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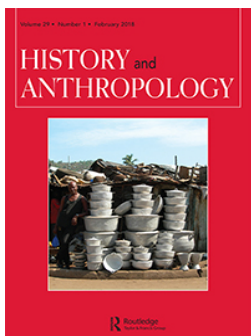
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## Islamic cosmopolitanism out of Muslim Asia: Hindu–Muslim business co-operation between Odessa and Yiwu

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the forms of cosmopolitanism that form an important element of the identities and activities of long-distance Muslim merchants involved in the global trade in Chinese commodities. It focuses on two nodes that are central for this type of trade: Odessa on Ukraine's Black Sea coast and Yiwu in China's Zhejiang Province. Ethnographically, the paper focuses on the commercial and social ties that exist between Muslim traders from Afghanistan and those who identify with the country's dispersed Hindu ethno-religious minority. It argues that the ability to manage heterogeneous social and religious relationships is of critical significance to the activities and identities of these commodity traders.

### KEYWORDS

Afghanistan; Yiwu; Odessa; Commodity traders; Markets; Islam; Cosmopolitanism

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

This article explores the forms of cosmopolitanism that are an important element of the identities and activities of long-distance Muslim merchants involved in the global trade in Chinese commodities. It focuses on two nodes located at different extremes of Asia that are central for this type of trade and that also feature prominently in the geographical imaginations of Muslim Asia's traders: the port of Odessa on Ukraine's Black Sea coast and the officially designated 'International Trade City' of Yiwu in China's Zhejiang Province. Both Odessa and Yiwu have risen to prominence in the geographical horizons of Asian Muslim traders over the past two decades as vibrant sites for the procurement and distribution of small and mostly low-grade Chinese-made commodities. Odessa is well known to scholars of the post-Soviet world for the Seventh-Kilometre wholesale market: a 'container market' that acts as a central distribution node for Chinese commodities across Ukraine and, until the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, also Russia (cf. Humphrey and Skvirskaja 2009). While the commodities sold in the Seventh-Kilometre are sourced by traders from a variety of cities in China, including Beijing and Guangzhou, Yiwu is an especially significant location for Odessa-based traders to source 'small commodities' (especially toys, umbrellas, and souvenirs). If the Seventh-Kilometre market figures strongly in representations of contemporary Odessa, then Yiwu's commercial landscape is dominated by the world's largest market for the purchase of 'small commodities': the Futian market complex is home to over 70,000 shops which sell 1.7 million types of 'small commodity' (Marsden 2016a).

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An expanding body of scholarship has documented and theorized the type of insights that a consideration of the social and economic dynamics of markets such as the Seventh-Kilometre and Futian reveal into the nature of 'globalisation from below' (Matthews et al. 2011). Less is known about the relations that exist between the different nodes that are critical for this type of commerce (Pliez 2012). An analysis of such city-to-city relationships adds a further layer to our understanding of 'globalisation from below', however, because the connections between Yiwu and Odessa are mediated not only through a flow of commodities but also a sustained circulation of commercial personnel.<sup>2</sup> As I explore below, the identities of the mobile merchants and sojourners involved in such types of movement are regularly informed by the long-term experience of mobility, often over the course of several decades. In terms of the relationship between Odessa and Yiwu, Muslim communities and networks play an especially visible role in mediating the relationship between these two trading cities: investigating the relationship between the two cities also stands to illuminate the understanding of the forms of Islam and Muslim identity that are an important feature of China's relationship to the post-Soviet world.

The article builds on and make connections between two bodies of literature that raise conceptual issues for both anthropologists and historians concerned with study of trade, mobility, and transregional connectivity. On the one hand, studies of transregional trading networks have revealed the insights that this type of social formation offers into understanding the nexus between mobility and cosmopolitan identity formations. Scholars of trading networks have brought recognition to the long-term role that 'mobile societies' have played in forging connections between adjacent world regions, and over long periods of time (Ho forthcoming). In so doing, they have illuminated the importance of the transregional as a specific scale of analysis (Henig 2016b) and brought into focus analytical problems associated with the use of categories such as 'globalisation' and 'translationalism' (Ho 2002). This body of literature has also made a contribution by demonstrating that trading networks play a role in facilitating not merely the geographical movement of commodities but also of ideas and practices. Historians increasingly recognize how rather than having been based merely on 'in-group cohesion' (Thompson 2011), the permeable social identities of those who made up trading networks facilitated the type of cross-cultural relations that were critical to their commercial activities (Trivellato 2009; Aslanian 2014). Anthropologists have built on this literature by addressing the ways in which cross-cultural interactions reflect sedimented forms of social action embedded in historic mobility, rather than arising directly out of the 'flows' associated with modern expressions of globalization (cf. Marsden and Ibanez-Tirado 2015).

Recognition of the flexible nature of the social identities of trading networks led several anthropologists to conceptualize such social formations as being 'cosmopolitan' (for example, Werbner 1999). More recently, scholarship has addressed the way in which by focusing on the cosmopolitan openness of trading networks earlier studies paid insufficient attention to the intensely 'local' aspect of mobile traders' identities and the ways in which in which these existed alongside their cosmopolitanism (Ho forthcoming; Osella and Osella 2007; Marsden 2008). A second body of work that developed in parallel to studies nuancing the use in anthropological theory of the notion of cosmopolitanism documented the contested political history of the term, shedding light on the celebratory way in which academics have deployed it (Cf. Humphrey 2004, 2012; Gilroy 2005; Grant 2010). In the light of new studies of 'local cosmopolitans' and critical awareness of the

term's politically charged history, scholars have increasingly studied 'post-cosmopolitanism' (Humphrey and Skvirskaja 2014). Post-cosmopolitanism is used in the analysis of contexts whose populations have experienced 'a co-presence of cosmopolitanism and its opposite, ethnic violence, ... over time' (Humphrey and Skvirskaja 2012, 6; cf. Henig 2016a). Studies of post-cosmopolitanism focus not on unqualified attempts to achieve universal human openness but on the specific practices people living in fragile social settings employ in order to live a life that is simultaneously both 'together and apart' (Humphrey and Skvirskaja 2012, 6).

In this article, I seek to bring anthropological literature on cosmopolitanism into conversation with scholarship that has sought to document and theorize 'Islamic cosmopolitanism' (Bose and Manjapra 2010; MacLean and Nasir 2010; Werbner 2016). Islamic cosmopolitanism is depicted as emerging over the course of centuries of Islamic history and in the context of mobility and interaction resulting both from Islamic teachings and practices (especially those collectively labelled as Sufi) and the importance of long-distance trade to Asia's Muslim societies (for example, Ahmed 2016, 146–149). There is recognition of the conceptual problems inherent with such scholarship. Hodgson (1963) distinguished, for example, between the use of the term 'Islamic' to refer to a religious tradition, and 'Islamicate' to a culture that had emerged in the context of an expansive 'Afro-Eurasian' Muslim dominion. Ahmed (2016) suggests however that this distinction reproduces a simplistic understanding of Islam as a law-centred 'religion': this does little justice to Islam's cultural capaciousness, leading Nasir to argue the case for recognizing the historic significance of a distinctively Islamic cosmopolitanism in a world arena he refers to as the Balkans-to-Bengal complex. Nile Green (2016b), furthermore, has recently added a new angle to theoretical debates on the nature and place of cosmopolitanism in the history of Muslim Asia. He argues that a consideration of the current dynamics of Muslim Asia throws into sharp relief the celebratory tone of scholarly work on Islamic cosmopolitanism. Asia's Muslim-majority cities in the first decades of the twenty-first century, Green suggests, are characterized by a steady 'decosmopoliticization'. Against a backdrop of both population growth and rising levels of rural–urban migration, Green argues that Muslim-majority cities in Asia are both seeing the emigration of ethno-religious minorities, and the emergence of increasingly segregated urban landscapes. As such forms of segregation have become further visible in Muslim Asia, the region's ethno-religious minorities have increasingly moved to cities in the West.

By exploring networks that are predominantly though not exclusively Muslim and which connect two cities at different extremes of Asia, this article seeks to build on these studies and underscore the conceptual benefits of treating lived modes of dealing with difference not in terms of constituting a search for unqualified openness but, rather, as fraught attempts to live together at the same time as maintaining distinctive social identities. In this sense, it corroborates the findings of earlier work in the anthropology of Muslim societies and points to the relevance of such studies for understanding contemporary forms of Muslim trade and commerce. Geertz (1978) and Barth (1983) brought attention to the cosmopolitan aspects of bazaars in the Middle East yet also recognized that in other contexts (especially the home) social boundaries were vigorously erected and maintained. The article seeks to demonstrate how the modes of dealing with difference that are showcased on a daily basis by the long-distance traders on whom it focuses are informed by pragmatic commercial concerns and especially visible in their

commercial dealings (cf. Alavi 2015; Sood 2016). Cosmopolitanism remains a valuable analytical device for interpreting such modes of dealing with difference however because my informants think in reflexive and public ways about what their ability to fashion relationships across boundaries of religion, ethnicity, and language, often asking themselves as they do what doing so signifies about themselves as well as the worlds they inhabit.

The article is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted over the course of five years with traders who identify themselves as being from Afghanistan and who regularly travel between Yiwu and Odessa in connection with the trade in small, Chinese-made commodities. Many different trading networks are active in Odessa's Seventh-Kilometre market, ranging from Turks, Kurds, and Arabs to Vietnamese, Chinese, and Nigerians. Traders from Afghanistan are the focus of this article because this group specializes in the trade between Odessa and Yiwu. The history of the interaction between Odessa-based Afghans and Yiwu goes back to the late 1990s: during this decade, several individuals decided to place the import of commodities from China to Ukraine as the central element of their commercial activities. Prior to this, these men had brought goods to Ukraine from Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, as well as Thailand and Taiwan. While some of these figures have experience of trading between Ukraine and Afghanistan (for example, exporting cooking oil and wood to Afghanistan), the business activities of most of them now revolves around Chinese-made commodities.

Elsewhere I have explored the ethnolinguistically diverse nature of these network (Marsden 2016b); my aim here is to bring attention to the commercial and social ties that exist between Muslim traders from Afghanistan and those who identify with the country's substantial but today dispersed Hindu ethno-religious minority. My ethnography suggests that the ability to manage heterogeneous social relationships (for example, between Hindu and Muslim traders from Afghanistan) and reflect on increasingly 'hidden histories' of inter-religious engagement is of critical significance to the activities and identities of these commodity traders. The ongoing ability of Afghan Muslim merchants in Odessa and Yiwu to nurture and sustain modes of trading and living together with members of the country's small yet commercially influential Hindu minority corroborates Green's arguments about the 'de-cosmopolitanization' of cities in Muslim Asia. Indeed, in the context of circulations of people and things that are informed by historic forms of connectedness while also being made possible in the current era by modern forms of economic globalization, the ethnography presented points to the social and historic processes through which Islamic cosmopolitanism is being relocated from cities with Muslim Asia to those outside.

### Odessa and Yiwu: cities of Asian Interaction

Attempts by anthropologists to document and explore specifically Islamic expressions of cosmopolitanism have largely focused on historic cities in the Muslim world – 'sites of interaction' (Harper and Amrith 2012) in which Muslims from different backgrounds and cultural contexts have come into contact with one another for hundreds of years (for example, Humphrey, Marsden, and Skirvskaja 2008; Can 2012). By contrast, Odessa and Yiwu have come to be known to Muslim merchants within and beyond Asia as sites in which commercial networks converge, and also as being home to sizeable and diverse Muslim communities, over a much shorter period of history.

Odessa's significance to Muslim Asians thus peaked historically in the first decades of the twentieth century: Eileen Kane (2015) has demonstrated the important role that the city played in the pilgrimage routes of Muslims from Russia, Russian and Chinese Turkestan, and Afghanistan, to the Hejaz in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Steam ships sailing from Odessa both shortened the duration of the journey to Mecca, and also made possible a stop en-route in the capital city of the Ottoman Empire (Istanbul), a city that a new generation of hajjis desired to visit to see during this period. In the context of these developments, Muslim entrepreneurs and religious specialists shifted to Odessa in order to cash in on these developments: they opened inns, restaurants, and eventually imperially supported complexes for the transiting hajjis (Gelvin and Green 2013).

While Odessa was recognized as an important commercial centre by traders in Muslim settings in the early twentieth century, its significance as a site of contemporary commerce for Muslim trading networks arose against the backdrop of the Cold War. The city hosted students from Muslim countries in its universities, technical colleges, and military training academies from the 1950s onwards, some of whom went on to achieve positions of power and influence in their home countries. Aslam Watanjar (Afghanistan's Defence Minister 1979) studied in Odessa during the decade prior to his appointment to high office in Afghanistan. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, individuals (mostly men) who had been living in Odessa since having arrived there as students in the 1970s and 1980s began to trade in the city's emerging marketplaces. From the mid-1990s onwards, Ukraine's relatively porous borders enabled Muslim traders, migrants, sojourners, and exiles to move to the city with the specific aim of earning a living in the rapidly expanding Seventh-Kilometre market. Many had come to know of the city having been students in Odessa during the Soviet years; others had been alerted to its attention as a place to trade and to live well by relatives in their home countries. For still more, the city formed a useful 'way station' on overland migration to Europe (Skvirskaja 2010).

Over the following decades, Odessa's Muslim communities became an increasingly prominent and public aspect of the city's dynamics. Wealthy merchants with powerful contacts both in Ukraine and in their home countries established mosques in Odessa, including a prominent Arab cultural centre-cum-mosque in the city centre. At the same time, community leaders acting on behalf of particular ethnic and national groups established smaller prayer rooms in the city's suburbs. These were often associated with particular ethnolinguistic migrant groups (for example, Afghans, Chechens, Daghestanis, and Azeris, as well as Kurds and Turks both from Turkey and the former Soviet Union).<sup>3</sup> Anthropologists have explored the relationships between Odessa's multiple Turkic communities in Odessa, and the diverse ways in which such people reflect about their status in the city through the lens of Ottoman history (Skvirskaja 2014). Muslim-trader-migrants to Odessa from a diverse range of ethnolinguistic backgrounds establish relations with one another, and across a variety of domains, including those of trade, religious ritual, charity, education, and family life. Islam therefore plays a public role in the city and its immediate environs; this has resulted in Odessa occupying an increasingly visible position in the geographic horizons of Muslims in West and Central Asia but simultaneously resulted in hostility by local Odessans towards Islam and Muslims (for example, Skvirskaja 2014).

Yiwu's relationship to Asia's Muslim societies by contrast is firmly rooted in the globalizing political economy that followed in the wake of China's decision to accept World Trade



Organization rules in 1997. Against the backdrop of China's policies of economic liberalization, which grew in intensity during the 1980s, the city rose to prominence in the early 1990s as a centre for trade between China and South, Central, and West Asia. From the early 2000s onwards, Yiwu gained a degree of public notoriety in China as well as the wider world as a result of the distinctively 'Islamic' flavour of life in parts of the city in which foreign traders lived and socialized.<sup>4</sup>

If Yiwu attracts visitors from most parts of the world and is now also a home to or at least stable node in the geographically dispersed activities of culturally and religiously diverse trading communities,<sup>5</sup> the city has earned a reputation amongst international networks of Muslim traders as being a Chinese city in which everyday life for observant overseas Muslims is straightforward, especially in comparison to elsewhere in the country.<sup>6</sup> During my stay in Yiwu I watched as Islamic scholars from the Rakhine region of Myanmar travelled from restaurant-to-restaurant gathering donations for members of the community. I also encountered a preacher from Indian Kashmir gathering donations for Islamic movements based in India. The main occasion on which foreign Muslim merchants based in Yiwu did regularly remark to me that their lives were being affected by stringent policy by Chinese authorities towards Islam was during the run up to the G20 2016 summit that was held in Hangzhou (85 miles from Yiwu). During this period, Yiwu's authorities carefully monitored the residency of foreign traders in the city, and restricted the widespread use of unofficial mosques for holding prayers.

Specific parts of Yiwu's urban landscape are especially informed by Islamic symbols. While in Yiwu foreign Muslim traders face few difficulties in maintaining Islamic requirements and practices during the course of everyday life. There are several mosques in the city; these are not officially registered, but are open for daily prayers (mostly presided over by Imams who belong to China's ethnically Hui Muslim community).<sup>7</sup> The city's central mosque (located a 10-minute walk from the city centre) is also a site at which Muslims gather on Friday afternoons for congregational prayer, as well as for post- and pre-prayer socializing over dishes of Chinese Muslim food. During the month of Ramadan, the extended post-fast *taraweh* prayers as well as collective gatherings at which the fast is broken (*iftar*) are regularly organized in the city's many halal restaurants by traders. Indeed, during Ramadan, Muslim traders in Yiwu often collect donations that cover the travel and living expenses of a *hafiz* (a term that refers to Islamic authorities who have committed the entire Qur'an to memory) who visit Yiwu in order to recite verses of the holy book. In 2016, for example, worshippers at a mosque in Yiwu that is predominantly attended by traders from Afghanistan (though some ethnically Kurdish traders from Iran also worshipped there) arranged for two *hafiz-e qura'n* to travel to Yiwu from Mumbai. In addition to reciting the Qur'an in the mosque over the course of Ramadan, one of the two *hafiz* visiting Yiwu recited the evening *azan* (which marks the opening of the days' fast) in a restaurant that is jointly owned by two Afghan traders (one of the partners had moved to Yiwu from a commercial town in southern Russia having traded between Russia and China for several years). On inquiring as to why the traders had not funded an Afghan *hafiz* to visit the city, a trader from north-eastern Afghanistan told me that bringing scholars to Yiwu from India worked out being more economic (*iqtisodi*); furthermore, a visiting Afghan *hafiz* required a higher level of maintenance as a guest (*mehmon*) during their stay in the city than that required of individuals who identified with a different ethno-national communities. The circulation of religious personnel in



connection with major events in the Muslim calendar such as Ramadan points to the openness of Muslims in the city to engagement with people from different cultural backgrounds than their own, even if such engagement arises from the pressures of the 'religious market' (Green 2015) as much as from a distinctively religious inclination to forged ties with the 'global' Islamic *umma* (brotherhood).<sup>8</sup>

Another way in which the Islamic character of Yiwu is publicly visible is in terms of the city's 'foodways'. There are many restaurants along the city's central axis – Chouzhou Lu – that cater specifically to a Muslim clientele: restaurants run and owned by Hui and Uyghur Muslims who have migrated to Yiwu from elsewhere in China (especially Xinjiang, Ningxia, and Lanzhou) compete with eateries that have been established by international traders based in the city. For international traders, owning a restaurant is not only a mode of making money, but also a strategy for expanding their business activities, and of establishing commercial networks with traders working in the regions of the world to which they export commodities. Several such restaurants are owned by individuals who belong to communities that have played a role in serving food to mobile Muslim traders in cosmopolitan trading nodes elsewhere in Asia such as Dubai, Jeddah, and Istanbul. There are thus several Afghan restaurants in Yiwu. On the whole, these are clearly demarcated as eateries associated with Afghanistan – flags of Afghanistan adorn their walls, as too do pictures of iconic sites in the country (such as the Buddhas in Bamiyan and the shrine of Ali in Mazar-i Sharif). Indeed, the names of the restaurants reflect the competing nature of Afghanistan's official national identity formations, formations indeed that sought to harness the cosmopolitan history of the territory in which Afghanistan is located for nationalist aims. One prominent restaurant is called 'Ariana' – a name that indexes the country's pre-Islamic and European past as being the plank on which Afghanistan's political elites sought to stake a 'civilizational claims on the international stage in the decades after independence in 1919' (cf. Nile Green 2016a, 1). Another restaurant owned by traders from Afghanistan in Yiwu, by contrast, carries the name Kabul Darbar, thereby geographically and politically locating Afghanistan within Islamic(ate) Eurasia (*darbar* being an Indo-Persian term used to refer to the courtly). Indeed, the names of such restaurants carry significance for traders from Afghanistan visiting and living in the city: the regular Afghan clientele at Kabul Darbar mostly comprises traders who identify themselves as speaking Pashto and hailing from regions that lie adjacent to Afghanistan's border with Pakistan; the men who gather nightly to smoke shisha and take green tea at Ariana are generally Persian speakers from central and northern Afghanistan, many of whom identify with imaginaries that insert Persianate culture and civility at the heart of Afghanistan's national identity.<sup>9</sup>

Importantly, however, the menus and clientele of these restaurants suggest that the public presentations of these establishments as being committed to purified national communities reveal only an element of the identities of those who both own and visit them. The restaurants also sell dishes popularized by Afghan cooks and restaurateurs, for example, in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia's port city. 'Bukhary' restaurants – eateries named after the nineteenth century Central Asian Emirate which cook Central Asian dishes that have been adapted to Arab tastes over decades – are a feature of the urban landscape across Saudi Arabia that are predominantly run by Uzbek-speaking men from northern Afghanistan's Sar-i Pul province, but visited by West Africans, Saudi Arabians, and Yemenis rather more than there are Afghans or Central Asians (who frequent restaurants known to serve 'authentic' dishes). The clientele at such eateries in Yiwu – including at an

establishment called ‘Amanullah’ that closed in 2017 – are both visiting traders from Afghanistan but also merchants from elsewhere (such as Nigeria, Yemen, and Chad) who are familiar with these types of cooking having tasted it in the nodes that were important to their trading activities before they moved to Yiwu. Restaurants that appear to carry distinctively national identities therefore bear the clear imprint of decades of circulation, as well as long-term settlement in the choke points that are important to such patterns of mobility and exchange.

The past 30 years, then, have seen the growing significance of Odessa and Yiwu within Muslim imaginaries of trade and travel. Both cities have come to be recognized as sites in which commercial personnel and merchant networks that are identifiably Muslim may thrive economically at the same time as the men and women who form them continue to publicly adhere to Islam. Additionally, while Muslim commercial networks present in both cities are defined in terms of a variety of combinations of defined ethnolinguistic and national identities, there are also important ‘sites of interactions’ within each of context at which Muslims from different regions and backgrounds interact. In both Odessa and Yiwu, furthermore, Muslims have been required to face and respond to forms of hostility that have arisen in the context of their being Muslim. In spite of these forces, however, for many of the traders, life in both Odessa and Yiwu is compared positively to other centres of commercial life with which they are familiar. Afghan traders, for example, regularly contrast the ease with which they lead convivial and public lives in Yiwu and Odessa with the restrictions that a combination of state officials and public attitudes towards Muslims place on this aspect of everyday life elsewhere, notably in Moscow and St Petersburg, cities that are central for their transregional commercial strategies yet known as being ‘difficult for life’.<sup>10</sup>

While one aspect of both Yiwu and Odessa that attracts Muslim traders is the forms of Islamic infrastructures present in them, it is important not to exaggerate this out of context. While being able to lead a properly Muslim religious life is a critical aspect of Afghan traders’ notion of the good life, many of the traders also claim that the forms of Islam practiced in Yiwu and Odessa are flexible, not only in comparison to those influential in Afghanistan but also in Western Europe. As one of my informants in Odessa remarked to me,

I can’t stand it when my Afghan relatives visit me in Ukraine from London. Immediately, they ask what is halal and what is not. I say to them, we are not bothered by that issue here, so long as it is not pork. If you are, then you had better get ready to eat fish for the remainder of your stay.

What the traders value about Yiwu and Odessa is that Islamic infrastructures and symbols are deeply embedded but not in a manner that precludes the possibility for interacting with these urban environments in relationship to different sets of values, aspirations, and moral orders (cf. Schielke 2009).

### Hindu and Muslim Afghan commercial co-operations

While the majority of traders from Afghanistan who trade in Yiwu commodities in Odessa are Muslim, it is impossible to understand the historical emergence of their activities in both cities without taking into account the role played by people who identify with

Afghanistan's Hindu and Sikh ethno-religious minorities. During the course of my fieldwork in Yiwu I noticed that there were regular gatherings of Hindus and Sikhs from Afghanistan in one of the city's most lively streets known for its outdoor restaurants and 'Middle Eastern' ambience. The men who gathered at these events – regularly involving up to 25 persons – spoke mostly in Pashtu and Dari, only occasionally breaking into Punjabi or English. They were either based permanently in Yiwu or visiting the city on purchasing trips from a wide range of global cities, most especially Moscow, Odessa, New Delhi, the UAE, and London. During the course of a series of conversations with these men, they told me how their families were often based in New Delhi, while they worked and traded between Russia, Ukraine, and China. During fieldwork in 2016, members of the community also informed me that the weakening Russian currency was making their activities as importers and suppliers of goods on credit in Russia increasingly difficult and that in this context some had chosen to move to London where there are established communities of Afghan Hindus and Sikhs, mostly dating to the early 1990s and the outbreak of civil war in the country.

Dheepak, for example, is a trader based in Odessa who is in his early forties and belongs to a family that identifies itself as being Afghan Hindus.<sup>11</sup> Dheepak's father lived in Afghanistan until the collapse of the pro-Soviet government of President Najibullah Ahmadzai in 1992, while Dheepak himself had left Afghanistan in the early eighties, and moved to New Delhi, the city in which he had been raised and schooled. The family are Punjabi-speaking Hindus who had been based in North West India until 1947, at which point, in the context of the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan, Dheepak's grandfather moved to Afghanistan, settling in the environs of the eastern city of Jalalabad. The family had been active in various types of commercial activity in Afghanistan, including the official barter trade in dried fruits and wood that took place between Kabul and the Soviet Union – it was in connection to this trade that one of Dheepak's father's brothers had visited Ukraine in the late 1970s. By the beginning of the 1980s, in addition to working in Soviet-related traders, the family had become the sole sale agent in Afghanistan for Toshiba electronic products. The products were imported to Afghanistan from Japan by a Kabul-based Sikh; Dheepak's father's trading agency was responsible for the wholesale of the goods in Afghanistan, allowing him to make a name for himself and his family members as trustworthy operators in Kabul's central wholesale market, the *mandawi*. During the 1980s other family members started to travel to and from Kabul and cities in East Asia, most especially Hong Kong, a city in which traders from Afghanistan currently based there told me that was home to approximately 40 Afghan trading companies in the 1980s. During the 1980s, Dheepak's family members purchased digital watches that I have been told were especially popular with the Soviet Union's Red Army Afghanistan-stationed soldiers. There appears to have been a barter-style trade between these Hong Kong-made modern watches and the high-quality Soviet-made time pieces that army personnel bought with them from the USSR. Like many other Hindu families, Dheepak lived in a street in Kabul's Kart-e Parwan neighbourhood, in the environs of which both Hindu temples (*mandir*) and Sikh gurdwaras were constructed by merchant families identifying with these ethno-religious minority communities. The family had done well enough in its various trading activities to own their own property in this part of the city by the mid-1980s.

According to officials with whom I have spoken in the pro-Soviet government of Dr Najibullah Ahmadzai (d. 1995), the administration made efforts to keep Hindus and Sikhs in Afghanistan, not least because their skills in the arts of trade and money exchange

were central to the country's economy. However, after the collapse of Dr Najibullah's government (1992) and in the wake of the rise to power of mujahidin groups, many of the country's Sikh and Hindu traders left the country, moving to India, either flying on commercial airlines or using clandestine routes that passed through Pakistan. After the rise to power of the mujahidin forces in Kabul, many of the houses owned by Sikhs and Hindus in the Kart-e Parwan neighbourhood were occupied by influential figures associated with the mujahidin; after returning to Kabul in the context of the defeat of the Taliban by the U.S. and a range of mujahidin groups, these mujahidin-aligned strongmen were purportedly involved in the illegal sale of the same properties for inflated \$US prices. The years of the Taliban's control of Kabul saw restrictions placed on Afghanistan's Hindu and Sikh communities, Hindus being instructed, for example, to wear insignia that identified them as non-Muslim *dhimmis* (minorities).

Dheepak's family were permanently based in India for over a decade after leaving Kabul, yet, as was the case for many other Hindu and Sikhs who had moved to the country from Afghanistan, they found conditions of both life and business in India difficult. On the one hand, access to official permits and citizenship was difficult if not impossible for these historic Indian diasporic communities that had long ties to Afghanistan and India's North West Frontier.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, business conditions in India were not favourable to the type of trading activities in which such families were specialized: there were high levels of competition in India's markets, and major Indian traders were able to run businesses on miniscule profit margins. In the face of these difficulties, Dheepak and his father moved from Delhi to Tashkent having heard from Afghan traders based in Central Asia of the types of business opportunities that Uzbekistan offered in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union. In Tashkent, Dheepak and his father (the family's women stayed on in Delhi where they were supported by Dheepak's elder brother who was training to be a doctor) functioned as 'shuttle traders': they brought 'all types of goods' from Dubai to Tashkent on a regular flight. Whilst Dheepak remembers working conditions as having been 'difficult', largely as a result of the hostility to the presence of foreign traders in the city of the local police force and security agents, the business was successful: father and son were able to make a decent living for themselves, while also sending funds back to India for their families.

Having worked for three years in Tashkent, Dheepak moved to Moscow, another city that is well known historically to Hindu and Sikh traders from Afghanistan. Until the end of the nineteenth century, Sikh and Hindu communities from Afghanistan had stationed themselves in Moscow in order to arrange the money transfers that made trade between Kabul and Russia possible (Hanifi 2011). While the scope for such activities was dramatically narrowed during the high years of the Soviet Union, traders such as Dheepak's uncle did keep these links alive from the 1960s onwards, mostly through their involvement in official barter trade. During his time in Moscow Dheepak was involved in the trade of Chinese goods to Russia. In the early 1990s Sikh and Hindu traders from Afghanistan were amongst some of the first traders to import goods to Russia from Asia (initially from Hong Kong where they had established contacts, and in later years Taiwan, Thailand, and eventually China). The networks involved in this type of trade, however, were not exclusively 'Hindu': men such as Dheepak's father distributed commodities as loans (*qarz*) to Muslim traders from Afghanistan who had moved to Russia and Ukraine after

the collapse of the pro-Soviet regime in which they had served and the subsequent outbreak of a civil war involving the countries' mujahidin factions (Marsden 2015).

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

After a while, Dheepak was able to bring his father to Ukraine from Tashkent, helping him to adjust to the city's business practices over the coming years. In the late 1990s Dheepak and his father entered into a business partnership with a leading Odessa-based Afghan Muslim trader. The trader, Riaz, at the time aged in his early forties, had studied in one of Odessa's military academies, and only returned to the city in 1992. The Muslim and Hindu traders pooled capital and travelled to Dubai and Taiwan in order to bring goods for sale in Odessa. Additionally, these traders also formed a 'group' (*gruh*) that brought commodities to Ukraine for other traders of Afghan background working in Ukraine, charging their clients a percentage of the total costs of the products they brought for them. During this phase of their trading activities, the partnership had to contend with competition from traders newly arriving from Afghanistan who were seeking to take control of a large share of the now very profitable market using finances brought from Kabul. Dheepak recounted to me how during these years some Afghan Muslim traders had sought to force him and his father out of the market. He claimed that it was only the support of the Muslim traders with whom they had developed established business partnerships that had allowed them to withstand the pressure and to continue to trade in the city. By the early 2000s, Dheepak and his father had switched their activities from shuttle trading between Dubai and Taiwan to Yiwu. Rather than selling 'all types of things', father and son had now also moved into a specialist trading operation – the working glove – which they purchased in Yiwu's Futian market as well as directly from factories elsewhere in China. The business has been a high-volume activity for several years, although, he told me in 2016, the financial crisis of 2008 and then the conflict between Russia and Ukraine in 2014 had resulted in the market 'slowing' and ultimately reducing the size of their overall trading activities. Whereas Dheepak had travelled to Yiwu in China approximately once a month in the mid-2000s, by the time I spoke to him in the summer of August 2016, he only made the trip on three or so occasions each year.

Indeed, the state of the market in Odessa and the fact that his children were now finishing their schooling and soon to start at university had led Dheepak to think seriously about his future in Ukraine. On the one hand, Dheepak told me, his daughter would be expected to marry someone from within the community of Afghan Hindus, and there were very few such marriageable men in Odessa. On the other hand, the bazaar had been 'asleep' (*khow*)

for many months, he was now eating into his family savings in order to keep the businesses going, and did not know how long this situation would last. Yet Deephak was also very reluctant to move elsewhere – ‘how many times can I go somewhere, find a new house for my family, build up a new business, learn the new culture – it is very tiring and I am tired of it’, he told me one day as we sat in his shop in the market. Despite these reservations of moving on once more, Dheepak was considering making a visit to London: being in possession of a UK business visa that he had yet to use, he told me that he needed to travel to the UK anyway should he wish to make a successful visa application for the country in the future. There was also a new scheme for issuing business visas to people who invested in the country, he told me, and so during his stay in the UK he would also explore the possibility of using that scheme to relocate his family to the UK. This was a strategy that other Afghan Hindu and Sikhs had purportedly used to gradually shift their business activities from Odessa to London.<sup>13</sup>

Deephak’s life history demonstrates the centrality of cooperation involving Hindu, Sikhs, and Muslims from Afghanistan to the commercial networks that connect Yiwu and Odessa to one another today. Such cooperation has proved vital to commercial portfolios established in the context of exile and international migration. Traders such as Dheepak and his father and uncles supported the activities of Muslim Afghans by providing commodities and credit; they also entered joint partnerships that allowed all traders to access commercial suppliers in Asia with the relatively low levels of capital in which they were in possession. Finally, while there had clearly been tensions between Afghan Muslims and Hindus/Sikhs, these had been mitigated by traders offering support of both a political, economic, and social nature to one another, and recognizing in a competitive economic environment, the mutually beneficial nature of the commercial ties that had brought them together.

### Islamic cosmopolitanism?

Having explored the forms of cooperation that saw Hindu and Muslim traders from Afghanistan working alongside one another in Odessa’s Seventh-Kilometre market, I now address the role played by such multi-dimensional networks in connecting Yiwu and Odessa. Doing so reveals how far the forms of trust and reputation accounting upon which such networks are founded arise not merely from either pre-existing forms of trust based on kinship or ethnicity or from cooperation in the context of exile and migration: rather, what is also evident in Odessa is the reproduction of commercial relations over generations.

Having been born in Afghanistan, brought up in India, and intermittently lived in Uzbekistan, Russia, and China, Dheepak now sat at the desk in his spacious shop in Odessa’s Seventh-Kilometre market. He counted his earnings for the day, and gave instructions to a Muslim labourer from Guinea whom he employed in his shop about which boxes of the type of Chinese-made working gloves in which he dealt to move from the display area in front to the storage area at the back. Another employee, a Muslim man in his thirties from Jhelum in Pakistan’s Punjab province, also shifted boxes of gloves around the interior of the shop. Meanwhile news from India was beaming out of a television set positioned directly opposite from the desk at which we were sitting.



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

A further man present in the room was Nasir, a Farsi-speaking trader in his early forties whose family is originally from a mountainous region in north-eastern Afghanistan; the family, however, have been based in Kabul since the early 1980s. Nasir currently lives in Yiwu where he runs a trading company that assists traders visiting the city in the sourcing, purchase, storage, customs clearance, and transportation of commodities. Nasir moved to China from Afghanistan in 1998 having been awarded a Chinese-funded scholarship by Afghan officials connected to the mujahidin government led by Burhanudin Rabbani (d. 2011). Nasir studied International Relations at a respected Chinese-language university in eastern central China, and went on to successfully study for an MA in the same institution. It was only in 2006 that Nasir turned his Chinese-language skills (fluency in both written and spoken Chinese) to use in the field of trade, opening a trading office in Yiwu. He told me that during his student years he had known of their being Afghan traders in Yiwu, but had focused on his studies and so had never had the time to visit the city.

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

Due to the gradual withdrawal of NATO forces after 2014, and restrictions on the activities of private security companies in the country, however there was a substantial decline in this type of trade between China and Afghanistan. In the context of these changes, Nasir had sought to create new geographical niches in his portfolio of trading activities. Nasir assisted, for example, a Pashto-speaking trader based in London with the shipping of



bags and suitcases between Yiwu and London. But it was in Ukraine where Nasir had developed his business activities most successfully, especially in the eastern city of Kharkiv where several traders from his region of eastern Afghanistan were based. The traders in Kharkiv used Nasir and his fluent Chinese to buy and arrange for the transportation of goods from Yiwu to Ukraine. Nasir was employed on a commission basis by these merchants when they visited Yiwu on their annual trips to source and procure commodities to sell in Kharkiv. He also used new technologies, especially the Chinese App, wechat, in his trading activities: traders in Kharkiv send photos of the goods they require, and Nasir informs them about the costs of purchase, storage, and transport of these before deciding whether to arrange a deal. Additionally, due to his relation with Chinese suppliers in the Futian market, as well as with the factories that supply these, Nasir is able to arrange for the Kharkiv-based traders' shipments to be delivered on credit basis, usually meaning that they are expected to make a partial payment on the purchase of the commodities, and to pay the remaining amount three months after their despatch from China.

Nasir had travelled to Ukraine in the summer of 2016, along with his wife and their three-year-old son, in order to meet with his business clients in the cities of Kharkiv and Odessa. Such visits form an important element of the business activities of such China-based traders, and are an important way in which their trading networks are sustained and expanded. Six months after visiting Odessa, for example, Nasir also made a trip, with a friend and business partner from Afghanistan (also based in Yiwu), to Moscow. These trips are used to both explore new markets and make relevant business contacts, but also to follow up on the collection of overdue debts from the previous season's trading. The traders effortlessly switch between the blocs of flats in which they live in Yiwu with the homes of their friends and business associates in Odessa, Moscow, and Kharkiv. Nasir had told me that he was interested in seeking out clients in Odessa, and it was partly with this aim in mind that he had visited the city. During his visit to the city, he also took me to see a Pashto-speaking man from south eastern Afghanistan who sold cosmetics in Odessa, and with whom one of his associates in Yiwu was involved in a conflict over the costs of shipping goods between Yiwu and Odessa.

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

Nasir and Dheepak conversed with one another in Farsi, though Dheepak told me he had not learned the language in Afghanistan or from his father who spoke both it and Pashto fluently, but over the course of the many years that he had worked alongside traders from Afghanistan in Tashkent, Kiev, and Odessa. I had come to know about Nasir and Deepak's relationship in Yiwu when Nasir had remarked that other traders from the same region of eastern Afghanistan as him had been shocked to discover that he preferred to be hosted by a Hindu Afghan than 'one of his own'. Indeed, confirming the important role that the provision of hospitality plays in the enactment of and claims to be cosmopolitan (Werbner 2016), Nasir chose on his trip to Odessa to accept the

hospitality (*mehmon dusti*) of his Hindu friend and partner, rather than the offers of men from his ancestral region of Afghanistan. After the shop closed for the day at 12 noon, Dheepak, Nasir, and myself were invited by a group of three traders from Nasir's home region for a dinner in an Afghan restaurant in Odessa that was owned by a further trader from Nasir's home region. Having eaten, we returned home to Dheepak's house: Nasir's wife and young child had been there all along with Dheepak's wife and children, chatting and sipping tea from a pot that the Hindu family had brought with them from Kabul on leaving the city in the early 1990s.

Nasir and Dheepak's relationship, however, arose from more stable foundations than merely the odd encounter in Yiwu or Ukraine. Nasir's closest friend and associate in Yiwu is Atiq, a man in his mid-thirties who is from an established Kabul-based trading family, and whose ancestral home is in a small town in the east of the country close to Nasir's home region. While young, Atiq has already performed the haj pilgrimage on several occasions and lives with his Afghan family in Yiwu – both public markers of his personal success as a trader, and reputation as someone who is honest and trustworthy. Atiq's trading skills, however, have a long pedigree: his father is widely talked about by traders in Yiwu and beyond as having been one of Kabul's first principal merchants to bring commodities from China to Afghanistan, notably the *bicycle-e chinooie* (Chinese bicycle) that was popular with city children in the country during the 1990s, and imported from Hong Kong. Dheepak told me how his father and Atiq's father had worked together closely in Kabul bazaar in the 1970s and 1980s – Atiq's father would give goods on credit to Dheepak's family that he had brought from Hong Kong, and Dheepak's father would sell these in the bazaar to merchants from across the country. On the basis of Atiq's reference, I was told, Nasir and Dheepak had commenced working with one another.

Several dynamics were thus visible in a shop in Odessa in which Chinese-made working gloves were sold at wholesale prices. Most obviously, the shop was a meeting place for traders and workers from countries across 'the global South', ranging from Guinea in Africa, to Pakistan, China, Afghanistan, and India in Asia. A relation that was central to this site of interaction in long-distance trading networks in Ukraine today, however, was between a Hindu and a Muslim, both of Afghan nationality. While Dheepak's family had left Afghanistan in the context of the rise to power of the mujahidin, Nasir had benefitted from the same grouping assisting him to secure a scholarship to study in China. Such relations are not however only fashioned in the context of modern forms of 'globalization'; they stretch back, rather, over several generations, and are intricately connected to an inter-generational circulation of credit, commodities, and reputations, as evidenced by the ties between Dheepak, Atiq, and Atiq's father.

## Conclusion

Yiwu and Odessa both occupy an important position in the commercial and geographical horizons of Asia's Muslims. This paper has sought to document the particular role played by Muslim trading networks in the interaction between these two cities that lie beyond the conventional boundaries of Muslim Asia. It has highlighted the role played by the Cold War in re-energizing Odessa's role as a site of Muslim commerce and sociability, and of economic reform in China as a trigger for the emergence of Yiwu as a new type of Muslim-oriented trading node. The paper has suggested that while Yiwu and Odessa might be

both relatively new sites of Muslim commerce, the commercial activities of the mobile traders who work within them have relied on historically durable social types of social relations and institutions in building their transregional business profiles. Focusing on the social relationships that are significant to the activities of the traders who work and live across Odessa and Yiwu simultaneously illuminates an aspect of contemporary Muslim commercial networks that is barely touched upon in existing accounts. Rather than pointing to the significance of reformist Islam or adherence to Sufi brotherhoods as factors explaining the durability of such networks, my ethnography suggests the significance of cosmopolitanism and flexibility to the modes of being Muslim enacted by Afghan participants in the Yiwu–Odessa trade. My aim has not, however, been to present a celebratory rendering of this mode of cosmopolitanism. Rather, the forms of cosmopolitanism evinced by men such as Dheepak and Nasir arises from the pragmatic concerns of hard-nosed traders whose lives are caught at the cusps of multiple forms of co-dependencies (cf. Alavi 2015). Men such as these are seeking to make profit together while continuing to demonstrate their loyalty and adherence to their regional and ethno-religious communities. They are setting to this task in the context of a contentious contemporary geopolitical environment and a past scarred by violent conflict and hardened identities. Interactions between individuals affiliated to Islamist movements who chose to be the guests of Hindu Afghans rather than fellow Muslims bring into sharp relief the need to understand the ways in which historic expressions of Islamic cosmopolitanism are finding new contexts in which to take hold.

## Notes

1. Following anthropological convention, pseudonyms are used throughout.
2. On the notion of circulation see Markovits, Pouchepeas, and Subrahmanyam 2003; cf. Ho [forthcoming](#) on 'mobile societies'.
3. On Islamic associations in Ukraine see Yarosh and Brylov 2011.
4. An extensive body of literature exists in Chinese on Yiwu, e.g. Ma, Yan [马艳]. 2012. *Yige xinyang qunti de yimin shijian – Yiwu Musilin shehui shenghuo de minzu zhi* (The Migrated Practice of a Faith Community: An Ethnography of Yiwu Muslims Social Life). Beijing: Central Minzu U. Publishers.
5. According to official statistics, 14,000 foreigners are registered as living in Yiwu.
6. By contrast, for migrants from Xinjiang the city is widely regarded as being a context in which it is difficult to settle for work or business due to government policies that discourage migration from Xinjiang.
7. On the ethno-national category 'Hui', see Gladney 1996; for a study of Hui Muslims, see Erie 2016.
8. Several of my informants reported to me that the Islamic preacher-celebratory Dr Zakir Naik visited the city in 2014. Cf. Sudairi Al 2016.
9. On the naming of businesses in other trading communities see Anderson 2011 and Heslop 2015.
10. The leading of a 'life-well-lived' is an important aspects of Afghan trading ethics, see Marsden 2016b.
11. Approximately 15 Sikh and Hindu Afghan families are based in Odessa. The community have established a temple that is used as a place of worship for both Sikhs and Hindus. The temple was established in cooperation with the local branch of the Hari Krishna movement and is located in a village close to the Seventh-Kilometre market.
12. On Afghanistan's Sikh and Hindu trading communities and networks, see Dale 2002; Hanifi 2011; Markovitz 2000.

13. Sikh and Hindu traders of Afghan background tend to run their business in Southall, a historically important neighbourhood for South Asian communities.

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