



Actually existing silk roads



Magnus Marsden

Department of Anthropology, School of Global Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9RH, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 23 September 2016

Accepted 12 November 2016

Available online 22 November 2016

Keywords:

new silk road

Afghanistan

trading networks

Yiwu

merchants

small commodities

ABSTRACT

This article explores the relevance of the concept of Silk Road for understanding the patterns of trade and exchange between China, Eurasia and the Middle East. It is based on ethnographic fieldwork in the city of Yiwu, in China's Zhejiang Province. Yiwu is a node in the global distribution of Chinese 'small commodities' and home to merchants and traders from across Asia and beyond. The article explores the role played by traders from Afghanistan in connecting the city of Yiwu to markets and trading posts in the world beyond. It seeks to bring attention to the diverse types of networks involved in such forms of trade, as well as their emergence and development over the past thirty years.

Copyright © 2017, Asia-Pacific Research Center, Hanyang University. Production and hosting by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

'Our country is at the heart of Asia', Zia, an Afghan trader in his mid-50s 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'.

A succession of policy initiatives announced in recent years depict Afghanistan as a future regional hub on the 'New Silk Road'. Such initiatives, including the USA's New Silk Roads strategy launched by Hillary Clinton at the UN General Assembly in September 2011, are a marked improvement on depictions of Afghanistan that circulated in the international media in the 2000s as an isolated, backward and mediaeval state. Representing Afghanistan as a regional hub correctly brings attention to the country's historic place on long-distance trade routes, as well as to the critical signif-

icance of trade, exchange, and the wider world to Afghan culture and society.

Yet it is also undeniable that talk of Afghanistan re-assuming its past status as a pivot between Europe and Asia is both utopian and politically cynical. Levels of violence in Afghanistan have never been as high over the past sixteen years of international intervention as they are today. New threats to Afghanistan's security, including the activities of ISIS in the east of the country, and the rise of international militant groups in the north, arise on a day-to-day basis. I have observed this at first hand: villages and districts in the north of Afghanistan that I used to visit at ease until four years ago are now in the hands of militants. Afghanistan's economy furthermore is palpitating in the wake of the withdrawal of international forces and funding and the rise of insecurity. One indication of this is the streams of educated and resourceful youth leaving the country in search of a better life. In spite of all of this, international opinion formers are confident enough to envisage a prosperous, stable, and globally connected Afghanistan.

If one thing remains stable in recent international efforts to engage with Afghanistan, it is the disjunction between the worlds inhabited by policy makers and those

Department of Anthropology, School of Global Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9RH, UK.

E-mail address: m.marsden@sussex.ac.uk.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2016.11.006>

1879-3665/Copyright © 2017, Asia-Pacific Research Center, Hanyang University. Production and hosting by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

by local people. The unwillingness to consult with, seek to understand, and learn from local actors is what stands in the path of a stable Afghanistan. The USA and its allies erred repeatedly in the way in which they engaged with Afghanistan's society during the long Taliban insurgency – seeing 'traditional tribal structures' where thirty years of war and conflict had in fact wreaked havoc and changed society irremediably, they armed the wrong partners, implemented the wrong policies, and traumatic violence was unleashed as a result (Marsden and Hopkins, 2012).

The New Silk Road strategy is likely to have similarly negative consequences: utopian projects of international development that overlook on-the-ground realities frequently bring untold misery to those whose lives they were designed to improve (cf. Karrar, 2016). There however is no shortage of actors on the ground who possess a great deal of insight about the possibilities of and barriers to sustainable forms of Eurasian trade. Afghan trader-refugees, men like Zia, are busy at work in markets and trading spaces across Eurasia: in Moscow, St Petersburg, and Krasnodar in Russia; Odessa, Kiev and Kharkiv in Ukraine; and Dushanbe, Bishkek, and Alma Ata in Central Asia, traders of Afghan background are leading players in the import and wholesale of commodities. Many of these commodities come from China – where Afghan traders are also an established feature of commercial cities such as Urumqi in the West, Guangzhou in the South, and Yiwu in the East. But Afghan traders are also experts in facilitating the import of Iranian, Pakistani, and Indian commodities to Central Asian markets thereby connecting, in a way that few others are able, this region's notoriously complex markets to West and South Asia.

Why sell the dream of a 'New Silk Road' when a multiplicity of silk – or perhaps more aptly nylon – roads already exist? Why impose a utopian vision of a connected world on people who are already familiar in sophisticated and intimate ways with the dynamics of a complex region? Why are communities that obviously have so much to offer into understanding the role played by trade in connecting Asia and Europe absent from the discourse of the New Silk Road? If the answer is because this category of actor is simplistically thought of as being either drug smugglers or people traffickers then the time has come to think again. As has been amply seen inside Afghanistan, the failure to consult actors on the basis of one-sided images – be such actors former Taliban ideologues or 'communist' officials – results only in negative consequences for the country as sources of experience and expertise are dismissed (Marsden and Hopkins, 2012).

This article focuses on the role played by traders of Afghan background in facilitating commercial exchanges not only between China and Afghanistan but also a wide range of settings in Eurasia, the Middle East, and East Asia. It builds on an earlier work in which explored the importance of the Chinese city of Yiwu as a node for the activities of transregional Afghan merchants (Marsden, 2016a). In this article, I shift my focus from the study of the node to the nature of the networks that emanate from the city and connect it to the wider world. An emerging body of scholarship exists on the importance of bringing to scholarly recognition the connections that exist between

Asia settings (e.g. Amrith, 2013), as well as the role played by newer and older types of networks in facilitating such forms of connection and circulation. Here I build on these developments in the wider literature in Asian studies, and seek to document that wide range of economic niches that Afghan niches occupy both in China and its connected markets, as well as analyse the character of the networks they form and sustain. In so doing, the article seeks to bring attention to the diverse histories and experiences of commerce, mobility, and exchange that inform and underpin the activities of Afghan traders in what might be thought of as the countries of the New Silk Road.

2. Background and setting

2.1. Trans-regional Afghan merchants

A consideration of the biographies of individual Afghan traders who are commercially active in Yiwu reveals two broad sources of historical influence on the formation of the networks they form. On the one hand, Afghan traders emphasise that they are uniquely suited to being global commodity traders because of the role that people from the territories that currently make-up Afghanistan have played as trans-regional merchants between South and Central Asia (e.g. Hanifi, 2011; Hopkins, 2009). On the other hand, many of the traders also say that they have become traders because of their experience of conflict and dispersal resulting from the 'cold war' (*jang-i sard*) that 'turned hot' (*garm shud*) in Afghanistan.

Afghan traders do not form a homogeneous 'social group', but are differentiated according to markers of status, wealth, and position in trading hierarchies; such forms of difference also intersect with, yet are never simply defined by, the traders' 'ethnic' and linguistic identities. Traders do identify with particular 'ethnic groups' (e.g. Turkmen, Uzbek, Tajik, and Pashtun), yet most if not all traders have business partnerships with men who identify with communities different from their own. The past ideological and political affiliations of the traders also reflect Afghanistan's modern political history: some worked as state officials and were directly affiliated to the Afghan socialist movement (through membership of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan) and trained in 'Party Schools' in Central Asia, others fought on the side of anti-Soviet mujahidin organisations. More recently, many traders form commercial relations with people from political factions they once opposed.

The networks are therefore influenced both by the forms of modern cultural nationalism promoted by political organisations such as the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) and by the historic participation of Afghans in distinctively Muslim networks of commerce and intellectual exchange (e.g. Cooke & Lawrence, 2005). The identities of those who make-up the networks are also informed by the past participation of many of the traders in the global 'socialist ecumene' (Bayly, 2007). All of these varied influences are visible in the multi-dimensional nature of the traders' self-understandings.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5126602>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5126602>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)