

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.