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Performing Eurasia in the textiles and clothing businesses along the Silk Road

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Abstract

The article looks at the processes, metaphors and politics of the “Silk Road” as an ideological concept and the ways in which “authenticity” is actively constructed, implemented and performed as a strategy for development by government, non-governmental agencies and business owners. Case studies from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan are touched upon and material from interviews, observations and examples from material culture presented. This project seeks to analyse: the culture of the textiles business in Central Asia and how this operates at the seams of national-ethnic identity within the Eurasian context; the formal and informal business practices of the everyday, operating within the discourses of economic development; and how consumer culture may be interrogated as a means for performing identity at the local and global perspectives. Contemporary intersectional approaches to understanding the business of textiles and fashion in Central Asia should redress the marginalisation of academic efforts across multiple disciplines to unite the region inwardly and outwardly and call for an integrated approach to considering both the cultural and economic value of handmade textiles, which acknowledges and makes visible the role of the artisan, the designer, the entrepreneur, the retailer and all the stages that exist in the value chain between production the final consumer. The precursors to the current framework of research necessarily lie in the work of scholars of development and industrialisation established during the Soviet period. Their expertise must be called upon to enrich the perspective presented here, which is focused on contemporary craftsmanship and enterprise in Central Asia and how current practices in design and business may offer fruitful opportunities for development of the New Silk Road project, both intellectually and economically.

Introduction

The shifts in identity that have emerged from the redefinition of the national identities of these young republics ([Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan]) continue to be an uncommon phenomenon with serious political consequences [...] In an attempt to reconstruct national identities without calling into question the borders inherited from the Soviet Union, the region’s mediaeval and Islamic past were re-evaluated and exploited as a new component of identity, thereby making it possible to overcome ethnic and group divisions.¹

This article explores the role of textiles and clothing in responding to these formal visions of national and regional identity emerging in the Central Asian Republics and the multiple complex roles played by textiles and fashion business owners, artisans and entrepreneurs in enabling the performance of aspects of identity which seek to be both “traditional” and “modern” or “national” and “fashionable” at the same time.

¹ UNESCO, *Investing in cultural diversity and Intercultural dialogue: UNESCO world report World Reports Series* (Paris: United Nations Educational; 2009), 21.

This approach considers the multiple roles performed by textiles and fashion designers, makers and entrepreneurs as cultural intermediaries, navigating the complex web of myths linking national identity and the marketing of textiles and dress in Central Asia. This brings together perspectives from the disciplines of fashion and textiles, business and development sectors. In this sense, this article seeks to bridge a disciplinary gap that cleaves the study of fashion and textiles into the study of either business or culture, and tries to consider these spheres together to acknowledge the transcultural capital these entrepreneurs have amassed in trying to negotiate globalised structures of creative industries in a development context.

By considering the role of these individuals, this article aims to personalise the discourses of cultural globalisation through development and drive the discussion of fashion, textiles and identity away from unhelpful dichotomous debates comparing the West with the Non-West; Orientalising discussions featuring “us” against “the exotic other” and ideas of the “modern” versus the “not-modern” or the “fashionable” versus “traditional” to explore the cultural, economic and political aspects which can reconnect discussions of silk with the concept of the Silk Road.

“Silk, paper, steel”: Myth, poetry and the marketing of cultural heritage

The idea of “The Silk Road” proliferates in the nomenclature of key development projects undertaken throughout Central Asia (as well as elsewhere in Eurasia) since the break-up of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991 and is furthermore a potent myth used for marketing many aspects of the cultural heritage of Eurasia, including the textiles and dress relating to the Central Asian Republics. It has become a very useful metaphor for the marketing of culture industries including travel agencies, orchestras, theatre companies, textiles, fashion and design business and more.

The term *die Seidenstrasse* was originally coined by Prussian geographer Ferdinand Freiherr von Richthofen in 1876 and was doubtless fuelled by the seemingly insatiable appetite of large audiences in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century for lectures and books on exploration, adventure travel, and archaeological discovery,² a desire which is arguably just as strong today and fuelled by tourism, Lonely Planet and like-minded media forums. Of all the commodities and ideas to traverse the network of land routes criss-crossing Eurasia, why pick “silk”? How representative was this of the goods being traded and their relative significance? Daniel Waugh suggests that *The Paper Road* may have been a more accurate term for describing the most significant innovation that traversed the route from East to West. Waugh is clear that von Richthofen specifically defined the term *Seidenstraßen* only to refer to the Han period (206 BCE–220 CE) and he meant it to apply to only a very specific overland route defined by a single historical source, although he recognised that there were other routes in various directions in use at the same time and *The Silk Road* was just a shorthand term for representing the network trading knowledge and goods along the overland routes across Eurasia.³ The concept stuck and has become an evocative and effective myth.

Vanessa Hansen mentions that Richthofen had actually been charged with designing a potential railway line from the German sphere of influence in Shandong through the coalfields near Xi’an all the way to Germany when he devised the term, linking two millennia of trade, travel and transportation together with his mapping exercise.⁴ *The Steel Road* was obviously not deemed to evoke the romantic imagination as effectively as *The Silk Road*.

Tamara Chin puts forward an extensive discussion on the invention, usage and popularisation of the term “Silk Roads” during the period 1877–1936 and credits the exploration and writing of Swedish geographer, traveller and writer Sven Hedin with the success of the term in the collective

2 Daniel C. Waugh, “Richthofen’s ‘Silk Roads’: Toward the archaeology of a concept,” *The Silk Road*, 2007, 5 (1): 1–10. Available at: http://silkroadfoundation.org/newsletter/vol5num1/srjournal_v5n1.pdf. Accessed 25 May 2016.

3 Waugh, “Richthofen’s ‘Silk Roads’.”

4 Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press; 2012).

imagination of early twentieth century audiences. Chin underscores the political and economic development outcomes of his cultural rearticulations of Richthofen's terminology.

Through him [Hedin] the Silk Road became something ethically as well as geopolitically imperative to remember through collective industrial reconstruction. Hedin essentially reprised Richthofen's Central Asian railways project. His first Sino-Swedish scientific expedition (1927–1928) in Central Asia sought the best airline route between Berlin and Peking-Shanghai on behalf of the German government and Lufthansa; his third Sino-Swedish expedition (1933–1935) plotted a motor-road route between Europe and China financed by the Chinese Nationalist government.⁵

James Ellroy Flecker's poem *The Golden Road to Samarkand* was written in 1913 and Robert Byron's great travel book *The Road to Oxiana* was published in 1937 and clearly driven by the same romance and sense of adventure for Central Asia as popularised by Hedin. Colin Thubron's *Shadow of the Silk Road* (2006) might be viewed as a modern-day counterpart, contributing to the romanticisation of Eurasia, seen through European eyes.

If the Silk Road was used to inspire infrastructural developments in the early 20th century, nowadays the concept holds sway as an evocative tag-line for culture industry reconstructions including holidays, international museum exhibitions, fashion shows, and furthermore international diplomacy and economic development projects of Central Asia and related regions.⁶

There is an international Silk Road committee organised by the United Nations World Tourism Organisation and the US Department of State considered the first New Silk Road Strategy Act in 1999 focused on trying to integrate Afghanistan into the region economically and politically, as well as promote intra-regional trade across Central Asia.⁷ Hillary Clinton's remarks at the New Silk Road Ministerial Meeting in New York, September 2011 firmly invoked the myth of the Silk Road to set forward the vision for US foreign policy strategy for Central Asia.

For centuries, the nations of South and Central Asia were connected to each other and the rest of the continent by a sprawling trading network called the Silk Road [...] Let's set our sights on a new Silk Road – a web of economic and transit connections that will bind together a region too long torn apart by conflict and division.⁸

The language of US diplomacy uses the extremely effective metaphor of the Silk Road to signal the way forward for developing Central Asia and implementing US Foreign Policy. Organisations such as United States Agency for International Development fund development projects for supporting textiles in the area, through initiatives like their Textile Grant Program⁹ which aims to increase regional economic trade and linkages through strengthening the textile industry and advance the skills and capacity of women entrepreneurs working in the industry in Central Asia.

Textiles from *The Silk Road* have wide historic and contemporary appeal, from the collection of Robert Shaw's *ikat* coats in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford¹⁰ to high profile fashion shows by international fashion designers using or "being inspired by" silk *ikat* and *suzani* embroidery from Central Asia. International fashion designers from John Galliano (1997) to Oscar De La Renta

5 Tamara Chin, "The invention of the silk road, 1877," *Critical Inquiry*, 2013, 40 (1): 194–219: 216, <https://doi.org/10.1086/673232>.

6 Chin, "The invention of the silk road, 1877."

7 Jeffrey Mankoff, *The United States and Central Asia after 2014. A Report of the CSIS Russia and Eurasia Programme*. (Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 2013). Available at: http://csis.org/files/publication/130122_Mankoff_USCentralAsia_Web.pdf. Accessed 25 May 2016.

8 US Department of State, Remarks at the New Silk Road Ministerial Meeting, New York City, New York, 22 September 2011. Available at: <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/09/173807.htm>. Accessed 25 May 2016.

9 USAID, Textile Grant Program. Regional Economic Cooperation Project (REC). Request for Applications (RFA) No. 002. Issuance Date: 26 November 2012.

10 Ruth Barnes, "Dressing for the Great Game: The Robert Shaw collection in the Ashmolean Museum," *Khil'a Journal for Dress and Textiles of the Islamic World*, 2005, 1: 1–13. Available at: http://poj.peeters-leuven.be/content.php?url=article&id=629995&journal_code=KH. Accessed 25 May 2016.

(2005), and more recently Basso & Brooke (2010) obviously favour the “silk” connotations of *The Silk Road* and it offers an attractive creative theme and marketing image for fashion and textiles industry. In 2010, the British Council sponsored a research trip of Basso & Brooke¹¹ to Uzbekistan. The project “*Adventures on the Silk Road*” aimed,

to use the arts and traditions of the region to make these places seem vivid again, and to address negative stereotypes with a creative energy that is independent of politics.¹²

I disagree. The use of the arts and traditions to make regions seem vivid again is entirely linked to the geopolitical project, governing development and cultural heritage programmes all over the world. Although “the arts” may be seen as an innocuous and neutral zone, devoid of political impact and disconnected from the hard mechanics of economic development, this is as much to do with the distinctly gendered politics of global development, let alone the frivolous and ephemeral role that textiles, fashion designers and other “artisans” may be accorded within macroeconomic discourses of development.

Handmade textiles and craft industries may exist as the vanguard of industrialisation, but these crafts and skills are not abandoned as a country becomes more economically developed. In recent years there has been a growing demand for products which are both handmade and provide an innovative business model. The realms of business and the handmade are not mutually exclusive and should not be treated separately.¹³

International fashion and lifestyle magazines still present collections “inspired by the East” as indulgent editorial fantasies, although this is increasingly being replaced in the UK by concerns of “Cultural Appropriation” as debates about Orientalism have filtered through from academia into more critically-engaged fashion media platforms, such as Dazed & Confused.¹⁴ Fashion media in Central Asia began to present their own cultural identity as local versions of international fashion magazines proliferate and borrow the visual and editorial narratives of mainstream international fashion media. *L’Officiel Central Asia* began in 2010 and lasted for six issues over 2010–2012. The magazine described itself as,

[...] the first women’s luxury magazine in the region. Based in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, it is also distributed in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan. Gulnara Karimova, the Editor in Chief, presents the women of Central Asian women with all the latest international and local trends.¹⁵

Editor in Chief Gulnara Karimova, the daughter of the late President of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, was placed under house arrest in 2014 on suspicion of corruption. This is a clear example of how closely intertwined are the fields of politics, business and the marketing of cultural heritage through textiles and fashion.

11 Bruno Basso & Christopher Brooke won the prestigious Fashion Fringe Award in 2004 for the innovative fashion textile innovation using digital printing. For this project, Basso & Brooke travelled from London to Margilan 9–19 October 2009 and worked in collaboration with Ruth Greany from Woven Studio, London and John Gillow on history of the new silk road. Three weavers from Margilan conducted residency and industry tour of London 12–19 March 2010. They visited Vanners Mill in Sudbury and Laura Miles of Woven Studio, London. For further information see <http://bassoandbrooke.com/>. Accessed 25 May 2016.

12 British Council Design Tank on Southbank, London, 2010.

13 Imran Amed, “Right Brain, Left Brain: Sustainability is out, responsible innovation is in; Business of Fashion,” *The Business of Fashion*, 13 May 2016. Available at: http://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/right-brain-left-brain/sustainability-is-out-responsible-innovation-is-in-copenhagen-fashion-summit-environment-nike-patagonia?utm_source=Subscribers&utm_campaign=50547b776f-&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_d2191372b3-50547b776f-416955053. Accessed 16 May 2016.

14 See for example Adam Geczy, *Fashion and Orientalism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) and Available at: <http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/28767/1/how-to-culturally-appreciate-and-not-culturally-appropriate>. Accessed 27 November 2016.

15 “Bienvenue dans les archives de L’Officiel Central Asia,” Available at: <http://patrimoine.editionsjalou.com/lofficel-central-asiarchivesa-68-2011.html>. Accessed 4 April 2018. The link to the editorial content at <http://jaloumediagroup.com/en/brands/lofficel-brands/lofficel-central-asia/> is no longer live. Accessed 16 May 2017.

Political state craft

How do the politics of the artisanal apply to geopolitical issues of the Central Asian Republics? The design, production and marketing of handmade textiles and fashion businesses in the region is very closely linked to governmental agendas for what is and is not deemed appropriate national cultural heritage, as well as servicing agendas for international diplomacy and development.

The tourism industry is closely related to the cultural production of ideas about dress and identity and provides a useful target market for developing product ideas that do not require knowledge, experience or practical capacity to export products.

Sites of production of textiles may not necessarily be the same as the sites of consumption for textiles, particularly if one considers the mobility of textiles and souvenir products. Some historic marketplaces and legendary “Silk Road” cities may provide very important aspects for the marketing myth of the crafts associated with that town or market. A salient example would be the famous “Bukhara” carpet type, so-called because of its historic association with Bukhara city as a site of consumption for this product. The bazaars of Bukhara were legendary as part of the Silk Road mythology, and their reputation continues in the present-day marketing of Uzbekistan as a Silk Road tourism destination. Bukhara never had anything to do with the site of production of these carpets which were made by nomadic Turkmen weavers from all over the region and in fact nowadays most so-called “Bukhara” carpets are made in Pakistan or Afghanistan, where labour is much cheaper.¹⁶ Brian Spooner draws attention to the importance of “trade lore” in constructing the notions of authenticity about Oriental Carpets and highlights how little importance the weaver herself is given in these processes of authentication.

Contemporary intersectional approaches to understanding the business of textiles and fashion in Central Asia should redress this imbalance and call for an integrated approach to considering both the cultural and economic value of handmade textiles which acknowledges and makes visible the role of the artisan, the designer, the entrepreneur, the retailer and all the stages that exist in the value chain between its production the final consumer.

Heightened consumer awareness and inter-governmental organisation responsibility to act on the moral imperative to sort out the issues of abusive environments in supply chains in the textiles and garment sector lend support to this approach. Increased consumer ability to challenge businesses and supply chains which do not conform to standards for international labour and human rights has an impact. Politicised organisations are campaigning to make transparent the supply chains and tell the story of the labour behind the label, thus demystify the mechanics of Marx’s commodity fetishism. All of these issues are represented in core activist movements which call for change in the way that supply chains for consumer goods operate and aim to illuminate these issues and abuses of human rights.¹⁷

The international development sector undoubtedly sets particular priorities internationally and this structures which areas of cultural heritage are imperative to support and develop and therefore which kind of designs and products are deemed suitable priorities for funding. The popular souvenir figures of the Central Asian dolly wearing an *ikat* dress with gold embroidery work, wearing her hair long in braids under an embroidered skullcap and the old *baba* wearing a skullcap, and possibly eating a watermelon, have not moved on a whole lot from archetypes set in the visual and material culture of the USSR, which cast the Central Asian Republics as backwards

16 See for example Brian Spooner, “Weavers and dealers: The authenticity of an oriental carpet” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press; 1986), 195–235.

17 High-level Conference on Responsible Management of the Supply Chain in the Garment Sector in the Framework of an EU Garment initiative took place in the European Commission in Brussels on 25 April 2016 and brought together commissioners, ministers, some of the biggest names from the fast fashion industry, such as H&M and Zara, along with Trade Union representatives from Bangladesh and Pakistan, along with Clean Clothes Campaign, Fair Wear Foundation, Fashion Revolution, MADE-BY, SPINNA Circle.



Figure 1. Soviet Central Asia. 1930s Intourist poster by Maria Nesterova, printed in USSR.

As seen in Elena Sudakova. See *USSR, Intourist Posters and the Marketing of the Soviet Union* (London, GRAD Galley, 2013), 79. Reproduced with permission provided by Russian State Library.

and under-developed, as for example pictured in a striking Intourist poster of “Soviet Central Asia” by artist Maria Nesterova (Figure 1).¹⁸

A relatively well-established tourism industry had developed within the USSR, complete with souvenir products for sale to the Western left-leaning élite who liked to travel there, and brought valuable foreign currency into the system. Soviet economic reformers in the mid-twentieth century moved towards a model where profits from tourism were used as an indicator of efficiency in

¹⁸ Elena Sudakova, *See USSR: Intourist Posters and the Marketing of the Soviet Union* (London: GRAD Galley, 2013), 79.



Figure 2. Doll wearing “national” costume, souvenir from Uzbekistan (given as gift by artisan-entrepreneur in Ferghana Valley in 2015).

Photograph of the author.

planning.¹⁹ Vladimir Ankudinov, the Head of Intourist from 1947–1968, the Soviet state administration for foreign tourism, was very vocal about the new focus on profits from tourism. Shawn Salmon argues that tourism was regarded as a “miracle industry” and as such, Soviet officials were encouraged to engage with the market “in order to sell Socialism.”²⁰ Russian factories produced all manner of popular and more luxury souvenir items, including dolls wearing “national costume” and Central Asian skullcaps, *tiubeteiki*, both of which are still sold today (Figure 2). The construction of cultural authenticity is by no means solely a product or indicator of neo-liberal capitalist economies and many of the ideas about defining Central Asian regional identity through commercial souvenirs of textiles and dress were already formulated during the Soviet period.

The concept of *The Silk Road* continues to have a significant impact on the contemporary tourism industry of Central Asia and on the types of textiles and souvenir products developed in the region for sale to tourists. One of the first activities of Uzbekistan with international organisations post-independence was joining the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation-initiated project to safeguard intangible cultural heritage of the region entitled, “*Revival of the Great Silk Road: Safeguarding of cultural heritage and development of cultural tourism*” (1994).

Adeeb Khalid writes about state-sponsored ideologies in Uzbekistan and the importance of the concept of *Oltin Meros*, for establishing and legitimising a nationalised concept of “Golden Heritage.”

In Uzbekistan, the celebration of *meros* became a major, and completely legitimate, pre-occupation of the intelligentsia in the last three decades of Soviet rule. Much to the chagrin of other Central Asians, Uzbek intellectuals laid claim to the entire cultural heritage of Transoxiana. Lavishly funded “jubilees” celebrated anniversaries of the founding of Bukhara, Samarqand, and Tashkent. Figures such as Abu Rayhan Beruni, Ibn Sina, Alisher Nawa’i, and Mirza Ulughbek were likewise claimed as “Uzbek”; their works were published in massive editions, their deeds celebrated in historical fiction, and their statues strewn about the cities of Uzbekistan.²¹

19 Anne E. Gorsuch and Diane P. Koenker, editors. *Turizm: The Russian and East European Tourist Under Capitalism and Socialism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006).

20 Shawn Salmon, “Marketing socialism: Intourist in the late 1950s and early 1960s,” in *Turizm: The Russian and East European Tourist Under Capitalism and Socialism*, ed. Anne E. Gorsuch and Diane P. Koenker (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006), 192.

21 Adeeb Khalid, “A Secular Islam: Nation, State, and Religion in Uzbekistan,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 2003, 35 (4): 579.

One must appreciate that in contemporary Central Asia, history is very fluid and changing. There is an ongoing positivist construction of an “appropriate” historical narrative which meets with contemporary visions for nationalistic statecraft and in parallel with this there is the gradual evolution of what could be deemed appropriate examples of national craft, by the state, alongside other intergovernmental agencies and commercial actors. A presidential decree in Uzbekistan in 2008 offered tax exemption for all kinds of activities in the field of manufacture of “national craft products”, and hence this terminology is used in marketing quite a lot, on the billboards outside craft centres and on proudly “nationalistic” posters and business cards. In this way cultural products can be associated with one geopolitical entity rather than another, or carry different meanings in different contexts. The traditional and the modern co-exist and are being crafted in tandem.

To achieve a sense of empowerment and greater agency, textile artisans and entrepreneurs working in Central Asia should differentiate between touristic products based on atavistic state-sponsored visions of Central Asian identity and gain confidence to develop new vocabularies of dress which communicate their own contemporary geopolitical and aesthetic identities, based on very clear critically-engaged research and understanding of real target customers. As the Central Asian Republics have moved away from planned centralised economy and society and tried to integrate with the market-led model dominant in the rest of the world, successful designers, artisans and entrepreneurs in Central Asia have become very good at navigating this complicated landscape between different stakeholders in the g/local contexts, understanding, embodying, fulfilling and fashioning multiple identities.

Catwalk economies along the Silk Road

In the 21st century, the cities, towns and villages along *The Silk Road*, are working to build new global networks and enter the schedule of international Fashion Weeks emerging in second-tier fashionable cities and countries worldwide to benefit from what Orvar Löfgren terms “*Catwalk Economies*”²² Trying to bring hand-skill into the mainstream is not an easy job at all and a sophisticated understanding of the cultural contexts, politics and practical capacities of both handicraft sector and global markets, is necessary. Non-profit organisation SPINNA Circle, based in the UK, specialises in this role, catalysing connections and translating from one sphere of work to another, providing mentoring and support to local artisans and entrepreneurs on the one hand, and promoting their products to the global market on the other.²³

In Kazakhstan two organisations, Kazakhstan Fashion Week and Mercedes Benz Fashion Week Almaty are working to develop the country as a showcase for local designers and develop Almaty as a regional hub to promote fashion from the Central Asian / Russian region and a location for international designers to show their work. Kazakhstan Fashion Week is based in Almaty and has been organising Fashion Shows since 2012 and seeks partnership from businesses in Kazakhstan, explicitly linking the act of giving corporate support with nationalistic beneficence contributing to domestic development and the fashion industry as key to raising the cultural level of Kazakhstan,

By becoming a partner of Kazakhstan Fashion Week, you are making an invaluable contribution to the development of the domestic fashion industry and raise the cultural level of the country, linking their company name with a unique international high-end project.²⁴

22 See e.g., Orvar Löfgren, “Catwalking and Coolhunting: The Production of Newness,” in *Magic, Culture and the New Economy*, ed. Orvar Löfgren and Robert Willim (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2005), 57–71.

23 Detailed discussion and analysis of SPINNA’s role in developing Central Asian artisans can be found on SPINNA’s website www.spinna.org and in: Emma Dick, Rupa Ganguli, and Kiran Gobin, “Empowering women in fashion and textiles globally: Enabling strategies for diversity in the global fashion and textiles industry,” Cfi Annual Conference: Diversity, Middlesex University, 19 May 2016; Emma Dick, “Cultural Heritage as Economic Value and Social Opportunity – Strengthening Networks in Central Asia and developing markets for women entrepreneurs in textiles through SPINNA Circle,” 1st InHeriT Conference on Cultural Heritage as Economic Value, excelixi, Center for Sustainable Entrepreneurship, Athens, 11–13 May 2016 and forthcoming publications.

24 “Kazakhstan Fashion Report,” Available at: <http://kfw.kz/proekty/partneram/>. Accessed 26 May 2016.

Mercedes Benz Fashion Week is a global enterprise owned by IMG Worldwide, a global conglomerate in sports, media and fashion industry events, which operates in more than 30 countries. In 2014, IMG was acquired by WME, a leading global entertainment agency, headquartered in Beverly Hills, California.²⁵ Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week Almaty positions itself as the only international fashion event in Central Asia capable of promoting Kazakhstani designers at international level, and “part of the world family of fashion-events, along with New-York, Paris, London, Madrid, Berlin Fashion Weeks.”²⁶ Sally Weller, writing about the incorporation of Australian Fashion Week into IMG’s global network in 2005, views the opportunities afforded by connectivity with such a global enterprise as overwhelmingly positive for the local designers in Australia, although others may see this as a form of corporate colonisation. Weller notes that the shift of the local event into the global network,

transforms both the value of the events and the values it promotes as it adopts the (transnational) cultural practices carried in the day-to-day routines, business systems, and governance structures of IMG (see Thrift 1998).²⁷

Weller argues that the local economic value of each event is enhanced by its association with similar events in other places on the worldwide Mercedes Benz Fashion Week network, although local dynamics of production may be disrupted or squeezed out by this transnational fashion behemoth, as “local” nodes are now “interpenetrated by the power-geometries that actively create the global scale.”²⁸

Direct connections between global conglomerates like IMG/WME and the world’s fashion media guarantee Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week Almaty place in *Vogue.com* to promote some of Kazakhstan’s leading fashion design names. A glossary of patronising fashion clichés abound to describe Kazakh street-style as “head-to-toe colour and print” (a bit too colourful to be actually fashionable?) The event was “Not a bad way to put a nation on the Style Map” and the readers are invited to “see the best IRL (“in real life”) looks hailing from this Central Asian country.”

There is nothing remotely “real” about these photo shoots—the staging of digitised reality, the contrast between “exotic” Kazakh models engrossed in their smart phones replaying a social media trope is all too familiar globally. These connections and this media space in *Vogue* are enabled only because of the IMG connection, bringing the Kazakh designers into the visual mainstream of the fashion industry. However this is true only in terms of image production, which is quite separated from the circuits of textiles and clothing production. Through processes of handcrafting and industrial manufacture, textiles and clothing are taxed with the heavy duties of national identity formation in ways which the visual signifiers of modernity floating freely on the pages of *Vogue.com* are not. Buying *into* the idea of Kazakh fashion becomes easier through the IMG connection, but buying garments made in Kazakhstan, for the most part, does not become much easier for the global, or even the local, consumer.

President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev visited an exhibition of products of large and medium-sized enterprises of light industry in Almaty in November 2015 and issued the following statement,

I want to say to all people of Kazakhstan: it is necessary to buy domestic products, including shoes and suits “made in Kazakhstan”. If the light industry begins to “breathe”, the people,

25 “IMG: Our Story,” Available at: <http://img.com/story/>. Accessed 4 April 2018.

26 “Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week Almaty,” Available at: <http://mbfwa.kz/about/>. Accessed 4 April 2018.

27 Sally Weller, “Beyond ‘global production networks’: Australian fashion week’s trans-sectoral synergies,” *Growth and Change*, 2008, 39 (1): 104–122, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2257.2007.00407.x>.

28 Weller, “Beyond ‘global production networks’,” 112.

working in the enterprises of this sector, will receive a salary, pay taxes to the state. It is beneficial to everyone.²⁹

Artisan entrepreneurs interacting with the President at this level understand the importance of proper communication of national values through the marketing of their handmade products. The designers presented at Mercedes Benz Fashion Week Almaty are at the top of the hierarchy within Kazakhstan and for an artisan, small business or new designer to be presented here is just as unattainable to most artisans and entrepreneurs as it would be to show in London, Paris or Milan.

The fashion show is a promotional activity, whose form initially developed in Paris in the late 19th century, intended to sell clothes to private clients. Fashion promotion has evolved into a trans-global business, bringing markers of high cultural esteem to the host nation. In geopolitical terms, incubating a fashion industry and hosting a fashion show is a great strategy for nation-branding, ensuring that Kazakhstan is viewed on the global stage as fashionable, well-integrated into free-market capitalism and sharing similar values in consumer culture and (life)style. Even if no clothes are actually sold, the event will be a success, as the fashionable image of the country will circulate worldwide and the fees created by the photography and media industries for the event alone will generate sizeable revenue, which will increase with repeat events year on year. The status and cultural capital of Kazakhstan will increase.

In Uzbekistan³⁰ Gulnara Karimova, the daughter of the former President, Islam Karimov, set up an annual fashion and cultural festival called Style.Uz in 2006, which took place mainly in Tashkent, the capital city. Karimova is a person who has occupied many professional roles, from diplomat, to pop singer and also fashion designer, under her own label *Guli*, which incorporated woven *ikat* designs, as produced in the Ferghana valley in Uzbekistan, and floaty dresses with silk painted silhouetted of famous buildings now valued as cultural heritage monuments from the 15th and 16th century Timurid and Shaybanid dynasties in Transoxiana. Style.Uz was one of a series of hundreds of events carried out under the auspices of Fund Forum, an Uzbek cultural organisation with philanthropic objectives to promote the ancient culture, arts, heritage and traditions of Uzbekistan. Fund Forum was shut down in 2013, a year before Karimova's fall from grace, and Style.Uz events have ceased to take place.

Karimova's own fashion show for *Guli* was cancelled from New York Fashion Week in 2012, by organisers IMG, midst concerns that protestors may storm the show to protest against alleged use of child labour in the harvesting of Uzbek cotton. This is an oft-highlighted issue and several European and American clothing companies have signed a boycott against using Uzbek cotton in any of their garment or textiles manufacture. There is a strange moral contradiction in this, where some of the same businesses are happy to sell "artisan-inspired" products, appropriating patterns and cultural heritage from the Central Asian region as inspiration for a low-cost fast-fashion product, but not willing or able to engage in the admittedly complex networks of production that would give work to artisans and entrepreneurs in these countries.

Style.Uz offered a national opportunity for Uzbek fashion designers to showcase their work, alongside providing a location in Uzbekistan to showcase the work of famous international designers, in an attempt to bring prestige to Tashkent. The collections of international designers would however be seen several weeks or sometimes months after the collections had been originally debuted on the catwalk, as Tashkent does not yet figure on the mainstream schedule of global fashion weeks. This means that buyers from significant retail spaces are not present to make orders from Central Asian designers.

29 "The President Of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev Noted Uniqueness Of Products Of Aigul Line Company," 25 November 2015. Available at: <http://aigulline.kz/en/about/news/>. Accessed 4 April 2018.

30 Joanna Lillis, "Uzbekistan: Fashion Industry Flourishing in Post-Gulnara Era," *Eurasianet*, 5 August 2015. Available at: <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/74546>. Accessed 4 April 2018.

Interestingly, some local dissatisfaction was expressed about the derivative nature of some of the Uzbek collections on show, and the lack of capacity to show designs of originality but instead an over-reliance on “contemporary ethnic” styles. Tashkent designer Darina Solova was interviewed as saying,

Young Uzbek designers showed good works [...] Nothing really original, but esthetically pleasing and quite suitable for everyday wear. I’m really happy that from year to year we see fewer clothes with national elements and more with something original. Everybody is tired of the fusion of modern and ethnic styles.³¹

Gabriele Mengtes repeats the role that *ikat* fabric has been accorded in forming ideas of national sovereignty for Uzbekistan.³² But the tension between official expectations of dress and identity and the role that fashion designers are expected to take in developing new sartorial models of identity which transcend the national archetype is clear. Lola Shamukhitdinova further notes the inter-relationship between the local and the global elements for forging ideas about fashionability and dress in Uzbekistan, citing international designers such as Oscar de la Renta, House of Balenciaga, Gucci, and Dries van Noten who have used Central Asian *ikat* inspirations in their fashion collections as being highly influential in forming reinvigorated interest in the fabric for local designers and makers.³³ Fashion in the Central Asian Republics is to some extent being mediated through the eyes of international designers who contribute to global circuits of value in the production and consumption of fashionable dress and identity.

In Tajikistan, the poorest of the Central Asian Republics, the country’s first international Fashion Show took place in 2013, as reported by the BBC.³⁴ The event was called Eurasia and staged in the Tajik capital Dushanbe. Although none of the internationally famous big brands participated, organisers expressed the wish that in the future Dushanbe Fashion Week will sit alongside those in Paris or Milan. The status of staging a Fashion Week is clear, in raising the economic and perhaps even more importantly highlighting the cultural capital of a country in geopolitical terms.

There have been reports of the fear of Islamic Radicalisation in Central Asia. In 2015 forms of sumptuary law were exercised in Tajikistan, controlling the facial hairstyles which would be regarded acceptable for men, and guarding against the wearing of black *hijab* by Tajik women. The Dushanbe Fashion Week shows in 2015 emphasised “Traditional Tajik Style.”³⁵ What is regarded as “traditional Tajik style” is clearly quite highly influenced by the aesthetic expectations of the government, who may not be versed in the exciting developments taking place in handcrafted textiles and traditional techniques within the region, and instead resort to the familiar female archetypes from the past.³⁶ Some of the looks showcased bear a close resemblance to the visions expressed in the Intourist poster from the 1930s. Here it seems abundantly clear that it is the political economies of the Central Asian Republics, rather than their national cultures, which are shaping their style on the catwalk.³⁷

31 Dengiz Uralov, “Dressing for Success in Tashkent,” *Transitions Online: Regional Intelligence*, 31 October 2012. Available at: <http://www.tol.org/client/article/23438-dressing-for-success-in-tashkent.html>. Accessed 4 April 2018.

32 Gabriele Mengtes, “Textile legacies in motion. Introductory remarks,” in *Modernity of Tradition: Uzbek Textile Culture Today*, ed. Gabriele Mengtes and Lola Shamukhitdinova (Munster: Waxmann, 2013), 7–10.

33 Lola Shamukhitdinova, “Ikata in all its manifestations: A new wave of popularity,” in *Modernity of Tradition: Uzbek Textile Culture Today*, ed. Gabriele Mengtes and Lola Shamukhitdinova (Munster: Waxmann, 2013), 11–25.

34 “Tajikistan holds its first ever international fashion show,” *BBC News*, 11 December 2013. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-25326021>. Accessed 4 April 2018.

35 “Tajik fashion week showcases home-grown styles,” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, 18 August 2015. Available at: <http://www.rferl.org/media/video/tajikistan-fashion/27195511.html>. Accessed 4 April 2018.

36 For example, images of Dushanbe Fashion Week, 2015. Available at: <http://tjk.rus4all.ru/news/20150818/726083542.html>. Accessed 10 December 2017, demonstrate this practically unchanged stereotype in the way that “national” fashions are conceived and presented.

37 See Frederick F. Wherry, *The Culture of Markets* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 28–29.

From “handicraft” to “handcrafted”

In the national handicraft centres for artisan development, just as in the office blocks in cosmopolitan centres along the new cities of *The Silk Road*, energetic businessmen and women are working to situate themselves as artisans, designers, makers, entrepreneurs, retailers, wholesalers, factory managers, tailors and all other manner of professions within the complex value chains of the craft, garment, fashion and textiles industries. Understanding where to position their products within a global marketplace that encompasses incoming juggernauts bringing cheap threads, zips and fabrics from China to high-end international fashion designers from America creating “Silk Road” themed collections requires multi-lingual, multi-talented, internationally-networked individuals to negotiate the shifting sands of taste in and across Central Asia—they are the modern-day equivalents of the Sogdian merchants along *The Silk Road*.

A range of textiles and clothing businesses are established and emerging in the Central Asian Republics. The Yodgorlik Silk factory was established in Margilan in Ferghana Valley in Uzbekistan in 1972. Azam Abdullaev has been director since 1991. Yusufjon Mamayusupov is Margilan’s Marketing Manager and Khalim Zokirov is master colourist, specialising in natural dyes.³⁸ The Yodgorlik Silk Factory is one of the longest-established specialist production centres of hand-woven, hand-dyed silk *ikat* fabric in Central Asia and alongside the neighbouring centre for handicraft development set up by Rasuljon Mirzaahmedov in the Said Akhmad Khuja Madrasa and the *ikat* weaving, carpet weaving and jacquard loom weaving enterprises owned by Fazlitdin Dadajonov makes Margilan and the surrounding region a hub of textiles production and craftsmanship in Central Asia, around which other smaller craft businesses and entrepreneurs congregate.³⁹

Throughout Uzbekistan and Tajikistan skilled embroiderers, tailors, seamstresses and one-person micro-enterprises sell cross-stitched pencil cases and skull-caps, embroidered *suzani* cushion covers, old *suzani* embroideries cut up and remade into bags and examples of goldthread *zardosi* embroidery adorn dresses and boots. Fatima workshop in Samarkand produces a range of high quality gifts and clothes which are coveted by tourists and Uzbeks alike. Happy Bird gallery, established by Elena Ladik in Samarkand in 2005, showcases all manner of Uzbek arts and crafts. Both of these galleries are situated in prime positions on the newly-pedestrianised street built beside the Registan square in Samarkand, one of the most fabled spaces in the imaginary Silk Road and one of the most significant sites of architectural and cultural heritage of the Timurid and Shaybanid period.

The relational space between sites of touristic pilgrimage and sites of Silk Road textiles consumption is clear, but as was for the case of the “Bukhara” carpets in the 19th century, this might not have anything to do with the sites of production of these textiles—which could be imported from all over the country, or sometimes from other countries. The brightly-coloured, synthetic-dyed, eye-catching “Paisley-patterned” scarves and “pashminas” sold at makeshift stalls inside the walled city of Khiva are clearly not handmade locally, but machine-made and imported perhaps from Pakistan, or somewhere else with greater mechanised weaving capacity. Sabokhat Pulatova notes exactly the same process happening in Bukhara.⁴⁰ Fun designs worn by local women and tourists alike include silk scarves printed in a local Uzbek factory to give the appearance of resist dye technique, with “traditional” motifs mixed with images of Soviet motor cars, the very symbol of modernity. For many tourists visiting, however, it is the site of consumption that is significant and memorable for them, and these textiles will remind them of their magical *Silk Road* travels, regardless of their true place of origin.

38 British Council, *New Silk Road: Trade, Creativity and collaboration in Central South Asia 2007–2010* (London: British Council, 2010).

39 “Rasuljon Mirzaahmedov website,” Available at: <http://ikat.uz/node/90>. Accessed 4 April 2018.

40 Sabokhat Pulatova, “Folklore market in ‘Old Bukhara’,” in *Modernity of Tradition: Uzbek Textile Culture Today*, ed. Gabriele Mentges and Lola Shamukhitdinova (Munster: Waxmann, 2013), 95–102.

In *Dress and Globalisation* (2004), Margaret Maynard makes a number of significant points about the role of the tourist in mediating ideas about dress and cultural authenticity. She places some blame on the tourist industries globally, feeding what she terms, “a voracious souvenir market by offering what is claimed to be “authentic” ethnic clothing, and by fabricating indigenous styles and textiles.”⁴¹ Maynard goes on to question how those whose traditions have been “exploited” by the tourist industry respond to appropriation and continues,

“Global tourism is partly the worldwide search for “authentic” experiences, that are deemed to be different from the tourist’s own culture. Tourist industries all over the world are in the business of vigorously marketing ethnic style or traditional garments, jewellery and fabrics for visitors [...] Garments are claimed to be authentic indigenous products, but the labels and markers of this supposed ethnicity are not straightforward reflections of a social reality. Producers consciously fabricate these clothes, making them deliberately attractive to souvenir hunters.”⁴²

Sophisticated businessmen and women all along the Silk Road have a nuanced understanding of what products will work for which customers. In cosmopolitan boutiques such as Human Wear Gallery in Tashkent, similar visions of “national” dress and identity prevail, but the emphasis shifts to innovation and building a social enterprise to create and sell garments which are “unique” and “fashionable.” The gallery’s website states that the main purpose of Human Wear Gallery, “is to create a network of shops selling unique designer clothes with the Silk Road in the largest cities around the world and building a brand of authentic human values.”⁴³ The shift from “handicraft” to “handcrafted” is necessary in marketing terms to promote products from the Central Asian Region to global consumer market place on equal terms and escape the negative “lumpen” associations sometimes given to “handicraft.”

Performing Eurasia in the textiles and clothing businesses along the Silk Road

Talented artisans at the top of their profession may often be very well-travelled and cosmopolitan individuals, invited to showcase their products at international showcases such as Santa Fe International Folk Art Market in US, Art in Action in UK, or asked to represent their country at World Travel Market and other similar events for the tourism industry. These people very quickly become au fait with international tastes in interiors and fashionable garments and with the official line required for promotion of national cultural heritage. Through building international connections and experience, such skilled artisans begin to understand how to distinguish between the different target audiences with nuanced understanding and these artisans and entrepreneurs occupy powerful positions at the seams of understanding, creating, manipulating and performing different forms of national-ethnic identity according to their intended audience, through the products that they develop and the ways in which they promote these. Daily they draw upon selected myths and metaphors from *The Silk Road*, the strategic language of development, the key phrases necessary for effective marketing and conducting successful business. They are multi-lingual. They transcend fixed positionalities on a global value chain and occupy several nodes all at once.

Mark Graham’s article on the Warped Geographies of Development highlights key ways in which the internet works to collapse time and space between different actors along a global value chain. He suggests that,

any move to disintermediate a commodity chain, for example, by using the Internet to directly connect producers with consumers, consequently creates a wormhole allowing two or

41 Margaret Maynard, *Dress and Globalisation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 70.

42 Maynard, *Dress and Globalisation*, 83.

43 “Human Wear Gallery website,” Available at: <http://www.humanhuman.net/about-2>. Accessed 4 April 2018.

more nodes/people/places to jump over place, people, and nodes that were previously in the middle (or intermediaries). Wormholes thus allow recognition of the fact that commodity chains stretched out over space will not disappear onto the head of a pin, but will instead continue to link people, places, and nodes albeit often in complex and non-Euclidean ways.⁴⁴

By taking interdisciplinary perspectives to study the fashion and textiles businesses operating along *The Silk Road* one quickly realises that many entrepreneurs operating in these spaces between commerce and culture occupy multiple nodes on the commodity chain at the same time. One person might be “local textiles artisan,” “national entrepreneur,” “international representative of the nation,” according to the cultural and commercial context into which they are placed. Their positionality is also contingent on the disciplinary context through which these artisan-entrepreneurs are examined and linked to the politics of specialist language and definitions of key terminologies for funding bids, marketing strategies and the reporting of trade data and statistics.

These artisan-entrepreneurs are positioned at the meeting point between cultural heritage and the marketing of history, at the intersection of nation-branding strategies of Central Asian Republics and their consequences. This is the point where global fashion industries and media collide with the international craft sector, its marketing and values.

The formal and informal business practices of the fashion and textiles entrepreneurs are structured quite clearly by the expectations, regulations and possibly overlapping or competing ideologies of national government, inter-governmental agencies, tourists and the international fashion and textiles industries. The entrepreneurs who navigate this terrain perform a very sophisticated understanding of local, regional, international and inter-sectoral concepts of tradition and identity and how to fulfill the necessary criteria for many of these organisations and different sectors. These artisans perform a truly critical engagement with the transdisciplinary nature of business, culture and value. These are global actors and polyglots—modern day—Sogdians—who understand the zeitgeist of Fashion and the wormholes of history and whose work enables the advancement of the terrain of the New Silk Road project, both intellectually and economically.

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44 Mark Graham, “Warped geographies of development: The internet and theories of economic development,” *Geography Compass*, 2008, 2 (3): 771–789, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8198.2008.00093.x>.