

BEYOND THE SILK ROADS

Trade, Mobility and
Geopolitics across Eurasia

MAGNUS MARSDEN



Beyond the Silk Roads

Small-scale traders play a crucial role in forging Asian connectivity, forming networks and informal institutions separate from those driven by nation states, such as China's Belt and Road Initiative. This ambitious study provides a unique insight into the lives of the mobile traders from Afghanistan who traverse Eurasia. Reflecting on over a decade of intensive ethnographic fieldwork, Magnus Marsden introduces readers to a dynamic yet historically durable universe of commercial and cultural connections. Through an exploration of the traders' networks, cultural and religious identities, as well as the nodes in which they operate, Marsden emphasises their ability to navigate Eurasia's geopolitical tensions and to forge transregional routes that channel significant flows of people, resources and ideas. *Beyond the Silk Roads* will interest those seeking to understand contemporary iterations of the Silk Road within the context of geopolitics in the region. This title is also available as Open Access.

Magnus Marsden is Professor of Social Anthropology and Director of the Sussex Asia Centre in the School of Global Studies at the University of Sussex. He is the author of the prize-winning *Living Islam: Muslim Religious Experience in Pakistan's North-West Frontier* (2005), *Fragments of the Afghan Frontier* (with B. D. Hopkins, 2012) and *Trading Worlds* (2016).

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Magnus Marsden

University of Sussex



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For mur-e chashmam Robin jan!

Contents

<i>List of Maps</i>	page viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>Glossary</i>	xiii
Introduction: Beyond the Silk Roads	1
1 ‘Take Your Help Away and Leave Us in Peace!’: The Anthropology of Geopolitics as Lived	33
2 Inter-Asian Corridor of Connectivity (1): The Eurasian World – China, Russia, Ukraine and Western Europe	56
3 Inter-Asian Corridor of Connectivity (2): West Asia – China, the Arabian Peninsula and Turkey	86
4 ‘Welcome to Yiwu, China International Trade City!’ Everyday Life in a Chinese Commercial Node	122
5 Minorities, Commerce and the Legacy of Muslim Asia’s Urban Cosmopolitanism: Afghanistan’s Hindus and Sikhs	162
6 An Alternative Eurasian Economic Geography: Afghanistan’s Role in Long-Distance Trade	189
7 Afghan Restaurants in Inter-Asian Worlds: Prestige, Information Pooling and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Long-Distance Trade	221
Conclusion: Geopolitics, Critical Responsiveness and Navigational Agency in Eurasian Connectivity	254
<i>Note on Fieldwork</i>	267
<i>References</i>	269
<i>Index</i>	289

Maps

- | | |
|---|------------------|
| 1 The main centres of significance for Afghanistan's
Central Asian emigres | <i>page</i> xvii |
| 2 The main commercial centres of the 'Eurasian corridor' | xviii |
| 3 The main commercial centres of the 'West Asian corridor' | xix |

Acknowledgements

The research grant out of which this book arose spanned the years between 2015 and 2020: Donald Trump's election year marking one end of the period, and the UK's exit from the European Union the other. It will come as no surprise that a key theme of this study is the ways in which the mobile traders upon whom it focuses engage with geopolitical processes. These traders – most of whom identify themselves as being from Afghanistan – offer unique insights into the nature of such processes because of their experiences of the ongoing attempts of empires and nation states to project power and influence on the part of the world they call home.

In an earlier book, *Trading Worlds: Afghan Merchants across Modern Frontiers*, I explored the life histories of mobile Afghan traders living and working in Central Asia. *Trading Worlds* documented the nature of mobile Afghans' livelihood strategies and everyday lives, especially in Tajikistan, and theorised these in relation to the anthropology of ethics and morality and to debates about the form taken by national identity formations in fragile states. By turning its attention to Afghan traders active in China, as well as documenting their connections to traders in the former Soviet Union (especially Russia and Ukraine) and West Asia (notably Turkey and Saudi Arabia), this book expands the geographical scope of *Trading Worlds*. More significantly, *Beyond the Silk Roads* shifts its thematic focus away from the traders' individual life histories and social relationships and towards the structure and dynamics of the networks and nodes that are critical for their collective activities.

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Some sections of the chapters have been previously published elsewhere, though they are reanalysed and framed here in relation to this book's overarching themes. The final section of the ethnographic material presented in **Chapter 5** was initially published in the *Journal of History and Anthropology* as 'Islamic cosmopolitanism out of Muslim Asia: Hindu-Muslim business co-operation between Odessa and Yiwu' (29(1): 121–39). **Chapter 4** includes a revised and reframed version of ethnographic material initially published by myself and Diana Ibañez-Tirado.¹ Ethnographic material discussed in one section of **Chapter 6** was initially published by the *Journal of Global Networks* in the form of an article in *Global Networks*.²

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¹ Marsden and Ibañez Tirado 2018. ² Marsden 2020a.

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As the following pages will make amply clear, the fieldwork on which this book is based was not always plain sailing: its more difficult aspects, however, were frequently punctuated by the warmth and generosity of traders from Afghanistan, many of whom I am now honoured to think of as friends. I regret for reasons of confidentiality that I am unable to name any of them here.

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progressed and eventually concluded. I wish him all the best in the years to come and am honoured to dedicate this book to him and to him alone.

I have used pseudonyms for all people in this book, as well as for easily identifiable locations and businesses. Any mistakes remaining in the book are my own, and I take responsibility for them.

Glossary

Unless otherwise stated, the glossary comprises key words and phrases used in the standard form of Persian/Farsi spoken in Afghanistan that has been referred to officially in the country as ‘Dari’ since 1958.³

<i>amanat kardan</i>	to entrust
<i>andiwal-e sahi</i>	real friend
<i>anjoman</i>	association
<i>ashak</i>	pasta dumpling filled with <i>gandana</i>
<i>ashna</i>	acquaintance
<i>ashpaz</i>	chef
<i>ay khanum</i>	sheets of dough interspersed with mincemeat
<i>badmash</i>	criminals; thugs
<i>ba-farhang</i>	cultured
<i>ba-sawad</i>	educated
<i>bay’ al wafa</i>	selling on faithfulness (Arabic)
<i>bewatan</i>	stateless
<i>beinsaf</i>	unjust
<i>bekar</i>	without work
<i>billa aywaz</i>	without replacement
<i>boja</i>	relationship between men married to sisters
<i>brinj</i>	rice
<i>buhran</i>	crisis
<i>chainaki</i>	lamb and chickpea stew slowly cooked in metal teapots
<i>chaykhana</i>	teahouse
<i>chai-ye sabz</i>	green tea
<i>dast-e khali</i>	empty handed
<i>deg</i>	cooking pot

³ See Beeman 2010.

<i>deg kardan</i>	to cook
<i>dil tang</i>	depressed
<i>dindar</i>	religious
<i>duq</i>	bored
<i>dost-e waqiyee</i>	true friend
<i>dukandar</i>	shopkeeper
<i>dosti; rafaqat</i>	friendship
<i>ehtimad</i>	trust
<i>ehtibar</i>	trustable
<i>ishleki</i>	a dish popular amongst Turkmen in Afghanistan comprising minced meat and onions in a pastry crust
<i>fesad-e idara</i>	institutional corruption
<i>gandana</i>	Afghan leek/Chinese chives
<i>gap</i>	discussion
<i>gashatak</i>	discussion (Uzbek/Turkestani)
<i>ghalmaghal</i>	raucous
<i>ghulam</i>	slaves
<i>giraw</i>	surety, mostly made in the form of a jointly agreed upon temporary ownership of a property
<i>gruh</i>	group
<i>gudam/anbar</i>	warehouse
<i>gumruk</i>	customs
<i>hafiz-e qur'an</i>	a person who has committed the entire Qur'an to memory
<i>haji khana</i>	lodgings used by pilgrims on the hajj
<i>hawala</i>	money transfer
<i>hawaladar</i>	unofficial currency dealers
<i>ikhhtitaf kardan</i>	to kidnap
<i>kaala pacha</i>	a stew comprising cow feet and head
<i>kafala</i>	system used in Saudi Arabia and other countries in the Gulf legally linking a migrants' work visa to a particular job and a particular citizen-sponsor/corporate entity (Arabic)
<i>kafeel</i>	sponsor (Arabic)
<i>kaka</i>	father's brother
<i>kalanha</i>	elders
<i>karai shinwari</i>	lamb, tomato and chilli cooked in a <i>karai</i>
<i>kar-e janjal</i>	problematic/difficult work
<i>karmandha-ye dawlat</i>	state officials

<i>keraye</i>	rental
<i>khairat</i>	sacrificial feast of remembrance
<i>khakh</i>	soil
<i>khamirbab</i>	dough used in the preparation of pasta dishes
<i>kharab</i>	bad
<i>khatum-e qur'an</i>	recitation of the entire Qur'an by memory
<i>khud khwah</i>	egoist/selfish
<i>khush tab</i>	humorous
<i>khow</i>	asleep
<i>kuch kardan</i>	to migrate
<i>lutf</i>	a favour
<i>malia</i>	tax
<i>mama</i>	mother's brother
<i>mantu</i>	pasta dumplings stuffed with meat
<i>markaz</i>	centre
<i>mazhabi</i>	religious
<i>mehman nawazi/dosti</i>	hospitality
<i>mehnat</i>	hard work
<i>mobariza-ye motadawoom</i>	sustained struggle
<i>modarn</i>	modern
<i>motamadin</i>	sophisticated
<i>muhajir</i>	refugee
<i>mui safed</i>	elders
<i>musafir khana</i>	lodgings for travellers
<i>nasabnama</i>	genealogies
<i>nanwai</i>	bakery
<i>nur-e chashmam</i>	light of my eye
<i>paisa-e nurkh</i>	cash
<i>pul-e peshaki</i>	an advance fee
<i>pul-e siah</i>	black/illegal money
<i>puldar</i>	rich/wealthy
<i>qabala</i>	land registration documents
<i>qachaqbar</i>	smugglers
<i>qaradadiha</i>	contractors
<i>qarz</i>	loan/debt/good provided on credit
<i>qarzdar</i>	debtor
<i>qorma</i>	stew
<i>raan</i>	mortgage (Arabic)
<i>rahbaran</i>	leaders
<i>riba</i>	interest (Arabic)
<i>rishwat</i>	bribes

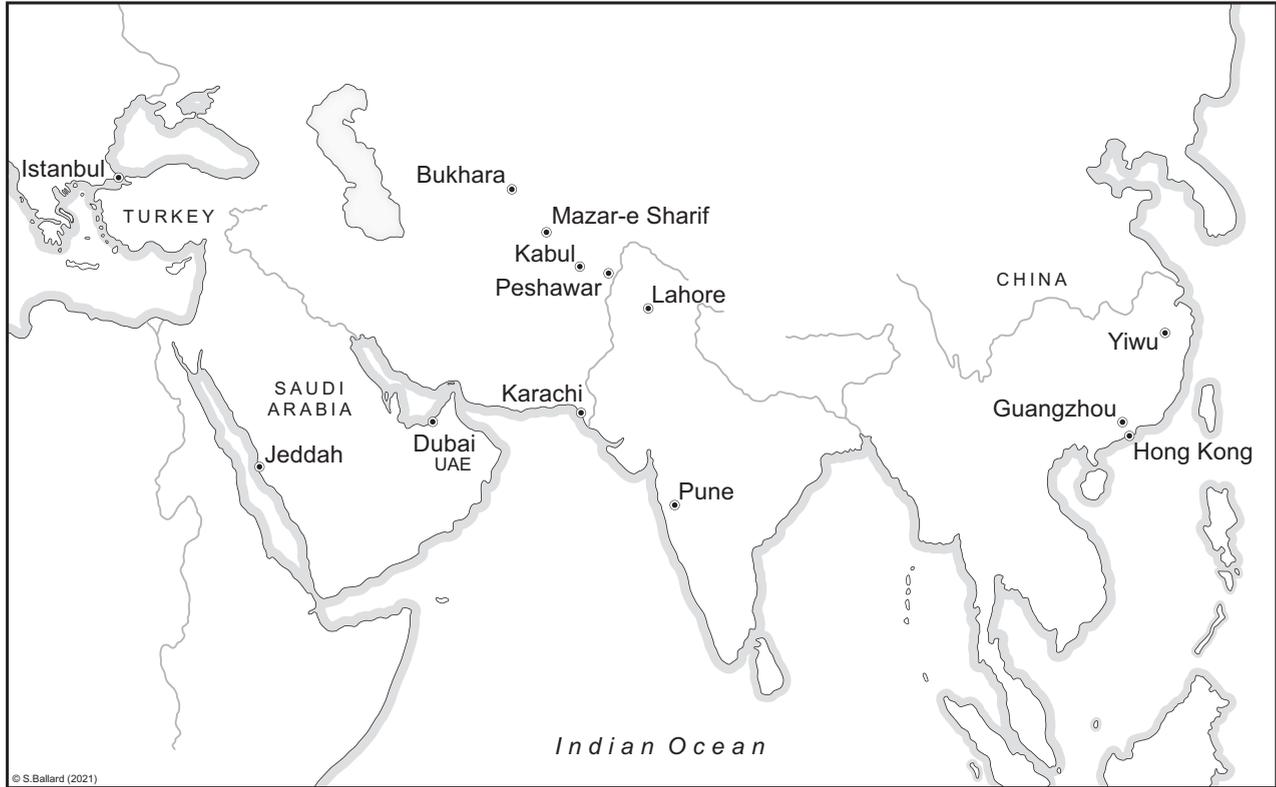
<i>rowarbit</i>	relationships (Arabic)
<i>rughan-e kunjit</i>	sesame oil
<i>ruz-e shahadat</i>	day of martyrdom
<i>sadiq</i>	honest and true
<i>sambusa</i>	baked mincemeat pies
<i>saraf</i>	money exchange agent
<i>sar qulfi</i>	long-term lease arrangement
<i>sazman</i>	organisation
<i>sheer yakh</i>	hand-made Afghan ice cream
<i>shorba</i>	soup
<i>sharakat</i>	partnership
<i>shirkat-e transporti</i>	transport companies
<i>shirkat-e tijorati</i>	company offering services related to trade
<i>shirin buya</i>	liquorice
<i>sofra/daastarkhan</i>	cloth around which diners sit on the floor when eating
<i>sud</i>	interest
<i>sumnati</i>	traditional
<i>talukat</i>	relationships
<i>ta'arof</i>	ritualised display/performance of politeness
<i>tajir</i>	trader/merchant
<i>tanbal</i>	lazy
<i>tandur</i>	clay oven
<i>taqiya khana</i>	Sufi lodge
<i>taqwa</i>	piety
<i>tarbiya</i>	upbringing
<i>tazkira</i>	national identity card
<i>tekke</i>	Sufi lodge (Turkish)
<i>turk-tabar</i>	Turkic
<i>urf-o adat-e afghanha</i>	Afghan culture and traditions
<i>ushr</i>	land tax based on shari'a law
<i>ustad</i>	a master
<i>waqf</i>	charitable foundation (Arabic)
<i>wasita</i>	connections
<i>zakat</i>	alms that Muslims are religiously obliged to give
<i>zer-e nazar</i>	under the gaze



Map 1 The main centres of significance for Afghanistan's Central Asian emigres



Map 2 The main commercial centres of the 'Eurasian corridor'



Map 3 The main commercial centres of the 'West Asian corridor'

Introduction: Beyond the Silk Roads

‘Our country is at the heart of Asia’, Zia, an Afghan trader in his mid-fifties who works in St Petersburg’s Apraksin Dvor market, remarked to me in December 2015. ‘Yet if the heart has all the qualities that allow the entire body to function, so too is the heart – as pressure increases and the veins block – the place where if one thing goes wrong the entire body fails.’ Along with a further 100,000 Afghans living across the Russian Federation, and thousands in Ukraine, Belarus and the Central Asian states, Zia makes a living selling goods imported from China to Russian buyers. Such goods are mostly sold on a wholesale basis in large markets often identified by scholars and policymakers as being the sites of the post-Soviet world’s ‘informal economy’. It is impossible to calculate with any degree of accuracy the monetary size of this type of activity, not least because many of the goods in which traders such as Zia deal are imported to the Russian Federation without the completion of formal customs procedures. But the size of the markets in which these traders work, alongside the vibrant nature of the commercial cities in China in which they purchase commodities, indicates a sizeable contribution to post-Soviet economies.

This book is a study of the connective networks and supporting corridors that bind together different parts of Eurasia. In the last five years, China’s Belt and Road Initiative has brought Eurasian connectivity to the heart of global discussions about development and geopolitics.¹ The vantage point that *Beyond the Silk Roads* takes on regional connectivity, however, is not that of China’s policymakers, but of traders from Afghanistan, one of the world’s most turbulent countries. I conducted fieldwork with traders in Afghanistan but also in the vibrant commercial

¹ The Belt and Road Initiative is China’s infrastructural development strategy that was announced in 2013 and seeks to promote global and regional connectivity by way of the development of Central Asian land routes and Indo-Pacific sea routes. See: Clarke 2017, Fallon 2015, Ferdinand 2016, Gladney 1994, Ploberger 2017, Rolland 2017a, Winter 2019.

nodes in which traders from the country operate, spending time with them in their shops in Kabul, offices in China's 'international trade city' of Yiwu, as well as in wholesale markets in Jeddah, Istanbul, Odessa, London and St Petersburg. The book identifies and focuses on two trans-regional 'corridors of connectivity' along which the traders operate: one connecting China and the post-Soviet world, and the other that involves Central Asian traders linking China to West Asia. Its chief concern is with the ability of traders active across these human-commercial corridors to navigate between fraught geopolitical worlds. By documenting this critical dimension of their everyday lives, and its effects on their identities, *Beyond the Silk Roads* seeks to illuminate aspects of Asian connectivity that are not fully accounted for in an expanding and increasingly sophisticated body of literature on inter-Asian dynamics that treats regions as 'fluid and interconnected', rather than 'fixed and self-contained' and explores the relevance of notions of 'the Silk Road' and 'the Eurasian arena' to understanding this.² Describing and analysing the experiences of mobile traders, the networks they form and the multiple inter-Asian commercial nodes in which they operate, the book illuminates the relevance, resilience and ongoing vitality of their commercial activities, histories, communities and geographies.

From the US New Silk Roads strategy, launched by Hillary Clinton in Chennai in July 2011, to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, announced by President Xi Jinping in 2013, forms of 'regional connectivity' driven by state policy have come to be regarded as key to the future of unstable states in Central Asia such as Afghanistan and to global economic growth more generally. The trope of the Silk Road has also grown in stature in scholarship on Asia. The concept has increasingly come to be used as a window for understanding global history at its most expansive scale.³ It has also been deployed to reveal the state of geopolitical dynamics and tensions in Asia and Europe today.⁴ The focus on such megaprojects of trade and infrastructure is understandable. Yet the emphasis given to 'state-driven, state-centric and state-controlled' visions of regional connectivity has had a silencing effect on the ongoing significance of the lived forms of Eurasian connections that are the central focus of this study.⁵ At the same time, the scholarly fixation with 'the local' and 'the global' has resulted in comparatively little attention being paid to the types of sustained transregional connections forged by men such as Zia.

² Huat et al. 2019: 40. ³ Frankopan 2015. ⁴ Frankopan 2018.

⁵ Van Schendel 2020: 39.

From a Central Asian Oasis City to the Black Sea: Beginnings

My interest in inter-Asian trading networks dates to my first visit to Pakistan in 1995. In 1995–1996, I spent a year teaching English at a small school in Chitral – a mountainous and relatively remote district of northern Pakistan that shares a border with Afghanistan and in parts lies only miles from the post-Soviet state of Tajikistan. In Chitral, the lively and diverse commercial roles played by Afghans in villages and small towns was a striking feature of daily life. Chitral Town, the district's administrative headquarters, was home to tens of thousands of Afghans, many from the country's northern provinces of Panjshir and Badakhshan. These Afghans sold all manner of goods in the bazaar, ranging from the type of waistcoats worn by Afghan mujahidin fighters to handicrafts chiselled out of Lapis Lazuli that were popular among the Western tourists who visited Chitral during the summer months. There were also shops in the bazaar that functioned largely as money exchange and transfer agents. The Afghans living in remoter villages also travelled far and wide, and often across the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, to purchase livestock that they then slaughtered and sold in Chitral.⁶

The following year, I returned to Pakistan, spending six weeks in Chitral but also making a trip along the Karakoram Highway in order to visit the city of Kashgar in China's Xinjiang autonomous region. Today, little remains of the architecture of this historic oasis city other than a street preserved for the mostly Han Chinese tourists who continue to visit it. In 1996, however, Kashgar's old city remained largely intact; groups of elderly Uyghurs sat around in the town's central mosque square and in the teahouses (*chaykhana*) dotting its street discussing the day's events. Another equally memorable aspect of my brief time in the city was staying at the Chini Bagh Hotel, a ramshackle establishment housed in the buildings of the nineteenth-century British consulate that had a pleasant garden to while away the hot summer nights. Aside from a handful of other tourists and backpackers, many of the other guests in the hotel were traders from Pakistan visiting Kashgar to procure small commodities, especially batteries and jewellery. At the time, China had recently embarked on the policy of 'opening up', though it did not go on to join the World Trade Organization until 2001. Most traders from Pakistan visited north-western China in specially organised groups – doing so facilitated their securing visas and the relevant documents they required in order to trade. Most of the traders with whom I spoke in the

⁶ For a detailed discussion, see [Chapter 6](#) in [Marsden and Hopkins \(2012\)](#).

smattering of Pashtu I had learned in Chitral identified themselves as being ethnolinguistic Pashtuns from eastern Afghanistan, though they had travelled to China using Pakistani passports. Indeed, many were the descendants of families that had moved to Pakistan from Afghanistan in the 1960s, a decade or so before the country's invasion by the Soviet Union. The traders appeared to pass their days well in Kashgar. At the time, the city was predominantly Muslim. As a result, traders from Pakistan and Afghanistan faced few if any of the issues procuring suitable halal food that they would in later years as they moved their commercial operations to the country's eastern seaboard.

My encounters with these transborder Pashtun itinerant merchants came back to me vividly in June 2012 during a visit to Ukraine's Black Sea port of Odessa. I had travelled to Odessa after hearing about a lively community of Afghans living there from Afghan friends and anthropologist colleagues who had conducted research in the city.⁷ A healthy proportion of the 4,000 Afghans who lived in Odessa had been educated in Ukraine during the Soviet period. At that time, the Soviet Union played an active role in the politics and economy of Afghanistan. During the time that I spent in Odessa in 2012, one of the most informative and open of the many Afghans I met was Gulzad, a man in his late forties who hailed from Afghanistan's eastern city of Jalalabad. Gulzad took me to Odessa's beach most evenings during my three-week stay in Odessa. We chatted about our experiences while playing volleyball in the warm waters of the Black Sea. In the evenings, my new friend invited me to take tea in an Afghan-style guest room he had built in the house he owned in the city's outskirts, showing me the chillies and okra that his wife grew in the garden with seeds brought from eastern Afghanistan. During the day, I would visit the shop he ran from a container in Odessa's renowned Sidmoi or 'Seventh-Kilometre' Market – a sprawling market in which migrants and immigrants purvey imported goods from inside row upon row of containers. Gulzad's friends regularly told me how generous he was, but one also shared with me a word of warning, 'make sure you don't compete too hard when we play volley ball in the sea because if you cross him you will be in difficulties'.

Like me, Gulzad – along with one of his friends who also lived in Odessa in 2012 – had spent much time living in Chitral during the 1990s. Back then, the two friends sold Chinese batteries and Indian-made bangles to local Chitrali villagers. They also worked with traders in the district who oversaw a healthy business in the procurement and sale of scrap plastic items such as sandals. Gulzad reminisced about how Chitral's cool nights

⁷ Skvirskaja 2012.

had offered a welcome respite from the suffocating heat of Peshawar, the capital of what was then referred to as Pakistan's North West Frontier Province until being officially designated as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2010. In addition to having spent time in Chitral, Gulzad had in those years also travelled regularly to Kashgar – we speculated that we had been in the city at around the same time. Far from being a simple purveyor in small commodities like the traders with whom I had interacted in the Chini Bagh Hotel, Gulzad had engaged in more complex operations and transactions during his visits to China in the mid-1990s. One activity he told me about was his role as a financier for Arabs who contracted Pakistanis to travel to the Xinjiang region and capture birds of prey for export to Pakistan and from there on to the Gulf states. A difficulty faced by the Pakistani hawk hunters was the payment of labour costs to the Chinese locals who worked for them. At the time, the Chinese authorities strictly enforced legislation relating to currency conversion and the bringing of cash in and out of China. Gulzad visited China on officially sponsored trade visits that facilitated the export of goods to Pakistan through officially sanctioned barter schemes. As a result, he was able to pay the salaries and living costs of the Chinese labourers who worked for the Pakistani hawk hunters by providing them with Indian-made bangles, which they could then go on to sell in Xinjiang's markets. Gulzad made a profit from such activities by selling Chinese goods on his return to Pakistan.

In the years to come, such skills would come to shape Gulzad's development as a trader. From his involvement in the transborder trade between Pakistan and China, Gulzad went on to establish a trading office in the mid-2000s in the Chinese city of Yiwu – a global hub for the purchase of 'small commodities' located in the wealthy eastern province of Zhejiang and about which we will learn a great deal later in this book. He eventually moved to Ukraine and established himself in the wholesale of commodities imported from China. Gulzad wore his trans-Eurasian background as a mark of distinction: he told me that he had made his first visit to Ukraine by land by way of China, Kazakhstan and Russia and without carrying a single identification document.

As I studied different aspects of the social dynamics of Pakistan and Afghanistan and the interactions between these societies and the wider world through migration, I began to recognise the significant role the traders I had come to know played in connecting regions of Asia rarely thought about in relation to one another. Relatively few discussions of the importance of such traders, their routes and the networks to which they belonged existed in the literature on contemporary forms of inter-Asian commerce. Those studies that did address such communities tended to

view them through the lens of ‘migration’ or ‘refugee studies’, focusing upon the social and political barriers to everyday life, citizenship and integration within the societies in which they had settled. Other studies focused narrowly on the way in which trade was a livelihood strategy in times of political and economic upheaval. And within this literature there was also the tendency to focus on the experiences of racially distinct communities – Africans in China, for instance. The fortunes and experiences of mobile people from adjacent regions within Eurasia was less regularly the focus of sustained attention and analysis. I also found little substantial recognition of the lives of men and women who had adapted to life in the countries in which they had settled and – mostly through a combination of commerce and marriage into local communities – had subsequently earned positions of status and respect.

As my research progressed, international projects such as the ‘New Silk Road’ and the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ grew increasingly powerful and important. More and more focus turned to the effect of new infrastructures on Asia’s geopolitics. As a result, the forms of trade that had animated commerce, exchange and mobility in the region for decades before the design of geopolitical and infrastructural megaprojects in regional and international capitals were further marginalised from discussions about the nature and benefits of regional connectivity. Indeed, existing forms of trade were increasingly regarded as the archaic hangover of a time gone by, or as constituting the ‘survival strategy’ of destitute and marginal refugee and migrant communities in the context of war, social breakdown and the dissolution of older political structures, especially those of the Soviet Union.

Having seen people I had known in Chitral in the mid-1990s transform into actors such as the eminently transnational Gulzad in Odessa in the second decade of the twenty-first century, it was clear to me that existing understandings represented just one aspect of a much more layered history. In order to understand the multiple influences that Afghans brought to their trading activities across Eurasia, I spent the next eight years visiting the commercial centres that traders told me were significant to their work.⁸ These ranged from the modern cosmopolitan trading city of Yiwu in China to the historic ports of Istanbul and Jeddah in West Asia; they also incorporated many smaller cities and towns in between. During these visits, I met and spoke to hundreds of traders. Some – like Gulzad – were people I had come to know, which allowed me to follow them to different places as and when they moved. Others were introduced (*ma’arefi*) to me – often using telephones or social

⁸ For the precise dates and location of the fieldwork, see ‘Note on Fieldwork’.

media – by my established contacts: on hearing that I would be visiting a location in which they had friends, associates and business partners, they would give me the contact details of people I should speak to on my arrival. I learned in meetings with such traders how individuals built on their cumulative experience of inter-Asian trade and deployed this knowledge in the different settings across which they worked.

As we shall see later, historians have emphasised the ways in which Eurasian commercial communities have acted in culturally flexible ways while at the same time building durable networks and identities.⁹ A combination of both sets of skills played a critical role in the ability of networks to trade, both over long distances and over extended periods of time. In his study of Armenian trading networks centred on the city of New Julfa in Iran, Sebouh David Aslanian suggests that Armenian traders in the early modern period are helpfully thought of as ‘transimperial cosmopolitans’ as a result of their ability to straddle linguistic, political and religious boundaries.¹⁰ In similar terms, Gagan Sood, in his study of Eurasian trading networks in the early modern period, demonstrates that traders from a wide variety of religious and cultural backgrounds communicated with one another through their use of a shared Persian vernacular, itself heavily inflected with standard idioms and key phrases.¹¹

As I spent more and more time with Afghan merchants in Eurasian contexts, I came to see how modern institutions, most especially those associated with the nation state, have irrevocably changed the worlds explored by historians. Such transformations are evident in the material presented in this book, most especially in terms of traders’ fraught relationships with the citizenship regimes of the countries across which they move. In some contexts, the traders appeal for formal citizenship – or at least the forms of protection and security it is regarded as conferring on individuals and their families – on the basis of marriage, the relationships they build with local officials and displays of loyalty to the nation states they inhabit. In other settings in which they are unable to secure legal access to citizenship, traders seek to build relationships with governments elsewhere that do grant citizenship, often in a manner that reflects the traders’ understanding of complex geopolitical dynamics. They may also seek a degree of security by emphasising their cultural and historic connections to a particular society – what anthropologists often refer to as ‘flexible’ or ‘cultural’ citizenship – even if doing so cannot fully address the precarious legal uncertainties that animate many aspects of their daily

⁹ For a pioneering attempt to explain the forms of cultural brokerage practised by ‘trade diasporas’, see Curtin, 1984 and see also Baghdiantz-McCabe, Harlaftis and Pepelasis Minoglou 2005.

¹⁰ Aslanian 2014: 66. ¹¹ Sood 2016: 130–33.

lives.¹² This strategy is, for example, particularly evident in the case of traders of Turkic ethnolinguistic groups that are currently based in Turkey – we will meet these traders in [Chapter 3](#).

Yet against the backdrop of such transformations, parallels between earlier and contemporary trading structures, identities and modes of mobile life are also visible. Traders thrive in the intermediate zones between competing geopolitical projects. They are able to make and handle competing loyalties to political entities and projects. And, for the traders, cultural and linguistic versatility is widely regarded as a necessary quality for life in the connected contexts of Eurasia. Given that they enact such modes of being in a wider context intersected by multiple geopolitical projects, the designation of actors such as Gulzad as contemporary ‘transimperial cosmopolitans’ assumes an even more direct relevance.

Beyond the Silk Roads

This book brings attention and definition to the alternative geographies authored by traders such as Gulzad and the communities and the histories of connectivity with which they are entangled; it does so in two major ways.

First, *Beyond the Silk Roads* aims to analyse the role played by ‘informal traders’ in connecting China to multiple Asian settings. In order to do so, it focuses not on the traders’ economic practices but on the types of networks and communities important to the traders, as well as the routes along which goods, people and ideas travel.¹³ It does so against the backdrop of the broader geopolitical contexts in which the traders act, and asks how these contexts inform and are informed by the traders’ personal and collective identities and strategies. In particular, the book builds on but also seeks to extend scholarship that distinguishes between forms of economic globalisation forged from ‘the bottom-up’ and those orchestrated ‘top-down’ by nation states and international organisations.¹⁴ International boundary crossing mobility is a central aspect of the traders’ livelihoods. As a result, the traders upon whom the book focuses are routinely exposed to and sensitive of geopolitical shifts. I emphasise how in order to participate in commercial forms of connective activity, merchants must learn to navigate multiple projects of ‘geopolitical engineering’ and the forms of political and

¹² Ong 1999.

¹³ On the economic aspects of the traders’ activities and relationships, see [Chapter 1](#) of [Marsden 2016](#). An extensive body of literature within the field of ‘economic anthropology’ explores the business models of Eurasia’s informal traders. For an overview, see [Fehlings and Karrar 2020](#).

¹⁴ [Mathews, Lins Ribeiro and Alba 2012](#).

cultural ‘divergence’ these inevitably spawn.¹⁵ The traders, I argue, are adept at contending with such tensions through the conduct of informal or everyday diplomacy. They also build institutions that are the product of, and able to withstand, shifts in geopolitical configurations through time.¹⁶ In the course of such activities, the traders forge transnational routes and nodes of circulation that channel significant flows of people, resources and ideas. The routes and nodes authored by the traders are of interest to state actors who react to them in a range of ways, including attempting to regulate them, capitalising directly from them or using them as channels to extend the influence and reach of the states they serve across national boundaries.

In this sense, the book develops an anthropological approach to the study of geopolitics as lived. The approach I develop departs from the conventional tendency to assume that the sphere of geopolitics is the preserve of state actors alone and inherently external to society, impinging upon everyday life but not being shaped by it. The traders on whom the book focuses do not merely carry out the same role as state actors, diplomats and strategists in the commercial rather than political sphere or in an informal rather than formal idiom. Nor is it the relative paucity of the resources available to traders as compared with those available to states that distinguishes the role they play in geopolitical processes. The anthropological approach to ‘lived geopolitics’ that I advance in the book, rather, resists locating groups such as the traders explored in the following pages as being either ‘above’ or ‘below’ the state. It focuses, instead, on recognising that the context in which they act is located in the interstices between geopolitical projects, including those across time (as in the case of the shift in forms of Eurasian connectivity promoted by the USSR to those developed by China) and space (between Russian and Turkish conceptions of Eurasian connectivity, for instance). It is unhelpful to think of mobile Afghan traders, I suggest, in terms of their being either opposed to state boundaries and geopolitical projects or simply derivative of them. The traders are themselves authors of geographical routes, connections and imaginations – this distinguishes them from business communities originating in nation states that are playing a major role in promoting projects of Eurasian connectivity. Unlike political projects such as ISIS that directly challenge the international order, however, the transregional routes and geographical imaginations the traders author are imbricated and layered in a complex and inherently

¹⁵ Van Schendel 2020: 39.

¹⁶ The term ‘informal diplomacy’ is increasingly used by scholars across a range of disciplines to analyse the ‘intermediation between states through the interaction of non-state actors’. See Yolaçan 2019: 37.

contingent way with ‘official’ geopolitics; an analysis of their activities thus requires a consideration of specific spatial and temporal contexts.

Second, *Beyond the Silk Roads* is also about the lives and experiences of the individuals involved in this type of trade and mobility: tens of thousands of traders from countries including Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan travel frequently between their home countries, as well as the third settings in which they live, to China in order to procure goods for export. Settled communities of traders, moneychangers and export agents from these countries and many others besides live in China’s commercial cities, as well as in vibrant and interconnected trading nodes across Eurasia. Decades before the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative, these communities and networks were playing a pivotal role in the movement of Chinese commodities across Eurasia. Today, they are also increasingly active in the import of critical products – agricultural and natural resources in particular – to China.

This book takes as its point of empirical departure the role played in Eurasian connectivity by traders from or connected to Afghanistan. The story it tells, however, is much broader than one connected to any single group, community or nation state. This is something revealed in the diversity of actors from Afghanistan involved in the forging of such connections.

Zia’s remarks about his country acting as Asia’s throbbing heart demonstrate that traders derive pride and an important sense of professional accomplishment from the role they play in such forms of long-distance commerce – an aspect of being a trader that I have explored in detail in an earlier book, the focus of which was on the moral and ethical dimensions of the everyday lives and identities of long-distance traders from Afghanistan.¹⁷ In the remarks he made to me in St Petersburg, Zia also underscored, however, the extent to which traders must also contend with the visceral tensions and strains that come from being located at the interfaces of multiple geopolitical projects. The traders explored in the book are not merely savvy people able to instrumentally exploit the opportunities offered by tensions between competing geopolitical projects. Learning how to navigate fraught geopolitical contexts also has a palpable effect on their sensibilities and imaginations of the world. A central focus of *Beyond the Silk Roads* is on the way in which traders live and experience life in a world uneasily nestled between multiple geopolitical dynamics, and how doing so affects their everyday experiences, feelings, perceptions and imaginations.

¹⁷ Marsden 2016.

History, Culture and Ideology in Long-Distance Trading Networks

A key finding of the research arising from the fieldwork on which this book is based is that commercial networks made up of individual traders play a critical role in connecting different parts of Asia to one another. Several excellent works by historians have gone beyond abstract and aggregate models of ‘the Silk Road’. Instead, they have developed a ‘Eurasian geographical frame’ that brings together regions (Central Asia, South Asia and the Middle East) that have tended to be treated as distinct ‘civilisations’. This approach emphasises the dynamism of Central Asian commercial networks, highlighting their ‘pulsating structure’ and the ways in which their collective activities were ‘orchestrated’ by multiple competing and collaborating groups.¹⁸ It has brought attention to ‘inter-linked and entangled’ histories of Eurasia while recognising that ‘encounters and interactions could often lead to disconnections and constructions of difference’.¹⁹ In order to achieve these aims, historians have presented ‘fine-grained’ pictures of the ‘people, places, contradictions, and experiences’ that informed the make up of the specific networks that played a critical role in facilitating commercial, cultural and intellectual exchanges in modern Eurasia.²⁰ These studies have emphasised the role played by ties of trust and commercial institutions in facilitating the operations and durability of such long-distance trading networks. They dwell on the powerful mechanisms developed and deployed by networks collectively to enforce shared standards of behaviour across long distances and emphasise the strategies and cultural forms developed by traders to communicate in complex multilingual and multicultural worlds. Shared commitments to religion and ethnicity have played a prominent role in the analysis of the internal coherence of such networks and their ability to withstand historical change over centuries.²¹ Of importance too has been the recognition of *lingua francas*, notably Persian, that are readily deployed by traders and other mobile people regardless of their specific cultural, religious and regional identities and backgrounds.²² New approaches to the ‘Eurasian arena’ developed by historians do not treat the region as a fundamentally unitary ‘civilisation’: Eurasia, it shows, is helpfully conceptualised as a ‘crossroads’ of imperial, economic and cultural interactions – interactions that resulted in significant connections and commonalities but also powerful disconnections and divergences.

¹⁸ Levi 2020.

¹⁹ Khazeni 2014: 8–9. Cf. Fletcher 1995, Hodgson 1963, Subrahmanyam 2007.

²⁰ Can 2020: 182. ²¹ Cf. Aslanian 2014 and Trivellato 2009.

²² On the concept of ‘the Persianate world’, see Green 2019 and Sood 2016.

There are striking similarities between the networks introduced in this book and those documented by historians. These similarities are visible in terms of the importance of understandings of trust to the traders' own analysis of the functioning of the networks to which they belong. They are also apparent in the ways in which networks cross vast territories and are made up of mobile individuals yet simultaneously also depend on their ability to anchor their commercial activities into specific nodes. In a manner reminiscent of Christopher Bayly's analysis of colonial India's 'information order', if networks enable the circulation of critical commercial and political information across long distances, then commercial nodes function as pools for the sharing of information and knowledge about opportunities and risks.²³ Nodes are also the sites in which the reputations of individual commercial personnel are made and unmade, as well as producing the conditions in which networks reproduce themselves culturally, ideologically and sociologically – acting as emotionally pregnant spaces in which traders cultivate and embody shared sensibilities, establish families and reproduce community life. Finally, the networks operating across Eurasian contexts today – like those from the deeper past – are historically layered. As we shall see in the pages that follow, the contemporary shape of networks reflects modern geopolitical projects, but also the ongoing significance of past geopolitical and commercial arrangements. The networks thus layer together, paper over and mediate between multiple projects of Eurasian connectivity across space and time. Rather than approaching history in terms of it being a sequentially unfolding series of stages or periods, understanding the influence of Eurasian projects of connectivity on trading networks necessitates an approach towards time that is layered, overlapping and interpenetrating.²⁴ And it also requires a concurrent conceptualisation of the networks' relationship to space that emphasises circulatory mobility rather than assuming that networks and diasporas are merely the transnational extensions of nation states and the 'ready-made' identities and categories they offer.²⁵ Traders working in the markets of Eurasia today are not archaic hangovers from earlier forms of economic activity. Rather, studying them reveals the ways in which multiple histories are interleaved in an overlapping way in the trading networks they form. The diversity arising from such historical processes manifests itself in the ability of traders to be flexible in the face

²³ Bayly 1996. On Afghanistan's bazaars as nodes in an information order, see Karimi 2020.

²⁴ On the problems associated with fixating on the rupture between 'modern' and 'pre-modern' periods, Smail and Shryock 2013: 721–22. For a discussion on the significance of the recognition of overlapping temporal layers for the understanding of the historiography of Muslim societies, see Bashir 2014.

²⁵ Mandal 2018; Cf. Gualtieri 2020.

of geopolitical change and transformation; the traders attach value to this diversity and recognise the ways in which it enables them to respond to changing scenarios.

But studying the trading networks in the twentieth-first century by means of observing traders' everyday interactions with one another and the contexts they inhabit also illuminates aspects of trading networks that historians – dependent to a large degree on fragmentary documentary evidence – are rarely if ever able to explore in detail. Most importantly, a consideration of the lives of individual traders renders visible disjunctions between the public and collectively held aspects of commercial communities and the lived nature of their everyday lives. Anthropology's capacity to shed light on the distinctions between 'what is said' and 'what is done' in particular societies has for long been the discipline's mainstay.²⁶ Exploring the terrain in between the representations that societies hold of themselves and the dynamics of such societies at an everyday level enabled anthropologists to go beyond stereotypes and generate complex models of social organisation – an approach that has also had a palpable influence on understandings of long-distance trade.²⁷ Such complex models have simultaneously challenged and enriched the abstract approach of social theorists.

The distinction between what traders say about their networks and communities and their lived dynamics is most apparent in this book in relation to the ideas they hold about the importance of trust in their activities. Traders from vastly different communities share a collective emphasis on the important role played by relations and ties of trust in their mode of making a livelihood. Yet, in the context of their everyday lives, individual traders are often far more circumspect about the extent to which their commercial activities really arise from long-term ties of trust, as well as, when required, the successful enforcement of breaches of trust. Time and again, traders remark that they are successful not because of their ability to fashion ties of trust with those with whom they work; instead, they say, it is their ability to withstand mistrustful behaviour that best explains the durability of their activities over time and space.

Recognition of the imperfect workings of trust in the activities of long-distance traders shifts attention away from the conventional scholarly emphasis on the importance of long-term interpersonal relationships of trust that are often found in shared ethnic, religious or cultural backgrounds to the durability of trading networks. *Beyond the Silk Roads* underscores the need, instead, to emphasise the importance of the

²⁶ Malinowski 1992. ²⁷ Cohen 1971 and Cohen 1969.

flexibility of traders and the networks they form, as well as their ability to access and deploy in a contextual manner multiple cultural and ideological resources.²⁸ Such flexibility, and the cultural and ideological multiplicity upon which its enactment relies, plays an important role in three major ways in the durability of the networks studied in this book: it informs their capacity to work with and between multiple geopolitical projects, to work across ideological and cultural divisions and to build social institutions that facilitate the overall activities of trading networks.

Anthropology, Geopolitics and Informal Diplomacy

It is impossible to understand vicissitudes in the fortunes of trading networks without addressing the ways in which the dynamics played out in the field of international politics affect them. The term ‘geopolitical’ has for over a century brought attention to the influence of physical space – rather than merely national territory – on the shaping of international dynamics. The sphere of geopolitics is widely regarded by scholars and analysts alike as being the preserve of the state. As a result, the term geopolitics is most generally associated with deliberate attempts made by state actors to control territories beyond their national boundaries and to influence actors belonging to other states.

If scholars assume that attempts to control territory matter most when they involve the state, then they have also long recognised the need to explore how such processes are affected by the intersection between local ideas about geography and the form taken by political organisations, ranging from those of the tribe to the modern state.²⁹ There is also considerable recognition of the significance of local dynamics to the analysis of international political processes.³⁰ Similarly, scholars of geopolitics have explored nation states’ strategic use of diaspora and transnational communities in attempts to extend their reach, influence and even control.³¹ More recently, anthropologists and scholars in related disciplines have developed the concept of ‘popular geopolitics’. The concept is most widely used to attend to the ways in which states seek to disseminate and materialise their geopolitical projects among local communities – communities that regularly inhabit contexts beyond the

²⁸ For a study emphasising the ‘skills, expertise, and contacts’ of Jewish traders active in the global trade in ostrich feathers, see [Stein 2008](#): 10. For a critique of the deployment of trust in the analysis of trading networks, see [Mathew 2019](#). Alessandro Monsutti employs the notion of ‘trustability’ rather than ‘trust’ per se to emphasise that the act of entrustment in Afghanistan is contingent on the availability of mechanisms that remedy breaches of trust ([Monsutti 2013](#)).

²⁹ See [Dresch 1990](#). ³⁰ See [Kwon 2010](#).

³¹ [Anderson and Clibbens 2018](#), [King and Melvin 1999](#), [Koinova 2017](#), [Scheffer 1986](#).

territories of the national boundaries of the states seeking to influence them.³² The strategies deployed by communities to ‘deal with new regimes of control and (partially) open borders’ have been explored most clearly through a focus on ‘everyday processes of neighbouring’, or ‘collective and individual efforts to manage evolving relations’ across international boundaries.³³

Scholarly writing in this vein has been helpful in bringing attention to the effect of geopolitical processes on particular social and cultural contexts. Traders and mobile persons and societies, however, complicate such approaches in general and the notion of ‘popular geopolitics’ in particular. Such groups are not helpfully understood as ‘locals’ who are either merely on the receiving end of the geopolitical projects of nation states – such as the Belt and Road Initiative – or, alternatively, the actors that localise such projects in particular contexts. Instead, traders by definition make a living by moving things and persons across political boundaries, thereby challenging a dichotomous distinction between the local and the geopolitical.³⁴ For the traders whose lives are explored in this book, making a livelihood in this manner both today and in the past has meant that the critical context in which they act is not a local site influenced by geopolitical forces arising from empires or nation states. The key context in which they act, rather, lies at the interface of multiple contests and struggles between empires and nation states over territory, influence and control beyond national boundaries. The political context in which Afghan traders act and position themselves is not best defined in terms of state boundaries but by historically shifting geographies of power, influence and control. In this context, it is unhelpful to see trading networks as the agent of one state or another, and the traders’ agency as being constrained by the boundaries of the nation state. Instead, the traders and the networks they form are better thought of as being an important ‘substrate of transregional political formations’³⁵ – understanding them requires an approach that reflects the specificities of the geopolitical contexts that shape their modes of acting and interpreting the world.³⁶

State actors are not the only category of person who seek presence, alliances and even control across borders. By acting as pivots between

³² The terms ‘public diplomacy’, ‘popular geopolitics’ and ‘everyday’ or ‘informal’ diplomacy have all been used by scholars to shed light on grounded ways of engaging with and responding to geopolitical processes. For an overview, see [Marsden, Ibañez-Tirado and Henig 2016](#).

³³ [Zhang and Saxer 2017](#): 12. ³⁴ [Humphrey 2018](#). ³⁵ [Anderson forthcoming \(a\)](#).

³⁶ On poetry as a window into the negotiation by Afghans of the geopolitics of imperialism, see [Caron 2018](#).

multiple states advancing different Eurasian geopolitical projects, Afghan traders also facilitate interactions between two or more nation states. Their ability to do this is not underpinned by ‘diplomatic immunity’ but, instead, their own skills of linguistic versatility and ‘cultural immersion’. In order to play such roles, traders must learn and acquire the capacities that enable them to navigate the spaces betwixt and between inelastic, rigid and state-centric approaches to connectivity.³⁷ Popular concepts such as the ‘black economy’ and the ‘unregulated economy’ posit the existence of entirely distinct economic domains. As several scholars have noted, however, ‘legal and illegal, formal and informal, practices are intertwined in complex and fluid ways, and many people take part in both’.³⁸ It is a key contention of this book that understanding such ‘fluid and complex worlds’ requires an analysis not only of the intertwining of formal and informal economic practices but also of actors’ political and cultural skills and capacities. As we shall see, the traders with whom I work regard these skills and capacities as being of unique importance in determining their experiences and fortunes across Eurasia today.

Eurasia has been widely regarded by generations of geopolitical theorists as a physical space of special significance to international politics. In a manner that problematically reflects mid-twentieth-century European politics, some have regarded Eurasia as the ‘heartland’ of global power politics.³⁹ Others, by contrast, argue that as a geographic category Eurasia is inherently elastic. As such, it is helpful because it blurs boundaries between multiple world regions including various parts of Asia and ‘East and West Europe’ and poses a challenge to ‘neatly defined boundaries of the nation-state’.⁴⁰ Another body of literature builds on the idea of ‘civilisation’ and urges recognition of the commonalities in Eurasia’s social and political organisation in ways that transcend the constraints of narrow regions and the boundaries of the nation state.⁴¹

Eurasia’s informal commercial terrain is in no sense level, horizontal or fluid.⁴² As in the past, networks able to call upon the support and protection of particular states and powerful holders of authority regularly find themselves better positioned to conduct commerce across this complex arena than those unable – or unwilling – to do so.⁴³ Such forms of support and protection are of value not merely within the territories of the

³⁷ Anderson 2020. ³⁸ Van Schendel 2020: 41.

³⁹ Bassin and Aksenov 2006 and Megoran and Sharapova 2014. ⁴⁰ Bloch 2017.

⁴¹ Hann 2015. ⁴² Hann 2016.

⁴³ In the nineteenth century traders from South and Central Asia often opted to trade in Ottoman territories under the protection of Russian and British consular support. See Stephens 2014.

specific nation states with which traders identify. Given that being a merchant requires travel and regular mobility, traders invest with great significance the ability to count on the support of an influential state beyond one's home territory. A trader from Afghanistan able to call upon Turkish consular support in Saudi Arabia by dint of holding Turkish nationality, for example, is regarded by his compatriots as being better able to flourish in the Arabian Peninsula than a trader who relies solely on representation by the Afghan state – a political entity they regard as being weak. If, as we shall see, traders are mobile and adaptive in terms of their identities, they also recognise that such mobility depends on close ties and bonds with nation states and those in positions of power and authority. The traders recognise that the territories across which they work have been at the forefront of attempts by regional and global powers to extend and enhance their influence and power in transnational if not imperial ways; they are also clearly aware that if their economic activities are not recorded in a direct sense, then they do constantly engage in practices – ranging from travel to the transfer of capital – that states are able to, and indeed do, 'detect and record'.⁴⁴ From the traders' perspective, there is little that is elastic in terms of their experiences of Eurasia, despite their living highly mobile lives and working across multiple settings.

The decade or so following the collapse of the Soviet Union saw greater levels of fluidity and mobility across Eurasia than had been the case at any point in time since the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. By contrast, the years since 2001 have seen both superpowers and medium-size states seeking to use the state as the prime structure in the forging of interregional connectivity. This is most obvious, of course, in China's Belt and Road Initiative, but it is also apparent in Turkey's policy towards Asia,⁴⁵ as well as in the role played by Russia in the establishment of a Eurasian Customs Union.⁴⁶ Eurasia's 'far neighbours' – from the United States to the EU – have also been active in projects relating to the arena, sometimes launching projects, at other times being drawn into the region by smaller states in order to counterbalance the influence of its 'great powers'.⁴⁷ Viewed from the perspective of these actors, such multiple geopolitical processes undermine the abstract scholarly understanding of Eurasian civilisational commonality yet further. The traders explored in this book often work in distinct geographical corridors, or pathways, of activity, which brings to light the importance of acknowledging the simultaneous importance of different geographic scales. As we see later in the book,

⁴⁴ Van Schendel 2020: 41. ⁴⁵ Aras and Fidan 2009, Bilgin and Bilgiç 2011, Lin 2016.

⁴⁶ Cooper 2013. ⁴⁷ Peyrouse and Raballand 2015, Warkotsch 2011.

Turkey's 'look east' policy, for instance, has invested the concept of West Asia with especially palpable relevance for many mobile traders whose lives criss-cross Turkey, the Gulf states and China but only infrequently penetrate post-Soviet, Eurasian worlds.

Trading networks that have been successful over time in modern Eurasian contexts are generally those that have worked flexibly with rather than against such a multiplicity of geopolitical projects. Rather than demonstrating loyalty to one or other geopolitical player, the capacity to navigate across the spaces in between multiple geopolitical projects is what has enabled them to survive and often flourish. A consideration of the trading networks active in present-day Eurasia reveals the importance for their durability of the ability to hitch themselves simultaneously to multiple and often competing geopolitical projects without becoming ensnared in the power dynamics and conflicts between them. In a manner comparable to the jihadists studied by Darryl Li and the Baluch networks documented by Ameer Lutfi, the traders explored in this world are protagonists in a connected Asia who simultaneously 'move beneath and between governments'⁴⁸ 'without being bound by anyone of them'.⁴⁹

Ideological and Cultural Complexity of Commercial Networks

In a 2018 study, Rutger Claassen sought to develop a model of *navigational* agency. According to Claassen, this mode of agency requires that individuals and groups develop the ability to navigate between social projects at the same time as actively choosing in which social practices they do and do not wish to participate.⁵⁰ The traders explored in *Beyond the Silk Roads* deploy navigational agency in their ability to weave between multiple geopolitical projects. Rather than emphasising the power and importance of choice for either groups or individuals, however, I suggest that a key principle of being a trader in the geopolitical interstices of Eurasian connectivity is that of pragmatically working with rather than against, and across rather than within, different geopolitical projects. A pervasive assumption in the scholarly literature on trading networks is that to be successful such networks must enjoy a strong degree of cultural and ideological coherence.⁵¹ By contrast, this book suggests that networks best able to navigate the spaces between Eurasia's multiple geopolitical projects are those that have access to multiple ideological and

⁴⁸ Li 2020: 5. ⁴⁹ Lutfi 2018: 24. Cf. Alavi 2015. ⁵⁰ Claassen 2018.

⁵¹ Werbner 2004.

cultural resources. Being able to draw on a diverse and plural pool of ideological and cultural knowledge enables the successful navigation of choppy geopolitical waters by particular networks and communities.

A visit to the shop in Kabul of a trader who deals in goods imported from China underscored to me the extent to which traders consciously conceive of the acquisition of multiple cultural and ideological resources as being important for their future commercial and mobile trajectories. The trader had recently returned to Kabul after a year of living with his family in Istanbul. As is the case for many such Afghans seeking to conduct business in Istanbul, the man had been unable to establish a sustainable business in the city. Having returned to Kabul, he was worried about the mental health of his teenage children: confined to the family home in the city because of an increasingly volatile security situation, they complained of missing the stimulation of attending school in Istanbul. While he had tried to improve their self-confidence by buying a shop in a relatively secure building and putting them in charge of its stocklist, he was thinking about where he should send them for education in the future. In this context, he remarked to another man present – who lives in China and runs a trading office that exports goods to Ukraine – ‘my family have been sending our youngsters to Russia for education for years. I think now is the time that we also try something different. If we send our children to China too, they can meet their cousins educated in Russia in Kabul and create something new and different. It’s time to follow two paths, not just one.’ The man’s remark aptly captures the degree to which traders do not regard themselves as the beneficiaries of one or other geopolitical project. The traders, rather, themselves recognise the ways in which their activities and modes of living mediate between and paper over contrasting geopolitical projects of Eurasian connectivity and regard this as being the key context in which they act and think.

Several anthropologists have explored the intersections between kinship and international politics in Asia. In particular, in the context of the divisive effects of colonialism and the ‘global Cold War’, as well as their afterlives, on Asian societies, they have analysed the role played by kinship and the family both as a ‘site of struggle’ but also in post-conflict ‘community repair’.⁵² Kinship is not a central concern of this book.⁵³ I do, however, build on the insights of scholarship addressing the intersections of familial life and international politics. *Beyond the Silk Roads* explores

⁵² Kwon 2020. See also, Kwon 2013 and Bayly 2007.

⁵³ On the ambiguous role that kinship relations play in the traders’ lives and activities, see Marsden 2016.

the collective strategies deployed by the members of trading networks to accrue multiple forms of not merely commercial but also cultural and ideological knowledge. Traders, it suggests, treat such forms of knowledge as critical resources that enhance their individual and collective ability to navigate across fraught geopolitical contexts. Importantly, however, traders often engage in such strategies of diversification at the same time as emphasising the importance of building contexts in which they can forge shared sensibilities, identities and ideas. I focus in a [later chapter](#) of the book, for example, on the important role played by the domain of the neighbourhood in maintaining the long-term durability of their networks. In the study of Muslim societies, there is widespread recognition of the extent to which neighbourhoods are thought about locally in relationship to the idioms of kinship, especially the notion of ‘closeness’.⁵⁴ The neighbourhoods explored in this book are very different from the bounded if changing urban settings explored by an earlier generation of anthropologists. Often geographically dispersed, they are also ‘partial’: to understand a neighbourhood in one context requires a consideration of its relationship to other connected neighbourhoods elsewhere.⁵⁵ Such ‘partial neighbourhoods’, I suggest, enhance the durability of trading networks and do so in ways comparable with the important role that scholars such as Susan Bayly and Heonik Kwon have ascribed to the family in dealing with the divisive effects of colonialism and the Cold War. Partial neighbourhoods are emotionally resonant domains central to the creation and nurturing of shared sensibilities and identities; among the communities for whom such neighbourhoods are important, a great deal of energy, effort and resources is invested into their cultivation and sustenance.

The individuals who make up Eurasia’s networks reflect, then, multiple layers of historical engagements across Eurasia. The palimpsest of influences they embody inform their collective and individual lives and identities, as well as those of the dynamics of the states in which they have lived and worked. As such, the lives and social relationships in trading networks reveal the way in which varying and often contradictory historical, cultural and ideological influences interleave with one another, challenging the assumption that ideological compatibility is the secret to collective commercial success.

Trust and Mistrust in Long-Distance Trade

The durability of trading networks depends not merely on the ability of individual traders to predict with accuracy the behaviour of the

⁵⁴ [Eickelman 1974](#). ⁵⁵ On the notion of ‘partial societies’, see [Ho 2014](#).

commercial personnel with whom they work through the making of assessments about their 'trustworthiness'. As importantly, networks fashion institutions that comprehensively coordinate the 'pooling' of knowledge about commercial opportunities and dangers, shifting legal regimes and requirements and the reputations of individuals and collective commercial ventures.⁵⁶ The term 'institution' inevitably brings to mind images of clearly defined economic and legal entities important for businesses: banks, firms, corporations and commercial courts. Yet this definition is too narrow to encompass the institution-building powers of merchants involved in the forms of commerce explored in this book. In the strictest sense of the term, an institution is 'an organization or other formal social structure that governs a field of action'.⁵⁷ More recently, however, economists have given attention to the 'social institutions' important to the functioning of markets. Douglass North, for example, developed the term 'rules of the game' to identify social institutions comprising 'formal rules, informal constraints, and the characteristics of enforcing those constraints'.⁵⁸ Social institutions, including formations such as ethnic trading communities, according to North, play a critical role in setting norms of accepted social behaviour.

Anthropologists have built on North's formulations but also brought attention to the need to identify the specific social contexts in which 'rules are implemented' and the 'beliefs and values' of actors maintained and sustained.⁵⁹ In doing so, anthropological scholarship builds on an earlier body of literature that brought widespread attention to the importance of durable social structures in societies that had hitherto been regarded as primitive or anarchic, most especially the so-called tribal societies of Asia and Africa.⁶⁰ This book builds on this important tradition in anthropological scholarship. It suggests, however, that the institutions central to the organisation and durability of the traders' activities is not the network they form in aggregate. I suggest, instead, that greater attention needs to be placed on the traders' ability to fashion institutions that they collectively regard as being central to their activities. In the chapters that follow, then, I document how traders regard marketplaces (*bazaarha*), hotels and restaurants (*hotalha*), as well as religious and cultural associations (*anjo-manha*) as key aspects of their activities and institutions (*sazmanha*) of which they themselves are the authors.

Many scholars writing about diaspora and migrant communities have emphasised the role that the social institutions they have fashioned play in shaping and maintaining cultural identities in the context of migration

⁵⁶ Anderson 2020. ⁵⁷ Oxford Bibliographies 2017. ⁵⁸ North 1992.

⁵⁹ Hann and Hart 2011: 91. ⁶⁰ Evans Pritchard 2013.

and mobility.⁶¹ Such institutions, I suggest in this book, also coordinate the circulation and exchange of knowledge, commodities and people and are therefore indispensable to a trading network's success and durability. As we shall see in the following pages, such circulations and the forms of regional connectivity in which they result are very different from the official models that envisage formal agreements between nation states leading to expansions in the volume of trade and cultural exchanges between specific settings. Instead, the circulations on which this book focuses are the result of hard work. They arise from intimate knowledge of multiple settings, societies and polities – knowledge that individuals and communities that are frequently the foci of restrictive policy on the part of national and international political forces garner over decades if not generations.

Religious Plurality and Long-Distance Eurasian Trade: Past Meets Present

Religious plurality features strongly in historical studies of long-distance Eurasian trade and commerce. Sikhs and Hindus from Afghanistan played a major role in the trade between South and Central Asia, for example, establishing communities in the Muslim-majority khanates of Central Asia.⁶² Jews were critical to the trade between the Muslim-majority societies of Central and West Asia. The city of Isfahan in Iran, for example, was for centuries a major node for the activities of Armenian Christians across Muslim-majority Asia.⁶³ Similarly, Muslim merchants from the historic *entrepôt* of Bukhara settled in such far-flung places as Siberia and the Russian city of Orenburg – an important commercial node in which they traded in silks, cotton and natural products, such as rhubarb.⁶⁴ Bukharan merchants also travelled to China, acting between the sixteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries in particular as the middlemen for the trade in goods between China and Europe.⁶⁵ In the deeper past, Sogdian traders based in Central Asia established the main caravan networks that connected China and India to Europe between the fifth and seventh centuries CE.⁶⁶

By contrast, the focus of much international media coverage of Eurasia today is on the pressures facing communities that are now classified as forming 'ethno-religious minorities'.⁶⁷ From Muslims in China's western

⁶¹ See Tölölyan 2000. ⁶² Levi 2002 and Markovits 2000. ⁶³ Aslanian 2014.

⁶⁴ Monahan 2015. ⁶⁵ Levi 2017. ⁶⁶ Vaissière 2018.

⁶⁷ On the process through which Christians and Jews in the Arabic-speaking world had to choose between being 'a cloistered, dependent "minority" and belonging to an anticolonial nationalist majority' in the context of the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of the postcolonial nation state, see Makdisi 2019: 123.

Xinjiang autonomous region to Sikhs and Hindus in Muslim-majority Afghanistan, to Bukhara's historic Jewish communities, ethno-religious minorities from across a spectrum of traditions that historically played a pivotal role in long-distance trade have been directly affected by repressive state policies, authoritarian governments, civil and military conflict and movements of politically oriented religious reform and purification. In many contexts, this has led to the mass emigration of Eurasia's ethno-religious minorities. Bukhara's Jews have now mostly relocated to Tel Aviv and New York's Queens neighbourhood,⁶⁸ while Afghanistan's Sikh and Hindu communities currently number only 500 or so families in the country itself – since the onset of civil war in 1992, most have moved to cities in South Asia, Western Europe and North America.⁶⁹ Chinese policies in Xinjiang are resulting in the emigration of China's Uyghurs and Kazakhs to settings across Asia, Europe and North America; scholars also interpret these policies as reflecting an active policy of the 'Sinicisation' of China's western frontier and the forms of Islam present in that contested geopolitical space.⁷⁰ Historian Nile Green argues that such processes reflect the broader bleaching out of the historic cosmopolitanism of Asia's Muslim-majority urban centres: cities such as Kabul, Herat and Bukhara that were once home to flourishing ethno-religious minorities have also become entirely Muslim as the communities that once lived within them have sought refuge beyond Asia.⁷¹

This book charts the effect of such population movements on the sociological make up of Eurasia's commercial personnel. The infamous money market – the Sarai Shahzada – that lies at the heart of Kabul's historic commercial district (Mandawi) was once predominantly home to businesses run by Jewish, Sikh and Hindu moneylenders.⁷² Today, those operating businesses out of it are largely Farsi- and Pashto-speaking Muslims. Bukhara's Jewish neighbourhood is now home to but a handful of Jewish families, while no Jews currently reside in the Jewish neighbourhood located in the ancient Afghan city of Herat. Sikh gurdwaras and Hindu temples in Kabul and Ghazni have fallen into disrepair as 'new entrants' into the world of trade from the country's provinces master the skills of business and trade.⁷³

⁶⁸ Cooper 2012 and Baldauf, Gammer and Loy 2008. ⁶⁹ Marsden 2018.

⁷⁰ Thum 2014. ⁷¹ Green 2016. ⁷² Chaudhury forthcoming and Chaudhury 2020.

⁷³ Many of Afghanistan's established trading families left the country in the 1970s and 1980s and relocated themselves and their capital to countries in the Americas and Western Europe. A significant majority of the traders whose lives are explored in this book hail from families that turned from agriculture and state employment to trade from 1970s onwards. See Marsden 2016

Such transformations have undoubtedly led to major shifts in the ethos underlying long-distance trade and commercial activity. But modes of doing business have also been transmitted across religious boundaries widely held as being impenetrable. An Afghan Muslim setting up a business in Moscow or Odessa, for instance, is likely to have started by selling goods purchased on credit with Hindu and Sikh merchants who are also of Afghan nationality. Similar stories are important in ‘global cities’ around the world, especially in Western Europe (London and Hamburg most notably) and in the Middle East (most obviously in Dubai). Ethnic Turkmen traders from northern Afghanistan – leading players in developing the country’s fabled business in handwoven carpets in the 1960s – often recount their interactions with internationally connected Jewish carpet and antique dealers from Central Asia.⁷⁴ There has been a displacement of ethno-religious trading minorities from Eurasia’s commercial nodes. Yet what is notable is the ongoing importance of ethno-religious minorities to the forms of long-distance trade across the area, albeit in the new settings and nodes in which dispersed communities have established themselves. The undeniable depletion of ethno-religious diversity in Eurasia’s historic trading nodes has not simply resulted in the death of the old modes of doing business and forms of sensibility with which these were entangled. These have, rather, re-emerged in a new and different range of ‘sites of interaction’, adapting and altering as they have done so.⁷⁵

Alternative Geographies

Conventional geographies of the so-called New Silk Road often dwell on the transformative significance of new ports and specially constructed commercial ‘hubs’ for Eurasian economic and political connectivity. New or redeveloped ports in the Persian Gulf – such as the Indian- and Iranian-funded Chabahar in Iran or the Chinese-built Gwadar in Pakistan – will facilitate connectivity between India and the Central Asian states and China and the maritime routes of the Indian Ocean.⁷⁶ Scholarship also emphasises the ways in which such hubs will extend the military reach of global and regional powers into spaces that fall well beyond their ‘sphere of influence’.⁷⁷ Similarly, political decision-making processes affecting trade and commerce across Eurasia are widely analysed in terms of government policies arising out of influential Eurasian capital cities: Beijing, New Delhi, Istanbul, Riyadh, Dubai and Moscow, most notably.⁷⁸ There is also growing recognition of the strategies deployed

⁷⁴ See the preface in [Cordell 2018](#). ⁷⁵ [Harper and Amrith 2012](#). ⁷⁶ [Anwar 2013](#).

⁷⁷ [Daniels 2013](#). ⁷⁸ [Friedman 2019](#).

by ‘emerging’ states – such as Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Mongolia – to navigate their relationships in a field overcrowded by ‘great players’.⁷⁹

Existing analysis of the intersections between geographies of economic and political power in the Eurasian arena reflects the wider tendency for scholars to address regional dynamics through the lens of the nation state.⁸⁰ The overwhelming emphasis in much work that purportedly concerns regional connectivity is actually on the role played by nation states or formal associations of nation states – such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation – in forging and eroding connectivity across national boundaries. Scholars critical of this tendency within and beyond Eurasia have developed the term ‘methodological nationalism’ to illuminate the powerful assumption visible in much scholarly and popular discourse that the world is naturally ordered in relationship to nation states.⁸¹ As I have suggested, this tendency is even more visible in the study of geopolitics, a field within which virtually the only type of actor conceived as being relevant is the nation state. Instead, scholars in the humanities and social sciences have increasingly called for recognition of the significance of regional contexts and communities that cross the boundaries both of the nation state and the regions upon which nation states are often problematically assumed to have emerged.⁸² The nation state system is rarely the best lens through which to understand the dynamics of such communities and contexts. This approach brings attention to the social, cultural, political and economic interpenetration of ‘transregional’ contexts that criss-cross both nation states and a ‘particular scale of region’.⁸³ It also argues that the ‘culture-areas’ in relationship to which scholarship and policy have been organised – such as those of South and Central Asia – are premised on notions of cultural purity and origin, similarity and difference, which are themselves connected to conceptions of national identity. For historians, work in this vein has called for critical historicisation of conventional ‘conceptions of place, origin and selfhood’, and growing emphasis is being placed on studying linkages across polities and regions. ‘To be a Persian’, Mana Kia argues, for example, ‘was to be embedded in a set of connections with people we today consider members of different groups.’⁸⁴ If historians have emphasised the need to study historic transregional geographic contexts without extrapolating the narrow frame of interstate relations on to the past, then anthropologists have questioned the assumption that the nation state is always the most important force in the organisation of

⁷⁹ Yolaçan 2019b and Bulag 2014. ⁸⁰ Malkki 1995.

⁸¹ Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002. ⁸² Freitag and von Oppen 2010.

⁸³ Kia 2020: 12. ⁸⁴ *Ibid.*: 4.

contemporary forms of politics, economy and identity. Anthropologists have pointed to specific types of communities, groups and societies, especially those inhabiting ‘borderlands’, that are of special analytical value for attempts to understand the social and political dynamics of transregional societies.⁸⁵

In an especially insightful article published in 2017, for example, anthropologist and historian Engeng Ho challenges the tendency to frame regional connectivity in terms both of ‘transnationalism’ and of ‘diaspora studies’. Ho has urged, instead, for recognition and analysis of ‘mobile societies’, which he defines as ‘small, mobile, and less integrated’ social formations. Ho suggests that such societies have not traditionally been the focus of social scientists because of the emphasis placed in social theory on large-scale social and political aggregates. ‘Mobile societies’, he argues, are spatially dispersed and made up of individuals with multiple allegiances, loyalties and identities; they are also often fashioned over decades if not centuries of movement, exchange and interaction.⁸⁶ Ho identifies mobile societies as being ‘partial’: their overall dynamics can only be understood if multiple contexts are investigated and analysed alongside one another.

A consideration of transregional contexts through empirical studies of mobile societies rather than of communities identified on the basis either of their transgressing or of upholding national boundaries reveals the ongoing significance of histories of connectivity that are older than those associated with relations between modern nation states. As I discussed earlier, the networks explored in this book layer together, paper over and mediate between different historical projects of Eurasian connectivity that have involved states seeking presence, alliance, influence and sometimes control across national boundaries. As such, it is unhelpful to think of the networks as narrowly ‘transnational’: the context with which they must contend, adapt to and profit from is not one merely of nation states but of overlapping and interpenetrating historical influences shaped by forms of political activity that project power across national, regional and cultural boundaries.

In an earlier book, I explored the ways in which the Afghan traders whom I studied held varying and often critical ideas about the extent to which the national identity category ‘Afghan’ reflected their personal and collective identities. Yet they also developed their own – often embodied – understandings of ‘being Afghan’. Doing so allowed traders to recognise and relate to one another in a manner that questioned the overwhelming

⁸⁵ Van Schendel 2002. ⁸⁶ Ho 2017: 907–08.

salience of markers of religious, regional and ethnolinguistic identity and facilitated the making of complex commercial relationships that crossed such boundaries.⁸⁷

The focus of this book is also on traders and networks that share a history of entwinement with the territories that make up Afghanistan, as well as its state structures and the identity categories these have played a powerful role in creating. But the book avoids treating Afghanistan simply as a site from which trading communities have been historically dispersed. Afghanistan is also a context that has been historically significant for the activities of multiple mobile societies and has also been affected in complex ways by the projection of power by empires and modern-day nation states. In this sense, internal and external movements, circulations and inter-Asian connections have informed and shaped the make up of Afghanistan's societies, social and political structures, communities, commercial practices and cultures. We shall see in this book the extent to which the country's social and cultural composition is redolent with vital expressions of such transregional dynamics and connections, and how it is through these that traders connected to the territories that make up modern-day Afghanistan influence multiple Asian contexts in both economic and cultural ways.⁸⁸

The mercantile individuals and groups with whom I have worked while conducting the research on which this book is based relate to and identify with Afghanistan in diverse and contested ways. Some collectively identify with the nation state of Afghanistan and think of this as being a natural and authentic source of identity and political structures. For others, however, Afghanistan is a colonial and postcolonial political construct that has marginalised regional identity formations and histories. A trader I had come to know in China, for example, took me on a visit to his home village in Afghanistan's Panjshir Valley. During the course of the journey from Kabul, he drew my attention to a few words of graffiti written in Persian on a large rock standing over the fast-flowing river at the narrow defile that marks the start of the valley; the graffiti read: 'We are not Afghan' (*ma afghani nistim*). For this trader, the term Afghan refers to the country's Pashto-speakers and erases the identities of Farsi-speakers in the country such as himself. Many of the traders from Afghanistan neither embrace nor entirely reject their categorisation in relation to the nation-identity category 'Afghan'. There are contexts in which it is helpful to analyse the traders

⁸⁷ Marsden 2016.

⁸⁸ On Afghanistan's global connections over the *longue durée*, see Crews 2015.

described in this book in relationship to national identity; in many others, their identities and histories are more helpfully viewed through the lens of mobile societies, partial communities and transregional connectivity.

A central focus of the ethnography presented in this book, for example, are two communities that are historically connected through commerce and migration to multiple Asian settings yet also deeply immersed in Afghanistan. The two communities relate to the category 'Afghan' in different ways. A consideration of the modes in which they do so disrupts the widely held notion that Afghanistan is best thought of as a site of dispersal and that its migrant communities have inevitably formed 'diasporas'. Instead, such communities reveal that Afghanistan's networks, if generally conceived of in scholarly, economic and geopolitical terms as being peripheral, are actually critical players in wider inter-Asian dynamics.

Chapter 2, for instance, explores the activities of traders who identify as 'Bukharan'. These traders' families entered Afghanistan in the 1920s in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution in Central Asia. Today, they live and work in Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Pakistan – few have returned to Afghanistan since leaving the country in the late 1970s. For them, Afghanistan did not constitute a homeland in any one-dimensional sense; instead, the country was more akin to a 'way station' in which they had spent time. Yet it was a way station that had long-lasting and important implications for their community and its identities as well as collective experiences – many such families continue to hold Afghan citizenship because the countries in which they are based (especially the UAE and Saudi Arabia) have not granted them citizenship. In this way, Afghanistan is not a straightforward homeland or site of dispersal for this community, yet nor is its importance to this group simply that of a temporary site of refuge. It is instead a context deeply relevant and integral to their activities and identities but not in a manner that is exclusivist or bounding.

Similarly, the focus of **Chapter 3** is on the role played by Sikh and Hindu traders in contemporary expressions of Eurasian connectivity. Today based in Moscow, Odessa, Amsterdam and London, early generations of Afghanistan-based Sikhs and Hindus previously played a pivotal role in both finance and trade in Afghanistan, especially in the transit trade that saw goods moving in a multidirectional nature between Central and South Asia. Their past lies in the pioneering role that Indian merchants played in the trade between South and Central Asia between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. In the 1960s and 1970s, Sikh and Hindu traders based in Kabul played an

important role in the official trade between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union. While being connected to Afghanistan is an important aspect of the identity of Sikhs and Hindus, so too is a longer history of mobility across an Asia-wide arena. This longer history requires an analysis that goes beyond not only the nation state but also the notions of 'home' and 'host' societies associated with much work on diasporas. It requires recognition, instead, of historical embeddedness of mobile societies across multiple and interconnected contexts.

Mobile societies such as Afghanistan's 'Bukharans' and the country's Sikhs and Hindus reveal especially acutely the limitations that arise when regional connectivity is approached narrowly from the perspective of specific nation states. Indeed, they require forms of analysis that go beyond assessing the ways in which historic connections have shaped and influenced the nation states in which people live today. Instead, they bring to light the importance of studying communities that are distributed geographically across Asia yet are interconnected with one another across both space and time. This book explores the movements, adjustments and nodes of interaction that have been important for mobile societies and partial communities. It focuses on contingent shifts in identity formation important for these societies and addresses the ways in which these relate to transforming geopolitical initiatives and circumstances. Under exploration are the ways in which merchants identify their own backgrounds, identities and collective histories in changing ways according to the varying circumstances in which they operate.

The forms of Eurasian connectivity explored in this book require us to delve into the ways in which traders and mobile merchants *actually do* connect different parts of Eurasia, rather than relying on powerful images of the states and international organisations that depict how they think such connections should look. This not only necessitates visiting places that conventional accounts rarely consider of any significance to interregional connectivity; it also requires recognition of the ways in which such places are of significance to settings they are infrequently considered in relationship to. For a trader with an Afghan background in Ukraine, the ability to import the toy scooters on which his livelihood depends to the Black Sea port of Odessa from the Chinese trading city of Yiwu is intricately connected to his ability to raise capital in Kabul. Capital flows from Kabul to Odessa enable the transport of merchandise from China to Ukraine. Exploring Eurasia from the inside out reveals alternative geographies and entanglements of culture, politics and economy with which these are entangled.

Plan of the Book

Conventional understandings of the New Silk Road frequently rehearse the utopian understanding of such projects as arising out of the historic east–west flows that characterise official narratives about them.⁸⁹ Similarly, approaches more critical of international diplomacy tend to reduce the analysis of megaprojects to a power play between geopolitical forces of varying scales, be these superpowers, emerging powers or spoilers – smugglers and militants of various stripes, for example – who inhabit the so-called ‘spaces in between’. What both approaches omit are the nature of on-the-ground realities and the historically informed perspectives and experiences of individuals, networks and communities that are involved in the fashioning of interregional connections. This book brings attention to the multiple actors on the ground who possess a great deal of insight into how to survive and prosper in such a contested geopolitical environment.

The carefully managed and regulated flows of commodities, goods, products and people envisaged in the Belt and Road Initiative is likely to constrain rather than facilitate the flourishing of the social, cultural and political skills that are necessary for durable forms of regional interconnectivity. Fieldwork has demonstrated that such visions squeeze the livelihoods of communities in Eurasia’s borderlands.⁹⁰ Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the inhabitants of such contexts have benefited from informal trans-Asian connections by dint of their geographic location and knowledge of local conditions. The declining significance of smaller-scale traders and the diplomatic yet socially valued capacities they display on a daily basis also stands to erase an important social mechanism for helping to ensure that multiple conflicts across the region’s numerous boundaries do not erupt further. The granular, jagged and jarring – in short, un-silky – roads explored in this book should not be treated as informal and illegal and thereby inevitably a security threat or a risk. They are, rather, monuments to the creative activity of people who have been poorly served by the nation state and the international system over previous decades. It is in this context that they have built their own structures, institutions and sensibilities, both for life and for commerce. **Chapter 1** offers insights into the mode of fieldwork on which the book is based and the contributions that such research can make to the anthropological study of geopolitics. It focuses in particular on the importance of ‘mistrust’ to the traders’ universes and relationships, and asks how traders and anthropologists live and work in contexts in which ‘everyone is an agent’.

⁸⁹ [Simpfendorfer 2009](#). ⁹⁰ [Mostowlansky and Karrar 2018](#).

Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4 explore networks and nodes that are of significance for inter-Asian connectivity. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on two different inter-Asian human–commercial corridors. Together, the chapters demonstrate that Afghan merchants simultaneously connect multiple parts of Asia to one another. The chapters highlight in particular the capacity of merchants active across both corridors to navigate between competing Eurasian geopolitical projects advanced by great powers acting within and beyond Asia, including Russia, Turkey, China and, in its role as a ‘distant neighbour’, the United States. And they suggest that recognising the sophistication of commercial actors in the field of geopolitics is something that can have important implications for the strategies that smaller nation states squeezed between their more powerful neighbours are seeking to develop. The corridor of connectivity documented and explored in Chapter 2 connects post-Soviet Eurasia to China via the Muslim-majority states of Central Asia. Chapter 3 focuses on a West Asian corridor of connectivity that connects Turkey, the Hijaz and Central Asia in a triangle.

Chapter 4 takes the reader to a commercial city that has become central for the organic forms of connectivity explored in this book – Yiwu International Trade City, located in China’s commercially powerful Zhejiang province. It describes the ways in which Eurasian geopolitics are imprinted on the city’s physical and social spaces, as well as its development over the past two decades as a site of China’s global connections. The chapter analyses tensions between the visions that Chinese policymakers hold of Yiwu’s place on the Belt and Road Initiative and the types of aspirations and feelings that international traders living there hold about its current and future significance for their commercial activities and communities.

Chapter 5 turns its attention to the significance of ethno-religious minorities to Eurasian connectivity. It focuses in particular on the activities and identities of Hindu and Sikh traders who hold Afghan citizenship but now largely work in markets, both in post-Soviet Eurasia and Western Europe. In the face of the ‘de-cosmopolitanisation’ of Muslim Asia’s historic cities, this chapter makes the case for recognising the ongoing vitality of an older legacy of living and doing trade in culturally complex urban settings.

Having focused on networks, nodes and communities, the book’s final empirical chapters address the significance of social institutions and specific practices to the forms of Asian connectivity upon which it focuses. Chapter 6 focuses on the notion of alternative geography by means of a discussion of the importance of Afghanistan not as a site of dispersal but of the circulation of capital required for the movement of people and

things. This chapter also tackles head on the widely held assumption that 'trust' is central to the workings of trade networks. It analyses instead the significance of contingency and dynamism to the durability of trading networks and brings attention to specific practices and financial instruments in relationship to which traders organise their activities in deeply uncertain worlds.

Building on the preceding consideration of financial instruments and practices, [Chapter 7](#) considers the importance of social institutions to the functioning of the jagged roads explored in the book, focusing in particular on restaurants and eateries. At one level, the chapter's consideration of the distribution of Afghan restaurants and eateries in Asia's trading nodes demonstrates that the country's assumed status as peripheral to Asian dynamics needs questioning not only in the sphere of finance but also that of culture. Not merely sites of pleasure and the building of relationships of trust through acts of hospitality and food-sharing, restaurants are also sites of critical significance for the pooling of knowledge about commerce and reputation. This function of restaurants is invested with heightened significance and value in geopolitically fraught settings characterised by pervasive forms of mistrust in which 'everybody is an agent' – restaurateurs as well as traders are required to demonstrate skills in the arts of living geopolitics.

The conclusion sums up the overall findings of the book and explores the future prospects for mobile societies, trading networks and the cultural and commercial geographies with which these are connected.

1 'Take Your Help Away and Leave Us in Peace!'

The Anthropology of Geopolitics as Lived

This book is primarily an ethnographic study of actually existing forms of Eurasian connectivity. Across its pages, however, I also seek to offer insights into the ways in which I have collected the data on which the study is based. I intertwine this aspect of the book with a discussion of how my fieldwork activities have shaped the arguments in relation to which it is structured. It is not my intention to develop a distinct or novel methodology: fieldwork is always shaped by personal preferences, sensibilities and capacities rather than methodological conventions. There is, however, need for reflection on the types of fieldwork practices that can be deployed in order to achieve the accounts of 'thick transregionalism' in geopolitically complex contexts that theoretical interventions in the field of inter-Asian studies have advocated.¹ Such practices go beyond debates in the social sciences concerning the conduct of so-called multi-sited fieldwork. Literature on multi-sited fieldwork dwells on the question of how researchers can maintain ethnographic depth in the data they gather while working across a range of geographic locales;² alternatively, anthropologists argue that defining a specific field of research, rather than being preoccupied with the number of locales in which the research is conducted, is of central importance.³

I take the importance of ethnographic depth and conceptual definition for granted. My focus, rather, is on the specific challenges surrounding fieldwork in contexts characterised by the simultaneous presence of multiple geopolitical projects and among communities that work in and across such contexts. This chapter contributes to the book as a whole in two ways. Most generally, it demonstrates the degree to which the traders with whom I have worked have been routinely exposed to successive geopolitical shifts and tensions, and how such a distinctive level of exposure is intimately tied to their livelihoods, sensibilities and imaginations. I explore how I gauged the interaction between geopolitics and my interlocutors' thinking and sensibilities during the course of the fieldwork

¹ Ho 2017. ² Marcus 1995 and Candea 2007.

³ Cook, Laidlaw and Mair 2009 and Candea 2013.

and the way in which this led me to develop a convivial mode of ethnographic practice that may be of value for fieldworkers conducting research in comparable contexts shaped by multiple geopolitical projects and the tensions in which these result. Second, the chapter contributes to the arguments made in the book about the importance of mistrust to the traders' lives. It does so by way of an exploration of the significance of mistrust to my relationships with them during the course of the fieldwork. I build on work in anthropology that argues that mistrust can play a 'socially productive' role in sociality by encouraging groups and individuals to embark on particular courses of action.⁴ I also suggest that scholars stand to learn a great deal about the meaning, significance and value of mistrust to everyday life by engaging directly with the importance of this aspect of life to their own fieldwork activities. The aspect of fieldwork with which the chapter deals in particular, then, is my being an object of mistrust among the traders on whose activities I focused. As I suggest in what follows, this was an important if not all-defining dimension of fieldwork with the traders, with many of whom I was also able to establish warm, supportive and enduring relationships. In addition to exploring the implications of mistrust for shaping the nature of the data on which this book is based, I reflect on the ways in which the suspicious dispositions that my informants adopted towards me illuminate their broader experiences of living in a world at the centre of multiple geopolitical processes. As we shall see in [Chapters 2 and 3](#), for the traders with whom I have worked, living geopolitics requires skill in navigating across and between multiple contexts. This chapter emphasises the importance of another equally important aspect of their everyday lives: the ability to withstand the stresses and tensions that life in the interstices of multiple geopolitical projects inevitably raises.

Geopolitics as Lived

The geopolitical contexts across which the traders operate are characterised by pervasive tensions and struggles; many traders experience these in recurring ways over the course of their lives. For all the traders from Afghanistan with whom I have interacted, the relationship between violence in their country and the legacy of nineteenth-century European imperial expansion, British colonialism, the Cold War, contemporary expressions of US imperialism and 'humanitarian intervention' and political tensions between the country's regional neighbours (notably Pakistan and India, and the Gulf states and Iran) are a vivid aspect of

⁴ [Humphrey 2016](#): 9–10.

their daily thought and conversation. A great deal of everyday discussion among the traders concerns the nature of the geopolitical dynamics affecting Afghanistan, be these related, for example, to the question of whether ‘the English’ or the Americans have the upper hand in Afghanistan today, or assessments of Pakistan’s interests in the country and Saudi Arabia’s changing role. As well as actively presenting themselves through such conversations as accomplished theorists of international relations, some of the traders with whom I have interacted are themselves experienced and highly informed actors in formal forms of geopolitics. As I explore in greater detail in [Chapter 2](#), men in their fifties and above conducting business between China and the former Soviet Union often entered the field of trade after serving as state officials in Afghanistan during the 1980s.

Interestingly, the nature of such traders’ contemporary activities often reflects their past roles within the Afghan state. Afghanistan’s Soviet-trained fighter pilots, for example, are renowned among the traders for the important role they play in long-distance transport companies. Transport companies (*shirkat-e transporti*) are an important aspect of the commercial landscapes of all the cities in which Afghan traders live and work. Such companies arrange for the transport of goods – by land and sea – from the cities in which they are procured to the contexts in which they are sold in wholesale markets. At the same time, transport companies must also be able to arrange the transfer of commodities through customs procedures – given the informal nature of much of the trade in which Afghan merchants are involved, doing so inevitably involves establishing relationships with officials in multiple contexts across Eurasia. In many such contexts, especially influential companies are run by men who formerly served as pilots in the Afghan air force. In the Chinese city of Yiwu, for example, a fighter pilot trained in Afghanistan during the 1980s arranges for the transport of goods to Odessa on Ukraine’s Black Sea Coast, where a former colleague is known to have excellent ties with local officials and is able to pass goods through customs in a speedy and reliable manner. These former pilots also have one-time colleagues based in Afghanistan who oversee the import of Chinese goods to the country. The life histories of the pilots are vivid reminders of how traders have lived at the centre of geopolitical projects for several decades. One of the pilots, for example, told me how he had been trained by Soviet pilots in Afghanistan before flying for the mujahidin government that rose to power in the wake of the collapse of Kabul’s Soviet-aligned regime in 1992. From 1996, the pilot flew for the Taliban government before being arrested and eventually released by American forces after they invaded Afghanistan and deposed the Taliban regime in 2001. The former pilots

regularly told me that they established themselves in the field of transport because they were left with no other options after losing their salaried positions in the 1990s and early 2000s. Afghan traders who use the services of such companies, however, remark that these men's excellence in trade-related transport reflects both their knowledge of international transport regulations and the close friendships they established with one another in the context of conflict – friendship that facilitates their ability to work together and trust one another over long distances.⁵

Afghanistan's historic status as an integrated part of an Asia-wide military labour market also impinges on the activities of the country's traders in the present day.⁶ A very limited number of traders who currently operate businesses across Eurasia have been actively involved in regional conflicts inflected with powerful geopolitical dynamics. I have heard reports, for example, that some of the traders now based in Russia and Ukraine were employed as mercenaries in the 1990s in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, a conflict involving fighters aligned to the Afghan Islamist leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.⁷ Other traders belong to communities in which individuals participated in such conflicts. During the course of a visit to Afghanistan, for example, a China-based trader was keen to introduce me to his uncle, who, he said, could teach me a great deal about 'the region' (*mantiqa*). During our meeting, my friend's uncle told me that during the 1980s he had fought alongside Iraqi-based Kurdish militia units fighting the Iranian regime.

The role Afghans have played in violent conflicts of a geopolitical nature remains a source of tension for migrants from the country in various settings today. The recruitment of ethnically Shi'i Hazara migrant labourers by Iran into the Fatemiyoun militia that has fought Sunni mujahidin groups in Syria has been widely documented in the international media.⁸ Reports also exist of the recruitment of young, rural Sunni Afghans by Saudi Arabia to fight Houthi Shi'i rebels in Yemen. Of a more ad hoc nature, Afghans in Ukraine have gained notoriety for achieving powerful positions in Ukraine's military and parliament; similarly, men of Afghan heritage living in Russia engaged in armed conflict against Ukraine.⁹ While most of the traders explored in this book have not been active in such conflicts, their status as foreign nationals or naturalised citizens in the places in which they work has been affected by the

⁵ Darryl Li argues that a range of factors – including migrant history, linguistic versatility and a career in civil aviation – led particular individuals to achieve the status of global jihadis in Afghanistan and then Bosnia in the 1980s and 1990s (Li 2020: 39–40).

⁶ Hopkins 2020. See also Nichols 2008. ⁷ Sands and Qazizai 2019: 341–46.

⁸ See Hamidi 2019. ⁹ Reuters 2016; BBC 2020.

former and ongoing military activities of Afghans in multiple conflicts – an issue I address in more detail in [Chapter 3](#).

Geopolitical conflicts in the settings outside of Afghanistan in which they trade and work also directly affect the traders' commercial activities. As we shall see in [Chapter 2](#), Afghan traders based in Ukraine made a significant proportion of their income by facilitating the informal movement of goods important to the country from China to Russia. The conflict between Ukraine and Russia made it harder for Ukrainian-based Afghan importers to transport Chinese commodities to Russia – the market that many relied upon to make substantial profits. The same conflict also required them to develop new routes for importing goods to regions of Ukraine – notably Crimea, which was annexed by Russia in February 2014 – that were especially affected by it. Some traders – including Gulzad, the trader I introduced earlier who had worked in China and Ukraine over the past three decades – were living in Odessa, Ukraine, in 2014. During the initial months of the conflict, they travelled back and forth between Odessa and Crimea in order to transport commodities to the newly annexed region. By 2016, Gulzad had managed to shift his residency to Crimea. Other Afghan traders capitalised on their location in southern towns of Russia – such as Pyatigorsk, the commercial significance of which expanded as the geography of trading routes to Crimea shifted as a result of the official closure of the Ukraine–Russia border.

Political tensions between Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran and the Gulf states also affect the activities of Afghan traders. As we shall see in [Chapter 3](#), against the backdrop of tensions between the predominantly Sunni UAE and Shi'i Iran, suspicion in Dubai and Sharjah of Farsi-speaking Shi'i Afghans led to the closure of several businesses belonging to members of this community, as well as their being deported from the UAE. Since 2016, Chinese policy towards Muslims of Uyghur and Kazakh ethnicity living in Xinjiang has also affected the routes that Afghan traders use to travel to the country and the choices they make about where to locate their businesses and families. In 2018, several Afghan traders based in Yiwu had moved their businesses to the city from Urumqi (the administrative headquarters of Xinjiang autonomous region) because of intrusive forms of security practised by officials. Doing so meant that the contacts they had cultivated with officials in a range of areas of government in Urumqi – including the all-important offices that issue visas and residency permits – were rendered valueless. Similarly, the strict surveillance practices deployed by Chinese security officials in Xinjiang discouraged traders from travelling to the country by using a well-established air corridor that connected Kabul to Urumqi; instead,

traders travelled to eastern China using a circuitous route that involved long transit stays in either Dubai or Delhi. Knowledge about the ways in which Chinese policy in Xinjiang had affected Afghan traders there was shared by traders in the shops, markets and restaurants they collectively frequent. In October 2017, for example, I spent an afternoon with a China-based trader in his shop in western Kabul. During the course of the afternoon, the trader was visited by a further merchant from the city who made regular trips to China to procure commodities. The visitor told the shop-owner that he should avoid travelling to China via Urumqi, as all his phone data would inevitably be downloaded by Chinese security officials and the process would likely be so drawn out that he would miss his connecting flight to Yiwu. The men also shared with one another stories of Afghans married to Uyghur women in Xinjiang who had been forced to live apart from their wives and children by security officials.

Living in a world shaped by such conflicts and geopolitical tensions has, then, affected the traders' commercial activities as well as the routes along which they transport commodities and travel in multiple ways. In some contexts, it has also injected the nature of their relationships with officials in the states in which they live with political tensions and resulted in traders and migrants from Afghanistan more generally as being marked out for particular scrutiny by security services. As I now explore, life at the centre of various geopolitical projects has also affected the traders' sensibilities and imaginations in the countries in which they earn a livelihood, live and, often, raise their families.

Friends and Acquaintances across Eurasia

'This is my friend, Magnus, from the UK' is the way in which my friends in Afghanistan's trading worlds often introduce me to one another. It might be assumed that an introduction from a trusted friend offers a fail-safe route to further contacts and information. Among the communities with whom I have worked, however, the power of such introductions belies more complex dynamics. A frequent early riposte from the person to whom I had been introduced, for example, was to ask, 'Oh really, and how long have you known Mr Magnus for?' Nothing is taken for granted, and the need to test and investigate assertions of closeness and trust are widely accepted among the traders. Thus, the person to whom I am being introduced will often enquire whether I am someone's 'real friend' (*and-i-wal-e sahi*) or merely an 'acquaintance' (*ashna*). Indeed, my informants regularly evaluate the exact nature of such interpersonal relationships in terms of the length of time over which their partners have been known to one another. 'I've been friends with Magnus for over fifteen years' is likely

to elicit a response such as ‘Oh, so he is your real/true friend then’; a relationship that stretches back a mere five years is regarded as being far more suspect.

A mere five years? Anthropologists generally regard a long spell of fieldwork during which it is possible to establish multifaceted relationships with one’s research participants as falling somewhere between one year and eighteen months. Indeed, anthropology remains the only major discipline in the social sciences and humanities that requires doctoral students to engage in long-term fieldwork for a year or more. The inappropriateness of this model for studying the types of commercial networks on which this book focuses has struck me on many occasions over the past decade. It is widely recognised among anthropologists and students of related disciplines that traders are guarded about giving details of their activities to outsiders: they are fearful of commercial espionage and wary of information passing into the hands of their competitors. During my time in the Chinese city of Yiwu, traders I came to know would often ask me if I was working for a brand or company (Nike being the one most regularly referred to) in order to unearth their role in the sale of counterfeit goods.

The traders are especially sensitive to the effect of geopolitical processes on their activities and indeed their identities and ways of perceiving the world more generally. As Caroline Humphrey has argued, trade in general ‘operates between making a profit from the differences between the state of affairs in one place and that in another’, meaning that traders ‘by definition . . . infringe the boundaries between regionally defined units’.¹⁰ As I have explored elsewhere, this aspect of long-distance commerce also means that traders are open to the accusation of being spies and traitors.¹¹ It is hardly surprising, then, that traders regard figures who are engaged in practices similar to them with intense suspicion (travelling between nodes, establishing multiple relationships of trust and interacting with local authorities) yet in a manner that has no clear commercial motive. Fieldworkers studying such networks clearly fit this category of suspicious outsider, but so too do other actors from the region who visit the traders in the nodes in which they work: during the period over which I conducted fieldwork in Yiwu, my Afghan friends in the city were so suspicious of one Pakistani man who befriended them – on the grounds that he was interested in their lives and also spoke some Farsi – that they referred to him as ‘ISI’, the acronym of Pakistan’s intelligence agency (Inter-Services Intelligence). Over the course of my research, rumours have swirled about the cities and towns in which I have stayed about the

¹⁰ Humphrey 2002: 96–7. ¹¹ Marsden 2016.

'real' motivation for my interest in Afghanistan and its traders. What, I am often asked, is your 'real motive'? I have found it largely possible to address such suspicion about my research with people directly and on a face-to-face basis. It has, however, also restricted my ability to engage in practices – such as community surveys – that anthropologists regularly deploy in other settings. I decided during the course of my stay in Yiwu that to conduct a formal survey of Afghans in the city would result in further layers of suspicion among the traders towards me. Indeed, conducting a survey may also have excited the interest of Chinese state officials, even if all the research I conducted in China was approved by the municipal authorities and conducted on the basis of my holding the relevant visa. Influential Afghan traders in Yiwu enjoy close contacts with Chinese officials through their participation in organisations such as the city's 'dispute resolution' scheme, and I had been told that some traders provided such officials with information about suspicious foreigners in order to curry favour. There had been complex encounters during fieldwork too, including one in a shop in Odessa when a trader from Afghanistan told me that he knew I worked for MI6 and instructed me to stop visiting his shop. A central contention of this book is that mistrust permeates and pervades the lives and activities of traders as much as relationships of trust do. As a result, mistrust is also an enduring aspect of fieldwork: the strength, insistency and persistence of geopolitical tensions, anxieties and insecurities are palpable aspects of everyday life and one that permeates relationships of multiple types.

Anthropologists tend to assume that rumours about a fieldworker's dubious loyalties and what she or he intends to do with data gathered are issues of particular significance in the initial stages of fieldwork. The passage of time and the gradual emergence of closer ties, it is held, eventually result in the threshold between 'outsider' and 'insider' research being crossed and in higher levels of trust and a willingness on the part of research participants to better understand the purpose of fieldwork. I have come to recognise, however, that this assumption belies the more pervasive and complex role that mistrust plays in the lives, identities, social relationships and activities of the people with whom I worked.¹² As Venkatesh has argued, this simplified understanding of fieldwork also fails to assess how representations of 'the persona of the anthropologist' made by research participants reveal 'the interpretive properties and resources' available to them.¹³ Mistrust's pervasive place in the traders' lives is especially evident in the permanent state of vigilance they cultivate and in the manner in which they constantly test, gauge and evaluate the

¹² Verdery 2018. ¹³ Venkatesh 2002.

trustworthiness of those with whom they interact, both within and beyond the networks they form. As we shall see in what follows, for the traders, suspicion and mistrust are not aspects of interpersonal relationships that time corrects – they regard mistrust as a permanent and necessary aspect of sociality: one that is as much generative as it is corrosive of social relationships.

Take Your Help Away and Leave Us in Peace!

Traders in Yiwu regularly suggested to one another and myself that I was a spy for the British government. On the whole, traders made such accusations with considerable subtlety: sometimes using body language such as the wink of an eye; at other times by deploying irony and wit – ‘what will be the situation next year in Afghanistan’, I was often asked, ‘you should know because you English are in control of the situation’. For many of my informants in Yiwu, indeed, ‘the English’ (*inglis*) were regarded as the global masters of espionage – if the United States had paid for the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the English had masterminded it. ‘The English’ were held to exert unassailable influence over much of world politics, especially in Afghanistan, due to Britain’s long history of interference in the country’s politics and society. Attitudes such as these reveal the ways in which the historical experience of older and newer geopolitical tensions arising from the projects of empires and nation states interleave themselves in the networks, identities and imaginations of those who comprise them.

A colonial history of Anglo–Afghan relations that dates to the beginning of the nineteenth century shaped such attitudes towards my presence in Yiwu and elsewhere. Earlier scholarship by historians of Afghanistan emphasised the successive defeats of British military campaigns in the territories that make up modern-day Afghanistan and argued that the country had never fully been incorporated as a colony into British India.¹⁴ These studies depicted the British role in Afghanistan as limited to the creation of the region as a ‘buffer state’ between British India and the Russian Empire’s presence in Central Asia. Afghanistan’s purported status as a country that remained either free of European colonial influence or only ‘semi-colonial’ has for long been an important aspect of political discourse and official historiography in the country. The conception of Afghanistan as a country that resisted colonial interference informs official expressions of national identity in powerful and important ways. More recently, however, historians have brought attention to the direct

¹⁴ For a critical discussion of Afghanistan’s status as a ‘buffer state’, see Bayly 2014.

forms of influence that British India's colonial authorities did hold over various iterations of the Afghan polity from the early nineteenth century onwards.¹⁵ As in many other settings in Asia and Africa in the nineteenth century, British influence in Afghanistan, these accounts argue, was visible in official treaties, relationships cultivated with specific communities and officials and in specific policy areas, including the country's foreign affairs, diplomatic activities and the demarcation of its international boundaries. Scholars have also clearly demonstrated how far the models used to govern Afghanistan in the context of recent international interventions in the country build upon forms of 'colonial knowledge' that have their origins in nineteenth-century projects of European imperialism.¹⁶

Afghanistan played a pivotal role in the global Cold War, the immediate context of the conflict between mujahidin fighters and the pro-Soviet Afghan government in the 1980s.¹⁷ After the defeat of the Taliban in the wake of the 2001 US intervention, a new phase of international intervention unfolded. The framework for this period of intervention was one of liberal state-building: development, nation-building and women's rights were high on the agenda until 2014. After 2014, the withdrawal of a significant proportion of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troops resulted in the presence of international forces in the country being defined in terms of 'global security'. From 2001 until the present day, international forces have enacted a range of forms of violence on Afghanistan's citizenry: night-raids on family compounds, deadly drone attacks and the deployment of the world's largest bomb being among the most visible.¹⁸ Scholarship on Afghanistan documents the nature and effects of contemporary military involvement in the country, the similarities and differences between present and past interventions, the value of analysing the 2001 occupation as an extension of the country's colonial past and the implications of the intervention for understanding global humanitarianism.¹⁹

Michael Herzfeld – a US-based anthropologist – has developed the concept of crypto-colonialism to analyse the paradoxical nature of the notion that particular societies were able to maintain their independence in the context of the global enforcement of international power structures. The notion of crypto-colonialism is also useful for thinking about Afghanistan because power-holders and the country's official discourse emphasise the degree to which its culture remains untainted by colonial influence.²⁰ Herzfeld deploys the concept of crypto-colonialism to

¹⁵ Bayly 2018, Fuoli 2017, Hopkins 2009. ¹⁶ Hanifi 2019. ¹⁷ Nunan 2016.

¹⁸ Bashir and Crews 2012. ¹⁹ Coburn 2016. ²⁰ Herzfeld 2002.

analyse the ways in which the denial of colonial influence in such contexts by political elites conceals the reality of direct foreign influence and control. Concealing overarching power structures in this manner obscures the role that national elites play in such processes, in terms, for example, of their role in 'civilising projects' and the active attempt of such projects to denigrate local forms of knowledge, identity and social organisation. Historical narratives – partly though not one-dimensionally originating in the Western academy – that depict Afghanistan as distinct from other countries in South Asia by dint of it having not undergone colonisation reinforce the country's depictions of the success of past leaders in stymieing colonial influence.

Traders were often direct in the criticisms they had of the effects that the latest expression of international intervention had had on their country. On making my way from Yiwu's wholesale market complex (Futian) to the hotel in which I was staying one hot summer afternoon, I came across a trader based in the city from eastern Afghanistan, Nasir. Nasir had lived in Russia for several years and held Russian and Afghan citizenship. He had moved to Yiwu from St Petersburg four years ago, and his main activity in the city was purchasing goods for export to Odessa in Ukraine. Nasir's younger brother had lived in Odessa for much of the past decade, and they ran a wholesale business in the city dealing in bathroom ware. In many of the contexts in which Afghans work, family members are distributed in this way across various geographical contexts to enable them to benefit from the circulation of commercial knowledge as well as shifting profit margins in multiple settings. Having discussed his circulatory mobility between Russia, Ukraine and Afghanistan, Nasir remarked to me that nothing would give him greater pleasure than to stop travelling around the world and to settle in Afghanistan. He concluded his discussion by remarking, 'you have destroyed the country, we do not know what you want from our country, and we Afghans are fed up with your help: you should take your help away and leave us in peace' (*buro qati komakha-at*).²¹

I emphasise in this book the role played by traders' experiences of the country's recent and more distant history in their everyday lives and self-understandings. The immediate context of the traders with whom I conducted fieldwork was defined, then, by a history of European imperialism and successive waves of international interventions, driven, at least in part, by competing projects of Eurasian geopolitical connectivity. Rather than merely being aspects of their societies' past that have displaced one another in a successive or sequential historical manner,

²¹ For a comparative discussion, see [Morris 2016](#).

however, this history of geopolitical competition and conflict enfold itself within the identities and self-understandings of the traders who make up the networks. The traders think of themselves as sophisticated actors who understand the complex geopolitical processes affecting the worlds across which they live; some, if by no means all of the traders, seek to transfer the knowledge of geopolitics they have acquired in the domain of trade to that of politics by playing an active role in the government of Afghanistan.

Anthropology and Geopolitics

Anthropologists find it difficult to grapple in an ethnographic manner with the complex realm of geopolitics. Attempts to think about the role of geopolitics in anthropological fieldwork tend to revolve around the category of 'conspiracy theories'. As Mathijs Pelkmans and Rhys Machold have argued, this concept is problematic because it ascribes irrationality to particular theories of understanding the world rather than seeking to understand their interactions with the 'social and political worlds through which they travel'.²² Anthropologists tend to regard accusations of spying as an aspect of fieldwork that needs to be overcome and that the best way to do so is by building trust-based relationships. Alternatively, they treat such accusations as an inevitable occupational hazard in a discipline that requires individual researchers to cross multiple types of boundaries. Long-standing debates within and beyond anthropology about the discipline's relationship to power is also a central frame for the analysis of this aspect of fieldwork.²³

In the context of being repeatedly regaled during my time in the field with questions such as 'what is the future of Afghanistan?' or 'what plans do China and Russia have for Central Asia?', I have been tempted to enact a sensory shutdown and respectfully wait for specific evidence on trade and commerce to come my way. On reflection, however, it seems perplexing that a discipline perhaps best known for enriching our understanding of key scientific categories such as rationality, truth and evidence has developed arguments with ease and fluency in the field of religion but found engaging with that of geopolitics more difficult.²⁴ The focus on 'conspiracy theories' and anthropology's relationship to power is helpful

²² Pelkmans and Machold 2011: 68. Cf. Marcus 1998 and Sanders and West 2003. For a self-reflexive study of how one anthropologist followed up on accusations of her having been a spy, see Verdery 2018.

²³ For a classic intervention, see Asad 1973.

²⁴ For a notable exception, see Pelkmans and Machold 2011. For older and newer attempts by anthropologists to think about truth in relationship to the category of religion, see Pritchard 1937 and Holbraad 2009.

in many respects. Nevertheless, it fails to ask what encounters such as those described earlier reveal about the forms of agency and experience that people living in the midst of competing geopolitical projects themselves regard as being important.

The approach taken in this book, then, is to explore the ways in which particular communities, networks and groups experience and navigate life in the spaces betwixt and between competing geopolitical processes, powers, projects and dynamics. Doing so entails recognising – as others have – the skilful ways in which actors who operate in such contexts navigate between, and strategise in relation to, multiple geopolitical forces. But it also requires recognition of an aspect of acquiring such skills that has received less attention: the longer-term implications that cultivating the arts of navigational agency have for individuals and the mobile societies of which they are a part. While it is most straightforward to conceive of mistrust as the negative corollary of functional forms of trust-based relationships, my fieldwork experiences have brought my attention, instead, to the multifaceted significance of mistrust to traders' activities and lives. On the one hand, living in a wider context perceived as being characterised by mistrust can be profoundly distressing for traders whose livelihoods depend on making accurate assessments based on detailed knowledge of the trustworthiness of others.²⁵ On the other hand, however, they also recognise that it is important to maintain a healthy degree of mistrust – doing so allows them to survive and, potentially, flourish in the charged geopolitical contexts across which they lead their lives. Many of my own fieldwork experiences have themselves been characterised by interactions powerfully inflected with mistrust. As the earlier account of my fieldwork suggests, such interactions are multidimensional: they are distressing and stressful, but they have also acted as the grounds upon which I have established convivial relationships of friendships, humour and exchange. In this sense, just as the traders regard mistrust as being a fundamental substrate of all their social relationships and activities, so too has the experience of mistrust in fieldwork enriched rather than subtracted from my understanding of their modes of navigational agency, and, more broadly, of the approach I take towards conceptualising geopolitics as lived.

'You're an Agent, I'm an Agent – We're All Agents'!

I came to realise during the course of interactions such as the one in China described earlier that professing innocence in an earnest and sincere way

²⁵ Monsutti 2013.

in the face of accusations that I was a spy for the British government rarely if ever resulted in changes in the traders' attitudes towards me. Rather, using wit and irony to address the traders' thinking about my activities generated more interesting and engaging conversation. At one level, seeking to live up to the high standards of humour, intellectual exchange and irony that the traders' deploy in their conversations with one another helped me establish social relationships with them.²⁶ My informants would laugh uproariously, for example, when I would remark upon leaving a café in which we had spent an evening that I had to go to my hotel room urgently as it was time to submit another report to central command (*markaz*). One day, a group of traders asked me whether I drank alcohol – they enjoyed it when I remarked offhand that I did not, and they should know why: my work did not allow me to use intoxicating substances for reasons surrounding the sensitivity of what I knew. We also had many evenings of humorous banter during the course of which I joined the traders in their discussions about who 'the English' did and did not wish to serve in the Afghan government. Regardless of how effective an individual was or was not in their government position, it was their connections with the English that would determine their fate, they remarked. My friends would also remark to me that they were tired of living in China and told me that I could easily use my contacts in the United Kingdom to get them appointed to a ministerial position in a relevant part of Afghanistan's government. While such comments were made as jokes in the restaurants, trading offices and cafés in which we sat, they did reflect a seam of ambition among successful traders to trade in their accomplishments in the field of commerce for a political position. For example, a trader who learned Chinese in China after being sent to the country on a Chinese bursary arranged by the mujahidin government in the 1990s told me how he had activated his networks in Kabul after completing his MA with the aim of being appointed to a position in the country's embassy in Beijing. Only having not secured access to a suitable position did he embark on a new life by opening a trading company in Yiwu. The presence of such ambitions among the traders is important: it underscores the degree to which successful traders actively regard themselves as skilled and capable actors on the geopolitical stage, and it questions the relevance of thinking of them either as inevitably above or below formal expressions of geopolitics.

²⁶ Historical and anthropological scholarship on South and Central Asia has brought attention to the significant role played by lively debate inflected by the use of humour and wit in regional cultures. See [Marsden 2005](#) and [Subtelny 1984](#).

In other words, embracing the traders' categorisation of myself as a spy – albeit through the use of humour, wit and irony – enabled me to show respect to their historical understandings and experiences, and to do so in a way that privileged the form of sociality they deployed in their relations with one another. This reflects the dynamics of conducting fieldwork in environments that are best characterised as lying at the point at which multiple geopolitical projects intersect. My fieldwork practices constituted a way of addressing Afghanistan's position in relationship to international power structures yet in a manner that did not openly challenge the taken-for-granted nature of the country's historic independence from colonial influence. Joking and deploying irony to discuss the sensitive nature of Afghanistan's political relations with the wider world facilitated the discussion of aspects of the country's past and present that official discourses treat as unthinkable.

In light of such fieldwork experiences, conviviality is a helpful frame for analysing social dynamics in commercial nodes, but it is also worth thinking of it as a relevant type of behaviour for fieldworkers studying fraught geopolitical contexts. Conviviality has increasingly been used in a range of disciplines in the social sciences to refer to 'concrete practices of everyday interaction'.²⁷ In that such practices might enfold aspects that are good-natured and others that are more antagonistic, the concept is less clearly normative than other comparable ones, such as civility or cosmopolitanism.²⁸ The boundaries between humorous and antagonistic exchanges, indeed, dissolve in the course of convivial sociality. As a result, the outcomes of moments of convivial interaction – be they the deepening of social relationships or the eruption of interpersonal tensions – are contingent and difficult to predict. The contingent and pragmatic nature of conviviality offers a better lens into understanding actually existing forms of sociality found in fraught geopolitical landscapes than concepts invested with a powerful moral or even utopian component, such as those of civility or cosmopolitanism.²⁹ Convivial modes of sociality, moreover, are valued among people in Yiwu and the other trading nodes in which I have spent time. Learning and performing convivial modes of operating offers scholars of such contexts the possibility to engage in exchanges that more morally one-dimensional modes of interacting – such as sincerity and earnestness – preclude, not least because they reassert hierarchies of power, morality and knowledge. In contexts in which mistrust is a pervasive feature of daily life, modes of interacting that acknowledge

²⁷ Freitag 2020: 25.

²⁸ On the concept of conviviality in anthropology, see Marsden and Reeves 2018.

²⁹ On the concept of civility in anthropology, see Thiranagama, Kelly and Forment 2018.

and contest power differentials between researchers and research participants facilitate interaction and discussion.

One evening in Yiwu, for example, I passed by one of the simple beer shacks that I would occasionally frequent in the evenings if I wished to have a break from my normal routine of taking tea with traders in one of the city's many Muslim-oriented restaurants. On this occasion, instead of sitting outside on tables placed on the pavement, I went into the rather dimly lit backroom of the beer shack, where I discovered an Afghan trader known to me sitting with a partly consumed bottle of imported whisky. After checking there was nobody he knew outside, he beckoned me to join him. Aged in his late twenties and with a young family in Yiwu, he sighed 'Ah Mr Magnus, you've even found me here', before going on to tell me how many of his friends said 'all types of things about me', insinuating that I was an agent. But, he emphasised, he always told them that I was who I said I was – a professor – and that he had read pieces I had published on the BBC website in Persian that demonstrated this was indeed the case. There were, he said, others who had also vouched for me in his network of friends and business associates, especially a man in his forties whom I had met in one of the city's nightclubs popular with foreigners. Many more insisted, however, that Afghans should avoid me outright.

Checking once more that all was clear outside the beer shack, he poured another drink before telling me that I should not take the attitudes of Yiwu's Afghans towards me personally: they related to one another in this manner. Indeed, that was why he had come to drink his whisky alone – he was fed up spending time with his Afghan associates and wanted to decompress by himself from the combined stresses of trade and Afghan sociality. As the night wore on and the bottle of whisky gradually emptied, my friend – always alert as to the other people with whom we were sharing the room – explained to me that there were so many different points of view (*nakaat-e nazar*) in Afghan society that it had essentially become impossible for people to get along with one another. The country should be divided, he said, not by ethnicity or language but point of view: the piety-minded, the ethnicists and the politically ideological sections of society would all have their own spaces in which to live in Afghanistan if his model were to be adopted. There also needed to be a zone for us – literally, in Farsi, 'me and you' (*ma-u shoma*). If such a zone did not exist, he asked me, what would become of him? While he greatly enjoyed his life in China, the Chinese did not want people like him in their country forever, so he would have to move on to somewhere else in the future. Before leaving for home, the young trader (using a black marker pen) wrote his name and the Afghan name (Jawed) bestowed upon me by my informants in Afghanistan on the remaining

contents of a second bottle of whisky. I was welcome to have a glass whenever I swung by this store, he told me – I just needed to ask the Chinese shopkeeper (known by foreigners in the city as Josephina) to give me the bottle.

The night in the beer shack was revealing not simply for the insights it offered about the stresses and strains of life in Yiwu, traders' anxieties concerning their future in the city or the nature of their attachments to and imaginations of Afghanistan – all concerns that are explored in greater detail in later chapters of the book. Additionally, the evening also highlighted the extent to which mistrust pervaded traders' lives in terms of their experiences in and of China but also their interpersonal relationships with one another.

The following day, I decided to address the rumours circulating among Afghans in the city about my being a spy with another trader I had come to know during the course of my most recent spells of fieldwork in Yiwu. With experience of life in Russia and China and having once served as a government official in Afghanistan, I thought that this man in his late fifties would be an ideal person with whom to talk about my personal experiences. Not only was he experienced in dealing with sensitive issues, my turning to advice from a trader older than myself would be regarded as a demonstration of respect. Over the course of the night before meeting him, I carefully thought about what I would say. I would remark that I was surprised about such rumours continuing to swirl so vehemently in Yiwu even though I had made several visits to the city and had come to know traders well both there and elsewhere in the world. I prepared myself to say that I found such accusations bemusing: Was it not obvious that I would be a hopeless spy in this environment? Surely Afghans in Yiwu, I rehearsed, could recognise that if – for whatever reason – the UK government wished to investigate their activities in the city, they would recruit an Afghan with British citizenship rather than someone like myself, who stood out like a sore thumb in the city's Afghan social circles.

The following afternoon – as I often did – I ambled to the large and spacious café the man managed and also owned in partnership with an Arab merchant based in North Africa. After raising the issue of my being called a spy with him, however, I did not receive the answer of reassurance and support that I had – rather naively – expected. Nor did the trader express incredulity towards the attitudes of his fellow Afghans. Laughing, my friend remarked:

Not a few people say these things about you but a thousand! And they're right! But I say, yes, he's an agent, but let's speak to him – it's a great opportunity, we can

benefit from him, and he can benefit from us! The stupid thing about the other Afghans in this city is that they don't understand the value of agents – I do!

Slightly taken aback by my friend's response, I asserted that – regardless of what he thought – I was not an agent (*jasus*). Could he not see that there were individuals in Yiwu who were in a far better position to spy for the British on the city's Afghans than I was?

What do you mean you're not an agent? And anyway, what's wrong with being an agent? I'm an agent. There are lots of different types of agents – political agents, commercial agents, knowledge agents. Look! Every day I ask you about economic conditions in the UK, in Europe and other places; I ask you about taxes; I ask you about visas. What am I doing? I'm getting commercial knowledge from you which I then use and share with others. In your case, you are a knowledge agent: I tell you things about Afghans in Yiwu, and you will take it back and write it down and it will be used. It will be used by someone, otherwise why bother? There is nothing wrong with that! We're all agents – the problem with my compatriots is that they do not understand the value of being an agent and think that the only type of agent that exists is the political agent. But political agents are just one type of agent. Do you get my point?

As our conversation about the identification of 'agents' and their role in Yiwu continued, a further man joined us at the table at which we were sitting: a Pashto-speaking trader in his mid-fifties who was involved in commercial activities in Pakistan and Afghanistan. We had been introduced to one another in the same café some nights previously, and he was also keen to contribute to our ongoing conversation. He remarked that my friend was right: there are many different types of agent, and in Yiwu 'everybody is an agent' – it was on this assumption that all social relationships in the city were cultivated and maintained. It was impossible to know what type of agent people were or for whom they were working. Yet everybody in the city was conveying knowledge for one or another reason to one or another party: traders in Yiwu were reticent about dealing with one another for justifiable reasons, he remarked, but the accusation of spying in the city was nothing to be concerned about. Once again, these men's conceptions of themselves and the skills they recognise are required of them to work in a commercial node such as Yiwu underscore the ways in which living in a world of fraught geopolitics penetrates their sensibilities and self-understandings. As importantly, the traders do not regard themselves as being out of their depth or the beneficiary of one or other geopolitical power. Instead, they emphasise their ability to play the game as well if not with a greater degree of sophistication than more formally positioned geopolitical actors.

Convivial evenings such as these – in which humour and deadly seriousness, *bonhomie* and antagonism, openness and suspicion and trust

and mistrust are combined in creative and sometimes flamboyant ways – characterised much of my fieldwork experience in Yiwu and the other locations I have visited while conducting research for this book. My interactions with the traders underscore the role played by mistrust not only in the preservation of commercial secrets; it is also of critical significance to the building of social relationships with one another, as well as with non-Afghans. Societies in which the assumption of mistrust is all-pervasive reflect a wider attitude that regards the ability to read other people's minds and predict future courses of action as being impossible and indeed immoral.³⁰ As I have already noted, the traders' attitudes towards trust are multidimensional. They emphasise the significance of enduring ties of trust established in the context of social relationships to their activities, yet they also regularly remark that it is impossible to establish full relationships of trust – in the sense of being able to predict future courses of behaviour – because 'humans are always able to change their minds'.³¹ Afghan traders agree, then, that it is impossible to read other people's minds. In this sense, mistrust is not merely corrosive of human relationships but, rather, can establish the basis for future acts of forgiveness. In Humphrey's formulation, mistrust can be 'socially productive' in a 'non-normative sense': it enables 'something else' to happen, be that 'the emergence of mediators, processes of testing the untrusted other, or protests that may become political'.³² In this instance, the trader emphasises that mistrust of others need not foreclose the possibility of cultivating and sustaining social relationships and the forms of knowledge exchange in which these are implicated. Rather, a healthy degree of mistrust helps ensure that a relationship entails positive implications for both of its partners. Indeed, not refusing their categorisation of my being a specific type of agent – 'a knowledge agent' – helped to address the concerns of Afghans who were sceptical that scholarly interest in their activities alone would result in my spending as much time in the places in which I worked as I did. Interestingly, moreover, the trader also demonstrated to me his powers of analysis, insight and perception: he suggested that he was better able to understand my situation and activity than I was. Evident in the encounter, therefore, is the way in which traders seek to convey and transmit to one another and those with whom they interact the importance not simply of being sceptical of others but also of the nature of their own thinking and activities.

³⁰ See [Carey 2017](#).

³¹ For a detailed consideration of trust's role in Afghan trading networks, see [Marsden 2016](#).

³² [Humphrey 2016](#).

You Cannot Just Stop Your Thoughts and Feelings

The responses of my informants to my presence in Yiwu are important not only because of the insights they offer into the type of fieldwork sensibilities helpful in conducting research in geopolitical sensitive contexts. They also offer important perspectives into the types of worlds and environments inhabited by the traders. These worlds have arisen over the course of many years at the heart of geopolitical struggles, tensions and boundaries – struggles that have and continue to be characterised by violence, military conflict and political and social ruptures. Trading networks that have arisen and proved durable in such contexts have done so because they are able to negotiate between multiple geopolitical projects. It is important, however, not to lose sight of the ways in which life at the interfaces of geopolitical projects inflects people's everyday lives, sentiments and modes of interpreting the world in a way that reminds us that such actors are not merely savvy and slippery characters able to exploit complex situations instrumentally and for their own benefit. This is not merely the case in terms of their understandings and attitudes towards the state, politics and power but also with regard to the social relationships they establish and their daily experiences.

Living a life at such geopolitical junctures highlights with poignant immediacy the forms of mistrust that interweave human relationships of all kinds. Several traders, for instance, told me about the complex emotional and health-related problems they have experienced. A Pashto-speaking trader I came to know during the course of meetings in Yiwu and Kabul shared with me difficult health issues he had faced over several years. One day, while sitting in a café in Kabul with three other Yiwu-based traders, he told us that he lives a good life – dividing his time between Kabul, Yiwu and Dubai, having a wife and children and facing no financial difficulties. Yet, nevertheless, he went on to tell us, he suffers from 'anxiety and depression', and a doctor he visits regularly in Delhi had prescribed medicine to improve the quality of his daily life:

People at home [Kabul] don't think about things because they think they are right. I'm always thinking 'why are things as they are?' My Indian doctor – who is a Hindu – tells me to stop and watch cartoons rather than the news, or to become more religious. Imagine a Hindu telling a Muslim to be more religious! But it won't work that way either. You can't just stop your thoughts and feelings. Even though I pray and don't drink alcohol, relatives of mine from our ancestral village [in central Afghanistan] tell me that I am a communist because I advise them to work and earn money for their families rather than fight alongside the Taliban. Why would I wish to become like them?

Paul Anderson has suggested that traders move and mediate between different geographies, acting ‘strategically to keep several contexts in play at once because they are faced with an unforeseeable future and marginal citizenship rights’.³³ Traders do not strategically connect Eurasian settings in a remote or detached manner, however. As Anderson himself notes in a study of merchants in the Syrian city of Aleppo, being a trader in Muslim contexts is often also connected to ‘ethics of good interaction’ premised upon a sensitive and emotionally astute response to particular social circumstances.³⁴ Many of the traders with whom I have interacted also argue that their ability to make such connections is premised on an especially sensitive mode of behaviour – unlike ‘other Afghans’, the trader above emphasises the forms of thought and feeling that influence his behaviour and shape his everyday emotional experiences. On the one hand, the reflections of life in Yiwu offered to me by traders from a range of generations underscore the extent to which deploying strategies to survive in the midst of geopolitical tensions is a source of prestige and self-worth. On the other hand, however, leading such a life is fraught and stressful and has long-term implications for them, both collectively and individually.

Conclusion

The Afghan traders explored in this book think of themselves as being informed, savvy and strategic actors operating in a world defined earlier by fraught geopolitical projects and processes. In this chapter, we have seen how a range of historic and contemporary experiences of geopolitical processes are evident in the traders’ thinking, conversations and modes of self-understandings, and these include those connected to histories of European imperialism in Asia, as well as more recent forms of intervention often framed in relationship to a discourse of ‘humanitarian intervention’. Viewed from the traders’ perspective, these multiple experiences of geopolitics enfold over and within rather than sequentially displace one another. Instead of identifying with one or another project of Eurasian connectivity, the traders emphasise that their ability to survive in contexts in which ‘everyone is a spy’ is dependent upon their ability to work ‘beneath and between governments’ rather than for them. The geopolitical contexts in which the traders work, then, play a powerful role in informing their self-understandings, their imaginations of the

³³ Anderson 2020.

³⁴ For an extended account of this approach to merchants’ ethics, see Anderson forthcoming (c).

world they inhabit and their socio-moral perceptions of those with whom they live, work and interact on a daily basis. As the ethnography presented in this chapter also demonstrates, the traders are not always or equally successful at navigating such complex and tense environments. Individual traders also complain of the negative effects on their well-being of years spent living across and between such contexts. Importantly, openly discussing such elements of their everyday lives is not regarded by the traders simply as evidence of a trader's failure or weakness, but instead as constituting evidence of their possessing the forms of sentiment that are necessary for them to be able to lead lives in Eurasia's geopolitical frontiers, sentiments that those not involved in such activities are widely regarded as lacking.

Anthropological fieldwork depends on an openness to establishing relationships that will outlive specific research projects: it is solely these kinds of relationships that enable fieldworkers to gather material that is not accessible to scholars who hold a narrower understanding of the nature of relevant knowledge. In order to establish such relationships, however, scholars conducting anthropological fieldwork must often forsake the collection of particular types of material for a reliance on different types of data. In the case of the fieldwork upon which this book is based, it was clear that formal surveys would preclude me from establishing the relationships I needed to build to understand the aspects of the traders' lives – their identities, experiences and networks – in which I was most interested. It has become a truism to state that knowledge about society and people is always partial. Fieldwork exploring mobile traders at the interstices of Eurasia's geopolitical struggles ensures that ethnographic knowledge about mobile societies is also inevitably fragmentary and kaleidoscopic.

Recognition of the constraints of fieldwork in fraught geopolitical contexts helps to identify practices that can help anthropologists working in these and comparable circumstances. This chapter has explored the relevance of two concepts that are of importance to understanding the traders' modes of living but simultaneously also helpful methodological instruments: conviviality and mistrust. Conviviality is a complex mode of sociality that combines contrasting aspects of behaviour – including suspicion and openness, humour and seriousness, as well as trust and mistrust. As such, conviviality is not only a mode of sociality observable in geopolitically fraught trading worlds but also a practice that can be adopted to help establish social relationships in fraught settings in which 'everyone is an agent'. Rather than earnestly seeking to convince my informants that I was not a spy, or assume that years of acquaintance would eventually win their total trust, I discovered that it was more

helpful to embrace their suspicions about me and to do so in a polite if jovial, respectful if sceptical – in short, convivial – manner. Acting in this manner established the grounds for sociality and exchange even in the face of the persistent presence of mistrust. Doing so also offered insights into the role played by mistrust in the traders' relationships with one another: far from being merely corrosive of social relationships, mistrust, for the traders, is an ever-present and undeniable feature of daily life, and one in relation to which all social relationships are inevitably cultivated, maintained and sustained. [Chapter 2](#) turns its attention to an environment in which traders must hone their skills in the arts of navigating geopolitical tensions especially acutely: the countries of the former Soviet Union.

2 Inter-Asian Corridor of Connectivity (1): The Eurasian World – China, Russia, Ukraine and Western Europe

Introduction

This chapter documents and analyses the first of two major corridors of connectivity that shape and inform the forms of Afghan mobility that this book argues constitute a critical aspect of the connections that link different regions of Asian to one another. The corridor explored in the following pages connects commercial nodes in post-Soviet Eurasia to China via the Muslim-majority states of Central Asia. The chapter's overarching aim is to describe and analyse the contours and structure of the networks that operate along this Eurasian corridor of connectivity, as well as the role played by nodes in the functioning and dynamics of these networks. Recalling Zia's comparison of Afghan traders to Asia's heart, trading networks can be thought of as being the connective tissues that bind different parts of Asia to one another; corridors, in turn, function as conductive tissues that channel and protect traders moving within and along networks. A further way of conceptualising the concept is in terms of a 'pathway', which has been developed by Martin Saxer to describe

a configuration that is at once geographical and social. A pathway is thus not just another word for trade route . . . Life along a pathway is shaped by things, stories, rumors, and people passing through – by motion, or by flows, if you will. However, a pathway is neither just another word for flow. While shaped by motion, pathways are also conditioned by terrain, infrastructure and environmental factors like climate and weather.¹

Work by historians of trading networks has shown how exploring in detail a network's social make up and geographical contours adds to our understanding of the multidimensionality of this type of social formation.² A network may, for example, comprise a single and coherent network; alternatively, a multiplicity of micro-networks connected to one another may make it impossible to identify a single network. Similarly, if the activities of specific networks revolve around a single defining node,

¹ See Saxer 2016: 105. ² Notably, [Aslanian 2014](#): 14–15, [Can 2020](#), [Trivellato 2009](#).

then, for others, multiple nodes may be of simultaneous significance, with each node playing a specific role in the functioning of a network as a whole. The different roles played by nodes in a network may include, for example, those related to commerce and the centralisation of capital, as well as ensuring the sociological and cultural reproduction of networks by way of provisions for family life and the transmission of knowledge, values and ideologies that lend coherence to the activities and identities of the people making up a network. Historians have also argued that the structure of trading networks plays a significant role in shaping the collective ability of this type of social formation to withstand shocks affecting the commercial and political environments in which they operate. A trading network organised in relation to a single node, for instance, may be especially vulnerable to economic and political transformations and ruptures, whereas one organised in relation to multiple nodes – significant sites for networks of capital, merchants, family life, commodities, and information – may be better positioned to adapt and respond to such shocks.

This chapter engages with this body of literature and seeks to answer a series of related questions that primarily address issues concerning the durability of trading networks across space and time. What forms does the structure of trading networks take? How do their structures affect or not affect their durability over the *longue durée*? Is it accurate to identify commercial networks in the singular, or is it possible to think of multiple networks acting independently but coalescing with one another in relationship to shared goals and ambitions? If nodes are sites at which networks converge and interact, then do commercial networks differ from one another in terms of the number of such nodes that are important for them? Furthermore, do such nodes combine key functions (e.g. economic, sociological, cultural and ideological), or do particular nodes perform distinct roles?

The chapter also seeks to contribute to this body of literature, however, by bringing closer attention to the ways in which the structure of trading networks and the role that nodes play within these are shaped by the wider geopolitical contexts in which they emerge, evolve and operate. The networks discussed in this chapter emerged in the context of the collapse of the Soviet Union, an event that had a range of consequences for the region's dynamics.³ At the same time, as I argue across the book, traders' activities are situated at the interface of multiple geopolitical dynamics active across space and time. It is impossible to understand contemporary trading networks along the Eurasian corridor of connectivity, then,

³ See Humphrey 2002.

without also taking into account Russia's and Britain's imperial legacy in Central Asia, as well as the changing nature of Chinese policy towards its western neighbours. These intersecting geopolitical dynamics have all played a critical role in shaping the geography, history and composition of the trading networks discussed in what follows.

By focusing on the geopolitical contexts shaping the activities and identities of an Afghan trading network, this chapter and the one that follows depart from a general tendency in the literature on trading networks of varying types comprising Muslims to dwell on religion's significance in determining a network's distinctive character. A great deal of work across the fields of history and anthropology has sought to explore intersections of religion and economic life, especially in Muslim contexts and trading communities. Most notably, Green has theorised the 'religious market' in a range of settings in the nineteenth-century imperial world as a space in which religious organisations acted as 'firms' and their leaders as 'entrepreneurs'.⁴ In anthropology, many scholars have documented and theorised connections between 'neo-liberalism' and Islam, especially with regard to so-called 'neoliberal piety', often conceived as a manner of being Muslim that brings together Islamic ethics with an emphasis on individual entrepreneurialism and accountability.⁵ In light of dominant trends in the literature on Muslim commercial networks, a surprising conclusion of this chapter is that the identities of Afghan traders working along the Eurasian corridor of connectivity largely revolve around the enactment of secular forms of national identity as much as a public commitment to Islam. Indeed, many of the traders are openly ambiguous about Islam's relevance to their commercial activities and daily lives. The chapter explains this not as evidence of Islam or religion in general being inconsequential to these traders' worldviews. Nor does it argue that the identities of Afghan traders in the Eurasian corridor are simply a legacy of their having been politically invested in socialist forms of ideology during the Soviet period. Rather, it seeks to understand the traders' predilection for the display of secular forms of national identity as being a specific facet of the modes in which they navigate between the competing Eurasian geopolitical projects that shape the contexts in which they live their lives and earn a livelihood. Geopolitical projects initiated by Russia and China are of greatest significance to the contexts inhabited by the traders acting in the Eurasian corridor.

⁴ Green 2011 and Green 2014.

⁵ See, for example, Atia 2013. For a critical discussion, see Osella and Osella 2009.

Analysing the structure of trading networks also raises important questions about the relationship between this type of social formation and the geopolitical contexts they navigate. On the one hand, the geopolitical ambitions of multiple nation states directly affect the lives and activities of the traders explored in this chapter. On the other hand, nation states also seek to instrumentally use the trading networks and communities operating across their territories as a means of expanding their reach and influence geopolitically. In what follows, for example, I document the role played by Afghan traders in the organisation of meetings between Taliban and Afghan politicians in Moscow; in [Chapter 4](#), we see how in the Chinese city of Yiwu traders are also deployed in attempts to brand the city as a tolerant commercial hub on the ‘Silk Road’.

Better understanding the relationship between trading networks, the nation states in which they operate and the dynamics of various geopolitical projects can have important implications for the foreign policies of weaker countries squeezed between more powerful neighbours. Afghanistan has for long been nestled between powers seeking to extend their influence and reach beyond imperial and national boundaries and in a manner that has sought to limit the country’s ability to act autonomously on the global stage through foreign policy and diplomacy. A strong case exists for treating Central Asia’s transnational actors as ‘everyday diplomats’ – a term that emphasises the capacities that particular groups and networks of persons have in the skills of diplomacy, especially those of negotiation and cultural/linguistic versatility. But what might recognition of the everyday or informal diplomatic skills of the mobile citizenry of small nation states mean for specific countries?⁶ Nation states in many regions have increasingly recognised how the diplomatic skills that sections of their populations have acquired over the course of decades of transregional mobility can add a new layer to their foreign policy agendas and the practices they deploy to form interstate relations.⁷ Afghanistan could similarly capitalise on the navigational agency that its traders employ along multiple human–commercial corridors. Yet, in order to do so, one-sided stereotypes that circulate about traders from the region need to be rigorously contested. Traders navigate complex geopolitical dynamics in sophisticated and nuanced ways. A recognition of such forms of navigational agency stands to increase the likelihood of Afghanistan and similarly positioned countries developing the role that traders and trading networks play in informal diplomacy. More generally, trading networks bring attention to the geographies,

⁶ Marsden, Ibañez-Tirado and Henig 2016. ⁷ Christelow 2012, Yolaçan 2019a.

activities, skills and cultural as well as linguistic aptitudes of people, rather than those projected upon them by nation states.⁸

Trading Networks: Structures, Dynamics and Geographies

Historians working on long-distance trade have identified two especially significant types of trading network: monocentric and polycentric networks. 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: both the objects and credit necessary for commerce and the women and priests central to the network’s social and cultural reproduction, however, had their origins in New Julfa. In this sense, New Julfa formed a single dominant ‘nodal center’ that ‘defines and regulates the identity and economic vitality of the network as a whole’.⁹ By contrast, ‘multinodal polycentric’ trading networks are identified through their having no single ‘nodal center that dominated most aspects of . . . the lives of merchants and members of the same community’.¹⁰ Multinodal polycentric networks, by contrast, operated from numerous centres, each of which was of if not equal then varying importance for the activities of the trading network as whole.¹¹

Differences in the structure of historic trading networks had significant implications for the types of commercial ventures embarked upon by the traders. 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 – a key principle upon which the durability of such networks was premised.¹²

Historians have also suggested that a network’s multinodal or mononodal nature also had implications for its ability to withstand transformation in the contexts across which it operated. Aslanian focuses on the decline of Armenian trading networks in the wake of the calamity that beset its central node of New Julfa after Nadir Shah’s invasion of the city in the mid-eighteenth century. The commercial activities of the networks were connected to the city to such a degree that they were unable to survive in the aftermath of its sacking. Aslanian’s work also illustrates, however, that a network’s durability is not merely determined by its

⁸ Cf. Pickett 2015, Yolaçan 2019a. ⁹ Aslanian 2014: 14–15. ¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ See Trivellato 2011. ¹² Markovits 2000.

mononodal or multinodal structure. Durability, rather, is also conferred by a network's ability to switch between and connect different fields of agency, for example, those of economics and politics. Thus, if New Julfa's Armenians' collective commercial activities suffered irrevocably in the wake of the decline of their central node, merchants subsequently played a major role in creating new forms of political identity and institutions: they reinvented themselves as members of an Armenian nation and called for the creation of a nation state.¹³ In this sense, networks also switch between different fields of agency, and doing so can ensure their long-term relevance and influence in changing political and economic circumstances.

Students, Merchants, Workers and Sellers: Eurasia's Afghans – An Overview

One regional context in which Afghan traders have been especially adept operators is that of the countries of the former Soviet Union. Given that Afghan networks operating in these contexts pivot between commercial nodes in China, and often extend into cities in Western Europe, I refer to them as operating within a Eurasian corridor of connectivity.

Afghan traders themselves analyse, reflect upon and clearly articulate the role they have played in establishing commercial routes between China and the countries of the former Soviet Union. During the course of my fieldwork, traders working in the Eurasian corridor of connectivity would often remark to one another that 'we Afghans have made a name for ourselves as traders in the markets of Russia and Ukraine'. Similarly, one evening in Yiwu over a dinner in an Afghan restaurant, a St Petersburg-based trader gave me a finely argued account and analysis of the ways in which Afghans had come to be established merchants in Russia and Ukraine. In this sense, Afghans are not only the authors of trading routes and geographies but, importantly, they also recognise that they are, and this, in turn, feeds into their distinctive sense of themselves as actors affected by but also influential in geopolitical projects and processes.

However, officials from the region and beyond often view mobile Afghans in Central Asia as either costly refugees or terrorists/criminals.¹⁴ Since 2001, policy relating to Afghan traders has been confused. States in the region, such as Turkmenistan, have introduced policies that specifically target the commercial activities of Afghan traders.¹⁵ Less frequently,

¹³ Aslanian 2014: 214. ¹⁴ UNODC 2012.

¹⁵ For a detailed account of the effect of Turkmenistan's policies on Afghan traders, see Chapter 2 in Marsden 2016: 118.

policymakers have encouraged Afghan merchants to invest in the commercial and agricultural sectors of their countries. This was the case in Uzbekistan following the installation in 2016 of Shavkat Mirziyoyev as the country's president, for example.

Afghanistan's long-distance merchants in Eurasia organise their commercial activities in relationship to multiple commercial nodes. The distribution of these nodes reflects the economic geography of particular countries but also the longer history of Afghan migration to the region. The nodes in which Afghans work and have played a key role in establishing markets are often cities and towns in which people from the country had studied and trained during the Soviet period. A handful of such nodes is of particular significance to the collective activities of Afghans across the expansive Eurasian arena: Moscow and Odessa, for example, not only act as suppliers of commodities imported from China for their immediate environs but also at wider national and even international scales – traders in Moscow 'export' goods to Belarus, while those in Odessa are involved in the transport of commodities to Russia. None of these nodes, however, assumes a position of overwhelming importance over other nodes in the network – a point underscored by their simultaneous presence and the ways in which they jostle for position and influence with one another. As I have explored in detail elsewhere, kin- and ethnicity-based relationships help to shape the commercial relationships of Afghan traders. Yet the traders also collectively value the capacity to develop ties to persons external to their networks – such ties regularly take the form of marital bonds to women from the societies in which they live.¹⁶ Indeed, traders take pride in demonstrating their ability to establish emotional and commercial relationships with people of different backgrounds from their own; traders often also emphasise that their closest friends and commercial confidants are of Russian and Ukrainian rather than Afghan heritage. A trader in his late forties whom I came to know in Odessa, for example, proudly told me that he travels to China to purchase goods with a Ukrainian friend rather than his Afghan associates; such visits, moreover, also often involve holidays in Asian destinations, such as Sanya in China or Thailand's coastal resorts. In these ways, the activities, identities and geographical distribution of Eurasia's Afghans point towards the network's multinodal nature.

Afghan traders' interactions with politics and the state are also comparable in particular respects, however, to those of New Julfa's Armenians. Afghan traders currently active in the former Soviet Union mostly embarked upon their careers as officials in the pro-Soviet Kabul-based

¹⁶ See Marsden and Ibañez-Tirado 2015.

government. They formed a political grouping that lost authority in 1992 over what had been its political 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 reemerged in the form of an economic network. Having undergone higher education and training in the Soviet Union, the individuals making up the network were intimately familiar in multiple respects with formerly Soviet Eurasia.¹⁷ 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, Kharkiv, Dushanbe, Odessa and Minsk. These cities had played an affective and ideological role in the life trajectories of Afghans: they were centres of professional training and education, and places in which young Afghan men had matured and come of age. The experience of coming of age in Soviet contexts had resulted in many Afghans marrying local women they met during their years as students and officials. After returning to the former Soviet countries after the collapse of the government for which they served in Kabul in 1992, they began to earn a living and generate capital through trading in the informal markets and bazaars that had surfaced across the former Soviet space in the context of the collapse of the command economy. A range of diaspora organisations – including those run by Afghans as well as other communities such as Vietnamese – played a critical role in establishing these institutions.¹⁸

Soviet-sympathising Afghans who studied in Soviet universities, technical institutes, boarding schools and orphanages (*internat*) and party schools during the 1970s and 1980s played a critical and pioneering role in establishing Afghan commercial activities and networks in the post-Soviet space.¹⁹ These students engaged in petty trade on the side of their studies. They dealt in foreign currency and clandestinely sold Indian-made cloth and jeans from Hong Kong to Soviet citizens. On home visits to Afghanistan, they transported air conditioning units made in Azerbaijan as well as Russian-made teapots. The goods they brought to Afghanistan from the Soviet Union also found their way to Pakistan along established smuggling networks. At the same time, Afghans visiting India also brought items of wooden handicraft back to Kabul, and these were subsequently taken for sale in Soviet cities. During the Soviet era, then, Afghan students became sophisticated actors in the

¹⁷ Ibañez-Tirado 2019. ¹⁸ Humphrey 2002 and Marouda 2020. See also Spector 2017.

¹⁹ On the history of Afghan–Soviet educational programmes, see Nunan 2016. For a discussion of the importance of Central Asia to official depictions of Soviet modernity in Africa and Asia, see Kalynovsky 2013.

field of informal international trade and, in the course of doing so, helped to author a series of intersecting trade routes on an inter-Asian scale.

Afghans who attended different types of institutes and training centres in the former Soviet Union remain active in trade in Russia and Ukraine today. The specific nature of their early experiences in the Soviet Union, however, is held by them to have had long-term implications for their lives and livelihoods. Traders often remark that the most successful Afghans working in these contexts are from among the last batch of students sent from Afghanistan to the Soviet Union. It is often said that this generation of students was unencumbered by the prospect of having to return to work for the state in Afghanistan; in the wake of the Soviet collapse, rather than studying, they immediately set to the task of making a living through trade: it is this final cohort of students to the Soviet Union that went on to establish the most sizeable businesses. By contrast, Afghans who were enrolled by participation in interstate Afghan–Soviet programmes as primary school goers in Soviet boarding schools are regarded as having faced the most difficulties earning a livelihood. Having been regularly sent for education in boarding schools in the wake of losing fathers or close relatives in the Soviet–mujahidin conflict in Afghanistan, they lacked the moral and financial support available to students who travelled for education on bursaries.²⁰ Moreover, the upbringing (*tarbiya*) of Afghan children in boarding schools is also said to have distanced them from ‘Afghan culture and traditions’ (*urf-o adat-e afghanha*) – this is something, the traders argue, that made it harder for them in future years to establish successful relationships of trust with their compatriots on which the conduct of informal commerce depends. Indeed, several of these ‘*internat* boys’ are said to have turned to crime and violence in the tumultuous years following the Soviet collapse. In these ways, the transition of Afghan networks from those based on politics and ideology to trade and commerce was gradual and layered; differently positioned groups of actors had varied and diverse experiences of life in the interstices of Afghanistan and the Soviet Union and adapted to changing scenarios in a multiplicity of ways.

The trading activities of these Afghan students built on a deeper knowledge of the historical trade in Muslim Central Asia and Eurasia. Various Afghan networks – including those made up of Sikhs and Hindus, as we will discuss in greater detail in [Chapter 2](#) – were active in the nineteenth

²⁰ On this Soviet programme and the role played by the transnational transfer of children from Afghanistan by both the USSR and the United States during the Cold War conflict in the 1980s, see [Nunan 2016](#): 229–33.

century in the trade between British India and Central Asia/the Russian Empire, stretching to Murmansk, close to the Arctic Circle.²¹

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Afghan traders helped ensure that the populations of its successor states received basic foodstuffs. They imported and re-exported to Central Asia foodstuffs imported from Iran and Pakistan. In the same years, they also established themselves in the wholesale market in Chinese commodities in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. Doing so involved establishing trade routes between China and the post-Soviet countries, interacting with officials and negotiating market access with other influential trading communities. Initially, Afghans involved in such forms of trade travelled to China from the formerly Soviet cities in which they lived. They purchased commodities before arranging the transport of these themselves to the markets in which they worked. A trader aged in his early seventies who is currently based in Odessa told me of the long train journeys he made in the 1990s from Moscow to China, travelling by way of Almaty and purchasing goods in Urumqi, Harbin and Beijing. On their return visits, the traders often met the trucks that transported the Chinese commodities they had purchased at several national borders. My interlocutor in Odessa told me that he needed to do this to arrange the payment of bribes (*rishwat*) to customs officials, thereby hastening the arrival of the goods at the markets in which they conducted business.

Traders not only built pragmatic and cooperative relationships across the expansive Eurasian arena. A trader in his late fifties who lives in Yiwu and imports food products from Ukraine to China and also runs a business in one of Moscow's wholesale markets told me that in the 'early days' of China–Russia trade, Afghans also had arrangements with the transport companies that were influential in the formerly Soviet countries. He emphasised in particular arrangements between Afghan commodity traders and a transport company run by a wealthy Azeri businessman.²² The trader remarked to me that 'we Afghans played a big role in starting the trade between China and Russia, but we also had to work with different groups of people in order to do so'. So, if the trading networks along which goods and commercial personnel moved were characterised by their Afghan identities, the corridors along which they operated and that supported, protected and channelled their activities arose out of commercial exchanges and interpersonal relationships with people from a range of ethnolinguistic and national backgrounds. For the traders, the ability to negotiate arrangements with companies run by renowned individuals and operating on a Eurasian scale is regarded as

²¹ Dale 2002. ²² On Azeri traders, see Yolacan 2018.

further evidence of the context for their agency being geopolitical in scope rather than narrowly national.

After the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, circulatory migration between the country and former Soviet settings continued: individuals and families fleeing the conflict between the international forces and the Taliban officially registered themselves in post-Soviet countries as refugees. At the same time, wealthier families also moved to the former Soviet countries, including those with established businesses in the country and others who had worked as translators for the international forces in Afghanistan; such migrants regularly put their savings into businesses established by longer-term residents in the region.²³ The interconnections between the movement of traders and refugees and migrants are of critical importance to the dynamics of Afghan commercial networks in the post-Soviet world – an issue to which I turn in [Chapter 6](#). Government policies in formerly Soviet countries, as well as the activities of international institutions such as UNHRC and the ILO, shaped and influenced migratory movements. Yet the routes upon which the migrants travelled and the settings in which they stayed bore the imprint and agency of Afghans themselves. Afghan traders in Russia and China have reported to me how during the 1990s and early 2000s they established relationships with officials ranging from border officials to those working on regional railway systems that allowed them to ‘facilitate’ the movement of migrants from Afghanistan to a range of settings across the former Soviet Union. Men who embarked upon such journeys have told me that ‘smugglers’ (*qachaqbar*) oversaw the routes upon which migrants travelled to Moscow: ‘smugglers’ arranged for them to board trains at unscheduled stops in remote locations in Central Asia’s steppes, for example. As a result of activities such as these, a steady flow of refugees into the Soviet countries from Afghanistan ensured a source of relatively cheap labour for merchants working in these contexts. Refugees and undocumented migrants worked as sellers for the traders, handling day-to-day commercial activities in the wholesale and retail shops they owned.

Established Afghan merchants in post-Soviet countries supported but also profited from the presence of the ‘new arrivals’ (*naw umada*). Newcomers to the former Soviet countries also did much of the heavy lifting in the markets, manually moving goods between warehouses and shops and transporting them in vehicles from market to market. In the nodes of the Eurasian corridor, as in the many other contexts in which Afghan traders work, the legal position of such migrants was precarious.²⁴ A significant proportion of such migrants did not have the necessary

²³ On this type of work in Afghanistan, see [Mojaddedi 2019](#). ²⁴ [Reeves 2013](#).

documents to live in the countries in which they were based, let alone to work and earn a living for themselves and their families in Afghanistan to whom almost all send money in the form of remittances.

The story of Dil Agha exemplifies many of the themes discussed in this chapter so far. Dil Agha was a mid-ranking state official in the Soviet-aligned government of Afghanistan in the 1980s. After the regime's collapse in 1992, he initially moved to a Soviet successor state in the Caucasus, where he worked for a company that sourced hazelnuts for export to Ukraine. In the Caucasus, he married a local woman, and 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 established Afghan trader of Hindu background. After four years, he had earned enough credit working in this manner to rent his own shop from the market authorities; he eventually began travelling to China and independently importing children's bicycles to Ukraine from Yiwu. At the time of our first meeting in the summer of 2012, it was clear that his prudence and creditworthiness were reflected both in the capital he had earned over the years and 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 (*gudam; anbar*) in a building close to the market. He then bought shops next to his own in order to prevent his competitors from doing so and weakening his business. As we shall see in greater detail in [Chapter 6](#), Dil Agha was also supported in his business activities by 'newcomers' from Afghanistan: his nephew (*barodarzada*, brother's son) migrated to Ukraine by way of an informal route in 2014 and worked for two years alongside Dil Agha in his shop and warehouse. Dil Agha also held the money of a transient Afghan in Odessa for safe-keeping, using it to buy the commodities in which he dealt. 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' (*puldar*). In addition to three containers and a warehouse, he 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 successfully accumulate and invest capital over twenty years in Odessa, the decline in the value of Ukraine's currency in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, alongside increasing levels of cut-throat competition between traders from Afghanistan in the market, meant that Dil Agha was always seeking to cut his daily costs.

Dil Agha was widely held in high esteem by other Afghan traders based in Odessa, and much of his social life revolved around personal

relationships with such traders, as well as in his participation in community organisations of the type I discuss later in the chapter. Yet competition in the market in Odessa is also a powerful aspect of the traders' lives, and a consideration of Dil Agha's relationships with his compatriots reveals that while trust plays a critical role in the traders' modes of making a living, it is over-simplistic to assume that it is the fundamental tissue that binds trading networks together. According to Dil Agha, an Afghan who had lived in Canada for many years 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: he imported scooters from China bearing his own company's logo, meaning that he had entered into a contract (*qaradad*) 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 migrated to Odessa from London, bringing with him savings generated from working in the city initially as a waiter and subsequently as a taxi driver – these were also invested in the brother's scooter business. For Dil Agha, the two brothers were attempting to dominate and control Odessa's market in scooters. Yet attempting to do this by using money transferred from London and Canada was unjust (*beinsaf*) for Afghan traders who had spent years building up a business in the Seventh-Kilometre Market.

Competition was not only cut-throat in the market due to rivals from beyond what Dil Agha and others regarded as being the moral community of Odessa's established Afghan traders. Dil Agha told me that his business had suffered on several occasions due to the skulduggery of his own Afghan friends. Dil Agha is part of a circle of friends who all identify as being from northern Afghanistan; the men making up the circle are roughly of the same age and political background. The friends socialise 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 *kolektif*. One of the friends in the *kolektif* is Hajji 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 Hajji Karim had imported a large number 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, Hajji

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 in order 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 for the services of Chinese companies to arrange the export of his goods to Ukraine.

Sevastopol Hotel: From Olympic Accommodation to Eurasian Trade

Transient migrants received, however, a degree of protection from organisations registered by Afghans in the various countries in which they lived. These organisations – often referred to as ‘diasporas’ in order to comply with legal convention in formerly Soviet countries – acted as an important mechanism through which state officials communicated with the Afghan community through formal and established structures. Influential Afghan traders with close ties to people of power and authority in post-Soviet states established and subsequently directed such diaspora organisations. They enjoyed such relationships mostly because they had served in high-level government positions during the era of the pro-Soviet Afghan state. The head of one of the most prominent of these organisations in Russia, for instance, served in a high-level position in the pro-Soviet government in Afghanistan’s Ministry of Interior in the 1980s. The leaders of these organisations were able to deploy their relationships with the officials of the countries in which they lived in order to safeguard – at least partially – the informal commercial activities of Afghan merchants, as well as the ability of undocumented migrants to work in specified markets and trading spaces.

It is helpful – as Anderson has suggested – to think of such organisations and the marketplaces they have played a major role in co-establishing as ‘institutions of neighbourhood’. Such institutions are critical in ‘fostering durable trade networks’ because they ‘play a major role in pooling reputation, dispute resolution’ and the fashioning of ‘shared sensibilities and . . . familiarity’.²⁵ In terms of the wider arguments of this book, it is these specific social institutions, rather than the trading networks as a whole, that play a critical role in establishing the ‘rules of the game’ in relationship to which traders work and make a livelihood.

In the context of the Russian Federation, a diaspora organisation that played an especially influential role in securing the commercial success

²⁵ Anderson forthcoming(b).

and long-term durability of Afghan trading networks was established in a market complex known as the Watan Trading Centre located in the Sevastopol Hotel. The Sevastopol Hotel was built by the Soviet Union specifically for the 1980 Moscow Olympics. By the mid-1990s, however, two of its buildings had been transformed into the trading offices and wholesale shops of international traders from a range of backgrounds; the traders included Yemenis and Syrians, but the most densely represented group in the buildings identified as Afghan. The Watan Trading Centre is well known among traders from Moscow and across the Russian Federation more generally as a commercial node important for the procurement of commodities of daily use imported from China. Commodities ranging from bags and jewellery to gemstones, beads, hardware and souvenirs are all available for wholesale. The wider environment of the hotel is influenced by the cultural backgrounds of the traders who work in its buildings. Traders from Afghanistan and South Asia are able to buy ingredients for preparing dishes loved in their home countries from a Pakistani-owned shop that imports foodstuffs from Afghanistan, Pakistan and India; there is a restaurant serving Afghan specialities and, at the entrance to the complex, Afghan migrants sell snacks from their home country that they prepare in their apartments.

Afghan traders working in cities across Russia visit the hotel to purchase commodities. Travelling from cities such as Rostov-on-Don, St Petersburg, Kazan, Stavropol and Krasnodar, they purchase (often on credit from traders with whom they have long-term ties) commodities that they then sell on a wholesale basis in the cities in which they run wholesale businesses. The hotel-cum-commercial complex is of importance not only for traders in the Russian Federation but also those working in Ukraine and Belarus. Traders based in Odessa on Ukraine's Black Sea Coast transport goods informally to Moscow by way of the border city of Kharkiv in Ukraine – this form of trade has declined in the wake of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine but is still relevant to the commercial activities of Afghan traders. At the same time, traders based in Moscow also transport the commodities in which they deal with the approximately 200 traders from Afghanistan active in the Belarusian capital, Minsk. Similarly, the commodities imported by Afghans from China to Odessa are sold on a wholesale basis in the Seventh-Kilometre Market, from where they are distributed across Ukraine, as well as to the Russian Federation.

In the early 1990s, many of the traders and undocumented migrants who worked in the Sevastopol Hotel complex lived in what had formerly been guestrooms. Leaders of the officially registered Afghan diaspora association made informal agreements with powerful officials in

Moscow to secure this arrangement. Afghans who lived in Moscow during this period have reported to me that such agreements reduced the likelihood of Russian security officials and personnel entering the premises of the hotel-cum-market and asking to see the identity papers of unregistered Afghans who laboured within. Indeed, during visits I made to the Sevastopol Hotel in 2012 and again in 2014, I was told that around 4,000 individuals of Afghan origin ran businesses and/or worked in its shops and warehouses. Labourers with whom I spoke remarked that within the confines of the building they largely did not need to worry about being pursued by Russian security personnel. There were, however, occasional breakdowns in such agreements, which intermittently resulted in undocumented labourers being detained and sometimes deported to Afghanistan by the Russian authorities. On a number of occasions, the local authorities had closed the market and seized 'contraband' goods that had not completed formal customs procedures. Such events resulted in a considerable loss of earnings for Afghan merchants, but they were generally resolved after discussions between Russian officials and diaspora leaders had resulted in agreements and financial exchanges.

In the context of Russia, traders and state officials form relationships with one another behind closed doors. As a result, 'diaspora leaders' are able to play a central role in mediating relationships between the state and trading networks. Russian officials recognise such individuals as having the capacity to direct and discipline the behaviour of traders more generally. As Anderson has helpfully pointed out, the conduct of diplomacy entails the 'horizontal' skills of working across linguistic and cultural boundaries, but it is also premised on the 'vertical' skills that enable figures to control and direct the behaviour of those whom they represent.²⁶ As we shall see later, formal and informal diaspora organisations in the Sevastopol Hotel and the former Soviet Union more generally play a critical role in securing the durability of networks by ensuring that members maintain at least a degree of compliance with collective practices, standards and expectations.

It is important, however, not to over-amplify the power of diaspora organisations to direct and shape the networks. Nor should we assume that the vertical relationships at the heart of such organisations are automatically or inevitably successful in disciplining networks. In the case of the Sevastopol Hotel, besides the intermittent breakdown in trustful relationships (*gosast-e ehtimad*) between its officials and those of the

²⁶ On the role that social institutions and ties to figures of authority play in the disciplining of diasporas and trading networks in the Arab world, see [Anderson forthcoming\(a\)](#).

Russian state, the Watan Trading Centre is widely criticised by Afghan traders themselves. Traders are often resentful of what they view as being the ways in which holders of authority in the diaspora organisation have benefited from their relationships with state officials, especially in promoting and protecting their own commercial dealings, often to the detriment of the compatriots they proudly claim to serve. Resentment towards the diaspora leaders is often visible in conflicts that erupt within market-places between the leadership of community organisations and the traders, mostly over rent rises for shops and warehouses. Traders are positioned differently in inter-network hierarchies, then, and these are evident in their commercial practices and relationships. As we shall see later in the chapter, such hierarchies also manifest themselves in debates over the specific form taken by cultural gatherings. Such tensions not only inform the interpersonal relationships of traders operating in market-places such as the Sevastopol Hotel but also contribute to the dynamic geographies of the settings in which they work. Traders who have secured access to Russian citizenship and no longer require the same degree of protection as they had while refugees and migrants, for example, tend to move their businesses into newly established markets rather than those controlled by particular associations. Over time, traders predict that diaspora organisations will hold less sway over their activities, and that this will lead to their decline.

In other contexts in post-Soviet Eurasian settings, Afghan traders are involved in publicly contentious relationships with state officials, which leads them to deploy different strategies to achieve their aims and goals. The Seventh-Kilometre (or Sidmoi) Market in Odessa, Ukraine, for example, is one of the largest informal markets in the former Soviet Union. The traders who sell goods from the thousands of containers that form the basic physical infrastructure of the market hail from a multinational range of backgrounds: Ukrainian and Moldavian merchants work alongside sizeable communities of traders, labourers and money exchange agents from Vietnam, Afghanistan and Turkey.²⁷ As with the Sevastopol Hotel market complex, so too in Odessa do the market traders work with the local and national state authorities in a manner that enables them to influence and shape a range of realms that are of critical importance to their livelihoods, most importantly those of taxation and the payment of customs duties and those relating to the presence of undocumented migrants who work as labourers in the market.

²⁷ Skvirskaja 2014.

Agreements between traders, market authorities and state officials regularly break down, however. In the summer of 2018, for example, traders I knew told me that officials they identified as being from Ukraine's federal custom and taxation department were becoming a noticeable presence in the market. The officials wore forms of identity-protecting clothing (balaclavas) and visited shops, requesting sight of the identity documents of both shopkeepers and their labourers. The officials also reported traders – including those originally from Afghanistan – who employed undocumented migrants in their businesses, as well as Ukrainian nationals not formally registered (for tax purposes) as their employees. During this period, traders kept a careful eye on customers unknown to them who entered their shops; they told me that undercover tax officials and police regularly sought to fine or even extract bribes from shopkeepers by gathering information about them in this manner.

The traders told me that such officials were especially targeting the many Vietnamese money agents working in the Seventh-Kilometre Market. Marina Marouda has documented the important role played by Vietnamese working in the Seventh-Kilometre Market in various forms of currency markets.²⁸ At the end of each day, Vietnamese 'money people' change the Ukrainian cash earnings of shopkeepers into US dollars – a more stable currency in which traders often maintain their savings and reserves. Vietnamese exchange agents also arrange international US dollar money transfers to China – doing so allows traders in the market to pay their Chinese suppliers in instalments for the commodities they import to Ukraine.

Most of the Afghan traders I know in Odessa deploy the services of Vietnamese money exchange agents to pay their Chinese suppliers. Afghans are active in global currency markets, yet undertaking this type of activity in Ukraine is widely regarded as complex and dangerous – Ukrainian authorities are said to regularly arrest Afghans who are involved in such activities, and this has on occasion resulted in their imprisonment. One afternoon while I was sitting in the shop of an Afghan shopkeeper in the market, an Afghan man in his mid-twenties approached us and asked the shopkeeper if he had any money to change from local currency to US dollars; after the shopkeeper had declined the offer and the young exchange agent had left, he remarked to me that the young man was foolish to engage in this activity in Ukraine as it could cause him serious trouble with the authorities. Traders are aware of the sensitivities attached to the different types of commercial activities in which they are involved across the varying contexts in which they work

²⁸ Marouda 2020.

and use this knowledge to alter their behaviour and strategies on a context-by-context basis.

In the context of Odessa, attempts by Ukrainian officials to further control and limit the activities of Vietnamese money exchange agents in the market had the potential to directly affect Afghan commercial activities in the city: restrictions on the activities of the Vietnamese would make it harder for them to send payments to China and thereby raise the costs of trading with the country. Many Afghan traders in the Seventh-Kilometre Market with whom I spoke perceived the attacks on the Vietnamese exchange agents in the market as being unjust (*beinsaf*). They claimed that the driver behind the high level of official interest in the activities of the Vietnamese was not a desire to regulate and formalise the making of financial transactions and the payment of taxes in the market. Rather, they argued, it arose from a need on the part of corrupt Ukrainian officials to gain access to capital in the run up to the country's presidential elections in 2019. As a result, Afghan traders organised among themselves to stage a demonstration in opposition to the behaviour of the state officials in the market. In these demonstrations, they vocally argued that the behaviour of officials entering the market was unlawful because they concealed their identities from the people with whom they interacted. The traders also took active steps to spread news of their demonstration: they contacted a local TV station to cover the events unfolding at the market, for example. A trader in his late forties who runs a successful business in leather products told me that if the city's Afghans were divided internally, they were nevertheless effective at causing a 'ruckus' (*ghalmaghal*) and resisting the state and its corrupt officials. The ability to organise effectively in order to address changing threats to their mode of making a livelihood is thus an important aspect of the traders' activities in the Eurasian corridor.

Informal Diplomacy

Relationships between traders and the state are two-way in nature: the officials in the cities and nation states in which traders work see their relationships with Afghan traders as being important in geopolitical terms. In particular circumstances, the region's states do treat these networks as 'instrumental channels' that they and political elites can 'use to achieve their purposes'.²⁹ Afghan merchants operating in this expansive context communicate with one another in Farsi and Pashto. But they are always fluent in Central Asia's Turkic and Persian languages,

²⁹ Anderson forthcoming(a).

as well as Russian; those who live in China often also speak Mandarin or Cantonese. Authorities in the countries in which they work occasionally seek to instrumentally benefit from the traders' cultural knowledge and adaptability. An Afghan trader in Ukraine was said by his co-nationals in the city to have helped secure the release of a Ukrainian citizen captured by the Taliban in August 2015, for example. In Yiwu, a trader from Afghanistan who operates a company serving Russia and Ukraine as well as Western European countries was elected as representative of the city's approximately 13,000 foreign traders who hail from a wide variety of countries. The trader is now a regular feature at official meetings organised by the city's municipal government and widely featured on China's state television channels. He also plays an active role in an organisation tasked by the city's municipal authorities with resolving disputes between international traders and Chinese suppliers. As I now explore, Afghan traders in Russia have played a major public role in the country's attempts to foster a political settlement between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

Most recently, for example, the Russian authorities have sought to benefit politically and in the field of international politics from their close relationship with Afghan traders based in the country. Against the backdrop of negotiations between the United States and the Taliban relating to attempts to arrive at a political settlement, a conference at a hotel in Moscow run by the Kremlin brought together prominent Afghan politicians and representatives of the Taliban. Official news reports in Russia and in the international media claimed that the event had been organised by an Afghan diaspora organisation in Russia.³⁰ The Russian state sought to distance itself from the hosting and organisation of the conference, partly because Afghanistan's government and various international actors in the country were suspicious of the event. Ashraf Ghani, the Afghan president, argued that the conference's delegates were not representatives of Afghanistan and therefore had no capacity to represent the country. Russian officials sought to instrumentally use Afghan traders in the country to extend their influence and reach into a context in which other nation states are playing an active role. At the same time, the willingness of Russian officials to foreground the country's Afghan diaspora organisation in such a manner also illustrates the close relationship Russia has built up with this mobile community over several decades, and the ways in which it regards the traders as being able to play critical if informal diplomatic roles in a fraught geopolitical context.

³⁰ Roth 2018.

Traders and Cultural Sensibility

The remit of the specific social institutions that traders establish is not limited to the strategic making of commercial and political arrangements alone. The traders' social institutions also play a critical role in creating and sustaining the 'shared sensibilities' and 'sense of familiarity' upon which the functioning and durability of trading networks also depend.³¹ During my time conducting fieldwork with Afghan merchants in settings across the Eurasian corridor of connectivity, I came to see the work that traders invested into organising events that enabled the building of such shared sensibilities and forms of familiarity.

On the basis of the earlier description and analysis, the Watan Trading Centre may well come across as a site of hardnosed bargains and the building of pragmatic relationships between traders and state officials. Yet while this is certainly an important aspect of the dynamics of the institution, it is not the only one. In addition to it being the base of several hundred trading companies, the Sevastopol Hotel complex also houses the offices of one of Russia's most influential Afghan diaspora organisations. This organisation mediates between traders and the state; for several years, it also ran an Afghan school to which traders based in Russia were able to send their children for instruction in Farsi, Pashto and Islamic principles. Furthermore, while today traders have easy access to news about Afghanistan from the Internet, in the late 1990s the organisation installed a cable network within the buildings of the hotel that allowed traders to watch TV programmes in Farsi and Pashto in their offices and workspaces. Indeed, the editor of a Farsi newspaper published in the building told me how he wrote news articles about Afghanistan as well as articles on issues relating to Russia's Afghan community. Afghan traders in Russia regularly complain that they are unable to lead public forms of pleasurable social life in the country. A combination of racist attitudes and behaviour from local populations towards 'black-heads' – the derogatory term used by some in Russia to refer to Muslims from Central Asia and the Caucasus – and the fear of security officials interrogating them outside of the spaces in which they work leads many traders to avoid spending time with one another and their families in public spaces. The provision of newspapers, schools and television within the trade centre played a critical role in the shared instantiation of cultural values and ideas; this aspect of the activities of traders' institutions also enables collective connections with Afghanistan to be sustained.

³¹ Anderson 2020.

Afghan traders in Ukraine have not only established formal diaspora organisations; they are also extremely active and energetic in organising events and gatherings that lay the foundations for building shared sensibilities and forms of familiarity. In Odessa, for example, there are two major types of Afghan community organisations (*sazmanha*): *funds* (credit associations) and formal diaspora associations (*anjomanha*). The *funds* are institutions led and managed by a committee of Afghan traders who collect financial contributions from Afghans in the market that are used to support traders facing financial difficulties. The committee members of the *fund* release money, for example, if a trader's business goes into bankruptcy and he loses his source of income. *Funds* also support traders who need to cover the funeral costs of their relatives in Odessa or travel to Afghanistan unexpectedly, most especially in the case of death and illness in the family. Traders refer to the provision of cash in this manner as *billa ayvaz* – a contribution given on the assumption that repayment is not required. It is expected, however, that if a trader is able to recover his losses that he will return money to those who had pooled together to provide it, but this is not a condition of the support being extended.

Organisations (*anjoman*) mediate between Afghans in Odessa and the municipal authorities, as well as organising gatherings and events to commemorate important Afghan festivals, including the two Muslim Eid festivals and the Persian New Year (*Nowruz*) celebrations. Afghan musicians based in Europe are often invited to perform at such celebratory gatherings. A popular London-based singer, for example, performed at a series of concerts organised by an Afghan association in Odessa in 2010. Gatherings such as these ensure that Odessa is a site of significance for Afghan business and cement the city's status as a node in the social and cultural reproduction of transregional networks, meaning that it is known globally as a 'central node of entrepreneurial and affective life' to Afghans.³² A further type of event regularly organised in Odessa marks the 'day of martyrdom' (*ruz-e shahadat*) of political figures from the country, such as former resistance leader and minister of defence Ahmad Shah Massoud (d. 2001). As we shall see in [Chapter 4](#), events such as these are inherently political and often only attended by traders affiliated to particular figures, mostly through ethnolinguistic and regional identity – as a result, they tend to play a role in cementing bonds between micro-networks. Such events mostly involve speeches by traders in Farsi and/or Pashto about leaders' lives and contributions to Afghanistan.

³² Arsan 2011: 9.

The close relationships forged by organisations between traders and local authorities invest their activities with political significance. A trader active in one organisation in a Ukrainian city, for example, is said to have built extremely close relationships with local officials and, as a result, is able to support Afghan nationals wishing to enter the country, even if they do not have the necessary documents. The trader is known among traders active within and beyond Ukraine as the ‘Minister of Interior’ of the country’s resident Afghans – a similar figure in another city in Ukraine is said by traders to facilitate the clandestine migration of Afghans from Ukraine to the European Union and is known as the community’s ‘Minister of Foreign Affairs’. These examples point once again to the extent to which Afghans see themselves not merely as the passive recipients of geopolitical projects but as exerting agency in complex geopolitical contexts. Furthermore, by designating the community as having ersatz ministers of foreign and internal affairs, the traders underscore the extent to which participation in a broad sphere of geopolitics also shapes their collective self-understandings.

Formally established social institutions alone do not play a role in cementing Odessa’s significance as a site for the cultural and social reproduction of Afghan trading networks in Eurasia. Afghans also invest considerable effort in the organisation of informal gatherings (*majlis*) that play a significant role in generating shared sensibilities and senses of familiarity. In the summer of 2016, for example, Riaz – a trader aged in his late fifties in Odessa who had played a widely recognised role in establishing Afghan commercial activities in the Seventh-Kilometre Market – passed away; Afghans in the city knew Riaz for his dedication to business and his prudent approach to doing trade. Riaz was regarded in rather ambiguous ways by Odessa’s Afghans. Unlike other traders, he saved his money rather than spending it lavishly on parties and social gatherings arranged for members of the community. At the same time, his purportedly overly distant and miserly natured relationships with his son from his Ukrainian wife was a source of controversy: having never trusted his son with business activities, the boy had grown up with little or no practical sense of business or money. As a result of this problematic relationship, the community feared that the businesses built up by the trader over decades would be ‘lost’ as there was no one in his family who would be able to manage and run them effectively.

Regardless of his personal shortcomings, the community in Odessa marked the trader’s death in as prominent a manner as possible. Members of the community invited me to a gathering held at a restaurant owned and run by an Afghan in the city who also traded in the Seventh-Kilometre Market; I did not attend the funeral itself because

I was concerned that my presence would detract from the solemnity of the occasion for its attendees, principally because it would lead to further suspicion about why an *inglis* was interested in the city's Afghans. The pre-funeral social gathering took place in the restaurant shortly before the burial of Riaz's body in the Muslim section of the city's cemetery. Not only were around 100 Afghan traders in Odessa present at the gathering, but it was also attended by men of social and commercial standing from the Afghan community across Ukraine. The representatives of Afghan organisations in Kiev and Kharkiv – both cities with substantial Afghan communities, mostly comprising traders – had travelled overnight by train and car to attend the funeral. The first secretary of the Afghan embassy in Kiev had also travelled from the capital city to attend the event in Odessa, ensuring that it acted as a conduit for relations between the traders and the Afghan government. The traders had also invited well-known political figures from Afghanistan – these figures had sought exile in Ukraine after the collapse of the pro-Soviet government in Kabul in 1992 and included a former ambassador and a former vice-president from the 1990s. A further individual present at the gathering was a Kiev-based intellectual from Afghanistan. This scholar had studied in Odessa during the Soviet period but instead of turning to trade in 1992 had worked for several years at the Oriental Studies Department of the National Academy of Sciences. Both the former government officials and the intellectual subsist in the country on meagre salaries. As a result, Odessa-based traders had supported their visits to the city for the funeral by arranging vehicles to transport them to Odessa, as well as providing them access to Afghan-owned flats in the city. Such provisions ensured that people with access to fewer economic resources than the traders would be able to attend the funeral; as we shall see, the presence of such figures helped to shape the event's significance as a forum for the instantiation of shared cultural sensibilities as well as geopolitical perspectives among the traders.

Much of the conversation at the pre-burial gathering concerned Riaz's life, his successes in the field of trade and the future prospects of his business activities given the specific nature of his family arrangements (in addition to being married to a Ukrainian woman, Riaz also had an Afghan wife with two young children who was also based in Odessa). At the same time, the gathering also formed an opportunity for those present to engage in discussions with one another over a wider range of issues. An issue of particular significance at the time concerned the attitude that traders from Afghanistan held about the conflict between Ukraine and Russia. Many of the traders – a substantial proportion of whom had been aligned with Afghanistan's leftist People's Democratic Party of

Afghanistan (PDPA) – were hostile towards the Ukrainian leadership’s opposition to Russia and desire to forge closer relations with Western Europe and the United States. By contrast, the former vice-president of Afghanistan – who is the author of several books in Farsi on Afghanistan’s modern history – forcibly argued the traders should not be so one-sided in their support for Russia and its policies towards Ukraine, not least because they were Ukrainian rather than Russian nationals. Informal gatherings such as these, which involve the deployment of considerable resources by traders – financial, but also in terms of time and personnel – provide important fora for the fostering of shared sensibilities and the pooling of knowledge about commercial and political dynamics and developments. Importantly, the funeral gathering also demonstrated that Afghans think in open and reflective ways about the geopolitical dynamics affecting the context in which they lead their lives, and that they also seek to arrive at collective positions on how they should present themselves in relation to such dynamics.

A Mosque or a Discotheque?

Religion is an important aspect of the organisational activities of Afghans in Eurasia, as well as the personal and collective identities and moral worlds of the community. Islam’s role in the dynamics of trading networks, however, is contested, variable, shifting and a source of constant internal debate and reflection. Anthropologists and scholars in related disciplines have tended to invest considerable emphasis on Islam’s significance to the coherence of trading networks that comprise people of a Muslim background.³³ In the context of Eurasia and the Belt and Road Initiative, ‘Muslim culture’ is also argued to play a critical role in modern-day iterations of the Silk Road, allowing Muslim communities across the arena to interact with one another in relation to a shared religious culture.³⁴ Literalist forms of Islam are also recognised as playing an increasingly significant role in the Russian Federation in helping to form a distinct culture of ‘halal’ business.³⁵ Religion is an important aspect of the identities and activities of Afghan traders operating along the Eurasian corridor of connectivity but in a far less totalising manner than the earlier accounts might suggest.³⁶ Islam’s complex role in Afghan

³³ Ho 2006.

³⁴ Belguidoum and Pliez 2012, Belguidoum and Pliez 2015, Belguidoum and Pliez 2016, Bertonecello, Bredeloup and Pliez 2009, Simpfendorfer 2009.

³⁵ Benussi 2018.

³⁶ For a nuanced approach to ‘halal exchange’ in a different post-social environment, see Henig 2019.

trading networks serves as an important reminder of the dangers of assuming that mobile Muslims inevitably participate in expressions of 'global Islam'.³⁷ Afghan traders active in the corridor, rather, actively and consciously distance themselves from expressions of global and reformist Islam and regard doing so as central to their ability to navigate a world of competing geopolitical projects.

Islam's role in the lives of Afghan traders is a source of reflection and analysis by traders themselves. Afghans working in formerly Soviet Eurasian contexts regularly emphasise the extent to which they are more religiously observant Muslims today than during the years in which they studied in Soviet institutes, as well as the period when they first embarked on the life of a trader. Traders often remark to one another that far fewer of their compatriots drink alcohol now in comparison with previous years. Afghans living and working across Eurasia have also established institutions in which they hold and conduct religious rituals and gatherings.³⁸ Most regularly, rooms are set aside within markets to act as prayer spaces for Muslim merchants. In Odessa, however, two mosques in the city have been established and are largely attended by Afghans living in the city. Attendance at these mosques reflects the importance of ethnolinguistic diversity in the community: Pashto-speaking traders mostly frequent one, while those from Farsi- and Uzbek-speaking backgrounds tend to attend the second institution for Friday prayers. Two brothers from central Afghanistan who run businesses in Odessa and Kabul established the latter mosque; the congregation of the former has recently purchased a plot of land in a suburb on the city's outskirts upon which they intend to construct a purpose-built mosque. In both mosques, Afghans gather collectively for Friday prayers; they also organise important ritual events, especially feasts held to commemorate the deaths of traders in Odessa and their relatives beyond.

Traders in Odessa comment on the amount of time they spend attending such events, as well as the intensity of the social pressure placed upon them by Afghans to regularly attend Friday prayers and contribute to the organisation of collective religious events. The frequent nature of such events is also a source of consternation because it further reduces the time that traders spend with their families and means they must squeeze important administrative tasks – such as acquiring documents relating to their commercial and family lives – into their already busy lives. Participation in religious rituals and regular practice is, thus, a type of

³⁷ For a detailed consideration of this distinction, see [Green 2020](#).

³⁸ For an analysis of religious institutions established by Muslim migrants in Ukraine, see [Yarosh and Brylov 2011](#).

activity that plays an important role in forging vertical discipline within the community, as well as in the building of shared sensibilities and intense forms of familiarity upon which the durability of trading networks depends.

Islam plays a stabilising role in Afghan identity and institutions in Eurasia, yet it is also a source of critical discussion. The social and economic resources expended at the city's mosques are in particular a much-commented feature of life among Afghans in the city. It is, however, important not to assume that this aspect of the institutional dynamics of Afghan traders in Eurasia points in any one-dimensional way either to Islam being the central aspect of the traders' identities or to traders identifying with a singular form of Islam. Indeed, the religious institutions established by Afghans in Odessa are not necessarily 'Islamic' in any simple sense. A well-known trader in the city from northern Afghanistan, for example, used a considerable sum of his own money to purchase land close to the Seventh-Kilometre Market on which he built a large three-storey building, ostensibly, at least, for benefit of the community. The building's ground floor is a large mosque, and on its second floor an airy hall is decorated with wall paintings of important figures and landmarks from Afghan history, including King Mohammad Zahir Shah (1914–2007), who was deposed in a *coup d'état* in 1973; the Ghurid-era Minaret of Jam; and the Herati-born Turkic poet Ali Sher Navoi (1441–1501). The latter painting indicates the owner's ethnic Uzbek identity and was a source of criticism among Odessa's Afghans who identify as Pashtun and reportedly told the trader that a building decorated in such a partisan way could not act as the community's collective cultural centre. On the third floor is a 'hotel' comprising a series of rooms that are available for rent for members of the community and guests attending events. The trader told me that he had hoped to profit from the building by renting it to Afghans for the organisation of weddings. Its distance from the city, however, meant that the enterprise failed only a few years after it had been launched. Furthermore, traders in the market who identify as religious (*mazhabi*; *dindar*) objected that the structure contained both a room for parties – at which alcohol was inevitably served – and a mosque. Indeed, on the occasion the owner invited me to visit the building, my hosts emphasised the importance of seeing the mosque before celebrations got underway upstairs. A trader in his late forties who lives in Odessa remarked to me wilyly, 'People couldn't work out whether it was a mosque or whether it was a discotheque.' The culturally heterogeneous building illustrates the complex position occupied by Islam in the traders' cultural worlds, while the debates about it also show how far Islam is a contested aspect of their collective identities.

Conversations with traders often suggest that the significance of participating in collective forms of Islamic ritual practice lies more in its importance to the display of success in trade than the instantiation of piety. When I asked an Odessa-based trader in his late forties why Afghans did not attend Friday prayers in the city's central mosque, he remarked that it did not have a car park large enough for Afghans to display their vehicles to one another. 'We are more interested in showing how successful we are then attending the mosque', he said. Public forms of sociability are also central to cultural and ideological reproduction over time, however.

More broadly, Afghan traders reflect openly on the functional role they see mosque attendance as playing in the community. Many remark that they regard mosque attendance as important because it demonstrates a trader's social commitment to the community and its networks rather than his attempts to lead a life guided by a particular set of ethical principles. In this respect, many if not all of the traders I know consciously distinguish themselves from Muslims of different cultural backgrounds who identify with 'reformist' forms of Islam and Muslim identity. During research in Odessa in the summer of 2017, for instance, my friends expressed their hostility to what they identified as religious families from Uzbekistan who were active in the promotion of Salafi Islam. Several traders remarked to me that the unwillingness of the Ukrainian authorities to take action against such migrants demonstrated the malaise of the country's security institutions in the post-Soviet period. They publicly advocated for more not less policing of Muslim identities and activities in the country.

A group of traders I know in Odessa – who are closely related to one another through intermarriages conducted since their migration to Ukraine and are involved in shared commercial activities – reflect the complex role played by Islamic practice and belief in trading networks in former Soviet settings. They would always make sure to attend Friday prayers in the mosque in Odessa that had been established by two Afghan merchants. In conversations among themselves, however, the friends – who referred to themselves as forming a *kolektif* – would emphasise that they attended the mosque above all because of social pressure: the consequences of not attending Friday prayers would involve their compatriots commenting on their absence from this most important of weekly ritual events. Indeed, one of the men in the group – a trader in his early fifties from Kabul – proudly remarked to his friends at a family dinner in a Ukrainian fish restaurant that he always went to Friday prayers in the mosque even if he had been out dancing in Odessa's famous nightclubs until early on Friday morning. Another trader – in his late fifties and from

northern Afghanistan – told the gathering that he encouraged young Afghans to attend Friday prayers because it was shameful to see half-asleep Arab students in the city making the effort to attend the gathering after a hard night of drinking and for Afghan youth to be absent. ‘Even if you’ve been partying until six in the morning’, he remarked, ‘we should always show up at the mosque on Friday.’

Conclusion

Before turning to the next Afghan network under consideration, let us briefly recap the arguments advanced in this chapter. First, the chapter has emphasised the prominent and visible role played by traders of Afghan background in formerly Soviet Eurasian settings, illustrating that the history of these communities and the networks they form lies in Cold War geopolitical dynamics while also showing how traders have successfully negotiated the evolving geopolitical projects of countries such as Russia, Ukraine and China. Second, the chapter has brought attention to the importance of specific social institutions built by the traders to their collective activities. It has paid particular attention to the important role that institutions including diaspora organisations and markets play in mediating traders’ relationships with state officials, as well as their significance in building shared senses of sensibility and intense forms of familiarity within networks. Third, a distinct but related finding of the chapter concerns the extent to which such institutions in formerly Soviet Eurasian contexts are regularly defined in terms of the shared national backgrounds of Afghans, and it is on this basis that states within Eurasia interact and engage within them. Religion plays a powerful and important role in traders’ daily lives and self-identities, yet it is also subtly enfolded within Afghan national identity, something illustrated in the dual role played by mosques as sites of worship but also of the fostering of distinctly Afghan cultural sensibilities, knowledge and identities. To a large degree, indeed, collective Afghan identity is built and performed in relationship to a secular-national identity that is often in competition with the national and religious identity formations of Muslims from different cultural backgrounds.

Traders, then, deploy various forms of civic activism to assert the autonomy of the spaces they have helped to fashion. They also demonstrate their ability to build forms of solidarity with commercial personnel from backgrounds different from their own. Traders actively seek to reject the association of Afghanistan with radical Islam. They largely lead secular lives in which the shared ideal of ‘living well’ is achieved through the demonstration of commercial success and participation in public forms of

entertainment. This personal ethics of the good life interact in creative ways with a strong collective and cultural commitment to Afghan national identity. Policies towards migrants in the post-Soviet states reinforce this aspect of the traders' identities: state officials monitor, fashion ties with and channel available support to 'migrant communities' through formally established 'diaspora associations'. The 'corridor of connectivity' that connects China to West Asia on which I focus in [Chapter 3](#) requires traders to fashion identities and social institutions in more unambiguous terms in relation to the Islamic tradition than those explored in the preceding pages.

3 Inter-Asian Corridor of Connectivity (2): West Asia – China, the Arabian Peninsula and Turkey

In June 2016, I visited the trading office in Yiwu of Abdul Rahman on a hot and humid afternoon. Abdul Rahman is an ethnically Turkmen trader from Afghanistan who operates a trade and transport business largely serving visiting businessmen and women from the post-Soviet state of Turkmenistan.¹ He has never visited Turkmenistan, yet his Turkmen ethnicity means that he is able to speak the Turkmen language; doing so enables him to work with traders from the country with ease. Brought up in a predominantly Turkmen village in north-western Afghanistan, he left the country with his family as a teenager, initially moving to the city of Peshawar in north-west Pakistan and occasionally spending time working in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia – something he like many others in this and other communities do by acquiring and then overstaying pilgrimage visas.² As was the case with hundreds of Afghan Turkmen families, in Pakistan the family established a business trading in carpets handwoven by Afghan refugees. Later in the 2000s, Abdul Rahman left Pakistan with his family. They joined several Afghan Turkmen families in the Gulf city of Sharjah, opening an office that provided trading and transport services to visiting merchants from Turkmenistan. In the context of a steep decline in this trade, resulting from changing import duties in Turkmenistan, Abdul Rahman relocated his commercial activities to Yiwu. Rising costs in the UAE, alongside the inability of foreigners based in the country to become naturalised citizens, led him to move his wife

¹ The category ‘Turkmen’ is used in the context of premodern history to refer to various Turkic groups that had converted to Islam and lived in particular steppe areas of Central Asia. In the context of Russian imperial and Soviet nationalities policy, ‘Turkmen’ was increasingly used as an ethnolinguistic identity marker. Turkmens constitute one of Afghanistan’s smaller ethnolinguistic communities, numbering around two million. Turkmens have traditionally inhabited arid regions along the country’s northern and western borders. The community comprises émigrés from Russian Turkestan as well as communities that had settled on the south bank of the Oxus historically. Today, they are an increasingly important aspect of the country’s urban populations. See [Bregel 2009](#). On the notion of the modern category of Turkmen, see [Edgar 2006](#). On the political and economic activities of Turkmen in the context of Iran, the Central Asian Khanates and Russian imperial expansion, see [Eden 2018](#).

² Cf. [Jeong 2019](#).

and children to Istanbul. He secured residency permits for his family by cultivating relationships with the relevant authorities and renting an apartment in Zeytinburnu – a neighbourhood in which several members of his community (including one of his elder brothers) lived. As we chatted in Yiwu about trade and family life, Abdul Rahman pulled a partially consumed bottle of Chinese red wine from a draw in his desk. He had been entertaining a Chinese woman in his flat the night before, he told me, but, being Muslim, he did not drink – ‘take it, and finish it’, he instructed me.

Chapter 2 demonstrated that Afghan networks are playing an important role in forging transregional connections across Eurasia. Afghans active in the formerly Soviet parts of Eurasia publicly perform their ability to thrive in the secular environments they inhabit. They emphasise their skills in adapting to cultural contexts markedly different from their own. For these traders, demonstrating political belonging to Afghanistan and the nation states in which they live is an important aspect of their identities and something they regularly do through their participation in ‘Afghan’ diaspora organisations and displays of loyalty and allegiance to their adopted homelands.³

This chapter explores a second key human–commercial corridor that acts as a channel for a specific trading network. It illuminates the activities of traders who identify with adjacent regions of Afghanistan and Central Asia. These traders currently live and work, however, in two of Muslim Asia’s historic and most significant religious, commercial and political centres: Istanbul and Jeddah. Going beyond the tendency in much scholarly work to fixate on the East–West connectivity of the ‘Silk Road’, the chapter explores these networks in relationship to the geographical scale of West Asia. Unlike ‘the Middle East’ – which posits the existence of a distinct yet liminal cultural region that is neither Asia nor Europe – ‘West Asia’ points towards a geographical scale that is defined by specific characteristics and dynamics but that is also inherently part of Asia more generally. In particular, West Asia helps to illuminate the simultaneous significance of dense North–South and East–West connections that collectively enable the interpenetration of multiple parts of Asia – these connections tend to be overlooked in the scholarship, which often focuses either on Eurasia or the dynamics of the Middle East.⁴ The distinctive nature of the networks described in this chapter is also an important reminder of diversity within the Eurasian arena as a whole and of the dangers of overly unitary attempts to conceptualise it. Afghan merchants of backgrounds very different from those discussed in Chapter 2 bring

³ Aydin 2017. ⁴ See Marsden and Mostowlansky 2019.

together East Asia, the Arabian Peninsula and Turkey as a triangle. The trading networks involved in mediating these connections, furthermore, act pragmatically within the nation state system at the same time as cultivating collective identities that do not revolve around one-dimensional belonging to Afghanistan.

The traders discussed in what follows identify as hailing from a range of late modern political entities located in Central Asia, especially the Emirate of Bukhara. Russian imperial projects weakened the structures of these Central Asian polities from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Russian Turkestan was established in 1867 and expanded until 1889, resulting in the Emirate of Bukhara and the Khanates of Koqand and Khiva being reduced to Russian protectorates. In the context of the Bolshevik Revolution and Soviet rule in Central Asia, these protectorates disintegrated further: eventually, they were fully incorporated into the region's newly created Soviet republics. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, mobile people from the region – including merchants, itinerants and pilgrims – continued to play a critical role in connecting Central Asia to other parts of Asia, as well as to Europe.⁵ However, by the 1920s, Central Asia had effectively been isolated from such long-distance and cross-cultural commercial dynamics. Many historians and anthropologists have explored the effects that Central Asia's isolation from the wider region had on the nature of life in its cities and villages, the role played by Islamic authorities, knowledge and institutions in its societies and its perception as a distinct region by outsider observers.⁶ As Lâle Can notes, the 'afterlife' of Central Asian 'transimperial mobility and travel' in the years following the Bolshevik Revolution is less widely told.⁷

As the case of Abdul Rahman indicates, many of the traders whose lives are explored in this chapter invest great emphasis on the importance of Islamic teachings and prescriptions to their personal and collective identities. In contrast to the traders discussed in [Chapter 2](#), they also reflect openly on the ways in which the geographical parameters of the worlds they inhabit reflect their considerations of the type of context in which leading a good Muslim life is possible. At the same time, however, Islam does not dictate the identities and political affiliations of Central Asia's émigré traders. Instead, traders working in this network pursue various strategies to secure access to citizenship and legal residency of the countries in which they live, including those that emphasise their distinctive ethnolinguistic and regional identities, as well as their commitment to

⁵ Levi 2020, Levi 2017 and Can 2020.

⁶ Humphrey, Skrvskaja and Marsden 2009, Khalid 2007, Megoran, Nick and John Heathershaw 2011, Sahadeo 2011a.

⁷ Can 2020: 172.

being Muslim and adherence to the Islamic tradition. That these traders are the descendants of historic émigrés from a political entity that no longer exists also occupies a powerful element of their self-understandings, the ways in which they present themselves to the wider world and their modes of building community. As we shall see, traders refer to themselves using names that denote the regions of Central Asia from which their forefathers hailed; they also brand the products in which they deal by referencing Central Asia's historic geography.

This chapter explores the activities and networks of merchants and artisans who fled from Central Asia to Afghanistan in the 1920s and 1930s, charting the ways in which these people deployed their commercial skills not only in Afghanistan but also across many contexts that straddled geopolitical divisions over the course of the century that followed. It documents and analyses the networks and nodes that shape the dynamics of this commercial corridor linking China and West Asia. An especially important aspect of the dynamics of these nodes emerges from the social institutions that Central Asian émigré merchants are active in establishing along this corridor, so I will also investigate the relationship of such institutions to their identities and to shifting geopolitical contexts and initiatives.

Religion influences these traders' identity, agency and patterns of mobility, yet not in a one-dimensional or totalising way. Rather, the members of this mobile society pursue multiple strategies – including emphasising various aspects of their religious, regional and ethnic identities – to maintain connections with their site of dispersal and build connections with their new homelands as well as the third spaces in which they have lived in the past. Given their historic commitment to trade, it is not surprising that such strategies also seek to maximise their ability to maintain and expand their business activities. Moreover, exploring such networks in detail provides an opportunity to reflect on the types of cultural and ideological resources deployed by actors who work within a world informed by Islam that is nevertheless forged in the midst of competing geopolitical projects.

Turkestani Socks and Bukhari Rice: The Making of an Ethnographic Moment

Before embarking on a detailed discussion of the Central Asian émigré merchants who are the focus of this chapter, let me explain how I came to recognise the particular significance of the West Asian corridor within the wider Eurasian arena during the course of my fieldwork. Doing so adds depth to the argument made in [Chapter 1](#) about the intertwined nature of

fieldwork and analysis, as well as illustrating the historically layered and dynamic nature of the trading networks studied in this book.

In November 2017, I visited the al-Asif Square apartment blocks in Karachi's Sohrab Goth neighbourhood and encountered a street vendor selling a pair of socks that piqued my interest. In the context of the conflict between mujahidin fighters and the Soviet and Afghan armies in the 1980s, Sohrab Goth had earned a reputation across South Asia as being a hotbed of religious militancy, gunrunning and drug smuggling.⁸ The reason for my visit to Sohrab Goth, however, was to meet Central Asian émigrés. In the late 1970s, the neighbourhood saw the arrival of thousands of refugees from northern Afghanistan, many of whom were the descendants of Central Asian émigré families; during my visit to Karachi, *muhajirs* also told me that after arriving in Karachi they had met Turkic-speaking families that had resided in the city since fleeing Turkestan in the 1930s. It was in this context that I was delighted to come across a pair of socks for sale in a makeshift and moveable store – the merchant who had commissioned their manufacture in China had branded the socks 'Turkestani'.

My interest in the Turkestani-branded socks in Karachi had arisen as a result of interactions with Central Asian émigré merchants in Yiwu. On a wet March evening in 2016, I had bumped into two traders in their mid-forties from Afghanistan. The night market was a space in Yiwu that I visited most evenings while based in the city. As well as frequenting the many cafés and restaurants in this part of the city, traders visiting Yiwu on short visits tend to while away their evenings by walking around the market and checking out the products for sale. Traders sometimes also visited the night market with the aim of finding new products in which to deal. For the most part, though, such visits offered a time to relax with friends and to purchase gifts for their families – I found traders to be more approachable during such moments of relaxation than during the day. I initially assumed the two men had come to the city from Afghanistan, and because of the clothing they wore that they were from the northern city of Mazar-e Sharif. Many traders visit Yiwu to send products to northern Afghanistan using overland transport routes that pass through Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. It was a surprise, then, when they told me that they had visited China not from Afghanistan but Saudi Arabia, where they were based in the Red Sea port city of Jeddah. After chatting about the political dynamics of northern Afghanistan, they gave me their business cards before heading back to their hotel.

⁸ See Hassan 1987.

For the remainder of the time I spent in Yiwu, I regularly enquired about the Afghan community in Saudi Arabia and their ties to China in general and Yiwu in particular. I was told about a street in Jeddah called ‘the Bukhariyya’, or, in Farsi, ‘street of the Bukharans’ (*kucha-ye bukhari-ya*). An Afghan trader based in Yiwu who was in his late fifties told me that as a young man he had stayed in Jeddah for several years in the 1970s. While having travelled to Saudi Arabia on a government scholarship, his involvement in Afghanistan in an Islamist political organisation meant that other members of the party advised him not to return regularly to his home. Indeed, after winning a scholarship to study in the United States, Afghan embassy officials in Saudi Arabia had told him he must return to Kabul to extend his passport, something that eventually resulted in him being jailed, and, in later years, playing an active role in the ‘jihad’ against the Red Army. He had consequently sought employment in Jeddah, eventually securing a job as an accountant in a restaurant owned by an ethnically Turkmen man from northern Afghanistan. In addition to owning a restaurant, his employer also imported spare parts to Saudi Arabia from Japan and South Korea – it was while working as an accountant that the trader had first learned how to deal in commodities procured in East Asia. I was able to glean insights about the Afghan community in Saudi Arabia and Jeddah in particular through conversations with such traders; I doubted that I would ever be able to travel to Saudi Arabia to explore the forms of trade important in the Bukhariyya Street itself. Rather abruptly, however, I heard in October 2016 that I had been appointed a Visiting Fellow at the King Faisal Research and Islamic Studies Centre in Riyadh, an appointment that would allow me to visit Jeddah and meet traders working there who were from Afghanistan.

Within two hours of landing in Jeddah after the short flight from Riyadh, I had already bumped into the men I had met on that spring night in Yiwu. They were now dressed in Arab robes and showed me the shops they traded from in historic Jeddah. Both of the men sold trainers that they imported to Saudi Arabia from Guangzhou and Yiwu. Over the following three weeks I stayed in Jeddah, I had many meetings and encounters with traders I had met in both China and Turkey.

Much of my time was spent making visits to ‘Bukhariyya Street’, about which traders in Yiwu had told me so much. The Bukhariyya Street is actually a neighbourhood comprising two commercial streets. The neighbourhood’s narrow alleys are bustling with activity: children run around from house to house, and men make their way to and from the many mosques located in the area, as well as the local bakery. Men from northern Afghanistan, especially those who identify as ethnically Uzbek or Turkmen, staff the shops on both of the main streets that run through

the area. There are also Farsi-speaking ‘Tajiks’ from eastern and northern Afghanistan; two of these families also told me that they were the descendants of émigrés who had left eastern regions of the Emirate of Bukhara in the 1920s.⁹ The businesses on one of the streets relate predominantly to the restaurant trade, a sector of the Saudi Arabian economy within which people from northern Afghanistan are very active.¹⁰ In this street, Afghans sell the type of large aluminium cooking pot (*deg*) in which the region’s famous rice dish – *palaw* – is cooked; ‘Bukharan’ Afghans who live in the nearby city of Taif mostly craft these pots from steel. The businesses on the other street in the Bukhariyya Street centre largely deal in the sale of carpets, prayer mats, blankets and furniture. Most traders in this street deal in goods imported from China or Turkey. A couple of shops on the street also sell handwoven carpets from Afghanistan, Iran, China, Pakistan and the Caucasus – customers visiting these carpet shops are mostly wealthy Saudis.

West Asia

Spending time in the shops of Bukhariyya enabled me to meet young men who while resident in Jeddah had spent much of their adult lives in Chinese cities (mostly Yiwu and Guangzhou) and spoke fluent Cantonese or Mandarin in addition to Persian and Arabic. During my conversations with these men and their families in Jeddah and Riyadh, I learned of their family backgrounds in Afghanistan, the processes through which they had migrated from Afghanistan to Pakistan and then to Saudi Arabia, their modes of making a living, as well as their relations with other communities in these cities.

Most traders of an Afghan background working in these contexts claim descent from families who lived in the emirates of Central Asia and who emigrated ‘across the Oxus river’, seeking refuge in Afghanistan in the 1920s. This movement occurred in the context of the Bolshevik persecution of notable and wealthy families and was mostly to towns and villages in the north-west and north-east of Afghanistan.¹¹ The provinces of Afghanistan in which these families resettled are all close to the border with the former Soviet republics of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Until the consolidation of the Afghan state by Emir Abdur Rahman Khan in the late nineteenth century,¹² this region had been made up of various dynasties involved in tributary relationships with the

⁹ For a rich ethnographic account of this region – now a part of Tajikistan – see [Ibañez-Tirado 2013](#).

¹⁰ See [Chapter 7](#). ¹¹ [Khalid 2007](#). ¹² [Edwards 1996](#).

Emirate of Bukhara and with polities to the east and the south.¹³ After the delineation of an international boundary by the Afghan Boundary Commission in the mid-nineteenth century, the region was officially designated as ‘Afghan Turkestan’.¹⁴ Most of the traders making up this network are from families that moved permanently to Afghan Turkestan in the late 1920s in the wake of the Stalinist purges of notables, wealthy peasants and religious authorities in Central Asia. From the 1920s, there was a progressive strengthening of the border between Soviet Central Asia’s new republics and Afghanistan.¹⁵ Many of my interlocutors have told me that their families were merchants and artisans in Bukhara and were able to continue their activities in this field in Afghanistan. Other families turned to trade after leaving their homes in Central Asia.¹⁶ Many such families often remark that status hierarchies that had been important in Central Asia were upturned and recast in Afghanistan: slaves (*ghulam*) became successful traders, for example, eventually accruing more capital than historic merchants, only some of whom were able to adapt to the new circumstances.

The commercial acumen of these families reflects the early modern economic dynamics of Bukhara. The city of Bukhara was a historic site of transregional Asian trade that involved merchants from the region traveling to Iran, Muscovy, Siberia, China and India. While much scholarship has taken for granted that Central Asia became isolated from the global economy in the context of the development from the eighteenth century onwards of sea trade by European imperial powers, recent work contests this approach and has brought attention to ‘multivectoral’ sedentary and nomadic networks that ‘linked Central Asia with its neighbours on the Eurasian peripheries’.¹⁷ Audrey Burton has documented the wide range of contexts that were important to the activities of Bukharan merchants between 1558 and 1718.¹⁸ Merchants from Bukhara made trading sorties across this period to Iran, Muscovy, Siberia, China and India. During these sorties, they transported goods from Bukhara for sale (especially the region’s high-quality cotton materials and furs largely made from sheepskin) and purchased goods for sale either in Bukhara or other regions in which Bukharan merchants were active: rhubarb purchased in China and Siberia was thus sold in Iran, where it was regarded as an essential medicinal ingredient. Not all Bukharan merchants operated in this

¹³ Lee 1996. ¹⁴ Fuoli 2017. ¹⁵ Dageyi 2017 and Marsden and Hopkins 2012.

¹⁶ Jalallar 2011.

¹⁷ Levi 2020: 37–35. Bukhara also exerted transregional influence until the middle of the nineteenth century as a result of its status as a centre of Persianate education and learning, see: Pickett 2020.

¹⁸ Burton 1993.

mobile manner. Burton also identifies the role played by individual merchants who were permanently settled outside of the emirate in the activities of merchants based within it. In Siberia, for example, settled Bukharan merchants owned land and ran businesses.¹⁹ In addition to dealing with far-away people and their rulers, Bukhara's merchants also engaged in close trading relations with the communities surrounding the urban centres in which they lived: they collected fur and carpets from Turkmen tribes and provided Bukhara's elite with fermented mare's milk.

The nineteenth century saw the progressive incorporation of the Emirate of Bukhara within the Russian Empire and, during the twentieth century, the Soviet Union, which led to the demise of the city's and the wider region's significance for inter-Asian commerce and connectivity.²⁰ In the wake of the creation of the Soviet Union, however, a proportion of Bukhara's commercial community left Central Asia, moving into present-day Iran, Afghanistan, Chinese Turkestan and India. After leaving Central Asia, some of the Central Asian émigrés settled in the contexts to which they had initially moved: northern Afghanistan continues to be home to substantial and settled communities of Central Asian émigrés.²¹ A smaller number of émigré families in a position to do so, however, migrated out of these neighbouring regions, most frequently to Jeddah and the holy cities of the Hejaz: Mecca and Medina.²² In the Hejaz, there were pre-existing communities of Central Asians who had initially travelled to the territories of modern-day Saudi Arabia with the intention of making the hajj pilgrimage but later stayed on either because they lacked the funds to return home or sought to benefit from the opportunities offered by acting as middlemen between Arab guides and Central Asian pilgrims.²³ In later years, these communities were joined by émigrés from Chinese Turkestan who either fled after the collapse of the Turkestan state in 1949 or found themselves conducting pilgrimage in Arabia as the events in China unfolded.²⁴

Bukharan émigrés who remained in northern Afghanistan adapted to a new set of circumstances in Afghan Turkestan. After moving to Afghanistan, the trade of lamb pelt (*karakul*) continued to be of importance to members of the community, but they also became active in related commercial fields, such as the sale of meat and skins. As I explore in [Chapter 5](#), northern Afghanistan's fur trade had also attracted Farsi-speaking Afghan Jewish traders and financiers based in the cities of

¹⁹ Monahan 2015. ²⁰ Humphrey, Skvirskaya and Marsden 2009. ²¹ Shahrani 2001.

²² On Jeddah as a site of convivial cosmopolitan diversity, see Freitag 2020.

²³ Balci 2003 and Kane 2015. ²⁴ Thum and Kashgari 2020.

Kabul and Herat, as well as Bukharan Jews who had fled the violence that affected their lives and commercial activities in Bukhara, Samarqand and Tashkent from 1918 onwards. Central Asian traders today intermittently suggest that some members of their community are 'originally' (*asl*) Bukharan Jews who converted to Islam only after moving to Afghanistan from the Soviet Union. Indeed, wealthy traders identifying as 'Bukharan' and currently based in Saudi Arabia are widely said by their fellow Central Asian émigrés to be Farsi-speaking Jewish converts to Islam.

The modern trade in 'Bukharan' carpets to European and American markets stretches back to the eighteenth century.²⁵ From the 1960s to the present day, some of Afghanistan's most well-known merchants came from families that had crossed the Amu Darya and migrated to Afghanistan in the late 1920s and 1930s. The role that such merchants played in innovating the production and distribution of carpets raised their social status, both within and beyond the country. They established small factories in northern Afghanistan that employed men and children to weave cheap carpets specifically for the 'Western market'. Émigré merchants in Afghanistan also opened transport companies that connected the cities of northern Afghanistan to Pakistan, Iran, the Arabian Peninsula, Turkey and Germany and created international business networks, most especially in the global centres of the carpet trade, Hamburg and Istanbul.²⁶ A merchant in his mid-seventies who runs a carpet business in Jeddah told me that he had initially travelled in the 1960s and 1970s to Saudi Arabia by road from Afghanistan. The trader made money en route by selling Indian-made jewellery in Iran and on arriving in Mecca sold Afghan carpets to Yemenis; on his return, he told me, he sold *abayas* (gowns worn by women) that he bought in Kuwait to Iranians in Tehran. In the late 1970s, traders used these routes to move themselves and their families out of Afghanistan on a permanent basis. During the twentieth century, successful Central Asian merchant families also became close to Afghanistan's urban elite: they sometimes intermarried with powerful Afghan families and were appointed to high-level government positions, even if they continued to be widely referred to as having come to the country from 'the other side of the river' (*pan-e darya; ubar e darya*).²⁷ A handful of such elite families left Afghanistan for Saudi Arabia, Europe and the United States after the 1973 *coup d'état* that resulted in the overthrow of Afghanistan's monarchy. In the United States, for example, several families of this background settled in Brooklyn and New Jersey.

²⁵ Spooner 1986. ²⁶ *Ibid.*: 216–17. ²⁷ Nasiri and Khalili 2013 and Jalallari 2011.

After the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, thousands of émigré families who had continued to live in Afghanistan fled to Pakistan, fearing the confiscation of their lands by the communist regime in Kabul. Community elders often supported various anti-Soviet mujahidin organisations, yet many families migrated in order to avoid their children being conscripted into the Afghan army or the ranks of the mujahidin.²⁸ In Pakistan, merchant families continued to be active in the manufacture of and trade in the Central Asian carpet industries, while those from village backgrounds regularly wove carpets on a commission basis. In the late 1980s, hundreds of these families moved from Pakistan to Jeddah in Saudi Arabia: as we have seen, Central Asians had lived in Jeddah's Bukhariyya neighbourhood since at least the 1850s, and a later flow of Central Asians had settled in the city and the Hejaz region in the 1920s and 1930s.

The Central Asian émigrés who arrived in Jeddah in the 1980s rapidly established themselves there as well as in Mecca and Medina. They initially filled niches in the economy that earlier waves of Central Asian migrants had vacated, especially restaurants selling the 'national dish' of Saudi Arabia, *ruz al-bukhari* – a type of social institution I explore in detail in [Chapter 7](#). In the following decades, Afghanistan's Saudi-based Central Asian émigrés also became active in the import from Turkey and subsequently China of machine-made prayer carpets and cheap ready-made clothing, both items purchased by hajjis and overseas labourers as gifts to take to their home countries.

The Strategic and Cultural Dimensions of Mobile Citizenship in West Asia

In [Chapter 2](#), we saw that Afghan community associations played a critical role in brokering relationships between networks and the state and its officials – relationships that have allowed traders to establish nodes that act as anchor points for their communities in formerly Soviet settings. Such relationships also facilitated the access of Afghans to visas, residency permits and citizenship of the countries in which they worked.

I now address issues relating to citizenship and residency rights that are important to the experiences and activities of Central Asian émigré traders working in the West Asian corridor of connectivity. The material presented below points to concerns that overlap with those in the chapter on the Eurasian corridor, especially in terms of the role played by formally recognised associations in brokering between the state and Afghan traders

²⁸ [Shalinsky 1993](#) and [Shahrani 1984](#).

and migrants. There are, however, also important contrasts between the experiences of traders working in these two corridors of connectivity. On the one hand, these reflect the different approaches to citizenship taken by the countries in which they live and work. It is widely known that over the past half-century Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states more generally have come to manage immigration through specific visa and residency permit regimes rather than offering the possibility of integration through citizenship.²⁹ A sophisticated body of scholarship has argued that the absence of states conferring formal citizenship rights on immigrants has resulted in overseas communities making claims to citizenship at different levels. Anthropologist of the UAE Neha Vora, for example, has developed the term 'consumptive citizenship' to describe the ways in which immigrants regard long-term economic contributions to the societies in which they live as acting as the basis of their citizenship claims. Such a wider understanding is helpful for interpreting the dynamics of stable communities with relatively straightforward access to formal citizenship in their countries of 'origin'.³⁰

Afghanistan's Central Asian émigrés identify with territories and political structures that no longer exist: they trace their 'origins' to a 'somewhen' as much as a 'somewhere'.³¹ As Diana Ibañez-Tirado has argued, scholars of such mobile societies must recognise how mobile people not only switch identifications, identities and affiliations as they move across different contexts but also do so in relation to 'who they have become in different times'. Deploying this dynamic understanding of identity reveals 'different understandings of space and time beyond the authoritative master narratives of history and the existing geographical categories that pinpoint migrants to a specific place of origin, and thus to established patterns of mobility and immobility, as well as fixed legal categories'.³²

Most if not all of the Central Asian émigrés I am concerned with in this chapter hold Afghan citizenship as a result of their families having lived in the country for several decades. At the same time, many of the Central Asian émigré Afghan nationality-holding traders based in West Asia – especially those living in the Arabian Peninsula and Turkey – have not been resident in Afghanistan for over forty years. Most left Afghanistan as children or young adults. They were subsequently educated outside the country and raised their families in a range of settings across West Asia. As a result, the traders discussed in this chapter widely think of themselves as being 'double émigrés': they are exiles from now non-existent Central Asian polities and also from the space in which their families initially

²⁹ Fargues 2011. ³⁰ Vora 2013. ³¹ Da Col 2007. ³² Ibañez-Tirado 2018b.

sought refuge, Afghanistan. Regardless of whether they have access to capital or not, they inhabit an inherently precarious position in a world dominated by nation states. The precariousness they live with and through is rendered yet more complex by the citizenship policies of the countries in which these traders currently live: few if any of the traders belonging to this generation of émigré migrant to West Asia have earned citizenship rights in either Saudi Arabia or the UAE.

The influence of this specific context is visible in two interconnected ways in the material that follows. First, it is normal to think of trading networks and diasporas as sharing a single site or moment of dispersion. As we shall see, the identities of Central Asian émigré traders are closely intermeshed with transforming geopolitical initiatives and circumstances: they identify their backgrounds, identities and collective histories in changing ways according to the circumstances in which they find themselves and do so as much in relation to a time as a place of dispersal. Second, the precarious citizenship of most if not all traders who identify as being Afghan Central Asian émigrés is visible in these traders' pursuit of multiple strategies to secure residency and – in some instances – citizenship rights in the settings across which they work. In some contexts, they develop a 'strategic' approach to citizenship in order to address their vulnerable position;³³ in other contexts they make claims to citizenship that resembles those anthropologists refer to as 'cultural citizenship' – that is, claims based on cultural and historic connections to the host society which are regarded as being of value in that they confirm rights, representation and recognition.³⁴

Citizenship Dilemmas among Saudi Arabia's Central Asian Émigrés

The central issue facing Afghan Central Asian émigrés living in Saudi Arabia is their citizenship status. Most of the émigrés from Central Asia who arrived in the Hejaz in the 1920s eventually secured citizenship in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and established themselves politically and economically there.³⁵ Yet those who settled from the 1970s onwards have not been awarded such documents and the rights they confer on their holders. Instead, these later double-émigrés are dependent on the granting of visa extensions by the kingdom and on applications for residency documents. As a result, the children and grandchildren of families that moved to Saudi Arabia in the 1970s continue to be legally regarded as 'foreigners' (*ajnabi*) by the country's government. Their ability to

³³ Gardner 2008. ³⁴ Ong 1996. ³⁵ Balci 2003.

maintain business interests and family lives in the country is entirely dependent on the dynamics of Saudi immigration policy. This situation is rendered even more complex for such families because they must also go about securing Afghan passports and identity documents. This is often despite having not regularly visited the country since emigrating over thirty years ago.³⁶ Many younger men and women have never set foot in their 'home country', having been brought up in Saudi Arabia; they identify themselves in terms of their Central Asian and/or ethnic heritage as much as they do in relationship to their being 'Afghan'. A trader from such a background who had lived over four decades in Saudi Arabia and who now lives in Istanbul told me that 'such people are Afghan only in the sense that they hold Afghan passports. In other respects they are not Afghan at all – they are Bukharan or Turkestani.'

That many such families initially migrated to Saudi Arabia from Pakistan using Pakistani passports they procured while residing in the country as refugees further compounds the citizenship issues they face in the Arabian Peninsula. The names with which they travelled to Saudi Arabia and then to secure registration documents in the country are different from those in official records in Afghanistan, including all-important 'national identity' (*tazkira*) and land registration documents. Since 2002, high-level representatives of the Afghan state have encouraged Saudi Arabia to allow Afghan citizens in the country to switch Saudi visa and residency permits registered in relation to Pakistani passports to their newly issued Afghan identity documents. However, Afghans in Saudi Arabia often told me that the country's officials have yet to grant Afghans the right to change the names in relation to which they are registered as residents in the country from those they acquired in Pakistan to those listed on their official Afghanistan documents. As a result, families encounter hurdles when seeking to claim rights to their property in Afghanistan because their Afghan passports list different names from land registration documents. And traders face difficulties during the course of international journeys – given that travel and mobility is an indispensable aspect of traders' activities, such difficulties also affect their ability to secure a livelihood. In particular, new technology used by border and security regimes creates especially significant difficulties for traders based in Saudi Arabia. Several Saudi-based Afghans, for example, have been denied entry to China since 2017, when the country began using facial recognition technology and fingerprinting to verify the

³⁶ Such issues can be rendered more problematic as a result of women from Central Asian émigré backgrounds having never been issued with identification documents in Afghanistan – a state of affairs that can effectively render them stateless (*be watan*).

identities of visitors to the country. One evening in Yiwu, for example, a trader of Turkmen ethnicity from Afghanistan told me that one of his customers from Saudi Arabia had been denied permission to enter the country after border officials recognised that the man had made previous visits to China using a different name. Immigration officials reportedly told the man that as a result his visa was not valid; they subsequently deported him to Afghanistan and barred him from making further visits to China. I was told that these cases were so common in Afghanistan that the authorities in Kabul's international airport do not investigate citizens deported to the country on these grounds.

A major concern of some families is the prospect of being declared stateless (*bewatan*) by the Saudi authorities. This is a concern that relates especially to the grandchildren of families that migrated to Saudi Arabia over thirty years ago and have faced difficulties in securing access to Afghan passports, identity cards (*tazkira*) and other relevant documents identifying their ties to the country. One of my informants – currently based in Istanbul – told me how he had sought to travel with his infant son between two countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council, something that was usually possible while in possession of a residency permit from one of the relevant countries. The trader assumed that his son would be able to travel with him because he was in possession of a birth certificate identifying him as the recognised father. Border officials, however, informed the man that his son risked being declared stateless unless he was able to produce relevant nationality documents within the following month. The trader was only able to secure access to an Afghan passport for his son in the short period of time he was given because he was known to officials in Afghanistan's consulate in Jeddah who expedited his application for the relevant documents as 'a favour' (*lutf*). Instances such as this illustrate that if traders regularly move across national boundaries and develop a wide variety of strategies in order to do so, then this aspect of their lives is one experienced in relation to high levels of anxiety and can also have long-term consequences for their individual and familial lives.

The *kafala* system – whereby foreigners must register their visas and businesses in the name of a Saudi Arabian sponsor or *kafeel* – means that conducting business in Saudi Arabia is inherently risky for foreigners.³⁷ A central reason for this is that while foreign traders invest capital in their businesses, these businesses are formally owned by their Saudi sponsors. In addition, while traders purchase and sell and lease valuable

³⁷ An extensive body of literature exists on the *kafala* system, especially in terms of its historical emergence and role in the exclusion of migrant worker communities from public life in the Gulf states. For a critical overview, see [Vora and Koch 2015](#). On the historical emergence of *kafala* in Kuwait, see [Longva 1997](#).

commercial and residential properties (including shops but also warehouses and residential properties) among themselves, all such transactions are conducted through agents, proxy owners and intermediaries. Traders who have worked in Saudi Arabia often report to me the dangers of running a business in the country: sponsors may decide to take control of their company's assets and property. Afghan Central Asian émigré traders draw upon deep historic knowledge of such practices, which have been a norm among Central Asians based in the region since the nineteenth century.³⁸ They also deploy cultural resources to offset the inherent risks that come from doing business under the name of a *kafeel*. Some of my informants have told me that their *kafeel* are third-generation descendants of 1920 émigrés from Central Asia. These people, they say, have 'become Arab'. They are, nevertheless, regarded as being more trustworthy partners than Saudi citizens lacking historic connections to Central Asia. Nevertheless, establishing a relationship with a Saudi citizen of a Central Asian émigré background is in no sense regarded as a failsafe route to a trustworthy relationship. A Farsi-speaking trader originally from the Samangan province in northern Afghanistan who is now based in Jeddah told me over breakfast in a hotel widely frequented by Central Asian émigrés in Istanbul that he owned a house in the city. In the summer of 2016, he had allowed his originally Kashgari *kafeel* to use the home for two weeks – four weeks later, the trader and his family were still staying in a hotel because the *kafeel* had decided to prolong his stay in Turkey. Shared regional and ethnolinguistic affiliation, then, is regarded as playing a positive role in attempts to foster relationships of trust but not in a simple or failsafe manner.

The traders say that Saudi officials are prone to grabbing capital on legal grounds from successful businesses that they know foreigners run. In this context, a key skill of being a trader in Saudi Arabia is recognising at what stage a business is likely to come to the attention of the authorities and to find appropriate ways of moving capital out of the country in the event that such attention results in the direct intervention of state officials into a business. The trade in goods between China and Saudi Arabia is one recognised vehicle through which to move capital; the standard practice of creating invoices for a higher value than the goods actually purchased is especially widely deployed with this aim in mind. Hajji Nazar, for example, was based in Yiwu in 2016 and ran a business that exported small commodities to Amsterdam – including trinkets for grinding hashish leaves.³⁹ In the late 1970s, he moved to Jeddah after coming

³⁸ *Can* 2020: 118–19.

³⁹ I visited De Bazaar in November 2018. In the Netherlands, the market has a reputation for being an exotic site of 'Oriental commerce'; Afghans, by contrast, widely refer to it as being a good place to engage in the sale of Chinese-made commodities of everyday use.

under suspicion in Afghanistan for involvement in the Islamist party Hezb-e Islami. During that period, he worked as an accountant for a restaurateur of Afghan Central Asian heritage who also introduced him into the trade in commodities between Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong and Saudi Arabia. Having returned to Afghanistan after the communist government came to power, Hajji Nazar spent a period of time in jail before being released and spending several years fighting alongside Hezb-e Islami in ‘the jihad’ against the Soviet Union. After falling out with the party’s leadership, he returned to Saudi Arabia at the onset of civil war in the 1990s and looked for the émigré trader for whom he had worked as an accountant over a decade before. The restaurateur’s contacts told him that his former employee had moved his capital and family to Istanbul after his businesses had fallen ‘under the gaze’ (*zer-e nazar*) of Saudi officials.

Rising living expenses in Saudi Arabia – partly from a ‘family tax’ introduced by the Saudi Arabian government in 2016 – has also resulted in many Saudi-based Afghans closing their business in the kingdom. Foreigners based in the country must now pay a monthly sum per dependant: expats were required to pay £21 per dependant in 2016 – a sum that rose to £308 in 2020.⁴⁰ Such taxes have hit poorer families the hardest: families that earn a living working as labourers in warehouses and as sellers in shops are unable to afford the costs of annually renewing their residency permits, much less paying new taxes. Many such families also do not have the savings necessary to pay for expensive air tickets home, not least because families often might number a dozen or so individuals: they thus have little option other than to await their deportation by the Saudi Arabian authorities. The taxes have resulted in fewer difficulties for established business families. Yet even Afghan Central Asian émigrés who own their own businesses in the kingdom claim that a combination of rising costs alongside an economy weakened by conflicts in Syria and Yemen is significantly narrowing their profit margins. Difficulties arising from the taxes and Saudi Arabia’s economy are also compounded by the country’s ‘Saudisation’ policy that requires companies to employ a higher proportion of Saudi citizens than had been the case in previous years.⁴¹ As a result, major questions hang over the extent to which Bukhariyya Street will maintain its status as a central node of critical significance for the reproduction of Central Asian émigrés’ commercial activities.

⁴⁰ Kerr 2016.

⁴¹ On the impact of ‘Saudisation’ policies on migrant communities in Saudi Arabia, see, for example, de Regt, Tafesse 2015.

Out of Arabia

Against the backdrop of these transformations in Saudi Arabia's political economy and its immigration policies, many Saudi-based Afghans have made or are in the process of making complex decisions about their futures in the country. The citizenship strategies arising from these calculations take into account multiple concerns. These include, of course, the possibilities for trade and the making of a livelihood in the countries to which they are considering relocating. A further – if not central – area of consideration revolves around the prospect of earning formal citizenship in a third country. This consideration is also connected to longer-term opportunities for their children's education and employment. However, it also relates to the important role played by neighbourhoods – such as that in Bukhariyya – in their collective worlds and identities, particularly in terms of the role played by social institutions in forging shared sensibilities and senses of familiarity.

The significance invested in the ability to establish and live within distinctive neighbourhoods distinguishes the role played by nodes in the networks of Central Asian émigrés in West Asia from the situation explored within the Eurasian corridor. Cultural and religious concerns play an important role in the decision-making processes of mobile Central Asian émigrés. As is the case with traders in the Eurasian corridor, traders identifying as 'Bukharan' operating across West Asia are culturally and linguistically versatile. They are at home across the Muslim societies of South and Central Asia, the Hejaz and the Arabian Peninsula more generally, as well as in Turkey. They speak Arabic, Farsi, Central Asian Turkic languages and modern Turkish. Those who travel to China for trade also often speak fluent Mandarin and/or Cantonese. Most are also fluent in Urdu, having lived in Pakistan and interacted with South Asian migrants in Saudi Arabia and the other countries in the Arabian Peninsula in which they have lived and worked. Yet they also identify important limits to the type of worlds in which they established nodes for their community. In contrast to the Afghan networks in post-Soviet Eurasia, the émigré traders in West Asia often remark that 'their people' chose to live in Saudi Arabia because 'there are few greater blessings than living close to the sacred cities of Mecca and Medina'. They also regularly say that they seek to ensure that their families live in countries in which 'the call to prayer can be heard'. This does not mean that there are no Central Asian émigré families working beyond the Islamicate spaces of West Asia: some émigré families are commercially active in the West – for instance, in London, the United States and Canada, as well as Europe. Single men and less often families also live in China and other East Asian countries

that play a role in their business activities. Such scattered families often aspire, however, for their families to collectively live either in neighbourhoods in Saudi cities with a high density of Central Asian émigrés or in the Zeytinburnu area of Istanbul. Traders of Central Asian émigré backgrounds in London, for example, arrange for their families and their elderly parents to live in Istanbul, where, they say, they can live in an Islamic cultural environment, engage with their community and hear the sound of the call to prayer.

Becoming Kazakh

Families who have taken the complex decision to leave Saudi Arabia after living there for several decades mostly regard returning to Afghanistan as the least attractive option available to them. A substantial segment of Jeddah's Afghan Central Asian population hails from parts of northern Afghanistan that since 2009 have seen levels of violence perpetrated by the Taliban and ISIS-affiliates rise significantly. Families with little capital at their disposal have relocated themselves and their families in Afghanistan: most have moved to cities in the north of the country (especially Mazar-e Sharif), though some have returned to the villages in which they were brought up and to which they have access – albeit in highly contested ways – to ancestral plots of land. (I explore this context in detail in [Chapter 6](#).)

For most traders and their families, however, the prospect of returning to Afghanistan with children born and raised in Saudi Arabia is painful. As a result, many traders identify multiple options in terms of where to move with their families. A small proportion of such families have relocated to Kazakhstan. Citizenship policy in Kazakhstan has provisions for the return of Kazakh diasporas under the *oralman* policy.⁴² In recent times, the Kazakh state has sought to deploy this policy to increase the proportion of ethnically 'Kazakh' peoples living in regions with a predominantly Russian population, most especially in the north and west of the country. Moving to Kazakhstan under such provisions is a legal possibility open to some émigré families if they are able to demonstrate their descent from a particular Central Asian 'tribe' – the *qarluq*. The law in Kazakhstan identifies this tribe as being ethnically Kazakh, even though it is widely distributed across Central Asia due to historic migratory patterns and long-term political processes. In Afghanistan,

⁴² The *oralman* is the Kazakh term to refer to Kazakhs living in the diaspora who have returned to the country since 1991. On policy relating to returnees and debates about it in Kazakhstan, see [Kuşcu 2013](#) and [Genina 2016](#).

qarluqs are dispersed across the northern regions of the country and widely referred to as being ethnically Uzbek.⁴³ Indeed, most families identifying as *qarluq* in Afghanistan speak Farsi: as a result, they are unable to apply for Kazakh citizenship on linguistic grounds but are eligible to do so based on their genealogies (*nasabnama*). In Afghanistan, ethnic Kazakh leaders (*kalanha*) and elders (*mui safed*) verify the genealogies of families seeking residency in Kazakhstan. It is the prospect of formal citizenship that motivates most émigré families to relocate to Kazakhstan. But the country is also regarded as a viable place in which to trade, being the site of both established post-Soviet bazaars (similar to those explored in [Chapter 2](#)) and different types of commercial opportunities arising out of the Eurasian Customs Union and investment in infrastructural links with China.⁴⁴ Many of the traders with whom I spoke in Jeddah also had reservations about moving to Kazakhstan: it is widely thought among Central Asian émigrés that women in the community would be unable to wear the face veil (*chadari* or *niqab* in Arabic) in the country as a result of its Soviet heritage, and that, consequently, relocation to the country would place obstacles in front of their mode of living.

The United Arab Emirates

A destination for many wealthy traders is the UAE, especially the cities of Dubai and Sharjah. Saudi-based émigrés have enjoyed connections to other émigré families settled in Dubai for several decades, often being involved in the export of commodities (prayer mats and ready-made clothing in particular but also more novel and niche items such as electronic prayer beads) from Dubai's Murshid market to Jeddah and Istanbul. Indeed, there are around thirty shops owned by Central Asian émigrés in the market, several of whom also run businesses in Jeddah – a handful of such merchants also own carpet factories in Istanbul. In addition to investing in such businesses in the UAE, formerly Saudi-based Afghans are also active in the UAE's busy restaurant sector, mostly running establishments that purvey variations of Afghan cuisine to an international, rather than Afghan, clientele. Since the introduction of VAT in Dubai in 2018, the historic city centre's (Deira) status as an infrastructural trading node has undergone significant changes and is less widely used as a procurement node for Asian and African commodity traders. As a result, Deira is no longer an especially attractive destination in which to invest and is increasingly a locale that émigré families are

⁴³ On the complexity of Uzbek–Kazakh identities, see [Bregel 2009](#). ⁴⁴ [Karar 2013](#).

actively seeking to leave. Furthermore, while restrictions on foreigners doing business in the UAE are considerably less strict than those in place in Saudi Arabia, long-term residents in the UAE have no rights to citizenship or long-term residency; they must also negotiate access to capital used to purchase homes, businesses and warehouses with the local inviting partner (*arbab*). Both Afghan and Central Asian émigré families based for decades or more in the UAE have thus increasingly sought to relocate to countries that do hold out the promise of citizenship to immigrants and their families. One of the most favoured destination points is Istanbul.

Turkey

The most successful of Afghanistan's Central Asian émigré merchants in Saudi Arabia and the wider West Asian corridor have preferred to move their families and capital to Turkey. In terms of trade and commerce, the wealthiest traders are able to open factories in Turkey in which they produce commodities, especially machine-made carpets. In doing so, such traders are building on the historic role played by Central Asian merchants in Turkey in this activity over the past half a century or more. Carpets produced in Turkey are then mostly exported to the Gulf countries. In order to partake in such activities, traders divide their time between their factories and families in Turkey and their wholesale businesses in the UAE and Saudi Arabia; fathers entrust their children to run either a shop or a factory during their absences from one or other of the settings in which they work. For traders who do not have access to sufficient capital to invest in a factory in Turkey, relocating family members to the country is regarded as a prudent step to take: doing so reduces household costs as there is no need to pay the expensive fees required to renew residency permits. Traders generally regard the cost of living in Turkey as being more affordable in comparison with the UAE, and, increasingly, Saudi Arabia.

Traders with sufficient capital often secure access to Turkish residency permits (*eqama*) and sometimes also citizenship. It is common for traders in the process of seeking citizenship in Turkey to emphasise their historic status as belonging to Central Asia's 'Turkic' communities: doing so is recognised by them and the authorities with whom they interact as legitimising their collective and individual citizenship claims in Turkey. Traders regularly also report that holding Turkish citizenship is of value not only in terms of securing residency rights in the country but that it also improves their ability to work abroad, especially in Saudi Arabia – 'if you hold Afghan documents', remarked one trader in his mid-thirties who lives in Yiwu and runs businesses in Saudi Arabia, Turkey and

Afghanistan, ‘the Saudis treat you as if you are nothing. But if you claim you are Turkish and you have access to Turkish consular representation, then they at least think twice about what they do to you.’ Historians have recently explored the ways in which Afghan itinerants (mostly pilgrims and merchants) claimed multiple forms of imperial jurisdictional subjecthood in the years in which a treaty with the British government denied Afghanistan’s right to an independent foreign policy.⁴⁵ Afghans travelling in West Asia and Eurasia selectively claimed access to protection from Ottoman, Russian imperial and British Indian authorities.⁴⁶ Central Asian émigrés regard Turkish citizenship in a similar manner, meaning that acquiring it offers an important avenue for navigating the fraught geopolitical worlds across which they move.

Traders deploy various strategies to secure access to Turkish citizenship and residency rights. Several of the Afghan traders with whom I have spent time successfully acquired Turkish citizenship in the 1990s and 2000s – one of the most straightforward ways in which they did so was to rent or occasionally purchase property in Turkey. Since 2018, legislation in Turkey on the granting of residency permits has been tightened: immigrants are now required to have bought a property in the country to the value of \$200,000. Such legislation has made the move to Turkey for traders from Saudi Arabia harder though not impossible. There is a healthy trade between the country’s officials and merchants with sufficient capital to pay substantial bribes in the procurement of Turkish residency permits and even citizenship documents, for example. ‘Estate agents’ (*rahmama-e mamalat*) run by Afghans are also able to produce receipts that show purchased property as being more valuable than the actual cash transaction.

The institutional life of Central Asia’s émigrés in Turkey also plays a major role in facilitating the ability of individuals and families to secure access to citizenship and residency rights in Turkey. Associations (*anjo-manha*) established by Afghans in Istanbul are frequently founded in relationship to an explicitly ethnolinguistic Turkic identity, most conventionally that of ‘Afghan Turk’. Turkey has for long cultivated close relations with Afghanistan’s Turkic-speaking communities. Central Asian communities established themselves in Turkey in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution; in the 1980s, several thousand Afghans were granted residency and citizenship rights in Turkey on the basis of their being Uzbek- and Kirgiz-speaking ‘Turks’.⁴⁷ As we have already seen,

⁴⁵ On the legacies of this history for independent Afghanistan, see [Drephal 2019](#).

⁴⁶ Afghan itinerants (mostly pilgrims and merchants) claimed multiple forms of imperial jurisdictional subjecthood, including of the Ottomans, the Russian Empire and British India. See [Ahmed 2016](#), [Can 2012](#), [Can 2016](#) and [Stephens 2014](#).

⁴⁷ [Kreutzmann 2015](#).

a central aspect of Turkey's foreign policy – the so-called 'pivot to the East' – has been its emphasis on rebuilding relationships with contexts that were formerly part of or in a close relationship with the Ottoman Empire. Afghanistan's Central Asian émigrés have increasingly identified themselves in relation to this geopolitical project: the granting of Turkish citizenship is widely regarded by the community as arising directly from their 'Turkic ancestry' and support for the project to reinvigorate Turkey's Ottoman imperial legacy. The choice by Afghans in Istanbul to designate their associations in Istanbul as 'Afghan Turk' reflects this alignment between their identity project and Turkey's geopolitical project. Afghans in the country widely regard such associations as playing an important role in shaping their ability to reside legally or semi-legally in Turkey. Several Central Asian émigrés based in Istanbul told me that community organisations (*dernigi*) play an important role in mediating the citizenship and residency applications of Afghans in the city, especially those claiming Turkic forms of ethnic identity. Indeed, it is also purported to be the case that immigrants from Central Asian countries – especially Uzbekistan – seek affiliation with such organisations knowing that their citizenship applications stand a better chance of success if they can claim Afghan national identity; doing so allows them to claim refugee status and benefit from relationships between figures of influence in the country's Afghan communities and relevant government officials.⁴⁸

Afghans in Turkey are themselves critically aware that the ways in which they identify their backgrounds, identities and collective histories are interleaved with geopolitical projects. Central Asian émigrés in Zeytinburnu openly reflect, for instance, on the extent to which they have come to emphasise the Turkic aspects of their identity after moving to Turkey. In many regions of Afghanistan, the designation of being 'Turkic' (*turktabar*) has been invested with increasing political significance since 2002. This is partly a result of the country's constitutional system, which was developed in the context of the US invasion of the country in 2001 and the Bonn Agreement signed in December of the same year. The constitution seeks to distribute the ethnic balance of power in the government at various levels, although especially by means of a presidential system that is accompanied – theoretically, at least – by the appointment of two vice-presidents.⁴⁹ In the context of Afghanistan's post-Bonn elections, electoral teams largely seek to select candidates for

⁴⁸ The role played by such association heads as mediating figures between migrants and state authorities builds on a long tradition of the shaykhs of Sufi lodges acting as the guarantors of claims made by foreign Muslims to become Ottoman subjects. See [Can 2020: 119](#).

⁴⁹ [Rubin 2014](#).

such appointments from varying ethnic constituencies.⁵⁰ As Niamattulah Ibrahim has argued, the 'inclusive design of the post-Taliban government . . . has inadvertently contributed to a more popular ethnification of politics'.⁵¹ One of the results of such arrangements is that 'Turkic' Afghans play a significant role in national politics: they are regarded as being able to deliver a substantial amount of votes for powerful Pashtun and Tajik politicians and do so in return for Turkic representation at the highest level of government. The politics of ethnicity in Afghanistan masks, however, a much more fluid range of identities that have been important in the past and remain so today, including those related to the category of 'Turkic'.⁵² A representative of one cultural association based in Istanbul who is from Afghanistan's northern Takhar province and had lived for several years in New Delhi before moving to Turkey made the following remark to me in August 2017: 'Back in Afghanistan, we knew we were Uzbek but we only ever spoke Farsi. I learned more Uzbek in Istanbul than in my homeland.'

The community in Zeytinburnu nurtures and maintains a type of social institution that has a long history in West Asia as being central for sustaining the identities and activities of mobile societies: Sufi lodges, referred to by the traders and the communities they form as *tekke* in Turkish or *taqiya khana* in Farsi.⁵³ The foundation of *tekkes* by mobile societies in nodes of commerce, trade and travel across West Asia is a recognised aspect of the region's history. In the nineteenth century, however, the establishment of *tekke* in Mecca and Medina by Muslims from societies outside the Ottoman world became a source of considerable tension. The Ottoman authorities came to regard such institutions as vehicles used by European powers to extend their influence beyond territorial boundaries. As a result, the Ottoman authorities introduced legislation in 1867 that banned 'foreigners' from purchasing land in the Hijaz. Can has shown, however, that the Ottoman state also depended on foreign philanthropic funds to finance the construction of lodges for the growing numbers of pilgrims and migrants visiting Mecca and Medina – as a result, officials turned a blind eye to Central Asian merchants purchasing land and establishing endowments (*waqf*) using local intermediaries.⁵⁴ Endowments established in this manner mostly provided lodgings for merchants and pilgrims from Central Asia and were distributed not only in Mecca and Medina but also in cities along the hajj routes, including Damascus, Jeddah and Istanbul. Muslims could

⁵⁰ Sharan and Heathershaw 2011 and Sharan and Bose 2016. ⁵¹ Ibrahim 2017: 219.

⁵² Rasuly-Palczek 1998. ⁵³ Can 2012, Green 2010 and Martin Smith 1980.

⁵⁴ Can 2020: 111–19.

designate *tekke* as available for general use or by Muslims from particular regions. The history and development of religious institutions of importance to mobile societies in West Asia has, then, for long been interleaved with competing projects of geopolitical influence and containment.⁵⁵

The history of such institutions is also embodied by mobile merchant families active across the region. The great-grandson of a wealthy Central Asian émigré from Andijon – a Central Asian khanate that occupied an important role on multiple trading routes – reported to me during a series of conversations in Istanbul (where he now lives and conducts business) during August 2017 that his grandfather had established a *waqf* in Mecca in the 1920s. The building was designated by his grandfather as being available for use by all Muslims (a *waqf al muslimin*), rather than his kin or indeed people from their region of Central Asia. It comprised rooms intended for use for a diverse range of activities. Rooms were designated for use as lodgings for pilgrims making the hajj (*musafir khana*; *hajji khana*), and others were intended for occupancy by widowers. Still more rooms were open for those wishing to organise social and religious events important to Muslim communal life, such as sacrificial feasts of remembrance (*khairat*). He told me that the *waqf* continued to function in Mecca, but that his family no longer oversaw it and had become embroiled in a legal dispute over its management with another group of kinsmen.

Central Asian merchants continue to play a role in the management of *tekke/taqiya khana* in Jeddah, Mecca and Medina. As Can has explored, *tekkes* were closed by the Turkish Republic as a result of secular legislation being introduced that targeted Sufi institutions in the country; despite such policies, they continued for decades to play a role in the fortune of migrants.⁵⁶ In the context of the planned relocation of Turkic Afghan refugees in Turkey in the 1980s, new types of social and religious institutions were established that played some of the roles that *tekkes* had occupied in the past. In Zeytinburnu, two *waqf* (*vakif* in modern Turkish) have been established by groups of successful traders who pooled together collective resources. These *vakif* are often referred to by members of the community as *tekke* and *taqiya khana* and are available to them to hold important collective events. While *Bukharan émigré* traders state that these institutions are no longer used for *Sufi* practices such as the collective recitation of the names of Allah (*zikr*), they are spaces that are regularly deployed by the traders for the holding of sacrificial feasts (*qorbani*), charitable feasts (*khairat*)

⁵⁵ On the significance of circulation and mobility to *waqf* in Asia, see Fauzia Mostowlansky and Yahaya 2018.

⁵⁶ Can 2020:182.

and other funerary rites, especially *fatiha*, or prayers of remembrance. The complex and multifaceted nature of the connections between *tekkes* and the collective identity of Central Asian émigrés suggests that, even in the face of a reform-minded Islam that is hostile to Sufism in Saudi Arabia and of the secularising logics of the Turkish state, it is impossible to discount the ongoing importance of Sufi ideas, institutions and practices to this transregional community.

Émigré families moving to Istanbul from Saudi Arabia initially bought homes in a neighbourhood long favoured by the city's Central Asian communities: Zeytinburnu. Many émigré families moved into rented flats in the neighbourhood, with some buying properties that they later developed – often increasing the size of the apartments and turning ground-floor flats into basements used as small-scale stitching workshops, largely employing Afghans and Syrians as their workforce. The Zeytinburnu neighbourhood in Istanbul is now an important node for the commercial and affective lives of Afghanistan's Central Asian émigrés. It is usual for such families to maintain business activities in Jeddah while basing their families in Zeytinburnu, which means that their children have easier and more affordable access to higher education than is the case in Saudi Arabia. More and more traders are also opening businesses in Istanbul, especially in the field of property (where they procure accommodation for families moving from Afghanistan to Istanbul) and in the money exchange and travel agency businesses (both of which have expanded in significance as Afghans based in the city have increased in number).

Community life is a critical feature of Central Asian émigré experiences in Zeytinburnu, and, as we have seen, a motivation for people from such backgrounds to relocate to the city. Many families visit Istanbul in the summer to escape the heat of Jeddah, as well as to order Turkish-made carpets and clothes to be delivered to Saudi Arabia on time for sale during the great hajj pilgrimage. These traders and their families also attend or organise wedding celebrations in the city. Marriages are contracted between trading families long known to one another in Saudi Arabia and who now lead split lives between Jeddah and Istanbul. Central Asian émigré newcomers to Istanbul also forge marriages with the children of families who were resettled in Turkey in the 1980s and have established successful businesses – especially in the fields of clothing and machine-made carpets – over subsequent decades. In this respect, Zeytinburnu combines in important ways a status as a node for trade and infrastructure as well as for the sociological and commercial reproduction of Central Asian émigré trading networks. This node furthermore is concentrated in a specific part of Istanbul – Zeytinburnu – giving further

force to Anderson's conception of the social institutions that traders establish as akin to those of the neighbourhood. In this case, however, the neighbourhoods established by traders are also 'partial'. Ho argues that understanding transregional dynamics requires the development of models of society that can embrace the type of 'small, mobile, and less integrated' social formations that have largely not been encompassed by social science studies of large-scale social aggregates. According to Ho, accounts of multiple 'partial communities' – defined as communities that are connected to each other in the context of an Asia-wide arena of circulation and interaction – afford the possibility of 'spatially expansive' yet 'integrative' accounts of mobile societies.⁵⁷ It is helpful to think of Jeddah and Zeytinburnu as two geographically distinct neighbourhoods that are nevertheless of collective importance to Central Asian émigré networks. Jeddah was historically the primary seat for the capital accumulation of Central Asian émigrés active in the carpet business and commodity trade; Zeytinburnu has increasingly become the centrally important node for this network's sociological and cultural reproduction, though in the context of the changing nature of Saudi Arabia's political economy it is also playing a progressively more important role in the network's commercial profile, especially as a site in which capital is invested in property and industry.

There is nevertheless considerable uncertainty in the mobile society about the future significance of Zeytinburnu as a shared site of cultural and social reproduction for Central Asian émigré trading networks. At one level, this neighbourhood of historic significance for Central Asian émigrés is no longer regarded by families as the most suitable site for them to settle in Turkey. From the 2010s onwards, it has become increasingly popular among Central Asian émigré families to invest in the new housing and commercial developments that have sprung up in western Istanbul under the regime of President Tayyip Erdoğan. Beylikdüzü, for example, is a new housing and commercial development in western Istanbul that is regarded as being a safer and more convenient locale for family life than the bustling and densely populated neighbourhood of Zeytinburnu. Several Central Asian émigré families have remarked to me that they avoid visiting Zeytinburnu. A trader in his mid-forties who deals in carpets and has offices in Turkey, China and Dubai, for example, told me that Zeytinburnu is full of recently arrived (*naw umada*) Afghans who have 'no understanding of how to behave' in Turkey and fight with one another, and that gangs comprising different ethnic groups are also present in the neighbourhood. For traders such as this one, living outside

⁵⁷ Ho 2017. See also Ho 2014.

Zeytinburnu establishes a boundary between themselves and Afghan 'migrants' and 'refugees'; residing in the modern apartment blocks of Beylikdüzü also makes it easier for their women and daughters to visit public spaces without the risk of being seen by Central Asian émigré families known to them. One émigré trader I have known for ten years who runs an import–export business between Turkmenistan and Dubai invited my family and me to visit his home and to meet with his mother, wife and daughters, all of whom had recently relocated from Dubai to Istanbul. He told his daughter aged in her early twenties to drive us around Beylikdüzü, telling us that we could never do such things in Afghanistan, Dubai or, for that matter, Zeytinburnu. The active choice of traders such as this one to reside with their families in locales in which few of their fellow Central Asians live suggests imperatives for family living that do not revolve around the significance of collective residency in specific neighbourhoods.

At another level, the extent to which Istanbul is likely to have the same degree of commercial significance for émigré networks as Jeddah in previous decades is also a source of reflection. Istanbul's status as a node in the cultural and social reproduction of Central Asian émigré life is undisputed, yet its capacity to act as node of trade and infrastructure is a source of serious concern for many émigré families. These families and their commodity trading businesses have profited over decades from low tax import tariffs in the Gulf countries. By contrast, Turkey continues to be a major producer of the types of commodities in which the émigrés deal (notably machine-made carpets and ready-made clothing); such commodities are subject to hefty import duties in Turkey. As a result, a trader moving a business from Jeddah to Istanbul is usually unable to simply shift his operations from one city to the other but is instead required to consider developing a different type of commercial model in Turkey, most usually of a small-scale industrial nature.

The traders also say that their businesses were successful in Saudi Arabia because relatively few Saudi citizens were involved in the trade in small commodities, and niches emerged in the country's economy that could be filled by different groups of 'foreigners' specialising in specific commodity types. By contrast, in Turkey traders often remark that 'everybody is a trader', and therefore there are few opportunities to capture and shape a specific niche. The most obvious niche open to traders moving their operations to Istanbul revolves around the running of businesses that cater to the needs of migrants entering the city. Most especially, Afghan traders have opened grocery shops, travel agents, restaurants, businesses importing the specific varieties of rice, tea and spices favoured by Afghans and Arabs, estate agents and Internet cafés

that also act as money transfer businesses (*hawala*). The trader of Andijoni heritage who has spent most of his life in Saudi Arabia, mentioned earlier in connection to his family's *waqf* in Medina, for example, ran a business importing rice and spices to Turkey from India – the line of trade in which his family had been active for decades. In Istanbul, the rice he imported was mostly of the type preferred by the expanding communities of Arabs, Afghans and Iranians living in the city. The fortunes of his business and others like it, however, depend to a significant degree on the policy of Turkey towards immigration from the wider region, including undocumented migrants who regularly stay in the country on long sojourns or en route to Europe.⁵⁸ A 2016 agreement between Turkey and the EU, for example, resulted in more undocumented migrants from Afghanistan being deported by Turkey rather than being tacitly allowed to travel on to Europe using informal routes, as had previously been the case. Indeed, the trader told me that he was unable to make sufficient profits to maintain the vitality of his business in Turkey. Against this backdrop, successful traders maintain businesses in Saudi Arabia and the UAE while also exploring opportunities in Turkey. As a result, if Istanbul is of growing significance to the cultural and social reproduction of the community, then cities in the Arabian Peninsula, most especially Jeddah, continue to hold commercial relevance for the networks. In this way, Zeytinburnu and Jeddah function as two dimensions of a partial neighbourhood that is significant for the dynamics of the mobile society as a whole.

Political Contestations of Culture and Heritage

Central Asian émigré traders collectively agree, then, that Turkish citizenship invests them with a national identity that carries positive legal and cultural implications. Indeed, in their discussions with one another, traders of these backgrounds regard being identified as Turkish rather than Afghan as better reflecting their cultural and historical backgrounds. An understanding of the traders' citizenship strategies therefore requires a consideration of their economic goals and motivations, as well as the ways in which they can emphasise particular aspects of their ethnolinguistic, regional and religious identities in a manner that calibrates with the ideological currents informing the geopolitical projects of West Asia's states. Citizenship manoeuvres such as these, as well as the attendant shifts in relation to geopolitical projects they signal, are the focus of

⁵⁸ There is a voluminous literature on the EU's policy regarding refugees and the role of Turkey. See, notably, [Schuster 2011](#).

intense and critical discussion by the traders. Far from merely forming strategies in relation to a consideration that the outcomes might have for their individual and collective futures, the traders debate the political implications of the decisions they make about where to live and how to earn a livelihood. The embrace of Turkey, for example, is a source of much critical discussion among these families. Traders ask one another the extent to which thinking of their relationship to Turkey in terms of 'authenticity' and in opposition to being 'Afghan' holds negative as well as positive implications. As I have noted already in the chapter, relatively few of the émigré families that now trade in the West Asian corridor make frequent visits to Afghanistan. They do, however, arrange marriages between their children and suitable families in Afghanistan, something that brings them into conversation and contact with émigrés living in their former temporary homeland. Central Asian émigrés based in Turkey increasingly depict themselves as a Turkic 'diaspora' from a lost Central Asian homeland. By contrast, émigrés in Afghanistan often remain deeply invested politically, economically and culturally in the ongoing presence of the community in the country. Such differences in perspective reflect the shifting identifications of many 'diaspora' communities and the analytical distinction advanced in this book between 'diasporas' and 'mobile societies'. Whereas mobile societies bring to light the sustained and ongoing participation of communities in and across multiple contexts, the notion of diaspora is associated in much scholarly writing with the binary distinction between 'home' and the 'host' 'societies'.⁵⁹

Abdul, for example, was a trader of mixed Uzbek and Turkmen heritage who lived in a house in the outskirts of the northern city of Mazar-e Sharif until his death in 2018. In the autumn of 2016, I participated in a lively debate between Abdul, who often travelled to the Central Asian states to trade but maintained his family base in Mazar-e Sharif, and a Turkmen Afghan émigré who had moved his family to Istanbul in 2011. Abdul told his guest from Turkey that he was opposed to émigré Turkmen families leaving Afghanistan to live in Istanbul. He said that they were uncritically accepting an exclusive and simplistic form of Turkish national identity. The Turkish state, he went on to argue, was interested in their capital and status as voters rather than the unique nature of their Turkic culture and society and its importance to the history of modern Turkey. He argued that Afghanistan's Turkmens should be committed to protecting their people's place in a specific regional

⁵⁹ See, for example, the contrasting approaches of Brubaker (2005) and Safran (1991). For an approach focusing on the need to understand the importance of 'third' settings as much as 'home' and 'host' societies, see Ho 2017.

geography that has been of significance to the community for centuries: if influential members of the community continued to migrate (*kuch kardān*) to Turkey, he argued, this would act as a fillip to exclusivist forms of Afghan national identity, a political development that would diminish the vitality of their geography. By contrast, the Istanbul-based trader argued that for decades the Afghan state had not supported émigrés based in northern regions of the country – in Turkey, by contrast, they could lead a respectable and stable life but also keep their culture and identity intact.

Debates such as these in which traders advance different positions about the benefits or otherwise of aligning their identities with those of modern Turkey also carry on apace in the trading nodes of the West Asian corridor of connectivity. During my research in Saudi Arabia, I was invited by a trader of Turkmen ethnicity from northern Afghanistan to visit him at his home in Riyadh. The trader ran a successful furniture business in the country's capital and also owned shops in Jeddah's Bukhariyya neighbourhood. My host had invited other Afghan Turkmen traders living in Riyadh for an evening of discussion (*gap; gashtak*) – we ate traditional Afghan dishes, listened to two men sing Turkmen songs to the sound of traditional musical instruments and then discussed the significance of modern Turkey to their identities.⁶⁰ Having seen a news clip about Turkey, two of the other guests present argued that Turkmens naturally belonged to Turkey – the two men had even gone on Turkish-run tours to China's Xinjiang region to explore the region's distinctly 'Turkic' heritage. My host, by contrast, said his community should be suspicious of Turkish policy towards speakers of Turkic languages in Central Asia: if Turkish political leaders might speak of Central Asian Turks as their 'brothers', he cautioned, then such groups were treated in the country as a source of cheap labour as well as hard capital.

Such discussions point towards the processes through which the traders' identities undergo shifts in relation to the geopolitical projects of state actors active across the Eurasian arena, yet such shifts also have important ramifications for Afghanistan itself. They also demonstrate that the traders think critically about the ideological projects advanced by the states in which they live – some if by no means all of the traders recognise the exclusionary realities that lie beneath the rhetoric of pan-Turkic unity advanced by Turkey in its 'look East' policy.⁶¹

⁶⁰ For an insightful discussion of the significance of such gatherings for social life in Central Asia, see [Harris and Kamalov 2020](#).

⁶¹ An extensive body of historical literature has drawn attention to the mismatch between the rhetoric of pan-Turkic and pan-Islamic unity and the strategic manner in which the Ottoman Empire actually related to regions of the world that were home to Turkic populations. See [Can 2020](#): 124. Cf. [Meyer 2014](#).

Conclusion: Trading Networks; a Comparative Historical Approach

Chapters 2 and 3 focused on two core axes of Afghan mobility along Asia's contemporary Silk Roads – one that connects China to the former Soviet republics and increasingly Western Europe, and the other to West Asia, notably Turkey and the Arabian Peninsula. These two axes of connection are, however, disconnected; they are also characterised by the contrasting cultural and political priorities and outlooks of those who form them.

Afghan traders in the former Soviet Union tend to share an emphasis on their culturally Afghan identities. They also promote an understanding of themselves in the societies in which they live as being if not one-dimensionally secular, then avowedly flexible in terms of their cultural and religious identities. This mode of cultural and religious identification is especially visible in the emphasis they place on their ability to partake in public forms of social life; traders in this corridor also regard such behaviour as a vehicle to demonstrate their flexibility, success and commercial acumen to one another. They are also visible in the types of institutions they establish in the settings in which they live, notably those framed in terms of 'the Afghan diaspora'. The events organised by such institutions also place much emphasis on the cultural needs of overseas Afghans, as well as the political dynamics of Afghanistan. The forging of ties with local communities through marriage and friendship – communities that rarely identify as 'Muslim' – demonstrates such cultural flexibility. An area where the performance of flexibility is especially visible is that of marriage – many Afghan traders in the former Soviet Union have married local Russian and Ukrainian women; doing so enables them to demonstrate the flexible nature of their identities and modes of acting but also to expand and consolidate their trading activities in multiple nodes.

By contrast, the émigré Bukharans active in West Asia do identify as 'Afghan' in particular circumstances, and rarely if at all contest or refuse this aspect of their identities, yet they also collectively orient around a conception of themselves as émigré Central Asians – in some contexts, self-representations congeal in relation to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century political entities in which their families lived, notably the Emirate of Bukhara. More recently – in the context of Turkey's pivot to the East – the émigrés have also actively identified and engaged with the category of Turkic. Afghanistan plays a complex role in the identifications of most traders in this group. Rarely regarded as 'home' in any simple sense, it is, however, a country that is invested with emotional significance in both more positive and negative ways. Afghanistan is also of practical

significance for the traders: many of them are Afghan citizens, and others are able to use their past residence in the country to claim citizenship in the contexts to which they move. These merchants also collectively emphasise the importance of Islamic thinking, practice and institutions to their public identities and activities. Institutions such as *taqiya khana/ tekke* are maintained over decades and are registered with religious bodies such as the Turkish *vakif* department; they are used specifically for performing Islamic rituals important to the collective life of the community. The extent to which Islamic values and models for action shape Bukharan émigré networks is also visible in the types of choices they make about where to live. Most traders emphasise the importance to them of their families living in culturally Islamic contexts, be these in Saudi Arabia or Turkey. In this sense, ideological projects of pan-Turkic and pan-Islamic unity inform the thinking and identities of these traders in a manner that reflects the context they inhabit. At the same time, the traders are often critical of such ideologies and hold divergent views of them.

There are clear differences in the cultural and political priorities of the networks sketched out in this chapter; these variations also assume a material form in the type of social institutions that the chapter has argued played a critical role in the commercial and cultural reproduction of the networks under study. Differences in outlook between the networks also reflect the varying ways in which they are structured and the forms of behaviour facilitated, shaped and encouraged by such structures. In this sense, Afghan traders in Eurasia organise their activities in relationship to multiple nodes that hold various forms of commercial, cultural, sociological and economic significance. Such nodes are geographically scattered; they are constantly renewed and recreated in the face of changing political and economic circumstances. The relative influence of particular nodes on the activities of the network more generally vary: some are of critical commercial importance, while others are significant for the networks' cultural and sociological reproduction; still more seek to combine multiple functions. In the case of the Central Asian émigrés in West Asia, traders seek to establish all-influential nodes that combine commercial, social and cultural functions. Traders in this network emphasise the importance of their families living together in close proximity and in specific neighbourhoods. There are currently two such physical neighbourhoods (Bukhariyya in Jeddah and Zeytinburnu in Istanbul). The degree of connectivity between these neighbourhoods suggests they are best analysed as a 'partial neighbourhood': a shared site of sociality that is dispersed spatially, with each locale requiring the co-presence of the other. This complex arrangement has arisen in the context of the traders'

cultural preferences for living communally and as a strategic response to Turkish and Saudi policies, especially in relationship to immigration, citizenship and policy towards business in general and international trade in particular. So, while geographically dispersed, Central Asian émigré networks more closely approximate the model of the mononodal network introduced earlier. They emphasise the importance of their being a central node that acts as a departure point for women, credit, commodities and religious authorities.

Despite important divergences in the nature of these two trading networks, there are also important areas of convergence. Historical processes played out over the *longue durée* are important to the dynamics of both of these contemporary networks. Afghan traders in Eurasia and Central Asian émigré merchants in Bukhara both work in contexts in which the communities with which they identify have for long occupied important commercial niches. Afghan merchants have dealt in Central Asia's renowned fruits in Russian markets for at least two centuries; Bukharan merchants have historically acted as mediators between the Central and West Asian commercial spheres. As importantly, both networks also share a comparable elasticity in the ways in which they incorporate successive waves of traders into their activities and worlds. Neither Eurasia's Afghans nor West Asia's Central Asian émigrés form bounded communities strictly determined by ethnolinguistic or ideological boundaries. Complex and multiple layered identities and ideological influences inform the dynamics and cultural content of these networks. Erstwhile Afghan communists share their commercial spaces with newer waves of entrepreneurial migrants who identify with Islamist movements or have served as translators for the US army in Afghanistan. Central Asian émigrés' networks collectively orientate around shared Islamic values and modes of community life. Yet in important respects, they are also layered in complex ways: this is most clearly illustrated in their relationships with historic communities of Central Asians in Saudi Arabia and with newer and older communities of 'Afghan Turk' refugees in Turkey.

The networks are also similar in their ability to work at the intersections of multiple geopolitical projects. In the case of the Afghan traders in the former Soviet Union, the traders simultaneously thrived in the context of the Soviet collapse and China's ascension to the WTO in 2001. They successfully forged an important medial position between these two contexts. More recently, these traders have maintained a foothold in Russia in the context of the country's reinvention of its place in Eurasia, most especially seen in the example of the Eurasian Customs Union. Yet they have also navigated the tensions this has spawned, most noticeably with Ukraine, but also with China and the direct role that the People's

Republic plays in Eurasia's political economy, initially by way of its 'Look West' policy and currently in the form of the Belt and Road Initiative. The traders have also been successful in extending their networks within the European Union. Similarly, Central Asian émigré networks have also engaged with multiple geopolitical projects, including the growing emphasis placed by Saudi Arabia on its relationship with China and, most recently, Turkey's pivot to the East and the attempt to garner identities based on the history and geography of the Ottoman Empire.

But if both networks have adapted to such geopolitical projects, then it is important to emphasise that they have not come to be defined by them. The geographical connections, routes and imaginations of traders in both of the networks are not opposed to state boundaries and geopolitical projects – nor are they simply derivative of them. Rather, their own routes and geographical imaginations are imbricated and layered in a complex and often contingent way within and across states and prominent geopolitical projects. Traders in both networks regard their ability to think critically about geopolitics as being central to the way they make a profit at the interface of multiple geopolitical projects. This mode of activity distinguishes them from trading communities that are directly associated with one or other geopolitical player in Asia. For such communities, association with a single political entity brings benefits in protection and consular support, but also risks. Turkey's volatile relationships with Russia and China over issues ranging from the Syrian conflict to the status of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang have intermittently affected Turkish businesspeople across these contexts. Turkish businesspeople vacated Russia in the aftermath of the downturn in Russian–Turkish ties in the wake of Turkey shooting down a Russian jet in 2015. In 2016, Turkish traders in Yiwu told me that poor relations between Beijing and Ankara had made it difficult for them to acquire Chinese visas. Afghan traders operating in the Eurasian and West Asian corridors, by contrast, thrive in the interstices between geopolitical projects.

Geopolitical dynamics are having a considerable effect on the traders' geographical location and the routes along which they move and transport commodities, as well as capital. [Chapters 2 and 3](#) distinguished between two distinct corridors of connectivity that have been shaped by histories of geopolitical dynamics including those connected to nineteenth-century European empires and their aftermath, the Cold War and the contemporary attempts of China and Russia to promote particular visions of Eurasian connectivity. Yet there is the possibility that commercial networks that have been historically and geographically disconnected will fold into one another. During my time conducting fieldwork, for example, I met a trader in Jeddah who had sent his children to be educated in

aeronautical engineering in a Ukrainian university and a trader who ran a currency exchange business between Istanbul and Jeddah who had recently expanded his activities to Odessa. Afghan traders develop routes and businesses not in relation to ideologies such as Turkic or Islamic identity but, rather, the pragmatic concerns of trade, commerce and livelihoods. As a result, they are well positioned to continue to author unfolding forms of transregional connectivity that build off but also transcend those of particular geopolitical projects. The Afghan state's ability to benefit from such connections depends on its willingness to recognise the relevance of engaging with mobile communities and networks and the particularity of the routes they forge.

Chapter 4 focuses on a node of particular importance to both of the networks explored in this and previous chapters: Yiwu, a trading city in China in which individuals making up diverse trading networks meet and interact. This will involve a discussion of the ways in which diverse trading networks interact in the city, both with one another and with the city's authorities and policymakers, and an exploration of the ways in which geopolitical processes contribute to the socio-spatial organisation of Yiwu.

4 'Welcome to Yiwu, China International Trade City!' Everyday Life in a Chinese Commercial Node

Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrated that two corridors of connectivity forged by merchants identifying with the territories of modern Afghanistan play a critical role in supporting and channelling trading networks connecting China to post-Soviet Eurasia and West Asia. In this chapter, I focus on a specific node that is of considerable if varying significance for the activities of many of the traders discussed in this book – the Chinese international trade city of Yiwu. A particular concern of the chapter is the differences in the expectations that Chinese policymakers and commodity traders have of Yiwu's status as an inter-Asian commercial node. City planners in Yiwu have introduced policy reforms across various areas relating to the lives of international traders active in Yiwu. Much of this policy reform has sought to enhance Yiwu's international renown as a centre for the global trade in 'small commodities'. Thousands of international traders working in Yiwu – including those from Afghanistan who are the focus of this book – have played an active and visible role in the city's commercial dynamics since the mid-1990s in particular. Far from seeing Yiwu solely as a commercial infrastructure hub in the rather narrow manner in which Chinese policymakers regard it, however, the traders emphasise their emotional and cultural attachments to the city. The traders also believe that the manifold contributions they have made to Yiwu's development entitle them to a settled place in the city's future. The chapter argues that tensions between these two different perspectives on Yiwu's status as an inter-Asian commercial node play out in palpable ways in the traders' experiences of daily life in the city.

I focus on the city of Yiwu for two main reasons. First, Yiwu is the permanent commercial base of around 200 trading companies owned and run by Afghans who are active across a range of globally interconnected markets. In terms of population size, there are around 1,000 Afghans residing in the city; the residency in Yiwu of many of these traders is as nationals of countries in which they do business rather than Afghanistan itself, which makes it difficult to arrive at an accurate figure of the number of traders living in the city. Many Afghans also visit Yiwu on shorter trading sorties, mostly to procure commodities – their numbers are not

recorded in official statistics. More important than the numerical significance of Yiwu from Afghanistan, however, is the fact that Afghans operating globally procure a substantial proportion of the commodities in which they deal in Yiwu, making the city one of global importance for Afghan trading networks.

Afghans are but one of many visible and sizeable trading communities active in Yiwu. As work on other trading nodes has demonstrated, 'interconnections associated with different historical periods and human mobilities overlap and entangle'.¹ Scholarship attests to Yiwu being a node of truly global significance for merchants involved in the trade of commodities of everyday use manufactured in China.² Traders from countries across the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia, Africa, North and South America, as well as Europe, assemble in the city. As is the case with Afghans, such traders deal in goods purchased in Yiwu in their home countries and regions, as well as in the further countries in which they or members of their networks live and sell commodities. The chapter addresses intersections and relationships between the different trading networks present in Yiwu, doing so through a consideration of the city's spatial dynamics and the place-making practices of the traders based there. A consideration of such spatial dynamics underscores the extent to which trading networks operating in and out of the city are poorly understood simply as the spatial extension of territorially bound nation states. Instead, the ethnographic material presented in the chapter points towards the networks' relationship to contested border spaces that sit at the juxtaposition of multiple geopolitical projects, as well as the importance to their internal dynamics of recurrent forms of circulation and mobility.

Second, the coexistence of diverse trading networks in Yiwu means that the city sheds light on the relationship between competing projects of Eurasian commercial connectivity. The importance of Yiwu to the global commodity trade and the city's status as a node for international trade networks predates the initiative's formal launch in 2014 – it would therefore be a mistake to analyse its dynamics solely in relation to the Belt and Road Initiative. Traders' modes of inhabiting Yiwu, and also of thinking about their futures within and beyond the city, rather, entails them conceiving of and making strategies in relation to the geopolitics of other nation states active in attempts to forge Eurasian connectivity. Chinese policymakers and planners played a powerful role in transforming the city from a small 'county town' into an 'international trade city' over the three decades leading up to the announcement of the Belt and

¹ Bunnell 2016: 11. ² For example, Marsden 2015.

Road Initiative. At the same time, local actors – especially merchants – also played a significant role in Yiwu's emergence as a trade hub. Huaichuan Rui, for example, has drawn attention to the willingness of Yiwu merchants to take commercial risks in the 1970s in an uncertain political environment that remained hostile to 'the entrepreneur'.³ As I explore in what follows, policies relating to the Belt and Road Initiative are affecting in complex ways Yiwu's status as a node for long-distance commerce. Analysing traders' experience of work and life in Yiwu requires a consideration not merely of the city's relationship to Chinese projects of Eurasian connectivity but also the relationship of these to past and present projects arising from elsewhere, including, most especially, those of the Soviet Union, Russia and Turkey.

Yiwu and China's Belt and Road Initiative

This chapter's focus is on Yiwu's significance as a node for long-distance trading networks, an aspect of the city I explore through ethnographic material relating to Afghans' experiences of life there. But several general features of the city's role in global commodity trading should be noted before I turn to the ethnographic material. First, Yiwu's significance as a node in long-distance commercial networks predates China's launch of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2014. As Huaichuan Rui has shown, Yiwu was an important commercial centre even before China became a member of the World Trade Organization in 2000: despite trade being illegal in China, local farmers were nevertheless able to earn additional income by acting as 'walking traders' (*xing shang*) selling products they produced across the country.⁴ In the 1980s, policymakers reduced restrictions on such trade in Yiwu in the context of China's introduction of economic reforms: traders were now able to sell products bought from state-owned industries in street markets in the town. From 1992 onwards, Yiwu began to attract an increasing number of 'middlemen' traders from South Asia and the Middle East, and especially after 1997, the city's authorities began to direct their activities at the internationalisation of their trading activities: in 1992, 20 per cent of the city's products were exported; by 2015, this figure had risen to 65 per cent; and the most recent data seen by Huaichuan Rui suggests that the current proportion is as much as 80 per cent. During this period, the city had gained notoriety among international merchants as a suitable setting in which to procure Chinese-made commodities of everyday use and ship these to the various contexts in which they worked. Yiwu's overall significance to

³ Rui 2018. ⁴ The following data is drawn from Rui 2018.

long-distance and often informal trade between China and the wider world was supported in powerful and important ways by the city's municipality. Policymakers in the city introduced legislation that sought to encourage the city's development into a nationally recognised 'international trade reform pilot city' – a formal status for which it was nominated in 2011. These included, most importantly, simplified visa and taxation regimes, the establishment of a dry port and customs post, as well as the expansion and development of the Futian market complex. This status attracted further traders to the city, often because they were able to benefit from its distinct tax code, a provision that enabled them to export mixed goods from a single container, and, as a result, to supply smaller-scale wholesale businesses in the countries in which they worked than would have otherwise been possible.⁵ What had initially been stalls located on streets in the city centre became a giant commercial structure in the late 1990s. By 2016, the Futian market complex came to comprise 70,000 sales booths selling 1,700,000 types of 'small commodities' that were sold in five specifically designated districts. In the wake of these developments, thousands of international traders opened trading and transportation offices in the city. Such offices facilitated international traders visiting the city to procure commodities (*jins*), access warehouse space (*gudam*), pass goods through customs (*gumruk*) and transport commodities in bulk to their final destinations around the world.

Second, as in the case of other commercial nodes in China and beyond, major questions hang over Yiwu's future as a trading node for international networks. Such uncertainty reflects general changes in the nature of China's role in the global economy: rising labour costs in China and the growing trade in industrial equipment have resulted in Chinese and international businesses producing more and more commodities in the countries in which they work rather than relying on imports from China. There have been major transformations in the priorities of China's economic policymakers, some of which have had important and positive implications for Yiwu. After the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative, Yiwu's status as a hub of international trade was recognised with the launch of several major infrastructure projects: the city became the departure point of several high-profile freight train routes, including those to Tehran and Mazar-e Sharif, and to Madrid, Duisburg (Germany) and London in Europe.⁶ At the same time, as I laid out in the introduction, in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, policies have also been introduced that have resulted in new difficulties for traders involved in the export of Chinese small commodities, especially those acting informally and at a smaller scale than large multinational

⁵ I thank Huaichuan Rui for providing this detail. ⁶ McVeigh 2017.

corporations. Yiwu has been under pressure from China's central government to 'upgrade' the role it plays in global commerce in line with the country's shift from a 'made in China' to an 'invented in China' approach.⁷ The type of affordable and often low-grade commodities purveyed in Yiwu no longer hold the significance that they once did for China's economic planners. A growing emphasis by officials on e-commerce platforms, rather than 'traditional commerce' involving mobile international traders and physical marketplaces, is also resulting in declining numbers of foreign traders in Yiwu; this decline affects both the financial turnover of the Futian market and the viability of service businesses aimed at foreign traders in Yiwu.⁸

In light of its own anti-corruption policies as well as concerns about the activities of 'terrorist organisations', China has responded to a growing global emphasis on the dangers of illegal transnational financial transactions by restricting the activities of informal money exchange agents in cities across the country, including in Yiwu. In 2016, many foreign traders emphasised to me the ease with which they could transfer money to China as making the city a more attractive place in which to do business than other cities to which they had travelled for business, both in China and beyond. Police investigations did intermittently affect the activities of international money transfer agents, yet foreign traders reported that such issues had hitherto regularly been resolved through face-to-face negotiations with the relevant local authorities in Yiwu. By 2018, however, traders increasingly remarked to me that it was harder to open the bank accounts necessary for making informal transactions, to persuade Chinese citizens to offer their bank accounts for use in international money transfers and to recover cash confiscated by financial investigators in China. Traders also believed that such policies targeted the citizens of specific countries, notably Yemen, Afghanistan and Syria. After the United States imposed sanctions on Iran in August 2018, a stricter policy towards transnational financial transactions resulted in Iranian trading companies being unable to pay their Chinese clients and having to close their activities in the city when they fell into bankruptcy.

A Global Supermarket?

Yiwu has been widely represented in the media and more scholarly accounts as the 'supermarket' of the Arab world.⁹ This image of Yiwu is

⁷ Rui 2018.

⁸ The Covid-19 pandemic and the restrictions in which it resulted on international travel is set to further intensify the pressure for traders to embrace e-commerce platforms.

⁹ Pliez 2015.

unsatisfactory in two respects. Most obviously, the depiction of Yiwu in relation to the ‘Arab world’ fails to do justice to the great diversity of nationalities and ethnolinguistic groups active in the city. Second, treating Yiwu simply as a modern-day logistical centre unnecessarily narrows our understanding of its significance for the international traders who either live there or visit it regularly. As this chapter documents and explores, it is the multiple histories that international traders bring to Yiwu that shape the kind of node the city is; this also ensures a cultural and emotional life to Yiwu that is not captured by characterisations of the city as a ‘capitalist supermarket’. Furthermore, it is critical to understand the economic activities that have contributed to Yiwu’s prominence in relation to geopolitical shifts and tensions in the wider world over the past thirty years: geopolitical projects are visible not merely in the city’s economic fortunes but also, more concretely, in its dynamic spatial layout and the trajectories of the international traders working there.

Far from seeing Yiwu as an enormous non-place or supermarket,¹⁰ many merchants are conscious that their own biographies (past and to an extent future), particular histories and tastes are intertwined with the city’s development and are integral to the practices and politics of ‘place-making’ upon which they embark.¹¹ As a result, many of the foreign traders based in Yiwu regard themselves as the authors of the city’s destiny; they relate to it in ways that are emotional in important respects. Indeed, if the mix of traders that travel to the city is far more diverse than the image of an ‘Arab supermarket’ suggests, so too do traders from many more parts of the world than the Middle East and Africa visit the city as commodity traders. As we will see in this chapter, it is commonplace to hear foreign merchants in Yiwu (both visitors and residents) remarking that they and the city or its enterprises have ‘grown up together’ and that the city owes its development to their (and other foreigners’) presence and activities. Put differently, various (national) communities of traders are essential for Yiwu’s social reproduction. As a trader from Afghanistan who transports goods between Yiwu and Ukraine told me in a conversation we were having about the difficulties of life for international traders in the city in September 2018, ‘without foreigners this city would be nothing – if we leave, it collapses’.

For many foreign visitors, ‘trade’ occupies only one side of their activities in Yiwu. The number of restaurants and cafés in the city, not to

¹⁰ Augé 1992.

¹¹ The term ‘place-making’ is widely used in anthropology and related disciplines to question the notion that community and locality are natural and to bring attention, instead, to ‘embodied practices that shape identities and enable resistances’ (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 6). See also, Anderson 2019 and Ibañez-Tirado 2019.

mention several large 'foot massage parlours' and nightclubs, underscores the extent to which Yiwu is a site of leisure and tourism as well as commerce. Indeed, many traders visiting Yiwu treat the city as a node in international touristic circuits. For Russians, the city might be their first and only experience of China;¹² Afghans based in Odessa might travel on from Yiwu to the southern Chinese city of Sanya for a beach holiday; Syrians travel to Malaysia for English-language courses; while Central Asian émigré families located in the Arabian Peninsula often combine a trip to Yiwu with taking their family members for health checks in India. Some traders even see Yiwu as a model city that could act as a template for the organisation of urban life in the countries from which they originate: an Afghan trader based in Odessa remarked to me one day in Yiwu, 'if only Kabul could be like this'. In this way, Yiwu's foreign visitors entertain a conception of the city as an internationally connected urban milieu that is shaped and reshaped in relation to specific cultural tastes and trajectories. As a result, the traders also need to be understood as authors of the geographies of which Yiwu is a part, rather than being one-dimensionally derivative of state-driven geopolitical projects, including but not limited to China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Place-Making in an International Trade City

When explored in detail, it is increasingly clear that the various trading communities and networks present in the city have clustered in specific areas, as is often the case in diverse urban settings.¹³ Importantly, however, such clustering does not simply reinforce immutable boundaries based on markers of national, ethnic, cultural or religious identity. The imprint, rather, of geopolitical dynamics arising from the regions of the world in and across which groups of traders work is equally important in shaping social and physical space in Yiwu.¹⁴

The extent to which the Futian market complex is the focal point of the city's commercial activities is apparent each morning and late afternoon in Yiwu. International traders and local businesspeople make their way to and from the market using the city's main artery – Chouzhou Lu – and do so by foot, on motorcycle, in private vehicles and using the city's extensive bus and mass transit network. Visiting international traders travel to the market on most days of their stays in the city to purchase the commodities in which they deal, as well as to spend time exploring the market for new

¹² Skvirskaja 2019. ¹³ Cf. Simone 2004.

¹⁴ This section is a revised and expanded version of a section of Marsden and Ibañez-Tirado 2018.

items. Chinese translators accompany some traders, the representatives of international transport companies visit the market with others – many more traders have learned enough Chinese over the course of repeated visits to be able to carry out the conversations and bargaining they need. Indeed, traders from Afghanistan highlight the fact that members of their community are rarely to be seen with a translator – an aspect of their way of working, they say, that demonstrates their ‘big hearts’ and aptitude for sustained struggle (*mehnat; mobariza-ye motadawoom*). International traders based in the city also make regular visits to Futian market. They mostly visit the market complex to make purchases at the request of their international customers, pay outstanding bills to shopkeepers and familiarise themselves with new products. International traders do build up long and established relationships with the Chinese businesspeople in the market, yet the Futian market complex is not a site of intense sociality for them in the way that the bazaars in their home countries often are.¹⁵ Most of the traders from Afghanistan with whom I worked instead regarded Futian unambiguously as a space of work if not also toil. I was only invited by them to march through its districts and lanes on a few occasions; on the occasions that I was, visits were undertaken in a business-like manner: other than hard-bargaining between themselves and Chinese shopkeepers, most of the conversation was advice to one another on which designs to buy and at what price.

The neighbourhoods parallel to the Futian market comprise five-storey apartment buildings that traders use for living and commerce. In this part of the city, ground-floor lots are used as shops selling beads and jewellery, the warehouses of transport companies and also for an increasing number of restaurants – international and Chinese. Traders from Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Ukraine and the Central Asian states often choose to rent transport offices and residential apartments in this part of the city.¹⁶ As we shall see later, many traders from post-Soviet contexts concentrate themselves a short walk from this area. An increasing number of Afghan trading companies, however, located themselves in this part of the city: some cite access to the Futian market as being their primary consideration, others – especially those who deal in the trade in goods between Yiwu and Turkmenistan – prefer this region because it is a congregation point for Central Asian traders whose custom they seek to attract. As much as if not more than the impulse to establish culturally defined

¹⁵ See Geertz 1978, Rosen, Geertz and Geertz 1979 and Coburn 2011.

¹⁶ For a detailed discussion of this neighbourhood in particular and its significance for merchants from Central Asia, especially Tajikistan, see Ibañez-Tirado 2018a.

trading enclaves, a combination of cultural, commercial and geopolitical factors impinge on the organisation of space in Yiwu.

Reflecting the ethnolinguistic and national backgrounds of its international residents, the main international languages of trade and sociality in this part of Yiwu are Russian, various 'Turkic' languages spoken in Central Asia (especially Uyghur, Uzbek, Azeri and Turkmen) and Persian (both Farsi and Tajik). The neighbourhood is not monocultural in any sense, however. It is, rather, also attractive for Latin American traders and companies, especially those from Colombia and Bolivia, several of whom own restaurants, cafés, bars and shops in the neighbourhood. Indeed, for part of the time in which I conducted research in Yiwu, the international trader appointed by Yiwu's municipal authorities to oversee relations between the municipality, international traders and local residents and traders in the neighbourhood was a trader-restaurateur from Colombia.

Away from the Futian market in the direction of the city centre there are two buildings of special significance for the city's Afghans: the Tianhe and Fuyuan Towers. It is tempting to treat the networks that Afghan traders collectively form as representing the most salient 'institution' critical for establishing the 'rules of the game' in relation to which they conduct commerce. For anthropologists, however, identifying 'specific social contexts' – such as the conglomeration of trading offices located in the two towers – offers a less abstract and more precise mode of analysing the traders' activities. Around 100 Afghan companies run offices in these buildings. Most of the offices are large rooms containing desks decorated with flags of Afghanistan, China and the countries with which specific traders do business. In the offices of trading and transport companies that are involved in relatively large-scale commercial activity in Afghan terms (the transportation of between ten and thirty containers per month), it is common to find Chinese staff employed to assist the traders in their daily activities. Nothing distinguishes the buildings as being Afghan in any notable way, though the two buildings do house offices that the traders have converted into and identify as 'mosques'. These mosques – or, perhaps more accurately, prayer rooms – are mostly used by worshippers from Afghanistan based in the building to conduct their daily prayers. They are an important aspect of Afghan collective life in the city though not in a permanent or straightforward way – during the course of a visit to Yiwu that I made in 2019, for example, I was told that traders had been told to cease using the prayer rooms by the city authorities.

Afghan traders have collectively located their businesses in these buildings over the past decade. I was told that almost all traders from Afghanistan living and working in Yiwu were previously located in

a hotel at the other end of town. The hotel in which Afghan traders had based their offices was also the building out of which traders from Pakistan had worked. In particular, the hotel was the base of traders identifying as being from the country's two 'Afghan frontier' cities of Peshawar and Quetta. This arrangement reflected the commercial and geopolitical arrangement of the time. During the years of the Taliban government in Afghanistan (1995–2001), almost all Chinese commodities imported to the country reached their destinations by way of transit trade routes that passed through Pakistan's port city of Karachi and the road networks connecting it to Afghanistan. Many such goods were subsequently smuggled from Afghanistan back into Pakistan in order to avoid the latter's import tariffs. The history of such forms of cross-border trade was older than the Taliban government. Afghan trade networks active in Pakistan were invigorated in 1965 with the signing of the Afghanistan–Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (ATTA), which allowed Afghan merchants to transit goods through Pakistan duty-free. Traders then profited from the illegal re-export of goods to Pakistan through informal and illicit routes that had been brought to Afghanistan under the ATTA. These routes fed extensive market complexes in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), most notably the Barra market, located in Khyber Agency on the peripheries of Peshawar, the major and mostly Pashto-speaking city in the country's north-west.¹⁷ Such goods also reached numerous 'Sunday bazaars', especially in Karachi, in which itinerant Afghan traders purveyed their goods, especially to women belonging to the country's middle class.¹⁸

The end of the Taliban regime in 2001 and the introduction of new state structures in Afghanistan, as well as worsening relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, resulted in significant changes to the treaty agreement in 2010.¹⁹ As a result of these changes, the profits to be made from smuggling goods to Pakistan were no longer as attractive as they had been during the preceding decades. The resulting change in commercial dynamics led established Afghan traders to move their capital, families and businesses from Pakistan to Afghanistan; traders with access to larger pools of capital opened businesses in Dubai and China. At the same time as Pakistan declined in significance, the post-2001 period also saw the development of new trade routes connecting China to northern Afghanistan, mostly by way of the formerly Soviet Central Asian republics

¹⁷ See Marsden and Hopkins 2019.

¹⁸ I visited one such market with women from a well-to-do family of Karachi bankers in July 1996. The visit to the largely Afghan market was regarded as being an exotic day out in this and many other comparable families.

¹⁹ For more detail, see Ibañez-Tirado and Magnus Marsden 2020.

of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. As border and customs controls between China and Central Asia became easier for traders to navigate, these overland routes became increasingly cost-effective, especially for traders active in the important commercial city of Mazar-e Sharif, close to the Afghanistan–Uzbekistan border. An important consequence of the development of these overland routes through Central Asia was that Afghan traders in Yiwu who had previously worked closely with officials and businesses in Pakistan increasingly needed to form relationships with officials and traders in the post-Soviet states. Viewed from this perspective, the transfer of Afghan trading offices from a site of transborder 'Pak-Afghan' commerce to buildings that served predominantly as a base for traders from Afghanistan did not simply reflect the growing significance that markers of cultural, linguistic, ethnic and national distinctions played in shaping the interactions between traders from the two countries. Rather, the reorganisation of space in the city also needs to be understood in relation to geopolitical transformations affecting the regions of the world in which they work – the traders' ability to navigate such shifting geopolitical situations is reflected in the place-making practices upon which they embark in China.

Afghan traders based in these two buildings regard with a significant degree of ambiguity their experiences of clustering in Yiwu on the basis of shared national and ethnolinguistic identity. The nature of such ambiguities serves as an important reminder of the dangers of assuming that ethnic similarity or cultural affiliation are inevitably of prime importance to the collective identities and strategies of trading networks. Traders recognise the importance of establishing collective sites of trade for their businesses, but they also reflect in a critical manner on the consequences that doing so has for the scope and nature of their trading relationships, as well as their daily experiences of life in Yiwu. In January 2018, for instance, I came to know two traders from Afghanistan who had opened an office in a building close to but distinct from the Tianhe and Fuyuan Towers. Both were young men in their mid-twenties who had experience of trade and commerce in Afghanistan and Dubai before moving to Yiwu permanently over the past five years. Both had initially worked for established Afghan trading companies in Yiwu. Disappointed by the commission rates their previous Afghan employers paid them, they had decided to establish a business together. Importantly, while the young men were both holders of Afghan citizenship, they identified as belonging to distinct ethno-religious communities: one was a Sunni Muslim who identified as being an ethnolinguistically Turkmen from northern Afghanistan, the other was a Shi'i Muslim who identified as a Hazara from central Afghanistan. Many of the traders visiting their Yiwu offices from abroad

were not Afghan but merchants from the post-Soviet state of Turkmenistan – a group of customers with whom they could work as a result of the Turkmen partner being able to speak Turkmen fluently. In the case of these traders, then, the ability to form brokerage roles between Yiwu and markets across both the Eurasian and West Asian commercial corridors of connectivity, as much as their cultural identity as Afghans, shaped their lifestyles and daily practices in Yiwu.

The two young traders had also jointly mobilised their connections in order to attract Afghan customers, especially those from Saudi Arabia who were involved in the import of machine-made prayer mats and ready-made clothing from China to Jeddah in Saudi Arabia. They also shared the contacts they had made with officials in Afghanistan with one another. During a trip to Afghanistan made by the ethnolinguistically Turkmen trader from northern Afghanistan in February 2018, for example, he met one of Afghanistan's vice-presidents in a meeting that his Yiwu partner's personal networks had held to facilitate – the vice-president was a Shi'i Hazara. The man hoped that meeting this high-ranking official might facilitate his ability to penetrate the volatile yet lucrative world of official government purchasing contracts for the Afghan state – a world explored in greater detail in [Chapter 6](#). Meetings such as these underscore the extent to which traders active across Eurasia who are involved in relatively small-scale and traditional forms of commerce actively cultivate connections with high-level state officials in Afghanistan. Indeed, larger-scale traders regularly meet with such figures and do so with relative ease. The access of Yiwu's traders to persons of power and authority in Kabul questions the relevance of analysing such actors in terms of their being either below or above the state or draws attention rather to the significance of close relationships with state actors to their networks and activities.²⁰

In addition to the effect of geopolitical configurations of the forms of commerce in which they engaged, generational dynamics also affected these men's self-identities. The two young traders felt that they were different from their compatriots in Yiwu. Above all, they emphasised that they were keen to expand their business activities beyond ethnically defined networks; 'modernising' business activities, they told me, was something that more 'traditional' (*sunmati*) or 'typical' (*am*) Afghan traders were ill-equipped and unwilling to do. One evening in Yiwu, for example, the ethnically Turkmen trader invited me to a meal in an Afghan restaurant. He also invited one of his friends who was in his late twenties and from central Algeria; later on, another friend of a similar age to the

²⁰ [Sharan 2013](#).

Afghan Turkmen trader from Gabon joined us at the table for a post-dinner shisha. My host told me that he had befriended these young men and traders from different countries by himself while playing football and smoking shisha in Yiwu's many cafés. Over the course of the evening, the young men talked about the lack of ambition that characterised traditional modes of trading – traders from their home countries, the men remarked, were content with making a regular but small profit from their activities but unable to expand and grow their businesses. They discussed the possibility of enrolling on a high-tech course in commerce and business in Shanghai, roughly a two-hour train journey from Yiwu, in order to update their approach to doing business. During four hours of sociality, they unanimously agreed that they needed to break free from the constraints that the habits of elders from their communities placed upon them. For these two traders, then, the decision to leave the Tianhe and Fuyuan Towers and set up an office in a distinct and non-Afghan space signalled an attempt to innovate trading practices and break away from the outdated modes of doing business of their co-nationals.

The ambition to break off from established trading networks and their practices and institutions proved more complex than these young and ambitious traders might have first thought, however. During a visit to Yiwu six months later, I discovered that the two young men had since moved their office out of the building they had chosen and into the predominantly Afghan Fuyuan Tower. They invited me to their new office, and I sipped Afghan-style green tea as a stream of Afghans, most of whom directed or worked in trading offices in the same building, visited. On that day, three of the visitors were money exchange agents (*saraf*) who had recently moved their offices from Urumqi in western China to Yiwu because of increasing levels of intrusive surveillance by China's security agencies in Xinjiang. Two further visitors were merchants running trading companies in Afghanistan that served the country and Afghan networks active in the former Soviet republics. Both of the young traders appeared relaxed in the company of their compatriots; later in the evening, the two men took me out for a meal in a restaurant – we were joined by a third Afghan trader based in Yiwu, as well as two of my friends' visiting clients from Turkmenistan. During our chat over halal pizzas cooked by a Syrian chef, I asked the ethnically Turkmen Afghan trader why he had decided to return to the conglomeration of Afghans that was the Fuyuan Tower. 'There are benefits to being surrounded by Afghans', he replied, 'above all else we can know better what is going on, what prices are and who is dealing with what.' The types of social institutions established by the traders – in this case, a conglomeration of geographically proximate trading offices – not only contribute to the

durability of trading networks in complex geopolitical settings such as Yiwu; such social institutions and the contexts in which they are established are also themselves able to remain vital and relevant in the face of powerful pressures to transform established business practices.

A particularly important infrastructural intersection in Yiwu is the crossroad of Chouzhou Lu and Zongze Road – a fifteen-minute walk from the entrance to the Futian market. This intersection is home to a restaurant that has become a well-known geographical reference point in Yiwu: ‘Pamir’, an Afghan-owned eatery that opened its doors to traders in 2009. Traders from the country regard it as being a reputable establishment though not one with the same standards as pricier Turkish establishments farther down town that Arabs living in Yiwu often frequent; nevertheless, Pamir has successfully captured a significant portion of Yiwu’s culinary market. Afghans often remark that its owner (a Farsi-speaker originally from central Afghanistan) demonstrated his intelligence by establishing a business in this particular location. Sited at a ‘crossroads’ (*chahrahi*) on the route that traders take between the Futian market and the city centre, the restaurant captures the attention of visitors to the city, especially Muslims who are trapesing up and down between their hotels and the Futian market complex. Pamir also does a brisk trade in the delivery of packaged meals to Afghan traders based in the Tianhe and Fuyuan Towers – a service that allows them to avoid wasting time on busy days visiting a restaurant and to entertain guests in their offices and discuss trading issues in a private atmosphere free from intrusions. Pamir is also a landmark for Yiwu’s population more generally: the city’s taxi drivers invariably know the location of ‘Pamir’, meaning that the corner on which the restaurant stands is a popular meeting point for international traders unable to communicate in Chinese.

Fierce competition rages between eateries owned by Afghans in Yiwu. On the opposite side of the road to Pamir, an Afghan trader opened another restaurant to the public in 2016, yet despite the restaurant’s comparatively inexpensive buffet, it was unable to win a clientele that compared to that of Pamir; by 2019, the new restaurant had closed. A similar fate also befell two further eateries opened by Afghan traders based in the same part of the city. As a result, Pamir’s only remaining competitor is ‘Maiwand Restaurant’, a restaurant located a few minutes’ walk down the street. This eatery is popular with some Afghans but mostly with Arabs and Pakistanis. Known for its cheap and filling buffet, it serves dishes cooked by a Pakistani chef, raising serious questions, in the minds of the city’s Afghans, about its authenticity. Importantly, the competition between the two restaurants also reflects regional and ethnic distinctions and division among Yiwu’s Afghan community. If the owner

of Pamir is a Farsi-speaker from central Afghanistan, the proprietors of Maiwand are both Pashto-speakers from the eastern city of Jalalabad. Afghans in Yiwu mostly prefer to eat their national cuisine in Pamir, yet both of the eateries play an important role as social institutions of significance for commerce and community life more generally: Pamir is a site of sociality and information-sharing among Farsi-speakers from northern and central Afghanistan, whereas traders know Maiwand for nightly discussions involving Pashto-speakers, especially from eastern Afghanistan. [Chapter 7](#) analyses the role that restaurants play as institutions that facilitate the 'pooling' and 'sharing' of knowledge about commerce and reputation, as well as the significance of food to the building of shared sensibilities within trading networks. For now, however, it is important to emphasise that establishments such as Pamir and Maiwand rise, fall and not infrequently fail; their presence in any trading node is not a taken-for-granted fact – rather, traders must demonstrate their skills in institution-building in a wide variety of ways: the outfits they open need to be financially sustainable, and they must also build a regular clientele that endures and demonstrates loyalty over an extended period.

A brief walk farther down the street from Pamir, and the city's environment changes once again. The central office of the Bank of China (noticeable for the throngs of Hui foreign currency dealers standing outside) marks the first signs of the influence of 'the Middle East' on Yiwu's urban space. An Egyptian restaurant and a joint Turkish–Syrian venture are popular for food and shisha among traders from the Middle East. Afghanistan's Central Asian émigrés also often organise their *iftar* feasts in the Turkish restaurant located in this part of town, saying they have come to appreciate Turkish food during their many visits to Istanbul. Choosing such an establishment in which to hold their collective events also distinguishes them from other 'Afghans' living in the city, such as the Farsi- and Pashto-speakers discussed earlier. The decision to hold collective events in Turkish rather than Afghan institutions also reveals the extent to which Turkic-speaking Afghan traders in the city emphasise their distinct historical, ethnolinguistic and cultural backgrounds. As we saw in [Chapter 3](#), traders working in the West Asian corridor of connectivity are aware of and responsive to geopolitical projects that shape their activities.

There are other Middle Eastern establishments – a Syrian-owned supermarket and a Syrian butcher (closed in 2017), as well as another Turkish restaurant – in this part of the city, not to mention several 'nightclubs', including a bar-restaurant named 'Moscow', which was run by an Azeri until 2018. This and several other such establishments are known by traders to be frequented by 'party girls', mostly women from

Russia and Ukraine but also the Central Asian states, who visit China on short-term visas arranged by local 'hosts' and are paid by nightclubs and similar establishments with the aim of attracting male customers and encouraging the consumption of alcohol bought on the premises. Immature traders are said to frit away money in such establishments with unthinking abandon – something widely regarded as a momentary and therefore condonable break from the pressures of life in Afghanistan but also from the repetitive and boring nature of daily life in Yiwu. A practice regarded as deeply morally circumspect by Afghans in Yiwu, however, is that of co-residing in an apartment with 'party girls'. In order to do so, men not only spend money on 'party girls' at such establishments but also pay managers and the girls' hosts to 'release' a woman from her working 'contract'; they must also cover her costs in Yiwu and flights to and from her home country. Behaving in such a way damages a trader's reputation as a moral family man; perhaps more significantly, from the traders' perspective, it also raises questions about a man's ability to act prudently – a key requirement of success in trade.²¹

The street scene is lively in this part of town, especially at night, making it a favoured place among international traders to pass time in the evenings. Several cafés owned by Egyptians are busy during the day and the night, mostly with traders from Algeria, Mauritania and Morocco. Daily rhythms of different parts of the city reflect the specific ways in which different trading networks conduct commerce. Traders from the Maghreb tend to socialise and conduct commerce from the coffee shops in this part of the city all day long – here, as in North Africa, cafés and coffee are suitable mediums over which traders discuss business and strike deals.²² By contrast, for Afghan traders to be seen socialising in public spaces during the day signals that they are either lazy (*tambal*), spendthrift (*fuzul kharch*) or without work (*bekar*) – the latter being a state that itself raises questions about skills in the field of commerce. For Yiwu's Afghans, public forms of socialising almost invariably take place in the late evening; business deals and negotiations largely involve public displays of hospitality and generosity, mostly enacted in one or other of the city's Afghan restaurants.

Yiwu's temporal dynamics are not only affected by night and day; the city's shifting rhythms also reflect the backgrounds of the international traders based there. Interactions between Yiwu and its various trading networks are on especially vivid display during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, for example. Restaurants run by Muslims in Yiwu close during the day in Ramadan; the restaurants run by Coptic Christians are some of the few places in which international food is available during daylight

²¹ Marsden 2016: 173. ²² Main 2011.

hours. More generally, multiple calendars and festivals affect Yiwu's social and economic vibrancy. Each year, traders based in the city await visitors in the months leading up to the two Muslim Eids and Christmas, times of the year when the sale of particular 'lines' of goods – such as Christmas trees, decorations, toys and houseware – is especially lively. By contrast, they expect the city to be quiet in the two weeks on either side of these festivals because buyers are busy with family life in their home countries. Similarly, before the revival of US sanctions, the days following the celebration of the Persian New Year saw an influx of visitors from Iran.

The distinctively 'Arab' nature of this part of Yiwu is changing, however – front of shop appearances are not always what they seem. In a side alley, a string of shisha cafés are nestled closely to one another. Bearing names such as 'Umm Kulthum' (a popular Egyptian singer), it is easy to assume that these are established, run and owned by Arabs. Several, however, are not in fact Arab- but rather Afghan-owned, and the clientele of these establishments is mixed. As in the case of restaurants, so too is competition between Afghan establishments a pronounced and visible feature of Yiwu's shisha-café culture. Two Afghan-owned shisha cafés in this part of the city engaged in a pricing war that was the focus of much conversation in the summer of 2018. Each establishment reduced the price of its products – especially shisha – in order to attract customers from the other. The same two café owners also competed with one another in their attempts to employ beautiful Chinese Muslim women to work for them in their cafés; they both regarded having an attractive yet veiled Chinese woman serving customers as a powerful and almost irresistible draw for their clientele. Purportedly, the owners also encouraged specific employees to abandon one venture for another through competitive wage offers.²³ Like restaurants, Afghans hailing from the same parts of Afghanistan as their owners favoured these two establishments. Thus, traders largely from south-east Afghanistan frequented one establishment, while the other café attracted clientele from the country's north-west. Importantly, however, traders from the north-west who spent time in the café identified with a range of ethnolinguistic identities, including speakers of Uzbek, Turkmen, Pashto and Farsi. Rather than illustrating the importance of regional in addition to ethnolinguistic identity for Yiwu's Afghans, such social dynamics reveal intersections between the

²³ Such tensions also affected my fieldwork practices: if I was seen in one or other of the establishments, I would be asked by their owners to provide details concerning the prices of their competitor, as well as information on the café's clientele and waiting staff. I was, after all, 'an agent', like everyone else in Yiwu.

pragmatics of trade and the place-making practices of traders in Yiwu: traders from the same region of Afghanistan share markets, routes and ports of entry to Afghanistan. If ethnicity, language and region shape the social groupings of Afghans in Yiwu, then their patterns of sociality also reflect the pragmatic imperatives of trade and the need to secure access to the most relevant forms of knowledge and information.

The Bingwan night market is a context in which Chinese shopkeepers and foreign visitors meet on a daily basis for shopping, strolling and relaxing in the evenings. The area around the night market was home to numerous Uyghur-run restaurants, mini-markets and stalls selling barbecued meat, as well as vendors of Chinese street food, the smell of which is a constant source of complaint from our Afghan informants. In the run-up to the G20 meeting held in Zhejiang in 2016, Yiwu's authorities either closed or relocated many of the stores and street-food vendors. Such actions were taken on the pretext either of Yiwu's participation in a provincial beautiful city competition or for broadly defined 'reasons of security'. Many traders, however, suggested that they signalled growing hostility from the city's authorities to the presence of Muslims from Xinjiang province in the city, a point of view, they argued, that was corroborated by the city's police force installing surveillance cameras directly in front of all apartment buildings in which Xinjiang-domiciled Chinese citizens were living. All the traders with whom I interacted reflected on the way in which their activities were also captured using such technology, often remarking to one another how many cameras took pictures of visitors to Yiwu's night market. Perhaps because of an almost perpetual police presence, this part of the city was less widely frequented by international traders in 2019 than had been the case during fieldwork in 2013 and 2016.

Between the night market and the area officially called Bingwan (but popularly known as Maedha after a famous Yemeni-owned restaurant), there are dozens of establishments owned by Arabs and Kurds from Syria, Iraq and Yemen – the latter establishments also being popular among visiting traders from Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. In this part of the city, there are also Chinese Hui-owned restaurants catering specifically to the tastes of customers from the Middle East and Africa.

A short taxi ride from this part of Yiwu is the Wu Ai area, home to numerous Arab-owned trading companies, as well as restaurants from the Middle East, including a Yemeni establishment. Wu Ai is one of several neighbourhoods in which foreign traders with families prefer to live. A handful of traders have also opened businesses in the area, including a restaurant run by an Afghan trader and his Chinese wife that serves Chinese hot-pot dishes prepared in the Sichuan style. Afghans who own

trade and transport offices in the city take visiting Afghan clients to this restaurant in the evenings when they wish to introduce them to Chinese cuisine and culture – 'better to give our money to a compatriot than to a Chinese', remarked one trader from northern Afghanistan hosting four visiting Afghan traders based in Ukraine at his friends' hot-pot restaurant. In the context of rising rents and taxes in Yiwu, more and more international traders – including those who identify as Afghan – are moving from the city to properties in the county-level city of Dongyang, which lies about a thirty-minute drive away. Dongyang has a different taxation policy for foreign traders, while its cheaper rents mean that it is especially popular for traders with families. For traders who require easy access to the Futian market complex, moving to the city is practically impossible, yet for those who have largely shifted their commercial activities from the export to import sector – of sunflower oil from Ukraine, for instance – life in Dongyang is increasingly regarded as better than in Yiwu.

Different parts of Yiwu have come to be associated with the activities of particular trading networks. In addition to the Afghan and Middle Eastern social spaces discussed earlier, there is a street with a number of Indian and Nepali restaurants, hotels and trading companies.²⁴ Elsewhere in the city – not far from the twin Afghan trading towers – was an area in which several Iranian companies and eateries were located, but the re-imposition of US sanctions on Iran in 2018 resulted in several such offices and eateries closing. It is nevertheless limiting to regard the city's landscape solely through an ethnolinguistic or national lens: Yiwu's spatial dynamics are shifting and dynamic and arise from the place-making practices of merchants themselves, practices that are conducted in a broader context in which the imprint of past and present Eurasian geopolitical dynamics is evident.

Schools, Mosques and Nightlife: Intercultural Mixing in Yiwu

Mixed and intercultural aspects of sociality are rendered more visible when exploring Yiwu from the perspective not of place-making practices and the general organisation of space but, instead, in relation to the ways in which traders inhabit the city. Importantly, however, many traders are ambiguous about sites in which such forms of mixing regularly take place.

An area of daily life in which the trajectories of traders from different cultural backgrounds intersect is in the field of education. Foreigners – including Indians, Egyptians and Iraqis – have opened several foreign

²⁴ On Indian traders in Yiwu, see [Cheuk 2016](#). See [Osella forthcoming](#).

schools in Yiwu that seek to attract the children of foreign traders living in the city. Teachers from Muslim backgrounds, including foreigners and Chinese Han who have converted to Islam, as well as Uyghur and Hui Muslims, staff a further 'Muslim' school in the city. In addition to teaching children, the school's owner has also popularised electronic books that help Muslims seeking to memorise the Qur'an. Yiwu is indeed home to growing communities of people of Muslim backgrounds from elsewhere in China, especially Hui Chinese-speaking Muslims who migrate to the city from the provinces of Yunnan, Ningxia and Gansu, and Uyghurs from various locales across Xinjiang.²⁵ Yiwu's Muslims – foreigners and Chinese citizens – gather on Fridays at the city's mosque (a former silk factory), which was inaugurated in 2012 thanks to donations from local and foreign Muslims, including one in the form of several tonnes of Iranian marble. Around 7,000 people attend the mosque each week, with the weekly congregational Friday prayers forming a centre point of the traders' collective lives.²⁶ In addition to this busy mosque, Yiwu also hosts several officially registered and non-registered places of worship; many of the Muslim restaurants mentioned earlier also house prayer rooms for Muslims. There is also a Hindu temple inside the Futian market, several Catholic churches with services in Spanish, English, Korean and Chinese, as well as a Protestant and a Coptic church – the latter being a site of worship for Egyptian, Syrian and Sudanese Christian merchants, as well as converted Chinese Han.

Religious institutions and practices also bring together traders from different backgrounds, though the field of religious practice is one about which the traders from Afghanistan with whom I am most acquainted were especially circumspect. As with traders from other regional backgrounds in Yiwu who identify as Muslims, Afghans attend the 'big mosque' on Fridays and regularly post pictures of themselves doing so on the Chinese social media app WeChat – relatively infrequently, such photographs depict Afghan traders standing side-by-side with Muslims from other parts of the world. While such photographs point towards a shared sense of participation within a global Islamic *umma* (brotherhood), many Afghans are keen to underscore the differences between their ways of being Muslim and those of other Muslims living in the city. Such differences are often interpreted as arising not from culture but from geopolitics. For Afghans, the role played by Arabs in Afghanistan's Cold War-era conflict is an especially contentious source of discussion and one that is raised by interactions between Arabs and Afghans in settings such

²⁵ On Hui Islam and its manifestations in Yiwu, see [Erie 2016](#).

²⁶ [Bodomo and Ma 2010](#).

as mosques. A trader from eastern Afghanistan, whom I introduced in [Chapter 1](#) in the context of his insistence that I was a foreign agent, often told me about his interactions with Arab Muslims in the Yiwu mosque. One evening as we sat and chatted in his shisha café, he told me that a few months previously he had been approached by two Arabs in the Friday mosque, which he had visited to perform Friday prayers in congregation (*jama'at*). On discovering that he was Afghan, the Arab men had told him that they were his 'brothers': they had, they told him, fought alongside the Afghan mujahidin in the 'war of resistance' against the Soviet Union. The trader – who had himself served in the 1980s and early 1990s as an official in Afghanistan's pro-Soviet regime – told me that he had listened in silence to what the two Arab men had to say before bidding farewell. 'Why', he asked me, 'do the Chinese authorities not exercise more care about the type of Muslims they permit to visit their country? What a mistake they are making.' As I documented in [Chapter 2](#), it is commonplace for traders based in former Soviet settings to express hostility towards individuals and groups they regard as being the carriers of Saudi-supported forms of Salafi or ultra-literalist expressions of global Islam. In the context of China, too, the past experiences of traders from Afghanistan shapes the ideas they hold and advocate about the role states should play in the regulation of religious life and identities.

Relatively few of the Afghan traders in the city are especially public or ostentatious in the ways in which they display their religious identities. Participation in transnational – or 'global' – forms of Muslim identity are conspicuously rare.²⁷ Traders are largely in agreement, indeed, that not being ostentatious about their religious commitments is an important strategy to adopt while living in Yiwu. Traders often remark that in China the local police are less concerned about Muslim foreigners if they drink and attend nightclubs than if they are pious and God-fearing. Indeed, a trader in his late thirties told me that having recently applied for a new Chinese visa, the police had asked him if he went to nightclubs or drank alcohol; when he replied that he did not, he said, they even asked him about the nature of his relationships with the Taliban. According to the trader, the police had investigated his place of birth in Afghanistan and discovered that it was currently under Taliban influence; they were concerned that he might sympathise with the movement. This trader told me that he was honest with officials about his religiosity, informing them that he did not drink or attend nightclubs. Other traders, however, openly discussed with me and among themselves the strategic value of *not* being

²⁷ For an excellent overview and critique of the use of the category 'global Islam' in the humanities and social sciences, see [Green 2020](#).

a strictly observant Muslim while resident in Yiwu, occasionally remarking, ‘the more you drink and waste money [*paisa-ra gum mekoni*] on luxury [*ayashi*] in Yiwu, the better you are regarded by the authorities’. In Yiwu, then, as in the Eurasian corridor of connectivity more generally, an important aspect of the conduct of navigational agency is the ability to steer between competing geopolitical projects by establishing a distance from visible and distinct forms of religiosity, most especially those often referred to as ‘global Salafism’.

Traders in Yiwu do not, however, lead secular lives in which religion is of little or no public importance. One way in which Yiwu-based traders publicly display their religious commitments is by undertaking the hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. In Afghanistan, with the exception of young men travelling to Mecca because they need to accompany an elderly parent, most men and women do not carry out the ritual until later in life. In Yiwu, however, most Afghans living in the city who are aged in their thirties and above and run relatively successful offices have performed the hajj pilgrimage on multiple occasions. As in other Muslim communities, performing the hajj is regarded by Yiwu’s Afghans as a demonstration of wealth and success, and in terms of its status as an ethical commitment to the Islamic notion that worldly success is based not just on a trader’s accounts with his customers and partners but also his moral accounts with God.²⁸ But traders are also careful to ensure they register their commitment to this ethical principle in a manner that does not compromise their ability to enact navigational agency in China and elsewhere. One evening while we were sitting in one of the cafés introduced earlier in the chapter, for example, a group of traders from Afghanistan playing cards with one another asked a man in the group how undertaking the hajji had changed his life. ‘This much has changed’, he remarked to the gathered men, grinning, ‘before I used to drink whisky out of a bottle, now I take it from a tea pot.’ Traders, then, must walk a narrow path between observing and maintaining Islamic ritual practices, yet not in a manner that marks them out as being inflexible to their compatriots or potentially dangerous to officials of the states in which they work. The contradictions of such attempts to steer a course between religious commitment and flexibility are not lost on traders active in the network. Traders visiting Yiwu on purchasing trips from Eurasia are often sceptical about Yiwu-based traders’ motivations for going on the hajj. A trader in his mid-fifties living in Odessa remarked to me, ‘these hajjis of thirty years old aren’t interested in Islam at all, they just want to show to others how successful they are: it’s all just a business’. Religion plays an important yet fluid and

²⁸ Anderson 2011 and Henig 2019.

contested role in the identities and activities of traders making up Afghan networks, especially those operating in the Eurasian corridor, and this is recognised by the traders themselves who openly reflect upon this aspect of their identities and the worlds they inhabit.

To a significant degree, the relationships of Afghans in Yiwu to the city's authorities are not coloured by tensions over their religious identities or activities. Importantly, this reflects the strategic ways in which Afghans in the city carry out their religious activities and obligations. A time of the year during which tensions arise between traders from Afghanistan willing to organise religious events and the local authorities who are suspicious of such activities is during the holy month of Ramadan. In June 2016, for example, the local authorities refused to allow restaurants to set aside rooms as venues for prayer gatherings, Quranic recitations and *iftar* feasts during Ramadan. At the time, security concerns arising from the upcoming G20 meeting in nearby Hangzhou were believed to be the source of this change in policy. By 2019, official hostility towards the public enactment of religiosity in the city arose from a more general suspicion of Islam by the Chinese state. The questioning of Afghans about their relationships with the Taliban as well as the closure of mosques in the buildings in which they work illustrated this transformation.

A City of Borderlands?

A close look at Yiwu's spatial organisation brings to light the complex distribution of distinct ethno-religious networks in the city; these are not simply distributed in space in relation to cultural and ethnic boundaries but also in a manner that reflects their interleaving with transregional identities and geographical scales, as well as geopolitical dynamics, past and present.

At first glance, Yiwu's spatial organisation reveals above all else the importance of the nation state and the ethnolinguistically defined region as being the salient markers of the traders' identities. As discussed in the preceding pages, particular city districts become shaped as distinctively 'post-Soviet', 'Indian', 'Arab' or 'Afghan' as a result of the day-to-day activities – place-making practices – of foreign traders. Importantly, however, if Yiwu appears at first sight to be organised in relationship to ethnicity or nationality, then the spaces delimited above regularly correspond to transregional borderlands rather than to nation states.²⁹ This underscores the limitations of analysing the trading networks active in Yiwu, including

²⁹ Marsden and Hopkins 2012.

most especially the Afghan ones explored in this book, as simply ‘trans-national’, and the need, instead, to develop a lens that brings attention to the significance of transregional scales, geopolitical contexts, multi-vectoral structures and circulatory (as opposed to unidirectional) mobility. Russian-speaking Afghans frequently gather in a Tajik restaurant to talk to their Central Asian peers, for example. Similarly, the ‘Arab area’ of the city comprises a complex mixture of traders who identify not only with majority Arab-speaking countries but with settings across East Africa’s Indian Ocean seaboard. The preponderance of social institutions catering to Muslims from such varying but distinctly ‘borderland’ spaces reflects the role that transregional contexts that are intensely affected by the presence of competing geopolitical projects are playing in contemporary patterns of ‘informal’ inter-Asian trade. Scholarship has long recognised the role played by geographical borderlands and the populations who inhabit them in long-distance trade and commerce.³⁰ The case of Yiwu also illuminates the ways in which commercial networks arising out of such borderlands have adapted successfully to and intermeshed themselves with processes of economic globalisation by rooting themselves within emergent commercial and urban spaces.

In addition to engaging in place-making practices that took place against the backdrop of transregional rather than narrowly national contexts, the emotional lives of Afghan traders in Yiwu are also not limited by the boundaries of the community with which they identify in any simple sense. Several of the Afghan traders with whom I spent time, for example, confessed to me that they preferred spending their leisure time (*waqt-e faragha*) in parts of the city that were not distinctively ‘Afghan’. Traders of an Afghan background visiting Yiwu from the former Soviet Union often remarked that their ‘perspectives’ were fundamentally different from those of their countrymen who continued to live in Afghanistan. As a result, they remarked, they preferred to spend their time in parts of the city that were Russian or ‘international’ instead of the cafés and restaurants run by their compatriots: it was only by keeping a low profile among their compatriots that they could enjoy a drink in a street-side café owned by an African and soak up Yiwu’s distinctive atmosphere. Indeed, traders living in formerly Soviet countries often remarked, ‘if only Kabul was like Yiwu!’ A group of traders in their early thirties who had lived in China for over a decade, and with whom I regularly spent long evenings in Yiwu’s shisha cafés, told me that they preferred to frequent establishments owned and attended by Arabs and Iranians as opposed to those preferred by Yiwu’s Afghans. Further traders – often those based permanently in Yiwu – remarked to

³⁰ See, for example, [Giersch 2010](#) and [McDougall 2012](#).

me that they were able to talk more openly to one another about their business activities in parts of the city less widely frequented by Afghans and so shunned areas in which Afghans congregated for more 'Chinese' settings. The range of choices that traders from Afghanistan make about where to pass their free time indicates a powerful desire to experience and gain familiarity with spaces other than those simply designated as Afghan. Such desires are an important part of the traders' modes of experiencing and inhabiting Yiwu.

Traders in Yiwu take active steps to establish relationships with city-dwellers of backgrounds different from their own. For many of the traders, Saturday night is the evening of the week on which it is normal to leave the office and relax and spend time with friends. Afghan traders often do so by sitting and chatting in one of the cafés frequently visited by their compatriots. Yet traders also often elect to visit one of the several nightclubs in the city frequented by foreign traders. Cultivating a distinctively 'Latin' atmosphere by playing salsa music and serving cocktails made from tequila, one of these venues was the preferred site of relaxation for Afghan traders. The nightclub attracted numerous women who work and live in Yiwu as traders, commodity designers and managers of companies, and who come to the city from countries including Ethiopia, Italy, Russia, Brazil, Bolivia and Mexico. On several Saturday evenings, I visited the nightclub together with some Afghan traders. One evening, I was invited by a group of traders from north-east Afghanistan. My hosts, whom I had come to know in Yiwu but also during the course of visits to Afghanistan, told me that they hoped I would be able to use my (limited) knowledge of Spanish to introduce them to Colombian women who often gathered at the nightclub. The traders included a man in his mid-forties who had recently returned from the pilgrimage to Mecca and was referred to respectfully by his friends as 'hajji'. But the evening did not progress according to the traders' expectations: the men anticipated being able to find a table around which they could sit and survey the dance floor, but because the club was busy, they had no other option than to stand by the bar – they did so awkwardly for a few minutes before deciding that there was no point in spending more time in the club. Ruefully remarking to me that at least I could pass the evening with a beer, they bid me farewell, leaving me in the company of a small group of traders from Kabul, one of whom was a regular at the club along with his Chinese girlfriend.

Yiwu: A Dominant Node in a Multinodal Network?

Having documented Yiwu's spatial dynamics, the place-making practices of the traders and the ways in which they establish relationships within

and beyond their communities in the city, I now ask what specific role Yiwu plays in the activities of Afghan inter-Asian commercial networks. Is Yiwu best characterised as being a node of trade and infrastructure, or does it play a role in the sociological and cultural reproduction of the forms of inter-Asian networks explored across the pages of this book? In what ways do traders understand and evaluate Yiwu's status as a node of significance to their commercial networks, and what is the nature of the traders' relationship with the city and its authorities, as well as the Chinese state more generally?

Trade and Infrastructure

Yiwu holds greater significance for Afghan trading networks than other nodes in which traders from Afghanistan conglomerate and operate in many parts of the world. A significant proportion of the approximately 100,000 Afghan traders working across the former Soviet Union directly purchase the products in which they deal in Yiwu or procure these from merchants (both Afghan and of other nationalities) who do. Afghans based in various settings across Islamic West Asia also travel to Yiwu to purchase commodities and run trading and transport companies based in the city. Additionally, Afghans active in the global commodity trade in many other settings – including Western Europe, Australia and North America – depend on Yiwu to procure the commodities from which they make a living.

The importance of Yiwu to Afghan and other comparable trading networks has arisen as a result of policies introduced at the municipal and national levels in China. As we have seen, Yiwu's municipal authorities implemented policies from the 1990s onwards with the specific aim of attracting international traders, with particularly important policies including the provision of a two-year business visa/work permit and a simplified taxation system. Until the introduction of stricter regulation by the Chinese authorities from 2016 onwards, *hawala* currency dealers reported to me that they were able to transfer cash from Afghanistan to Yiwu with ease.³¹ Such capital – often identified by the merchants themselves as 'black money' (*pul-e siah*) – 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.

In discussions among themselves, Afghan traders in Yiwu often reflect on the city's significance for their networks, directly addressing the extent to

³¹ De Goede 2003 and Monsutti 2004.

which it is now a dominant node for their collective commercial activities. There is widespread if not unanimous acknowledgement that Yiwu is important for Afghan business activities worldwide. Afghan trading networks – especially those active in the Eurasian corridor – emphasise the importance of maintaining visits across several settings and in multiple nodes, which allows them to offset risk and capitalise from emerging opportunities across several contexts. It is not surprising, then, that there is a degree of concern among traders about the apparently unassailable importance of Yiwu to their activities. Afghan traders have sought to expand their activities beyond Yiwu by establishing offices elsewhere in China, notably in Keqiao and Dongyang but also farther afield in Guangzhou, and travelling to India, Malaysia and Indonesia to purchase products.

Sociological Reproduction

There is clear recognition, then, among the traders of Yiwu's growing influence on their commercial activities in trading infrastructure terms. At the same time, a pressing concern for the traders is the limited relevance of Yiwu for the sociological reproduction of their networks. Indeed, the traders often say that Yiwu's influence as a site of sociological reproduction is likely to decline yet further in the immediate future. Afghan and other foreign traders based in Yiwu are aware of the extent to which policy developments in China mean that Yiwu's significance is inherently transitory for them. If policies developed by the city's municipal authorities have enhanced Yiwu's significance for the global trade in small commodities, then nationwide policies that impinge on the lives of foreign traders in the city act as a barrier to it becoming a node of long-term social significance in a manner comparable with other cities important for Afghan trading networks including Moscow and Odessa, Jeddah and Istanbul. Above all, Chinese law prevents the traders from securing citizenship or access to long-term residency documents: even traders with substantial business interests must reapply for their visas and residency documents at least every two years and undergo repeated taxation audits and medical checks. In 2019, Yiwu's authorities announced that traders would henceforth be able to apply for a five-year visa and that such visas would be granted to traders who had contributed most – in financial terms – to the city. Afghan traders with whom I spoke in 2019, however, were sceptical about the implications of this policy for their lives and experiences in Yiwu: in reality, they argued, few such visas were likely to be issued, and in China's 'communist system' those that were would be issued on the basis of individual traders 'helping' China, not as a result of their rights and entitlements according to the law.

Traders also regularly remark on the degree to which being born in Afghanistan, let alone carrying the country's passport, places them at a disadvantage in relation to other international trading communities. A trader in Odessa, for instance, told me that he had travelled on his Ukrainian passport to Hong Kong with the aim of opening an official US dollar bank account in the city – a strategy many international traders use to circumvent regulation in China on foreign currency reserves.³² Having approached several banks for an account in Hong Kong, however, he told me that each of the banks refused his application without giving an adequate reason. A bank manager eventually told him that it was because his passport named Afghanistan as his place of birth, causing the country's banking systems to flag him up as a risky customer – under no circumstances, she told him, would he be able to open a bank account in the city. Afghan mobile traders, then, are affected by hierarchies embedded within the international citizenship regime, hierarchies that often persist regardless of the passports they hold.

Immigration policy in China in general and in Yiwu specifically reduces the city's scope as a centre of sociological significance for Afghans. Indeed, particular policies narrow further the likelihood of the city becoming a site of Afghan family life and activity. Traders aged sixty-five years and above are unable to secure access to Chinese work visas and residency permits; during the course of my visits to Yiwu, several older traders left the city because of their inability to secure resident permits. Traders living with their families in Yiwu face considerable legal and financial implications in sending their children to school: the children of foreign traders are unable to gain admission to Chinese government schools, while China's residency (*hukou*) system means that even children born to Chinese mothers in Yiwu cannot attend the city's state schools.³³ In the context of such difficulties, foreign traders who live with their families in the city must either seek to mobilise connections with the local authorities in order to reach arrangements that enable their children to study in government schools or pay the substantial fees charged by private schools operated by foreigners. The difficulties of arranging formal education for children in Yiwu dissuades many traders from bringing their families to live with them in the city. In many instances, wives and children brought to live in Yiwu leave China after short stays because they have found it impossible to admit their children to school. The small and fluctuating number of families in Yiwu makes it harder for families to build long-term relationships with one another in the city, especially in comparison with other commercial nodes in which Afghans live and

³² I thank Ka-Kin Cheuk for this detail. ³³ Sha 2019a and Sha 2019b.

work. As a result, women's experiences of the city are widely said by their husbands to be characterised by feelings of loneliness and isolation. While such concerns about education and family life are especially visible among individuals and families with access to limited resources and capital, they are an important aspect of the experiences of even the most well-established merchants based in the city.

In this context, traders have decided to move not only their families but also their businesses and capital out of Yiwu. Rising costs, limited access to long-term visas and residency and the difficulty of educating children are factors that have led several of Yiwu's most successful Afghan traders to relocate their families and businesses to settings they regard as more favourable sites for conducting commerce and everyday life. The most popular destination among traders in Yiwu is Istanbul. A handful of Yiwu traders have established new businesses in Turkey; many more have relocated their families to Istanbul but continue to live and do business in Yiwu. Traders then deploy mobility strategically in order to benefit from commercial infrastructures (capital and commercial activities) advanced by different geopolitical actors, and to avail themselves of policies and provisions that facilitate the network's sociological reproduction, especially in terms of family life, residency and education. Most remark, however, that in the current context no city can compete with Yiwu in terms of availability of products and access to a functioning trading infrastructure.

Traders, of course, experience and are able to respond to the broader legal environments in which they live in a manner that reflects their specific circumstances. I now present the examples of individual traders who are situated at very different positions in Afghan trading hierarchies in Yiwu; I do so in order to illustrate the effects of the impermanent nature of Yiwu's status as a node of sociological reproduction on the community's dynamics in the city.

Ahmad is a Farsi-speaker from Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan. He has been living in Yiwu for the past five years after a St Petersburg-based Afghan trader who opened a restaurant in Yiwu hired him in the spring of 2013. The restaurant in which he worked as a cook, however, operated only until 2016, at which point its owner sold the establishment to an ethnically Kurdish merchant from Iran. As the restaurant is located near an affordable hotel favoured by Afghans visiting Yiwu, a significant proportion of the eatery's clientele were Afghan; being an Iranian-run establishment, it was also especially popular among Afghans who live and work in Iran. With such commercial considerations in mind, rather than cancelling Ahmad's visa for Yiwu, the new owners kept him on the restaurant staff so that he could continue to cook popular Afghan dishes. In 2018,

Ahmad also decided to bring his wife and two children to Yiwu – in the months preceding their joining him in China, the security situation in his home city in Afghanistan had deteriorated dramatically, largely due to a series of attacks carried out by ISIS-Khorasan. In the wake of these attacks – at least one of which targeted schools in the city – the city's authorities had closed Jalalabad's schools. By bringing his family to Yiwu, Ahmad hoped that his children would be able to continue their education in China while schools remained closed in his home city. In the late summer of 2018, however, he told me that it had been impossible to secure admission for his children in a government school in Yiwu. Furthermore, his salary – around \$500 per month – was insufficient to cover the costs of their attending a school in Yiwu. 'I am', he remarked, 'lost. The schools are closed in Jalalabad and I can't educate my children here either. What will become of them? I have no idea.'

Individuals such as Ahmad who are employed by businesses that service foreign traders visiting Yiwu find it especially hard to contend with the city's regulations relating to residency, visas and schooling, yet the legal environment of the city also affects wealthier and more established traders as well. Hajji Kabir is widely known among Afghans in Yiwu as being one of the city's most successful Afghan merchants whose business interests are especially concentrated in Afghanistan and the former Soviet republics. Hajji Kabir has been visiting the city since the late 1990s; he settled there permanently – having registered a trade and transport company – in 2000. For most of the time in which he has lived in Yiwu, Hajji Kabir has lived with his business partners and employees, visiting his family in the northern Afghan city of Mazar-e Sharif regularly over the course of each year. In 2017, however, Hajji Kabir agreed to bring his wife and children to live in the city with him. One evening in a shisha café regularly frequented by Afghan merchants from provinces across the north of the country, he told a group of men gathered for a night of convivial chat and conversation how his wife's stay in the city had been entirely unsatisfactory. On arriving in the city, he had told her that he would be busy day and night in his office and would not be available to take her on shopping trips or visits around different parts of the city. Rather, the flat that he had rented would be where she stayed for the duration of her time in Yiwu. He then went on to tell the gathered men that he had asked his wife after her year-long visa had expired if she would like him to extend the visa or if she would prefer to return to their home in Afghanistan – without hesitating, he remarked, she chose to return.

At first sight, it is easy to assume that Hajji Kabir's attitude towards his wife's stay in the city is a reflection of rigid Afghan conventions of gender segregation, conventions the traders strive to maintain outside as much as

within the country. As we saw earlier in the chapter, Afghans in Yiwu often contrast their modes of being Muslim with those of Muslims from elsewhere, often emphasising the flexible nature of their modes of being Muslim. In terms of family life, however, traders in the city tend to argue that they maintain the respectability of their wives and women family members by maintaining conventions of gender segregation in a manner that Muslims from other countries in the city do not. It is common, for instance, to hear Afghan men remark that they are appalled to see Iranian men take their wives to nightclubs – an immoral type of behaviour that no self-respecting Afghan in the city would ever embark upon. At the same time, however, in other commercial nodes in which Afghans work, if women rarely if ever work alongside men in markets, then families do demonstrate flexibility in terms of how they follow conventions of gender segregation (*pardah*) in particular circumstances. The daughters of traders are often educated to university level, and mixed-gender celebrations outside of the home are a normal feature of daily life. The dynamics of Yiwu itself – rather than the inherently 'traditional' or 'conservative' attitudes of the Afghan traders who are based there – shape and inform the traders' thinking about the significance of gender segregation to family life in the city. For many of the traders, Yiwu is neither a suitable place for family life nor a context in which male Afghan traders should encourage their families to settle. This attitude has arisen because of the city's status as a commercial node that attracts short-term visitors who are mostly men from across Asia. Yet the complexity and cost of securing long-term visas for wives and access to education for children have reduced the scope for Yiwu's Afghans to successfully transform the city into a node for the social reproduction of the trading networks they collectively form. The traders' inability to construct the city as a collective seat of permanent forms of family life is then manifested in the cultural and moral interpretations that Afghans then make about it, especially regarding the ways in which they consider it ill-suited for raising children.

Cultural Reproduction

Afghan traders based in Yiwu regard the city as a transitory rather than a permanent anchoring point, and this is especially clear in terms of their conceptions of the role it plays in the social reproduction of their network. In many of the contexts in which Afghan merchants live and work, the public enactment of a rich social life is an important ethical aspiration for the traders; performing public forms of sociability also demonstrates wealth, commercial success

and administrative competence.³⁴ The organisation of musical performances involving well-known Afghan artists, cultural gatherings at which poetry is recited and commemorative events held for prominent figures in Afghanistan's military and political history are all an important focus for Afghan community life. In the commercial nodes explored in this book, such activities are patronised and organised by merchants and traders. They demonstrate commercial accomplishment in a field of intense status competition in a manner that resonates with what Arjun Appadurai identifies as 'tournaments of value'.³⁵ As importantly, they also play an important role in cultivating ties between Afghans abroad and those based in Afghanistan that facilitate the forging of political and commercial connections. Gatherings also provide an avenue for traders to perform and instantiate their being cultured people (*bafarhang*) and educated (*basawad*). Playing a leading role in staging such events provides traders with the scope for demonstrating their administrative competency and capacity. As we saw in [Chapter 2](#), traders living in commercial nodes located in the Eurasian corridor of connectivity invest significant time and resources in the organisation of events that help to fashion the shared sensibilities and identities of traders living and working in that context.

The rich and varied cultural life that is such an important aspect of life for the traders elsewhere in Eurasia is not a visible or prominent aspect of their experiences in Yiwu. A common refrain among Afghan traders based in Yiwu is to say that they feel 'bored' (*duq*) in the city, largely because of the monotonous routine that involves them moving in a regular and unremitting fashion between offices, restaurants and cafés, and home. A trader in his late twenties from Kabul, for example, joked one evening to a large gathering of Afghan traders gathered in a shisha café owned by a compatriot that on arriving in Yiwu he had been so depressed (*dil tang*) that he had consumed the same quantity of mouth tobacco (*naswar*) that he would normally use over six months in Kabul in the space of a month.

According to traders in Yiwu, the city's municipal authorities are wary of allowing them to hold cultural events. One of my Afghan interlocutors in the city told me that he had sought to arrange a concert at which a well-known Afghan woman singer known for her liberal and secular ideas would perform. After 'running from office to office' on the instruction of the local authorities, however, the performance did not go ahead. In August 2019, Afghanistan marked its ninetieth 'independence'

³⁴ Marsden 2016: 242. ³⁵ Appadurai 1986.

celebrations; a group of traders in Yiwu decided that they would arrange an event at which Afghans would commemorate the legacy of King Amanullah (1892–1960), who is widely credited in the country as having defeated the British Indian Army in the Third Afghan War of 1919 and was the object of a series of state-sponsored celebrations in Afghanistan in 2019. The traders told me, however, that Yiwu's authorities insisted they would need to approve the text of all the speeches to be delivered at the event, and that the organisers would be required to enforce a cap of 200 attendees. The amount of time spent engaging with Yiwu's authorities in the run-up to the event, they told me, meant it would be highly unlikely that traders would organise similar activities in the future.

Despite the restrictions the city's authorities place on the organisation of collective events that Afghan merchants regard as critical to the instantiation of their collective identities and modes of presenting themselves and their country to the societies in which they live, traders deploy considerable creativity in their attempts to foster cultural and, indeed, ideological activities in Yiwu. In September 2019, a different group of traders from those mentioned earlier decided to commemorate the anniversary of the death of Ahmad Shah Massoud – an important figure in the wars against the Soviet Union in the 1980s and the Taliban regime in the 1990s who was killed by a suicide bomber in September 2001. A trader especially devoted to Massoud's legacy, who had first come to China in 1997 thanks to a Chinese bursary dispensed by the mujahidin government of which Massoud was a part, saw the day as an opportunity to publicise to China the figure of Massoud. He also saw the day as an opportunity to contest what he regarded as the overtly 'Pashtun' narrative of Afghanistan's history advanced by the Yiwu traders who had followed the lead of the Afghan government and arranged celebrations marking the life of King Amanullah. In order to emphasise his political position, this trader decided to fly on his vehicle and those of his friends the white, black and green flag that symbolised Afghanistan during the government in which Massoud had served as minister of defence in the 1990s. The flag was, of course, not available for sale in China, so he created it by cutting a strip of red from the flag of the UAE. The trader also spoke to other traders who shared his broad political background, collecting cash donations that would enable them to display images of Massoud, as well as other ethnically Tajik political figures, most notably Habibullah Kalakani (1891–1929), on Yiwu's tallest building. Kalakani briefly ruled Afghanistan in 1929 after seizing power from Amanullah before being killed by Afghanistan's next king, Nadir Shah. Kalakani's legacy was the centre of a national debate in Afghanistan in 2016 after calls by ethnically Tajik scholars and political figures for his remains to be given a state

burial. The traders' insistence on amplifying the commemoration of Massoud's death into an event that contested the core symbols of the present Afghan nation state resulted, however, in a sense of anxiety, even among this trader's closest companions. On the one hand, they feared that such an event could harm their businesses as it would lead Afghans of a different political persuasion to stop using their trading services or visiting their restaurants and cafés. On the other hand, there was also a degree of concern that displaying a flag that was not the current official symbol of Afghanistan would get them into trouble with the city's authorities and thereby harm their collective ability to do business in the country in the future. Despite the trader insisting to his companions that he knew the Chinese authorities better than any of them and that he had been told that he could proceed with the event as planned, the celebrations eventually mutated into photographs of the leaders' photos being displayed on Yiwu's iconic building, and a limited number of traders driving through the city flying the controversial flag out of their vehicle windows.

Organising and participating in cultural events that are often deeply inflected by political debates is an important aspect of the ideational worlds of Afghans in a wide range of contexts. Activities such as these play a significant role in instantiating shared sensibilities and fostering relationships among particular groups; they also help cultivate and display the political affiliations and positions valued by some if not all of the traders. Living in Yiwu entails traders experiencing unique restrictions on being able to cultivate these aspects of their ideational and cultural worlds – such restrictions contribute to the sense of 'boredom' experienced by the traders in the city, but they also result in them further honing their skills in the field of navigational agency.

Investing in China

Yiwu's role in Afghan trading networks is contradictory and inherently unstable. It is an influential centre in terms of trading infrastructure. Yet in relation to social, ideological and cultural reproduction, the city's role is of little consequence for the networks more generally. As a result, Afghan traders in Yiwu are rarely if ever complacent about the city's permanence as a node in their networks. For example, relatively few traders from Afghanistan living in Yiwu have invested their capital in homes, property or indeed industrial ventures, such as single or jointly owned factories. One trader aged in his late twenties who runs a company that ships goods from Yiwu to Dubai, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and Belarus made the following comment to me one day in his office: '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.'

Before moving to Yiwu, this trader had worked for three years in a trading office in Sharjah, a commercial centre home to several hundred traders from Afghanistan, most of whom import cars and spare vehicle parts to the UAE from Japan, China and South Korea and re-export these globally. In 2015, the UAE revoked the visas of around 100 traders from the community. In the context of such past experiences of the state capture of capital, traders from Afghanistan are sensitive in their thinking about the future scenarios they may face in the settings in which they work, and, generally, cautious about how they invest capital.

The handful of Afghan traders who have bought property in Yiwu have done so in the context of their being married to Chinese women. Afghans living in Yiwu who have married in China have largely entered into unions with Han rather than Hui or Uyghur women and, indeed, often remark that 'proper' Chinese are more suitable marriage partners than Muslim Chinese. As in other contexts in which Afghans trade and live,³⁶ marriage to local women does open opportunities to Afghans living in China, especially in terms of their ability to invest capital in property and send any children born to such marriages to Chinese government schools. Afghans who have invested in the city (especially in restaurants, cafés, hotels and gyms) are said by their compatriots to have done so only because they have reliable contacts in the local government – sometimes, but not always, contacts forged through marital bonds. Such contacts are able to offer reliable advice about changing municipal policy relating to foreigners in general and Afghans in particular. We will learn more in [Chapter 7](#) about the ways in which restaurants signify the close ties of their owners to the local authorities, acting as indicators of a restaurateur's ability to conduct business and play a wider mediating role between traders and state authorities.

Settled Afghan traders living in China are wealthier than many of their compatriots both in the country and elsewhere and, as a result, are able to lead more stable lives and choose from a wider range of options regarding their residency than their compatriots living and working elsewhere in the world. As in the case of the Indian middle classes living in Bahrain studied by Andrew Gardner, however, they also face 'vulnerabilities and dilemmas' due to their legal position in the country and develop a 'strategic' approach to the possibilities of transnational citizenship in order to face these.³⁷ Traders, for example, aspire to send their children abroad for

³⁶ Marsden and Ibañez-Tirado 2015. ³⁷ Gardner 2008.

education, especially to countries where they believe there is a future possibility of securing a document for residency or citizenship. The countries Afghans most widely visited during the period of my research included Russia, India, Ukraine and Turkey. But traders also talk about the prospect of securing various forms of residency in Western Europe, often learning about official schemes and policies through conversations with Afghan traders visiting Yiwu from cities that are home to significant concentrations of compatriots, notably Hamburg, London and Amsterdam. For instance, a prominent trader I know had a discussion in a restaurant one evening with two Afghan traders from Hamburg about a new type of entrepreneur visa that had been launched by the German government. Entrepreneurs who invested a minimum of 350,000 euros in property and businesses, they told him, would qualify for a residency visa that would be made permanent after three years for the investor and after five years for his family. They emphasised that seeking a residency permit in this way would not ensure he secured citizenship rights during that period. 'I'm not interested in German citizenship', the trader replied, 'and I have no interest in having access to social security payments. But what I would want to do is live with my family and for my children to be able to attend school.' At one level, this man's remarks underscore the degree to which Afghan traders have undergone major capitalisation over the past two decades, and this is now enabling them to consider working in and profiting from advanced economies beyond Asia in a manner that was previously impossible. More broadly, many communities active in trade and businesses emphasise their desire to educate their children; anthropologists widely interpret the importance of education for traders in terms of their attempts to convert financial resources into 'cultural capital'.³⁸ In the case of Afghans, however, the desire to secure an education intersects with wider concerns in the community about the future stability of Afghanistan.

Traders are able to access flows of information that afford them access and insights into the complex and rapidly shifting world of international visa and residency policymaking. They are well informed about the best embassies in China in which to apply for Schengen visas that allow them to travel to Europe. According to the traders, visa applications submitted to particular countries (especially Germany) result in near automatic refusal, while the embassies of other countries (notably Italy) are generally more helpful. Indeed, several successfully applied for US visas, visiting the country to meet relatives, assess business opportunities and consider the prospect of crossing the border into Canada to submit an

³⁸ Ong 1996.

asylum application. Most, however, consider seeking asylum in Europe or North America during the course of such visits as being a last resort. A man in his late thirties in Yiwu who was in possession of a US visa and under considerable pressure from his friends to use the opportunity to travel to Canada where he had close relatives and submit an application for asylum remarked to me, 'I'm already depressed even though I have money and see my family. If I became a refugee in Canada, and was far from my family, had no money and nothing to do it would be the end of me.'

A substantial cross section of the 200 or so Afghan traders with whom I have regularly interacted in Yiwu had travelled to Europe or North America with the aim of admitting their children into schools or securing residency documents for themselves and their family members. One trader I know in Yiwu – originally from central Afghanistan but currently based in Kabul and running a business in Mazar-e Sharif – brought his family and children to live in Yiwu in 2017. Having admitted his children into the city's Iraqi-run school, he arranged for his elder son to be enrolled in a college in the United States – a tie existed between the college and the individuals that ran and administered the Iraqi school that smoothed over the admissions process. After entering the United States, however, his son crossed the border to Canada and filed an asylum case, eventually being able to live with his paternal uncle's family due to his young age. The trader told me that it was the costs and administrative hurdles of educating children in China that had led him to take this course of action. Indeed, he had calculated that it would be cheaper to educate his son at a college in the United States than cover his tuition and living expenses at a reputable private institution in Shanghai. By the summer of 2019, this trader had also decided to move his remaining children and their mother from Yiwu to Kabul.

Conclusion

The central assumption challenged in this chapter is that Yiwu is simply a capitalist supermarket that has emerged one-dimensionally out of the dynamics of the globalised economy. This finding also requires us to question the idea that commerce is merely a livelihood strategy or an aspect of economic life. What the material presented has demonstrated, instead, is that Yiwu is a culturally plural commercial node inhabited and visited by people who are heirs to multiple geographic, cultural and political trajectories. These diverse trajectories are visible in Yiwu's built environment, dynamics and daily rhythms. International traders visiting and living in the city inhabit Yiwu not merely in relationship to

the vicissitudes of their modes of making a living; they also experience the city in emotional ways and emphasise the role they have played in its recent development.

It is equally important to emphasise, however, that these aspects of Yiwu's built environment, as well as the social and emotional dynamics that shape the city's urban milieu, are also the focus of powerful interventions by policymakers and state authorities at the levels of the municipality and the state; as we have also seen, the shifting configurations of Yiwu's spatial dynamics also reflect in visible ways the multiple geopolitical contexts with which the lives of the city's traders are entwined. Such interventions often arise from policies that actively – indeed sometimes aggressively – seek to reduce a complex commercial node to a narrower type of infrastructural trade hub. Policies including a preference for e-commerce rather than 'traditional' trade involving mobile merchants, the vigorous and intrusive policing of visitors in the city and attempts to sanitise the city's urban environment to meet national and provincial 'upgrading' targets all focus attention on the city's status as an infrastructural trade hub. As a result, Yiwu's significance for more broadly conceived modes of commerce, exchange and connectivity is becoming narrower. The introduction of a new visa policy by Yiwu's authorities in 2019 that ranks traders' applications for visas on the basis of the size of their businesses further underscores to traders in the city the extent to which 'the only thing that interests people in Yiwu is our money'.

Beyond the attempts of policymakers and state officials to reduce Yiwu from a complex commercial node to a strictly defined trade infrastructure hub, the city is also shaped through its relationships with political, economic and technological processes important in China and in the sphere of Eurasian geopolitics more generally. In particular, suspicions on the part of local and national authorities concerning the political ramifications of the cultural events and gatherings that are a critical aspect of Afghan traders' cultural and intellectual worlds elsewhere means that Yiwu's traders rarely organise these events in Yiwu. Such cultural practices foster shared sensibilities and political affiliations within Afghan trading networks and facilitate the building of ties with relevant officials and states elsewhere; their relative absence in Yiwu limits the traders' emotional engagement with the city and adds to the suspicions they hold of Yiwu's policymakers and officials. Similarly, the inability of traders in Yiwu to secure access to citizenship or long-term residency means that few if any of them view the city as a permanent node in which to foster familial and collective social life. For traders arriving in the city from settings such as Afghanistan that are characterised by a high degree of political instability and violence, the absence of long-term prospects for

living in the city encourages traders to search for other contexts in which they might be better able to combine their social and commercial lives and activities. Finally, more established traders are currently seeking to transform their business activities from those that revolve around the trade in goods to the use of capital investments to make profit. The uncertain nature of their long-term status in China, combined with the insecure environment in Afghanistan, means that they are looking for investment opportunities elsewhere, most especially in Turkey and Western Europe.

Striking in respect to these aspects of Yiwu's dynamics are the insights that ethnography with foreign traders in the city reveal about the distinction between China's approach to forging regional Eurasian connectivity in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative and the past and present geopolitical politics of other regional powers. The nodes of Afghan traders based in the countries of the former Soviet Union became anchor points for commercial networks against the backdrop of long-term connections between the Afghan state and the Soviet Union. State-sponsored student exchange programmes initially played a critical role in forging such connections, which then resulted in some migrants who had come to live on that basis securing citizenship rights. Similarly, a key motive for many Afghan merchants choosing to invest in Turkey and relocate their families to the country stems from the formal and informal routes in Turkey available for securing access to long-term residency permits and, less frequently, citizenship status. By comparison, Chinese policy towards the residency and citizenship of foreign merchants more closely resembles the situation faced by merchants in the Gulf states, in which rigid regulations inject their lives with a powerful degree of vulnerability and uncertainty. The traders are aware of and openly reflective about the comparative policies of the contexts in which they live; such reflexivity bleeds into their identities and modes of perceiving the world and contributes to the forms of navigational agency they develop to negotiate them.

An enduring sense of impermanence hangs, then, over the lives of Afghan and other groups of international traders in Yiwu. This adds complexity and ambiguity to the ways in which the traders relate to the city, both emotionally and in terms of their commercial strategies. While traders emphasise the role they have played in authoring the city's destiny and shaping its organisation, atmosphere and dynamics, they also often explicitly reflect on the extent to which their presence in the city is ultimately ephemeral and conditional upon shifting geopolitical environments. 'They used to need us and our trade', is a widespread refrain heard from international traders based in the city – Afghan and non-Afghan alike:

When we came here there were no big cars or fancy restaurants, just people pushing around carts and riding in rickshaws. We've brought millions of dollars of trade and commerce to this city. It's that trade that has made it the place it is today. But now the Chinese are not interested in us anymore. If they want to get rid of us, they can do it in a day, and we can do nothing to stop them.

In the years following China's accession to the WTO in 2001, Yiwu has grown in status as an infrastructural node of near overwhelming significance for the trading activities of the Afghan networks studied in this book. In Yiwu, traders cultivate sites of importance in shaping their interactions with members of their networks while also interacting with traders from different backgrounds. Managing diversity is also a key theme of [Chapter 5](#), which focuses on the religiously plural nature of trading networks connecting different parts of Eurasia to one another and the role that wholesale markets play in sustaining such plurality at a time of unprecedented political and cultural pressure.

5 Minorities, Commerce and the Legacy of Muslim Asia's Urban Cosmopolitanism: Afghanistan's Hindus and Sikhs

Introduction

In the years following the Soviet invasion in December 1979, Afghanistan has come to be associated in the scholarly literature and more popular discourse with ultra-conservative forms of Islam – including, most especially, those espoused by the Taliban and ISIS.¹ There is little if any place in the imaginaries of such groups either of the Afghan nation or of Muslim identity for non-Muslim minorities; indeed, Islamists in Afghanistan as elsewhere are often directly hostile to the forging of social, commercial and emotional relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Hostility towards non-Muslim minorities in Afghanistan is not confined to active participants in Islamist movements such as ISIS and the Taliban; it is, rather, a pervasive aspect of everyday life in the country. I have often encountered animosity towards non-Muslim minority communities during my visits to Afghanistan. After I told a Kabul-based money exchange agent in September 2018 that I had spent the day visiting Hindu and Sikh Afghans in the 'old city' (*shahr-e kohna*), for instance, he told me that 'they should return to India – that is where they are from'. The man's remark is a reflection of the extent to which an exclusive form of autochthonous nationalism in which claims to belonging made on the basis of being from the 'soil' (*khakh*) is a prevalent feature of Afghan political discourse.

At the same time, I have also seen how Afghans from a variety of backgrounds hold and foster a deep interest in the past presence of ethno-religious minority communities in the country. Many people with whom I spoke in the country were keen to discover what had happened to the country's religious minorities after they left Afghanistan. Along with a local host, I visited a street (the *kucha-ye musawiha*) that had formerly been a site of Jewish community life in the historic city of Herat in western

¹ For a nuanced treatment of the historic role of Islam in Afghanistan, see [Green 2017](#). On the form of Islam adopted by the Taliban, see, for example, Maley 1997 and [Crews and Tarzi 2009](#).

Afghanistan. My host took me to a synagogue (renovated in the 2010s by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture) and a Jewish bathhouse. During a later visit to Herat, I visited the city's Jewish cemetery and was shown tombstones recently renovated with the support of Afghan Jews who had travelled to the city from North America.

My visit to the neighbourhood prompted me to explore various form of cultural production by Afghans in the country and its diasporas concerning the country's Jewish community. Afghan travellers to the city, I discovered, had written internet blogs about Herat's Jewish community; these blogs and other pieces by journalists advocated 'the Jewish street' (*kucha-ye musawiha*) as a must-see place for Afghan tourists visiting Herat. As in other parts of the world, Afghanistan's cultural elite regards acts of positively identifying with the country's historic cultural diversity as an effective way of demonstrating open-mindedness and cultural sophistication (*motamadin*).² In Afghanistan and within the country's diaspora, there is an interest among the elite in historic expressions of cultural and religious diversity. This results in forms of cultural production – including posts, articles, online videos, professionally produced documentaries and published books – that circulate widely among Afghans at home and abroad and are a source of comment, reflection and debate.³

The preceding chapters have demonstrated that Afghan trading networks are ethnolinguistically and ideologically diverse. This diversity reflects the layered histories of distinct trading networks and imprints itself in their structure and dynamics, as well as the traders' collective and individual cultural and political identities. Rather than mitigating against the cultivation of relationships of trust, internal diversity, I have argued, enables traders to cultivate an attitude of critical responsivity towards the multiple geopolitical projects that affect the worlds across which they operate.

This chapter's focus is on an equally important and perhaps surprising aspect of the historically layered and culturally complex composition of trading networks – their religious diversity. Long-term conflict and displacement in Afghanistan has resulted in the bleaching of 'ethno-religious minorities' from the country's social fabric.⁴ Historians argue, indeed, that such processes are visible in many settings across Muslim Asia and reflect the broader 'de-cosmopolitanisation' of the region's urban centres. Green uses the term 'de-cosmopolitanisation' to identify the bleaching of ethno-religious diversity in Muslim Asia's historic cities, arguing that declining

² Ziaratjaye 2017. ³ Jawad 2019 and Ziaratjaye 2017.

⁴ The use of the notion of 'minority' to describe and analyse such communities is problematic in a variety of ways, not least because it fails to recognise the role played by the state in determining the basis of the identities of 'minority' and 'majority' communities. See, for example, Mahmood 2013.

levels of cultural diversity have arisen in the context of the persecution and subsequent migration of minority communities over the past century. In addition to having become less diverse in cultural and religious terms, space in Muslim Asia's cities is increasingly ordered in relationship to social, economic and ethnic boundaries – a process that has been enhanced by waves of migrants arriving in urban centres from rural regions and smaller towns, often in the context of war and persistent civil conflict.⁵

By engaging with debates in the social sciences and humanities about the relevance of the category of cosmopolitanism to the analysis of Muslim societies, the chapter argues that processes of 'de-cosmopolitanisation' are best understood alongside recognition of the persistence in new settings of the legacy of past modes of doing commerce widely documented in multi-religious Muslim-majority societies. I explore the role traders play in cultivating and maintaining nuanced modes of engaging with religious diversity in the various settings in which they work, exploring the afterlife of Afghanistan's legacy of cosmopolitan modes of urban living in the geographies and sociality of contemporary forms of trade. In order to do so, the ethnographic focus of the chapter is on relationships between Muslim traders from Afghanistan and those who identify with the country's historic and substantial – but today geographically dispersed – Hindu and Sikh communities. Before discussing theoretical debates on cosmopolitanism in Muslim contexts and empirical material addressing Muslim–Hindu relationships in Afghan trading networks, I will first briefly outline some intersections of trade and religion in modern Afghanistan's history.

Religious Diversity in Modern Afghanistan

Afghanistan was home to several communities that were active in the field of commerce and did not identify as being Muslim; the most prominent of the country's non-Muslim trading communities was composed of Jews, Hindus, Sikhs and Armenian Christians. Armenians living in Afghanistan had mostly left the country by the early twentieth century;⁶ communities of Hindus, Sikhs and Jews remained active in its cities and small towns until the onset of civil war in the 1990s. The north, central and western parts of Afghanistan were home to a substantial Jewish community that was involved in the trade of pelt, leather and cloth, items of great significance to regional and national economies.⁷ Jewish communities in Afghanistan

⁵ Green 2016. ⁶ Lee 2002.

⁷ For a survey of Afghanistan's Jewish history, see Aharon 2011. On the community's fortunes in the twentieth centuries see: Brauer 1942, Jawad 2019, Koplik 2015, Mehrdad 2018, O'Halpin 2016

were connected to Jews living in Iranian cities, especially in Mashhad, as well as to co-religionists in Central Asia (across the Emirate of Bukhara) and British India (especially in Peshawar, Bombay and Karachi). A combination of nativistic economic policies and political tensions surrounding the Jewish presence in Afghanistan meant that most of Afghanistan's Jewish families migrated to Israel and the United States from the early 1950s onwards.⁸

This chapter's focus is on two ethno-religious minority communities in Afghanistan that were active in the field of trade: Sikhs and Hindus. As in the case of Afghanistan's Jews, Sikhs and Hindus have played a critical role in trade between Central and South Asia over several centuries. Historians have documented the geographical expanse and reach of Hindu and Sikh trading networks – what Shah Mahmoud Hanifi refers to collectively as 'Hindkis' – as well as the effect that Russian imperial policy and Bolshevik Sovietisation had on their activities in Central Asia.⁹ In the late 1930s, Afghanistan's Hindu and Sikh communities were subject to government-imposed resettlement in urban centres, reflecting hostility among the country's rulers at the time towards Hindus and Sikhs (as well as Jews).¹⁰ Yet Hindus and Sikhs continued to thrive economically in most of Afghanistan's major cities – especially Kabul, Ghazni, Jalalabad, Kandahar and Kunduz. Relatively little is known about the varying identities of different Sikh and Hindu communities within Afghanistan, though long-term residence in particular cities is reflected in whether they are fluent in either Farsi or Pashto. Similarly, particular communities are also said to have emerged in specific contexts – a notable example being that of the 'Hindu' community in the eastern region of Khost that I was told by Hindus and Sikhs in Kabul actually practise a particular form of Sikhism that has adapted to the complexity of life in a Muslim-majority context.

Hindus and Sikhs were especially active in foreign exchange markets, the import of goods from Asia, the official barter trade with the Soviet Union and the export of dried fruits to South Asia.¹¹ Sikhs were also especially active in the sale of medicinal plants used in the 'Greek' Perso-Arabic (or 'yunani') medical tradition. In the 1970s, a series of Hindu and Sikh temples (*mandir*; *gurdwara*) were constructed in Afghanistan's cities with the support of the government of President Mohammad Khan Daud. (Daud had seized power from King Zahir Shah in 1973 and established a republic.) During the 1980s, legislation introduced by the PDPA resulted in Sikhs and Hindus sending representatives to the

⁸ See Marsden 2020b. ⁹ Hanifi, 2012, Levi 2002, Markovits 2000.

¹⁰ O'Halpin 2016. ¹¹ Fry 1974.

Afghan parliament; individuals from these communities served as high-ranking government officials during the 1980s.

In the context of the mujahidin's rise to power in Kabul in 1992, however, both Sikhs and Hindus began to leave Afghanistan, most especially to Russia, India, Germany, North America and the United Kingdom. Many saw their properties in well-to-do areas of Kabul illegally occupied by mujahidin leaders; mujahidin 'commanders' forced others to sell their property at low prices, and their one-time Muslim employees increasingly operated the range of businesses that Sikhs and Hindus had owned. Such properties continue to function as the residences of influential mujahidin figures affiliated to powerful political movements. In August 2019, for example, I was taken for a walk in the neighbourhood by Seth, one of the few remaining Hindu men who continue to reside in this part of the city with his family. Seth was in his mid-fifties and continued to import cloth to Afghanistan from India even during the years of Taliban rule. While his brothers and cousins live outside Afghanistan, in settings ranging from Long Island in New York to Southall in London, Seth decided to stay in the country, often remarking that if he did not, there would not be anyone to act as a guardian for its temples and sites of Hindu religious heritage. As we walked through the backstreets, the bodyguards of one of the neighbourhood's most powerful residents stopped and asked where we were going. After we replied, my Hindu friend remarked, 'this whole area used to be full of Sikh and Hindu families, now we can't even step on to the street without being asked by armed men, not even the police, where we are going'.

The modern history of Afghanistan's ethno-religious minorities points, then, towards the demise of the country's urban centres as seats of cosmopolitan urban life. Fieldwork sometimes brings surprises, however. In what follows, I explore how I came to see that commercial relationships between Hindu, Sikh and Muslim Afghans played a critical role in the establishment of Afghan networks, especially in the Eurasian corridor of connectivity, from the late 1980s onwards. The significance to these commercial networks of relationships that cross the boundaries of religious affiliation persist into the present day in post-Soviet settings but also in the new contexts in which such trading communities are currently active.

Are Trading Networks Cosmopolitan?

Recognition of the flexible nature of the social identities of the individuals making up trading networks leads many scholars to conceptualise them as 'cosmopolitan'.¹² The term cosmopolitanism has been used since the

¹² Werbner 1999.

Enlightenment to identify human openness to difference. A key issue raised by its use in much scholarship, however, is the concept's association with Western social thought and the vision of a particularly liberal kind of society and polity.¹³ In the context of this critique, scholars have directly addressed the need to wrestle cosmopolitanism from the history of the Enlightenment and the normative understandings of society and politics with which it is connected. Scholarly studies focusing on the cosmopolitan openness of trading networks have brought attention to two dynamics that have been of relevance for these wider debates. First, they have challenged the inherent utopianism in the use of the term cosmopolitanism, emphasising instead the ways in which mobile traders' identities are 'closed' and 'local' in some ways while being 'global' and 'open' in others.¹⁴ Second, critical social theorists have shed light on the celebratory deployment of the term cosmopolitanism and brought attention to its intersections with violence and coercion. Paul Gilroy, for example, refers to 'armoured cosmopolitanism' in order to define the forms of international intervention in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan that took place in the context of the 'war on terror'. Ho draws parallels between the sites of cultural interaction that emerged in the context of nineteenth-century imperial rule and those evident in settings such as Dubai today.¹⁵ As Ho and other scholars have noted, the interstices between imperial projects were key and often creative contexts in which 'transimperial cosmopolitan' subjectivities, identities and communities emerged.¹⁶ Attention has also focused on the importance of moving beyond normative understandings of cosmopolitanism and recognising instead the 'co-presence of cosmopolitanism and its opposite, ethnic violence, ... over time' in specific settings.¹⁷ Rather than identifying unchanging forms of utopian cosmopolitanism, scholars deploy the notion of 'post-cosmopolitanism' to emphasise the specific practices that people living in fragile and diverse social settings use in order to live a life that is simultaneously both 'together and apart'.

Another way in which scholarship has sought to detach the notion of cosmopolitanism from political liberalism has been to identify its culturally diverse histories, trajectories and contexts. Most relevant to this chapter are the attempts of scholars to define specifically 'Islamic' expressions of cosmopolitanism. A range of studies depicts 'Islamic cosmopolitanism' as emerging over the course of centuries of Islamic history and in the context of mobility and interaction resulting from Islamic teachings and practices (especially those referred to as 'Sufi') and the importance of

¹³ Marsden and Reeves 2018. ¹⁴ Ho 2002. ¹⁵ Gilroy 2004. ¹⁶ Aslanian 2014: 66.

¹⁷ Humphrey and Skvirskaja 2012.

long-distance trade to Asia's Muslim societies.¹⁸ A problem with this approach is that it emphasises the ways in which Islamic history and teachings shape believers' attitudes to difference and diversity and downplays the role that multiple religious and cultural influences have had on the cultural composition of Muslim societies. World historian Marshall Hodgson sought to avoid the tendency to reify Islam's role in the fashioning of cosmopolitan cultural sensibilities by distinguishing between 'Islamic' and 'Islamicate': Hodgson uses the term 'Islamic' to refer to the religious tradition and 'Islamicate' to identify the culture that had emerged in the context of a historically durable and geographically expansive 'Afro-Eurasian' Muslim dominion in which Muslims were dominant but not lone agents.¹⁹ More recently, Shahab Ahmed has argued that this distinction reproduces orientalist understandings of 'pure' Islam being a religious tradition centrally defined by a bounded legal tradition, relegating wider forms of Muslim faith, identity and theological argument to the realm of 'culture'.²⁰ Ahmed asserts, instead, that Islam has historically been culturally capacious: it is a religious tradition that is able to embrace multiple and contradictory influences. An emergent area of debate within the study of Islamic cosmopolitanism concerns the role played by language. In her study of Persianate selfhood, Kia argues that Islam's geographic extension across multiple Asian societies depended on 'the transregional reach of the Persian language'. According to Kia, if 'Islam permeated the beings of Persian-speakers in multiple settings', then it did not do so in any 'totalising fashion': 'Persians', rather, 'could profess other faiths, or even be hostile to Islam, without necessarily being outside of it.'²¹ By contrast, in a recent study of the transregional reach of Bukhara as a centre for education, James Pickett argues that it is impossible to separate out either Islam or Arabic from the Persian cosmopolis.²² At stake in these debates, then, is how scholarship on Muslim societies might recognise the importance of cosmopolitan modes of dealing with diversity to Islamic history without reasserting a totalising understanding of 'Islamic culture' or leaving insufficient space for recognition of the influence of non-Muslim traditions, languages and beliefs on the dynamics of Muslim-majority societies.

What is the relationship between such historic forms of Islamic cosmopolitanism and the state of Muslim-majority settings today, many of which, as we have seen, have been bleached of their religious diversity? Green, a historian of the Muslim world, argues that a consideration of the dynamics of Muslim Asia today puts into stark relief the celebratory tone

¹⁸ Lawrence 2012. ¹⁹ Hodgson 1997. ²⁰ Ahmed 2015. ²¹ Kia 2020: 14.

²² Pickett 2020.

of scholarly work on Islamic pluralism. Green argues that Asia's Muslim-majority cities in the first decades of the twenty-first century are characterised by their 'de-cosmopolitanisation'. Muslim societies across Asia have witnessed and participated in the emigration of ethno-religious minorities and the emergence of increasingly rigidly segregated urban landscapes. As such forms of segregation have become further enhanced across Muslim Asia, ethno-religious minorities that lived in once culturally composite urban centres have increasingly moved out of the region, especially to Western Europe and North America.²³

The traders explored in this chapter showcase not only the ability to manage heterogeneous social relationships that comprise Hindus and Muslims but also to reflect on the importance of histories of interreligious engagement to Afghanistan – histories that the country's political dynamics over the past four decades have rendered increasingly 'hidden'.²⁴ Afghan Muslim merchants active in the forms of trade described in this book cultivate, nurture and sustain modes of trading and living together with members of Afghanistan's small yet commercially influential Hindu and Sikh minorities. At the same time, relationships between Muslims and Sikh and Hindu traders are more prevalent to the commercial activities of Afghans outside of Afghanistan than those working within it. This finding corroborates Green's argument about the 'de-cosmopolitanisation' of Asia's Muslim cities. Yet the ethnographic material discussed in what follows demonstrates that forms of co-existence once important in Asia's Muslim cities have not simply been lost as a result of the migration of ethno-religious minorities. Challenging the notion that migration one-dimensionally results in the cultivation of distinct and bounded forms of religious identity, my ethnographic material instead brings attention to the relocation of complex sensibilities cultivated in diverse urban environments from cities in Muslim Asia to new contexts in the wider world.

Afghanistan's Sikh and Hindu Communities: From Transnational Merchants to Religious Minority

A gurdwara located in the western London neighbourhood of Southall – home to migrants from the Indian subcontinent for much of the twentieth century – is the ritual focus of the lives of the 50,000 or so UK-based Afghan Sikhs. I made an initial visit to the gurdwara in the spring of 2018; during the day, I chatted to several elderly Sikh men from Afghanistan who had been living in the United Kingdom for between five and twenty-five

²³ Green 2016. ²⁴ Schneider and Rapp 1995.

years. They told me how they had mostly left Afghanistan in the 1980s and spent the years between that point and their move to the United Kingdom in commercial nodes across Eurasia, including Tashkent, Moscow and Odessa. Many had also spent time in India, where there are sizeable communities of Afghan Sikhs and Hindus. During later visits, I also spoke with Afghan Sikhs living in London who had served in high-level positions in the Afghan government during the 1980s. Officials at the gurdwara in London put me in touch with senior figures in Kabul's central Sikh gurdwara in the city's historic Shor Bazaar neighbourhood, close to the Mandawi wholesale market that I discuss in [Chapter 6](#). A short walk from the gurdwara in Southall is the Asamai Hindu temple, the institutional home of Afghanistan's Hindus in the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom's Afghan Hindu community is smaller than that of their co-national Sikhs – numbering around 500. Members of the congregation told me of their commercial activities in Afghanistan until the 1980s, many of which focused on money exchange and the trade in Afghanistan of Indian textiles and the export to India of dried fruits and medicines, including liquorice (*shirin buya*). Sharma, for example, is in his mid-forties and works in an accountancy firm. Until leaving Afghanistan in the mid-1990s, however, he had worked in his family business, which was concerned with the export of Afghan dried fruits to India. Today, only one of Sharma's close relatives continues to live in Afghanistan – Seth, the Hindu merchant I introduced earlier in the chapter who showed me around his neighbourhood.

I had for long been interested in seeing first-hand the collective life of Kabul's Sikh and Hindu communities – communities that were historically significant actors in Afghanistan's economy – and was delighted to have the opportunity of doing so during a visit to Kabul in the autumn of 2018. I interacted with around thirty Sikh individuals from a variety of ages and backgrounds, including influential community leaders, shopkeepers who run small businesses in the neighbourhood and in Kabul's wholesale market (Mandawi), religious education instructors, as well as women currently living in one or other of Kabul's gurdwaras. On a return visit to Kabul in August 2019, I visited sites important to the city's Hindu minority, including the Asamai temple located in Shor Bazaar.

In terms of size, the number of Sikh and Hindu families is minuscule in comparison with the period before the onset of major conflict in the country in the late 1970s. As a result of their dwindling population, most if not all of the Sikhs consider their future in the country to be tenuous and insecure. While Sikhs were once a pillar of the Afghan merchant community, successful Sikh merchants have left the country and conduct business abroad: between 400 and 500 Sikh and Hindu

families remain across Afghanistan today. The number of families located in Kabul has increased since 2016, as cities such as Jalalabad in the east have become increasingly violent because of the Taliban insurgency and the activities of ISIS in Khorasan.²⁵ As a result, a mere thirty-five families remained in Jalalabad in 2018 – this important centre of Sikh and Hindu life and commerce located miles from the important commercial border post with Pakistan at the head of the Khyber Pass in Torkham is now increasingly peripheral to the communities' activities. Similarly, central Afghanistan's historic commercial city of Ghazni – briefly overrun by Taliban insurgents in August 2018 – is home to as few as fifteen Sikh families, most having fled to India in recent years. Other urban centres in the country have even smaller Sikh and Hindu communities. Afghanistan's southern commercial hub of Kandahar (for many years the base of a sizeable Hindu trading community) now hosts around six Sikh families, while the northern city of Kunduz – an important geographical bridge into the Central Asian states and a formerly important industrial centre in Afghanistan – hosts a mere two. A handful of families continue to live in Parwan province (a politically important and agriculturally rich region famed for its dried raisins in the north of Kabul). I was told that access to the country's rural areas – previously a common feature of Sikh and Hindu commerce, especially for those families involved in purveying traditional 'Greek' or *yunani* medicine – had all but disappeared.

The number of Hindus continuing to live in the country is even fewer: only a handful of families remain in Kabul; even fewer lived in the towns and cities that had previously been centres of the community, especially Khost in eastern Afghanistan and Kandahar in the south. Most Hindus based in Kabul, members of the community told me, are single men who visit the country from India in order to maintain business operations, especially in the import of Indian-manufactured medicine.

Several serious security incidents directly affected the lives of Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan in the months leading up to my visit in September 2018. In Jalalabad in May 2018, a Sikh candidate for the parliamentary elections was killed along with fourteen other members of the community and their Muslim driver. The killings took place during a visit they were making to Jalalabad to hold a meeting with Ashraf Ghani, Afghanistan's president. Criminal gangs active in Afghanistan also target Sikhs. Reported cases include those of a Sikh shopkeeper being shot in the western city of Herat and the abduction and murder of a Sikh shopkeeper in Kabul. Moreover, a Sikh man in his early thirties from the city of

²⁵ Giustozzi 2018.

Jalalabad showed me a letter – written in Pashto – that threatened the Sikh community with reprisals if they did not hand over 3 million US dollars to the Islamic State organisation. Against this backdrop, the community had taken steps to maintain their collective security: armed guards (Muslim Afghans employed by the gurdwara) were stationed outside each of the religious buildings I visited.

It was not only public threats to community safety and security that the Sikhs and Hindus with whom I spoke highlighted as their most pressing concerns. A further key concern was the well-being of families from the communities. As internally displaced persons, migrants from different parts of Afghanistan and families facing economic difficulties are permitted to temporarily use the gurdwara and temple complexes I visited. In the central gurdwara in Shor Bazaar, for example, up to thirty-seven families lived in small rooms inside the complex – some had recently moved there from other Afghan cities, especially Jalalabad. Another gurdwara that I visited in the nearby 'Hindu Guzar' neighbourhood – the name indicating the importance of long-term Sikh and Hindu residency in this part of Kabul's old city – acted as the home of eight further Sikh families. Similarly, the Asamai temple – a large structure built in the 1970s when the community numbered in the thousands – is now the residence of around seven Hindu families that had left their homes in the town of Khost in eastern Afghanistan.

The education of children from the community was a pressing concern for the people I spoke to. By contrast to the situation of earlier generations of Afghanistan's Sikhs and Hindus, which had seen individuals educated to university degree level and rising to high-level positions in government, Sikh children and youth today find it difficult to avail themselves of even basic education. It was reported to me that children were taunted by passers-by on the streets who recognised them as non-Muslims by dint of their wearing turbans. Some children reportedly even had their hair pulled during such encounters as well as being called *kafir* (infidels). As a result of such experiences, my Sikh hosts told me that they increasingly sought to educate their young within the confines of their own community spaces, and I was shown a room in the gurdwara in which a class of around fifteen children was being instructed by a teacher from the community.²⁶

Members of the community also face difficulties carrying out key religious rituals, especially cremation. The piece of land in the city in which they had historically carried out cremations (the *hindu sazan*) was donated by a wealthy Sikh merchant in the era of President Daud

²⁶ The Afghan government opened a single school in 2017 for the Afghan Hindu and Sikh communities in Kabul.

(d. 1978). Houses inhabited by Muslims now encircle the cemetery. At least some of the Muslims living close to the cemetery were said to be openly hostile to cremations being conducted close to their homes. As a result, the community needs to inform Afghan security forces before conducting a cremation, and the forces are responsible for maintaining security during the ritual. Recognising the difficulties facing Sikhs and Hindus, the Afghan government had provided them with land, but it was in a far-off part of the wider province of Kabul in which the city is located. Community members complained, however, that this area was even less secure than the older site in the city centre: Muslim residents living nearby purportedly threatened a group of Sikhs visiting the site, telling them not to return and that, if they did, they would do so at risk to their lives. Various activist groups are seeking to strengthen the case for Afghanistan's remaining communities of Hindus and Sikhs to be recognised in Western Europe and North America as belonging to a group with specific claims to refugee status.²⁷ More generally, the community's current size in Afghanistan points towards the significant 'de-cosmopolitanisation' of Kabul and other historic urban centres in the country.

Hindu and Muslim Afghan Commercial Cooperation in the Eurasian Corridor

In contrast to the declining significance of Sikhs and Hindus in trade within Afghanistan, men from these communities continue to play a visible role in many of the commercial nodes in which I have conducted fieldwork, most especially those located in the Eurasian corridor. Most of the traders from Afghanistan who deal in Chinese commodities in various settings across post-Soviet contexts identify as Muslim. However, it is impossible to understand the emergence of the activities of Muslim Afghan traders in Eurasia over the past forty years without considering the role played by traders who identify as being Afghans of Sikh and Hindu background. Dubai is also home to a small but commercially active community of Afghan Sikhs that engages in multiple relationships with traders of a Muslim background from Afghanistan also doing business in the city.

While conducting fieldwork in Yiwu, I noticed that there were regular gatherings of Hindus and Sikhs from Afghanistan in 'the Maida' (the part of the city that is known by locals and foreigners alike for its 'Middle

²⁷ United Sikhs is one UN-affiliated organisation that has been active in promoting the human rights issues affecting Afghanistan's Sikh community.

Eastern' ambience). The men who gathered at these events – often up to twenty-five in number – spoke mostly in Pashtu and Dari, occasionally breaking out into Punjabi or English. During my conversations with them, I discovered that most were visiting the city on purchasing trips from Moscow, Dubai and London. The families of many of the men with whom I spoke were based in New Delhi, while they worked and traded between Russia, Ukraine and China. During visits to Moscow in 2012 and 2014, I had spoken to many Sikh and Hindu traders working in the hotel-cum-trading complex discussed in [Chapter 3](#), the Sevastopol Hotel. In Odessa, I also met Sikhs and Hindus from Afghanistan who traded in Chinese-made commodities in the Seventh-Kilometre Market. Muslim traders in Odessa told me that support from Sikhs and Hindus in the form of loans of credit and commodities had allowed them to establish the businesses they run and own today. Although the Sikh and Hindu communities in the nodes of the Eurasian commodity are numerically small in comparison to Muslims from Afghanistan, they nevertheless exert considerable influence along this commercial corridor, something that is recognised by Afghan traders of a wide variety of backgrounds. In both Odessa and Moscow, traders of Sikh and Hindu backgrounds were active participants in commercial and social relations with Afghan Muslim traders. On one occasion, for example, I observed a Hindu trader entering a business in Moscow run by an Afghan Muslim and loudly telling the Muslim shopkeeper that unless he paid his loan soon he would 'face consequences'.

The number of Sikhs and Hindus working in the Eurasian corridor has declined in recent years. Sikh and Hindu traders I met in Yiwu often told me that the weakening of the Russian rouble (precipitated by international sanctions following the annexation of Crimea in 2014) had made their activities as suppliers of credit – in the form of cash and commodities – to Afghan Muslim traders in Russia increasingly difficult. At the same time, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine had diminished the size of the market in Odessa: by 2018, only a handful of Sikh and Hindu traders of Afghan origin maintained businesses in the Seventh-Kilometre Market. As a result of the difficult economic environments affecting trade in the Eurasian corridor, Sikh and Hindu traders of Afghan nationality working in Russia and Ukraine were increasingly seeking to move to London.

London is home to around 25,000 Afghan Sikhs as well as a major gurdwara and Hindu temple established by and for the community. Sikh and Hindu Afghans also recognise that London in particular and the United Kingdom in general are excellent places in which to do business. There are several wholesale markets in which traders sell goods they

import from China, including notable ones in London and Manchester. The move to London is also precipitated by concerns over the future viability of the community in the towns and cities of Eurasia. As in the case of Afghanistan's Central Asian émigrés discussed in [Chapter 1](#), the Afghan Hindus and Sikhs with whom I spoke emphasised the importance to their community of establishing neighbourhoods that play a central role in both their cultural and sociological reproduction and their commercial activities. 'We Sikhs like to live together around those from the same background', they often remark. Indeed, Sikh and Hindu traders also told me that the size of their communities in Russia and Ukraine had become too small to support their sociological reproduction. 'We only give our daughters within our communities', remarked a trader in Odessa in his late thirties, 'so if our families are scattered and spread and we cannot move easily from one place to another we find it difficult.' The emphasis that Sikhs and Hindus place on living collectively among people from their specific communities is similar to the desire of Central Asian émigrés to congregate in specific neighbourhoods but distinct from the tendency among Afghan Muslims working in Eurasia to scatter across multiple lives. In several respects, then, Afghan Sikh and Hindu trading communities closely resemble the mononodal model of the trading network.

Dheepak in Odessa

A consideration of one trader – whom I shall call Dheepak – and his familial life over the past forty years exemplifies especially vividly the continued significance of interreligious relationships to the broader activities of Afghan trading networks. Dheepak is a trader based in Odessa who is in his early forties and belongs to a family that identifies as being Afghan Hindu. Dheepak's father told me that the family's ancestral home was in a small village in Afghanistan's eastern Kunar province, situated close to the border with British India and, after 1947, the newly created state of Pakistan. The family had moved to Jalalabad in the context of Hindus living in what was at the time referred to as Afghanistan's 'Eastern Province' being required to settle in urban centres rather than being based in outlying rural regions.²⁸ After trading and growing his business in Jalalabad, which eventually meant that he was able to operate an agency for a major brand of international cigarettes – an important marker of status and commercial success at the time – Dheepak's father moved to Kabul in the 1980s. In Kabul, the family business distributed Japanese

²⁸ O'Halpin 2016.

products imported from Japan by an Afghan Sikh agency. Dheepak's father fondly remembered the diversity of life in Kabul's markets at the time. He told me how he would buy cigarettes wholesale from a fastidious Jewish merchant who traded in this important product in such a manner as to ensure that the market was never flooded with his products, which meant that the prices were stable and his profit margins high. By contrast, sighed the man now aged in his mid-seventies, Afghan traders today only know how to undercut one another by importing large volumes of goods and selling these at minuscule profit margins.

The family had been active in various types of commercial activity in Afghanistan, including the official barter trade in dried fruits and wood that took place between Kabul and the Soviet Union – it was in connection to this trade that one of Dheepak's father's brothers had visited Ukraine in the late 1970s. By the beginning of the 1980s, in addition to working in Soviet–Afghanistan commerce, the family had become the sole sale agent in Afghanistan for Toshiba electronic products. A Kabul-based Sikh imported the products to Afghanistan from Japan; the trading agency belonging to Dheepak's father was responsible for the wholesale of the goods in Afghanistan. Doing so allowed him to make a name for himself and his family as trustworthy operators in Kabul's central wholesale market, the Mandawi. During the 1980s, other family members started to travel to and from Kabul and cities in East Asia, most especially Hong Kong, which traders from Afghanistan who are based in the city told me was home to around forty Afghan trading companies in the 1980s. During the 1980s, Dheepak's family members purchased digital watches that were especially popular among Soviet soldiers stationed in Afghanistan. A barter-style trade involving Hong Kong-made modern watches and Soviet-made timepieces that army personnel bought with them from the USSR did brisk business in Afghanistan in the 1980s. As with many other Hindu families, Dheepak lived in a street in Kabul's Kart-e Parwan neighbourhood in the environs of the Hindu temples (*mandir*) and Sikh gurdwaras discussed earlier in this chapter. The family's various trading activities were sufficiently successful to allow them to own their own property in this part of the city by the mid-1980s.

According to officials in the pro-Soviet government of Dr Najibullah Ahmadzai (d. 1996), the administration made efforts to maintain the presence of Hindus and Sikhs in Afghanistan, not least because of their skills as traders and money exchange agents. However, after the collapse of Najibullah's government in 1992 and the rise to power of mujahidin groups, many of the country's Sikh and Hindu traders left the country. Most moved to India. They either took flights on commercial airlines or used clandestine routes that passed through Pakistan. After the capture of

Kabul, influential figures in the mujahidin occupied or forcibly bought many houses owned by Sikhs and Hindus in Kabul (especially in the Kart-e Parwan neighbourhood that I visited with Seth in 2019). After returning to Kabul in the context of the defeat of the Taliban by the US military and a range of mujahidin groups aligned to it, these men rented out properties they had seized in earlier years at inflated US dollar prices. The years of the Taliban's control of Kabul saw restrictions placed on Afghanistan's Hindu and Sikh communities: Hindus were instructed, for example, to wear insignia that identified them as non-Muslim *dhimmis* (minorities).

The family's commercial activities continued to be concentrated in Afghanistan until the collapse of Najibullah's government in 1992. Dheepak, however, left Afghanistan in the early eighties, moving to New Delhi, the city in which he had gone on to be raised and schooled. Dheepak's family were permanently based in India for over a decade after leaving Kabul. Yet, as was the case for many other Hindus and Sikhs who had moved to the country from Afghanistan, they found conditions of life and business in India difficult. On the one hand, access to official permits and citizenship was difficult if not impossible for these historic Indian diasporic communities that had long ties to Afghanistan and India's North West Frontier. On the other hand, business conditions in India were not favourable to the types of trading activities in which such families specialised: there were high levels of competition in India's markets, and major Indian traders were able to run businesses on minucule profit margins. In the face of these difficulties, Dheepak and his father moved from Delhi to Tashkent, having heard from Afghan traders based in Central Asia of the types of business opportunities that Uzbekistan offered in the years following the Soviet collapse. In Tashkent, Dheepak and his father (the family's women stayed on in Delhi along with Dheepak's elder brother, who was training to be a doctor) functioned as 'shuttle traders': they brought 'all types of goods' from Dubai to Tashkent on a regular flight. While Dheepak remembers working conditions as having been 'difficult', largely as a result of the local police force's hostility to the presence of foreign traders in the city, the business was successful: father and son were able to make a decent living for themselves while also sending funds back to India for their families.

After working for three years in Tashkent, Dheepak moved to Moscow. Until the end of the nineteenth century, Sikh and Hindu communities from Afghanistan had stationed themselves in Moscow in order to arrange the money transfers that made trade between Kabul and Russia possible.²⁹

²⁹ See Hanifi 2012. For the early modern period, see Dale 1995.

While the scope for such activities was dramatically narrowed during the high years of the Soviet Union, traders such as Dheepak's uncle did keep these links alive from the 1960s onwards, mostly through their involvement in official barter trade. During his time in Moscow, Dheepak was involved in the trade of Chinese goods to Russia. In the early 1990s, Sikh and Hindu traders from Afghanistan were among some of the first traders to import goods to Russia from Asia (initially from Hong Kong, where they had established contacts, and in later years Taiwan, Thailand and eventually China). The networks involved in this type of trade, however, were not exclusively 'Hindu': men such as Dheepak's father distributed commodities as loans (*qarz*) to Muslim traders from Afghanistan who had moved to Russia and Ukraine after the collapse of the pro-Soviet regime in which they had served and the subsequent outbreak of a civil war involving the country's mujahidin factions.

However, Dheepak's stay in Moscow was shorter than expected: he was attacked while walking between the market and the apartment he was renting, losing a considerable sum of money as a result. After this, Dheepak moved to Kiev in Ukraine, where his uncle (who as we have already seen had been travelling to Ukraine since the 1970s in connection with the official Afghanistan–USSR barter trade) ran a well-established business in Kiev's Troeshchina wholesale market.³⁰ Dheepak told me that he initially worked for his uncle for a paltry salary of \$50 a month simply because he wanted to learn the business and find out how to be a successful trader in Ukraine. He went on to tell me, however, that he soon left his uncle's business because he realised that it would be impossible to learn how to trade from a relative: those close to you can never deliver the discipline that a successful master–apprentice relationship requires. For some years, then, Dheepak sold goods on a percentage basis in Kiev, taking the goods from importers based in the bazaar and selling them in the city's markets.

After some months, Dheepak was able to bring his father to Ukraine from Tashkent, helping him to adjust to the city's business practices over the coming years. In the late 1990s, Dheepak and his father entered into a business partnership with a leading Odessa-based Afghan Muslim trader, Riaz, whose funeral I documented in [Chapter 2](#). At the time, aged in his early forties, Riaz had studied in one of Odessa's military academies and only returned to the city in 1992. The Muslim and Hindu traders pooled their capital and travelled to Dubai and Taiwan in order to

³⁰ The Troeshchina market in Kiev is a centre for the wholesale of goods imported from China. As in the case of Odessa's Seventh-Kilometre Market, Troeshchina is the base of businesses run by Vietnamese and Afghans. A community of Bangladeshis who initially came to Ukraine in the 1990s also operates out of this market.

bring goods for sale in Odessa. Additionally, these traders also formed a 'group' (*gruh*) that brought commodities to Ukraine for other traders of an Afghan background working in Ukraine, charging their clients a percentage of the total costs of the products they bought for them. During this phase of their trading activities, the partnership had to contend with competition from traders newly arriving from Afghanistan: the 'newcomers' sought to take control of a large share of the now very profitable market using finances brought from Kabul. Dheepak recounted to me how during these years some Afghan Muslim traders had sought to force him and his father out of the market. He claimed that the support of the Muslim traders with whom they had developed business partnerships had allowed them to withstand the pressure and continue to trade in the city. By the early 2000s, Dheepak and his father had switched their activities from shuttle trading between Dubai and Taiwan to purchasing commodities in bulk in Yiwu. Rather than selling 'all types of things', father and son had now also moved into a specialist trading operation – work gloves – which they purchased in Yiwu's Futian market as well as directly from factories elsewhere in China. The business has been a high-volume activity for several years, although, he told me in 2016, the financial crisis of 2008 and then the conflict between Russia and Ukraine in 2014 had resulted in the market 'slowing' and ultimately reducing the size of their overall trading activities. Whereas Dheepak had travelled to Yiwu in China around once a month in the mid-2000s, by the time I spoke to him in the summer of August 2016 he only made the trip on three or so occasions each year.

By the time I met him in 2016, Dheepak had started to think seriously about his future in Ukraine given the state of the market in Odessa and as his children were now finishing their schooling and would enrol to study at university. On the one hand, Dheepak told me that his daughter would be expected to marry within the Afghan Hindu community and there were very few marriageable men in Odessa. On the other hand, the bazaar had been 'asleep' (*khow*) for many months; he was now eating into his family savings in order to keep the businesses going and did not know how long this situation would last. Yet Dheepak was also reluctant to move out of Odessa: 'How many times can I go somewhere, find a new house for my family, build up a new business, learn the new culture – it is very tiring and I am tired of moving', he told me one day as we sat in his shop in the market. Despite his reservations about moving his family and business yet again, Dheepak was considering making a visit to London. He was in possession of a UK business visa that he had yet to use and told me that he needed to travel to the United Kingdom should he wish to make a successful visa application for the country in the future – he would

also use the visit to explore business opportunities in the country. Dheepak also told me that he had heard of a new UK government scheme that issued business visas to people who invested in the country. He would also seek legal advice about the scheme during his visit to the United Kingdom and explore the possibility of relocating his family to London – a course of action undertaken by several other Afghan Hindus and Sikhs based in Odessa.

Dheepak's life history demonstrates the importance of interreligious relationships between Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims from Afghanistan in the development of present-day commercial networks operating within the conductive tissues of the Eurasian corridor. Cooperation between Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus has proved vital to commercial portfolios established in the context of exile and international migration. Traders such as Dheepak and his father and uncles supported the activities of Muslim Afghans by providing commodities and credit; they also established partnerships that allowed all traders to access commercial suppliers in Asia with the relatively low levels of capital they possessed. Finally, while there are clearly tensions between Afghan Muslims and 'Hindkis' – the term used to refer to Sikh and Hindus collectively – traders mitigated these by offering political, economic and social forms of support to one another, recognising, in a competitive economic environment, the mutually beneficial nature of cooperation.

Islamic Cosmopolitanism?

Hindu and Muslim traders from Afghanistan work alongside one another in Odessa's Seventh-Kilometre Market. Tensions do exist between different religious communities active in the market, yet it is especially notable, given Afghanistan's political dynamics, that cooperation between Muslim, Sikh and Hindu traders plays a critical role in the approach they take to earning a livelihood. It is tempting to assume that the forms of trust and reputation that such relationships require arise as a result of the immediate need for cooperation in the context of exile and migration. Yet evident in the ethnography that follows is the cultivation, maintenance and reproduction in Odessa of interpersonal commercial relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims that have been invested with significance over several generations. In this sense, relationships that cut across boundaries of religious identity and affiliation point towards the vitality of historic sensibilities and modes of doing commerce in Muslim Asia.

Having been born in Afghanistan before being raised in India and intermittently living in Uzbekistan, Russia and China, Dheepak now sat

at the desk in his spacious shop in Odessa's Seventh-Kilometre Market. He counted his earnings for the day and gave instructions to a Muslim labourer from Guinea. Another employee – a Muslim in his thirties from Jhelum in Pakistan's Punjab province – carried boxes of gloves around the interior of the shop. Meanwhile, news from India was beaming out of a television set positioned directly opposite the desk at which we were sitting.

Dheepak was not alone in his shop that day. His father, who ran a small business across the market's 'Kharkivsky Square' (named such because the buses that freight goods from Odessa to Kharkiv park in the square), had not joined his son for their usual cup of mid-morning chilled green tea delivered to the shop by a mobile café run by a Ukrainian. Father and son were at loggerheads over Dheepak's wish to make a substantial payment from their businesses to his elder son – a trained doctor who is based in New Delhi with his family. Dheepak had argued that he had worked hard and over several years to develop the family's business activities: as his brother already owned a home and enjoyed a stable salary, there was little need for him to take a slice of the profits of a company to which he had contributed little. The conflict had grown to such a degree that father and son no longer lived under the same roof: Dheepak's father and mother had moved into a small flat, whereas Dheepak lived with his family in a large and highly valuable detached house with a garden.

A further man present in the room was Nasir, a Farsi-speaking trader of Sunni Muslim background in his early forties. Nasir's family is originally from a mountainous region in north-eastern Afghanistan but has been based in Kabul since the early 1970s. Nasir currently lives in Yiwu where he runs a trading company that assists Afghan traders visiting the city from Ukraine in the sourcing, purchase, storage, customs clearance and transportation of commodities. Nasir moved to China from Afghanistan in 1998 having been one of a handful of Afghan students that were awarded Chinese-funded scholarships by Afghan officials connected to the mujahidin government led by Burhanuddin Rabbani (d. 2011). He studied international relations at a respected Chinese-language university in central China and went on to successfully study for an MA at the same institution. It was only in 2006, after failing to secure a position in Afghanistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, that Nasir turned his Chinese-language skills (fluency in written and spoken Chinese) to use in the field of trade, opening a trading office in Yiwu. He told me that during his student years he had known that Afghan traders lived and worked in Yiwu, but having focused on his studies he had never had the time to visit the city let alone conduct business there.

Initially, Nasir's main activity centred on the trade in small commodities between Yiwu and Afghanistan: he facilitated (for a commission rate) the shipments of traders based in two of Kabul's main wholesale markets (the Mandawi and the so-called 'Bush market' in which items procured from the US military were available for sale in the early 2000s). This type of business mainly revolved around the types of commodities that are popular among the many private security companies established in Afghanistan in the years of NATO occupation – heavy-duty boots, reporter-style waistcoats and equipment such as torches, for example. Traders from Nasir's home region in eastern Afghanistan were especially active in this trading niche. This was partly because of their connections to former mujahidin commanders who had now moved into the private security sector or successfully sought employment in the Ministry of Defence. Another reason that people from Nasir's region themselves give for being successful in these activities is that their villages are located close to the Afghanistan–Pakistan border; as a result, historic trade routes run through their villages, and people from them are thereby regarded nationally as being expert traders.

Due to the gradual withdrawal of NATO forces after 2014, and restrictions on the activities of private security companies in the country, however, there was a substantial decline in this type of trade between China and Afghanistan. In the context of these changes, Nasir created new geographical niches in his portfolio of trading activities. Nasir assisted, for example, a Pashto-speaking trader based in London with the shipping of bags and suitcases between Yiwu and London. Yet it was in Ukraine where Nasir had developed his business activities most successfully, especially in the eastern city of Kharkiv, the base of several traders from his region of eastern Afghanistan. The traders in Kharkiv used Nasir and his fluent Chinese to buy and arrange for the transportation of goods from Yiwu to Ukraine, benefiting from his services on a commission when they visited Yiwu on annual trips to source and procure commodities to sell in Kharkiv. Additionally, due to his close relations with Chinese suppliers in the Futian market, as well as with the factories that supply them, Nasir is able to arrange for the Kharkiv-based traders' shipments to be delivered on a credit basis. This mostly means that they are expected to make a partial payment on the purchase of the commodities and to meet the remaining costs three months after the despatch of their products from China.

Nasir had travelled to Ukraine in the summer of 2016 along with his wife and their three-year-old son in order to meet with his business clients in the cities of Kharkiv and Odessa. Such visits form an important element of the business activities of such China-based traders and are

an important way in which trading networks are sustained and expanded. These trips are used to explore new markets, make relevant business contacts and follow up on the collection of overdue debts from the previous season's trading. Traders switch the blocks of flats in which they live in Yiwu for the homes of their friends and business associates in Odessa, Moscow and Kharkiv. Nasir also holds a Ukrainian-residence permit, which makes travel between China and the country relatively straightforward, although not without difficulties: he has to remind himself of his children's dates of birth in preparation for the inevitable questioning that Afghans holding such documents face on arrival in Ukraine. He had told me that he was interested in seeking out clients and potentially opening a business in Odessa, and it was partly with this aim in mind that he had visited the city. During his visit to the city, he also visited a Pashto-speaking man from south-eastern Afghanistan who sold cosmetics in Odessa, and with whom one of his associates in Yiwu was involved in a conflict over the costs of shipping goods between Yiwu and Odessa.

In addition to catching up with business partners, smoothing over conflicts that had arisen in the preceding months and recovering unpaid debts, Nasir had also visited Ukraine to arrange his young son's circumcision, an operation that an Azeri doctor based in the city of Kharkiv conducted. According to Nasir, the operation, which he believed was crucial for all Muslim boys, was rarely carried out in China, and, when it was, Chinese surgeons performed the procedure in such a manner that the child's penis did not heal for several months. The young boy and his mother were sitting with us in the shop that day.

Nasir and Dheepak conversed with one another in Farsi, though Dheepak told me he had not learned the language in Afghanistan or from his father, who spoke both Farsi and Pashto fluently, but over the course of the many years that he had worked alongside traders from Afghanistan in Tashkent, Kiev and Odessa. I had come to know about Nasir and Dheepak's relationship in Yiwu when Nasir had remarked that other traders from the same region of eastern Afghanistan as him had been shocked to discover that he preferred to be hosted by a Hindu Afghan than 'one of his own'. Indeed, confirming the important role that the provision of hospitality plays in the enactment of and claims to be cosmopolitan,³¹ Nasir chose on his trip to Odessa to accept the hospitality (*mehman nawazi/mehman dusti*) of his Hindu friend and partner rather than the invitations made by men from his ancestral region of Afghanistan. After the shop closed for the day at 12 noon, a group of

³¹ Werbner 2016.

traders from Nasir's home region invited Dheepak, Nasir and me for dinner in an Afghan restaurant in Odessa. Having eaten, we returned home to Dheepak's house; Nasir's wife and young child had been there all along with Dheepak's wife and children, chatting and sipping tea – the pot in which it was served, they remarked, had belonged to them in Kabul, and they had carried it with them on leaving the city in the early 1990s.

Nasir and Dheepak's relationship arose not merely from the odd encounter in Yiwu or Odessa but over a generation of interactions between Muslim and Hindu traders in Kabul. One of Nasir's closest friends and associates in Yiwu is Atiq. Aged in his mid-thirties, Atiq is from an established Kabul-based trading family whose ancestral home is in a small town in the east of the country close to Nasir's home region. Atiq has already performed the hajj pilgrimage on several occasions and lives with his Afghan family in Yiwu – both hajj and family life are important public markers of a trader's personal success and reputation for being honest and trustworthy. Atiq's trading skills, however, have a long pedigree: his father is widely regarded by traders in Yiwu and beyond as having been one of Kabul's first merchants to bring commodities from China to Afghanistan, notably the *bicycle-e chinoiyi* (Chinese bicycle) that was popular with city children in the country during the 1980s, which he imported to Kabul from Hong Kong. Dheepak told me how his and Atiq's fathers had worked together closely in Kabul's bazaars in the 1970s and 1980s – Atiq's father would give the goods he brought to Afghanistan from Hong Kong on credit to Dheepak's family business; Dheepak's father would sell these in the bazaar to merchants from across the country. Indeed, I visited Atiq in his trading office in the Mandawi market of Kabul in August 2019, and he pointed to the precise shop from which Dheepak's father had run a business before leaving Afghanistan in the early 1990s. Nasir told me that he had become friends and entered into a business relationship with Dheepak after being introduced to him by Atiq.

Several dynamics were thus visible in a shop in Odessa in which Chinese-made work gloves were sold at wholesale prices. Most obviously, the shop was a meeting place for traders and workers from countries across 'the global South', ranging from Guinea in Africa to Pakistan, China, Afghanistan and India in Asia. A relation that was central to this site of interaction in long-distance trading networks in Ukraine today, however, was between a Hindu and a Muslim, both of Afghan nationality. While Dheepak's family had left Afghanistan after the mujahidin's rise to power, Nasir had benefited from the same political grouping: they had assisted in him securing a scholarship to study in China. Dheepak and Nasir's relationship has flourished in the context of commercial nodes

that have arisen as a result of 'economic globalisation' and geopolitical projects of Eurasian connectivity. Yet their relationships also stretch back over several generations of Muslim–Hindu commercial interaction in Afghanistan, interactions that are intricately connected to the intergenerational circulation of credit, commodities and reputations.

'My Customers Are Christians, Hindus and Jews – Yes, Jews!'

Relationships between Afghan Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus are also important in London. Far from having been absorbed into one-dimensionally 'religious' immigrant communities in the city, Afghan Sikhs and Hindus continue to construct relationships in the field of commerce with Muslim immigrants from Afghanistan to the United Kingdom.

In January 2018, for example, I travelled from Shanghai airport to Yiwu by bus. During the course of the journey, I spoke to two traders from Afghanistan who had travelled to China from London on the same flight. One of the men was a Muslim from central Afghanistan who held Danish citizenship yet lived and worked in the United Kingdom. He sold prayer mats, telling me, when I visited his shop five months after our meeting in China, that he preferred to work in the United Kingdom because the country's Muslim community was considerably larger than that of Denmark, which meant he could sell larger quantities of the product in which he dealt. The second man on the bus identified himself as being a Hindu from the town of Khost in eastern Afghanistan. As I mentioned earlier in the chapter, no families from the community continue to live in Khost, and even those living in Kabul reside in residences provided to them as a form of charity by the city's Hindu temples. Yet Hindu traders identifying as being from Khost are especially visible in the Sevastopol Hotel market in Moscow and have also established successful businesses in London. Both of these traders worked, however, in the same wholesale market in London; they had planned to travel together to China to keep one another company over the course of their journey and time away from home. For these two traders, religious difference did not impinge on their establishing a commercial relationship with one another or engaging in the intimate and important practice of undertaking a shared journey. As I have explored elsewhere, shared travel is regarded as critical to assessing the trust of a potential business partner and as a mode of cementing a relationship between two traders.³²

³² Marsden 2016: 193.

Afghans who work in the United Kingdom's wholesale markets are ethnically and religiously diverse. In all the markets, Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs from Afghanistan work side by side. The followers of these different religious traditions are also often engaged in shared commercial partnerships. In the United Kingdom, Afghans have established businesses in parts of British cities long connected to wholesale trade: Cheetham Hill in Manchester, Whitechapel in London's East End and the newer Charles House wholesale market in Southall, West London. The United Kingdom's print media frequently depicts the wholesale markets in which Afghans work as ungoverned spaces populated by illegal immigrants involved in illicit forms of economic activity, ranging from the trade in counterfeits to the smuggling of narcotics and people.³³

The largest such market complex in the United Kingdom is in Southall – a fifteen-minute walk from the Afghan Sikh and Hindu places of worship – and a lively site of sociality: usually visited by wholesalers, the narrow alleys of the market also teem with Afghan families visiting for the day, buying toys for their children as well as decorative items for their homes. A trader from northern Afghanistan told me that he sold goods at wholesale prices to such visiting Afghan families as doing so was only fair as 'they can't afford to buy at retail price'. Afghans in the United Kingdom emphasise their own agency in fashioning commercial spaces in the country. Merchants from Afghanistan established the wholesale market and warehouse complex at Charles House in Southall – a borough in West London that has been home since the 1950s to various South Asian communities – around twenty years previously. Markets such as these, then, are specific sites in which mobile Afghan merchants cultivate and sustain the legacies and sensibilities of complex forms of Afghan urban living.

In some of these markets (especially in Manchester's Cheetham Hill), Afghan Muslim, Sikh and Hindu merchants have occupied business niches that have been vacated by successive earlier trading networks – Jews from Russia's Pale of Settlement and Eastern Europe, followed by Pakistanis from Kashmir and Punjab, were previously the most visible communities in Cheetham Hill.³⁴ Importantly, Afghan traders are aware of the complex and religiously plural histories of the neighbourhoods and markets in which they work today. Some, indeed, consciously represent their ways of dealing with diversity in a manner that replicates universalising and utopian understandings of cosmopolitanism. They often also do so in a manner that challenges dominant images of Afghans in the settings in which they work as being ultra-conservative religious fundamentalists.

³³ Manchester Evening News 2017. ³⁴ Cesarani 1998, Halliday 1992, Werbner 1980.

A trader who runs a successful wholesale business in Cheetham Hill that deals in hundreds of 'lines' of pound shop items told me in Yiwu in January 2018, for example: 'I am only interested in humanity: my customers are Christians, Hindus, Sikhs and Jews, yes Jews, and I treat them all in the same way. Go around and tell people that Afghans are not terrorist but hard workers and humans!' The trader's remark points to the manner in which the traders not only openly reflect on their ability to establish relationships in culturally diverse settings but also do so in a manner that enables them to contest negative stereotypes of Afghans and Muslims that are of widespread significance in the varying European settings in which they work.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the ongoing if contested significance of ethno-religious minorities to Eurasian connectivity. It has argued that while there has been an evident decline in levels of religious diversity in cities across Afghanistan, ethno-religious minorities continue to play a role in the make up of long-distance trade networks, especially those active in the Eurasian corridor. This challenges the notion that Afghanistan's urban 'de-cosmopolitanisation' inevitably marks the loss of its population's nuanced ways of living and working in culturally complex social environments. Older modes of conducting commerce across religious boundaries are being cultivated instead, sustained and nurtured in new and different contexts. It might be tempting to assume that such religiously plural commercial universes and practices are persistent only among an older generation of traders with experience of trade in pre-conflict urban Afghanistan. However, the chapter has suggested that a younger generation of traders has learned about and acquired the linguistic and cultural capacities and skills for such modes of commerce in settings outside of Afghanistan. Afghanistan's plural past is now the subject of intense focus by intellectuals, students and policymakers in Afghanistan, groups that are playing an active role in initiating debates about the country's historic religious diversity. Far from being solely located in 'heritagised' sites of memory, or assuming the form of utopian projects of society and the self, I have underscored in this chapter the living and pragmatic aspects of such legacies. Wholesale markets dealing in Chinese commodities in Odessa and Manchester may ultimately play a more significant role in the vitalisation of Kabul's historic legacy of cosmopolitanism than restored buildings in the confines of its old city.

Afghanistan occupies an important place in the imaginations and identities of Sikhs, Jews and Hindus from Afghanistan who work in settings across the Eurasian landmass – and it is the nature of the relationship between Afghan trading networks and the country today that is the focus of [Chapter 6](#).

6 An Alternative Eurasian Economic Geography: Afghanistan's Role in Long-Distance Trade

Much thought and writing about Afghanistan assumes that the country is located in a peripheral manner to global circulations of finance and capital. By contrast, this chapter considers the relationship of mobile Afghan traders to Afghanistan and argues that commercial nodes within Afghanistan act as vital hubs that are rich in the types of capital and commercial personnel critical for long-distance Afghan networks of credit and trade. A consideration of the entangled trajectories of commercial actors and migrants also challenges the depiction of Afghanistan as a one-dimensional departure point for migrants. The country instead plays a central role in inter-Asian circulations of goods, capital and people and occupies a critical role in interconnected and multidirectional geographical trajectories of merchants and migrants. Literature focusing on Africa has shown that trading networks and the nodes at which they coalesce can play a critical role in economic development.¹ Similarly, Afghanistan's trading networks and the nodes important to them inform development across Eurasia in settings where we might least expect them to do so – the arrival of consignments of Chinese commodities in Odessa, for instance, being intimately connected to flows of capital from Afghanistan to Europe and China. In this sense, tracing Afghan trading networks reveals connections between different parts of Eurasia – connections in which Afghans are themselves active in constructing.

The chapter focuses on ethnographic material concerning the intertwined flows of commodities, capital and people, as well as the practices and social relationships implicated in such flows. It seeks to contribute to thinking in the social sciences about the political economy of Eurasian connectivity by addressing a distinction visible in much of the relevant literature between economic geographies regarded as being of central significance and others depicted as peripheral, marginal or 'small scale'. In the expanding body of scholarship on the effects of globalising processes in Eurasia, research tends to focus on either centres of power and economic life or the peripheries of these. At one level, an impressive body

¹ Carrier 2016.

of literature documents the experiences of mobile actors hailing from Eurasia's economic peripheries in its political and economic centres. Studies of Central Asian migrants in Moscow, of labourers from post-socialist countries in Istanbul and of migrants in China's great economic centres, such as Guangzhou, have enriched our understanding of migration at a Eurasian scale.² At another level, scholars have also recognised the importance of Eurasia's economic peripheries to long-distance trade and commerce.³ They have written accounts of the local, national and global imaginaries associated with new Asian transport corridors that link China to Central, South and South East Asia⁴ and assessed the influence that the Belt and Road Initiative is having on the livelihoods of informal traders operating in China's mountainous borderlands.⁵ The picture of everyday life in Eurasia's globalised hubs and in its economic peripheries that arises from such scholarship adds complexity to the top-down approach of much work in political science and international relations. Anthropologists and scholars in related disciplines have brought attention, instead, to the ways in which the agents of 'globalisation from below' – to use Gordon Mathews' felicitous phrase – are involved in informal forms of economic activity that are of global significance.⁶ The individuals and communities involved in such forms of 'globalisation from below' lead precarious lives that geopolitical projects of Eurasian 'connectivity' and 'development' exacerbate rather than ameliorate.⁷

Studies of 'globalisation from below' have added great nuance to models that construct rigid distinctions between the cores and peripheries of the global economy.⁸ I have suggested thus far, however, that rather than locate the trading networks studied in this book as 'above' or 'below' the nation state, it is helpful to think of them as thriving at the interstices of multiple geopolitical projects of Eurasian connectivity. Taking the perspective of long-distance trading networks and the merchants who form them reveals alternative geographies of Asian connectivity and shines light on the role played by traders in authoring these. Much writing in the field of history and anthropology has uncovered 'alternative' affective and intellectual geographies that question taken-for-granted assumptions about the geographic location of centres of knowledge and learning.⁹ As we have seen in the preceding chapters, focusing on the

² Excellent studies in this vein include Bloch 2011, Bodomo 2010, Chu 2019, Mathews, Gordon, Lin and Yang 2018, Mathews, Lins Ribeiro and Alba Vega (eds), 2012, Nikolotov, 2019, Reeves 2016, Sahadeo 2011b.

³ Zhang and Saxer 2017 and Saxer 2016a.

⁴ Rippa and Saxer 2016, Rippa 2019, Saxer 2011, Saxer 2016b.

⁵ Mostowlansky and Karrar 2018. ⁶ Mathews, Lins Ribeiro and Alba 2012.

⁷ Mathews, Lin and Yang 2018 and Cheuk 2016. ⁸ Wolf 2010.

⁹ Bayly 2007 and Pickett 2013.

activities of specific trading networks illuminates the significance to these of particular nodes, regardless of their location in dominant geopolitical landscapes. Understanding commercial nodes rests upon an analysis of their multiple significances – economic, cultural and political – for specific networks. Approaching them from this standpoint reveals commercial and geopolitical geographies that are rarely considered important in conventional accounts of Asia's political economy. Yiwu, for example, is a relatively small city that is peripheral to much trade between China and the wider world yet of critical significance to multiple and entwined trading networks.

By actively tracing intermeshing flows of people, things and credit, this chapter illuminates the broader alternative economic geographies that the networks cultivate and across which they operate. I use the term 'alternative geographies' to highlight particular 'circuits of consumption, exchange and production' that rest uneasily within a framework of economic cores and peripheries.¹⁰ Geographers have deployed the term 'alternative economic geographies' to index modes of organising the economy that either actively resist or are not subsumed within the concept of 'capitalist modernity' and the regulated forms of financial transactions with which it is associated. By focusing on the importance of credit networks to the activities of long-distance commodity traders, this chapter builds on such work yet employs the term in a broader sense than that used by most geographers. It does so for two reasons. First, if it is unhelpful to cast the trading networks under study as opposed to state boundaries or derivative of geopolitical projects, then the economic geographies explored in the chapter are not 'alternative' in the sense that they 'resist' global capitalism. The alterity of the networks is visible, rather, in the ways in which the flows of capital, commodities and commercial personnel they facilitate connect sites and contexts rarely thought of as having wider forms of economic significance. Second, the geographies explored are alternative because they question the dominant ethnic, national and geopolitical categories through which space is widely assumed to be organised.¹¹ The circuits of trade and migration described in what follows bring parts of the world into a dynamic relationship with one another, despite the fact that they are rarely if at all examined through the lens of 'regional connectivity', be this in a cultural, economic or political sense.

¹⁰ Leyshon, Lee and Williams 2003. ¹¹ Nowicka 2012: 13.

'We've Got No Choice, But Why You Come Here Completely Confuses Us': Yiwu's Afghan Traders at Home in Kabul

Kabul's wholesale Mandawi market is a commercial centre of national and indeed transregional significance that throngs with traders and customers at all times of the year. This is especially so in the days running up to the Eid holidays, when even pedestrians find it difficult to navigate their way through the narrow alleys and lanes that are used by labourers working in the market to pull barrow loads of commodities from warehouses to retail shops. Located on the southern bank of the Kabul River, the vast area making up Mandawi is sandwiched between the historic Murad Khani neighbourhood (a focus of recent heritage conservation activities by international organisations), key government buildings on the northern bank and the old city neighbourhood of Shur Bazaar (which was home to many of the city's Hindus and Sikhs before the 1990s) to its south. The main artery through the market is Mandawi Road, which runs between Kabul's iconic Cinema Pamir and its famed money exchange market, Sarai Shahzada.

Mandawi itself is a labyrinth of concrete structures – the largest comprising four to five stories – that house shops selling goods on wholesale and offices that act as the Afghanistan bases for trading, transport and money transfer businesses, including those discussed in the context of Yiwu in [Chapter 4](#). The history of these commercial buildings (*sarai*) varies – some were constructed before the outbreak of conflict in Afghanistan in the late 1970s, though most were built in the 1980s or after the US-led invasion in 2001. Individual merchants – after whom they are often named – financed most buildings in the market, and the shops inside them are used by traders on the basis of either monthly rental (*keraye*) or long-term lease (*sar qulfi*) arrangements. In the *sar qulfi* (literally 'head key') arrangement, traders make a lump payment to ensure continued access to a property and the business reputation it accrues over several years if not decades.¹²

As with many other markets within and beyond South and West Asia, the Mandawi market is organised into different sectors based on the category of goods for sale. In addition to the (in)famous 'money market' (the Sarai Shahzada), sections of Mandawi are devoted to the sale of cloth and ready-made clothing (mostly manufactured in India and China), rice (mostly imported from India and Pakistan), tea (imported from China and Vietnam) and dried fruits and nuts (including a great deal of Afghan

¹² See [Rahimi 2019](#).

produce as well as goods imported from Iran and beyond). There is also a part of the market (the *kah furooshi*) devoted to the sale of songbirds, cockerels and pigeons – birds traditionally kept in homes as well as being used in fighting contests. A considerable proportion of the small commodities sold in Mandawi – from toys to stationery, scarves, electronic gadgets and kitchen utensils – are imported to Afghanistan from China by traders such as those we have met in previous chapters of the book.

Above all, the Mandawi is a place of trade and work for many of the people I have come to know while conducting research on Afghan long-distance trading networks. The day starts early – shortly after morning prayers – and merchants dealing in commodities purvey their goods to customers (almost exclusively men) from across Afghanistan. Chinese-made 'pashminas' that are often 'branded' with the names of famous European fashion houses are sold by importers to men who run stores in military camps established by NATO – the scarves are sold to foreign troops stationed in Afghanistan. The trade in toys in the market is also brisk. Yet toy-sellers also require access to considerable warehouse (*gudam*) space, mostly located in ramshackle areas adjacent to trading offices. Another line of work in which many traders are active is the sale of the type of clothing purchased by the country's many security companies, especially hard-wearing boots – notably the 'Czech' design favoured in the country but now made as 'copies' in China. Commodities such as these are widely available in Kabul's 'Bush bazaar' – a market located close to the centre of Kabul that initially specialised in the sale of goods illegally procured from the American forces stationed in Afghanistan but increasingly evolved into one in which Chinese-made copies of such goods – often procured in Yiwu – were sold by Afghan traders. Traders in the market often come to be closely associated with the commodities in which they deal, being referred to by their fellow merchants as 'Hajji shawl' (*hajji chadari*) or, more embarrassingly, 'Mr dummy' (*aghai choshak*), for example.

If it is a site of commerce, hard work and exchange, then Mandawi is also famed for its intense sociality; traders delight in recounting the history of the structures from which they operate and discussing the changes that this part of Kabul has seen over the past decades. A working day in Mandawi is incomplete without plentiful cups of green tea, dishes of seasonal fruits – such as the famed *angur-e hussaini* (grapes) in the autumn months – and traditional Afghan lunches, either eaten in smoky but exquisite eateries or cooked in pressure cookers outside traders' offices and wholesale shops. If interactions with customers mostly revolve around hard-nosed bargaining about the cost, quality and design of commodities, then conversations over such delicacies are

often decidedly less commercial in nature. Afghanistan's political dynamics, the security situation in the provinces from which customers are visiting Kabul and the social and economic situation of fellow traders are often the focus of discussion. In my interactions with them, traders would regularly recount their knowledge of the history of the buildings in which we sat – frequently pointing out the shops in which Hindus and Sikhs had run businesses before leaving the country in the 1980s and 1990s, for example. I was also often reminded to take note of the ethno-linguistic diversity of the personnel working in such businesses: 'He's a Tajik, I'm a Pashtun, there's a Herati over there, and if you'd come two weeks ago we even had a Hazara! The idea that we Afghans don't get along is all made up by you English people. Now make sure you write that in your book!', remarked a partner in one money transfer agency I visited at the invitation of an Afghan trader I had come to know in Yiwu. Traders from a variety of backgrounds and with older and more recent histories of participation in commercial life in Kabul collectively emphasise that the market is a site of historic importance to the country. Traders also emphasise their sharing sensibilities and ethical standards that hold within them the potential for transcending the cultural and political divisions that are so important in Afghanistan.

Traders who have forged commercial and social relationships with one another in Yiwu meet regularly during the course of their visits to Kabul. Traders mostly make such visits to Afghanistan on the weeks on either side of the Eid holidays, an important time of the year to visit family in Afghanistan but also to oversee the operations and accounts of businesses and offices in Kabul. During the four visits I made to Kabul while conducting the research for this book, I spent many afternoons with traders I had initially come to know in Yiwu in a Turkish restaurant popular among traders and officials located in Kabul's New City (*shahr-e naw*). The restaurant is a twenty-minute walk past graffiti-daubed blast walls, government buildings, parks and newly built shopping centres to the north of Mandawi. Friendship circles comprising four or five men would regularly assemble over tea, juice and a shisha in the café from the mid-afternoon until just before the onset of darkness, 'the bazaar is so slow I left it to my apprentice', my friends would often remark. Importantly for my research, several traders told me they were able to talk to me more openly in Kabul than in Yiwu. 'We want to talk with you in China', remarked one trader in clothing who is in his late thirties, 'but we are under a lot of pressure – even if we go to the mosque or take some money out of the bank we get a knock on our office doors from the police.'

Traders do not treat return visits to Kabul simply as a momentary break from the pressures of life in China, however. Much of their time in Kabul

is spent dealing with the difficulties of running a business in Afghanistan, which is especially complex in the context of unannounced closures of border posts (*sarhad*), changes in Afghan government policy relating to customs duties (*gumruk*) and frequent attempts by the government and its 'international partners' to restrict the informal trade. Traders must also contend with Kabul's insecure environment, in particular the relatively regular kidnapping (*iqtitaf kardan*) of merchants for ransom. They also face direct threats from militants in the country, including those identifying as belonging to the Taliban. Militants regularly request traders for contributions to their activities in the form of alms (*zakat*) or taxes on any land (*ushr*) of which they might be in possession in their home villages. One trader told me how one of his clients in the southern city of Ghazni had recently been visited by a Taliban representative who had asked him for a monetary contribution to the movement. When the trader said that if he were to make such a contribution he would be investigated by the city's authorities, the Taliban representative replied, 'well, in that case, buy a consignment of motorcycles to be picked up from your shop'.

Doing Fieldwork: A Drive through North-Western Afghanistan

In addition to documenting and analysing the networks and nodes important for long-distance Eurasian trade in commodities, I am also seeking across this book to offer insights into the ways in which researchers might set to the task of studying vast and geographically dispersed networks and the intersections between these and geopolitical processes. While I spent much of my time in Afghanistan with traders based in Kabul, I also visited locales that had been of historical significance to specific networks. As will have become apparent in the preceding chapters, I conducted fieldwork in a range of nodes that conversations with traders revealed to be especially salient for their commercial activities and social lives. At the same time, I also sought to travel and move with traders between such nodes, documenting shifts in their behaviour, self-presentations and identities in and across such settings. Conducting fieldwork in this manner required me to adjust my plans in response to data that I gathered over the course of my fieldwork. As we saw in [Chapter 3](#), for example, conversations with Afghans in Yiwu brought Jeddah to my attention as a node of significance in China – it was on this basis that I visited the city and traced connections between Jeddah and Istanbul that were of particular importance to Central Asian émigré merchants. As I now explore, in addition to conducting research in nodes that are of contemporary significance, I also sought to visit sites that were of historic

significance to the networks under study. Making visits to sites of prior relevance to their activities meant it was possible to arrive at a better understanding of the histories of particular networks and of the ways in which these and the sites of importance to them are interleaved and layered within the traders' identities, sensibilities and commercial practices. In October 2017, I travelled with a trader from Mazar-e Sharif to Andkhuy, a town of about 40,000 souls, and also to the nearby border post of Aqinah, both located in the northern Faryab province.

We had been planning this trip since meeting one another in Tajikistan in the winter of 2009. My friend had told me many stories over the years of the time he had spent working for influential Afghan companies in Turkmenistan in the 1990s. More recently, the Aqinah border has been developed by Afghanistan's government and international funding agencies as part of a strategy to improve trade with Turkmenistan and to open the country's access to European markets by way of a trade transit corridor to Turkey via the Caspian Sea.¹³ At the same time, Andkhuy has been the home of many émigrés – Muslim and Jewish – from Soviet Central Asia since 1917. Close to the border, Andkhuy was a convenient refuge for Bukharan migrants arriving in Afghanistan in the late 1920s. Wealthier migrants mostly left the town, often moving to Kabul; many others stayed – eventually establishing a healthy industry in carpet production, as well as overseeing the trade in Karakul lamb fur, a commodity of critical importance to Afghanistan's exports until the 1970s.¹⁴ In light of the town's significance for the globalisation of Afghan trading networks, a visit to Andkhuy had long been an ethnographic ambition.

In 2009, we travelled on several occasions to another town that was also home to émigrés from Central Asia, Aqcha. Merchants from Aqcha are active across the Eurasian settings explored in this book. They own supermarket chains in Afghanistan that sell commodities of everyday use imported from Yiwu, run shops in Istanbul's Grand Bazaar that sell Afghan carpets and ersatz 'Afghan jewellery' manufactured in the town or procured by these traders in Nepal and Myanmar and are a visible feature of the bazaars of Jeddah and Dubai, where, as we saw in [Chapter 3](#), they deal in ready-made clothing, machine-made carpets and robes used for conducting the pilgrimage as well as other religious devices, most especially electronic 'prayer beads'.

The road to Andkhuy was in poor condition until 2009, and, unfortunately, our visit to the town never materialised. In October 2017, there

¹³ President Ashraf Ghani inaugurated the Lapis Lazuli Corridor in Herat in December 2018.

¹⁴ Jalallar 2011.

were stretches of the road at which Taliban and even purportedly ISIS-affiliated militants appeared; however, if we were careful and avoided these places from the afternoon onwards, he suggested that our journey would pass without incident.¹⁵ That we would travel in the simple car of a joint friend would mean that militants on the road would be unlikely to attack our vehicle – vehicles used by the security forces and border police that ply this route regularly come under attack, not those of civilians.

The verdant foliage that characterises the road as it leaves the urban peripheries of Mazar-e Sharif and passes by the villages of Balkh does not continue indefinitely. About forty-five minutes after leaving Mazar, the road enters the increasingly arid landscape that stretches up to and beyond the border with Turkmenistan. Water is a scarce resource in this part of Afghanistan. While the region's inhabitants – a complex mix of Farsi-, Pashto-, Uzbek- and Turkmen-speaking peoples – are renowned for being industrious and hard workers – as demonstrated in the many roadside brick kilns – the region's youth have for long laboured abroad and sent remittances to their families.¹⁶ Until the mid-2000s, most labour migration from northern Afghanistan was to Iran – fewer individuals and families also travelled to the Gulf, especially to the UAE and Saudi Arabia, where they worked in the shops, restaurants and warehouses of the émigré traders whose activities were explored in [Chapter 3](#). The poorer Saudi Arabia-based families that are having to return to Afghanistan after living and working in Jeddah and other cities in the Hejaz for over thirty years are mostly returning to their ancestral villages in this region. Over the past five years, increasing numbers of youth have travelled to Turkey, mostly illegally, though sometimes arriving on visas issued to them thanks to the brokerage of powerful figures from this region of Afghanistan who are influential in Kabul and Turkey. Young men such as these often staff the Istanbul-based businesses and

¹⁵ Aside from the purported influence of militants including the Taliban and ISIS, political instability in Jowzjan also increased in the wake of the self-exile to Turkey of one of the region's most well-known and powerful politicians: the Soviet-era militia man and Uzbek leader General Rashid Dostum. In the absence of Dostum, and his regular and widely reported assaults on militants, local people often remarked that both ISIS and the Taliban had carved control of important territory in north-western Afghanistan. Discussions of the geopolitical aspects of the conflict in north-western Afghanistan also focus on the role played by the governments of Russia and the various Central Asian states that the region borders. From 2016 onwards, these states were widely assumed by the country's media to be supporting particular factions of the Taliban in order to destabilise US influence in Afghanistan, as well as to act as a defensive force against the encroachment of ISIS into the Central Asian states and Russia beyond.

¹⁶ See [Hakimi 2020](#). In addition to receiving migrants from Central Asia in the early twentieth century, the region was also the focal point of state-sponsored Pashtun migration in the late nineteenth century. See [Tapper, N. 1973](#).

offices of émigré merchants. I first met the Turkmen-speaking Yusuf Aka, for example, in Mazar-e Sharif in 2009 when he was in his mid-teens; I was next able to meet him in the summer of 2017 in Istanbul, a city to which he had travelled along with his wife where he was employed in a travel agency and import–export company run by an émigré merchant and his wife.

The influence of Turkey and Saudi Arabia is clearly visible in the migratory patterns of north-western Afghanistan but also in its built and cultural environment. Sheberghan – the headquarters of the province of Jowzjan – is home to an impressively sized new mosque constructed in recent years by a Turkish construction company. This particular mosque's design is different from the low-key earth brick structures that are commonplace in north-western Afghanistan: Shiberghan's inhabitants are now able to worship in a replica of Istanbul's Ottoman-era 'Blue Mosque'. Local merchants, including the families of those with whom I conducted fieldwork in Yiwu, raised most of the funds, though the traders told me that the Turkish state also made a contribution.

One of the merchants most actively involved in financing the building of the mosque runs a trade and transport company that has offices in Yiwu, Istanbul, Jeddah and Kabul. The family had risen to public significance in Afghanistan in the 1990s when they ran the market complex in Mazar-e Sharif in which the city's substantial foreign exchange services were located. By building ties with the various strongmen active in Mazar at the time, the head of the family was able to provide security to money merchants based in the market while also making considerable profits from money exchange himself. The family were regarded not only as wealthy but also as religious and reputable merchants: they shunned the displays of lavish hospitality used by some merchant families to achieve fame and notoriety and were instead known to strictly follow an ethic that involved them refusing to accept or provide hospitality to others. The family is known for carefully guarding their relations with others – a nephew of the merchant who was based in Yiwu during my fieldwork was often talked about in terms of not merely refusing to engage in meetings between Afghan merchants but also shunning their company socially. For some of the traders in Yiwu, the man's reluctance to establish relations with other Afghans in the city was overly guarded; 'It's one thing to follow your uncle's advice and not speak to those you don't know', one trader remarked to me, 'but another to entirely cut off all relations.' In the 2000s, the family used the capital they made in Mazar-e Sharif to expand their trading activities into new commercial fields that emerged in the context of the US-led occupation. The merchant's nephew told two traders from Afghanistan and me in Yiwu, for instance, that his uncle

had made good profits importing the dog food that was required by NATO to feed the scores of dogs that were brought to the country to clean landmines and search for remote-controlled explosive devices.

Besides being involved in Afghanistan's expanding market in 'war commodities', the family was also able to use connections they had established in Turkmenistan over the prior two decades of Soviet intervention in Afghanistan to become active in that country as well. Companies connected to the family, for example, imported Turkmen oil to Afghanistan; they also acted as agents in exporting heavy machinery to Turkmenistan from China and Japan. By the late 2000s, as Afghanistan's economy shrank in the context of the withdrawal of NATO forces, the family pursued a range of alternative strategies, opening, for example, a supermarket chain selling foodstuffs and 'items of daily use' that targeted Afghanistan's expanding – if precarious – urban middle class. Many of the commodities of 'daily use' sold in this supermarket chain are purchased in Yiwu, hence the family's decision to open an office in the city. Traders in Yiwu often remarked to me that this merchant has for long played an active role in financing religious institutions (especially religious schools, or *madrastas*) in this region of northern Afghanistan, as well as covering the costs of students from the region seeking religious instruction in the country's urban centres.

We eventually arrived in Andkhuy at around 3 p.m. After a brief stop in Andkhuy, during which time my friend attended the funeral of his relative, we visited a historic mosque complex and looked around the bazaar, seeing the many wholesale shops selling carpets, most of which would be destined for export. We then continued our journey to Aqinah, the border post. The journey took us thirty minutes or so, and we eventually pulled up outside a trading office that also advertised itself as offering shower facilities – the latter being used by truck drivers bringing goods from Turkmenistan to Afghanistan. Stacks of cartons of high-quality cigarettes were a clear indication that the truck drivers also found room in the cabs of their truck to smuggle lucrative items to the bazaars of Turkmenistan. Indeed, as a sandstorm raged outside, our host – who trades in cigarettes across the border and was assisted in the building of his trading office by a loan from my friend – brought us bottles of vodka made in Turkmenistan and plates of fried fish caught in the waters of the nearby Amu Darya (Oxus River). My friend agreed with our host that he would remove the cost of these luxury items from the substantial sum of money owed to him.

In the morning, my friend prepared a fish soup inspired by a famous Russian recipe (*ukha*) that he had learned during many years spent in Turkmenistan, a country in which he had also married a woman of

Ukrainian ancestry and fathered a son (with whom he remained in contact by telephone and sent regular remittance payments to; his eldest son by his Afghan wife had also visited Turkmenistan to spend time with his Russian-speaking half-brother). In addition to being connected to the West Asian corridor, the influence of the forms of mobility and exchange of significance to the activities of traders in the Eurasian corridor is also evident in the thinking and identities of merchant families in north-western Afghanistan. This underscores the significance of being sited at the interstices of multiple Eurasian geopolitical projects for understanding their lives.

We then drove to the terminal of the railway connecting Aqinah with Turkmenistan; the terminal is mainly used for freighting Turkmen oil into Afghanistan, unlike a similar infrastructural development in the Uzbekistan–Afghanistan border post of Hairatan that Yiwu-based traders used to freight goods by train and truck from China. After the police guarding the terminal had shown us around, we set off back to Andkhuy, visiting the home of my friend's eldest son's in-laws. As we parked the car, our host's eldest son was leaving the home's courtyard. The Taliban had recently arrested and jailed some of his relatives for the role they had played in a land dispute: they had purportedly refused to hand over a portion of a disputed piece of land to their sisters, who, according to Islamic law, were entitled to a share of the property. The man – said by my friend to be brave and fearless – told us that the place he needed to visit to meet the Taliban representatives was only a fifteen-minute motorcycle ride away and that he would be back in time for lunch. As we waited, my friend's son found a bottle of Turkmen vodka hidden in his in-law's house and handed the bottle over to his father. Having lived for several years in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, my friend was convinced of the value of a 100-gram shot as an anti-hangover cure. A 100-gram shot quickly became the best part of the bottle, and my friend soon fell into a deep sleep as we waited for the return of the man who had paid the visit to the Taliban.

It was not until the early afternoon that my friend awoke, and the elder son of the home had returned from his mission. He had successfully negotiated the release of all but two of his imprisoned relatives. We now needed to return to Mazar-e Sharif as soon as possible if we were to pass through the contested parts of the road before late afternoon. The drive home was largely uneventful, other than the car in which we were traveling breaking down several times. We arrived back in Mazar-e Sharif before nightfall and without any difficulties.

My visit to Andkhuy brought into focus the geopolitical significance of northern Afghanistan both for Turkey and Russia. Merchants are active

in brokering and mediating relationships between powerful outside powers – such as the Turkish state – and local communities and political leaders, as in the case of Shiberghan’s replica ‘Blue Mosque’. At the same time, the migratory and familial experiences of mobile families in the region more generally demonstrate the ways in which such geopolitical projects become a part of their everyday lives. Making the visit to Andkhuy was important for methodological reasons because it enabled me to have discussions about the hometown of traders currently based in Saudi Arabia and Turkey, facilitating the exchange of memories about work and life in Afghanistan before they left the country to work elsewhere.

Beyond Remittances: Circulations of Credit, Commodities and People

The geopolitics of Eurasian connectivity are visible in Afghanistan’s political and cultural landscape, and merchants from the country play a significant role in mediating relationships between influential geopolitical projects on the one hand and local populations on the other. Rather than inevitably being on the receiving end of capital flows – be these in the form of remittances sent by its overseas communities or investments by influential states and the companies aligned to them – trading networks comprising Afghans are conduits for multidirectional circulations of capital, commodities and people. As I now explore by way of a discussion of the relationships between individual traders and Afghanistan, a consideration of these circulations questions the peripheral role that the country is often assumed to play in inter-Asian dynamics and connectivity. Traders deploy a range of financial instruments and practices of entrustment to secure access to capital within Afghanistan that helps to make possible the wider circulation of money, people and goods across Eurasia. Both the basis and outcomes of such ‘practices of entrustment’ are not necessarily, however, enduring bonds or ties of trust.¹⁷ On the one hand, historians have emphasised the role that ‘gut feelings’ alongside calculations made about the trustworthiness of others plays in encouraging merchants to enter into risky economic partnerships.¹⁸ On the other hand, the outcomes of practices of entrustment are often more helpfully understood as reflecting the roles and activities of individuals and networks at specific temporal junctures. In short, the role that practices of entrustment play in forging the social relationships on which trading networks are based is contingent on multiple factors: a change in

¹⁷ See [Shipton 2007](#). ¹⁸ [Mathew 2019](#).

a person's role or activity in a network also leads to transformations in their relationships with others. The ways in which the traders handle and manage underlying contingency adds a further layer in understanding the durability of commercial networks.

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 lived in Tajikistan along with his elder brother. 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 in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

The conditions of life in Tajikistan were a source of exasperation for Yama when I spent time with him in 2013 in Dushanbe, Tajikistan's capital. During our previous interactions between 2009 and 2013, Yama had talked freely with me 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. Afghans registered as refugees in Tajikistan were not permitted to reside in Dushanbe according to official legislation; 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. Additionally, Afghanistan received repeated visits from Dushanbe's intelligence services asking for 'road money' (*rah puli*) (to cover the cost of the officials' travel to and from work) and 'guest money' (*mehman puli*) (to allow the officers to treat their guests according to local standards of hospitality). In addition, the declining value of the Tajik currency (somoni) alongside official restrictions on the activities of unofficial currency dealers (*saraf; hawaladar*) that were introduced by the country's government in 2015 negatively affected 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.¹⁹ Against the backdrop of a worsening Tajik economy, however, additional and repeated payments made life for Afghan traders and refugees such as Yama unsustainable.

¹⁹ Marsden 2016: 241–47.

From Trader to Sojourner: Central Asia's Steppes to the Black Sea

In 2015, Yama travelled from Tajikistan to Ukraine, where he spent some six months in Odessa. During that period, Yama stayed in multiple apartments – one of which was made available to him by the Afghan ‘smuggler’ (*qachaqbar*) whom Yama had paid \$3,000 to arrange a Ukrainian entry visa. After the apartment was burgled, Yama decided to rent a flat of his own. Yama assumed that the burglar had known he was carrying a substantial amount of cash because he had been provided with this information by the smuggler. Yama’s two young children accompanied him to Ukraine, and he 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 Seventh-Kilometre Market that I introduced in [Chapter 2](#). Most of the approximately 4,000 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).

Afghan asylum seekers in Odessa tend to invest the cash with which they travel to Ukraine in a shop in the Seventh-Kilometre Market. Yama decided not to invest any of the capital (*sarmaya*) that 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 (*saraf*) from northern Afghanistan. Yama explained to me that he had 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 mond*) and his ability to move constrained. Yama’s transition from a trader (*tajir*) to an officially designated refugee (*muhajir*) involved him 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 (*amanat 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, having initially met in Uzbekistan. Shahid had fled Tajikistan in the context of the country’s bloody civil war (1992–97), and the two had established a trading partnership (*sharakat*); they also worked

together in Dushanbe after Shahid had returned to Tajikistan from Uzbekistan when conditions had improved in the early 2000s.

In Dushanbe, the men spent much time together, and their business activities (*marmalah*) became increasingly intertwined. Yama sent Shahid to the Khujand with consignments of tangerines to sell; Shahid was a regular guest in Yama's flat in Dushanbe. Additionally, because Yama was a registered refugee in Tajikistan and was unable to travel outside the country, he entrusted his capital to Shahid, who made use of visa-free travel for Tajikistan citizens to Iran to source products (especially citrus fruits) in Mashhad.

Despite the long-term nature of their relationship and the clear ties of friendship (*dusti*; *rifaqat*) as well as the shared experience (*tajrubah mosh-tarak*) and sharing of food and space that joined Yama and Shahid, Shahid failed to answer Yama's telephone calls from the day he left Tajikistan. As a result, Yama could not retrieve the savings he had entrusted to Shahid.

Yama faced a similar dilemma with one of his Afghan relatives, his brother's brother-in-law (Aziz). Aged in his mid-thirties, Aziz lived in Kabul, where he and his brothers ran a medium-sized business specialising in the sale of construction materials. Aziz had also traded in tangerines with Yama in Tajikistan. Aziz's business in Kabul had declined in size because of the withdrawal of significant numbers of NATO forces in 2014 and a decline in new infrastructure projects in the country. Against this backdrop, Aziz 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 not returned his phone calls in the days leading up to his departure for Ukraine.

Yama's difficulty in recovering debts from his transnational network of business associates, friends and kin underscores how an understanding of the dynamics of long-distance trading networks requires recognition of underlying mistrust as well as attempts to fashion trust. Alessandro Monsutti has made a comparable point in his consideration of the significance of trust to family life in Afghanistan, noting, for many Afghans, that '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'.²⁰ Yama's attempts to gather debts (*qarz jam kumi*) from his close relatives and friends suggest that the threat of physical or reputational vengeance loses its power in contexts characterised by flux, mobility and uncertainty, thereby investing the ability of traders to handle

²⁰ Monsutti 2013: 152.

contingency and an atmosphere of mistrust with even greater significance.

Trusted Friends or Unexpected Partners?

Understanding the calculations that individuals such as Yama make about whom to entrust with their capital in terms of 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 (*amanat kardan*) his money to Dil Agha, a man with whom he had neither worked nor enjoyed close (*qarib*) ties of friendship or kinship. Associates (*ashnaha*) whom Yama had come to know in Odessa had told him that Dil Agha was reliable and trustworthy. And Yama sought to verify these assessments, telling 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 safekeeping to a person known to him over a prolonged period or to a close relative, Yama entrusted the cash to Dil Agha – the trader in children’s bicycles whom I introduced in [Chapter 2](#) – after only a very brief acquaintance. The existence of a social institution – in this case, the market and the intense forms of familiarity among Afghans that it makes possible – that served as a pool of reliable information about commerce and personal reputation for Afghan traders enhanced his ability to do so.

Given the impromptu nature of Yama’s ties to Dil Agha, it is relevant to consider the relationship between the two men in detail.

*‘Gift by the Donkey Load; Account in Ounces!’ Calculation,
Trust and Serendipity*

In the context of intense competition between Afghan traders in the market, Dil Agha had used the cash (around \$20,000) entrusted to him by Yama to buy a larger than usual number of bicycles in Yiwu to sell in Odessa; he was sure the bicycles would sell well – they were a new design that had not hitherto been available in the market. The timing of the purchase and arrival of the bicycles was also perfect, he told me: they would arrive in the early spring season, a time of year punctuated by a series of public holidays in Ukraine, when parents buy bicycles as presents for their children.

However, a couple of months after entrusting the money to Dil Agha, Yama told him that he had found a smuggler (*qachaqbar*) 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. But Yama told Dil Agha that he had made up his mind: he asked Dil Agha to return the cash (*paisa-e nurkh*) that he had entrusted to him so that he could pay the advance fee (*pul-e 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 activities. I asked Yama if he had not been worried that Dil Agha would fail to return the money: he replied, citing the Farsi proverb *bakhshish ba kharwar, hisab ba musqal* (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. The distinction Yama was making here indexes important distinctions in many merchant communities between new entrants to trade who use lavish gifting and hospitality to stake a claim to reputability and success in the absence of having historical backgrounds in mercantile activity.

Entrusting Property, Returning Capital: Kabul's Property Market

Having been asked by Yama to return the money as soon as possible, Dil Agha deployed a financial instrument widely used in Afghanistan by property owners to secure access to cash: a *giraw*. A consideration of the manner in which Dil Agha deployed the *giraw* to raise the capital he owed Yama provides insights into the way in which, for many traders, including those who rarely if ever travel to the country, Afghanistan is regarded as a context that offers the possibility of securing access to resources and capital. 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 recognised legal practice within the part of the country's Ottoman-inspired legal code that relates to mortgages (*raan*).²¹ *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 property's original owner reassumes full ownership. While *giraw* is widely practised in Afghanistan, it is also the source of theological dispute, both in the country and in the wider Muslim world. For Muslims following legal

²¹ For a detailed discussion of the relationship between the Afghan and Ottoman legal systems, see [Ahmed 2017](#). On the use of *giraw* by merchants in Afghanistan and its complex relationship to the country's legal structure, see [Rahimi 2019](#).

traditions other than the Hanafi School, the practice of *giraw* (mostly referred to in Arabic as a *bay' al-wafa'* or 'selling on faithfulness') is regarded as constituting an agreement between seller and buyer to resell a property at the original purchasing price. As 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, sud*).

Afghan traders often point out that the making of regular and rigorous assessments by traders about how far their daily practices relate to Islamic prescriptions is relatively rare. A trader in his early forties who owns a clothing factory in China and a wholesale business in Kabul told me that Islam's role in Afghan traders' business activities should not be over-exaggerated, remarking that '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 *giraw*'s use in the case of Dil Agha illustrates less about the role that Islam does or does not play in the modes of commerce in which the traders are involved than the importance of specific practices of entrustment to Afghan trading networks and demonstrates Afghanistan's non-peripheral position in the Eurasian economic geography under consideration here.

In return for receiving \$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 transfer from Kabul to Odessa using a *saraf* and was able to return Yama his cash by the date on which it was required. Being party to such an agreement involves an important element of risk. This is especially so for an individual such as Dil Agha, who does not live in the country and does not regularly travel there either. While having friends, family and associates in Kabul, Dil Agha does not have 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 the flat in Kabul before the collapse of President Najibullah's regime in 1992. He had initially rented the flat in the Soviet-era *micro-rayon* (apartment block area). Eventually, however, a government scheme

allocated the flat to him in return for a monthly contribution with the prospect of eventual ownership. As with many other government employees, after the collapse of 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, often occupying the properties they owned. According to Dil Agha, however, his positive reputation and willingness to work for a time in the Islamic government meant that – against all odds – he was able to maintain control of his property; the property was not, moreover, merely an important aspect of the 'tangible presence of the absent migrant' as it also allowed him to secure access to the forms of capital required by his inter-Asian trading activities.²² Against this context, 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 for the border with Slovakia with his two children, having been instructed to leave by a 'people smuggler'. After staying for several weeks in a hotel in a town near the border, the family successfully travelled to the Netherlands by way of Slovakia, Austria and Germany. Before embarking on the journey, Yama agreed to take with him Dil Agha's brother's son, Karim. Aged in his early twenties, Karim had been working with Dil Agha in his shop on the Seventh-Kilometre Market for the past four years. However, uncle (*kaka*) and nephew (*barodarzada*) did not get on well. Karim was of a religious persuasion (*mazhabi*) and irritated Dil Agha by preaching against alcohol and insinuating that his wife dressed inappropriately for a Muslim. Additionally, three years carrying heavy goods between the warehouse and shops in the Seventh-Kilometre Market had taken its physical toll on Karim: he suffered serious health problems, and Dil Agha advised him either to return to Afghanistan for treatment or to travel on to Europe with Yama and file an asylum case. Yama agreed to pay half of the fee (around \$7,000) requested by the people smuggler – he knew that, despite being in poor health, Karim would be able to help Yama's children (aged ten and thirteen) to traverse what the people smuggler had warned them would be a long and difficult journey across the Carpathian Mountains.

²² An extensive body of anthropological literature explores the significance of houses in mediating the relationships between migrants and their homelands. See, for example, Dalakoglou 2010.

Before travelling to Western Europe, Yama entrusted a further tranche of cash to Dil Agha. Over the coming months, Dil Agha transferred Yama's *amanat* to the Netherlands in instalments using exchange agents (*saraf*) based in Odessa. When I met with Dil Agha in China in May 2016, he proudly showed me WhatsApp messages informing Yama how much money he had 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.²³

Dil Agha took a risk by giving his property to a loan provider based in Kabul and using the *giraw* as the instrument by which to do so. In the case explored earlier, the transaction was eventually completed: Yama gained access to his savings, which allowed him to move with his daughters to Europe; Dil Agha eventually paid off the debt he owed, and thus recovered ownership of his apartment. However, both men entered into the relationship in the context of experiences of breakdowns of trust: Yama was unable to recover debts from close friends and relatives to whom he had lent money; Dil Agha had come to see how his friends in Odessa had frequently gone against their word during commercial exchanges with him. Furthermore, traders in Afghanistan are acutely aware of the more general risks involved in *giraw*. The launch of a new Afghan currency in 2001 resulted in many families who had given their property on a *giraw* basis turning to the country's formal legal system to ensure that the money owed to them was calculated based on the equivalent cost in US dollars rather than local currency. Traders do make careful judgements about whom to entrust with 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 abstract assumptions about the role that pre-existing ties play in enabling individuals to make assessments about the future behaviour of a partner to such an exchange.

Favours and Friendship in Kabul

Traders play an active role, then, in the circulation of capital, commodities and personnel through the networks in relation to which they operate across Eurasia; in order to do so, they make calculations about whom to trust based on knowledge about traders' reputations that is pooled in social institutions of which they are themselves authors as well as acting

²³ Marsden 2020a.

upon their 'gut feelings'. As I now explore, traders working in Afghanistan must also engage in specific practices and activities in order to ensure the country is able to function as an important node in wider networks in the manner discussed earlier – such practices and activities enable the building of social relationships in a wider environment characterised by mistrust, political volatility and fragile state institutions. In the ethnographic material presented in what follows, I focus especially on the importance of food and sociality to the building of friendships between traders and security officials – figures who can play an important role in the recovery of loans and capital in the context of breakdowns of trust.

Relationships between merchants and state officials in settings such as Afghanistan are conventionally interpreted through the analytical lens of corruption and bribery. Afghanistan's political and economic dynamics are, indeed, widely analysed by scholars and policymakers alike in relation to discourses of corruption, and the country regularly appears in one or other of the scales used to rank the most corrupt countries in the world. At a general level, traders also talk about the 'system' within which they work as being pervaded by 'institutional corruption' (*fesad-e idara*), and the payments they make to officials as 'bribes' (*rishwat*). They also hold nuanced views on government attempts to reduce levels of corruption in the country. On the one hand, they say they pay bribes because there is no alternative – they wish their profits went to state coffers rather than the pockets of corrupt officials. Yet they also argue that legislation introduced by the authorities to reduce corruption actually compels more and more traders to use informal or 'black' (*siah*) methods. Many traders said that a crackdown by the government on the use of banks to transfer cash out of the country, for example, had resulted in them having to pass through several layers of bureaucracy to move money internationally, eventually resulting in traders using *hawala* networks for all – rather than a proportion – of their transactions. Finally, traders also distinguish between independent commodity traders and other individuals involved in the provision of contracts for government departments. They often argue that if independent commodity traders – including themselves – do 'circumvent the law', this is largely because of their need to increase profits as much as possible with the aim of establishing a reserve of capital substantial enough to allow them to move their families out of the country in the event of a major breakdown of security.²⁴ By contrast, contractors (*qaradadiha*) were spoken about as making very large sums of money based on their connections (*wasita*) to key government officials

²⁴ For the range of activities in which traders engage that require them to work 'outside the law', see [Ibañez-Tirado and Marsden 2020](#).

(*karmandha-ye dawlat*) – making money in this way was regarded as difficult (*kar-e janjal*) but also morally questionable (*kharab*) work. Indeed, traders in Yiwu often suggest that it is by acting as channels for the ‘black money’ (*pul-e siyah*) made from government contracts, rather than the sale of commodities themselves, that their compatriots in the city are able to own expensive cars and lead luxurious lifestyles.

Work by anthropologists similarly suggests that the notion of corruption is overly one-dimensional to account for the role played by gifts and exchanges in the making of relationships between commercial personnel and government officials. In an important book, David Henig and Nicolette Makovicky challenge the tendency of social scientists to explore favours through a zero-sum transactional approach.²⁵ This way of looking at favours, they argue, ignores the role played by gratuitous behaviour in the making of social relationships – it reduces acts of giving to the calculated expectation of future benefit. We have already seen how many Afghan traders think that a key problem with the notion of trust as it relates to their everyday lives is that it fails to allow for an important aspect of being human: a person’s ability to change their mind. For these traders, the notion that a gift will inevitably result in a return is a naive reading of human behaviour. Humphrey has suggested furthermore that analysing favours through a purely transactional lens fails to recognise the ‘moral aesthetics of action’ that inform such practices.²⁶ By using the term ‘moral aesthetics’, Humphrey is drawing attention to the ways in which the giving of favours does not merely carry out a function but constitutes, rather, a mode of acting that is ‘initiatory, “extra”, ethical, and gratuitous’.²⁷ As such, she suggests, favours might well result in mutually beneficial relationships for those involved, but they also endow ‘actors with a sense of standing and self-worth’²⁸ through bringing into being ‘indefinitely lasting relationships’ and ‘circles of beneficence’,²⁹ even in the most politically volatile of environments.

Debt Collecting: A Journey into Eastern Kabul

In November 2016, I journeyed around Kabul with Afghanistan-based merchants seeking to recover a loan – making a series of trips with traders seeking to recover a loan and officials that sought to help them allowed me to better understand the types of social practices and social relationships that are of central importance to the city’s ability to function as an inter-Asian commercial node for multiple trading networks.

²⁵ Henig and Makovicky 2016. ²⁶ Humphrey 2016. ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 51. ²⁸ *Ibid.*
²⁹ *Ibid.*: 68–9.

Some months earlier, Rauf Baig – a man in his late thirties from Mazar-e Sharif – had made a loan of \$10,000; however, he had not given the money on the basis of ‘gut feelings’ or in the absence of making calculations on the trustworthiness of the debtor (*qarzdar*): his debtor (Sharif), rather, was his wife’s sister’s husband – a type of kinship relationship referred to in Afghanistan as *boja*. In much of Afghanistan, the relationship between men who are married to sisters (*bojas*) falls in between the category of kinship and friendship and is associated with sentiments of closeness, support and trust; on this basis, Rauf Baig told me, he believed that no issues would be raised by his lending the money to Sharif. After requesting the payment of the money on a series of occasions, however, his *boja* ceased to answer his telephone. Rauf Baig’s wife told him that her father had also tried in vain to contact his indebted and missing son-in-law. Indeed, no one in the family was able to locate the part of Kabul in which Sharif was living. Rauf Baig, however, urgently needed access to the money: he was planning on moving from his home in northern Afghanistan (where he lived with his wife and children) to Kazakhstan with the aim of opening a trading office specialising in the export of Kazakh wheat to Afghanistan. Rauf Baig required the money to enable him to pay for an expensive Kazakh visa and also to ensure that he had sufficient cash at his disposal during his initial journey. Participation in the wheat trade in Kazakhstan is widely regarded by traders as a potentially very lucrative commercial activity. Yet the import in wheat from Central Asia is also regarded by traders in Afghanistan as especially high risk and dangerous: Kazakhstan’s security forces are said to be hostile in general towards Afghan citizens; more importantly, influential ‘mafias’ – made-up of wealthy Afghans and local businessmen – hold monopolies over the trade in flour between the two countries. Rauf Baig had decided to take the risk of travelling to Kazakhstan due to the economic difficulties of living in Mazar-e Sharif: he had recently lost his job working for a bank owned by one of the city’s major businessmen after it fell into arrears having failed in an application for a lucrative Afghan government contract.

In addition to seeking to open a trading office in Kazakhstan, Rauf Baig was knowledgeable about the trading activities of Afghan merchants in China, especially in Yiwu, and part of the capital he was planning to invest in Kazakhstan had its origins in the trade between China and Afghanistan. His brother (Ilham) – aged in his mid-twenties – had lived in Yiwu for the past three years at the time he lost his money. Ilham had initially worked in Yiwu for an export company run by a Turkmen merchant family from the town of Aqcha in north-western Afghanistan that I introduced in [Chapter 3](#).

Through his brother's presence in Yiwu, Rauf Baig's family enjoyed close connections to this business family and were aware of the prospects and problems of conducting business in a range of regional locales. In light of this, they were also considering sending a further brother to Ashgabat (Turkmenistan's principal commercial centre and also its capital city) to open a trading office of his own. Doing so would facilitate the flow of Chinese commodities to Turkmenistan and Turkmen oil to Afghanistan.

In order to embark on these courses of action and benefit commercially from the relationships his brother had established, however, Rauf Baig first needed to recover the capital he had lent to his *boja*. He first turned for advice to one of his close friends in Mazar-e Sharif, Abdullah – the merchant who travelled with me to Andkhuy who identifies as being Turkmen on his father's side and Uzbek on his mother's and has extensive experience of trading in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia. Most recently, Abdullah had run a transport company that arranged the travel of NATO convoys into and out of Afghanistan using 'the northern route' between the country and the Baltic port of Riga. Abdullah informed Rauf Baig that he had close contacts in Kabul's National Directorate of Security (*amniyat-i milli*), and that if he wished to find his debtor these would be the people most likely to help in a concrete manner. Abdullah had made these contacts during a visit to Delhi a couple of years ago (when his business activities were doing especially well). As I explored earlier, Afghans of a variety of backgrounds travel to hospitals and medical centres in India and Pakistan for urgent treatment – this form of mobility is rarely connected to commercial activity but does add a further layer to the experiences and understandings of inter-Asian connections. Abdullah had travelled to Delhi for a much-needed check-up in a heart clinic some years after having suffered a heart attack. On arriving in New Delhi, he had rented a flat in which to stay for the month he planned to stay in the Lajpat Nagar area of the city, a neighbourhood well known as being a hub for refugees, health tourists and traders and moneylenders from Afghanistan.³⁰ As he was waiting in the office of an estate agent, Abdullah told me how he began chatting to another man whom he also recognised as being from Afghanistan, and who, it would transpire, had also come to the city in order to have a heart check-up. The two chatted with one another and agreed that they should rent a flat for the duration of their stay – it would be better and more economical than living alone. In the days that followed, the two men in their fifties enjoyed one another's company, even though their preferred pastimes were markedly different.

³⁰ Warsi 2015.

Abdullah's years in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia had contributed to his love of vodka. His newfound friend, Bismillah, while having been an officer in the Soviet-aligned government of the 1980s, had recently become an active participant in the Naqshbandiyya Sufi brotherhood and sought to lead a pious lifestyle. Nonetheless, the two would sit together and eat the delicious meals prepared by Abdullah in the evening (many traders from Afghanistan pride themselves on their ability to cook, learned over years of *musafiri* [travel and being away from home]). Abdullah would enjoy his meals with a few 'pikes' (glasses) of whisky, while the pious Bismillah, who enjoyed watching the sunrise over the Delhi skyline in the early morning after saying his prayers, would ensure the fresh Afghan bread bought from a local bakery and strong tea were ready for the blurry-eyed Abdullah when he woke in the morning.

Besides creating a close friendship through acts of care and commensality performed against the backdrop of a shared sensibility of mortality, Abdullah also told me how he had prevented his new friend from being ripped off by an unscrupulous Indian doctor. The first Indian doctor whom Bismillah had visited had told him that he urgently needed to have an operation to open his arteries (*rag*) as they were blocked. On hearing this, Abdullah suggested that Bismillah get a second opinion from a doctor that he had come to know and trust over many years. According to the second doctor's suggestion, Bismillah's condition was treatable by medicine alone, and there was no need for an operation. After spending a month together in Delhi, the men returned to Afghanistan: Abdullah resumed his contracting obligations with NATO, and Bismillah returned to his position in the security forces based in Kabul. Abdullah informed a gathering of men in Bismillah's house in Kabul that he only realised what an important person his friend was when they were leaving for the airport: he had caught a glance of Bismillah's passport, and it turned out that he was a general. In narrating his discovery of Bismillah's influential status in this way, Abdullah was actively rejecting the notion that his relationship with 'the general' was transactional. Instead, he sought to underscore the ways in which an underlying 'moral aesthetic of action' endowed the men and the indefinitely lasting relationship they had established with mutually reinforcing 'standing' and senses of 'self-worth'.³¹

Rauf Baig and Abdullah – with myself in tow – prepared to go to see Bismillah in his home in the north-west of Kabul. But as Bismillah had only recently returned from the hajj pilgrimage, it would be impossible to visit empty-handed (*dast-e khali*). So, alongside a couple of the general's colleagues whom Abdullah had got to know on visits he had made to call

³¹ Humphrey 2016: 68–9.

on his friend subsequent to their Delhi trip, Abdullah and Rauf Baig brought a goat to sacrifice in honour of the general and his having completed the sacred pilgrimage. Abdullah made the choice of lean goat (*buz*) rather than fatty lamb (*gusfand* – the meat usually served at such events in Afghanistan), specifically with Bismillah's health and food prohibitions (*parhez*) in mind, another demonstrable act of care and thought for his friend. While Bismillah would not join them in drinking the Danish vodka, there was no reason why other less piety-conscious people in attendance could not partake in a 'pack' or two in the general's residence – a bottle of Danish vodka (no doubt originating from the Danish embassy) was also procured from a shop known to illegally sell alcohol.

Abdullah and his friend planned to sacrifice the goat in the garden of the general's new home. The house was on a street with extra security arrangements, including a police post and traffic-slowing devices meant to prevent the progress of bomb-laden vehicles. On welcoming us into the house, and being congratulated on his new home, the general mentioned that he had only rented the downstairs part of the house – this was actually rather cramped given that he lived with his wife and three children – but, he said, 'we are people used to leading a simple life, so it poses no problem'. A different family rented the upstairs part of the house. Abdullah immediately remarked that there were few high-ranking generals or officials as honest and true (*sadiq*) as this general in the entirety of Afghanistan. His honesty, Abdullah surmised, no doubt arose from his training in the years of Afghanistan's communist government in the 1980s: no matter the nature of the crimes committed in war, he said, Afghanistan's communists were free from corruption, noting that 'even Afghanistan's communist-era ambassadors drive taxis in London'. Abdullah and Bismillah consciously enacted and performed their honesty and frugality, implicitly contrasting their ethical qualities to those of high-ranking security officials in Afghanistan that are widely known to make significant sums of money from corrupt practices (*fasad fil ard; fesad-e zamin*), especially in government procurement contracts and the illegal trade in narcotics.

After an exchange of pleasantries and recounting once more the story of how a Turkmen–Uzbek trader and Farsi-speaking intelligence official had initially met in New Delhi, preparations got underway for the goat feast. As the goat was to be grilled in the form of kebabs, it would be cooked by the men present rather than being sent to the women of the household to prepare, as might well have been the case if another dish (such as the lamb and rice preparation known as *palaw*) was on the menu. With the general busy receiving guests to congratulate him on returning from hajj, it was

clear that Abdullah was to be in charge of getting the goat ready: a great deal had already been made, after all, of his cooking abilities by the general himself, who fondly remembered the dishes prepared by Abdullah during their time together in India.

Abdullah and the general's colleagues went outside into the small garden that was sandwiched between the guesthouse and the main road and began to prepare the kebabs while also enjoying a pack of vodka outside the confines of the general's guesthouse. Present too was a cousin of the general who would not drink in front of his uncle but took the opportunity to do so when out of his sight. The men cut and chopped the meat into kebab-size pieces. As it was already getting late, Abdullah decided that a special ingredient – Kiwi fruit – would be added to the marinade – this would ensure that the meat would not be too tough for the general in light of it not having been marinated (*aqta kardan*) the night before. Kiwi fruit juice had been recommended to Abdullah as an ingredient that softened even the toughest of meat, so several kiwis were peeled and squeezed on to the goat, which was also smothered in onions, garlic and tomato paste – all softening agents used in Afghan cooking. Within twenty minutes, Abdullah was threading the meat on to the skewers before one of the general's colleagues (who had removed his gun holster from under his jacket and placed it on the chair beside the grill) grilled it over hot charcoal. Soon afterwards, Abdullah carried the first pieces of meat to the general and the assembled guests who were sitting with him inside the house. Few could believe that such soft meat could have been goat, though there was also some concern from Abdullah at least about its rather gelatinous nature. Abdullah looked in the direction of the men with whom he had prepared the marinade, commenting that they had put too many Kiwis in the marinade: the fruit was such an effective ingredient in marinades that it had turned the meat into water (*aw shud*). Despite the disappointment over the marinade, the guests ate the meat alongside further glasses of Danish vodka for those participating in that aspect of the gathering.

After four hours of intense cooking and eating, the conversation finally turned to Rauf Baig's attempts to recover the loan he had made to his *boja*. Abdullah remarked to the general that he personally had no plans to come to Kabul. It was Rauf Baig who needed to come to the city to track down a defaulter (*qarzdar*), so he also thought it would be a good opportunity to accompany his friend and congratulate the general on his having returned from hajj. The general thanked Abdullah, immediately asking Ilham about the identity of the loan defaulter and his whereabouts in the city. He then gestured to one of the colleagues working with him to accompany the men to the relevant police station (located in the extreme west of the

city) – they should contact the local officer of the security services and ask for his assistance in tracking the defaulter, the general instructed the men. Shortly afterwards, the group left the general's house. Abdullah and Rauf Baig informed him they would come again and visit him before returning to Mazar-e Sharif.

The goat sacrifice at the general's home was but the first of many gatherings over the course of the next week as Rauf Baig, Abdullah and their friends in the security services sought to locate Sharif. Having left the general's house, Rauf Baig, Abdullah and I returned to the house of one of Rauf Baig's relatives from Mazar-e Sharif where we slept off the goat and vodka of the afternoon. In the morning, we drove in a car (entrusted to Abdullah for the duration of his stay in Kabul by one of the general's colleagues) in order to pick up a man who was known to the men as being on close terms with Rauf Baig's *boja*.³² The man – a Pashto-speaker from the Pakistan–Afghanistan frontier region known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas – said he knew the rough location of Rauf Baig's *boja*'s house. Yet he did not wish to join us on the trip: he would lose face before his friend if he was seen escorting Rauf Baig to his door. Abdullah and Ilham told him he had nothing to worry about: he could hide in the back of the car as they looked for the home.

We then drove to the other side of Kabul to find the debtor. Having driven around the streets of houses where Rauf Baig's *boja* purportedly lived yet having had no luck locating the man – despite asking the local baker (*nanwai*), a key holder of knowledge among urban communities in Afghanistan – we proceeded to the local police station (*awza*).³³ I did not enter the station and instead waited in the heavily guarded car park adjacent to it. After waiting for nearly two hours, the men returned with a National Directorate of Security (NDS) officer, and we all drove back to the area in which it was presumed the defaulter was living and resumed the search. Once again, however, there was little luck with the investigation; as it was now dark, all in the group – including the NDS officer – returned to central Kabul, where Rauf Baig took them for a meal of kebab and roast chicken before driving them to their homes.

The next day proceeded along very similar lines, although in the evening the NDS officer, his colleagues and one of Abdullah's friends from the northern city of Kunduz returned to the house in which we were staying for a special meal of *palaw-i turkmeni* (Turkmen *palaw*) that Rauf

³² Initially, Abdullah's son – working in a trading office in Kabul at the time – had arranged a large Humvee vehicle for his father's use in Kabul. Abdullah rejected the vehicle, saying that it would draw too much attention to him and his friends and that his son must have been stupid to even think that he could drive around Kabul in such a vehicle.

³³ Bayly 1996.

Baig's relatives had prepared. The *palaw* was accompanied by several glasses of 'local alcohol' (*sharab-e watani*) derived from sugar cane; the 'energy drink', as the traders referred to it, which was far cheaper than imported vodka, had been procured from a shop that the NDS officers vouched for as providing safe products. On this occasion, a Pashto-speaker from Kunduz – who worked as a contractor for the Ministry of Defence – joined the Turkmen traders and Dari-speaking security officials. According to Rauf Baig, the man sympathised with the Taliban. There were moments of friction in the encounters that took place, mostly about the various languages they spoke and the extent to which these were accorded equal respect in Afghanistan. Yet there were also repeated expressions of solidarity – the Taliban-inclined Pashtun from Kunduz did not object to the other men partaking of a glass or two of home brew spirit made from sugar cane while he relaxed and enjoyed a cigarette. At the end of the evening, the men rose to bid farewell – only after, however, they had shared their telephone numbers with one another, remarking 'we can be of use to each other if we fall into the wrong hands'.

Despite all the social gatherings and work invested into ensuring their conviviality, little progress was made in locating Rauf Baig's *boja*. Indeed, Abdullah and Rauf Baig distinguished the nature of their ties with the general from those they had cultivated with the NDS. The evening of goat kebab was framed aesthetically in terms of the lasting and mutually respectful friendship between Abdullah and the general. By contrast, Rauf Baig and Abdullah intimated to me that the delay in finding Sharif was down to the unwillingness of one or other of the NDS officers to complete the task without some form of payment; at least one of the men was directly seeking a bribe (*rishwat*). Thus, if the form of the favours offered across the days and nights were similar in nature (food suitable for festivals and hard-to-procure alcoholic drinks), then the social, moral and aesthetic quality of the gatherings and the tenor of the relationships between the traders and local officials were categorically different.

After my departure from Afghanistan, Abdullah and Rauf Baig continued trying to locate the debtor for several days, yet, they told me on the telephone, they had eventually returned to Mazar-e Sharif empty-handed. Ultimately, Rauf Baig's plans also changed: rather than establishing a business in Kazakhstan, he entered the employment of the US military as a translator in their base in Mazar-e Sharif. Abdullah set to work building a *sarai* (a heavy goods vehicle park with storage facility) on some land he had purchased in the outskirts of Mazar-e Sharif on a road leading to the Turkmenistan border. Having spent considerable resources in ensuring that his son's name appeared on the documents verifying ownership of the land, Abdullah died of a heart attack.

Conclusion

Afghanistan plays a powerful and important role in the activities of traders from the country who operate in a range of settings across Asia. This chapter has sought to shed light on the nature of the traders' relationships with Afghanistan, and the practices, skills and social relationships that play a critical role in maintaining their ties to it. I have sought to go beyond thinking about such relationships solely in terms of either remittances or corruption and bribery. Instead, the chapter has illuminated a more multidimensional set of practices and instruments that mediate traders' relationships with Afghanistan, including the use of property for accessing capital and the aesthetics of gift-giving and hospitality. The chapter has also emphasised the need to understand relationships between traders and officials in relation to enduring concepts and features of everyday life, especially those of friendship, the forms of solidarity forged in the context of human mortality and the ethical dimensions of the giving and receiving of favours.

The chapter has contributed to the overall arguments of the book in two specific ways. First, it has brought attention to the alternative geographies that are of significance to trade and exchange across Eurasia. Usually regarded as peripheral or indeed a barrier to regional interconnectivity, Afghanistan plays a critical role in the circulation of commodities, merchant personnel and migrants across Eurasia. We have already seen in [Chapter 2](#) how access to commercially gifted people has enabled the entrenchment of Afghan trading networks in the former Soviet Union and their expansion into Western Europe. The material presented in this chapter raises broader conceptual issues for understanding the role played by trading networks in inter-Asian connectivity. Examining flows of refugees alongside a consideration of the activities of Afghanistan's traders questions the assumption that Afghanistan is peripheral to globalised circulations of finance and commodities. When viewed from the perspective of traders, the country is 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 nodes, as well as challenging the notion that Afghanistan is merely a point of departure for refugees and migrant labourers. A consideration of such alternative geographies highlights the role played by trading networks and the nodes at which they coalesce in processes of development and in connecting regions rarely thought about in relation to one another.

The chapter's second specific contribution to the book's argument has concerned the significance of traders' modes of handling interlacing forms of trust and mistrust for understanding the durability of trading networks. The chapter sought to move beyond abstract conceptualisations of trust and mistrust to focus instead on tangible acts of entrustment (*amanat kardan*). The chapter explored, for example, the giving of cash for safekeeping and the raising of capital on property, as well as bringing attention to the contingency inherent in the manner in which traders cultivate relationships of trust. 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 in such social formations. They have done so ethnographically by focusing on 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 bringing 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 earlier emphasises that social actors do not 'trust' each other in the abstract, but only in relation to specific issues. Because the risks that merchants confront are varied and complex, the types of relationships that they build, and the ways that they do so, are necessarily varied. More than reflecting an assumption that long-term relationships lead to predictable behaviour on the part of trusted individuals, building valuable relationships requires access to reliable information and the willingness of individuals to take advantage of unexpected opportunities by forging ties with people little known to them.

An important dimension of this chapter and those preceding it has been the uses to which traders put food in their attempts to forge the ties upon which their activities depend. In [Chapter 7](#), I explore in detail the role played by food and the eateries in which it is served to the dynamics of trading networks and ask what a consideration of this aspect of the traders' activities also reveals about Afghanistan's cultural influence on inter-Asian sites of interaction.

7 Afghan Restaurants in Inter-Asian Worlds: Prestige, Information Pooling and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Long-Distance Trade

Introduction

The focus of this book thus far has been on the networks and nodes that are critical to the activities of long-distance Afghan traders and on the ability of these traders to navigate the complex Eurasian geopolitical contexts they inhabit. One of the overarching themes addressed in the previous chapters has been the significance of social institutions authored by the traders in maintaining and sustaining the networks through which they operate, and the nodes at which these coalesce. Social institutions of significance to the traders' activities have included diaspora organisations in the post-Soviet world and religious foundations in Turkey and Saudi Arabia. This chapter focuses on a specific type of social institution that Afghan traders use to anchor their networks and maintain their trading activities in the Eurasian and West Asian corridors of connectivity: the restaurant. To devote an entire chapter to establishments as apparently mundane as the restaurant in a book addressing the conduct of commerce at the interstices of Eurasian geopolitics might appear overly indulgent. Yet the 'Afghan restaurant' is a perennial feature of life across the settings Afghan traders work. Traders identifying as Afghan are not the only mobile people to visit such establishments on a regular basis; Afghan restaurants across the contexts explored in this book are frequented by diverse groups of mobile people, including West Africans, Gulf Arabs and Central Asians. Emphasising the inter-Asian significance of Afghan restaurants, the chapter extends the arguments advanced in [Chapter 6](#) on the problems of assuming that Afghanistan occupies a peripheral position in Asia-wide dynamics. If the country's moneylenders play a critical role in the economic development of Eurasian trading nodes, then its restaurateurs and cooks are active agents in the cultural aspects of inter-Asian commercial settings.

An emerging body of literature in the anthropology of food and related disciplines has theorised the insights that restaurants offer into multiple areas

of life. At one level, scholarship on restaurants focuses on the insights they furnish into the shifting and culturally diverse expressions taken by pleasure and leisure in the context of late capitalism. Anthropologists have examined, for instance, the management of tensions over leisure between restaurateurs, publics and Islamists in the Middle East.¹ Other studies have explored the ways in which, in specific contexts, frequenting restaurants and teahouses enables engagements with ‘diverse people and ideologies’ and facilitates the development of a ‘culture of hospitality and tolerance’.² Most work on restaurants as sites of leisure in anthropology tends to dwell, however, on the insights that ‘immigrant restaurants’ in Euro-American cities reveal into the nature of ‘late capitalism’. They focus on the role that subordinated immigrants – ‘ethnic feeders’ – have played in the development of urban life, the notion of ‘ethnic’ as a mode of reference that avoids the sensitivities of race and in the forms of ‘cultural appropriation’ and ‘orientalism’ in which such eateries and their clientele are implicated.³ More nuanced work emphasises the agency of ‘ethnic restaurateurs’ in the ‘transaction of taste’ and urges scholars to ask ‘immigrant restaurateurs what they think’ – a call to which I respond in this chapter, albeit in a very different type of setting from that of ethnic eateries in cities such as New York and London.⁴

At another level, anthropologists of food emphasise the varying ways in which the shared consumption of food – referred to as ‘commensality’ – is of critical significance to cultivating and sustaining social relationships and ties of trust.⁵ As we saw in [Chapter 6](#), the preparation and sharing of food is of deep significance to the ways in which traders establish and sustain relationships, both with one another and with state officials. Equally important, however, is recognition that everyday acts of food sharing are often imprinted with mistrust: traders often remark that having fed officials they will eventually end up ‘being eaten’ by them, underscoring the fraught and uncertain nature of their relations with people in positions of power and authority.⁶

Emphasising the importance of recognising the agency of cooks and restaurateurs as well as the relationship between food sharing and the experience of mistrust, this chapter focuses on intersections between restaurants and geopolitical processes. Afghan restaurants, it argues, are of critical importance to the transmission of shared sensibilities among traders identifying with the country and to complex forms of cross-cultural exchange and interaction that take place in fraught geopolitical contexts. In an expanding literature on the insights that the study of

¹ Deeb and Harb 2014 and Salamandra 2004. ² Suhail and Lutfi 2016.

³ Narayan 1995. ⁴ Ray 2016: 4. Lee 2009, Cho 2010.

⁵ See, for example, Kerner, Chou and Warmind 2015. ⁶ Bloch 1999 and Fausto 2007.

'sensory intercrossing and encounters' offers to theorising Asian interactions, many scholars have focused on historic and contemporary food practices culinary cultures.⁷ Jack Goody, for instance, argues that it is possible to distinguish the African and Eurasian civilisations on the basis of food cultures and processes of agricultural production.⁸ Building on Goody's geographically expansive scholarship,⁹ several anthropologists and historians have similarly explored processes of cultural interaction and mixing by way of an investigation of mobile food cultures and cuisines.¹⁰ At the same time, much scholarship has also recognised cuisine's critical role in the making of bounded forms of national and local identity.¹¹ This chapter builds on these insights by exploring the geopolitical significance of restaurants and food to commerce and culture in inter-Asian settings.

In his work on Sufi lodges in central Bosnia, Henig underscores the important role played by food sharing not only in forging but also mediating multiple relationships in complex social and political environments. Henig argues that the Sufi lodges in which he has worked act as sites of everyday forms of 'gastro-diplomacy'.¹² Building on Henig's work, in what follows I argue that restaurants are more than a mere backdrop to the making of social and commercial relationships. They are, rather, of vital significance to the durability of trading networks: traders collectively value restaurants as secure sites for the pooling of knowledge and information, and restaurateurs as well as cooks play an especially significant role in the overall cultural dynamics of networks. A great deal of work has emphasised the importance of a shared 'Muslim culture' to the forms of connectivity being established along the so-called 'New Silk Road'.¹³ This chapter, by contrast, argues that a wider pool of resources is of importance for Afghan modes of navigating across fraught geopolitical contexts and the contributions they make and leave in the settings in which they live.

Persian New Year in Yiwu

One of my most memorable evenings while conducting fieldwork in Yiwu in 2016 fell on 20 March, the evening of Nowruz, Persian New Year.

⁷ For an overview, see, [Low 2019](#). ⁸ See, especially, [Goody 1982](#) and [Goody 1998](#).

⁹ For an informative volume that critically assesses Goody's contribution to the field, see [Klein and Murcott 2014](#).

¹⁰ See, for example, [Chapters 3 and 4 in Lambourn 2018](#) and [Nabhan 2014](#). For an ethnographic study of the transregional aspects of food consumption in South Asia, see [Osella and Osella 2007](#).

¹¹ See, for example, [Raviv 2015](#) and [Gvion 2014](#). ¹² [Henig 2016](#).

¹³ [Simpfendorfer 2009](#).

During fieldwork in Yiwu, I often went for a beer in one of the two ramshackle bars popular with foreign traders that were located in 'Maida' – the 'Middle Eastern' part of Yiwu discussed in [Chapter 4](#). On previous evenings, I had met groups of traders from the Iranian cities of Gilan and the island of Kish, Afghans visiting Yiwu from Minsk with their Belarusian business partners, as well as Kenyans, Ugandans and Congolese merchant-migrants. This area was also the place in which I had witnessed the gatherings of Sikh and Hindu merchants discussed in [Chapter 4](#). Spending time in Maida allowed me to get a broader perspective on life in the city than confining myself solely to Afghan spaces of commerce and sociality allowed.

On the evening of the Persian New Year, I met a trader in his late fifties from central Afghanistan. He informed me that he had come to Yiwu from Odessa in Ukraine to purchase the skateboards he sold on a wholesale basis in Odessa, a city in which he had lived for twenty years; it quickly turned out that we shared several friends in Odessa, including Dil Agha, whose business activities and friendship circles I discussed in [Chapters 2 and 6](#). After a couple of toasts, we turned our attention to a group of young Iranian men and women also sitting in the street outside the bar. They were celebrating the New Year and dancing to Iranian pop music, telling us they were visitors to Yiwu from Tehran and Mashad.

A couple in their late fifties was sitting in a room that overlooked the street. After a while, the man and woman stood up to dance to the Persian music. After returning to the plastic table next to that around which I was sitting, the woman told us that she was originally from the western Pakistani city of Quetta; her husband was the son of an Iranian who had moved to Pakistan 'many years ago' in connection with the carpet trade. The couple, the woman's husband interjected, had for long been involved in the trade of used cars in Pakistan and had decided to visit China to see whether they could start importing goods – such as bags and textiles – to Pakistan. Over the course of the evening, it became apparent that the couple's trip to China had resulted in them realising that the costs of importing goods from China to Pakistan were too great for them.

Thus Farsi-speaking Afghans and Iranians, as well as a mixed Urdu–Persian-speaking couple, were all brought – momentarily – together through commerce in a city in maritime China. The setting in which this interaction arose was an impromptu and unplanned gathering in a Chinese beer shack frequented by a diverse and international clientele. The Iranian-Pakistani couple reminded me of Karachi's historic importance as an urban node for trade between South and West Asia. Connections between Iran and South Asia are widely documented by

historians of the early modern world.¹⁴ Iran and British India also enjoyed a close and intimate relationship in the first decades of the twentieth century, especially in relation to the great cities of Karachi and Bombay. Commercial ties between Karachi and Iran remained important until the 1990s. Several Iranian traders told me in Yiwu, for example, that before they started to visit China in the late 1990s they had mostly purchased the commodities in which they dealt in Karachi's Saddar Bazaar. Markets in Saddar Bazaar that were important two decades ago – such as the Zainab souvenir and leather market that I visited in January 2000 along with friends from Chitral who excitedly told me of the Russian and Central Asian traders who shopped there – are only irregularly visited by international merchants today. Shifts such as these are also evident in the city's cuisine and the distribution of cafés. The rise of new commercial nodes (such as Yiwu) has inevitably resulted in the decline of prior nodes of transregional commerce and cultural exchange, such as Karachi. A Persian New Year spent in a beer shack in Yiwu ultimately illuminates much about the city's complex role as a site of inter-Asian connectivity.

Come, Share My Table! Beyond Commensality

Aside from time spent in shops and markets, it is in cafés and restaurants where I have spent a great deal of my time conducting fieldwork over the past decade or so. I have often been fortunate to be invited for meals in Afghan-owned restaurants by my friends and informants. I have also deployed popular eateries as places in which to strike up relationships with traders, including restaurateurs themselves, as well as their customers. In some contexts, this is a pleasurable aspect of fieldwork. My trips to Kabul are incomplete if they do not involve a trip to eateries in the old city (*shahr-e kohna*) in which rich and earthy dishes such as lamb and chickpea stew cooked slowly in metal teapots (*chainaki*) and slow-cooked cow feet and head (*kaala pacha*) are served to guests sitting cross-legged on wooden platforms and drinking pots of green tea left to brew for hours in great clay ovens.

Restaurants oriented towards an Afghan and Central Asian émigré clientele in Saudi Arabia were another unique setting in which to spend time. Diners in these Saudi restaurants were delighted to talk to me in Farsi and hear what news I had to report about their country – a country

¹⁴ An extensive body of literature exists on the history of connections between Iran and India and the forms of transregional 'Persianate' culture that such interactions played a role in forging. For an extensive discussion, see Eaton 2019. See also Cole 2002. On the need to go beyond Iran-India dynamics to understand the importance of the Persian language for Eurasia more generally, see Green 2019 and Kia 2020.

that most of the younger men and boys in Jeddah have never visited. There was a marked contrast between the atmosphere in the restaurants and the shops I visited: in the latter space, shopkeepers reminded me of the likelihood that Saudi agents were closely observing me and that I should be mindful of what I said. Indeed, while chatting to one man in his shop, he asked me if I had spotted the ‘agent’ come in – a man who had asked about the cost of a piece of ready-made carpet before abruptly leaving without purchasing it, he told me, had visited the shop for no other reason than to observe my activities. By contrast, visiting inexpensive Central Asian Afghan eateries in Saudi Arabia afforded the opportunity to meet Afghans visiting Jeddah from the two cities in the kingdom that are home to substantial communities of Afghans but that Saudi law prohibits non-Muslims from visiting: Mecca and Madina. All too often, my fellow diners embarrassed me with unreturnable acts of hospitality and generosity: they would pay for my dishes without me knowing and leave, for example, therefore not even giving me a chance to remonstrate with them.

Elsewhere, however, sitting in restaurants regularly frequented by traders with the hope of meeting individuals and groups with whom to talk was a more trying experience. In Yiwu, traders are busy for much of the day in their offices; when not in their offices, they make frequent trips to the Futian wholesale market, the city’s dry port and to their warehouses, located nearby. If I regularly visited trading offices in Yiwu, I was infrequently invited to spend time with them in the Futian market and not invited to accompany them to the port. My lack of access to this space presumably arose because of the secretive nature of their business activities, as well as from a concern among traders that they risked becoming the target of surveillance by the city authorities if they were seen spending time with me in official and highly monitored commercial spaces. During the course of a visit to Yiwu in September 2019, for example, I sat with two traders in an Afghan restaurant. The men remarked that it was harder to procure a Chinese business visa this year compared with previous years; this prompted them to ask me what the situation regarding visas was in relation to UK passports. I replied that being issued a research or ‘F’ visa was more difficult, and that established professors had been denied a visa presumably as a result of their having made frequent trips to Xinjiang in the past. One of the traders responded, ‘yes and with the situation in Hong Kong, you English will be under surveillance here and we will be too if they see us together’; the other man present remarked, however, that ‘meeting in a restaurant no one pays any attention, but offices and houses would definitely raise attention’.

Hence traders generally regard restaurants as a comparatively secure type of space in which to spend time and interact socially with a range of different types of people, including the visiting 'English'. So, when unable to find traders with whom to spend time, I would instead pass many a hot and humid afternoon in the city's restaurants and cafés. This would involve my waiting – often rather aimlessly – for a trader to enter the establishment with whom there was a possibility of striking up a conversation. Doing so was often very frustrating – on quiet days, few traders walked through the restaurant door; on busy days, they would enter restaurants with their international customers with the aim of talking business and agreeing upon deals rather than 'passing time' with a visiting researcher. Nevertheless, as I now explore, I did come to meet engaging and informative traders in restaurants and cafés and benefited from hours of intense discussion with them.

Afghan Restaurants on the Global Stage

In the months following the appointment of Hamid Karzai as Afghanistan's president in 2001, restaurants came to occupy a surprisingly visible place in the geopolitical imagination of the country. Karzai and his brothers ran a number of restaurants on the east and west coasts of the United States that quickly became the focus of global media attention. Karzai's background as a restaurateur was widely regarded as evidence that he was insufficiently experienced to run a country as complex as Afghanistan. Indeed, reflecting in 2011 on Karzai's presidency, Ashraf Ghani, a trained anthropologist, cast aspersions on Karzai's ability to manage an eatery let alone Afghanistan: 'Unlike his brothers, he couldn't even run a two room restaurant', Ghani remarked to a journalist.¹⁵

As I explore in the pages that follow, running a restaurant in an inter-Asian commercial node is considerably more complex than Ghani's remark about his political rival's businesses in the United States suggests. More importantly, the debate about the Karzai family's restaurant business reveals the extent to which in Afghanistan and among its diasporas restaurant ownership enacts claims of belonging to a prestigious elite rather than a marker of the 'subordinate class' of 'ethnic feeders'. The daughter of another former president of Afghanistan, Burhanuddin Rabbani, for example, has also opened a restaurant in an upmarket area of Dubai. During a visit to the restaurant in August 2018, she told me that her aim was to present a more 'authentic' version of the country's cuisine than was available to diners in the city's more 'popular' areas in which

¹⁵ *The Guardian*, Monday, 23 March 2009.

most if not all Afghan eateries are located. Indeed, for this woman and others in a similarly situated position, opening a restaurant is a clearly thought-out mode of advancing a competing interpretation of Afghanistan's polity and culture on the global stage. As a result, restaurants such as this one constitute an elite site of 'gastro-diplomacy': while they are not sanctioned by the nation state, they are located closer to the formal end of the spectrum of modes of doing diplomacy than the decidedly informal sites and activities explored in this book.

Before exploring the role of restaurants and eateries in inter-Asian trade, it is important to outline the diverse form taken by Afghan eateries in the varying contexts in which the networks are anchored. Afghan eateries are a feature of urban space in all the inter-Asian commercial nodes in which traders from Afghanistan work. The specific form such eateries takes varies from context to context, reflecting the wider cultural, commercial and political environments in which they are located. The variation that arises as a result of their location in time and space is visible in the aesthetics of restaurants, the food they serve and the profiles of their clientele.

In the formerly Soviet countries, most Afghan eateries fit the category of the 'workers' café' (*stolovaia*) rather than that of 'the restaurant' with the latter's associations of pleasure, relaxation, competitive expenditure and the concomitant public display of social status. In almost all the markets in which Afghans work in formerly Soviet settings, small eateries that prepare a limited number of Afghan dishes are easy to find. Such eateries, usually nestled alongside those run by members of other international communities active in post-socialist markets (principally from Vietnam and the former Soviet Central Asian republics), cater to the daily food needs of Afghan traders. Men who have recently migrated to formerly Soviet countries from Afghanistan mostly run these eateries. Traders whose businesses are going through hard times often turn towards running a café as a way of making a living if they have little if any access to capital. Such eateries rarely employ men who would refer to themselves as 'cooks' in the professional sense of being experienced in preparing the types of Afghan dishes that tend to be served in restaurants. As we shall see later, in Afghanistan and elsewhere in Central Asia, professional cooks (*ashpaz*) receive apprentice-type instruction from a master (*ustad*) who is an expert in one or another type of culinary preparation.¹⁶ Restaurants in Afghanistan and in the diaspora employ

¹⁶ In this sense, the forms of knowledge and discipline important in the training of master chefs (*ustad*) are similar to those involved in the transmission of different types of knowledge – from religious, to musical and cultural – in Central and West Asia. For an

'masters' (*ustad*) trained in the arts of cooking different types of dishes, such as those made from rice (*brinj*), from dough and pasta (*khamirbab*) and from meat (*gusht*).

Cafés in the former Soviet Union have at most a couple of seats and chairs where hungry traders can sit and eat if they wish. More often, an Afghan eatery might not have such a seating area at all: an Afghan migrant seeking to earn a living through food preparation may instead cook basic dishes at home or pay a small fee to use the cooking facilities of a café owned by a Muslim Central Asian. He would then serve simple daily lunches (*chasht*) that traders eat mid-morning (work in Eurasia's wholesale markets tends to start early, often around 5 a.m.). Most traders rarely take time out from their busy daily schedule to eat in the café; instead, they prefer cafés to deliver their meals to the shops, offices and warehouses in which they work. Afghan migrants labouring in such markets often deliver the traders' meals in large wheeled suitcases or trolleys, commodities imported to Eurasia from China by Afghan merchants. The ability of such cafés to serve clients across vast and labyrinth-like market complexes depends on those wheeling such suitcases having an intimate knowledge of the layout of commercial space, as well as the individual traders who work in them.

Having food delivered is important for reasons directly relating to the traders' businesses. On the one hand, it enables the speedy, efficient and inexpensive enactment of hospitality to friends and fellow traders on the occasions at which such folk drop by in one another's shops on business-related visits during the course of the day. For the most part, during such events traders would simply sit in one another's shops – often housed in shipping containers – and eat their meals out of the polystyrene containers in which they were delivered to them; passers-by known to them would be politely asked to join in the expectation that such formal invitations would be refused and recognised for what they were, *ta'arof*, ritualised displays of politeness of importance to cultures across the Persianate world.¹⁷ On the other hand, traders often offer a daily meal to their employees, regardless of whether they are from Afghanistan or are local; Afghan-run cafés regularly provide such meals and do so at minimum expense. Low-paid sellers and warehouse workers can eat on site, thereby reducing expenses in cost and time for their employer.

The ability to offer and benefit from the regular service of meals in this way is relatively novel for many of the traders. Before cafés were a regular

excellent ethnography of such relationships and modes of transmission in Yemen, see [Marchand 2001](#).

¹⁷ On the enactment of *ta'arof* in Iran, see [Beeman 1976](#).

feature of the commercial landscapes of Eurasian markets, traders or their employees would cook their own lunch each day – or ‘do a pot’ (*deg kardan*). ‘Doing a *deg*’ mostly referred to cooking a soup (*shorba*) of meat, pulses and vegetables in a pressure cooker; additional ingredients such as coriander (*gashmeez*) or a mixture of ground black pepper (*murch-e siah*) brought by traders themselves from northern Afghanistan distinguished soups from one another in relation to the regional backgrounds of the trader-cooks. The meals served by Afghan eateries in post-Soviet Eurasia, however, more closely approximate standardised Afghan ideas of ‘restaurant food’ than dishes traditionally cooked by men at their places of work. Café lunches largely consist of Afghan rice cooked with raisins and offered with red kidney bean stew (*qorma-e lobiya*) and salad, as well as grilled kebabs served alongside portions of salad, bread and chipped potatoes.

In addition to running pragmatic yet inexpensive Afghan eateries, since around 2010 successful Afghan traders have also established restaurants in the major commercial nodes in which their networks operate in post-Soviet Eurasia, especially Moscow and Odessa. Despite being a new type of commercial institution, these restaurants arise out of a longer history of Eurasian geopolitics. In the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Afghans operated canteens in the universities and polytechnics in which they and students from other Muslim countries in West Asia had studied during the Soviet period. Located within university campuses, entrepreneurs transformed sections of institutional canteens into restaurants that attracted international students and Muslims living and working in such cities, as well as locals who enjoy the taste of ‘Middle Eastern’ dishes. These restaurants serve dishes specifically aimed at an Afghan clientele, but the food on offer is also of a type and standard generally not available in the working cafés discussed earlier. Dishes on the menus of establishments located in universities include rice dishes cooked with meat (*palaw*) and steamed stuffed dumplings, including those stuffed with mincemeat (known in Afghanistan as *mantu*) and filled with the Afghan leek, or *gandana* (known in Afghanistan as *ashak*). Various meat stews, especially *qorma-e gosht* (usually combining meat, chickpeas and sometimes potatoes) and *karai shinwari* (a stir-fry-type dish made from lamb, tomato and chilli favoured in eastern Afghanistan), are often also listed on the menu. Muslims from Arab countries (especially Syria, Yemen and Egypt) and Turkey form the largest immigrant group in cities such as Moscow and Odessa – newer Afghan restaurants recognise this and cater for more broadly ‘Middle Eastern’ palates: they sometimes employ Turkish chefs in addition to or even at the exclusion of cooks from Afghanistan and give their restaurants Arabic names, such as ‘Bait

al-Mandi'. These restaurants advertise themselves as being halal and do not serve the pork dishes that are ubiquitous in these countries' eateries more generally; it is rare, however, for them to prohibit customers from consuming alcohol on their premises – in this way, such establishments not only ensure that they are regarded as venues fit for the Muslim community but also that they are popular with a broader clientele.

Among Afghan traders, such restaurants have become significant sites for the collective and public display of social achievement and pleasure. Afghan traders often choose such establishments as venues for important community events, such as the Persian New Year festival of Nowruz and speeches and poetry recitals organised by Afghan diaspora associations in order to mark various occasions, such as the martyrdom of major political personalities. It is also common for traders to take guests and family visiting them from Afghanistan to these restaurants, as they cater to the halal sensitivities of those coming from the home country; perhaps more importantly, they are material demonstrations of the success of Afghans in the cities in which they live.

Yet the public social lives of Afghan traders are not confined to such settings. Traders are, in fact, more likely to organise dinners involving women family members in locally run restaurants as opposed to those owned by Afghans. In establishments run by locals, arrangements are made to ensure that pork is not served; those who wish to can also have a stronger drink with their friends and fellow merchants in such venues. For most of the traders in formerly Soviet Eurasia, taking the step of not serving pork is sufficient to ensure the designation of a meal as 'halal'. An important concern that also dictated traders' decisions about where to engage in acts of public social life is that of family privacy. When dining out, most Afghan women in post-Soviet Eurasia wear 'modern' (*modarn*) rather than 'traditional' (*sumnati*) clothing. They may or may not cover their heads. Given that families are more likely to meet co-nationals in specifically Afghan restaurants, family privacy and reputation is regarded as being easier to maintain and protect in locally run leisure spaces than in those run by Afghans themselves. Indeed, while the décor of this type of restaurant – notably the inclusion of side-seating areas concealed with curtains from public view – may appear to be of importance to Afghan families, such concealed spaces are generally used by all-male groups of traders wishing to hold conversations in private about familial and business issues. They also allow some traders to enjoy a drink without being seen by other members of their community in the restaurant.

Afghan eateries are also a visible feature of life in the commercial nodes in which Afghans operate in West Asia, though they are different in nature from those in post-Soviet Eurasia. As I mentioned briefly in [Chapter 3](#), in

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states more generally Afghan restaurants occupy a large and vibrant niche in the cooked food sector of these powerful economies with their substantial populations of foreign workers. In these countries, Afghan dishes and cooking are familiar to local populations. In some contexts, as I explore later, they have become localised, even constituting aspects of the 'national cuisine' of specific Gulf countries. In contrast to the ad hoc nature of Eurasia's Afghan cafés, Afghan activity in the restaurant sector in West Asia is a focus of major and sustained investment. Rather than being the preserve of traders whose businesses have seen better days, as is the case in the Eurasian corridor, it also involves the circulation of expert cooks who have been trained and gained experience in Afghanistan. As a result, restaurants run by Afghans in West Asia are closely connected to Afghanistan. Businessmen in Afghanistan seeking suitable and reliable projects in which to invest capital in the Arabian Peninsula often choose the restaurant sector; to do so, they must establish ties with Afghan restaurateurs who are long-term residents in cities such as Jeddah, Dubai and Qatar and have knowledge of the sector and its potential markets as well as downfalls.

The 2010s have also seen the development of large and often transnational chains of Afghan restaurants in West Asia. These allow restaurateurs to better adjust to the vicissitudes of business in one or other of the countries across which they operate: in the event of a decline in the activities of a restaurant in one country, they can focus their investments in another country in which they run businesses. The nature of ties between such restaurants and Afghanistan is not reducible to flows of money alone – the mobility of people is also of importance to this type of activity. While Saudi Arabia's Afghan population has historically been of sufficient size to ensure a steady provision of cooks for restaurants serving local variants of Afghan dishes, in other settings (especially Dubai and Sharjah), restaurateurs regularly arrange working visas that allow them to bring experienced staff from Afghanistan to the UAE, as well as managerial and waiting staff.

West Asia's Afghan restaurants differ from those in Eurasia not only in terms of their scale; in their design and ambiance, too, Afghan eateries in West Asia consciously seek to resemble traditional restaurants in Afghanistan. The attempts of the region's Afghan restaurants to build upon historic cultures of public eatery are visible not only in their decor but also in the opportunities they offer for particular postural cultures of eating. These restaurants usually comprise spaces in which diners can sit on chairs around tables, as well as large raised seating platforms at which meals are consumed sitting cross-legged on decorated plastic sheets laid out on the floor. Such a spatial arrangement is recognisably 'Afghan' to

those visiting such institutions – it draws upon the model of the *chaykhana* (teahouse) that serves food to guests and offers a sleeping area for travellers.¹⁸ In all such establishments, a high desk that the restaurant-owner or manager occupies by sitting cross-legged on a raised platform is also given a prominent place. All monetary transactions are managed through this focal point of the restaurant; owners also often install surveillance devices to ensure they can closely monitor the till and prevent theft by the manager and the restaurant waiting staff.

The clientele in such West Asian restaurants is diverse. In Dubai, many such restaurants are located in a part of the city – Deira – that is mostly visited by travellers from Asia and Africa who are involved in relatively small-scale forms of trade and commerce. Afghan restaurants in Deira have earned a reputation among travellers for the filling, adequate and affordable food they offer. Indeed, the general approach taken by owners of these restaurants is high turnover and large volume – in this sense, their mode of doing business is comparable to the commercial preferences of most Afghan traders working across Eurasia. Dishes that can be cooked and served in large quantities (most items on the menu are accompanied by a large portion of rice cooked according to a favoured Afghan method) are their stock in trade. Despite the diversity of the clientele, unlike the Middle Eastern-oriented prestige restaurants of formerly Soviet Eurasian countries, these institutions are distinctly Afghan. Besides having spaces in which diners can sit cross-legged on carpeted floors and eat communally from large dishes, the walls of such restaurants are almost without fail adorned with large pictures of historic sites in Afghanistan; the national flags of Afghanistan and the UAE inevitably stand prominently on the manager's counter. In terms of their names, too, such eateries vigorously assert their distinctively Afghan heritage: 'al-kebab al Afghani', 'Emerald Rice' (Zamarud Palaw) and 'Qasr-e Kabul' (Palace of Kabul) are among the most favoured names for such establishments.

Afghan merchants have also opened restaurants in China, especially in Yiwu but also in the southern city of Guangzhou, despite the relatively small numbers of Afghans permanently based in the country, especially when compared with the former Soviet Union and West Asia's Gulf states. The form taken by Afghan restaurants in China is comparable to those in West Asia: they reflect the requirements of Muslim international traders in China and the nature of the local restaurant market. The key issue facing many if not all Muslim traders who visit China to procure commodities or who are permanently based in the country in connection with the trading companies they operate is the availability of halal food.

¹⁸ For a description of *chaykhanas* in Afghanistan, see [Saberli 1997](#).

Traders from Afghanistan who travelled to China for trade in the early 1990s often speak of the difficulties they faced in procuring halal food: 'We would return home having eaten nothing for three weeks', they often remark. In Yiwu, the traders told me, there was initially a single eatery owned by a Chinese Hui Muslim that catered for the needs of all foreign Muslims living and visiting the city. In later years, Uyghur migrants to the city opened street stalls selling Xinjiang dishes (notably rice cooked with meat and carrots, kebabs, and noodle dishes served with vegetables and lamb or beef). In light of the limited availability of halal food of a type that suited Muslim visitors to the city from South and West Asia, a trader from Pakistan who had married a Chinese woman established the first foreign-owned halal eatery in Yiwu. Established in 1999, the café was initially located inside the hotel mentioned in [Chapter 4](#) that housed the offices of traders from Pakistan and Afghanistan. The redevelopment of that part of the city by the Yiwu authorities in 2017 meant that the restaurant's location eventually moved closer to the Futian market complex. Other establishments that catered to the culinary preferences of traders from Arabic-speaking countries followed on the heels of this Pakistani restaurant. Several restaurants served Yemeni dishes, the breakfast, meat and rice dishes of which, particularly the famed breakfast of eggs and vegetables (*shakshoukha*) and the rice and steam-roasted chicken dish 'mandi', are especially popular in West Asia and beyond. From the later 2000s, a large number of restaurants were established that catered to foreign Muslims, with Afghans, Syrians and Turks all opening new establishments. These new restaurants provided more options for visiting Muslim traders and catered to Chinese business owners seeking to secure clients of a Muslim background over dishes of food that were suitable for locals and foreign Muslim traders. This wave of restaurants also acted as a source of employment for capital-scant sojourners arriving in the city from Muslim Asia, especially against the backdrop of the wars in Syria, Yemen and Afghanistan.¹⁹ The rise of foreign-run restaurants, however, outpaced the number of foreigners visiting the city: by 2015, e-commerce had resulted in a significant decline of foreign visitors and the closure of several international restaurants, including those owned by Afghans, prompting restaurateurs to remark that this sector of the city's economy was in crisis (*buhran*).

In this context, restaurateurs from Afghanistan competed fiercely with one another and needed to explore new ways of keeping their restaurants financially viable. As we shall see, besides earning profits through food, restaurants are also important settings in which traders establish contact

¹⁹ [Anderson 2020](#).

with merchants visiting the city from across the world. Nevertheless, most businesses of this type are unable to afford to maintain a side-activity such as a restaurant if they are economically unviable. In 2016, one of Yiwu's most popular eateries among Afghan traders based in the city was owned by an Afghan Turkmen trader with commercial experience in the Gulf, Turkey and Turkmenistan. The eatery's chef – a man in his mid-twenties from the northern town of Andkhuy – was known among traders in the city for cooking the most authentic version of the classic Afghan rice dishes (*palaw*) in Yiwu; its unassuming and distinctly Afghan floor-seating area also encouraged traders to spend long afternoons drinking Afghan-style green tea flavoured with cardamom (*chai-ye sabz*) while chatting among themselves and the restaurant's owner. However, the owner ultimately decided to close the restaurant, telling me that while he had opened it 'to pass time' (*sa'at teri*) rather than to make a significant profit, it was now losing too much money to be sustainable. Afghan traders who owned offices in the part of the city in which the restaurant was located sought to persuade their friend to maintain the restaurant, arguing that it had many important spin-offs, most especially in terms of being a setting in which it was possible to meet and entertain potential customers for their businesses. The owner's priorities, however, had changed from the time at which he had opened the restaurant. After it had been closed, traders in this part of Yiwu had to eat their meals and entertain their guests in a Pakistani-owned establishment located close by.

More and more foreign Muslim restaurateurs recognised that if their business were to survive they would have to attract the custom not only of visiting foreign traders but also Chinese locals. In order to do so, many included *halal* versions of Chinese dishes on their menus, employing Chinese chefs – especially those identifying as Hui Muslims – in their kitchen staff. The owner of Yiwu's largest Afghan restaurant claims that his success resulted from incorporating Chinese dishes shortly after opening his two-floor eatery close to the city's central wholesale market. 'Yiwu is as quiet as it has ever been', he remarked to me one evening while we were sitting in his restaurant: 'We're still in business because most of our clientele is now Chinese – they like our Afghan dishes, but when eating out Chinese people like to order multiple dishes and our mixed Chinese–Afghan menu allows them to do that. They are more important to us than foreigners and Afghans.'

Afghan restaurants and eateries are a visible feature in many of the most vibrant inter-Asian trading nodes today. The form they take is diverse, though there are similarities between those established in the former Soviet Union on the one hand and those that operate in China, Turkey

and the Gulf on the other. As we shall now see, however, there is more to the restaurants owned and frequented by Afghan traders than the provision of food to mobile traders alone. If thought of as a specific type of social institution that is of significance to the dynamics of the trading networks as a whole, restaurants are helpfully considered as key sites in which traders negotiate relationships with people in positions of power and authority and engage in the navigation of geopolitical processes in the everyday.

‘Why Invest in a Restaurant If You Don’t Know Powerful People’: Materialising Influence, Information and Power

One evening in July 2016, I was sitting on the upstairs floor of one of the most prominent Afghan restaurants in Zeytinburnu (the neighbourhood in Istanbul that is home to large Central Asian and Afghan communities that I explored in [Chapter 3](#)). Sitting by my side was the owner of the establishment – a merchant who had been involved in various forms of inter-Asian commerce over the past three decades, including the import to the UAE of used car parts from Tokyo, and the sale in Kabul of Chinese- and Turkish-made construction materials following the 2001 international intervention. The trader-restaurateur hailed from a region of central Afghanistan known to many in the country today as the ancestral home of Afghanistan’s best-resourced trading families: the Dara-ye Turkmen (Turkmen Valley) in the province of Parwan.²⁰ The merchant told me that he had been seeking to offset the weakened economic climate in Kabul and hostility towards Hazara traders from officials in the UAE by exploring business opportunities in Istanbul – the city to which he had also relocated his immediate family members, having rented a property and procured residency permits. Besides learning about this man’s personal trajectory, the evening spent in the restaurant offered vivid insights into the role that such social institutions play as material embodiments of a merchant’s influence. Shortly after I sat down with the owner, he moved to another table at which three Turkish customers sat; shortly after doing so, he beckoned me to join the men. Rather than hesitating to join the men – as I often do, for fear of interrupting their meeting – I accepted the invitation and joined the group. The restaurateur arranged a meal for the Turkish guests and myself, and talked to them in the Turkish that he had learned in Istanbul since moving to the city some six months previously. The meeting was relatively brief: after finishing their food, the

²⁰ The Hazara population of the valley identify themselves as being Sunni rather than Shi’i Muslims.

Turkish guests departed and the trader-restaurateur bid them farewell. He then joined me and apologised that our conversation had been broken up by his guests, before explaining that the men were important figures in the local community: they owned a medical centre, were active in the local municipality and were well-known *badmash* (criminals; thugs) in Zeytinburnu. It was, he said, important to establish relationships (*taluhat*) with such individuals: owning a business in Zeytinburnu was impossible without the support and protection of such local figures.

Afghans with experience of life in Zeytinburnu and other settings in Turkey often tell me that the real purpose (*hadaf*) of the many Afghan restaurants is not to make a profit from the sale of food at all. Businesses such as these instead operate to provide the facilities for Afghans travelling to Western Europe to make payments to the ‘people smugglers’ (*qachaqbar-e insan*) involved in their transportation. Restaurants function, in short, as a ‘front’ for illicit forms of commercial activities. If, in Istanbul, Afghan restaurants are said to be the conduits of flows of money associated with informal forms of cross-border mobility, then they perform comparable roles in other settings in which Afghans live and work. In the UAE, for example, restaurants, alongside other businesses with a high daily cash turnover, such as car parks, are widely said by traders to be used by powerful figures in Afghanistan to ‘clean’ (*pak kardan*) ‘black money’ (*pul-e siyah*) either received illegally (in the form of bribes and kickbacks for contracts) or earned by way of criminal activities (notably the trade in opium and gemstones). Indeed, the rate at which restaurants come and go as well as rapid changes of ownership of particular establishments suggests that – at least in some contexts – the importance of earning a reputation for the quality of food served is outweighed by the ability of restaurateurs to conduct parallel commercial activities.

It is, however, too simple to see such restaurants as one-dimensional ‘fronts’ for illegal business activities. At one level, in order to avoid attracting the interest of authorities, restaurants functioning as fronts for criminal activity are more likely to specialise in the sale of a generic food type (notably pizzas) rather than something distinctly Afghan. This is because many traders think that authorities in the settings in which they operate will assume that businesses operated by Afghans are criminal in one way or another. More importantly, restaurants serve as a visible and tangible material manifestation of the close connections of their owners to figures as well as institutions of power and authority in the settings in which they are located. Material manifestations of local influence are important for two key reasons. First, they signal a degree of protection conferred upon a business and the people associated with it; this in turn

functions as a marker of security and stability to potential investors. Traders often remark to me that only individuals with close ties to influential people open restaurants – otherwise, my interlocutors comment, why would someone risk investing so much capital in a single venture? Second, successful restaurateurs are known to have access to authoritative people: this means that, for traders, they have access to and hold key forms of commercial and political information.²¹ Most notably, traders assume that restaurateurs have access to a steady flow of reliable and critical information about policy developments that are of importance to the commercial activities of individual traders and wider networks.

Most restaurateurs operate trading businesses themselves – the widespread perception that the owners of such businesses have close ties to persons of power and authority helps to attract customers and traders seeking reliable companies and well-connected individuals with whom to work. As a result, meetings and discussions among traders about the pressing commercial and policy-related issues of the day are often held in restaurants – far from merely facilitating meetings through the provision of food and space, restaurateurs, as I now explore, play a pivotal role in organising, directing and overseeing such discussions.

‘If You’re Thinking of Going to Malaysia to Buy Olive Oil, You’re Making a Big Error’: Restaurants and the Pooling of Commercial Information

On a hot evening in Yiwu in August 2018, I was sitting – as I did on most if not all evenings – in one of the city’s Afghan restaurants. The restaurant – one of the largest of Yiwu’s foreign eateries – comprised two floors of table and chair seating and was popular among international and Chinese merchants alike. A staff of around ten Hui Muslim employees from the southern province of Yunnan served guests, received payment for orders and managed its day-to-day running. Two managers in the restaurant came from Afghanistan to Yiwu specifically to work for the restaurateur. One of the two men (Lamaray) had initially worked at a wholesale clothing shop in central Kabul owned by the restaurateur’s brother – he was employed in China having proven to be a trustworthy and even-tempered employee in Afghanistan. The relationship between the restaurateur and his manager was close and extended into realms of life other than business: when Lamaray planned to get married in 2016, for example, the

²¹ On the importance of ‘indigenous’ networks and agents to the circulation of information in colonial India, see Bayly 1996.

Yiwu-based restaurateur offered him a generous interest-free loan (*qarz*) that helped to pay for the cost of the wedding (around \$15,000), which took place in Lamaray's modest family home in eastern Kabul.²² The kitchen staff is made up of Chinese Hui Muslim cooks and an *ashpaz* (chef) from Afghanistan. The chef employed in the restaurant was from Samangan in northern Afghanistan; his travel to China from Afghanistan was arranged by the restaurateur solely so that he could cook the Afghan *palaw* for which northern Afghanistan is especially famed.

It is relatively easy to strike up conversations with fellow diners in Afghan cafés and restaurants in West Asia and Eurasia. By contrast, in Yiwu the organisation of space in restaurants often frustrated my attempts to speak to traders over a meal. In particular, tables tend to be located far from one another, communal seating and dining spaces are rare and waiting staff remove menus and plates from adjacent seats on large tables, meaning that people do not generally join other diners unless they have been invited to do so.²³ I was delighted, then, when the restaurant I most regularly frequented opened a 'coffee shop'. In this coffee shop, clients could order smaller dishes, drinks and shisha at tables located more closely to one another than those in the neighbouring restaurant. Waiting staff monitored diners less vigorously than was the case in the restaurant proper. Many of my Afghan associates would spend their evenings sharing a table in this café, and it became an especially fruitful place in which to conduct fieldwork – I would meet with men I knew in the café but was also often introduced to other traders entering the establishment. It was a more open setting in which to sit and join in discussions and games of cards than was the case in the formal restaurant next door. That the seats were comfortable (at least in comparison with the plastic chairs on which traders used to sit outside the adjacent restaurant until the municipal authorities banned them from doing so) no doubt also encouraged traders to linger in the café for longer stretches of time than they had previously in the restaurant. Indeed, the owner of the restaurant told me that, by opening the coffee shop, he had sought to create a space in which traders could interact with one another: 'We needed somewhere to sit and pass time', he told me one evening. 'It is alright to sit on chairs outside the restaurant, but it is cold in winter and hot in summer, and the sound of passing vehicles often means it is impossible to hear what anybody has to say.'

One evening was particularly helpful in leading me to recognise that restaurants such as this functioned as institutions in which traders

²² I visited Lamaray's home in Kabul shortly after his wedding in October 2016.

²³ On the complex status of cafes as sites of intrusive state surveillance, see Verkaaik 2002.

collectively pool information about commerce and individual reputation. On that evening, I entered the café and walked up the steps to its upper floor. On doing so, I came across a group of men, five of whom I knew from my earlier visits to the city, including the restaurant owner, who spent most of his evenings with friends, visiting clients and fellow traders either in the café or in the adjacent restaurant. The men gathered there were all Farsi-speakers and largely from the same region of central Afghanistan; they mostly ran or worked in transport and trading offices in Yiwu and oversaw the export of commodities bound for Kabul's Mandawi market.

The Yiwu-based traders soon introduced me to two men whom I had not previously met: one lived in Hamburg and was visiting Yiwu to buy plastic food containers; the other lived in a city in the west of England – he had travelled to China to purchase items relating to the two takeaway pizza restaurants he owned in the United Kingdom. As was the case on most evenings, the Yiwu-based traders became increasingly engrossed in a card game. In a highly performed manner, they traded insults and accusations of cheating with one another, knowing that the losing team would be expected to buy a round of ice cream for all in attendance. On busy nights, such performances would be watched avidly by Afghan traders from around the world; in the carefully regulated context of Yiwu, the performances surrounding card games constituted the closest approximation of the forms of public leisure and entertainment that I have suggested are critical to the cultural lives of Afghan traders in the range of settings in which they work. As the card game continued, I chatted with the two guests from Europe, who also began to share details of their commercial projects and aspirations with one another. The pizza-shop owner from England informed us that he had been successful in the pizza trade despite being issued with warnings from two international pizza giants over the names of his pizza shops (Domenico's and Pizza Hot) and the menus they offered to customers. He was now seeking to expand his commercial activities: he wanted to open some type of factory in northern Afghanistan – perhaps in the bakery sector – and he was also interested in importing olive oil to Afghanistan, where there was a growing market for the product. It was, he reported, with the latter aim in mind that he was to travel some days later to Malaysia.

After hearing of his newly made acquaintance's plans, the Hamburg-based trader – who told me he had been involved in various types of trade since he was a child – asked the UK trader if he would be upset if he shared with him some frank advice. Upon being given the go-ahead to speak his mind, the Hamburg trader went on to say that opening a business in Afghanistan would be a disaster even if his friend intended to do so with

the support of his brother: whatever money you throw into Afghanistan, he said, the country's dry soil will simply eat it up. He told the UK-based pizza-shop owner that some years ago he had travelled from Hamburg to his home city of Herat to open a stationery business; within months, he had lost his money and his relationships with close family members had soured over accusations of fraud and mistrust. 'Whatever you do', he remarked candidly to the pizza-shop owner from the United Kingdom, 'do not risk your capital in Afghanistan.' The Hamburg trader then went on to say that his friend also risked losing significant capital and time if he travelled to Malaysia to buy olive oil – owning a catering business in Germany, he could guarantee that there was no olive oil available in Malaysia, a country in which his newly made associate would only find low-quality palm oil. If he was intending to go to Malaysia just to pass some time, then fine – if, however, he really was seeking to do business there, then he should change his plans immediately.

'Social institutions' – here, cafés and restaurants – are significant sites for the open sharing of information about commerce and the feasibility of particular types of trading activity. Establishing such institutions is about more than merely opening a successful eatery; it is also about knowing how to create the spaces and contexts in which merchants are willing and feel sufficiently secure to share sensitive information, insights and opinions with one another. In Yiwu and many other nodes across Eurasia, traders are generally of the opinion that 'everyone is an agent'. In such geopolitically fraught environments, the ability to create spaces of exchange and information-sharing is no simple task. As we have seen in Yiwu, a restaurateur-trader devoted considerable capital and thought into the creation of a space in which traders could sit together and discuss matters of importance to them. Yet restaurateurs must also convey to their clientele that they are well connected to government officials, albeit not in a manner that raises questions of privacy and security. Traders suspected of actively supplying information about the activities of Afghans to local officials, or, indeed, of playing a part in government departments, such as official dispute resolution organisations, are the source of much critical comment in Yiwu. Even in restaurants owned by well-connected traders, Afghans are regularly reminded of the precarious and transient nature of their presence in Yiwu: police visits to cafés and restaurants often involve spot checks on the visas, residency permits and hotel details of 'foreigners', which leads traders to collectively discuss their poor treatment by the city authorities. In this environment, the owner of the restaurant in Yiwu is not only credited by Afghans in the city for having chosen the perfect location for his business; as importantly, his ability to navigate the concerns of traders and state officials has also ensured the lasting role his restaurant plays as a social institution in the experiences of the

city's Afghans, and, more broadly, as is now explored, in the circulation of information that facilitates their commercial activities worldwide.

'Saudi Arabia's Security Forces Were Eating Two Meals of *Palaw* Per Day!' Gastro-Diplomacy

Restaurants play a critical role in ensuring the durability of trading networks: they mediate the relationships that traders forge with one another and with local authorities and power-holders. They are also key contexts in which traders pool and share information about commercial opportunities, as well as make assessments concerning the capabilities and reputations of merchants active in trading networks. Eateries are also especially important sites in which traders seek, if not always successfully, to engage in as convivial a manner as possible with neighbourhood- and municipal-level officials. As a great deal of scholarship has demonstrated, cuisine is also an arena for the display, transmission and exchange of cultural skills and knowledge; this is also visible in the influence of Afghan trading networks on the societies in which they operate, as well as on their modes of interacting with the multiple cultural settings in which they are immersed. This aspect of the Afghan eatery's contribution to inter-Asian connectivity is illuminated in an especially clear way through a consideration of the signature dish of most such restaurants: *palaw*. A consideration of the circulation of *palaw* through networks, its consumption in commercial nodes, the eateries in which it is served, the chefs who cook it and the diners attracted by it highlights Afghanistan's significance for the cultural dynamics of inter-Asia's 'sites of interaction'.²⁴

The Making of an Inter-Asian Cuisine: Bukhari Rice in Jeddah and Beyond

Bukhari rice (*ruz-al bukhari*) is a popular dish across the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Steamed with oil, carrots, raisins and spices favoured in the Arabian Peninsula (cardamom, all-spice, coriander, cumin and cinnamon), the long-grain rice (mainly of the lower-cost Sela that is parboiled in its husk and imported to Saudi Arabia from India and Pakistan) is served on enormous platters and usually topped with a piece of grilled chicken (*dhajaj al-faham*).²⁵ Bukhari rice is mostly consumed in cheap

²⁴ Harper and Amrith 2012.

²⁵ In the extensive literature on rice's history as a 'global commodity', comparatively little analysis exists on the crop's history in Central Asia. See, for example, Bray 2015. According to Nesbitt, Simpson and Swanberg, rice has been cultivated in Afghanistan since the first millennia CE and was likely introduced to Central Asia from India by way

eateries dotted across the kingdom’s cities and small towns. The managers and cooks in such restaurants in Saudi Arabia mostly hail from the province of Sar-e Pol in the north of the country. Most of the Sar-e Pol restaurateurs, chefs and workers in Saudi Arabia are Uzbek-speakers whose trajectories of mobility closely resemble those of the traders who are active in the West Asian corridor of connectivity that I mapped out in [Chapter 3](#). They migrated in the early 1980s from Afghanistan to Saudi Arabia by way of Pakistan, where they often stayed for several years in the cities of Peshawar, Lahore and Karachi, either operating Afghan restaurants or working as carpet weavers.

Rather than simply learning how to cook what Saudis sometimes refer to as their national dish, the restaurateurs engaged with the activities of an earlier wave of migrants to the kingdom from Afghanistan and Central Asia. As explored in detail in [Chapter 3](#), the holy cities of the Hejaz have long been connected to Central Asian emirates such as Bukhara, Andijon and Qoqand, not to mention the principalities in what is now Xinjiang to the east, by historic forms of mobility and circulation. In Saudi Arabia, these successive waves of pilgrims, traders and exiles established eateries serving Bukhari rice and bakeries selling Central Asian-style naan (referred to as *tamis* in Saudi Arabia). Later waves of migrants who left northern Afghanistan in the 1980s initially entered into employment in Saudi Arabia by cooking in these establishments; in later years, they financed and managed such restaurants.

Traders involved in expanding the influence of ‘Bukhari’ restaurants in Saudi Arabia displayed similar forms of navigational agency to those that we have seen enacted by traders in economic and political spheres of life. ‘The decision to call *palaw* [the generic Central/South Asian term for steamed rice] *ruz al-bukhari* was a strategic one’, remarked Abu Bakr to me one day in a *nargileh* (water pipe) café in Istanbul’s Zeytinburnu neighbourhood. Aged forty, Abu Bakr is the descendant of a trading family that originates from the Central Asian khanate of Andijon but has, for much of the past century, maintained homes, businesses and residences in Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, the UAE and now Turkey – a country in which he sought to extend his family’s historic involvement in the trade of dried fruits and nuts, spices and rice:

of Iran. *Palaw* has been known as an important dish in Central and West Asia since the thirteenth century CE and has such a central place in the region’s food culture that it is regarded by some specialists as being a ‘superfood’, though historically it was more likely to have been made with barley than rice. See [Nesbitt, Mark, Simpson and Svanberg 2010](#). See also [Chapter 5](#) of Spengler III 2020. Spengler III, [Robert 2020](#).

They calculated that the Saudis (who are very religious) would be attracted by the name because of the respect with which they held the Emirate of Bukhara, but, more importantly, Imam al-Bukhari [a ninth-century religious scholar who compiled an authoritative selection of hadith or sayings of the Prophet Muhammad]. In the years that followed, those involved in the Bukhari business made great profits. The rice became so popular that some companies even secured contracts to feed the Saudi security forces three meals a day, two of them *ruz-al bukhari*!

Ruz al-Bukhari bares only a family resemblance to the manner in which rice is prepared with meat, carrots, onions, raisins and sesame oil in northern Afghanistan. This mattered little to Afghanistan's Central Asian émigré entrepreneurs: if Saudi publics, as well as those visiting the country for trade, pilgrimage and labour, consumed heaps of Bukhari rice in eateries run by Central Asian Afghan émigrés, diners from Afghanistan would take up their positions in more modest cafés serving distinctively northern Afghan dishes. That a distinction exists between Central Asian *palaw* and its Saudi Arabian expression is evident in the form taken by restaurants specialising in the dish in the country. There are important differences between the venues aimed at Saudis and international migrants and eateries serving the Central Asian version of *ruz al-bukhari*. The latter establishments are mostly tucked away in the child-thronged backstreets of neighbourhoods in which substantial communities of Central Asian émigrés live, such as the Bukhariyya Street in Jeddah. In this type of eatery, Afghans and Central Asian émigrés gather to eat what they describe as food from northern Afghanistan, often remarking that the 'original' version of their dishes is too 'heavy' and 'strong' (*qawwi*) for Saudis. Alongside dishes of *palaw* (mounds of rice cooked with plenty of oil, meat, carrots and raisins), plates full of skewered kebabs and vessels of steaming cow foot stew (*pacha*) feature on menus as well as on *sofra* or *daastarkhans* (cloths around which diners sit when eating).

As we saw in [Chapter 3](#), Central Asian émigré merchants active in Saudi Arabia have established wide-ranging and intricate networks that connect different parts of the region to one another and to settings beyond. Bukhari rice has travelled along these networks and come to play an important aspect of the culinary culture of a wide range of inter-Asian commercial nodes.

Central Asian émigré restaurateurs also carried their dishes and restaurant businesses to other places in the Arabian Peninsula, often travelling on circuitous routes and engaging with people from other communities as they did so. As we saw earlier in this chapter, Afghan eateries flooded the UAE market in the 2000s – the cash for such business often came from Afghanistan, but the chefs were frequently from émigré

families based in Saudi Arabia. I met Dilmurad – a man in his thirties from a Central Asian Andijoni family that migrated to Kunduz (northern Afghanistan) in the 1920s – in Zeytinburnu, where he ran a small stall selling *sheer yakh* (hand-made ice cream) to Afghan migrants. Dilmurad told me that he had spent most of his life in Al-Asif Square, the apartment blocks inhabited by Farsi- and Uzbek-speaking refugees of Central Asian backgrounds in Karachi that I introduced in [Chapter 3](#). In the mid-2000s, a Yemeni restaurant chain in Ras Al Khaimah recruited Dilmurad to cook Bukhari rice to serve alongside Yemeni 'mandi' (steamed meat), arranging his visa and transport to the UAE. Forms of *palaw* that have been modified to suit Arab tastes are also now returning in their new guise to South Asia. Returnee middle-class migrants from Saudi Arabia miss the 'Arab cuisine' with which they became familiar in Saudi Arabia: three of the 'Arabic' restaurants serving 'mandi' that I visited in Karachi in 2017 were run by Central Asian émigré Afghans who had returned to Pakistan after decades living in Saudi Arabia.

Since the early 1990s, Istanbul has been the preferred destination for such traders to move their businesses and families. Farid – the son of a Bukharan émigré family who was born in Sar-e Pol and is now aged in his early seventies – moved his family to Istanbul from Mecca in the mid-1990s. His sons continued to live in Mecca (where they were born) and ran the family business until 2016, when the prospect of higher taxes on business and family based in the kingdom reluctantly persuaded him that the time had come to leave the holy city. In 2017, he opened a restaurant in Zeytinburnu with the aim of keeping his sons busy. The restaurant did not cater to Afghans (at least ten such restaurants have opened in this part of Istanbul) but to Turks. Diners could choose between white Turkish-style rice and 'yellow' or 'Uzbeki' *palaw*: *palaw*-branded Bukhari rice would not sell well in Istanbul, he remarked, so he advertised it as 'yellow rice' instead. Bukharan émigrés have opened other restaurants in Zeytinburnu that have similarly sought to expand their clientele by catering to the range of tastes popular in this part of Istanbul. A different establishment, for instance, was opened by an Uzbek-speaking Afghan Central Asia émigré who lives in Sweden; it serves dishes that are very particular to northern Afghanistan – such as a pasta dish made of layered dough interspersed with mincemeat known as Ay Khanum – alongside Uyghur specialities that it was hoped would attract Zeytinburnu's growing Uyghur community.²⁶

The signature dish of Saudi Arabia's Central Asian émigrés – a product, as we have seen earlier, of commercial calculations and

²⁶ On Uyghur migration to Turkey, see [Bonnenfant 2017](#).

interactions between the cuisines of Central Asia and the Arabian Peninsula – is now also a feature of nodes of significance in newer geographies of Eurasian connectivity, notably Yiwu. There is fierce competition between Afghan restaurants serving variations of *palaw* in Yiwu; hiring competent and trained specialists in the art of cooking the dish is of critical importance to the fortunes of such eateries. Both of the restaurants serving what Afghans in Yiwu regard as being ‘authentic’ (*ashi*) *palaw* employ ethnically Uzbek and Turkmen cooks from northern Afghanistan.

I came to know Rahimullah while conducting fieldwork in Yiwu in 2016. Aged in his late twenties, he hails from the northern Afghan town of Andkhuy that I visited in October 2017 and described in [Chapter 6](#). Before coming to China, Rahimullah had cooked in a restaurant owned by his mother’s brother (*mama*) in Kabul’s *shahr-e naw* (new city). During his time in Yiwu, Afghans knew him for cooking the city’s most authentic *palaw*. Yet Rahimullah had also learned from his maternal uncle living in Kabul how to make dishes favoured by diners in Saudi Arabia, notably *dajaj al-fahm* – the uncle ensured that a plentiful supply of the spice mixture required for this dish reached Rahimullah in Yiwu from Afghanistan. Customers at the restaurant in which Abdullah worked included traders from Africa and the Middle East, many of whom had become accustomed to *ruz al-Bukhari* during the decades in which they had travelled to Dubai and Jeddah to purchase Chinese commodities for re-export to Africa from Afghan and Yemini traders. Bukhari rice has followed such networks and travelled along with merchants from Central Asia to the Hijaz, east to China and south-west to West Africa.

Rahimullah eventually returned to Afghanistan after the restaurant in which he worked closed. Initially, he hoped to open a restaurant in the southern city of Kandahar, where, he told me, there were few restaurants serving *turkmeni palaw*: unlike other cities in Afghanistan – such as Herat – he calculated, Kandahris would take well to *palaw-e turkmeni* because they enjoyed eating meals in large quantities. Rahimullah was, however, unable to find a suitable investor for such a project in Kandahar and so opened, along with a partner, a restaurant serving *palaw-e turkmeni* in a largely residential part of Kabul not far from Shahr-e Naw. On the several occasions that I visited Rahimullah in the restaurant in the autumn of 2018, however, it was clear that the establishment was not doing as well as he had hoped; Rahimullah eventually closed the restaurant in Afghanistan and was employed as a *palaw* chef by an Afghan restaurateur living in Dubai. Meanwhile, Rahimullah’s elder brother moved to China,

where he was tasked exclusively with the role of *palaw* chef in a Pakistani restaurant in the city of Keqiao (China's 'textile city').²⁷

Afghanistan's Central Asian émigrés are skilled in feeding the diverse 'mobile societies' that circulate within and across inter-Asian networks and commercial nodes. Rather than simply nurturing the Central Asian émigré diaspora, they demonstrate navigational agency in their ability to provide a form of cuisine that is loved and cherished by people of diverse backgrounds. Another location in which Afghanistan's Central Asian émigrés have staked out their culinary presence over the past two decades is Manchester, especially the city's Wilmslow Road, which is located close to one of its universities. In Manchester, rather than acting as the 'ethnic feeders' of local middle classes, the primary market for the émigré restaurateurs are Middle Eastern students eager for a taste of home. Giving their establishments in this context distinctively Arabic (rather than Afghan or Central Asian) names (such as al-Taybah al-Bukhari and Al-Jazeera), Central Asian émigrés in Manchester attract Arab students and also compete with one another for the custom of Malay students.²⁸ Malaysians experiment in culinary terms by trying the tastes of 'the Middle East', even if what they are consuming are adapted versions of Afghan dishes cooked by Afghan Central Asian émigrés; the thousand or so Saudi students in Manchester are delighted with the plentiful supply of their 'national dish' far away from home.

Sesame Oil Rice and Kabul Restaurants: Authenticity and Ethnicity in Afghanistan

The transactions of taste upon which this chapter has focused thus far have been shaped, mediated by and carried along Afghan networks operating in a wide range of inter-Asian nodes. Importantly, however, food's significance to inter-Asian cultural dynamics is also related to developments within Afghanistan. Shifts in the preparation of particular 'Afghan' dishes in inter-Asian commercial nodes circulate in Afghanistan, influencing not only food in the country but also the types of restaurants in which it is served and the forms of identities with which it is implicated. Central Asia's émigrés have for long played an important role in the culinary dynamics of Kabul and Afghanistan more generally. Dishes referred to as 'Afghan', I am often told, have their origins in societies 'across the river' in Central Asia rather than in the territories making up the country today; there is, indeed, a widespread awareness of the importance of historic connections to the development of the country's culinary heritage. Older

²⁷ Cheuk 2015 ²⁸ Ibnu 2019.

Kabulis remember street stalls that were owned by Central Asian émigrés who sold Bukhari-style *mantu* (stuffed pasta dumplings) and *sambusa* (baked mincemeat pies) in the pol-e takhta street of the old city (*shahr-e kohna*), for example.

Food viewed as being distinctly Central Asian continues to be regarded positively in the country today. Over the past ten years, there has been an explosion in the number of restaurants in Afghanistan that advertise themselves as serving forms of *palaw* associated with Afghanistan's Central Asian émigrés.²⁹ In Kabul's central and modern Shahr-e Nau neighbourhood, for instance, there are clusters of eateries advertising the delicious dishes of 'Uzbeki' and 'Turkmen' *palaw* in which they specialise. A key selling point of such restaurants is that the meat served in the rice is brought daily to Kabul from the pastures of northern Afghanistan; the oil in which the meat and onions is fried before slow cooking commences is also advertised as a distinctly northern Afghan product, 'sesame oil' (*rughan-e kunjit*). Restaurateurs give such restaurants distinctly Turkic names associated with older and newer imperial projects: 'Osmani' (Ottoman) is a particularly favoured restaurant name among émigré communities in Kabul. Turkey's 'pivot to the East' is, indeed, manifested materially in this part of Kabul – 'the Ankara roundabout' (*chahrahi ankara*) is located at the intersection of a street with a multi-storey shopping complex housing Turkish shops and a restaurant, and another on which shopkeepers from the Turkish city of Eskisehir sell stoves. Restaurants in this part of Kabul regularly serve dishes that Central Asian émigrés have perfected in West Asia, such as *dajaj al-fahm*. They also attract middle-class Afghans, many of whom have spent time studying, working or trading in Istanbul, by preparing Turkish staples, such as doner kebabs and lentil soups.

In Henig's formulation, Afghanistan's Central Asian émigrés demonstrate their skill as flexible actors in the field of 'gastro-diplomacy', at the same time as earning a name and collective repute for their ability to prepare authentic Central Asian, Arab and Turkish dishes; in doing so, they also demonstrate their understanding of versatility in multiple cultures and languages. As we saw in [Chapter 3](#), their ability to navigate an expansive world region similar in scope to what Ahmed has referred to as the 'Balkans-to-Bengal' complex, even in the context of this world being divided geopolitically, is based on decades of work and travel in the West Asian corridor and beyond. They have adapted *palaw* to multiple markets and cultures yet sought to maintain their reputation as the carriers of the

²⁹ Contrast with Helen Saberi's description of the limited variety of public eateries in Kabul in the 1970s and 1980s; see [Saberi 1991](#).

'authentic' dish. Their simultaneous association with cosmopolitan and regionally authentic cultures underscores the degree to which cultural exchange, openness and closedness, interaction and boundary maintenance, and flexibility and the need to authenticate constitute two sides of the same coin.³⁰

If cuisine, cooks and restaurants are agents of inter-Asian circulation and exchange, then they are simultaneously implicated in the production and instantiation of bounded ethnolinguistic identities, sensibilities and distinctions. The restaurants and forms of cooking explored earlier are characterised by their flexibility and the imprint of decades and more of inter-Asian mobility; the same community, however, has established other institutions that point to the cultivation of narrower forms of ethnic identity.³¹ Abdullah (the trader of Turkmen background whose attempts to locate a debtor I discussed in [Chapter 6](#)) took me to a restaurant in Mazar-e Sharif that proudly claimed it was the first 'Turkmen' eatery in the city. In addition to displaying items of traditional Turkmen clothing and serving the *palaw* and dough-based dishes that are common across northern Afghanistan, the small eatery, which is located not far from the city's shrine to Ali, marked its distinctively Turkmen identity by serving a dish that had hitherto only rarely if ever been available in Afghanistan's restaurants, and, indeed, was rarely prepared in the home: *Ishleki*. *Ishleki* – sometimes referred to jokingly by informants as 'Turkmen pizza' – comprises minced meat and onions in a pastry crust; traditionally, the dish was slow-cooked in an earthenware container placed in the embers of the hearth of the Turkmen home.³² I had only eaten *ishleki* on one prior occasion, having been offered it by a police officer in Kunduz to whom members of the local Turkmen community had presented the delicacy as a 'gift'. The eatery in Mazar-e Sharif, a Turkmen trader in Yiwu had told me, was the first place in which *ishleki* had been available for sale in Afghanistan, despite the country's sizeable and historic Turkmen community and their renowned status as chefs. Abdullah told me that the owner of the restaurant – who was not present during our visit – had spent several years living and working in Istanbul: it was in Zeytinburnu where he had arrived at the idea of establishing an authentic Turkmen eatery in his home city of Mazar-e Sharif. Abdullah was not, however, entirely satisfied with the authenticity of the Turkmen dishes served at the

³⁰ See, for comparison, Osella and Caroline Osella 2007.

³¹ On the importance of food to ethnic identity in Central Asia, see Zanca 2007. On food's importance to Afghan diasporic identities, see Dossa 2014 and Monsutti 2010.

³² As with other dishes celebrated in Turkic communities in northern Afghanistan and Central Asia, the dish's origins lie in the historically mobile lifestyles of Turkmen pastoralists; see Perry 1996.

restaurants: there were tomatoes in the meat filling – not something, he noted, that he remembered his Turkmen grandmother ever adding to the *ishleki* she had cooked at home during his youth. Circulations and exchanges of an inter-Asian scale and scope produce open and adaptive forms of identity, but they also play a role in identity formations that emphasise boundaries and fixed understandings of authenticity; Central Asian émigrés, as well as other trading networks studied in this book, are simultaneously involved in both sets of processes.

In his study of Armenian trading networks, Aslanian has argued that in addition to the circulation of commodities and credit, the movement of trained religious personnel was critical to ‘the maintenance of the identity/integrity of the network’; such figures, as a result, were regarded as ‘jealously guarded possessions’.³³ Individuals learned in the field of the Islamic sciences who circulate between inter-Asian nodes are also valued in the networks under study in this book. In addition to valuing the status of authoritative holders of religious knowledge, Afghans conversant in specific cultural genres, especially poetic and musical production, play a critical role in informing the ideological and cultural reproduction of trading networks. Acknowledged figures of religious and cultural authority, however, regularly combine the roles they play in processes of ideological reproduction with those of being active traders, merchants and investors. The imam (prayer leader) in one of Odessa’s two Afghan mosques, for example, is a trader who is educated in the Islamic sciences. Similarly, a trader based in Yiwu who has committed the Qur’an to memory (a *hafiz-e qur’an*) presides over important religious events organised by Afghans in China. Many other traders are also skilled in the field of commerce and regarded as cultural experts – something they enact when using literary Persian in the context of being compères at Afghan cultural events, for instance, or writing books on Afghan history and culture at the same time as over-seeing wholesale shops and trading companies. Indeed, when Afghan traders hire the services of religious specialists to carry out particularly important religious rituals (most especially in order to recite the Qur’an in its entirety during the month of Ramadan), they are pragmatic in terms of the choices they make about whom to spend hard-earned money on. Afghans in Yiwu, for example, agreed to bring a religious specialist from Mumbai to China to recite the Qur’an during Ramadan; an Afghan religious expert, I was told, would have been expensive in terms of finance and the time that traders in the city would have been expected to spend with a guest from their ‘homeland’. It is not surprising that the role played by religious specialists in the reproduction of Afghan and Armenian trading

³³ Aslanian 2014.

networks differs in important ways: not only have secular forms of polity and government narrowed the scope for the role played by religious authority in the organisations of mobile societies but so too are there significant theological differences in the forms of globally influential Sunni Islam adhered to by most Afghan traders and the more specific forms of Christianity developed by the Armenian Apostolic Church.

I have suggested in this chapter that men such as Rahimullah who are trained in the art of cooking *palaw* can also be seen as ‘jealously guarded’ cultural specialists among Afghan long-distance trading networks. Rahimullah’s case demonstrates that chefs who have specialised in the cooking of the relevant variant of this dish – including the Saudi Arabian-inspired *ruz al-bukhari* – are widely sought after in the nodes in which Afghan trading networks coalesce. Chefs circulate far and wide between multiple nodes of Asian connectivity, moving back and forth between Jeddah, Yiwu, Dubai and Istanbul. Trader-restaurateurs also go to considerable lengths to bring chefs from regions of Afghanistan that are known as being cultural centres for knowledge about how to best prepare authentic dishes, especially *palaw*. In order to navigate Chinese visa regulations, for example, cooks are regularly included as partners in trading businesses; this course of action poses a considerable risk for trader-restaurateurs – the China business visas of all individuals registered as partners of a company depend on their being present in China in order to sign the document that confirms they are in an ongoing partnership or otherwise involved in the business. As a result, chefs hold a degree of power and influence over such companies – this is something that they can demonstrate in threats to return to Afghanistan (often made if their working pay and conditions do not meet their expectations) or seek work elsewhere. Traders are largely confident in their ability to maintain the significance of Islamic and cultural practices and knowledge to their collective activities, identities and expressions of familiarity without hiring the services of religious professionals. In the sphere of cuisine, however, the traders take specific steps to maintain authenticity – they also challenge establishments that threaten Afghanistan’s reputation by serving ‘copies’ of the country’s famed cuisine. Though chefs are certainly not the priests of Afghan networks, they do provide a window into the multiplicity of actors involved in the cultural reproduction of Afghan networks, as well as the multiple levels at which such reproduction occurs.

Conclusion

This chapter has identified four ways in which restaurants are important to long-distance inter-Asian trade in the first decades of the twenty-first

century. First, restaurants address a significant and everyday need of mobile traders and those who work for them: they provide regular, affordable and reliable food for mobile actors who do not constitute a 'global elite' but often work on the basis of tight profit margins. Second, the ability to conduct the forms of trade discussed in this book requires that members of networks pool information about commercial dynamics as well as the individual and collective reputations of traders. Doing so in geopolitically divided and tense contexts in which 'everyone is an agent', however, is no simple task. In such contexts, traders-restaurateurs play a critical role in cultivating spaces in which sensitive knowledge about commerce and reputation can be safely transmitted. Third, in the inter-Asian commercial nodes we have explored it is widely assumed that establishing and maintaining a restaurant requires political acumen and relationships with power-holders on the part of the restaurateur. Restaurants, in these contexts, are not only safe settings of knowledge transmission; they also materialise and symbolise power, influence, connectivity and authority at the collective and individual levels.

Finally, restaurants are important vehicles for the cultural interpenetration of Asian societies. As a result, they thus have long-lasting implications for traders and their networks, and also for the wider societies and cultures within and across which these operate. In this respect, restaurants differ from other 'neighbourhood institutions' explored and analysed in this book, such as diaspora organisations and religious foundations. If those institutions play a critical role in encouraging and – where necessary – enforcing hierarchical ties of loyalty between traders and the wider networks within which they work, restaurants also facilitate 'transactions in taste' within the societies in which they operate.

The inter-Asian circulations of various manifestations of Afghan cuisine explored in this chapter contribute to the book's more general argument about the need to rethink the conventional geographies through which Asian connectivity is addressed and explored. On the one hand, the significance of *palaw* and the restaurants that serve it to the culinary dynamics of some of Asia's greatest trade hubs – from Istanbul, Jeddah and Dubai in West Asia to Yiwu in China and Odessa and Moscow in the post-Soviet world – underscores the degree to which Afghanistan is not a peripheral feature of inter-Asian dynamics. In [Chapter 6](#), I argued that Kabul is an important node in long-distance trading networks, especially in terms of the provision of capital. In this chapter, I have argued that Afghanistan's mobile societies are also culturally influential, especially in the arena of cuisine, and that such influence is clearly visible in multiple hubs of inter-Asian commerce. On the other hand, traders regard cuisine as having great significance for their collective activities and identities, as well as the

manner in which they are perceived by people in the societies across which they work. And this underscores the ways in which inter-Asian traders deploy a multiplicity of cultural and ideological resources to navigate multiple geopolitical projects and the range of settings these often simultaneously shape and influence.

Because most of the Afghan traders whose activities are documented in this book are Muslim, it might be assumed that religion is inevitably the aspect of their identities that matters most to the cultural composition of their networks. However, the significance traders attach to cuisine and the social institutions, spaces and authoritative personnel connected to it shows how far the traders actively draw from a wide pool of cultural and ideological resources. As I have suggested in this and other chapters, there are two reasons why such resources are essential for understanding the durability of the networks. First, they ensure the cultural reproduction of their networks and the forms of familiarity between those making them up. Second, access to, awareness of and fluency in multiple cultural resources inform the ways in which the traders conceive of and exercise navigational agency in the complex geopolitical contexts across which they work. Cuisine plays an influential role in mediating the traders' individual and collective relationships with states, societies and officials in contexts as diverse and varied as the Gulf, Russia, China and Turkey. The forms of cuisine promoted by the traders transcend narrow understandings of their belonging to a 'national diaspora' – they illuminate, instead, the role played by traders in historically enduring interactions of multiple societies and cultures within the Eurasian arena. As *palaw*'s shifting nomenclature illustrates, the historic role played by mobile societies in such processes of cultural exchange, interaction and interpenetration is something that the traders consciously emphasise and de-emphasise depending on the geopolitical dynamics of the particular setting in which they live and work. The story of *palaw* thus illuminates the interplay between the flexible and shifting identities of trading networks premised on familiarity with multiple cultural resources and those that are narrower and ethnically particular in shape and form.

Conclusion: Geopolitics, Critical Responsiveness and Navigational Agency in Eurasian Connectivity

One of the challenges facing anthropologists exploring contemporary dynamics is how to forge a balance between shedding light on the specificities and complexity of human lives while addressing major debates about the nature of the world in which we live. I have sought in this book to emphasise the value of exploring the social institutional structures of networks, and of documenting the social and cultural practices that undergird these and the lively trade in commodities in which they are involved. At the same time, I have sought to do so without taking emphasis away from specific and unique aspects of individual agency and experience.

Navigational Agency in Eurasia

Throughout this book, I have argued that mobile traders operating across a range of settings in Eurasia demonstrate their ability to navigate between competing geopolitical projects of connectivity, and that my experience of life with such traders was consistently one of the enactment and performance of sophisticated forms of cultural, linguistic and political versatility. Yet there is also a darker side to the lives of the traders on whom I have focused: anxieties arising from decades of living in the context of fraught and often violent geopolitical struggles are a recurring dimension of their experiences. Focusing on the ability of traders to navigate between geopolitical projects and the pressures and strains of their daily lives challenges the notion that trading networks are durable because they are built upon functioning relationships of trust that are cultivated in ideologically and culturally coherent communities. I have instead documented the ways in which traders cultivate enduring social relationships in environments permeated by feelings of mistrust and regard access to a wide range of cultural, ideological and political resources as of inherent value to the forms of work in which they are involved.

The connective and conductive tissues of inter-Asian connectivity converge at vibrant nodes, including Yiwu, Odessa, Jeddah and

Istanbul. The wider significance of a commercial node might be in terms of it providing trading infrastructure, or in relationship to the social and cultural reproduction of a particular trading network. In rare cases, nodes successfully combine roles, playing a stable role in the provision of infrastructure for commercial activity and the environments that enable trading networks to engage in sociological and ideological reproduction and thus to endure over time and space. The case of Yiwu is especially striking because while Chinese policymakers envision the city as a specialised site of trading infrastructure, international traders active in the city – including those of an Afghan background – regard themselves as being key contributors to its development and emphasise their multiple cultural and emotional attachments to the city. Such diversity in the nature and function of nodes means that actors travel frequently between them in order to accomplish diverse goals and ambitions, nurturing family and community life in some contexts and securing and expanding their business activities in others.

The networks whose dynamics, structures and personnel I have documented and analysed in this book are not merely ad hoc responses by 'local' actors to contemporary forms of economic globalisation. Their internal composition and structure are informed, instead, by long though often silenced histories of participation by specific 'mobile societies' in trade, commerce and long-distance and circulatory forms of mobility. Our understanding of the commercial activities and mobile trajectories of Central Asian émigrés today will be impoverished without taking into account the past activities of mobile people from this region in inter-Asian commerce. Similarly, the role played by a small but versatile and economically influential community of Afghan Hindus and Sikhs in connecting various Eurasian settings to one another builds on the long-term contributions that networks comprising these and other ethno-religious minorities have made to commercial and cultural exchange in a variety of contexts across Eurasia over hundreds of years.

Recognition of the significance of historical processes to the activities and organisation of trading networks – the delicate connective tissues as opposed to blunt mega-projects of infrastructure that connect Eurasian societies from the ground up – does not inevitably romanticise stasis over change in the manner of much work on contemporary iterations of 'the Silk Roads'. Far from being archaic or anachronistic, the networks described and analysed in this book bear the imprint of global transformations in the organisation of political and economic life. The networks demonstrate, however, the ability to adapt to such transformations while simultaneously maintaining their cohesion. The Afghan traders in the former Soviet Union include individuals who successfully etched

themselves on to the Soviet Union's visions of an interconnected Eurasian landmass, mostly through participation in its ideological programmes of training and education. Commercial skills only came to the fore for these actors after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the political order in Afghanistan that it had played an important role in installing. Indeed, the individuals who established themselves as traders in the former Soviet Union were mostly new entrants to the 'field of trade' (*maidan-e tijarat*). Their backgrounds had hitherto been rural, or they may have come from families that had derived social status through state service rather than commercial skill and endeavour. Afghanistan's historic merchant families – the social respect and position of which derived from successive generations enacting prescribed forms of morally virtuous forms of behaviour in markets and urban settings – largely vacated the country and, indeed, the wider region in the mid-1970s. Few historic merchant families maintain a 'position' in Afghanistan's market; newer generations of traders argue, moreover, that the remaining descendants of older merchant families in the country are out of step with the skills required for business in the twenty-first century. Against this context, it is striking that Hindu and Sikh Afghan traders continued to play a role in the extension of Afghan commercial networks in the European settings in which they settled.

When continuities are evident in the commercial activities and geographies of Afghan traders, these do not, I have suggested, arise from either the traders or the structures in relationship to which they act seeking to resist or even being in opposition to a transforming world. My discussion of the activities of Central Asia's émigré merchants instead demonstrates the ability of this mobile society to maintain historically vital commercial structures while simultaneously being able to adapt to the cultural and ideological content of such structures. Participation in and adherence to formal Sufi brotherhoods played a critical role in promoting the cohesion and durability of historically mobile Central Asian communities across much of Eurasia until at least the mid-twentieth century. By contrast, the 'Bukharans' described in the pages of this book today are more likely to identify their modes of being Muslim with Islamic reformism than shared adherence to a Sufi brotherhood. Many Central Asian émigrés are in fact hostile to the forms of Sufic thought and practice that were of importance to previous generations of traders from their home region. At the same time, the social institutions bound up with Sufi Islam that were significant to earlier generations of traders – including the lodges (*tekke*) forged out of religious endowments (*waqf*) – are important to the collective lives of the traders in Jeddah and Istanbul today, being used to hold shared religious rituals and community celebrations. The modes of being

Muslim these traders practise today thus intersect in complex ways both with the current ideological projects of the nation states they inhabit and their community's long-term history.

Institution Builders

A crucial component of the durability of networks is the proficiency of their participants in institution-building. Historians and economists have increasingly emphasised the role that social institutions play in determining the 'rules of the game' in relationship to which trading networks conduct commerce. This book has sought to contribute to this body of literature by bringing granular attention to specific social institutions and sites that are of relevance for understanding the activities of Afghan traders. The social institutions important for Afghan traders are mostly autonomous from the state. Yet traders rarely establish institutions in direct opposition to the state structures of the countries in which they live. In settings as diverse as China, Turkey and the countries of the former Soviet Union, traders instead forge close and intimate relationships with state officials, yet rarely in a manner that suggests they are governed by or dependent on them. Indeed, individual traders who are regarded as acting in a manner that suggests unbending compliance with the dictates of local officials are a focus of much criticism in Afghan commercial circles.

The form taken by the social institutions fashioned by Afghan traders inevitably reflects the wider political cultures and environments of the societies in which they live and work. In the former Soviet countries, the traders build formal institutions recognised by local governments that are organised in relationship to national identity markers – a conventional medium through which Eurasian states have managed ethnolinguistic and cultural diversity, today as in the past.¹ In China, attempts made by traders to organise officially recognised institutions focus on their collective economic activities; institutions important but not formally recognised by the Chinese authorities are of a decidedly informal and amorphous form – notably the restaurants and cafés described in [Chapters 4 and 7](#). The bifurcation between formal economic and informal social institutions in China reflects the local and national preoccupation of Chinese officials with ethnolinguistic, cultural and religious identity. In West Asia, by contrast, mobile traders establish institutions – notably religious foundations (*wakf*) and community associations (*dermigi*) – that are informed by the religious and ethno-nationalist goals and identities of the nation states in which they are based.

¹ Crews 2007.

The social institutions established by the traders play a multiplicity of roles in their networks' activities. They are critical to the construction and instantiation of shared senses of familiarity and cultural and moral sensibilities, most especially through the organisation of cultural, religious and political events, as well as displays of hospitality and the sharing of food. Social institutions also play a major role in the sharing and pooling of knowledge and information about trade and commerce, as well as the social reputations of individual traders. They perform such roles in geopolitical contexts in which critical information and knowledge are regarded by traders and officials alike as being highly sensitive. In this sense, rather than distinguishing between institutions that seek to cultivate the cultural identities of diasporic communities and those that are organised as platforms for building economic partnerships, it is more helpful to explore the significance of a multiplicity of social institutions – formal and informal – to multi-layered and intersecting forms of inter-regional connectivity.

Geopolitics and Trading Networks

The book has also focused on the strategies, tactics and positioning developed by the traders in relationship to their understandings of the geopolitical processes and dynamics affecting the settings in which they work. Anthropologists are increasingly active in debates about geopolitics.² They have documented ordinary people's experience of geopolitical processes, a field of knowledge often referred to as constituting 'popular geopolitics'. A range of studies explores experiences of border regulation and control³ and the effect of geopolitical struggles on community life in geopolitically contested regions.⁴ Less visible, however, are studies of the identities and experiences of groups who inhabit the ideological and territorial spaces that fall between competing geopolitical projects. Building on historical studies of the complex and cosmopolitan identities of inter-imperial subjects,⁵ *Beyond the Silk Roads* has sought to illuminate the ways in which actors located in settings informed by multiple geopolitical projects engage in navigational agency. The study of geopolitics as lived involves recognition of the skills demonstrated by actors in carefully calibrated forms of navigation and the tensions and strains they experience in the course of performing such work: enacting navigational agency over long periods has visceral effects on people's identities, feelings and experiences. As Zia told me in the imperial

² For an overview, see Marsden, Ibañez-Tirado and Henig 2016. ³ Jansen 2009.

⁴ See, for example, Rimpiläinen 2017. ⁵ Aslanian 2014, Alavi 2015, Li 2020.

surroundings of St Petersburg, traders derive pride from working at the 'heart of Asia', but they are not simply savvy actors who are invariably able to exploit existing orders for their own benefit.

Much scholarship and analysis of contemporary Eurasian connectivity focuses on China's Belt and Road Initiative. However, the Belt and Road Initiative is but one of many attempts made by powerful states in and beyond the region to give political and economic definition to Eurasian connectivity. Russia and Turkey have increasingly positioned themselves as leading players in attempts to forge lasting forms of regional coherence, as the Eurasian Customs Union and Turkey's much-proclaimed 'pivot to the East' illustrate. Turkey's economic growth from the 1990s, alongside the development of a foreign policy that invests heavily in the Ottoman past and modern expressions of Sunni Muslim identity, means that it too plays a visible role in cultivating images and models of Eurasia connectivity.⁶ Turkey's presence is often most visible in the active support that the Turkish state offers to Turkish businesses.⁷ The political significance of the category of 'Turkic Muslim' in contexts as diverse as those of Crimea, northern Afghanistan and China's Xinjiang province is also notable. The Gulf states have also played a visible role in such dynamics, especially by using scriptural forms of Sunni Islam to extend their influence into multiple settings in West Asia and Eurasia, although there are signs, especially in Saudi Arabia, that change is underway in this region's relationships with Muslim Asia.⁸ Projects including the Belt and Road Initiative, the Eurasian Customs Union and Turkey's 'pivot to the East' also intersect with the legacies of earlier projects of Eurasian connectivity. Until its collapse in 1991, the Soviet Union played a leading role in seeking to create a Eurasian arena connected to contiguous world regions. Soviet strategists regularly deployed specific types of actors – including religious authorities and international students – to advance their geopolitical agenda.

Geopolitical projects of Eurasian connectivity relate to one another as well as to those of the United States and Europe in contested ways, sparking moments of outright opposition and conflict, as well as uneasy alliance.⁹ This book has sought to expand conventional understandings of the geopolitical implications of such projects by bringing attention to the ways in which they inform and are played out within human lives. It has explored the ways in which actors whose lives criss-cross Eurasia experience and think about the competing geopolitical forces with

⁶ Landau 1995 and Ozkan 2014. ⁷ See, for example, Flanagan 2013.

⁸ Jaffrelot and Louer 2017 and Farquhar 2015.

⁹ Chubin and Tripp 2014 and Rolland 2017b.

which they interact. Going beyond both the notions of ‘popular geopolitics’ and ‘globalisation from below’, I have built on anthropological studies of transregional networks and communities that have argued that if such actors operate ‘beneath’, then they also act ‘between’ governments.¹⁰ My focus has been on the critical responsiveness that traders demonstrate in relation to geopolitical processes: by authoring routes and forging connections between little-related contexts, Afghan traders actively participate in geopolitical processes rather than merely being affected by them. The traders also think of themselves as sophisticated geopolitical actors, deriving pride, esteem and status from displaying and highlighting their linguistic and cultural versatility.

The traders explored in this book are not state actors or strategists, nor do they hold official positions in multinational corporations. As I explored in [Chapter 2](#), some of the traders do have experience of working in high-level positions in the Afghan state – others participated as fighters and ideologues in geopolitical conflicts during the 1990s. More generally, however, participation in geopolitical processes by the traders introduced in this book brings to light a more subtle and nuanced mode of participating in geopolitics. Navigational agency – the ability to steer a course between major geopolitical projects at the same time as playing an active role within them – requires Eurasia’s trading networks to work across ideological boundaries rather than being defined by them.¹¹ The traders explored in *Beyond the Silk Roads* deploy navigational agency to weave between multiple geopolitical projects – a key principle of being a trader in the geopolitical interstices of Eurasia is that of pragmatically working alongside rather than against, and across rather than within, different geopolitical projects.¹²

The traders we have met, then, are skilled at navigating geopolitical processes. Yet, for the merchants explored in this book, accomplishing navigational agency is rarely a straightforward process. The traders emphasise how navigating complex geopolitical contexts is hard work and does not always end in success – the experience of past failures also contributes to the circumspect and watchful manner in which they act. Geopolitical tensions, conflicts and dynamics have indeed often directly impinged on the traders’ working and personal lives. Traders must tread carefully. The institutions that are so necessary for their collective activities have resulted in accusations of political activity in states that are sensitive about issues ranging from regional separatism to the politics of ethnicity. Even being inadvertently caught up in such dynamics can damage their ability to navigate geopolitical tensions, access important

¹⁰ Li 2020. ¹¹ Claassen 2018. ¹² Anderson 2020.

markets and raise their families in the settings they deem suitable and in which they invest cultural and emotional significance. A Chambers of Commerce organisation established in the Saudi city of Jeddah by a long-term Arabian Peninsula-based Central Asian émigré resulted, for example, in accusations by the Saudi authorities of the trader being involved in separatist activities. The security state erected by China in Xinjiang – a region of historic cultural and commercial significance for Afghans – curtailed their activities in the region and resulted in their further geographic dispersal. By 2018, almost all Afghan traders based in the cities of Kashgar and Urumqi in Xinjiang had relocated their activities to trading nodes elsewhere in China, especially Yiwu, as well as relocating their families to Afghanistan or Istanbul. As a result, Afghan traders were no longer anchored to a region that had been of importance for the trade in goods between China and Afghanistan and between China and the former Soviet Union.

The UAE's participation in geopolitical projects has also directly affected the individual lives of traders as well as the geographies and dynamics of their networks more generally. The UAE's deportation of hundreds of Afghan merchants in 2015 arose from government accusations that they were supporting pro-Iranian armed groups in Syria, mostly through charitable gifts.¹³ This sizeable deportation also arose against the backdrop of tensions between the UAE and Afghanistan after the arrest in the UAE of Iranian nationals who had travelled to the country on passports illegally issued in Afghanistan.¹⁴ The individuals and families deported had run substantial re-export businesses in Dubai and Sharjah; in order to protect their capital, they quickly exchanged the registrations of their companies with Afghans who continued to be legally resident in the UAE. Traders were able to do so by establishing arrangements that involved businesses run by ethnically Hazara Shi'i Muslims being entrusted to Pashtun and mostly Sunni merchants. Traders who ran smaller businesses in the UAE, by contrast, mostly returned to Afghanistan, abandoning their commercial activities and taking their capital with them. Yet traders who fled in this manner were unable to pay their outstanding debts to UAE-based suppliers; as a result, their businesses fell into bankruptcy, meaning that traders faced charges of financial criminality in the UAE and the possibility of hefty fines and even jail sentences. In this context, suppliers also left the UAE for settings elsewhere, especially Istanbul. It is experiences such as these that lead traders to act in a circumspect and watchful manner and that make them

¹³ Tolo News 9 August 2016. ¹⁴ Tolo News 22 August 2015.

reluctant to invest capital in the settings in which they are based for fear of falling ‘under the gaze’ (*zer-e nazar*) of the authorities.

The ever-shifting nature of geopolitical dynamics means that traders favour dispersing their activities geographically. Having intimate family members stationed in the United Kingdom, a wholesale business in Moscow and trading offices in the UAE and China, for example, is regarded by the traders as constituting the ideal arrangement. To achieve this scenario, traders must lead mobile lives and be astute in the relationships they build with officials and publics in multiple settings. The strategy of geographic dispersal allows traders to contend with fluctuating markets and unstable political conditions – a stable business in hardware items in Moscow can offset difficult business conditions in Dubai, for instance. As Anderson has argued, the active ‘triangulation’ of activities across several commercial nodes also allows traders to earn profits from arbitrating between multiple currency markets – a form of navigational agency enacted by the traders in the financial realm.¹⁵ Such modes of agency rest upon decades of patience. For instance, a trader may seek to secure the citizenship of a country that is not especially valuable in terms of trade but does offer the possibility of them holding a passport that can facilitate easier international travel in the future. A trader I know in Yiwu endured long years of partial inactivity in a Scandinavian country, for example, with the aim of securing a passport that would eventually enable him to work alongside his brothers in Yiwu and travel globally in search of new and different markets.

Trust, Entrustment and Mistrust

Social theorists have long debated the relative merits of various attempts to theorise ‘trust’. By contrast, this book has sought to move beyond the attempt to fit Afghan trading networks and the relationships upon which they are built in relationship to one or another model of trust. It has suggested, instead, that for Afghan traders, it is impossible to predict with any accuracy a person’s future course of behaviour. As this assumption informs the ways in which the traders think and act, I chose to focus on the specific practices of entrustment that traders deploy in a world they regard as being steeped in mistrust. Focusing on such concrete practices of entrustment highlights an important point about the role played by trust more generally in these traders’ networks: traders enact trust in relation to particular risks rather than to a relationship or situation as a whole. Traders embark on such acts of entrustment – such as giving

¹⁵ Anderson 2020.

their savings on the basis of 'gut feelings' to little-known friends – on the basis of knowledge about specific individuals that is pooled and acquired in social institutions of collective significance to them. It is by gathering knowledge in this way – rather than some innately Muslim 'culture of trust' – that allows traders to make assessments about the trustworthiness or, rather, 'trustability' of specific individuals in the networks.¹⁶

Historians working on trading networks have developed unique insights into this type of social formation because they are able to explore their dynamics over long periods and in specific contexts by consulting archival material. By contrast, most anthropologists working on trading networks in the present day rarely gain access to documentary evidence concerning financial, legal and personal dynamics. This is no doubt because enabling access to documentary material on the part of traders would run the risk of spilling trading secrets and revealing aspects of their activities that could contain evidence of illegal practices. Yet anthropologists are in a position to add depth and complexity to historical models. Most generally, the type of material gathered by anthropologists is based on long-term relationships cultivated with individual traders over long periods of time that illuminate the human and emotional dimension of commerce. The emphasis I have placed in this book on the effects that living at the heart of geopolitical processes has on individual and collective thought and experience was possible only because I came to know traders over a ten-year period and in a range of contexts and circumstances. If the traders upon whom the book has focused are skilled in the arts of navigating competing geopolitical tensions, then doing so also penetrates their thinking, emotions and sensibilities. Traders maintain a disposition of critical responsiveness towards the worlds they inhabit; even the most apparently mundane of social interactions and scenarios is often a source of suspicion and doubt. For an activity that is so often associated in historical scholarship and social science theory with 'trust', the everyday experiences of traders is bound up with concerns about mistrust, and this also informs the relationships they cultivate on a day-to-day basis.

Traders, I have suggested, do not regard the lived experience of mistrust as simply corrosive to the worlds they inhabit – they share a belief, rather, in the value of a healthy degree of mistrust to their activities. Mistrust represents not just a breakdown of social relationships; such social breakdowns also provide the possibility for traders to learn techniques for navigating changing and unpredictable contexts. *Beyond the Silk Roads* has suggested, then, that in addition to reflecting the ontological assumptions that Afghan traders hold about human behaviour,

¹⁶ Monsutti 2013: 147–62.

their critical responsiveness to the world around them reveals the influence on individuals and communities of decades of participation in contexts shaped by multiple and fraught geopolitical processes. Traders illuminate the effects of this particular type of context on their thoughts and emotions, their identities and their modes of agency and behaviour.

Anthropology's focus on individual experiences thus reveals aspects of the dynamics of networks that scholarship that does not involve fieldwork is unable to explore in detail. It remains a widely held assumption in the literature on trade networks that ties of kinship, caste, religion and ethnicity offer an underlying basis for cooperation and trust to commercial actors, even if this is inherently fragile. More recently, historical work has recognised that the significance of the underlying social structures of trading networks in the development of relationships of trust is altogether less certain for commercial partnerships between merchants from different communities. A consideration of relationships between traders of different backgrounds has led historians to emphasise the role played by emotions in trust. By means of an analysis of a commercial partnership between a Somali and Indian trader in the Arabian Peninsula, Mathews has argued that theories of trust need to recognise the role that 'gut feelings' play in encouraging merchants to enter into risky economic partnerships. Rather than being an ethical stance, trust, Mathews suggests, is better conceptualised as a type of relationship that arises from the intermeshing or 'assemblage' of various and contingent aspects of merchant life, including judicial systems, people, commodities, profits and, importantly, gut feelings.¹⁷

I have also sought to emphasise the contingency of the connected contexts that traders create and inhabit. The decision a trader makes about where to trade is as likely to be based on an evening of impromptu discussion in a café as on careful calculations about the trustworthiness of partners and business strategies. Traders share their worldly possessions with individuals with whom they do not enjoy long-established friendships, even if they often say that length of acquaintance is the best indicator of trust. Dubai-based merchants reportedly handed over million-dollar businesses to traders from different ethnic communities based in the city in the wake of their being deported from the UAE. At a smaller scale, a trader en route to Europe with his small daughters handed his worldly possessions to a merchant in Odessa with whom he had previously had no connections. He engaged in this act of entrustment in a specific context and on the basis of a 'gut feeling' that the partner was 'somebody good'.

¹⁷ Mathew 2019.

The critical responsiveness to contingency that traders demonstrate in their commercial activities and the plans they make and execute regarding their family lives means that, far from being archaic and unchanging, trading networks are dynamic and unstable structures that are in an inherent state of flux. At the aggregate level, I documented how a group of actors that had initially been formed in relationship to a shared political project shifted their collective activities towards trade and commerce in the context of being violently displaced from the political domain. The longer-term success of the group in the field of trade lay not just in their long-standing internal relationships but also in their ability to incorporate new actors with capital and skill who identified with political cultures very different from their own. At the individual level, I have shown how people shift between different roles within trading networks. Over the course of their life, an individual might identify as a merchant, an intermediary, a migrant and a refugee in relation to the settings in which they act at any particular point in time.

The Future of Eurasia's Networks

What, then, are the future of these networks and the forms of connectivity in which they have played such a critical role? It might be tempting to argue that trading structures are imbued with the capacity to endure over time. Alternatively, do mega-projects (including the Belt and Road Initiative) question the capacity of apparently 'traditional' modes of inter-Asian commerce to persist? The material explored in the preceding pages questions assumptions central to both of these lines of enquiry. On the one hand, as Willem van Schendel has argued, 'states see less – and their knowledge is less precise – than they pretend'.¹⁸ As a result, he contends, state-centric initiatives including the Belt and Road will suffer from the same 'legibility deficits' that have limited the reach of other recent multi-state programmes including the 'War on Terror' and the 'War on Drugs': such projects were unable to eliminate the scope for the informal practices being invested with ongoing significance by a multiplicity of differently positioned actors. On the other hand, trading networks and the corridors along which they operate are not given durable or geographically stable structures. They are heterogeneous and shifting structures that are engaged in a multiplicity of activities at any one time. Successful networks are durable amid such flux and uncertainty. Exploring networks from the inside out challenges assumptions that trust arising from coherent forms of identity or ethics forms the touchstone of durable trading networks.

¹⁸ Van Schendel 2020: 41.

The networks explored in this book take active steps to ensure they have access to a wide and varied pool of cultural and ideological resources. Those making up trading networks seek to create and inhabit institutions that enable and regulate connections between nodes. They also understand broader geopolitical processes and adapt to these in ways that enable them to mediate between different political moments and emerging Eurasian geographies. The future of such networks, then, is entwined with unfolding forms of Eurasian geopolitics. The traders we have met in this book are capable of mediating between competing geopolitical projects. It is unlikely that one or other of these projects will dominate Eurasia; indeed, the rise of smaller states as geopolitical players in the region suggests, if anything, a growing degree of diversity and complexity. Networks of a variety of types that fulfil a range of functions will continue to play a vital role in the making of actually existing forms of Eurasian connectivity in the years to come. However, the structure these networks will take, the nature of their shared goals, identities and collective ambitions, as well as their ideological, ethical and cultural content and the geographical distribution of their nodes, will be contingent upon the outcome of ongoing geopolitical processes.

Note on Fieldwork

The ethnographic material documented and analysed in this book was collected for the most part during a series of fieldwork visits made between December 2015 and September 2019 to commercial nodes important for Afghan merchants across Eurasia. I conducted fieldwork with Afghan traders in Yiwu between February and July 2016 and revisited the city in January 2018, August–September 2018 and September 2019. During this period, I also visited Guangzhou and Hong Kong in order to meet traders with businesses interests in Yiwu. I conducted fieldwork in the Zeytinburnu neighbourhood of Turkey in July and October 2016 and July–August in 2017, and made a brief visit in May 2019. In November–December 2016, I interviewed Afghan and ‘Bukharan’ traders in Jeddah and Riyadh in Saudi Arabia. I made fieldwork visits to Odessa in Ukraine during August–September 2016 and August 2018, and met traders and Afghan community members in Kiev in June 2017. In December 2015 and June 2017, I interviewed Afghan traders in St Petersburg. I conducted fieldwork in Afghanistan in October 2016 (visiting Kabul and Mazar-e Sharif), September–October 2017 (Kabul, Herat, Mazar-e Sharif and Andkhuy), September 2018 (Kabul and Panjshir), and August 2019 (Kabul, Herat and Panjshir).

I also made a series of short visits to nodes of significance for Afghan trading networks in order to meet traders previously known to me and to map the commercial activities of the trading networks of which they formed a part. I visited sites of significance to Afghan trading networks in Karachi in November 2017, especially the Sohrab Goth neighbourhood. Between May 2017 and September 2019, I made intermittent visits to wholesale markets in London (especially Southall and the Mile End Road areas) and Manchester (especially Cheetham Hill) in order to interview Afghan traders with whom I established contact in Yiwu. I also visited De Bazaar in Beverwijk, the Netherlands, in November 2018, and met merchants of Afghan Jewish and Muslim

background in New York and New Jersey in October–November 2019. During the course of a short visit to attend a conference in Japan in July 2016 I visited Cheba prefecture in order to meet Afghan traders based in the region. During the course of stopovers in Dubai en route to Kabul I was able to meet Afghan traders involved in Eurasia, most notably in Deira.

During the course of specific research visits to China, Russia and Turkey detailed above, I benefited from the co-presence of team members working on related but distinct aspects of the TRODITIES project. Most notably, I conducted spells of research alongside Diana Ibañez-Tirado in China, Ukraine, Turkey and Russia, Vera Skvirskaja in Russia and Paul Anderson and Huaichuan Rui in China.

In addition to these periods of fieldwork, the ethnographic material explored in the book builds on my engagement since 1995 with both Afghanistan and Pakistan – detailed descriptions of fieldwork conducted prior to 2015 can be found in my earlier publications.¹

¹ See [Marsden 2005](#) and [Marsden 2016](#).

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Index

- Abdul (trader), 115
- Abdullah (trader), 213–18, 249
- Abu Bakr (trader), 243
- accusations of spying
- as aspect of fieldwork to be overcome, 44
 - futility of professing innocence, 46, 49–50
 - as humorous banter with traders, 46–51
- Afghan Boundary Commission, 93
- Afghan restaurants
- benefits of meeting and engaging with traders in, 225–27
 - celebrating *Nowruz* in Yiwu, 223–25
 - Central Asian cuisine in Kabul restaurants, 247–51
 - creation of inter-Asian cuisine, 242–47
 - as diplomatic space, 242–51, 252
 - diverse forms of Afghan eateries, 228–34
 - diversity of clientele, 221, 224
 - everyday navigation of geopolitical processes and, 227–36
 - financial viability, 234–35
 - focus of anthropological scholarship on, 222–23
 - as front for illicit and criminal activities, 237–38
 - importance to long-distance inter-Asian trade, 221–23, 251–53
 - perceptions of restaurateurs' knowledge and power, 236–38
 - place in the geopolitical imagination of Afghanistan, 227–28
 - popularity with Saudi nationals, 242–47
 - role in cultural reproduction of Afghan networks, 247–51
 - role of in building relationships of trust, 32
 - role of in ensuring durability of trading networks, 242
 - signature dish, 242
 - see also *palaw*.
 - as source of commercial information, 238–42
- Afghan society, divisions, 48
- Afghan traders
- attitudes towards in Central Asia, 61
 - citizenship dilemmas of traders in Saudi Arabia, 98–102
 - concerns about the possibility of deportation, 155
 - defining political context of action and positioning, 15
 - diplomatic potential, 16
 - disadvantages of being born in Afghanistan, 149
 - diverse commercial roles, 3, 5
 - ethno-linguistic background, 4
 - geopolitics and trading networks, 258–62
 - goods sold by in Chitral bazaar, 3, 4
 - institution-building efforts, 257–58
 - languages spoken by, 74
 - models of trust, mistrust and entrustment, 262–65
 - navigational agency, 254–57, 260–61
 - participation in geopolitical processes, 260
 - past roles within the Afghan state, 35
 - religious activities, 142–44
 - self-image, 53–55
 - understandings of Afghan identity, 26–27
- Afghan trading networks, Islam's complex role in, 80–84
- Afghan Turkestan, 93, 94
- Afghanistan
- association with ultra-conservative forms of Islam, 162
 - Bolshevik persecution of wealthy families, 92
 - circulation of capital, commodities and people, 201–2

- Afghanistan (cont.)
 colonial and postcolonial political construction, 27
 composition of non-Muslim trading communities, 164
 coup d'état, 95
 former Soviet-trained fighter pilots' transport role, 35–36
 historical perspective of intersections of trade and religion, 164–66
 historical significance, 27
 ninetieth 'independence' celebrations, 153
 role in long-distance trade, 192–95
 Soviet invasion and mujahidin conflict, 4, 64, 96
 Soviet Union's role in politics and economy of, 4
 US-led invasion and occupation, 66, 108, 192, 198
- Afghanistan–Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (ATTA), 131
- Africa, role of trading networks and nodes in economic development, 189
- Ahmed, Shahab, 168
- alcohol, 46, 52, 81, 82, 137, 142, 208, 215, 218, 231
- alternative geographies, concept of, 191
- Amanullah Khan, King of Afghanistan, 154
- Anderson, Paul, 53, 71, 112, 262
- Andkhuy, 196, 199–201, 213, 235, 246
- Anglo-Afghan relations, history of, 41
- anthropology, fieldwork requirements, 39
- Appadurai, Arjun, 153
- Aqcha, 196, 212
- Arabs, Afghans' view of, 141
- Armenia, conflict with Azerbaijan, 36
- Armenian trading networks, 7, 60, 250
 Aslanian's study, 60–61
- Asia, study of intersections between kinship and international politics in, 19
- Aslanian, Sebouh David, 7, 60, 250
- Atiq (trader), 184
- autochthonous nationalism, prevalence in Afghan political discourse, 162
- Azerbaijan, 25, 36
- Aziz (trader), 204
- Baluch networks, 18
- Bayly, Christopher, 12
- Bayly, Susan, 20
- bazaars and markets, *see* markets/bazaars.
- Belarus, 1, 62, 65, 70
- Belt and Road Initiative, 15, 265
 announcement of, 2
- as example of state forging of interregional connectivity, 17
- geopolitical significance, 259
- growth in power, 6
- impact on Eurasian trading communities, 1, 10, 17, 30
- increasing importance, 6
- influence on livelihoods of informal traders operating in China's mountainous borderlands, 190
- launch, 124
- 'Muslim culture' in the context of, 80
- potential future, 265
- relationship with other state-centric strategies, 259
- Yiwu and, 31, 123, 124–26, 128, 160
- Bismillah (friend of Abdullah), 214–15
- black economy, 16
- 'black money' (*pul-e siah*), 147, 211, 237
- 'Blue Mosque' replica, Shiberghan, 198, 201
- boarding schools, consequences of upbringing of Afghan children in, 64
- Bolivia, 130
- Bolshevik Revolution, 17, 28, 88, 92, 107, 165
- bribes (*rishwat*), 237
 lack of alternative to payment, 210
 payment of to customs officials, 65
 payments to Dushanbe police, 202
 procurement of Turkish residency permits and, 107
 sought by officials, 218
- Britain, history of influence in Afghanistan, 41–42
- Bukhara, 22–23, 88
 early modern economic dynamics, 93–94
 impact of incorporation into the Soviet Union, 94
 transregional reach as centre for education, 168
- Bukharan traders
 historical background, 28
 identification as 'Afghan', 117
- Bukhari rice (*ruz al-Bukhari*), consumption in Afghan restaurants in Saudi Arabia, 242–47
- Bukhariyya neighbourhood, Jeddah, 91–92, 96, 102, 118, 244
- Burton, Audrey, 93
- Can, Lâle, 88, 110
- capital, circulation of, 201–2
- carpet trade
 Afghan refugees' involvement in, 86

- Andkhuy, 196, 199
 Bukharan, 95, 96
 Bukhariyya Street, 92
 development role of ethnic Turkmen traders, 24
 Pakistan, 224
 Turkey, 105–6, 111, 113
- Caspian Sea, 196
- Central Asia, Bolshevik revolution and isolation of, 88
- Central Asian commercial networks, dynamism of, 11
- Central Asian émigrés
 challenges of conducting business in Saudi Arabia, 100–2
 citizenship and residency rights, 98
 citizenship dilemmas, 98–102
 commercial acumen, 93
 culinary influence, 247–49
 cultural adaptability, 256
 family backgrounds, 92
 ‘gastro-diplomacy’, 248
 historical background, 89
 influence of religion, 88, 89
 institutional life, 107–12, 118
 languages fluent in, 92, 103
 migration pathways, 92–94, 95, 97
 national identity, 98–99
 patterns of mobility, 86–89
 political activities, 95, 109
 relocation destinations, 104–14
 cultural, religious and social concerns, 103–4
 Kazakhstan, 104–5
 Turkey, 106–14
 UAE (United Arab Emirates), 105–6
 restaurant businesses, 244–47
 self-representations, 117
 view of Turkish citizenship, 108
- Chabahar, 24
- China
 accession to WTO, 3, 119, 124, 161
 Belt and Road Initiative, *see* Belt and Road Initiative
 ‘corridors of connectivity’, 2
 currency restrictions, 5
 identity verification systems, 99
 ‘international trade city’, 2
 see also Yiwu.
 money transfer restrictions, 126, 147
 ‘opening up’ policy, 3
 policy towards Muslims of Uyghur and Kazakh ethnicity, 37
 settled communities of traders, 10
 traders’ institution-building efforts, 257
- Xinjiang autonomous region, 3
 see also Xinjiang.
- Chitral, Pakistan, 3
- citizenship
 access to in China, 159–60
 access to in India, 177
 access to in the UAE, 106
 access to in Turkey, 106–8
 relationship with security, 7
 traders’ issues with, 7–8
 traders’ strategies to secure access to, 88, 98, 157, 262
- Claassen, Rutger, 18
- Clinton, Hillary, 2
- Cold War, 20, 34, 84, 120
 Afghanistan’s role, 42
- Colombia, 130
- colonialism, 34
 divisive effects of, 19–20
- commensality, definition, 222
- commercial networks, ideological and cultural complexity of, 18–20
- commercial nodes
 displacement of ethno-religious trading minorities from, 24
 diversity in the nature and function of, 255
 family life, 152
 fieldwork conducted in, 195–201
 importance of Afghan nodes, 189
 requirements for working in, 50
 role of cultural activities, 153
 significance, 255
 understanding, 191
 where Afghan traders operate, 1
- commodities of everyday use, 70, 101, 123, 124, 196, 199
- conspiracy theories, 44
- conviviality
 beneficial role of in fieldwork, 47–51
 concept of, 54
- corridors of connectivity
 along which traders operate, 2
 Eurasian corridor, 31, 56–60
 see also Eurasian corridor of connectivity.
 West Asian corridor, 31, 86–89
 see also West Asian corridor of connectivity.
- corruption, 208, 210–11, 215, 219
- cosmopolitanism
 ‘armoured’, 167
 post-cosmopolitanism, 167
- cotton trade, 22, 93
- covid, 126

- covid-19 pandemic, 126
- credit networks, 191
- Crimea, annexation by Russia and its impact, 37, 67, 174
- crypto-colonialism, concept of, 42
- cultural and religious diversity
- Afghans' interest in historic expressions of, 163
 - impact of long-term conflict and displacement on in Afghanistan, 163–64
 - modern Afghanistan, 164–66
 - role of in Eurasian connectivity, 187–88
- cultural sensibility, traders and, 76–80
- customs officials, payment of bribes (*rishwat*) to, 65
- Daud, Mohammad Khan, 165, 172
- deportation
- Afghan merchants deported by UAE, 37, 261, 264
 - Afghan traders' concerns about, 156
 - commonality of deportations to Afghanistan, 100
 - as consequence of non-payment of tax in Saudi Arabia, 102
 - undocumented Afghan labourers deported by Russian authorities, 71
 - undocumented Afghan migrants deported by Turkey, 114
- Dheepak (trader), 175–80, 183–84
- diasporas
- as transnational extensions of nation-states, 12
 - cultural identity maintenance role, 21
 - exploration of nation-states' strategic use of, 14
 - Herat's Jewish community, 163
 - legal conventions in formerly Soviet countries, 69
 - perception of Afghan migrant communities as, 28
 - role of diaspora organisations in durability of trading networks, 69, 71
 - self-depiction of Central Asian émigrés based in Turkey as, 115
 - trade network establishment role of diaspora organisations, 69–74
- Dil Agha (trader), 67–69, 205–6, 207–9, 224
- Dilmurad (stallholder), 245
- Dongyang, 140, 148
- Dostum, Rashid, 197
- dual role, 84, 141
- durability of trading networks
- Afghan traders' institution-building efforts and, 257–58
 - conferred by ability to switch between different fields of agency, 61
 - institution-building proficiency of participants and, 21, 257
 - interpersonal relationships and, 60
 - management of underlying contingency and, 202
 - neighbourhoods and, 20
 - religion and, 80–84, 256
 - resources essential for understanding, 253
 - role of diaspora organisations, 69, 71
 - role of social institutions, 76, 135
 - role of trust, 13, 20–22, 32, 220
 - significance of restaurants for, 223, 242
 - social relationships and, 60, 254
 - structural perspectives, 57, 61
- e-commerce, impact on trade in Yiwu, 126
- education
- access to as factor in choice of business location, 19, 111, 150–51, 152, 157, 158, 203
 - importance for traders, 157
 - intersection of cultural background in, 140
 - Russian and Soviet provisions, 19, 63, 64, 256
 - Sikh and Hindu communities' concerns, 172
 - transregional reach of Bukhara as a centre for, 168
 - Turkish provisions, 111
- Eid, 77, 192, 194
- 'the English', Afghan views on, 41
- Erdoğan, Recep Tayyip, 112
- Eurasia
- informal commercial terrain, 16–17
 - international political significance, 16
- Eurasian connectivity
- circulation of capital, commodities and people, 201–2
 - differing conceptions of, 9
 - key principle of being a trader in the geopolitical interstices of, 18
 - significance of ethno-religious minorities to, 31
 - traders' role, 10, 11
- Eurasian corridor of connectivity
- Afghan networks operating in former Soviet countries, 61–69
 - Armenian merchant community of New Julfa, 60–61

- import and export of commodities, 62, 70
- informal diplomacy, 74–75
- protection of migrants, 69–74
- role of religion in organisational activities of Afghans, 80–84
- traders and cultural sensibility, 76–80
- Eurasian Customs Union, 17, 105, 119, 259
- Eurasian trading networks
 - flexibility, 18
 - future of, 265–66
 - shared Persian vernacular, 7
- European imperialism, 42, 43, 53
- everyday diplomacy, *see also* informal diplomacy, 9, 59
- external ties, value for Afghan traders, 62
- family members, benefits of geographic dispersal, 262
- fieldwork
 - analysis of fieldwork practices, 33–34
 - benefits of practising in restaurants, 225–27
 - celebrating *Nowruz* in Yiwu, 223–25
 - interpersonal relationships and, 38–41, 47–51
 - research visits conducted, 267–68
 - role of geopolitics in anthropological fieldwork, 44–45
 - trip from Mazar-e Sharif to Andkhuy, 195–201
- flexibility, importance for traders, 14
- food, Afghan dishes, 92
- former pilots, role in long-distance transport, 35–36
- former Soviet countries, traders' institution-building, 257
- former Soviet Union
 - Afghan traders' interactions with politics, 62
 - backgrounds of Afghan traders in, 255–56
 - establishment of Afghan trading networks, 61–69
 - marriages of Afghan traders to local women, 117
- former state officials, roles in the field of trade, 35
- Friday prayers, 81, 83–84, 141–42
- friendship
 - as facilitator of long-distance trade, 36
 - friendship circles, 68, 194, 224
 - see also* interpersonal relationships.
- fur trade, 94
- Futian market, Yiwu, 43, 125–26, 128–30, 135, 140, 141, 182, 226, 234
- Gardner, Andrew, 156
- 'gastro-diplomacy', 223, 228, 248
- geographic dispersal of family members, benefits of the strategy, 262
- geopolitics
 - Afghan restaurants and, 227–28
 - Afghan traders' participation in geopolitical processes, 260
 - anthropology and, 9, 14–18, 44–45
 - Belt and Road Initiative's geopolitical significance, 259
 - informal diplomacy and, 14–18
 - northern Afghanistan's geopolitical significance for Turkey and Russia, 200
 - popular geopolitics, 14–15, 258, 260
 - restaurants and everyday navigation of geopolitical processes, 227–36
 - Soviet Union's geopolitical influence in Eurasia, 259
 - traders' perspective, 8, 34–38, 53–55, 120, 123
 - trading networks and, 258–62
- Germany, entrepreneur visa launched by, 157
- Ghani, Ashraf, 75, 171, 227
- giraw* (financial instrument), practice of, 206–9
- global currency markets, Afghan activity in, 73
- globalisation from below, 190, 260
- Goody, Jack, 223
- Green, Nile, 23, 168–69
- Guangzhou, 91–92, 148, 190, 233
- Gulzad (trader), 4–5, 6–8, 37
- Gwadar port, Pakistan, 24
- Hajji Kabir (trader), 151
- Hajji Karim (trader), 68
- hajj, 94, 109–10, 111, 143, 146, 184, 214–15, 216
- Hanifi, Shah Mahmoud, 165
- Hejaz region, Saudi Arabia, 94, 96, 98, 197, 243
 - land purchase legislation, 109
- Hekmatyar, Gulbuddin, 36
- Henig, David, 223, 248
- Herzfeld, Michael, 42
- Ho, Engseeng, 26, 112, 167
- Hodgson, Marshall, 168

- humour and wit, role of in establishing relationships, 41, 45–47, 50, 54
- Humphrey, Caroline, 39, 51
- Ibañez-Tirado, Diana, 97
- Ibrahimi, Niamattullah, 109
- India
 - Bayly's analysis of colonial 'information order', 12
 - connectivity with Central Asian states and China, 24
 - export goods, 192, 242
 - history of trading networks, 22
 - medicine trade and, 171
 - Sikh and Hindu traders' connections with, 162, 166, 170–71, 176–77, 181
- informal diplomacy
 - anthropology, geopolitics and, 14–18
 - in the Eurasian corridor, 74–75
 - traders' skill, 9
 - value of informal diplomatic skills, 59
- international boundaries, role of in traders' livelihoods, 8
- international interventions
 - post-2001 and continuing, 42
 - Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, 4, 162
 - traders' criticisms of the effects on their country, 43
 - US-led invasion of Afghanistan, 66, 108, 192, 198
- interpersonal relationships
 - fieldwork and, 38–41, 47–51
 - influence on durability of trading networks, 60, 254
 - role of in maintaining trading networks, 209–11
- interregional connectivity, role of the state, 17
- Iran
 - Armenian trading networks, 7, 22
 - labour migration from northern Afghanistan, 197
 - recruitment of Afghans to fight in Syrian conflict, 36
 - US sanctions, 126, 140
- ishleki* (Turkmen dish), 249–50
- ISIS, 9, 104, 162, 171, 197
- Islam
 - Afghanistan's association with ultra-conservative forms of, 162
 - Chinese state suspicion, 144
 - contested nature, 82, 143
 - distinct culture of 'halal' business and, 80
 - giraw* practice and, 206–9
 - influence on Central Asia's émigré traders, 88–89, 95
 - Islamic cosmopolitanism, 167–68
 - Muslim communities in China, 141
 - national identity and, 58
 - role in Afghan traders' business activities, 206–9
 - role in the dynamics of trading networks, 80–84
 - role of in maintaining connections, 88, 89
 - stabilising role, 82
 - theoretical connection with neoliberalism, 58
 - see also* Sufism.
- Islamic cosmopolitanism
 - concept of, 167
 - in Odessa, 180–85
 - relationship with Muslim majority settings today, 168–69
 - role of language, 168
- Istanbul
 - Afghan associations, 107
 - Afghan restaurants, 236–37
 - carpet trade, 105
 - as favoured destination point for émigré families, 106, 111–13, 115, 245
 - as favoured destination point for Yiwu traders, 150, 261
 - fieldwork conducted in, 2
 - importance of connections between Jeddah and, 195
 - role of Afghan restaurants, 237
 - traders' experiences of, 19, 87, 99, 104, 109
 - see also* Turkey.
- Jeddah, fieldwork conducted in, 2
- Jewish communities in Afghanistan
 - Afghan travellers' writings, 163
 - historical trading connections, 164
- jihadis, 18, 36
- Kabul
 - 'Bush bazaar', 193
 - Central Asian cuisine in Kabul restaurants, 247–51
 - challenges of running a business in, 194–95
 - debt collection in, 211–18
 - favours and friendship in, 209–11
 - fieldwork conducted in, 2
 - importance as node in long-distance trading networks, 252
 - insecurity, 195

- Mandawi market, 192–94
Yiwu's Afghan traders at home in, 192–95
- Kalakani, Habibullah, 154
- Karachi
discovery of Turkestanian-branded socks in, 90
historic importance as commercial node, 224–25
- Karakul lamb fur trade, 196
- Karzai, Hamid, 227
- Kashgar, 4–5
- Kazakhstan, 25
Central Asian émigrés relocation to, 104–5
citizenship policy, 104–5
wheat trade, 212
- Keqiao, 148
- Kia, Mana, 25, 168
- kidnapping of merchants for ransom, 195
- King Faisal Research and Islamic Studies Centre, Riyadh, 91
- kinship, 205, 212, 220, 264
neighbourhoods and, 20
- Kwon, Heonik, 20
- lamb fur trade, 94, 196
- landmines, 199
- Lapis Lazuli Corridor, Turkey, 196
- Latin American traders, 130
- Li, Darryl, 18
- lingua francas, 11
- London, fieldwork conducted in, 2
- long-distance trading networks
anthropological perspectives, 13
cultural and ideological perspectives, 14
historical perspectives, 11–13
importance of flexibility, 14
traders' self-reporting of their experience, 13
trust and mistrust in, 20–22
- Lutfi, Aameem, 18
- Machold, Rhys, 44
- Mandawi market, Kabul, 192–94
- markets/bazaars
Bingwan night market, Yiwu, 139
'Bush bazaar', Kabul, 193
Chitral bazaar, 3, 4
Futian market, Yiwu, 43, 125–26, 128–30, 135, 140, 141, 182, 226, 234
Mandawi market, Kabul, 192–94
Saddar Bazaar, Karachi, 225
Seventh-Kilometre Market, Odessa, 4, 68, 70, 72–74, 78, 82, 174, 180–85, 203, 208
- Marouda, Marina, 73
- marriage, 6, 7, 62, 68, 95, 111, 115, 117, 156
- Massoud, Ahmad Shah, 154
- Mathews, Gordon, 190, 264
- Mazar-e Sharif
foreign exchange services, 198
road trip to Andkhuy, 195–201
'methodological nationalism', 25
micro-networks, 56, 77
- migrants, protection of in the Eurasian corridor, 69–74
- migration, between Afghanistan and former Soviet settings, 66–67
- Mirziyoyev, Shavkat, 62
- mistrust
concept of, 54
Humphrey's formulation, 51
significance in traders' lives and relationships, 40, 45, 47, 49, 51, 55
'socially productive' role in sociality, 34
see also practices of entrustment; trust.
- mobile citizenship, strategic and cultural dimensions, 98
- mobile societies, Ho's definition, 26
- Mongolia, 25
- monocentric networks, 60
- mononodal networks, 60, 119, 175
- Monsutti, Alessandro, 204
- Moscow
Afghan restaurants, 230, 252
significance for Afghan traders' commercial activities, 62, 70, 174, 177, 262
- Moscow Olympics (1980), 70
- mosques
Chinese closure of, 144
dual role, 84
ethnolinguistic diversity and mosque attendance, 81
functional role of mosque attendance, 83–84
mosque attendance in Odessa, 81
mosque attendance in Yiwu, 141
- mujahidin, 42, 90, 96, 166, 176–77, 184, 208
- mujahidin government, 35, 46, 154, 181
- multinodal networks, 62
- Muslim societies, role of neighbourhoods, 20
- Myanmar, 196

- Nadir Shah, 60, 154
- Nagorno-Karabakh, 36
- Najibullah Ahmadzai, 176–77
- Nasir (trader), 43, 181–84
- national identity, traders' predilection for secular forms, 58
- nationalism, 25, 162
- nation-states, tendency for scholars to address regional dynamics through the lens of, 25
- NATO
- occupation, 182
 - role in trading networks, 193
 - withdrawal, 42, 182, 199, 204
- navigational agency
- accomplishing, 254–57, 260–61
 - Afghan traders in Eurasia, 254–57
 - Claassen's model, 18
 - demonstrations of, 160, 243, 247
 - potential for Afghanistan to capitalise on, 59
- Navoi, Ali Sher, 82
- neighbourhoods
- Bukhariyya neighbourhood, Jeddah, 91–92, 96, 102, 118, 244
 - comparison with conception of social institutions, 103, 112
 - durability of trading networks and, 20
 - importance for Sikh and Hindu communities, 175
 - and kinship, 20
 - 'partial neighbourhoods', 20, 114, 118
 - Sohrab Goth neighbourhood, Karachi, 90
 - see also* Zeytinburnu neighbourhood, Istanbul.
- Nepal, 196
- New Julfa, Nadir Shah's invasion, 60
- New Silk Road
- alternative geographies, 24–29
 - conventional geographies, 24
 - increasing importance, 6
 - launch of the strategy, 2
- northern Afghanistan
- geopolitical significance for Turkey and Russia, 200
 - labour migration, 197
- north-western Afghanistan
- influence of Turkey and Saudi Arabia, 198
 - road trip, 195–201
- Nowruz, 77, 231
- celebrating in Yiwu, 223–25
 - date of, 223
- Odessa
- Afghan community, 4
 - Afghan restaurants, 184, 230, 252
 - diaspora organisations, 77
 - fieldwork conducted in, 2
 - mosque attendance, 81, 83
 - Seventh-Kilometre Market, 4, 68, 70, 72–74, 78, 82, 174, 180–85, 203, 208
 - significance for Afghan traders' commercial activities, 29, 35, 43, 62, 70, 72, 77, 174, 175–80, 184, 187–89, 203
 - see also* Ukraine.
- Pakistan
- Afghan carpet trade, 86
 - Afghan trade networks, 131
- palaw, 215, 230, 244
- cooking pot, 92
 - cultural and commercial significance, 242–51, 252
 - modified forms of, 245
- Pashtun itinerant merchants, 4
- passports, 4, 99–100, 149, 226
- Pelkmans, Mathijs, 44
- People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPFA), 80, 165
- Persian Gulf, new or redeveloped ports, 24
- Persian language, transregional reach, 168
- Picket, James, 168
- pilgrimage visas, 86
- pilots, role in long-distance transport of Soviet-trained fighter pilots, 35–36
- place-making practices of traders in Yiwu, 123, 127, 128–40
- Bingwan night market, 139
 - morally circumspect establishments, 137
 - religion and, 137
 - restaurants, 135–36, 137
 - shisha cafés, 138–39
 - significance of Tianhe and Fuyuan Towers, 130–34
 - Wu Ai neighbourhood, 139
- politics, Afghan traders' interactions with, 62
- polycentric networks, 60
- popular geopolitics, 14–15, 258, 260
- post-Soviet world, sites of 'informal economy', 1
- practices of entrustment, 201
- debt collection in Kabul, 211–18
 - favours and friendship in Kabul, 209–11
 - ontological assumptions about human behaviour and, 263–65

- relationship with risk, 262–65
 Yama and Dil Agha, 205–9
 Pyatigorsk, 37
- Rabbani, Burhanuddin, 181, 227
 Rahimullah (restaurateur), 246, 251
 Rahman, Abdul (trader), 86–87, 88
 Ramadan, 137, 144
 Rauf Baig (moneylender), 212–13, 214–15, 216–18
 refugees, 6, 108, 158, 173, 202, 203–4, 209, 265
 regional conflicts, past involvement of traders, 36–38
 regional connectivity
 alternative viewpoints, 24–29
 emphasis of scholarly work on role of nation-states, 25
 limitations of nation-state perspective, 29
 religion
 Afghan traders' religious activities, 142–44
 and durability of trading networks, 80–84, 256
 Green's 'religious market' theory, 58
 long-distance Eurasian trade and religious plurality, 22–24
 and place-making practices of traders in Yiwu, 137
 role of in maintaining connections, 88, 89
 role of religious specialists in inter-Asian trading networks, 250
 see also cultural and religious diversity.
 restaurants
 Afghan, *see* Afghan restaurants.
 and durability of trading networks, 223, 242
 and place-making practices of traders, 135–36, 137
 restaurant trade in UAE, 105
 role of in cultural interpenetration of Asian societies, 252
 Riaz (trader), 78, 178
 Rui, Huaichuan, 124
 Russia
 annexation of Crimea, 37, 67, 174
 mercenary background of some traders, 36
 role in establishment of a Eurasian Customs Union, 17
- Saddar Bazaar, Karachi, 225
 Saudi Arabia
 Afghan restaurants in, 225, 242–47
 Central Asian émigré trading community, 90–92
 see also Central Asian émigrés.
 challenges of conducting business in, 100–2
 citizenship dilemmas of traders in, 98–102
 deportation as consequence of non-payment of tax in, 102
 Hejaz region, 94, 96, 98, 197, 243
 immigration policy, 97, 99
 kafala system, 100
 labour migration from northern Afghanistan, 197
 national dish, 96
 recruitment of Afghans to the Yemeni conflict, 36
 relocation destinations of Central Asian émigrés, 104–14
 restaurant trade, Afghan activity, 92
 Saxer, Martin, 56
 Seth (trader), 166, 170
 Sevastopol Hotel, 69–72, 76, 174, 185
 Seventh-Kilometre Market, Odessa, 4, 68, 70, 72–74, 78, 82, 174, 180–85, 203, 208
 Shahid (trader), 203, 204
 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, 25
 sharing of food, role of in establishing and sustaining relationships, 222–23
 Sharma (trader), 170
 Sikh and Hindu communities
 Afghanistan-based, 170–73
 concerns over education of children, 172
 cultural influence, 255
 difficulties carrying out religious rituals, 172
 from transnational merchants to religious minority, 169–73
 historical role in trade between Central and South Asia, 28, 165
 impact of ISIS and Taliban activities, 171
 impact of mujahidin and Taliban rule, 166
 importance of neighbourhoods, 175
 relationships with Muslim Afghan traders, 173–75
 Dheepak in Odessa, 175–80
 Odessa's Seventh-Kilometre Market, 180–85
 UK, 185–87
 religious and political influences, 165
 role in the extension of Afghan commercial networks, 256

- Sikh and Hindu communities (cont.)
 role in the trade between South and Central Asia, 22
 security threats towards, 171–72
 UK-based, *see under* **United Kingdom (UK)**.
 Yiwu gatherings, 173
- Silk Road, scholarship's use of the concept, 2
- social institutions
 Afghan traders' institution-building efforts, 257–58
 Anderson's conception, 112
 Central Asian émigrés in Turkey, 107–12, 118
 cultural role, 103, 118
 remit of trader-established institutions, 76–80, 84, 134–35, 209, 257–58
 restaurants as, 136, 221
see also **Afghan restaurants**.
 role in establishing the 'rules of the game', 69, 257
 scholarship on, 21
 Sufi lodges (*tekkes*), 109–11, 256
see also **Sufism**.
- Sohrab Goth neighbourhood, Karachi, 90
- Sood, Gagan, 7
- Soviet Union
 collapse, 17, 57, 64–65, 230, 256, 259
 creation, 94
 education and training opportunities, 63
 geopolitical influence in Eurasia, 259
 invasion of Afghanistan, 4, 162
 long-term connections between Afghan state and, 160
 Moscow Olympics, 70
 official barter trade with, 165, 176, 178
 role in politics and economy of Afghanistan, 4
 trade between Afghanistan and, 29, 63
 wars against, 102, 142, 154
- state officials, traders' relationships with, 69, 71, 72–74, 76, 84, 210, 222, 257
- Sufism, 109, 110–11, 167, 214, 223, 256
- Syria, role of Afghans in the conflict, 36
- Tajikistan, difficulties for Afghan trader-refugees, 202
- Taliban
 and Afghanistan's association with ultra-conservative forms of Islam, 162
 Afghan traders informal diplomacy, 75
 arrests by, 200
 attitudes towards, 52, 218
 defeat, 42, 177
 demands for monetary contributions, 195
 political settlement between Afghan government and, 75
 questioning of Afghans about their relationships with, 142, 144
 rise in levels of violence perpetrated by, 104
 territory controlled by, 197
- Taliban insurgency, 171
- Taliban regime, 35, 131, 154
- tax/taxation, 72, 74, 102, 140, 147, 148, 195, 245
- traders
 citizenship issues, 7–8
 diversification strategies, 20
 forging of transnational routes and nodes of circulation, 9
 importance of consular support from foreign states, 17
 importance of flexibility, 14
 sense of pride and professional accomplishment, 10
- trading networks
 comparative historical approach, 117–21
 conditions for success, 18
 cosmopolitanism in, 166–69
 geopolitics and, 258–62
 implications for the foreign policies of weaker countries, 59
 implications of structural differences, 60
 multidimensionality of networks, 56
 overview of inter-Asian networks, 3–8
 polycentric networks, multinodal vs mononodal, 60
 role of in resilience against shocks, 57
 role of neighbourhoods, 20
 Saxer's 'pathway' concept, 56
 significance of historical processes, 255
 structures, dynamics and geographies, 60–61
 two especially significant types, 60
- translators, 66, 119, 218
- transport companies
 Afghan traders' arrangements with in former Soviet countries, 65
 function, 35
 importance of personal relationships with officials, 35
 role of Afghanistan's Soviet-trained fighter pilots, 35–36

- trust
- Afghan traders' models of trust, mistrust and entrustment, 262–65
 - and durability of trading networks, 13, 20–22, 32, 220
 - impact of boarding school upbringing on establishment of, 64
 - importance for network ties, 13
 - shared consumption of food and, 222
 - significance to family life in Afghanistan, 204
- Turkestan, 90, 94
- Turkey
- Central Asian émigrés relocation to, 106–14
 - immigration policy, 114
 - institutional life, 107–12, 118
 - labour migration from northern Afghanistan, 197
 - Lapis Lazuli Corridor, 196
 - national identity and, 108–9
 - 'pivot to the East' policy, 18, 108, 117, 259
 - political activities, 109
 - political and cultural implications of Turkish citizenship, 114–16
 - as relocation destination, 160
- Turkmenistan, 86
- Afghanistan government's strategy to improve trade with, 196
 - introduction of policies targeting commercial activities of Afghan traders, 61
- UAE (United Arab Emirates)
- Central Asian émigrés relocation to, 105–6
 - deportation of Afghan merchants, 37, 261, 264
 - impact of tensions with Iran on Afghan traders, 37
- Ukraine
- Afghan traders' experiences of, 5, 43, 61, 67–69, 79, 83, 176, 178–79, 182–83, 203, 205
 - Afghans educated in, 4, 19
 - attitudes of traders towards conflict with Russia, 79–80
 - clandestine migration of Afghans to the EU from, 78
 - community organisations, 77–78
 - decline in the value of currency, 67
 - impact of the conflict on trade, 37, 70, 174, 179
 - mercenary background of some traders, 36
 - role of Afghans in the conflict, 36
 - traders' relationships with the authorities, 72–74
 - transport and capital links with China, 29, 65
 - see also* Odessa.
- undocumented migrants, 66, 69, 70–71, 72–73, 114
- United Kingdom (UK)
- fieldwork conducted in London, 2
 - Sikh and Hindu communities, 169–70, 174
 - relationships with Muslim Afghan traders, 185–87
- United States (US)
- distant neighbour role, 31
 - New Silk Road strategy, *see* New Silk Road.
 - sanctions on Iran, 126, 140
 - US-led invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, 66, 108, 192, 198
- unregulated economy, 16
- Uyghurs, 3, 37
- Uzbekistan, encouragement of Afghan merchants' investment, 62
- Van Schendel, Willem, 265
- Venkatesh, Sudhir, 40
- Vietnamese exchange agents, 73–74
- violence, Afghan traders' relationship with, 34
- Vora, Neha, 97
- 'War on Drugs', 265
- 'war on terror', 167, 265
- Watan Trading Centre, Sevastopol, 70, 72, 76
- water, scarcity in north-western Afghanistan, 197
- West Asia
- traders' institution-building efforts, 257
 - Turkey's 'look east' policy and the concept of, 18
- West Asian corridor of connectivity, 31, 86
- citizenship and residency rights of traders, 98
 - citizenship dilemmas of traders in Saudi Arabia, 98–102
 - significance within the wider Eurasian arena, 89–92
 - the region and its connections, 86–89
 - the region and its inhabitants, 92–96

- West Asian corridor of connectivity (cont.)
trading networks, comparative historical approach, 117–21
see also Central Asian émigrés.
- Western Europe, traders' interest in securing residency in, 157
- women
life in Turkey, 113
life in Yiwu, 150, 152
potential challenges of moving to Kazakhstan for, 105
- World Trade Organization (WTO), China's accession to, 3, 119, 124, 161
- Xi Jinping, 2
- Xinjiang
impact of Chinese policy towards Uyghur and Kazakh Muslims, 37–38
impact of security state on traders, 261
surveillance practices, 37, 139
tourism, 3
visits to as trigger for surveillance, 226
- Yama (trader), 202–6, 208–9
- Yemen, role of Afghans in the conflict, 36
- Yiwu
Afghan restaurants, 238–41
Afghan traders' religious activities, 142–44
Afghan trading community, 122
Afghan-Pakistan cross-border trade and, 131–32
Belt and Road Initiative and, 31, 123, 124–26, 128, 160
'capitalist supermarket' depiction, 126, 158
celebrating *Nowruz* in, 223–25
challenges for family life of foreign traders, 149–52, 159
China's accession to the WTO and, 161
Chinese money transfer restrictions, 126, 147
co-existence of diverse trading networks, 123
commercial and geopolitical significance, 191
conceptions of the city, 126–28
consequences of traders' inability to secure citizenship or long-term residency, 159
cultural life, 152–55
development as trading hub, 123, 124–26
development of Central Asian trade routes and, 131
different expectations of Yiwu's status as an inter-Asian commercial node, 122
disadvantages for traders of being born in Afghanistan, 149
dispute resolution scheme, 40
distribution of ethno-religious networks, 144–46, 159
Eurasian geopolitical implications, 159
fieldwork conducted in, 2
freight train routes, 125
Futian market, 43, 125–26, 128–30, 135, 140, 141, 182, 226, 234
future of as a trading node for international networks, 125
global significance for trade of everyday commodities, 123
impact of e-commerce, 126
impermanence of life for international traders, 160
implications of Chinese residency and currency regulations for Afghan traders, 148–52
influence as site of sociological reproduction, 148–52
interactions with Central Asian émigré merchants in, 90
'international trade reform pilot city' status, 125
introduction of new visa policy, 159
leisure and tourism, 128
likelihood of Afghan traders to invest capital in, 155–56
location, 5
main international languages of trade and sociality, 130
marriages of Afghan traders to Chinese women, 156
Muslim communities, 141
place-making practices of traders in, *see* place-making practices of traders in Yiwu.
places of worship, 141
as relocation target of Xinjiang-based traders, 261
role in Afghan trading networks, 147–48, 155–58
schools, 141
significance as a commercial node, 255
social and intercultural mixing, 140–44
spatial organisation, 144–46, 159
surveillance of UK passport-holders, 226
temporal dynamics, 137

- Tianhe and Fuyuan Towers, significance for the city's Afghans, 130–34
trade and infrastructure, 147–48
Yiwu's Afghan traders at home in Kabul, 192–95
- Yusuf Aka (trader), 198
- Zahir Shah, King of Afghanistan, 82, 165
Zeytinburnu neighbourhood, Istanbul, 87, 104, 108–9, 110–13, 114, 118, 243, 245, 249
Afghan restaurants, 236–37
Zia (trader), 1, 2, 10, 258

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