"They are like Georgians but bigger": The Perceptions of Chinese Businesspeople in Georgia

by Susanne Fehlings (Frobenius Institute for Research in Cultural Anthropology at Goethe University Frankfurt am Main)

Abstract

This article looks at Georgians' perception of Chinese businesspeople in Tbilisi. Although Chinese communities can be found almost everywhere across the globe – including in the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, Western Europe, Russia, Central Asia, the Americas, South and East Asia, etc. – the Chinese presence in the Caucasus is a relatively new phenomenon. My analysis of case studies in Georgia, where the Urumqui-based Hualing Group is perhaps most powerful Chinese investor, *challenges* the assumption that differences between groups predominately create conflict and mistrust. It also challenges the hypothesis that trade and business networks is built on cooperation of ethnic and religious ties and communities. Instead, it gives examples of how common economic interests and shared social practices create a mutual understanding, and how this understanding is explained and experienced by Georgians.

Keywords: interethnic exchange, trust, mistrust, entrepreneurship, informality, Belt Road Initiative (BRI), Caucasus, Georgia, Global China

Introduction

Since the early 1990s, Chinese investors and traders have begun to migrate or sporadically come to the Caucasus for business. The first Chinese that appeared in the region were representatives of the People's Republic's state-owned companies; they were thus delegates of national state interests. Since the early 2000s, however, Chinese private traders and investors became more visible— especially in Georgia. Here, the largest Chinese foreign investor is currently the Urumqui-based Hualing Group, which, since 2007, has invested more than 500 million USD in different economic branches in the country. The company processes wood, has established a free industrial zone in Kutaisi, has purchased controlling shares in Georgia's Basis Bank in 2012 and has built the Youth Olympic Village and a housing area called Hualing City at the edge of the capital. In this article will focus on the perception of Chinese businesspeople in the Caucasus with an emphasis on the recognition of Hualing Group.

This article is based on materials collected in Tbilisi between 2016 and 2020. While I was conducting the anthropological research project "Informal Markets and Trade in Central Asia and the Caucasus," funded by the Volkswagen Foundation, I became interested in Hualing's so-called *Hualing Sea Plaza*, which is a shopping centre flanked by a marketplace. According to Hualing's website, these commercial facilities, which cover a territory of 150,000 square meters, will "become the largest wholesale and retail trading centre of Georgia and [the] whole Caucasus region and in future […] will […] [have] an important role [as a] wholesale, retail and distribution centre […] [in the] Euro-Asian region".[1]

[1] Hualing "Tbilisi Sea Plaza": **http://hualing.ge/language/en/tbilisi-sea-plaza/**.

For the last several years, my primary research interest has been the Georgian bazaar trade and the trade links between Georgian (and other post-Soviet) bazaar traders and China. As I observed the exchange and relationships between Georgian and Chinese traders in the so-called Russian Market in Beijing, the presence of Chinese traders and investors in the local bazaar scene in the Caucasus, though not my main research topic, caught my attention. Starting from the marketplace (Hualing Sea Plaza), I tried to understand the Chinese's activities and role in the Georgian trading sector. My insights, however, first of all reflect my Georgian interlocutors' perspective, who described their experiences with Chinese business partners and employers, as well as their views and interpretations of the actions and behaviours they observed.

All interlocutors quoted in this text worked for the Hualing Group. Although they were not traders, they all worked in the trading sector: as salespeople, as organizers of customs clearance or as managers in the Sea Plaza. Unlike other foreign investors, the Hualing Group, because of reasons explained below, is interested in the local bazaar sphere; it tries to cooperate with local bazaar traders and managers and pursues its own ambitions in this economic branch. Thus, although there are huge differences between traders classified as micro-entrepreneurs such as those I studied in local markets in the Caucasus and in Beijing and the local employees of Hualing Group and Hualing's Chinese investors, these different categories of people are linked through their involvement in the same economic branch. Examining my data, I ask which factors (ethnic, religious, social and cultural) shape the interactions of Georgian and Chinese individuals in this context.

Aiming at contributing to the broader discussion of this special issue, I also identify the role of religion in the described encounters. The fact that the Hualing Group is led by Muslim Uyghurs, is a curious one, which, I believe, should not be overinterpreted, but should be mentioned. Muslim Chinese are associated with trade practices and Silk Road imaginaries. In ethnographic studies, they extend over large networks and often take on the role of mediators in intercultural exchange. At the same time, Uyghur's Muslim identity opposes China's state atheism, and ideology and has made them a target of surveillance and suppression (Erie 2016). Their appearance in the Caucasus is thus an interesting case. Here, they find themselves in an environment in which the Georgian Orthodox Church is one of the most powerful and most trusted institutions (Gurchiani 2017). In 2013, the Caucasus Barometer household survey revealed that 93% of the general public and 95% in the eighteen to thirty-five year age group regarded religion as important in their daily lives, and studies on religiosity in Georgia point to the strong links between the church and the state and between religion and national identity. Thus, this case study gives insights into a so far understudied interreligious encounter, which occurs in a relatively secular business sphere that is shaped by global capitalism, and a Chinese-led globalization, which has recently been implemented through the so-called Belt Road or New Silk Road Initiative.

The article gives an overview of the Chinese presence in the Caucasus. It discusses prejudices of the Chinese people in post-Soviet Eurasia and contrasts these prejudices with the descriptions of my Georgian interlocutors, who emphasize their good relationships with the Chinese Hualing Group. Within the described relationships, practices of hospitality, feasting, and gifting occupy an important place. Such practices are related to social, cultural and religious values, but practiced and applied in a separate secular sphere. Although my materials are far from being comprehensive and should be taken as a starting point for further research, I come to the preliminary conclusion that in this context shared social and economic practice serves to overcome potential conflicts.

Chinese in post-Soviet Eurasia and the Caucasus

In 2005, many years before my first trip to the Caucasus, I travelled with a friend from Mos-

cow to Murmansk. It was a long journey, and through the train's compartment window, we saw birch tree after birch tree for hours. When I complained about this panorama, I got a laconic response: "In ten years, additionally, under each birch tree, there will sit a Chinese". At the time I did not pay much attention to these words. Looking back, however, I think that this sentence expressed an observation – or an anxiety – which emerges everywhere, in which China or Chinese people show agency and emerge as a social, economic and political power. As Zhang and Saxer described: "'Rising China' – the nation, the notion, and the buzzword – sparks dreams and triggers fears" (2017: 11).

These dreams and fears have a particular history in Eurasia[2]. Russian, Central Asian, Siberian and Chinese populations lived side by side for centuries and were involved in exchange and conflict. Alternately, coexistence led to cooperation, isolation or exclusion. In recent history, after a period of ideological consensus, the borders between the Soviet Union and Communist China were closed for about thirty years. Glasnost, perestroika, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union – as well as the reform era in China – then, resulted in a relaxing of these border regimes since the late 1980s (Humphrey 2018). In the 1990s it was relatively easy to get a visa to travel in both directions. Chinese as well as post-Soviet people including the first generation of my target group of Georgian traders, took it as a chance to forge shuttle-trade, which turned into a flourishing business (Fehlings 2017, Holzlehner 2014). Generally, goods moved in one direction: from China to bazaars in former Soviet territories (Humphrey 2018: 18, compare Nyíri 2007: 77-78). Thus, one could observe the proliferation of open-air markets, which were flooded with Chinese merchandize across Siberia, Central Asia, in Moscow, Odessa and the Caucasus (Fehlings & Karrar 2016). Simultaneously, Chinese labour force migrated to Russia. Chinese became visible as an ethnic minority and their presence started to trigger worries about an invasion of the so-called "yellow peril." The Russian government reacted to this thread with restrictions on legal migration (Namsaraeva 2018), but xenophobia remained an issue in Russia, as I witnessed first-hand when I studied in Moscow.

Unlike other parts of the world (Africa, America, Western Europe) – and unlike Russia – there is no long history of Chinese migration in the Caucasus. Liu Junzhou, who came to Georgia in 1890 and introduced and cultivated the first tea plants in the region of Adjara, is one of few exceptions. He and his family left the Caucasus in 1924, when the Soviets started to put pressure on him (Zhou 2012).[3] It was only after the collapse of the Soviet Union that Chinese people really started to discover Georgia. But unlike other post-Soviet countries, which became attractive for Chi-

[2] The concept of "Eurasia" as defined by Chris Hann has triggered a heated debate. This debate is about whether or not the Eurasian landmass forms a unity and/or is shaped by "civilizational interconnectedness" (Hann 2016). Alessantro Testa, in response to Hann, argues that "apart from features and common developments – important as they may be – dating back to prehistoric or ancient times, the Silk Road, the welfare state and the age of real socialism, there is little keeping Hann's Eurasia united" (Testa 2017: 65). This might be true. But for bazaar, shuttle trade and transregional exchange, the mentioned periods are exactly the phases, which are perceived to have been most important and formative for the expanse of networks, the development of trade routes, for the adaption of business practices, and for ideas (and imaginations) of connectivity. Because of their Soviet background, Caucasian traders are able to navigate post-Soviet shuttle trade. It is the breakdown of the Soviet Union that unites the trader community across Eurasia. At the same time, traders, businesspeople and state representatives often allude to the ancient past and Silk Road imaginaries to build bridges across national and ethnic borders, to justify foreign policies and to highlight their historical importance within the global order (Karrar 2018). This is why I believe that in this specific context of economic interaction – at least the contexts in which my interlocutors perceive as their social, cultural and economic environment – the "Eurasia" framework, as suggested by Hann, makes perfect sense.

[3] His family, who is quite famous in Georgia, maintained connections with the country (Zhou 2012) and until today symbolises the positive side of cultural exchange between Asia, Russia and the Caucasus.

nese migrants in the late 1980s and early 1990s[4] (Nyíri 2011), Georgia did not number among the favoured destinations of Chinese migration. According to Zhou: "it is likely that without any initial network of Chinese, the country and its market were less accessible. It is also possible that Georgia was still too obscure and unknown, even for enterprising Chinese. Georgia was not yet a destination in itself, but it was briefly used as a stepping stone for Chinese migrants seeking entry into Europe proper" (Zhou 2020: 4).

However, meanwhile, different groups of Chinese migrants have established themselves or have found temporarily work in Georgia. These groups are: a) representatives and employees of Chinese state owned companies (usually construction companies), which operate under the New Silk Road Initiative; b) Chinese micro-entrepreneurs, most of whom come from the Zhejiang and Fujian provinces in south-eastern China. Those usually work as traders in a marketplace, which was founded in 2006 in proximity to "Lilo Bazoba"[5]; and, c) private investors and companies, one of which is Hualing Group (Fehlings 2019b, Zhou 2012). I will focus on the latter, on Hualing Group, which was founded by Mi Enhua, a businessman from Xinjiang.

As mentioned above, I became interested in Hualing Group because of its shopping mall and marketplace. Both are part of a huge building complex including housing sections, a hospital, a concert hall, a hotel, infrastructures and a customs terminal. In spring 2016, a few of my Georgian friends, colleagues and interlocutors had heard about Hualing City despite the fact that, at that time, it had already developed into a satellite city that had been added to the periphery of Tbilisi's urban landscape. This changed in autumn. All of a sudden the so-called New Silk Road Initiative, which was supported by the Georgian government, was widely discussed in the media and in public. The headlines also drew new attention to Hualing Group, which was now perceived as an agent of Chinese BRI policies and investment.

The New Silk Road, also called OBOR (One Belt, One Road) or BRI (Belt Road Initiative), has created a stir since it was first announced by Xi Jinping in his famous speech at the Nazarbayev University in Astana in May 2014.[6] The BRI consists of a Chinese-led infrastructural and economic program, which can be seen as an attempt to implement the so-called "Chinese dream". Usually, it is presented in maps, which highlight "economic corridors" that are symbolised as arrows spanning across the globe. The Caucasus, in these maps, is located on the so-called "China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor". From a historical perspective, this area has always been a transit zone that connected Europe and Asia (Kaczmarski 2016, Larsen 2017).

In Georgia, now, the BRI is first of all associated with infrastructural projects and the private activities of the Hualing Group. It is difficult to estimate Hualing's involvement with state affairs (in China and in Georgia). Obviously, it has a privileged position. As mentioned, Hualing Group is based in Urumqui, the capital of the Uyghur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang. The company's elite are Muslims. It's head, Mi Enhua, is a Hui, who came from Shandong province to Xinjiang as a child (Zhang & Alon 2009). According to the 2010 census, about twenty-three million Muslims have lived in China, including about 10 Million Uyghurs, most of whom settled in Xinjiang, in China's Western borderlands in Central Asia.

[4] Between 1989 and 1992 "economic and political anxiety in China" and "the collapse of state socialist regimes in Eastern Europe created economic and political conditions for Chinese immigration: a brief window of liberal immigration policies […]" (Nyíri 2011: 145), which led to a mass movement towards Eastern Europe.

[5] For reference, Lilo Bazroba is the biggest bazaar and trading hub in the Caucasus and, since the 1990s, it is a distribution centre for Chinese goods that are brought to the Caucasus by local Caucasian traders (Fehlings 2017, 2020).

[6] A Summary of the speech has been published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China: **https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/xjpfwzysiesgjtfhshzzfh_665686/t1076334.shtml**; a video of the whole speech is available on YouTube: **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHkNzMjEv0Y**.

Uyghurs are a Turkish-speaking ethnicity with a Central Asian background. Their written language is Persian. The majority of Uyghurs belong to the Hanafi-Sunni branch of Islam, although Sufi brotherhoods (Naqshbandi) are widespread and maintain many local shrines. After riots in 2009 Uyghurs have collectively been accused of terrorism and been object to many restrictions (Erie 2016: 8-10). In recent years, news related to Uyghur matters report on harassment and concentration camps. Albeit (or because of) their difficult situation, many Chinese Muslims, within the last decades, have taken advantage from China's open border policy and the New Silk Road Initiative. One of the goals of the BRI was to economically and politically integrate Xinjiang into broader China, which is why it was target to financial support. At the same time, Hui and Uyghurs, which were both traditionally involved in trade activity, in recent years, established themselves and their networks in all major trading centres in China and abroad. They took over key positions as mediators, for example between the PRC and the Arab World, and are sometimes called the "agents of Chinese globalization" (Wang 2018, compare Alff 2014, Erie 2016, Steenberg 2018).

In Georgia, the Uyghur presence might still be surprising. Uyghur trading networks outside of China seem to be best developed in Muslim countries and/or countries with an ethnic Turkish and Turkish-speaking population. But because of Xinjiang's proximity to Central Asia, Uyghurs were quickly involved in post-Soviet shuttle trade in the 1980s and 1990s. The Hualing Group was built upon the breakdown of the Soviet Union. Mi Enhua became rich because of the shortage of supply and the demand for building materials that followed the Soviet collapse (Zhang & Alon 2009). His clients were traders from post-Soviet countries, which is why Georgia, with its Soviet past and post-Soviet bazaar culture, must have seemed to be familiar terrain. This is perhaps the reason why Hualing, of all others, took on the role of a Chinese economic pioneer here. Meanwhile, Hualing's representatives act as mediators between locals and Chinese interest groups, helping other Chinese companies to gain a foothold in the region.

Chinese markets in the local urban setting

In literature, encounters between the Chinese (in general) and people in Africa, Asia or Eurasia alike are frequently described as shaped by conflict (Lee 2014). A big issue, which has been debated in recent publications like in Humphrey's "Trust and Mistrust in the Economy of the China-Russia Borderlands" (2018) is the topic of trust – more precisely mistrust – in interethnic economic exchange (in general and with the Chinese). According to Humphrey, "If trust is the outcome of culturally specific performances, it will be doubly problematic in trans-border situations where there are radical differences in social strategies and ideas about what should be revealed and what hidden" (Humphrey 2018: 13). This is an often found argument.

The ethnographic literature on economic exchange between the Chinese and local populations in Eurasia can be divided into two interrelated subfields: 1) Works on so-called ethnic markets and 2) studies concerned with transnational trade. Chinese ethnic markets (markets organized and dominated by Chinese traders) first emerged in Russia, along the Chinese-Russian border in Siberia, in Central Asia and in big urban centres such as Irkutsk and Moscow. As reflected in the edited volume by Djatlov and Grigorichev (2015), Russian social scientists have been very active in investigating these fields. The research on transnational trade is concerned with trade networks, trading routes and so-called border markets. It includes, for example, studies on post-Soviet traders from Central Asia, the Caucasus or Russia working with the Chinese in China (Alff 2014, Fehlings 2020, Holzlehner 2014; Schröder 2020, Steenberg 2016), but also works on Hui Chinese merchants and businesspeople in the Arab world (Wang 2018), on Uyghurs trading between Central Asia and Xinjiang (Alff 2014, Steenberg 2016, 2018) and on Fujianese migrants in Hungary (Nyíri 2007, 2011). In both subfields (1 and 2) the topic of mistrust frequently emerges.

Many studies present data which support Humphrey's quote, and conclude that in exchange relationships, mistrust is often linked to perceptions of ethnic and religious difference, on the one hand, while trust is frequently associated with ideas of ethnic and religious homogeneity, on the other. In the context of international, long-distance and cross-border trade, exchange across ethnic and religious lines is almost unavoidable. As we can see in many ethnographic descriptions, traders with different backgrounds then find ways to overcome prejudices, to cooperate and to establish good relationships. During my research with Georgian traders, I witnessed positive interactions with Chinese partners in Beijing. However, Georgians were careful in trusting Chinese: "We know good people there. But there are also people you should not even talk to." Trust is thus limited and given on an individual basis. Trustworthy Chinese are rather perceived as exceptions "of their kind" because of their personal virtues. Accordingly, the Sino-Russian relationship, throughout history, has been characterized as complicated and shaped by mistrust -- unlike the relationship between Muslim Turk Uyghurs and Central Asians or Hui and Arabs, which is mostly described as rather trustful, a fact that is explained by interviewees with a mutual understanding deriving from a shared language, worldview, culture or religious background.

A result of mistrust, as described by Humphrey, is that Chinese (ethnic) markets in Russia have been "regarded by municipal authorities as 'crime-promoting spaces' and by the townsfolk as useful but alien closed enclaves" (2018: 23). The Chinese reaction is isolation: "Chinese traders lived and sheltered on site" and "were rarely venturing into the city for fear of xenophobic attacks" (Humphrey 2018: 23). According to Nyíri, because of the Chinese traders' "legal vulnerability to expulsion, they were inclined to take on economic roles or methods seen as deviant (such as usury). This led to an increased identification of the entire group with a particular business and the cementing of a view of it as an economic – as well as a moral and a sanitary – threat" (Nyíri 2011: 147).

In Georgia one can observe a similar phenomenon. The Chinese section of Lilo Bazroba that is, as mentioned earlier, a hub for Chinese migrants and micro-entrepreneurs from the Zhejiang and Fujian provinces, indeed, is an ethnic enclave with poor contact to the local Georgian population and the city. It is looked upon with suspect, it has a relatively bad reputation (regarding its sanitation), and I heard many prejudices about its Chinese traders, who are accused for "invading the country," "paying for marrying local woman to get a resident permit" and whose merchandize symbolizes bad, so-called "Chinese quality."

Hualing Sea Plaza, however, belongs to a totally different category. It represents China's modernity, superiority and economic potential. Its architecture and size is impressive, and the whole complex, to which the Plaza belongs, reflects "big money" and great ambition. Still, the Plaza and the market do not project a full success story. Since its opening it has been underutilized. Its corridors, as well as the parking lots in front of the market buildings, at least during my fieldwork, were empty, and the Georgian bazaar-traders working in the shopping mall complained about a lack of clients.

Hualing's market is, as mentioned, located on the outskirts of Tbilisi. It shares this position with many other marketplaces in Central Asia, Russia, Ukraine and the Caucasus – with the Central Bazaar in Astana (Baitas 2019), Dordoi in Bishkek (Karrar 2017, Spector 2017), Sed'moi in Odessa (Humphrey & Skvirskaja 2009, Marsden 2018), Barakholka in Yerevan (Melkumyan 2017) and Lilo Bazroba (and the Chinese market nearby) in Tbilisi. Many such markets and bazaars "are characteristically located in a 'grey zone'" (Humphrey & Skvirskaja 2009: 62). According to Humphrey and Skvirskaya "in relation to the city, which is also commercialized, such a market is like a bad boy alter ego" (2009: 62). All across Eurasia one can observe, "attempts to contain the market and its influences from seeping into urban life" (Marsden, 2016: 35), because it represents

"oriental chaos" threatening urban order and modernity.

Hualing's Sea Plaza and its market represent, again, a different case. They do not fit into the common image of a chaotic "oriental" bazaar. Still, it is even more marginalized. Unlike local bazaars, it is not just located on the periphery of the city, but on the periphery of local people's mental maps. This, I suggest, reflects the position of Chinese businesspeople in Georgia and their exclusion from social networks. The marginalization of Chinese businesspeople, as my interlocutors explained, is due to many reasons. One is that Chinese have only recently started to do business in the Caucasus. But social networks are important to succeed. Therefore, Chinese businesspeople have to build trusting relationships.

Perceptions

In Georgia, like in Russia and other parts of the former Soviet Union, one can find plenty of prejudices against Chinese migrants and China, which provide a breeding ground for suspicion. But xenophobia, although it flares up on some occasions, is not a major concern here. Zhou, who provides a small survey of Chinese migration in Georgia, states that "Chinese businessmen, company employees and even restaurant workers generally report no problems dealing with Georgians or living in Georgian society" (2012: 14). There are some complains about Chinese' low status within Georgian society, but there seems to be no significant evidence for systemic discrimination or targeted hate-crime (2012: 14).

Besides the above-mentioned prejudices, positive associations with China and Chinese exist, as well. In the 1980s and 1990s Chinese martial arts, films, medicine, mystics and philosophy became very popular among local youth. China was (and still is) admired for its old and rich civilization, which is compared to local pasts and societies. Armenians like to refer to Movses Khorenatsi, the author of the *History of Armenia*, who, in the fifth century BC wrote that the Mamikonyan family, which ruled big parts of Armenian territories between the fourth and eighth century AD[7], can be traced back to a Chinese ancestor: to Mamik, a family member of general Ma Chao, one of two brothers, who fled from China during the Three Kingdom's period (220-280 AD) (Zhou 2012). Chinese are thus not categorically rejected, not even from local myths and genealogy, and one can find Chinese literature or literature on Chinese on many Caucasian bookshelves.

Physical attacks on Chinese, as mentioned, unlike in Russia, are an exception – and so is open conflict. In 2016 one of the few conflicts I heard about occurred. It concerned land rights and access to woods. In the media one could read that Georgian employees of a Chinese company (probably the Hualing Group) had helped the local villagers to "transport firewood" from the company's premises and were therefore attacked with knifes, truncheons and batons by the company's Chinese workers[8]. According to my colleague Ketevan Khutsishvili, the incident caused a scandal and a boycott of Chinese goods but was forgotten a few weeks later.

As Chumburidze et al. (2016: 18) state, a limited share of the Georgian population is actually having personal contacts with foreigners. Opinions, as a rule, are formed on a rather theoretical level and based on second-hand information. This is also true for opinions on Chinese. My interlocutors, who worked with and for Hualing Group and who based their opinions on their own experiences, like most of the traders, who travelled to China, usually had a positive attitude towards their Chinese (Uyghur) partners and employers. In this Georgian context, this attitude was, as I understood, not confined to individual contacts but related to "the Chinese" in general. Local employees of Hualing Group knew that their employers came from Xinjiang province. They knew that they were Muslims.

[7] The legends about and the genealogy of the Mamikonyan family is accessible on Wikipedia.

[8] Vestnik Kavkaza "Police Detains Chinese Citizens for Attacking Georgian Workers", 06.11.2016: **http://vestnikkavkaza.net/news/Police-detains-Chinese-citizens-for-attacking-Georgian-workers.html**.

But they referred to them as "the Chinese." They did not differentiate between Han Chinese and Uyghurs. Instead, they distinguished different social or professional groups (traders, workers, businesspeople, and investors, for example). The first time I heard anyone talk about differences between the Han and Uyghurs and the Northern and Southern Chinese in Georgia was from a Chinese man, for whom these differences were essential.

Experiences

Georgian employees and partners of the Hualing Group emphasized that it was easy to work with "the Chinese." The Chinese, as they said, were diligent and reliable partners and very competent entrepreneurs. But positive assessments did not stop at this point. My interlocutors even claimed that Georgians and Chinese had much in common. Instead of mistrust, they described an atmosphere of generalized trust and talked about relationships, which can be classified as friendship or at least as friendship-like (see Fehlings 2020).

Lasha, one of my interviewees, who managed custom clearance for the Hualing Group told me that he felt very comfortable with his Chinese bosses. He trusted them because they proved to trust him. Lasha was employed by Hualing because of his father's hospitality towards Chinese employers, whom he had invited for dinner. Once Lasha attested to be an equally responsible employee as his father, his preliminary position was transformed into a permanent one. One of his Chinese bosses told him that he did not have to log-in his working hours, anymore, but could come and leave when needed and "work on trust." Lasha reacted to this offer with working even more – much more than he was obliged to according to his work contract. Talking to me, he praised his Chinese superiors for creating a good working atmosphere. Lasha did everything to help Hualing. He managed the clearance of goods the company imported to Georgia and took over the paperwork and other administrative tasks. After a while, he told his bosses that they should invite the customs officials for dinner, which was a step to establish a good relationship between Georgian officials and the Chinese investors. Lasha mediated between the two parties and thus fostered the integration of the Hualing Group into local networks. He hired a daughter of one of the custom officials and thus created new bonds. It worked. By sitting together at one table, trust began to form and Hualing faced less problems – at least with the local customs officials.

At the Sea Plaza, the Hualing Group organized an even bigger gala dinner for all the local contractors, the local Georgian bazaar traders included, who rented shops in the company's shopping mall and marketplace. Commensality is a proven method to make friends. In Georgia such feasts of banquettes are called *supra*. Lilo Bazroba's traders, to whom I talked about the gala dinner, as well as Lasha and his friend Irakli, were impressed by Hualing's representatives' readiness to participate in and to pay for such lavish feasting. The Georgian *supra* is a ritualized form of banqueting. It includes the consumption of a lot of wine and a strict sequence of toasts, which are spoken by the *tamada* (table master). Besides other things, the *supra* reflects social hierarchies, establishes and confirms good relationships and is associated with Georgian values linked to patriotism, masculinity, community and hospitality (Mühlfried 2007). Lasha and his friend Irakli both emphasized that their Chinese bosses did their best to adjust to this local custom. Sometimes, as Lasha told me with a certain pride, they even take over the part of the *tamada*. Even though they get drunk easily they do not refuse, as stressed out Lasha, the ritual consumption of alcohol, albeit the fact "that they are Muslims." Lasha and Iakli took this as a sign of respect for Georgians and Georgian culture. But Lasha was most impressed when his Chinese boss appeared at the funeral of one of his relatives. His superior had travelled a long way in order to attend. Quoting Lasha: "He came to this province, far away from Tbilisi, he gave me money and he said 'Lasha, write me

down in the book.' He even knew about this tradition!"

Mariam, another interviewee, who provided me with insights into the Hualing Group's policies, worked for the Sea Plaza as a sales manager and then as an operation specialist. She told me that she felt respected, was satisfied with the working conditions, and that the Plaza, for her, had become a second home. Her Georgian as well as her Chinese co-workers became close friends, and she was very sad when she had to leave the company for personal reasons. She remembered that her Chinese employers were very fair. She was well-paid by local standards, and overtime was always compensated. For the New Year and on the eighth of March (women's day) everyone received a present, which, as Mariam said, "makes you feel good and respected."

As an insider, Mariam knew about Hualing's ambitious plans to transform the Sea Plaza and the nearby marketplace into an important trading hub. According to her, Hualing initially tried to convince Lilo Bazroba's traders to move to Hualing's territories. Although the Hualing Group is the biggest Chinese investor in Georgia and is active in different economic sectors, it seems that it has not lost its original link to this specific kind of bazaar trade. The project, however, failed. But it did not fail because of prejudices about the Chinese or xenophobia. Lilo Bazroba's Georgian traders, especially those who travel to China regularly, are used to working with Chinese. It is because of their (positive) experiences with Chinese business partners that they opened small shops in the Plaza. But, as they explained, "clients are used to come to Lilo (Bazroba)." Traders rely on long-term relationships with co-traders and with clients – and these relationships and networks are embedded to Lilo Bazroba as a locality. Hualing has not yet established itself within these networks and commercial topography. It is marginalized in terms of contacts – it is not on the map. Still, Hualing started to negotiate about the transfer of another bazaar to the Plaza, "Eliava," which is a local bazaar specialized in building materials and spare parts.

Mariam mentioned that Hualing's bosses tried to improve their current situation by establishing good relationships with local traders and with the local elites, and that one way to do so was by offering gifts. Lasha gave me an example: "The bishop of Qazbegi wanted to do some renovations. He asked the President of Georgia what to do and then they approached Hualing Group[9]. Hualing Group agreed to support this project and brought materials for 300.000 USD from Turkey, which they simply gifted to the church. When there was the flood in Tbilisi in 2015, which destroyed parts of the city (Sabortalo) and the zoo, Hualing gifted 150.000 USD. Hualing even gifted some roads, but I forgot which one." Mariam concluded from such actions alluding to local bribing practices: "they (the Chinese) are like Georgians but bigger!"

The role of religion

The above-mentioned examples reveal Hualing's approach. My interlocutors, Lasha, Irakli, Mariam and others described that they felt trusted and respected. They described an atmosphere of mutual understanding and the Chinese's interest in and readiness to adapt to local traditions. Trust was thereby established on the personal level but then, apparently, went beyond this interaction and also shaped attitudes on a more abstract level.

As my insights are limited to the Georgian perspective, I cannot say much about how the Chinese assessed the situation. From the point of view of the Georgians, the Hualing Chinese behaved like "friends." Due to this behaviour and because of the Chinese's adaption to and involvement in local rituals and/or ritualized social practice, my local interviewees assumed that Chinese and Georgians also share similar codes of honour and a similar understanding of sociability.

I cannot say whether the Chinese or Uyghurs in particular share the same ideas and values. Looking at ethnography concerned with China, one can find descriptions of rituals, practices and

9 I was never able to confirm this story.

social relationships which resemble Georgian equivalents. The Chinese concept of "guanxi" (Brandtstädter 2009, Yang 1994, Yan 1996), for example, which is a widespread and contested form of reciprocal and hierarchal relationship includes many practices, obligations and codes of conduct that are comparable to those related to Georgian concepts of friendship, brotherhood and business-partnership, but also to practices associated with Soviet times, such as "blat" (a so-called economy of favours)(Ledeneva 1998) and other informal practices. Furthermore, in the context of guanxi, as well as in the broader context of China and the regional context of Uyghur culture, banquets have a long tradition (Yang 1994). Han Chinese, but especially Uyghurs, as other Central Asian people, share similar rites of hospitality with Caucasians, which might be rooted in common Turkish traditions. The above-described ritual of giving money at burials, again, is a practice that must be familiar to Uyghurs and Han Chinese alike. There is the Chinese tradition of giving monetary gifts (lijin), and keeping gift lists, so-called "lidan" (Yan 1996: 49-50). Actually, this and comparable practices at burials and weddings are widely established in the whole of Asia and the Caucasus (see, e.g., Brumann 1998, Yalçın-Heckmann 2001, Yan, 1996).

The question whether these practices and rituals have the same meaning and background also touches on the role of religious and cultural differences in interethnic/international exchange. Questions of cultural and religious identity are difficult to separate as they are blended with ethnic and national identities and ascriptions. Thus, it is, in my opinion, also hard to distinguish secular and religious rituals. The supra, for example, can be interpreted as a secular ritual. However, the ritual toasts may have religious content and address the Orthodox Church and the patriarch. Thus, there is some kind of link. A similar link may exist between religion and social constellations. Trading networks of Muslim communities, for example, are used for secular market exchange, but are usually described as based on mutual respect among believers, who share the same values, which, again, are related to the Quran and the life of Mohammad.[10] For this reason, the Muslim African traders working in Guangzhou described by Mathews (2015), and the Kyrgyz traders described by Schröder (2020), try to rely on Muslim networks when organizing their business in China. They prefer to work with people they can trust. This, as far as I understand, is also true for Uygur trading networks in Central Asia and Hui networks in the Arab world.

Georgian traders or employees and Hualing Group's Chinese business partners and employers do *not* share the same religious background. As I was told by Mariam, ethnic or religious identity was never discussed at her workplace. Only in the beginning, when she was hired by the Hualing Group to work at the Plaza, she was told that the heads of the company were Muslim and that for this reason "they don't have or eat pork". Questions and comments of that nature were never brought up again.

I think that different things are important for shaping relationships here. The business interests of all parties are obviously an important driving factor for establishing good contacts. Without trust, economic exchange is simply not possible. Referring to Dasgupta (1988) Humphrey argues that in the context of the economy "trust rests on the existence of a background agency, usually the state, that reliably enforces contracts and provides credible and impartial punishment for errant behaviour" (Humphrey 2018). But if the state fails to create trust, it must be replaced, as we learn from studies on informality, by other,

[10] The identification of such links fits into the definition of the role of religion by Woodhead. As summarized by Burchardt an Becci (2013: 11): "According to her (Woodhead), religion has been theorized either as a system within culture (with a focus on beliefs meaning, values, discourses or memory and tradition), or as identity, belonging and boundaries. Moreover, religion is also conceptualized as a social relationship, as network connecting people". Within Muslim networks, accordingly, trust (keeping one's word) is perceived as part of a code of honour, which is linked to Islam and which has to be followed in the interaction with other Muslims or Muslim traders.

usually personalized agreements. Such personal arrangements cover a wide spectrum of relationships that are sometimes associated with illegal practices, but most of the time are based on reciprocal exchange. In Georgia, although trust, on the official level, is guaranteed by formal contracts and governmental backup institutions, economic success, as described above, depends on good personal relationships to elites, officials, fellow-businesspeople and clients.

Still, behaviour that establishes trust, I believe, cannot be explained by mere rational factors; that is, it cannot be understood with by pragmatism alone. Clearly, the Hualing Chinese/ Uyghurs effectively adapt to the local environment and manage to participate in local practice. But I argue along with Sahlins that people "act in a world in terms of the social beings they are" (Sahlins 1999: 412). I suggest that Chinese and Georgian entrepreneurs, traders, employers and employees refer to their local concepts each, when establishing relationships with each other. At the same time, one can observe tolerance and acceptance toward strangers. In the Caucasus such forms of acceptance are quite common[11]. For centuries, despite conflicts, ethnic groups have established ways to communicate and have even developed ritual bonds with each other.

Rituals and practices are linked to (religious) identity, beliefs and values. But, as I deduce from my interlocutor's accounts, it is the practice and not the spiritual content, theology or ideology that are emphasized. This corresponds with the stressing of orthopraxis over orthodoxy, that has been described as a feature of Chinese ritual practice (Brandtstädter 2009, Watson 1992), as well as with the idea that "the Chinese propensity to establish networks of personal connections" are the basis "for a more flexible, more successful, 'Confucian capitalism'" (Brandtstädter 2009: 436). One can find many reasons for stressing orthopraxy. Gurchiani (2017) argues that Georgian Orthodoxy leaves space for negotiation and interpretation, especially when it comes to the interpretation and performance of so-called "domestic rituals," which are performed by lay people. The Soviet past of Georgia and the PRCs policies in China are certainly responsible for the secularization and domestication of many rituals. But even in the anthropology of Islam dealing with local contexts that have no communist background, there is a debate about whether *practice* should be at the centre of study. El-Zein (1977), for example, argues that Islam can take many shapes, which then are manifested in practice. Similarly, Schielke (2010) criticises that there is too much Islam in the Anthropology of Islam and advices to focus on practice and behaviour. Given the fact that religion is never made a topic in the context of Georgian-Chinese encounters, this advice seems even more appropriate in this context.

To conclude, I would like to make some suggestions how to read the encounters between Georgians and the Chinese and the positive feelings these evoked in my Georgian interlocutors:

1. It seems that local and Uyghur or/and the Chinese understandings of sociability are compatible. (As I do not know how Hualing members understand their identity, I can't differentiate between Uyghur and Chinese characteristics and deduce this conclusion from the answers of my Georgian interlocutors).
2. Chinese behaviour suggests familiarity with ritual feasting and similar life cycle rituals as performed in Georgia.
3. Given the very different cultural and religious backgrounds of the Georgians and the Chinese/Uyghurs, I suspect that the perceived compatibility of social and cultural values grounds on a mutual misunderstanding and misinterpretation of seemingly similar habits, practices and performances.
4. But this does not matter, because common practice, coming together for feasting and

[11] The capital Tbilisi is shaped by religious pluralism. Although most Georgians are born as Orthodox Christians and the Georgian Orthodox Church is central for national identity, one can find representatives of many other confessions. Neither the Soviet past nor globalization have led to a secularization of urban life (Burchardt & Becci 2013). On the opposite, in recent years, one could observe a religious revival.

mourning, and establishing good relationships is most important.

Whether these suggestions can serve as an explanation or not has to be clarified in future research that must include a Chinese perspective.

Conclusion

In this article, I presented some insights regarding Georgian perceptions of Muslim Chinese within the Caucasian business- and market sphere. Unlike in other parts of the world, Chinese presence is a relatively new phenomenon in the Caucasus. Here, one observes that ethno-religious difference is neglected or downplayed in business interaction. Instead, common understandings concerning social practice and social obligations are being emphasized and expressed in rituals of commensality, in gift giving and in other gestures of respect. These take place at the margins of the city and local society. However, these interactions become part of Tbilisi, its ethno-religious, political and economic composition. Much more research should be conducted on this topic. A promising approach would explore the question of interethnic and interreligious cooperation from a "histoire croisée" (Freitag and van Oppen 2010) perspective, which would allow one to look at transnationalism and interethnic and interreligious encounters from different perspectives – the Georgian and the Chinese – on different levels of entanglement. This could also be a way to link the macro and micro-level, as well as individual actors and institutions and their socio-cultural backgrounds. By doing so, one would gain a better understanding of Chinese globalization, of international and intercultural encounters, and of (among other things) the role of religion in these processes.

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Note on the Author

Susanne Fehlings is a research group leader at the Frobenius Institute for Research in Cultural Anthropology and a lecturer at the Goethe University Frankfurt am Main. Her main interests include economic anthropology, the anthropology of the state, urban anthropology and topics related to ethnobotany. Her regional focus is the Caucasus. One of her most recent publication is "Doing Business in Yabaolu Market, Beijing: (Inter-)Ethnic Entrepreneurship, Trust and Friendship between Caucasian and Chinese traders" (2020).
Email: **fehlings@uni-frankfurt.de**