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Embracing Chinese modernity?

Articulation and positioning in China-Kazakhstan trade and exchange processes

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Abstract

While much has been written recently about the increasing geo-political and economic impact of Chinese 'soft power' on neighbouring countries to the West, relatively few studies explore local people's reflections of China's rise in its north-western borderlands. In this paper, I argue that people in Kazakhstan oriented in their commercial activities at China due to experiences of enduring interaction within business networks stretching to Beijing, Shanghai or Guangzhou often support affirmative views towards Chinese modernity. This perspective, while defying widespread sinophobia in Kazakhstan's society, has partly triggered concerns among the involved actors vis-à-vis the post-Soviet state's capability in providing socio-economic development and has, at the same time, enabled them to strengthen their agency in cross-border commercial exchange. Based on recent ethnographical research on Bolashak Bazaar in Almaty and in a Dungan village cluster near the border with Kyrgyzstan, this working paper elaborates how trade actors both articulate their positioning and become situated in development discourses and how state-endorsed principles of Chinese modernity are utilised and accommodated with established representations of social change. By so doing, the working paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of the dynamic impact of translocal connections and flows of ideas on the everyday negotiation of development and social change.

1. Introduction

The agglomeration of retail and wholesale bazaars in Almaty known locally simply as Barakholka, after the Russian colloquial expression for 'flea market', few random observers would associate in any way with modernity. Located at the northern edge of Kazakhstan's largest city, Barakholka's seemingly chaotic rows and clusters of an estimated 10,000 - 15,000 two-stack shipping containers, serving as combined storage and sales units and as places of self-employment for a workforce of 40,000 (World Bank, 2009), are more frequently represented in public as shady leftovers of post-Soviet transition. They are associated in political and public discourse with Chinese-made contraband goods, illegal appropriation of land as well as anti-sanitary conditions and are envisaged to be transformed, through state intervention, into 'modern' or 'civilised' shopping centres (Kursiv 2013).

Many of the longstanding wholesale traders operating from Barakholka started their career under uncertain socio-economic and political conditions after the break-up of the Soviet Union. It was then that salaries in state-budgeted positions due to decreasing state funds dropped below the subsistence minimum and the dissolution of state enterprises and of collective farms resulted in high levels of unemployment and rural-urban migration (Yessenova, 2006). Lifting of travel restrictions, re-opening of borders and liberal trade policies made hundreds of thousands of people in Kazakhstan venture into so called 'shuttle trade' or 'trader tourism' - individuals importing consumer goods in small amounts from Poland, Turkey, the UAE, India and increasingly China for often quite profitable domestic re-sale and re-distribution (Angermann, 2006, Spector, 2008). This mode of translocal small trade has become unfeasible and largely extinct from bazaars (Alff, 2013). Yet, it gave way to the emergence of sophisticated and flexible cross-border wholesale trade and transport schemes within which Almaty's Barakholka has become a major node (Figure 1).

Profitable wholesale and cargo entrepreneurs nowadays use extensive and effective commercial networks that stretch from their sales points to coastal China and Xinjiang and to places and customers in provincial Kazakhstan and Siberia, transecting various state and socio-cultural boundaries (Karrar, 2013, Alff, 2014a, forthcoming). The present working paper explores the everyday development discourse that surrounds the exchange of goods, as well as of knowledge, values and ideas, inherent in these translocal trade and exchange activities. In particular, it inquires empirically upon the representational reflection, articulation and negotiation of Chinese modernisation and its inherent values and outcomes through the narratives of actors involved in 'China trade'. Based on biographical interviews and participant observation from two case studies, the working paper investigates the positioning of trade actors in favourably engaging with the ideas and values inherent in development ideology and navigating the impact of state-led development outcomes in the Xinjiang-Kazakhstan borderlands. It is argued that in particular longstanding trade entrepreneurs, due to their experience of enduring interaction and connectedness with Chinese partners, have acquired affirmative views towards what has been described as China's rise or more metaphorically as the 'Chinese Dream'² (Zhang & Saxer, Forthcoming 2014). By adapting new attitudes and subsequently new patterns of action, they contest widespread anti-Chinese hysteria in Kazakhstan's society on the one hand (Sadovskaya 2012), and sometimes voice concerns towards

² The term was brought into public discourse by Helen Wang's book 'The Chinese Dream' (2010) in which she outlines the objectives and aspirations of middle-class Chinese.

the post-Soviet state's capability in providing progress to the people, on the other (Alff, 2014a). The article follows an actor-centred perspective in order to reveal everyday life aspects of intersecting and overlapping, rather than contradicting visions in development discourses.

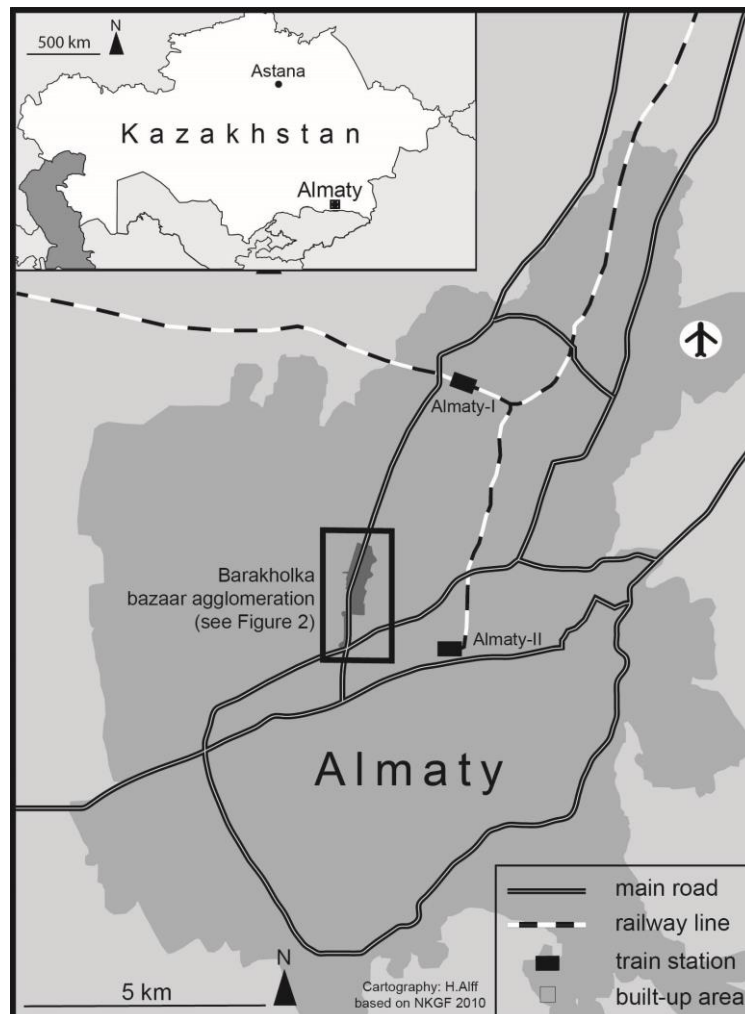


Figure 1: Localisation of the first case study area within intersecting transport links in Almaty, the logistic and commercial centre of Kazakhstan.

The article is based on three months of field research at the Bolashak Bazaar of Barakholka bazaar agglomeration in Almaty between August 2011 and June 2014 as well as three weeks of field research in a Dungan village cluster at Kazakhstan's border with Kyrgyzstan between October 2012 and June 2014. Thirty semi-structured biographical interviews were conducted with retail and wholesale traders at Bolashak by the author in Russian alongside informal conversation in Russian and Kazakh and participant observation. Similarly, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with Dungan community leaders in Shortobe and its surroundings, predominantly in Dungan-inhabited settlements, following a snowball sample. Local press and outlines of official development programs in both Russian and Kazakh served as additional sources for exploring the discursive dimension of development processes in the given contexts.

I draw on the notions of articulation and positioning proposed by Stuart Hall (1995, 1996), which address both the methodological and conceptual dimensions of my research. Hall attaches dual meaning to his notion of 'articulation': While it represents a process of rendering a collective identity or socio-spatial position, a set of interests of actors or groups explicit, it comes also as a contextualised process of conjoining or connecting that position to political subjects (Murray Li, 2000: 152). Consequently, as Hall remarks:

"A theory of articulation is both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects. [...] it enables us to think how an ideology empowers people, enabling them to begin to make some sense or intelligibility of their historical situation, without reducing those forms of intelligibility to their socio-economic or class location or social position" (1996: 141-42).

In examining the coherence of social position and the way people derive meaning from their everyday social practice, Hall emphasises the importance of consciousness and agency. This being said, Hall suggests that the articulation of certain positions, shared or conflictive ideas, interests and identities is partly preconfigured through the historical past. Yet, it is always provisional and transformative, as it encompasses a constant process of becoming, in the course of which actors position (and re-position) themselves often tactically or strategically, although never unconstrained by power asymmetries. Acknowledging the role of 'fields of power' or 'places of recognition' (Hall, 1995: 8), Hall draws attention to the often situational reflexivity of actors in articulating their position.

The following section offers a brief introduction to the historical and conceptual patterns of shifting ideas of development and modernisation in the Kazakhstan-China borderlands. This provides the context for an analysis of the current accommodation and framing of influential ideas of development in the practice of trade entrepreneurs in two case studies from Almaty's Barakholka and the Dungan village of Shortobe in Zhambyl region of Southern Kazakhstan. Finally, by engaging with Stuart Hall's writing, I attempt to derive from the two cases major insights concerning the outcome of the actors' positioning and articulation in processes of social change between China and Kazakhstan. This insight, I assume, contributes to a more profound understanding of how ideas of development and change in translocal trade and exchange both shape and are shaped through the agency of actors.

2. Shifting ideas of modernisation across borderlands

A textbook example of modernisation highlighting economic growth to gradually improve socio-economic conditions is of central ideological importance within the development project of the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Kreutzmann, 2012). The conceptual foundation of modernisation thought, characterised by declining revolutionary zeal and increasing Confucian philosophical influence (Chen, 2007: 5-6; Wang, 2009: 8), is often assumed to be the undisputed basis to achieve positive change in all parts of the Chinese society (Barabantseva, 2012: 64). A strong recourse to

Confucian thought nowadays is considered an important element in China's modernisation. However, such tendencies are far from unique to the contemporary period and draw attention to the meaning of 'tradition' in Chinese modernity (Duara, 1995: 88). Yet, whilst ideas of modernity are deeply rooted in Chinese history of thought, going back at least to the late Qing era and the Republican period, the contemporary development approach in China has been shaped tremendously by Western and Soviet theory. Ideas of modernisation in fact have criss-crossed the Sino-Soviet borderlands over the last century, spreading from the Soviet Union to Maoist China in the 1920s to 1960s and more recently from reform-era China to the successor states of the Soviet Union.

The October Revolution and, in particular, the construction of national societies in Soviet Central Asia since 1924, signified the acceleration of Soviet modernisation in education, administration and agriculture (Kandiyoti, 1996). It dominated, in an ambiguous way, the political economy, and local identities and ideas of development over almost a century until today, while serving as a role model for state visions of development across the Soviet borders. The Marxist-Leninist foundation of modernisation in Xinjiang in the 1950s, for instance, was laid when Soviet political advisors took a major stake in reforming the public administration, especially in terms of local and regional autonomous units, and the PRC's agricultural and industrial production. The logic of Stalinist modernisation figured strong in Mao Zedong's 'Great Leap Forward' and the Cultural Revolution to foster China's revolutionary development (see Kreutzmann, 2011). It took two decades for a transformed and market-oriented understanding of modernisation, encompassed by Deng Xiaoping's 'Four Modernisations' (of agriculture, industry, military defense and science and technology), to attain widespread prominence in China's political economy during the reform era starting in 1978.

Nowadays a flexible, innovative and especially a 'socially harmonious' society (*hexie shehui* in pinyin) is a much-quoted concept in state development programmes, standing in for the legitimising accountability of the Chinese state. In particular, the Confucian concept *xiaokang* ('well-off', 'moderately prosperous' in pinyin) was declared the eventual goal of Chinese modernisation (*xiandaihua*) in the mid- to long-term by Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao (Lin, 2010: 87). Based on market economic principles under the continuous leadership of the communist party it is deemed the highest point of modernity (Cao, 2009: 11). Since the chairmanship of Jiang both concepts came into widespread use in party terminology as territorial and social disparities increased within China (Jacques, 2012: 195).

A controversially discussed example of how this modernisation trajectory has been spread beyond China's coastal part can be seen in policies attributed to the long-term campaign of *xibu da kaifa* ('Open up the West' or 'Great Western Development' campaign). Officially proclaimed in 1999, it aimed at equating the disparities in infrastructural development, urbanisation, industrialisation, education and income level between the Western (often perceived as backward and largely inhabited by national minorities or *minzu*) and the coastal regions, and thus, at least officially at decreasing social and ethnic tensions (Bequelin, 2004; Shih, 2004). Tying parts of the country formerly perceived as peripheral and backwards more closely to the economic and political centre (in particular by employing resources of coastal administrations), while fostering their opening-up to neighbouring states, has become the central paradigm of China's development (Jacques, 2012: 258).

'Modernisation with Chinese characteristics' (Wheeler, 2005) as a cross-cutting concept claiming principles such as primacy of society, people and a sustainable relation between man and nature (Cao, 2009: 11), is used almost interchangeably with 'development' (*fazhan* in pinyin) in Xinjiang (Nyíri and Breidenbach, 2008: 127). This understanding hints at the dominant role of state policies and institutions in inducing and directing (or at least staging) unilinear processes of social change from above in order to achieve legitimacy (Bequelin, 2004; Brox and Bellér-Hann, 2014). Modernisation campaigns in China's West, often clumsily implemented, have evoked widespread anxiety and popular grievance, however, in particular among national minorities like Tibetans and Uyghurs, about their exclusion from societal improvement and well-being (Brox & Beller-Hann, 2014). These state programmes focus not only on the transformation of the domestic economy, but include regional aspirations. Woodside notes that China's mission within the cooperation with the neighbouring states to the west, "would be to 'congeal', or to 'coagulate', Central Asian economic life by transmitting Chinese reform experiences to Central Asians" (Woodside, 2007: 24-5; see also Millward, 2009: 55).

Aspects of Chinese modernisation, in particular those of social and ethnic harmony and innovativeness, have found close analogies in Kazakhstan's post-Soviet modernisation agenda. Exemplified by what president Nazarbaev in his strategy papers Kazakhstan-2030 (1997) and Kazakhstan-2050 (2012) has called the 'Kazakhstani Path', state-led development, most notably, draws on the country's unique position at the centre of Eurasia, which makes it neither 'East' nor 'West', but rather 'Eurasianist' (Koch, 2010). This intermediary position becomes evident from the recourse on aspects of development ideology both from the West and from East Asia. The modernisation trajectory in Kazakhstan revolves in particular around the Western capitalist mantra of enhancing the competitiveness of Kazakhstan's nowadays largely oil and gas-driven economy and of fostering the transit of goods along what is proclaimed a new 'Silk Road'. Yet, the seemingly utopian goal of becoming one of the 30 economically most advanced states by 2050 is aimed to be achieved also by regional integration, the diversification of customer markets and the introduction of innovative industries, such as renewable energy production (in the interest of a 'green economy'), explicitly referring to South Korea's, Malaysia's and China's economies as role models³ (Nazarbaev, 2005, 2012). This being said, modernisation in Kazakhstan is still often symbolised in Marxist notions of civilisation and progress inherited from the Soviet past (Koch, 2010), especially when it comes to the objective of increasing state control over largely unregulated sectors of the economy like bazaar-based trade.

The following sections seek to outline and to compare the different ways actors engage with newly encountered and with established ideas of development, based on the case studies of wholesale traders at Bolashak Bazaar and the Dungan village of Shortobe. These two examples offer a backdrop against which to grasp the dynamic actor-based negotiation of modernisation ideas vis-à-vis everyday development practices, as well as to understand the practical implications and outcomes of this interaction.

³ The 'Kazakhstani Snow Leopard' was proposed by Nazarbaev as a symbol for Kazakhstan's development path following the example of the Tiger states of East and Southeast Asia.

3. Re-articulating and re-connecting development on Almaty's Bolashak Bazaar

Covering more than 3,000 double stack containers on an area of 80,000 square meters and with a self-employed workforce of approximately 7,000, Bolashak Bazaar evolved as one of Barakholka's largest wholesale and retail markets in the mid-1990s (Figure 2). The term 'bolashak', defining "the people's explicit historical-practical task" of creating the future (Qazaqstan ulttyq entsiklopediyasy, 1999: 364), is extensively used in post-Soviet political discourse by the country's elite. It is attributed to the rise of socio-economic principles in society such as competitiveness and overall socio-economic prosperity (Ministerstvo kommunikatsii i transporta RK, 2011).

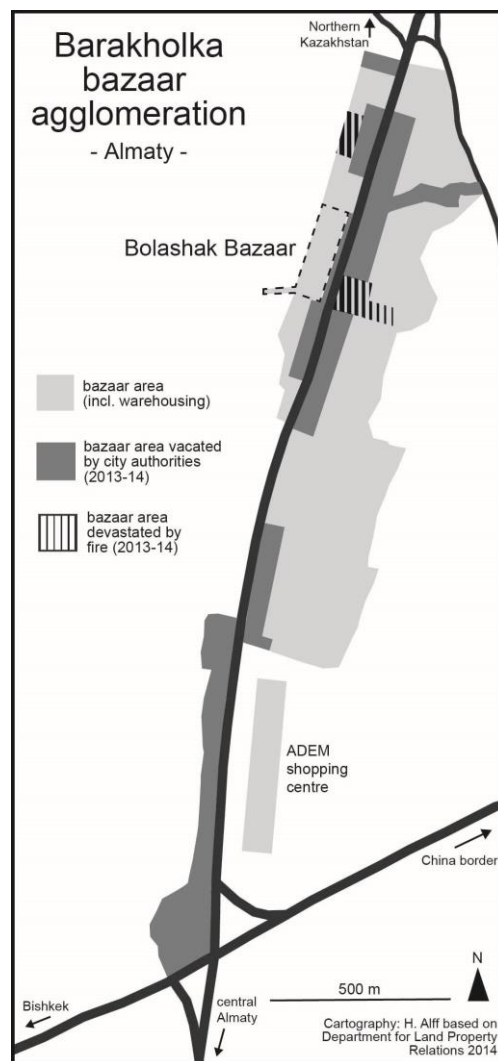


Figure 2: Barakholka bazaar agglomeration consisted of 28 bazaars as of 2012. Since then, most of the bazaars were partly or fully destroyed by fire or forcibly removed by Almaty's city authorities between 2013 and 2014 for the construction of a six-lane highway. Bolashak Bazaar in the northern part of Barakholka remained almost entirely operational until June 2014.

The term 'bolashak', meaning a privately-owned bazaar, originates in the entrepreneurial activities of people who had already become successfully involved in private trade during the late Soviet

period. With other bazaars of Barakholka called 'Barys' (Snow Leopard) and 'Kazakhstan-2030', referring to (symbols of) independent Kazakhstan's long-term political agenda as outlined by its President Nursultan Nazarbaev (1997), it becomes clear that entrepreneurialism and consumerism evolving at these bazaars in the post-Soviet period are aimed to be legitimised through the co-optation of widely propagated official visions of development.

Contrary to this aspiration of bazaar proprietors and other stakeholders, contemporary trade practices at bazaars at Almaty's Barakholka remain more commonly associated by the public with unsophisticated, backward and uncivilised economic behaviour that allegedly withstands and opposes the achievement of progress for which the state is held responsible (Alff, 2014a). This negative representation is due especially to the widespread public perception that deems bazaar trade in its current form an outlived phenomenon, resembling and reinforcing the miserable socio-economic and political conditions of post-Soviet transformation rather than contributing to the needs of a modern society. Another factor frequently highlighted is the 'lack of productivity' assigned to bazaar trade (Angermann, 2006: 24). Thirdly, it is the informal character of bazaar trade consistently evading official regulations, import restrictions, customs duties and taxation (Karrar, 2013), which influences the negative representation of bazaar trade. While the latter point of formality/informality in the trade sector has been covered elsewhere in considerable analytical depth (Humphrey, 2002; Kaiser, 2005; Angermann, 2006), I want to reflect here on the former two aspects, and especially on the first one, by focusing upon the narratives of wholesale traders in 'China trade', I came along during three months of ethnographic fieldwork at Bolashak Bazaar between August 2011 and June 2014.

The discursive engagement with ideas emerging from China's rise, particularly among wholesale entrepreneurs tightly cooperating with Chinese partners, forms an important aspect of how they articulate their positioning in development discourses surrounding bazaar trade (Alff, 2014a, b). Due to years of frequent journeys to Urumqi, Beijing or Guangzhou and their intense interaction within cross-cultural, translocal commercial networks, wholesale traders from Bolashak Bazaar encountered and experienced manifestations of what they consider modern trade across a variety of places and social contexts. As a major consequence of their translocal social practice, a considerable number of my interlocutors have a relatively clear-cut, distinct opinion towards what they consider to be preferred outcomes of ongoing and envisaged top-down development processes around Barakholka (see Forbes, 2014). Generally speaking, many traders accept the overall responsibility of state institutions in Kazakhstan for the ordering of society and bringing prosperity to the people (see Karavan, 2011; Vox Populi, 2014). This aspect hints at the paternal role that was in Soviet times and in many cases still is assigned in the society to the state (Koch, 2010; Humphrey, 2002). Notwithstanding this, many of my interlocutors voiced critique of the contemporary outcomes and the lack of effectiveness in ongoing state-led modernisation efforts in Kazakhstan on various scales. They identified deficiencies in the Kazakhstani modernisation approach, with outcomes of state-led development in China perceived as being more favourable.⁴ The material and immaterial (symbolic) outcomes of China's rapid development indeed were praised as exemplary throughout interviews with wholesale traders engaged with China-Kazakhstan trade. The 'Chinese model' is perceived to be

⁴ See Billé 2014 for an ethnographic account on receptions of competing modernities at the Far-East Russia-China border towns of Blagoveshchensk and Heihe.

propelled by the high effectiveness and pragmatism of state order.⁵ A statement of one of my interlocutors at Bolashak, a male merchant trading in Chinese-made fake-design fashion, exemplifies this understanding by hinting to the currently perceived elusiveness for similar scenarios of development in Kazakhstan:

For us it's still a long way to go to reach China (its development level) ("Nam eshche daleko do Kitaya"). Just take a look at Urumqi: A couple of years ago it was a provincial city with no appeal, but now it has become a civilised megapolis thanks to the Chinese state. [...] Here in Kazakhstan rampant corruption instead became a common sight everywhere you look, but in China bureaucrats taking bribes are severely punished.⁶

Thus, the 'Chinese model' is not only praiseworthy in the eyes of Bolashak traders, but is also seen to represent a stark contrast to the arbitrariness and lack of accountability on the part of the state perceived as characterising traders' everyday experience at the bazaar.

This admiration for rapidly increasing prosperity in China along what is perceived as a linear development path resulting from effective state intervention, rather than challenged by ubiquitous corruption (as in Kazakhstan's case), often overlaps with a favourable assessment of the entrepreneurial qualities of Chinese business partners. A high degree of moral accountability, flexibility and adaptability to be encountered in the interaction with Chinese partners are frequently mentioned by the interviewed traders as being conducive to societal improvement and personal entrepreneurial success alike (see also Alff, 2014a). These positively reflected features of what is often coined as Chinese flexible capitalism (Ong, 1999), are enacted most thoroughly along trustful and enduring interpersonal connections. These have been set between business partners through close interaction often over the course of years. A female wholesale trader purchasing women's apparel in bulk from a Beijing-based textile manufacturer for the last five years referred to the Chinese notion of *guanxi* (sets of mutually contributive inter-personal connections, networks). When showing me video clips she recently shot during her latest business dinner negotiating a business deal with her partners in an upmarket Beijing restaurant, she emphasises the ultimate role of mutual trust, responsibility and pragmatism (e.g. in supply schemes) in making wholesale trade between China and Kazakhstan work:

Even though I prefer to work at my own expense, my partners are always ready to send me goods on commission (pod real in Russian). Once I went out of stock due to enduring closure of the border, they operatively forwarded supplies directly by plane to me. [...] In case I need more supplies of one or another fast-selling model, they always find a way to get them to me in no time and without any extra charge. I really feel obliged to source from them thanks to their constant social responsibility towards me and my business.⁷

Guanxi in this sense of reciprocal connectedness could be related to the Russian expression *blat*, meaning a set of interpersonal relations being built for the sake of generating social capital and forging trust rather than on the sole benefit of personal financial gain, as in the case of bribery (*vzyatka* and *xinghui* respectively). Yet, the relevance of *blat* in Kazakhstan's socio-economic life, contributing to more social equity in times of dearth during Soviet times e.g. by giving access to

⁵ The forthcoming edited volume by Zhang & Saxer (2014) exemplifies these views in a selection of cases from different sections of China's borderlands.

⁶ Interview, 14 April 2012, Almaty.

⁷ Interview, 17 April 2012, Almaty.

otherwise unavailable goods, is often believed (in particular by interviewed traders) to have faded in favour of a socio-economically and morally rather destructive monetarisation of business relations, in corruption and bribery, especially with state officials since the end of the Soviet Union (Ledeneva, 1998). Yet, *guanxi*, as Mayfair Yang (2002) points out, has continued to shape business interactions and relations since China's opening-up and reform era. It is important to note that Yang detects an increasing role of *guanxi* in strategies "to locate and maintain supply sources for new commercial ventures" (Yang, 2002: 463) and, thus, in extending business networks, without necessarily contributing to schemes of corruption. By doing so, Yang denies *guanxi* to be merely an essence of backward economic behaviour. Rather she deems it to be a constituting and frequently re-negotiated aspect of modern, globally competitive Chinese entrepreneurial culture that is able to cope with a lack of state control (Yang, 2002: 468). This opinion, interestingly, is also reflected in the argumentation of some of my Bolashak-based interlocutors, who juxtapose durable, trust-based business relations across the border with the absence of functioning legal regulation in their own domains.

The overall positive representation of the outcomes of rapid development in China, both on the large-scale symbolic and the interpersonal level of business networks, consequently, has not only contributed to the perspectives of Bolashak Bazaar's wholesale traders towards values associated with modernity in China. More importantly, the connectedness with modern Chinese business culture through interpersonal connections and transaction in sophisticated trade operations has impacted upon the meaning they articulate regarding their own social practice and their self-identification. Aiming at social ascent or improvement of societal and moral prestige, some of my interviewees at Bolashak Bazaar reflect the validation of skills like flexibility, creativity and innovativeness as a way to imbue their work with modern appeal. One of my interlocutors describes this in the following way:

I appreciate being my own boss. [...] Leaving to Guangzhou twice, thrice a year, browsing giant wholesale shopping centres for supply that meets the changing taste of our customers and, therefore, being marketable back home with profit. Connecting to the right people for making deals and organising timely and cost-effective transport to Kazakhstan. All these are demanding and outright creative tasks, to a much stronger degree than outsiders would expect from mere 'buy and sell'. The ability to master these tasks and stay competitive is what we have partly taught ourselves and partly learned from the Chinese.⁸

It appears from this quote that becoming and economically striving as a wholesale trader not only means emancipating oneself from widespread stereotypes associated with traders at bazaars like Bolashak (characterising them as backward, unsophisticated and unproductive), but demands an extensive set of skills. A profound, long-term and translocal exchange of knowledge, enactment of skills and both conscious and unconscious learning have been critical for the socio-economic success of Bolashak Bazaar's merchants in 'China trade'. While learning has partly been deemed a self-induced process fostered by everyday experience and constant flexible navigation of opportunities and constraints, it has also considerably gained from mutual exchange with Chinese partners. As one wholesale merchant explicitly argues:

⁸ Interview, 11 October 2012, Almaty.

*We may have learned how to make business from close cooperation with the Chinese, but our business partners in Guangzhou have also benefited from our expertise in the Kazakh culture of consumption, giving them a foothold in supplying the Kazakh market with their produce.*⁹

While the latter statement is predominantly intended by my interlocutor to prove the mutuality or reciprocity of exchange (of knowledge, skills and values) alongside the rather unilinear flow of manufactured goods in wholesale trade between Guangzhou and Almaty, it also implies why bazaar traders do often suffer anti-Chinese resentment in the public. Suspected gatekeepers for the relentless inflow of cheaply manufactured, low-quality and predominantly contraband goods ‘Made in China’, wholesale traders at bazaars are commonly accused of being traitors for deliberately undermining domestic socio-economic development and progress rather than for facilitating it.

4. Aligning with state visions of modernity in a Dungan village

Socio-cultural and economic connectedness to China evokes different representations in the case of the Dungans¹⁰, a group of about 56,000 Chinese-speaking Muslims predominantly living in a cluster of compact settlements in Zhambyl oblast’ of Southern Kazakhstan (Agenstvo po statistike RK, 2012). The village of Shortobe, about 200 kilometres away from Almaty, although connected to Barakholka in multiple ways, served as the site for three weeks of field research (2012-14) in this case study (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Localisation of the second case study area in the Chu river valley demarcating the state border of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Shortobe is the centre of a predominantly Dungan-populated cluster of villages.

⁹ Interview, 17 April 2012, Almaty.

¹⁰ See the extensive work of Gladney (1991, 1996, 2004) for a more thorough ethnographic study of the Hui in China.

Unlike most Kazakh-populated villages in the area, Shortobe apparently expands and thrives, with intensive high-yield agriculture as well as cross-border trade and transport being the community's main sources of income.

The 20,000 inhabitants of Shortobe are almost exclusively descendants of Dungan refugees hailing from the Chinese province of Shaanxi. Having escaped annihilation in the Qing Empire during the late 1870s and 1880s (Sushanlo, 1967), their ancestors were settled by Tsarist authorities a few kilometres north of the garrison of Tokmak, now a border town to Kyrgyzstan. Along the fertile valley of the Chu River, they cultivated former grassland and established irrigated farms making use of their advanced agricultural skills and seeds they brought from Shaanxi. On the basis of Dungan-dominated settlements, collective agricultural production units were formed in the early Soviet period. Some of them, like the collective farm 'Komintern' in Shortobe, were renowned for their high productivity in growing corn, potatoes and garden vegetables throughout the Soviet period. This has contributed to the widespread reputation of Dungans across Central Asia as being sophisticated and particularly hard-working agriculturalists (Hong, 2005: 138).

The dismantling of the Soviet Union and subsequent independence of the republics of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in 1991 brought about considerable change to Shortobe's Dungan population. On the one hand, collective farming and the distribution of their products, the main source of employment and subsistence for the majority of the population, showed transient signs of disintegration in the early 1990s. On the other hand, Shortobe's Dungans were among the first rural dwellers in Kazakhstan to benefit from the re-opening of the Sino-Soviet border for private trade and exchange. Drawing on their ethno-linguistic affiliation with Hui and Han-Chinese, Dungan community leaders from Shortobe started to develop close interpersonal relations with partners across mainland China, and even as far as Malaysia, starting from the late 1980s (Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2012: 123). A sense of solidarity and loyalty between Dungan and Chinese business partners, based on ethnic and linguistic affiliation, contributed to an even stronger degree than with competing Kazakh, Kyrgyz and especially Uyghur traders to the establishment of enduring, trustful and often ethnically exclusive commercial and political alliances between them (Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2012). One of my interlocutors in Shortobe described the attitude towards and the benefit of the Dungan's role in cross-border interaction as follows:

*China with accelerated velocity draws closer to the US. And this will be experienced even stronger in places close to China's borders. Dungans, who know the local mentality and realities, speak both Russian and Kazakh, share commonalities in culture and language with the Chinese, should use the historical chances offered by China's rapid development any way they can.*¹¹

According to this statement, in what is deemed by him as China's linear path towards development, Dungans are expected to occupy a socio-culturally intermediate position to make maximum gain of their geographical and socio-ethnic closeness to China (see also Gladney, 1996: 454-8). In fact, Shortobe's former history teacher and head of an agricultural cooperative farm, Khusey Daurov, already in the mid-1990s facilitated the import of agricultural innovations from China like greenhouse and mushroom-growing technology to generate agricultural income even in the late autumn and early spring months. These technologies have since spread to other parts of Southern

¹¹ Interview, 5 October 2012, Shortobe.

Kazakhstan. As rapid housing construction on the fringes triggered the constant expansion of Dungan villages (and steeply rising local real estate prices), small-scale brick and paint manufactories were built in Shortobe and the neighbouring village on Daurov's initiative and on Chinese funds to satisfy the local demand. As a new means to develop Dungan villages beyond agriculture, Daurov in an interview proposed a project of "community-based tourism like in many parts of China nowadays" to attract larger numbers of Chinese visitors, who seek to experience (a highly folklorised version of) "traditional Hui culture" that had vanished there since the Cultural Revolution¹² (see also Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2012: 123). According to Daurov's visions, homestays, participation in "traditional Dungan wedding parties" and the construction of ethnographic villages with "ancient Dungan-style houses and Kazakh yurts" are presented as a way to forge Chinese-Dungan dialogue and interaction.¹³

Beyond these bold local projects reflecting a certain understanding of modernisation, a considerable proportion of Shortobe's Dungan community benefited immensely from interpersonal links to Xi'an, Shanghai and Guangzhou to establish trade and transport businesses. In up to 80 percent of Shortobe's households one or more members are reported to be self-employed in the urban trade sector, especially in wholesale trade based at Almaty's Barakholka. Furthermore, over the last years several hundred Dungan students, (including 80 in 2012 alone), have left to attend long-term Chinese language courses or to gain higher education in universities across China on state funds, with most of those returning to Kazakhstan to become employed in representations of Chinese companies.

Social change in Shortobe and other Dungan settlements over the past two decades appears to take place in close entanglement with modes, dynamics and ideas of state-led modernisation in China. In particular this is true when it comes to the attention given in Shortobe to agricultural innovation and the simultaneous facilitation of more urbanised economic activities, contributing to what are conceived as aspects of modern society like international trade, tourism and manufacture (Kreutzmann, 2012) as well as higher education. This implication of development ideas finds its vivid expression in narratives depicting the positioning of my Dungan interlocutors vis-à-vis particular elements of China's modernisation ideology. A member of the Shortobe's local branch of Kazakhstan's Association of Dungans said, for example:

In China, the advancement of people and society is given highest priority. The Chinese government supports unity, equity and dialogue in society though various measures, because this is seen as promising societal improvement and well-being. As Dungans in Kazakhstan's society, we also retain a high degree of respect for our compatriots.¹⁴

The emphasis placed on dialogue, harmony and equity in society as a precondition for creating desired change, and as imperative upon each individual, but at the same time as a major goal associated with achieving change, comes close to the notion of *hexie shehui* (social harmony) so prominent in the Chinese modernisation discourse. Yet, this is not the only aspect of 'Chinese modernity' Dungans in Shortobe tie in during conversations. Being able to flexibly react to changing socio-economic conditions, as for example to adapt their supplies to the demand for products or

¹² Interview, 9 October 2012, Almaty.

¹³ Interview, 9 October 2012, Almaty.

¹⁴ Interview, 5 October 2012, Shortobe.

services or to dynamically adjust crossborder trade and transport schemes to increase their effectiveness, are considered essential qualities being strategically enacted in the course of China's rise in its borderlands. Thus, like in the case of wholesale traders on Bolashak Bazaar, among the Dungan interlocutors a sense of positively connoted symbolic connectedness between fundamental ideas and mobilising forces of China's development, on the one hand, and social change at the local level in Shortobe, on the other, can hardly be denied.

Yet, there is a major difference between the two cases arising from the different positioning of actors. The exclusiveness of Dungan-Chinese business connections, challenging their competitors in Kazakhstan, and the deep suspicion or alienation brought forward in public upon encounter of such a close China-Kazakhstan exchange as in the case of Bolashak's wholesalers, is mitigated by Dungans in a way through their frequently articulated belonging to Kazakhstani society. Even more importantly, their sympathetic reception of and pragmatic alignment with the state-endorsed political discourse of modernisation in Kazakhstan allows them to avoid being marginalised as traitors. Described as "relational alterity" by Gladney (1996: 454), the Dungans' strategic practice of positioning themselves flexibly as intermediaries between China and Kazakhstan and as supporters (and profiteers) of Kazakhstan's modernisation policies highlights the way they make sense of their group's existence. Thus, for example, during my stay in Shortobe, the principal of a local school in neighbouring Masanchi village told me, interestingly, after having extensively praised the allocation of funds by Hui businessmen from China for the maintenance of this public school during recent years:

Dungans are a bridge, a connecting link between China and Kazakhstan. Our culture is Eastern, close to the Chinese one, but we are living in multi-ethnic Kazakhstan, where the policy of one nation – the united Kazakhstani nation – was, I think, rightly introduced [by president Nazarbaev]. [...] Now they are no longer speaking of peoples of Kazakhstan, but of the Kazakhstani people, of which Dungans are fond to be a part.¹⁵

When it comes to socio-economic development beyond the local level, key representatives of Shortobe's Dungan community indeed have managed to position themselves as acting at the same time in both Kazakhstan's and China's state interest thereby decreasing political animosities and objections possibly arising from the Dungans' economic and socio-cultural links to China. Especially Khusey Daurov does not hesitate to emphasise how he, on several occasions since the start of the new millennium, has been serving as an advisor to president Nazarbaev and has accompanied him and other high-ranking national and regional-level politicians on their respective visits to China (Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2009, 2012). Daurov and other Dungan business people were key figures in negotiating bilateral business deals with Chinese authorities in support of Kazakhstan's infrastructural development e.g. for a delivery of Chinese-made train cars to Kazakhstan's state railway company and the construction of a hydroelectric power station on the Charyn river in Almaty oblast' (Laruelle & Peyrouse 2009: 109), as well as in implementing a first ever inter-regional partnership between Shaanxi province in China and Zhambyl oblast' in Kazakhstan. Daurov explicitly refers to the strong state discourse in Kazakhstan and China addressing ambitions to rebuild a modern 'Silk Road' between Western China and Western Europe, when referring to the contemporary and future opportunities Dungans should utilise as an impulse for their community's own socio-economic advancement. Indeed, several of my interlocutors in Shortobe traced their

¹⁵ Interview, 6 October 2012, Masanchi.

historic descent as Chinese Muslims now living in Kazakhstan to century-long flows of people and values on the 'Silk Road', thereby aiming to connect their past to largely state-endorsed ideas and visions of ongoing social change.

5. Articulation and positioning in discourses of social change – some concluding remarks

In this analysis, I have aimed to elaborate on the examples of Bolashak's wholesale traders and Shortobe's Dungans how ideas and concepts inherent in China's modernisation approach have trickled into local everyday representations of development in the China-Kazakhstan borderlands. The exchange and adaptation of values may not come as a surprise, given the close encounters and dynamic interaction of wholesale traders at Barakholka and Dungan businessmen with Chinese partners over as much as two decades. Yet, I want to argue that this insight also illuminates the patterns of positioning and the transformative agency, in which actors in China-Kazakhstan trade and exchange become actively involved (or not), on the one hand, and of them becoming situated in (or excluded from) dominant discourses of social change, on the other.

It makes sense here to return with some reflections to Stuart Hall's initially outlined two-fold conceptualisation of articulation. Hall, firstly, claims articulation to be a persistent process in which people/groups actively render their socio-spatial positioning. This meaning of articulation becomes evident e.g. in claims of sophisticated and flexible entrepreneurial behaviour acquired through mutual transfer of skills and knowledge that are brought forward by Bolashak Bazaar's wholesale traders to enhance their social status. It is also implied by the Dungans' self-representation or strategic positioning as an intermediary group between Kazakhstan and China. Yet, secondly, articulation in Hall's understanding also refers to the contextual production of connectedness between certain ideological elements and political subjects, highlighting the non-essential, constructed character of links between the two that wax and wane in time-space. These dynamics of connection and isolation of ideological elements may lead to the (re-) production or the disruption of one or another discourse. Consequently, the second meaning of articulation as proposed by Hall points us to the assumption that ideas of social change are not autonomous, spatially or semantically fixed concepts, but that they derive their meaning from what he calls a "position in a formation. [...] Since those articulations are not inevitable, not necessary, they can potentially be transformed" (Hall, 1996: 142). While Hall exemplifies this on religion/religious formations, it appears that also ideas of development are constantly (re-) articulated and (re-) connected in various ways, yet, the "magnetic lines of tendency" (ibid.) that have sedimented historically, play a certain role in this process of discursive negotiation of social change down to the local level.

Thus, the issue of connectedness or alignment of local ideas of social change with hegemonic or historically influential development ideologies and practices indeed matter to a considerable degree for whether the positioning of actors is reproduced and supported or whether it remains rather vulnerable and possibly, though not necessarily, diminishes over time. What is at stake here are the 'places of recognition' (Hall, 1995: 8) produced by power asymmetries in social relations, which are pre-configured, though not pre-given, and which challenge the scope for the actors' socio-spatial positioning. It is given to their reflexivity, their capability of conscious and often situational weighing

the impact of dominant social forces, to compose newly emerging and historically established ideological elements in a way that would allow them to occupy an aspired position.

In the case of Shortobe's Dungans for example, ideas of symbolic state-endorsed modernisation, hailing from Soviet and reform-era Chinese thought, and visions and aspirations of social change align and favourably intersect, producing widespread public acknowledgement of social improvement that has materialised throughout their rural, albeit rapidly urbanising community. The transformative agency of Shortobe's Dungans in social relations between Kazakhstan and China emerges from the connection made between their historical descent and the (re-) assembling of recently emerging development ideas with historically established ones, in the interest of the two states' elites. Despite (or perhaps thanks to) their socio-spatially peripheral position, Shortobe's Dungans have managed to situate themselves as intermediaries between Kazakhstan and China, without eliciting societal objections or suspicion towards their role in translocal socio-economic business networks and in increasing China's socio-economic cloud beyond the PRC's borders.

The re-assembling of similar development ideas and values in the case of Bolashak's wholesale traders had so far rather different outcomes. The praising of China's modernisation vis-à-vis state-led development in Kazakhstan and the adaptation of entrepreneurial and moral values by my interlocutors, perceived by them as having partly originated in the rise of Chinese capitalism, in connection with the negative connotation persistently associated in public with bazaar-based trade, largely hamper efforts to raise their social prestige. Acquired skills like creativity and flexibility, as well as the facilitation of trustful and enduring translocal business networks to China, figure high in their self-representation as sophisticated entrepreneurs. Yet, this positioning of Bolashak's wholesale traders currently fails to engage and to become fruitfully arranged with historically entrenched images of state-dominated developmentalism and modernisation in Kazakhstan. Articulation, therefore, as Hall (1996: 141) has noted, "is the form of the connection that *can* make a unity of two different (ideological) elements", though not necessarily in every case and at every time. Hence, a discursive approach, brought forward by Bolashak's wholesale traders, claiming emerging productivity and innovativeness of bazaar trade so far remains poorly substantiated, isolated and broadly ignored in public and political circles, although this scenario may be overcome in the long run (Alff, 2014a).

Departing from both of these cases, this paper has offered a glimpse into the contemporary pragmatic, yet rather scattered and spotty, discursive revaluation of ideas and aspects of China's modernisation beyond the PRC's borders. Despite the predominantly suspicious and largely sinophobic environment in the Kazakhstani society, a bottom-up re-imagination of China's rise has taken hold among various groups, in diverse contexts and with different outcomes. It becomes clear that the shift of development ideas always has both a horizontal and a vertical dimension. Ideas of development, hailing from spatially distinct places and socio-culturally different contexts and being promoted from above and embraced from below act as a mobilising force or as means of empowerment for some groups, though, not for all in the same way, depending on these groups' contextual articulation and positioning.

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Information on the competence network Crossroads Asia

The competence network Crossroads Asia derives its name from the geographical area extending from eastern Iran to western China and from the Aral Sea to northern India. The scholars collaborating in the competence network pursue a novel, 'post-area studies' approach, making thematic figurations and mobility the overarching perspectives of their research in Crossroads Asia. The concept of figuration implies that changes, minor or major, within one element of a constellation always affect the constellation as a whole; the network will test the value of this concept for understanding the complex structures framed by the cultural, political and socio-economic contexts in Crossroads Asia. Mobility is the other key concept for studying Crossroads Asia, which has always been a space of entangled interaction and communication, with human beings, ideas and commodities on the move across and beyond cultural, social and political borders. Figurations and mobility thus form the analytical frame of all three main thematic foci of our research: conflict, migration, and development.

- Five sub-projects in the working group "Conflict" will focus upon specific localized conflict-figurations and their relation to structural changes, from the interplay of global politics, the erosion of statehood, and globalization effects from above and below, to local struggles for autonomy, urban-rural dynamics and phenomena of diaspora. To gain a deeper understanding of the rationales and dynamics of conflict in Crossroads Asia, the sub-projects aim to analyze the logics of the genesis and transformation of conflictual figurations, and to investigate autochthonous conceptions of, and modes of dealing with conflicts. Particular attention will be given to the interdependence of conflict(s) and mobility.
- Six sub-projects in the working group "Migration" aim to map out trans-local figurations (networks and flows) within Crossroads Asia as well as figurations extending into both neighboring and distant areas (Arabian Peninsula, Russia, Europe, Australia, America). The main research question addresses how basic organizational and functional networks are structured, and how these structures affect what is on the move (people, commodities, ideas etc.). Conceptualizing empirical methods for mapping mobility and complex connectivities in trans-local spaces is a genuine desideratum. The aim of the working group is to refine the method of qualitative network analysis, which includes flows as well as their structures of operation, and to map mobility and explain mobility patterns.
- In the "Development"-working group four sub-projects are focusing on the effects of spatial movements (flows) and interwoven networks at the micro level with regard to processes of long-term social change, and with a special focus on locally perceived livelihood opportunities and their potential for implementation. The four sub-projects focus on two fundamental aspects: first, on structural changes in processes of transformation of patterns of allocation and distribution of resources, which are contested both at the household level and between individual and government agents; secondly, on forms of social mobility, which may create new opportunities, but may also cause the persistence of social inequality.

The competence network understands itself as a mediator between the academic study of Crossroads Asia and efforts to meet the high demand for information on this area in politics and the public. Findings of the project will feed back into academic teaching, research outside the limits of the competence network, and public relations efforts. Further information on Crossroads Asia is available at www.crossroads-asia.de.

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