

Agha to return the cash (*paisa nurkh*) he had entrusted to him, so that he could pay the deposit (*puli peshaki*) required by the smuggler. Dil Agha told Yama that he would need a few days to get Yama his cash as he had invested it in his business. I asked Yama if he had not been worried that Dil Agha would fail to return the money: he replied, citing the Persian proverb, '*bakhshish ba kharwar, hisob ba musqol*' ('gift by the donkey load and account in ounces'). In other words, Dil Agha had demonstrated that he was reliable in that he was an 'exact' (*daqiq*) person, with a close focus on his accounting practices, rather than on achieving a name through lavish gift giving.

Entrusting property, returning capital: Kabul's property market

Having been requested by Yama to return the money he had been entrusted as soon as possible, Dil Agha deployed a financial instrument widely used in Afghanistan by property owners to secure access to cash – a *giraw*. The *giraw* practice is widely conducted in Afghanistan and other countries in which the dominant legal code is based on the Hanafi School (*maslak*) of Islamic law; in Afghanistan, it is a recognized legal practice within the part of the country's Ottoman-inspired legal code that relates to mortgages (*raan*).¹⁰ *Giraw* entails a property owner handing his or her property to another party for an agreed sum of cash. Upon the return of the cash, the original owner of the property reassumes full ownership. While *giraw* is widely practised in Afghanistan, it is the source of theological dispute, both in the country and in the wider Muslim world. For Muslims following legal traditions other than the Hanafi School, the practice of *giraw* (mostly referred to in Arabic as a *bay' al wafa* or 'purchase on honour') is regarded as constituting an agreement between a seller and buyer to resell a property at the original purchasing price. Since the person giving the loan can use the property to make money, scholars from other legal traditions regard *giraw* as a practice that allows individuals to contravene *shari'a* stipulations regarding interest (*riba*).

Afghan traders often point out that traders rarely make regular and rigorous assessments about how far their daily practices relate to Islamic prescriptions. A trader in his early forties who owns a clothing factory in China and wholesale business in Kabul told me that Islam's role in Afghan traders' business activities should not be over-exaggerated, remarking, 'there is much of what we do that Islam tells us not to and it is the same with *giraw*'. Other traders, however, do follow theological debates about *giraw*. They generally argue that if the party providing the cash uses the property to house his family, then the *giraw* is lawful (*halal*). Should the property, however, be rented out by the buyer to a third party, then this constitutes a mode of making interest (*sud*) on a loan (*qarz*) and is therefore impermissible (*haram*) according to Islamic law.

A consideration of the use of *giraw* in the case of Dil Agha tells us less about the role that Islam does or does not play in commerce than it does about the importance of specific practices of entrustment to Afghan trading networks; it is also a demonstration of Afghanistan's non-peripheral position in the Eurasian economic geography under consideration here. In return for \$20,000, Dil Agha allowed a creditor unrestricted use of his flat in Kabul until the loan had been repaid and a date agreed for the return of the flat. Dil Agha arranged for the money to be transferred to Odessa from Kabul using

a *saraaf* and was able to return Yama his cash by the date on which it was required. Being party to such an agreement contains an important element of risk, especially for an individual such as Dil Agha who is not based in the country and does not regularly travel there. While having friends, family and associates in Kabul, Dil Agha has no access in Afghanistan to the dense social and political networks that individuals permanently based in the country do.

The flat that Dil Agha had put on *giraw* to raise Yama's money was of great personal significance to him. Dil Agha proudly told me how he had bought it in Kabul before the collapse of President Najibullah's regime in 1992. He first rented the flat in the Soviet-era *microrayon* (housing area). Eventually, however, it was allocated to him under a government scheme into which he paid a monthly contribution with the prospect of eventually owning the property. As with many other government employees, after the collapse of President Najibullah's regime, Dil Agha initially remained in Kabul and continued working in his post. During this period, however, the *mujahidin* leaders who had come to power regularly accused former state officials of corruption and often occupied the properties they owned. According to Dil Agha, however, his good reputation and willingness to work for a time for the Islamic government meant that – against all odds – he was able to maintain control of his property. Dil Agha was intent on returning the loan and reassuming full ownership of the property as soon as possible.

Crossing the Carpathians: from sojourner to refugee

Shortly after Dil Agha received the money from Kabul, Yama left Odessa – on the instruction of a smuggler – with his two children for a town close to the Ukraine–Slovakia border. Having stayed for several weeks in a hotel in the town, the family successfully travelled to the Netherlands, by way of Slovakia, Austria and Germany. Before embarking on the journey, Yama agreed to take Dil Agha's brother's son, Karim with him. Now in his early twenties, Karim had been working with Dil Agha in his shop in the Seventh-Kilometre Market for the past four years. Uncle (*kaaka*) and nephew (*nawaasa*), however, did not get on well. Karim was religious (*mazhabi*) and his constant preaching against alcohol and insinuating that his wife dressed inappropriately for a Muslim irritated Dil Agha. In addition, three years of carrying heavy goods between the warehouse and shops in the Seventh-Kilometre Market had taken its physical toll on Karim: he suffered from serious health problems and Dil Agha advised him either to return to Afghanistan for treatment or to travel on to Europe with Yama and apply for an asylum case. Yama agreed to pay half of the fee (approximately \$7000) requested by the people smuggler: he knew that although in poor health, Karim would be able to help Yama's children (aged 10 and 13) to traverse what the people smuggler had warned them would be a long and difficult journey across the Carpathian Mountains.

Before travelling to Western Europe Yama entrusted a further tranche of cash to Dil Agha. Over the new few months Dil Agha transferred Yama's *amanat* to the Netherlands in instalments using exchange agents (*saraaf*) based in Odessa. When I met Dil Agha in China in May 2016, he proudly showed me WhatsApp messages

informing Yama of how much money had been forwarded to him – demonstrating his trustworthiness and commitment to our mutual friend. By the time I met Yama in the Netherlands in November 2017, Dil Agha had sent most of the remaining money to him. Yama meanwhile was growing accustomed to the new routines of his life as a ‘refugee’ supported by a national social welfare system but unable to maintain the life of an independent trader (Marsden forthcoming).

Conclusion

In this article, I have described the situation of Afghan trading networks in a Eurasian economic setting and analysed these in relation to models of the structure of such networks developed by historians. The Afghan networks were initially built by groups who responded to the retraction of the Soviet Union by shifting their collective activities from the domain of politics to that of the economy; over time, their activities have benefited from their ability to connect these two fields. The networks explored are best categorized as multimodal: Yiwu is a dominant node viewed from the perspective of a commercial infrastructure. Yet, the collective shift of mobile Afghans from political to economic functions has added other nodal centres in post-Soviet spaces to the network, which are also ‘centres’ when viewed from the perspective of social and cultural reproduction; as such, they contribute to the durability of the network as a whole. I have also suggested that commercial networks are more durable when they consist of coalescing networks of labourers, creditors and entrepreneurs – including mobile populations such as students and refugees – and that they are structured by institutions that allow individuals to shift between these statuses and functions. In the article, I have sought to make three more specific contributions towards understanding the durability of trading networks.

First, the circulations documented above arise out of multiple kinds of social relationships and networks. Such networks are the sites of interactions between traders, refugees, labourers and local actors in nodes, such as Yiwu and Odessa, at which the networks intersect. Indeed, the ethnographic material presented above points to the ways in which, over the course of their lives, individuals experience transformations in their statuses and roles in networks. The legal significance of being a ‘refugee’, for example, means something different in the Netherlands than in Tajikistan or Ukraine. Shifting meanings in the everyday significance of legal categories have critical implications for Afghan understandings of themselves and of the nature of the economic activities in which individuals are involved. A consideration of such entwined circulations, and the shifting statuses and roles with which mobility is associated, brings to light a multiplicity of commercial, financial and migratory geographies: these overlap with one another in the everyday lives of Afghans working in the Eurasian arena.

Second, the material presented in the article raises broader conceptual issues for understanding the role played by trading networks in the contemporary world. Examining flows of refugees alongside a consideration of the activities of Afghanistan’s traders, questions the assumption that Afghanistan is peripheral to

globalized circulations of finance and commodities. The country is, rather, a vital source of capital for transnational Afghan networks of credit and trust, networks that criss-cross an expansive Eurasian arena and that also extend into the advanced economies of Western Europe. Recognition of the penetration of Afghan networks into multiple contexts brings attention to alternative financial geographies and their centres, nodes, and peripheries. Such geographies challenge the simple understanding that migrant sending countries are merely a departure point for refugees. They draw attention instead to the role that such networks and nodes play in the processes of development (Carrier 2017). The ethnography presented above also demonstrates how they connect regions rarely thought about in relation to one another in conventional economic geography.

A third specific contribution of the article has been to debates on the durability of trading networks. Trust is an important concept that provides critical insights into the key determinants of the effectiveness of trading networks. Yet, by moving beyond the abstract conceptualizations of both trust and mistrust, and focusing instead on tangible acts of entrustment (*ammanat kardan*), notably giving cash for safe-keeping and raising capital on property, this article has brought attention to the contingency inherent in the social relationships around which trading networks form. Hitherto, anthropologists and scholars in related disciplines have sought to understand the significance of trust-based relations to trading networks and commerce in terms of the power of shared ties of kinship, friendship, religion and regional identity to such social formations. They have done so ethnographically by focusing on ethnographic concepts such as ‘closeness’ and ‘hospitality’, thereby revealing the importance of moral work and moral spaces – notably those associated with the provision of hospitality – to forging trust. By drawing attention to the contingent, coincidental and unpredictable interplay of individual and collective trajectories over extended periods of time and across complex geographical and legally diverse realms, the material presented here questions the extent to which the broad field of ethics is always the most suitable vehicle through which to understand the relationship between trust and commerce.

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Notes

1. I am aware that a few individuals have registered with the China-based offices of the UNHCR and are waiting for the organization to arrange their settlement in third countries.
2. Afghan traders keep a variety of nodes in place across space and time through maintaining properties and basing family members; connections to nodes that have gone through periods of decline, yet might prove to be valuable sites for future commerce, are thus sustained.

3. Compare Mathews's (2011) study of African communities in Hong Kong with that of Mathews et al. (2017) on Guangzhou.
4. On Afghan trading communities in Turkey, see Marsden (2018).
5. Other countries that have seen abrupt and large-scale deportations of Afghan traders over the past 15 years include Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan; Afghan traders in Tajikistan have also been stripped of their assets and seen their businesses closed by the authorities.
6. Most such women are of Han rather than Muslim Hui or Uyghur background, though some converted to Islam after marrying men from Afghanistan.
7. While Afghan traders visit and work in Tajikistan using official business visas, the majority of Afghans permanently based in the country are formally registered as refugees with the government and the UNHCR. For more details, see Marsden (2016b).
8. The Seventh-Kilometre market was established in 1999 against the backdrop of the breakdown of the Soviet Union and the emergence of new market economies (Humphrey and Skrvskaja 2009). Traders based in the market hail from a wide range of ethno-linguistic backgrounds, including local Russian-speaking Ukrainian nationals, Afghans, Turks, Kurds, Azeris, Syrians, and Vietnamese, each of which is active in a particular niche. See Skrvskaja (2014) and Marouda (this issue).
9. Afghanistan's Hindu and Sikh minority communities were critical actors in the trade in commodities between South and Central Asia, as well as Russia (Levi 2002).
10. For a detailed discussion of the relationship between the Afghan and Ottoman legal systems, see Ahmed (2017).

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