

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.

2 Introduction: Beyond the Silk Roads

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).

4 Introduction: Beyond the Silk Roads

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

6 Introduction: Beyond the Silk Roads

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.

8 Introduction: Beyond the Silk Roads

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 to 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.

10 Introduction: Beyond the Silk Roads

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.