Yiwu and Global Traders: Goods, Routes and Markets

Yiwu is a city of 2 million inhabitants, 14,000 of them foreign traders, located in China’s commercially vibrant Zhejiang province. For a variety of transnational trading networks, diasporas and communities Yiwu is a node from which to move ‘small commodities’ around the world. These commodities include goods for pound-shops, toys, stationery, shoes, zippers and buttons, socks and cosmetics among millions of other different products that are exported to more than 200 countries. Contrary to one-dimensional yet common depictions of Yiwu (and China more generally) as the source of ‘cheap stuff’ that ‘invade’ the world, the photographs in this exhibition show that trade in and from Yiwu is not simply a matter of buying and selling low-priced goods: it engenders a form of sociality predicated on the mutual recognition of value and people. The circulation of ‘small commodities’ makes daily life possible, at the same time that it is also implicated in the production of a great variety of networks of global traders and the geographies where they operate.

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The team members include: Magnus Marsden (Principal Investigator), Diana Ibañez Tirado, Saheira Sha, Marina Marouda and Filippo Osella (University of Sussex, UK); Huaichuan Rui (Royal Holloway, University of London, UK); Paul Anderson and Caroline Humphrey (University of Cambridge, UK); Vera Skvirskaja (University of Copenhagen, DK).

Diana Ibañez Tirado took the photographs in Yiwu (2013; 2016), Russia (2015), Ukraine (2016), and Iran (2017) and curated the core exhibition at the University of Cambridge, UK. Vera Skvirskaja took the photographs in Yiwu (2016) and Georgia (2017); Magnus Marsden in Afghanistan (2017) and Filippo Osella in Yiwu (2017).