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Fehlings, Susanne

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Encounters at the Grassroots Level: Chinese–Georgian Interactions in the BRI Era

By Susanne Fehlings (Goethe University Frankfurt am Main)

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Abstract

Under the label of the BRI (Belt Road Initiative), bilateral agreements have been signed between the PRC (People's Republic of China) and the Georgian government. Both governments promote cooperation. This article, however, explores face-to-face encounters between Georgian and Chinese individuals in this context. It discusses how the BRI is implemented and perceived in Georgia and thus provides grassroots materials for comparative analysis. It argues that while Chinese are met with prejudice, everyday encounters between locals and Chinese are shaped by pragmatic considerations and the long-term goals of the different actors involved. These actors, according to their goals, use a set of strategies when it comes to establishing social relationships.

Introduction

This essay is based on ethnographic fieldwork in the Caucasus. Most of the relevant material consisting in case studies, observations and interviews was collected in Tbilisi (Georgia) between 2016 and 2019 in the context of a project funded by the Volkswagen Foundation. Besides a survey with 200 Georgian traders from Lilo Bazroba, qualitative research was conducted among Georgian traders, workers and employees working with or for Hualing Group or in the Chinese section of Lilo Bazroba. Apart from an exception cited below, the article thus first of all reflects a Georgian perspective. It gives a general overview of Chinese actors in Georgia, of their strategies in establishing contacts, and of local assessments of their activities in the Caucasus.

The “Yellow Peril” and Romanticism

Sinophobia is a common phenomenon in post-Soviet Eurasia. Billé (2014) notes that it originates in Russian stereotypes of Asia, which have shaped the perception of Chinese people, even in China's neighbouring countries. In jargon taken from Marxist theory, these stereotypes describe Asian cultures as backward and wild.

In the Caucasus, such classifications are used frequently for the assessment of behaviour—not only of Asian people but also of locals, who are said to behave “like Asians”. Thus, my interlocutors would say such things as “Our men are still Asians!” when complaining about macho behaviour and “It's like in Asia” when talking about poor living conditions (Fehlings, 2014). At the same time, unlike Central Asia or India, China, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, has often been romanticized. In the Caucasus, it was (and still is) admired for its old and rich civilization, which is compared to local histories. Additionally, Chinese martial arts, films,

medicine and philosophy have become very popular among youth.

However, a vague anxiety towards the Chinese surfaces today. Some Georgians worry about the growing impact of Chinese investment and fear that China is “silently taking over the country”. In 2016, for example, an open conflict about property or access rights occurred. A Chinese firm had purchased a section of forest, and a fight started when villagers continued, as they had done before, to cut trees in the Chinese territory. Some people reported that the fight took place between Georgian villagers and Chinese employees; others said it occurred between Georgian employees and Chinese employers. According to the latter version, the Georgian employees helped the local villagers to “transport firewood” and were therefore attacked with knives, truncheons and batons by the company's Chinese representatives¹. The incident caused a scandal in the Georgian media, resulting in protests against Chinese people and Chinese-made goods. I was told by my colleague that “the protests lasted a few weeks, and it was a big issue. Then, everybody forgot about the story. It was as though nothing had happened”.

Chinese Actors in Georgia

Although the Chinese constitute an almost negligible minority in the Caucasus, they are very visible. They are easily recognized, and they have become very active in the local business (and cultural) sphere. Georgians usually do not distinguish between different subdivisions of Chinese people. But Chinese actors in Georgia, as detailed by Zhou (2012), have different backgrounds, including the following:

- a) restaurant owners and petty traders;

1 <http://vestnikkavkaza.net/news/Police-detains-Chinese-citizens-for-attacking-Georgian-workers.html>

- b) representatives of Chinese construction companies, which are closely linked to Chinese state institutions and associated with the New Silkroad Initiative; and
 - c) large (private) investors and their employees.
- These different groups apply different strategies in regard to interaction with the local population.

Petty Traders

A large part of the first group works and lives in an ethnic enclave adjacent to Lilo (Bazroba). Lilo is the largest bazaar and trading hub in the Caucasus for everyday items (such as clothing, shoes, handbags, kitchenware, furniture, plastic toys, and beauty products). In 2017, 41% of the goods sold in Lilo were, according to the bazaar's administration, imports from China, most of which were brought from China by Georgian traders. At the same time, the Chinese maintain their own separate market section, where low-quality products made in China can be purchased for even less than in the main bazaar.

The Chinese market section of Lilo can be accessed through a Chinese-designed gate. The market consists of flat buildings lined up along two or three small roads. In addition to shops, there are some storage buildings and small, garage-like living places. Chinese characters, lunchtime kitchen smells and the sounds of gathering families chatting in Chinese and playing children give the place an exotic atmosphere.

Chinese shopkeepers usually sit at the counter, while

Picture 1: Entry of the Chinese Market Section of Lilo Basroba, September 2016



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Georgian employees take over communication with clients. The marketplace serves as a Chinese community base for chain migration from Fujian and Zhejiang (Qingtian County) Provinces. Most of these migrants share an impoverished background (Zhou, 2012). Apart from exchange in the context of trade, these Chinese traders seem to have little contact with locals.

Construction Company Workers

The same is true for Chinese workers of Chinese construction companies. Construction companies are

usually partly or fully state-owned and act as instruments of the PRC's BRI policy. These companies, in addition to recruiting Georgian workers (70%), recruit Han Chinese from different parts of China. These Chinese workers live in camps close to the construction sites. As I was told, camp life mainly consists of boredom, which is why workers dream of returning home as soon as possible. Usually, they have the chance to do so once a year for the Chinese New Year celebrations. The entire duration of a stay corresponds to the duration of a project, which generally lasts for two or three years.

John, a young Han Chinese, works for a Chinese state-owned construction company that builds electricity plants. He confirmed that his work is part of the BRI, which he described as the "Chinese dream". For the ambitious young man, who is well educated, proved to be a good student and is a party member, Georgia did not represent an exciting opportunity for career advancement. John had been staying in Georgia for about a year at the time of our conversation. The company decided he would have to stay for another two years, which for him, felt long. He would have preferred to go to Turkey because "Turkey is more developed [...]", but he is still happy that he was not sent to the company's branch in Nigeria. In Georgia, John can attend an evening business course at one of the capital's universities. Although he feels bored, he enjoys some privileges. As an accountant, he is not forced to live in a camp but rents a flat in Tbilisi. Average workers are rarely allowed to leave the camp because of security regulations. They work as they would work in any other country and do not develop any ties to the locale, which, for them, is a temporary environment that remains suspicious.

Although, there is no major danger of being attacked in Georgia, John is aware of the fact that people have prejudices about the Chinese: "People are afraid of Chinese because they think they steal their property. They think we take everything away". The awareness of this fact does not seem to trouble John too much. Like the workers, he counts his days in Georgia. He tries to make the best of it.

Private Investors (Hualing Group)

The third subgroup of Chinese in the Caucasus is made up of large-scale private entrepreneurs and investors. The most important representative of this group is Hualing Group. Since 2007, Hualing has bought a wood-processing factory, built the Olympic Village and Hualing New City, run the "Hualing Free Industrial Zone" in Kutaisi, purchased controlling shares in Georgia's Basis Bank, and erected a huge commercial centre, the "Tbilisi Sea Plaza", which covers a territory of 150,000 square metres in total, including a shopping mall, a market

zone, a parking area, a processing zone, a custom bond zone, warehouses, pedestrian streets, restaurants and other facilities.

Picture 2: Hualing Tbilisi Sea Plaza, September 2016



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According to insider information, the Sea Plaza was projected to replace or give a new home to Lilo. This idea has failed, as Lilo's administration and marketing people were not ready to relocate, and Lilo continues to function as a trading hub. Hence, as written on Hualing's homepage, the Sea Plaza is intended to "become the largest [...] wholesale, retail and distribution centre [...] [in the] Euro-Asian region."²

Picture 3: Shop in the Market Section of Hualing Tbilisi Sea Plaza, September 2016



Copyright: Susanne Fehlings

Hualing Group is based in Urumqi, the capital of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. The company's founder, Mi Enhua, is a Hui Muslim who is listed in the "Biographical Dictionary of New Chinese Entrepreneurs and Business Leaders" (Zhang & Alon, 2009). In 2003, Asia Money ranked him the 38th wealthiest individual in China with estimated assets of \$155 million. Having started his business with a construction materials market in Urumqi, Mi Enhua took advantage of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the booming trade with Kazakhstan and Russia in the 1990s. He represents a broader group of Chinese Muslims who are characterized as agents of Chinese globalization

taking over the role of mediators for other Chinese interest groups in the context of the BRI (Wang, 2018). Indeed, Hualing's elites participate in all major meetings, such as the Silk Road Forum, and are involved in many cultural events promoting Chinese-Georgian partnership.

To Hualing's elites, Georgia means a permanent commitment that mirrors the company's attitude towards local people. The Georgian workers of Hualing Group report very positive experiences with their Chinese bosses. Hualing offers good working conditions: good salaries, reasonable working hours, and a respectful and friendly atmosphere. Sometimes, employees are even given access to cheap housing in Hualing city. On major festivals, employees receive presents, and quite often, a personal relationship built on trust between Chinese and Georgians in the context of work has been established. Vacho, one of my interlocutors doing customs clearance for Hualing, was impressed with how much effort the Chinese put into establishing mutual understanding and trust and adapting to local codes of conduct. Thus, Hualing representatives participate in Georgian banquets and sometimes take over the role of tamadas (table masters). They care for their staff and do not avoid meeting their (social) obligations. Vacho was particularly impressed by the fact that his boss attended the funeral of one of Vacho's relatives. By participating in such local rituals, Hualing's representatives strengthen the social bond with locals. In return, Vacho, like other Georgian employees of the company, considers his bosses friends and performs the role of a cultural broker for them.

At the everyday level, there seems to be little interaction between the different Chinese subgroups. As I was told by John, the paths of different parties usually do not cross, except at embassy-organized events such as the spring festival. Different Chinese actors must be regarded as representing different interests, and obviously, they use different strategies to establish themselves in the Caucasus.

Conclusion

Personal encounters within the BRI in the Caucasus are framed by prejudices about the "yellow peril" and romanticism on the one hand and trusting relationships between individuals on the other.

The described cases exemplify different perspectives on strategies of cooperation and other encounters. Far from being representative, these perspectives allow some insights into the grassroots level of interaction and of mutual perception. They show that much depends on

² <http://hualing.ge/language/en/tbilisi-sea-plaza/>

whether Chinese individuals stay temporarily in Georgia or engage in long-term projects.

According to Mathews (2015:120), “In an age of globalization, people are increasingly thrust into parts of the world of which they may know little”. Sometimes, this does not cause any problems. As John’s example shows, many Chinese work in places to which they do not establish any connection. They know that their stay is temporary. The cooperation on which this business is based takes place at the official state level—the level of trade agreements and diplomacy. In Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan, this level has been reframed under the BRI and currently pertains to the development of infrastructure—road, railway and port construction.

Some private companies striving for long-term goals, however, try to establish permanent links with locals. Here, “it is cultural brokers who provide them an anchor of cultural knowledge” (Mathews, 2015:120). Hualing has established good relationships with local power elites, business partners and employees. Such attempts, to my knowledge, have not been successful in Armenia so far. For Azerbaijan, I lack information. In Georgia, on a personal level, there seems to be a common ground, a common language based on shared concepts such as trust, honour, sociability, reciprocity and friendships. Here, most problems now occur in the formal context of bureaucracy. Trusted Georgians who act as cultural brokers are most important for navigating obstacles in these situations.

About the Author

Susanne Fehlings is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department for Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Goethe University Frankfurt am Main. She is the research group leader of the Volkswagen Foundation-funded project “Informal Markets and Trade in Central Asia and the Caucasus” and has specialized in small-scale trade between China and the Caucasus.

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