

## Formation and Longevity of Network Relationship Practices of Ghanaian Traders Importing from China

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### Abstract

Using qualitative data gathered in Ghana and China from Ghanaian importers of Chinese products, this paper addresses two major gaps in the social network literature: formation and cessation of network relationships. The study adapts social network theory, social exchange theory, and rational choice theory to argue that networks are purposely established when a party desires a result and set objective(s) it lacks the competence to accomplish. That party will procure the services of a competent person, at a cost, in order to achieve the set objective(s). It is argued that besides the lack of personal capacity, opportunity cost also explains the formation of network relationships. Furthermore, subject to the nature and personal characteristics of the object to be obtained and the parties to the formed network, the relationship may turn out to be either a one-off transaction or could become an enduring exchange relationship.

**Keywords:** Social Network, Network Formation, Network Cessation, Africa in China, Ghana, Transnational traders.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/contjas.v5i1.1>

## Formation and Longévité de Relations sur les Réseaux Pratiques de marchands ghanéens important des produits de Chine.

### Résumé

En s'appuyant sur de données qualitatives collectées au Ghana et en Chine auprès des importateurs de produits chinois, cet article fait le point sur deux lacunes principales qui existent dans la littérature sur les réseaux sociaux: la formation et la rupture de relations sur les réseaux sociaux. Cette étude, à l'aide de la théorie de réseaux sociaux, la théorie d'échange social et la théorie du choix rationnel, tient que les réseaux sont délibérément établis lorsqu'une partie désire obtenir des résultats mais ne

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possède pas les compétences pour en atteindre les objectifs définis. Ladite partie engagera les services d'une personne compétente, moyennant un prix, afin d'atteindre lesdits objectifs. Il est soutenu qu'outre le manque de capacité personnelle, le coût d'opportunité explique également la formation de relations sur les réseaux sociaux. Par ailleurs, en fonction de la nature et des caractéristiques personnelles de l'objet [de la relation] et des parties au réseau créé, la relation pourrait être soit une seule transaction ou une relation d'échange durable.

### **Introduction**

Increasingly, we are being made aware of the interdependencies of social life. The twenty-first century is characterised by communication and transportation technologies that have resulted in the shrinking of the world, making it much smaller, and therefore bringing into close and regular contacts individuals spatially distant from each other (Meyer, 2007; Prell, 2012). Our knowledge of the fact that the world is both large and small makes us more sensitive to the idea that our actions affect others around the world, and that those we know in our social circles could help connect us with someone in a distant land (Herz and Olivier, 2013). The networks are thus a form of social capital (Golub and Hansen-Lewis, 2012) and can contribute to economic activities. The networks, particularly in transnational trade, help create bonds of trust that enable contract fulfilments, access to financing, and information exchange with or without documentation or official involvement (Putnam, 1995; Golub and Hansen Lewis, 2012; Cisse, 2015). In Guangzhou, China, Mathews et. al. (2017) demonstrate vividly how such networks facilitate a form of globalization based on informality, reputation, and trust, rather than on formal contracts, particularly between Chinese and sub-Saharan Africans who do not share a common language, culture, or religion with Chinese. The relevance of networks to members and non-members, as well as the benefits that individuals or groups derive from an established network, are well discussed in the existing literature (see Cisse, 2015; Marfaing & Thiel, 2015). For example, African diaspora trade networks have increased the availability of market information essential for trade by hosting country exporters, helping them to find buyers, and improving their

knowledge of the market (Plaza and Ratha, 2011). These, as argued by Cisse (2015), have facilitated business expansion into new markets including Asia.

However, network theory is challenged on two major fronts when applied to transnational trade networks. First, the theory and researchers within the field have rarely described what transnational networks are, and how they are established, or in which context they can be found. They have instead focused on questions such as how information networks among internationally dispersed ethnic minorities or business groups can overcome informal trade barriers, such as inadequate information about trading opportunities and weak enforcement of international contracts (see Casella and Rauch, 2001; Petropoulou, 2005; Rauch, 2010). On the other hand, scholars such as Marfaing and Thiel (2015) focus on how these networks have been utilised to advance entrepreneurial success and social mobility through the circulation of capital from established entrepreneurs and “newcomers” in a distinct yet mutually integrated network. The relevance of network to trade, accordingly, is gender neutral, argued Huynh (2016); and consequently, she dismisses the presentation of African transnational trade as a field for men. She argues that women develop partnerships with other women to extend the spaces of trade (p.502). In the area of transnational trade one group that has received massive research interest is the Mourides of Senegal and The Gambia (see Babou, 2002; Diouf, 2000; Tall 2004). In various cities around the world, the Mourides are known to congregate in one neighbourhood sharing and providing mutual support and serving as a springboard for commercial success (Golub and Hansen-Lewis, 2012: 180-181). Membership of these networks have been limited to family and ethnic members (Tall 2004). As a result of these close-knitted relationships, Mourides connections are sufficient to guarantee fulfilment of obligations and thus deter dishonesty, because violations would betray the bonds of oneness. As important as these groups of literature are to our understanding of trade networks, these sets of works have focused on homogenous groups with little or no work done on heterogeneous populations who, unlike the Mourides, cannot fall on any “moral binding community” to illicit compliance from participants to a network relationship. In addition, the existing literature fails to elucidate how this network relationship gets terminated or severed when formed (Herz and Olivier 2013). Against this

backdrop, this paper contributes to the body of scholarship on the subject by focusing on the activities of a heterogeneous population to answer the following questions: how are networks formed, what are the contexts in which these networks get formed, and what factors determine the longevity of established network relationship?

These questions are answered by using the experiences of Ghanaian traders who import commodities from China. The paper argues that networks are purposely established when a party desires a result but lacks the personal capacity to accomplish the set objective(s). The party will thus procure the services of a competent person or persons at a cost in order to realise the set objective(s). It is further argued that besides the lack of personal capacity, opportunity cost also explains the formation of network relationships. On longevity of network relationship, it is argued that, subject to the nature and personal characteristics of the object to be obtained and the parties to the formed network, the relationship may either turn out to be a one-off exchange or become an enduring exchange relationship.

In the next section, the paper discusses the context of African transnational trade. This is followed by the methods, discussion of findings and conclusions.

### **African Transnational Trade Network**

Transnationalism, a concept whose origin can be located within the field of migration research (Glick-Schiller, Basch, and Blanc, 1992), has gained popularity in the last two decades (Herz and Olivier, 2013) and refers to cross-border relationships and networks. The analytical framework of transnationalism helps in the understanding of the cross-cutting transfer of ideas and transnational support, as well as the formation of opinions and lifestyles beyond nation states. These ideas and opinions are facilitated by transnational social/commercial networks which are mediated by communication technologies or through transportation, migration and mobility, and can, therefore, be organized in different ways (Herz and Olivier, 2013). As a result, transnationalism challenges methodological nationalism. Some of the researchers in the social sciences that have employed this framework include Olivier (2010, cited in Herz and Olivier, 2013), on networking as strategies in non-governmental organisations; Hochschild (2000), on care arrangements;

Hondagneu-Sotelo (1997), on transnational motherhood; Adiku (2012), on transnational marriages; and Setrana and Tonah (2016) on transnational businesses of return migrants. Mention can also be made of social remittances like knowledge and value transmission in the works of Levitt and Nieves (2011).

Transnational Network analysis therefore moves sociologists away from the study of social groups and social categories towards the study of ties among and between actors that are not “sufficiently bounded and densely knit to be termed groups” (Barnes 1954 cited in Wellman, 1983:37). A classical contribution to this school is Granovetter’s work on “the strength of weak ties”. Here, Granovetter (1973) differentiates between “strong ties” as links between people and their close friends, and “weak ties” between people and mere acquaintances. In this work, Granovetter brings into focus the importance of weak ties, which hitherto had been deemed trivial to sociological research, without necessarily compromising the value embedded in strong ties (1983:209).

Transnational trade networks involving Africans have originally been formed around shared identities such as ethnicity, country of origin, and religious affiliation (Cisse, 2015). The Mourides of Senegal and The Gambia have drawn the most attention from researchers (Ebin, 1995; Barron, Field and Schuller, 2000; Diouf, 2000; Tall, 2004; Golub and Hansen-Lewis, 2012) who explore African transnational trade networks due to their trading successes both within Africa and across other continents through international migration. Anchored on strong ties and affiliations, Mourides migrate to other African countries, Europe, Asia and America to buy wholesale products to resell both at wholesale and retail prices through their chain of transnational /international networks (Ebin, 1995; Cisse 2015). The influx of the Mourides to urban centres has been fostered by their international migration to Europe and the United States, particularly with their brotherhood becoming a highly effective international trading group (Golub and Hansen-Lewis, 2012; Cisse, 2015), the Mourides have thus created generations old networks which link together their communities in Europe, America and West Africa as well as maintaining ties with merchants in Dakar (Ebin, 1995).

A similar observation is made by Igué, (2003) on the Yorubas of Nigeria. Facilitated by kinship ties, the Yorubas remain at the centre of a large informal international trade network in West Africa. Those who succeed in their business often bring their relatives to assist them or later run their own business (see also Cisse, 2015).

In the case of Ghanaians, Obeng (2014:23), reports that the expansion of their trade networks abroad is tailored to the migration pattern of their international migrants, which has generally been determined by linguistic similarities or proximity as well as colonial ties (Bump, 2006). So, for instance, when significant numbers of Ghanaians relocated to other countries on the West coast of Africa, the importers were also carting commodities from these main locations. When the country experienced deteriorating economic fortunes, leading to a wave of emigrations, the destination of traders also expanded in response to the general migration routes with particular reference to Western Europe and Northern America. Importing from Western Europe and America, among Ghanaians, however, restricted the import business to those few who had adequate resources and status as a result of the strict visa requirements of these Western destinations (Darkwah, 2007).

The utility of such networks has recently become very pertinent as Africans began to engage with Asia in volumes never witnessed before (Obeng, 2014). Marfaing and Thiel (2015) highlight the utility of these relationship for West African importers of Chinese products in the following manner, “the networked socio-economic life... have important effects on members’ entrepreneurial success and upward social mobility” (p.65). Still on the relevance of networks for trading activities, Meagher (2010) identifies two types of networks, namely networks of accumulation and networks of survival. While the former offer selective benefits to kin and community mediated relations, the former lack such strong familial solidarity. Marfaing and Thiel (2015), interrogating Meagher’s typology, suggest that although Ghanaians and Senegalese networks are networks of survival and without any familial solidarity they are still able to advance in their enterprise and do eventually gain access to network of accumulation through functional contacts with Chinese businesses and other national business channels.

These networks have been referred to variously in the existing literature. Darkwah (2002) described these networks in Bangkok, Thailand, as transient

nationalistic networks, owing to their fluid nature in the host city and their clustering around shared communities of origin. Bodomo (2010), on the other hand, referred to the African trading community in Guangzhou as an emerging bridge for AFRICA-China<sup>1</sup> relationship. Assessing the bases upon which these networks are procured as well as the functions they perform particularly for commodity importers in China, Obeng (2015:72) labelled them as constituting a network of Trusted Experienced Transnational Traders (TETT), nomenclature I adopt in this paper.

In contrast to Bodomo (2010), Mathews et. al. (2015) prefer ‘cultural brokers’ as appropriate description for the Africans in China, based on their roles in assisting African customers to practically adjust to the Chinese life, and to grease the wheels of commerce between African customers and Chinese suppliers. In this paper however I use ‘network’ because the analysis adopts a transnational approach: which is broader compared to the relatively fixed locational focus of these other concepts. The utilisation of these networks usually begins in the home country, continues into the host country, and stretches out in time in a back and forth exchange.

These networks are central to the decision making process and beyond. They facilitate all aspects of trading particularly for merchants, who travel for a short period of time to, especially non-traditional trading destinations, to buy products. They assist with access to travelling documentations in the home country once business collaboration is established and in the host country they provide important services, including translation services, market survey, placement of order and purchases, payment and shipment. (Bodomo 2010; Cisse 2015; Obeng 2015). These networks are so effective that traders sometimes do not even need to travel in order to procure their commodities.

Transnationalism embraces the analytical framework, the tools, as well as concepts embedded in social network theory. For example, network size — referring to the number of participants in a network (Vertovec, 2003); density— the “extent to which ego’s contacts know each other” (Mitchell, 1969:15); multiplexity — the degree to which relations between participants include overlapping institutional spheres (Portes, 1995: 9-10); “actor

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<sup>1</sup> [AFRICA – China] – Bodomo never says China – Africa!

attributes” — additional information on each actor such as age and sex; and “ego network” — social networks of a particular focal actor, e.g. ego’s alters and the ties linking ego to alters and alters to alters (see Vertovec (2003:647 and Prell 2012).

In applying this to the analysis of activities of Ghanaian transnational traders importing consumables from China to Ghana, I adopt the ego-centred approach. In this approach, even though attempts are made to highlight the characteristics, as well as the intensity of the ties that exist between parties in a network relationship, this is only done in so far as it is connected to the activities of the transnational trader. The approach centres on the ties that are utilised by Ghanaian transnational traders as they embark on their businesses, emphasizing the conditions and factors that result in the formation of networks as well as the durability or otherwise of the relationships built. In this direction, it focuses on the processes, the mechanisms and the systems that are devised by the trader in order to procure the needed travelling documents, to survey the market, and to procure the commodities, among others. In the process, I highlight these egos’ attributes, as well as the forms of ties and the actors’ attributes so as to properly conceptualise the network processes.

### **Research Method**

Data for this paper was collected both in Ghana and China during a larger study which sought to understand the networks and strategies employed by Ghanaian transnational traders who import consumables from China. The respondents included both Ghanaians and Chinese citizens involved in the burgeoning trading relationship between Ghana and China. Multiple ethnographic methods were used. These included in-depth interviews with fifty Ghanaian importers — thirty in Accra and twenty in Kumasi [the two biggest commercial cities in Ghana]. This was supplemented with key informant interviews with visa agents in Ghana and itinerant agents in China. The itinerant agents included both Ghanaian and Chinese citizens. Other Chinese nationals interviewed were suppliers and shop attendants from whom the Ghanaian importers bought products. Additional data was solicited from Ghanaian residents in China whose livelihoods were connected to the import business. The last set of data was collected through a non-participant observation which entailed following two traders on their



trading routines in Guangzhou and Yiwu, China and observing their navigation processes. A total of eighty nine (89) interviews were held in order to properly contextualise the narratives and experiences of these transnational traders. All interviews were transcribed, manually analysed and discussed under the themes that emerged as well as themes suggested by the literature on the ‘China in Africa’, social exchange, and by rational choice and the network theories. Even though the narratives and discussions are presented mostly in the form of general themes, as indicated by the data, there are instances where specific cases are cited and presented verbatim to illustrate such positions. In all such cases the names used are not the real names of the respondents but are the author’s own construct to hide the respondents’ identity.

### **Overview of Ghanaian Transnational Traders Importing from China**

The study reveals that the formation and permanency of network relationships are determined by two major characteristics of traders: namely, transnational trade experience and import capacity. In the former three categories of traders are identifiable, namely, “the novices” for whom China represents an entry into international trade. The second are “the expansionist” — comprising traders for whom China represents an extension of business; they have previously traded along the coast of West Africa, and the third are “the global shifters” comprising experienced large scale importers who have either shifted their main source of import from the Global North to China or are combining China with their previous destination(s).

Similarly, the traders can be categorised into small scale and large scale importers based on their volume of imports. The small scale traders (most of whom are in the first and second category, in terms transnational trading experience) are characterized by the following: first, they do not have a particular supplier from whom they import. Because of this, they have limited control over the design, style and sizes of the product they import. Their success in the business is, therefore, governed by chance. Therefore, to be successful they have to move from one retail unit to another in search of marketable items which they purchase in limited **pieces**[quantities?]. Though doing so is very stressful and time consuming, they have the

advantage of importing less compromised quality imports because they procure displayed items mainly, which serves as a greater form of guarantee. However, their small volumes of import do not make it possible for them to hire a full container and, therefore, apply for joint ownership, technically referred to as ‘Less than Container Load’ (LCL)<sup>2</sup>. The large scale traders on the other hand are experienced importers who have previously imported from Europe and the USA. They enjoy more control over their type of imports. These importers, by virtue of their large capital, are able to deal directly with wholesalers and manufacturers. This direct access allows them to order for items to be produced to their own specifications. Some of them have their products branded with their registered trademarks. A second difference is that, unlike the small scale importers, those in this group place orders with specific manufacturers, usually located in the small towns, instead of searching for commodities from different retail outlets in the commercial districts. Alternatively, the traders may go to the factory’s showrooms in the commercial cities. One of the greatest advantages these importers enjoy over their small scale counterparts is that of economies of scale. This also ends up being the biggest threat to their business. Because of the large volumes of import, they are not always able to verify the quality and specifications of all the items ordered, which predisposes them to shipping home questionable products — a feature that makes the services of networks quite pivotal in their chain of activities. I return to this discussion.

#### *Formation of Transnational Trade Network among Ghanaian Importers*

Although the transnational network theory has been very popular for decades and has been used in researching activities across borders, the existing works have failed to address the subject of how network relationships come into existence. It has apparently been assumed that everybody understands how they work (Herz and Olivier 2013), and this is taken for granted because most works on the subject have focused on networks of homogenous groups (family/kinship, ethnicity or religious members) characterised by strong bond of solidarity among members (Babou,

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<sup>2</sup>The LCL implies that two or more importers hire a container and share the cost, based on the space occupied by their respective goods.

2002, Diouf, 2000; Golub and Hansen-Lewis, 2012; Tall 2004). Others have focused on networks and their functionality (see Bodomo, 2012; Cisse, 2015; Marfaing and Theil, 2015). In the case of non-homogenous groups, the closest sociological contribution towards answering the network formation question is gleaned from Blau's Social Exchange theory (Blau, 1964). Blau suggests that people are more likely to procure the service or support of others when they desire a particular outcome, yet realise that they can only achieve such objectives through another person. Under such circumstances, a person must dispense with some personal comforts in exchange for the services of the resourced individual. By this orientation, Blau suggests that the establishment of network relationships is need-driven. Similar postulations are made by Bodomo who describes African residents in Guangzhou as serving as cultural and economic bridges between their source communities and their host communities, even in the midst of tensions created by incidents such as immigration restrictions and irregularities (Bodomo, 2010). Marby and Mervyn (2012) argues that networks are desired because of humans' basic need to bond with others.

Consistent with Blau's (1964) proposition, all the traders revealed that to participate in the Chinese economy they needed, or once needed, an intermediary as a result of their personal incapacity manifesting itself in China's newness as an import destination (Obeng, 2015). Apart from the 'unknownness', the Chinese language also served as a major hurdle to the traders' ability to independently import their items. Until five years ago the Chinese language was not taught in any Ghanaian institution, and to date it remains very alien to most Ghanaians. Additionally, China, unlike Europe or North America, has not traditionally been an emigration destination for Ghanaians, in spite of Ghanaians' notoriety for travelling abroad (Peil, 1995; Obeng, 2015).

The above challenges are further complicated by the reported treachery that characterises business transactions in China (See Haugen, 2011) as well the increasing pressure mounted on Africans by the Chinese police (Caiyu, 2017). Those who import from China therefore had to do so with the assistance of paid intermediaries (Bodomo, 2012; Cisse 2015; Haugen 2015).

In China these elements of the network comprised both professionals and non-professionals, Africans and non-Africans, who have stayed in China for

considerable periods and are familiar with Chinese business practices. They constitute what Prell (2012:9) refers to as ‘event networks’, because they may or may not indicate a more permanent state of relationship, but they ensure that the objectives of the focal actor are accomplished. By the network theory, the focal actor, in this case the transnational trader, is referred to as the ‘ego’ and the people to whom ego is connected are ‘alters’. The alters who ensure that the egos realise their objectives as importers, include all other persons whose services are engaged by the traders in the course of their trading enterprise. They cut across borders and are identifiable in two interrelated stages: the preparatory stages in Ghana and the procurement and conveying stage in China. The use of agents in these different stages is influenced by the two main trader characteristics: transnational trade experience and volume of import.

This study however identified another basis for the formation of networks in addition to the need-driven one — that is “opportunity cost”. Formation of network by opportunity cost refers to situations where individuals opt to form trade network(s) and remain committed to the network(s) and in fulfilment part with some personal comfort in exchange for the services of others, even though s/he possess all the competences and qualification required to undertake the said exercise in person in anticipation of a superior benefit. I demonstrate how this works in the subsequent sections in Ghana and in China.

#### *Formation and Utilisation of Trade Networks*

The formation of networks in Ghana is usually in connection with visa acquisition and market survey. The former, however, remains the focal point for the procurement of key intermediaries. There are two grounds for the procurement of a network to facilitate the acquisition of a Chinese visa, namely “necessity” and “opportunity cost”. Whilst the formation of networks by necessity applies mostly to the small scale traders (novices and expansionist traders), formation by opportunity cost applies to the large scale global shifters. For the small scale traders the ‘necessity’ is a consequence of a combination of factors including the lack of knowledge of the processes, lack of the required travel and business documents and key contacts, as well as trading exposure. As novices they never applied for business related visas

and thus had never prepared for or attended visa interviews. Additionally, as a result of their small capital as well as the piecemeal means to making purchases from retail outlets, these traders lack the capacity to secure the services of major Chinese suppliers who wield the competence to provide them a letter of invitation.<sup>3</sup> As a result of these constraining circumstances, procuring the services of the visa agent who has proved to possess the capacity to facilitate their visa acquisition at a cost becomes the only means to getting a Chinese visa.

Formation of network by “opportunity cost” on the other hand is evidenced in the narratives of a respondent from Kumasi:

Oh when I started the China business about three years ago I was going to Accra to process the visa myself. You know, I had some of my family members in Accra so I will spend the night at home and return after submitting the documents.... I have stopped that for about a year now. I rather send the documents by “Ford” [courier service] to the agent to process it for me. It is more reasonable, it saves me time, money and the stress at the Embassy. You have to wake up very early and queue at the gate, and be shoved here and there by other people. I can no longer..., *I will rather give the agent 500 cedis [US\$ 250<sup>4</sup>] and stay in my shop or use the time to do other business that can fetch me some money. Time is money...* (Jacob, Kumasi, 2013 Emphasis mine)

Jacob, like some of the other respondents, initially processed his visa in person. As a large scale and experienced importer, he had the necessary exposure in the form of the visa requirements and also was able to procure all the required documents, such as a valid passport, business registration and tax clearance certificates, as well as the minimum capital requirements, and thus did not require the service of any intermediary in procuring his visa.

For Jacob and his kind, the services of networks are procured on the basis of the opportunity cost that the traders desire to forgo. The latter part of

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<sup>3</sup> As a measure by the Chinese authorities to control the number of persons who enter the country and to ensure that all persons who enter have legitimate business, the immigration service now insists that all persons desiring to enter China must produce a letter of invitation, a document that can only be issued by registered traders with accreditation from the Chinese authority. Most of these traders operate at wholesale levels.

<sup>4</sup> The figure is as at the (August-December) 2013 exchange rate. The Ghanaian currency has since depreciated over 80%. The current rate (as at the beginning of 2017) was about \$1: Ghs 4.00

Jacob's justification confirms this. The opportunity cost for joining the long queue and struggling endlessly at the entrance of the Chinese Embassy and leaving their businesses in pursuit of a Chinese visa is much higher than the amount to be paid to the visa contractor. As stated by Jacob, considering the sum of GHs 200 that one has to pay for a visa, if one secures it in person, the struggle that one has to endure, and the long wait at the entrance of the embassy, paying GHs 500 for the visa through a proxy is a better option. The roles that these networks perform are thus consistent with the general value of alters as people who help new enterprise/entrepreneurs to reduce cost whilst lowering the risk of embarking on a new venture (Naude and Havenga, 2005).

Irrespective of the justification for the formation of trader's network the process is undertaken in carefully thought out manner. This involved resorting to Trusted Experienced Transnational Traders (TETTs) as intermediaries. The TETT comprised family members, friends and other strong ties members. For most traders, the relationship with the TETTs predated their intention to import from China. Normally these TETTs had previously been assisted by the recommended visa contractors and thus were able to vouch for their integrity and capabilities to secure a valid visa. The function of these TETTs is synonymous with the functions of Granovetter's (1983) weak and strong ties and functioned as 'solidarity networks' in the words of Barr (2002).

After securing the visa, the traders will usually embark on different forms of "market survey". This applies to all traders, but particularly to first-timers and, to a greater extent, the importers of Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG). Market survey is described as the next phase for analytical purposes only, because there are traders who embarked on this process concurrently with the visa acquisition. Additionally, there were a few other traders who reported not having undertaken such an exercise. This was because they were already in the said industry and so needed no prior market survey.

The purpose of the market survey was twofold. For first time importers, the market surveys were used to identify the various types of commodities available in the market and the prices at which they were sold. The information gathered through the survey was subsequently used by the

traders to benchmark their price negotiation as well as product search in China. This is important because, importers always aim at importing the newest brands of goods at a relatively cheap cost. It is this that determines the extent of their profitability. See Obeng (2014) for a detailed analysis of this navigation process. Unlike the visa procurement, in this instance the intermediaries engaged were not paid and the relationship usually turned out to be a one-off exchange.

In preparing for the trip abroad, the services of procured networks are very pivotal, particularly for the small scale traders — a result of their inexperience, as well as their lack of familiarity with the Chinese terrain. In Ghana different people were engaged for specific tasks. First is the plan to undertake the business trip in the company of experienced traders. Though all the traders initiated the process with the help of close ties to an experienced importer, not all were successful. The refusal of some experienced traders to accompany new traders, in spite of their being recommended by strong ties of the experienced importer, places a limit on the utility of weak ties and their potential to enable networks access resources that are ordinarily out of their reach. This study thus advocates a delimitation of the utility of Granovetter's strength of weak ties. Although weak ties are instrumental in accessing valuables, the benefits thereof are only accessible within a context of strict cost and benefit exchange between the 'bridge'<sup>5</sup> and the 'weak tie'<sup>6</sup>. People can only benefit from such relationships if the referred weak tie stands to either benefit from the relationship or lose significantly should s/he fail to offer those supports to the third party. In the absence of such reinforcing or constraining factors, weak ties are likely to be indifferent to such a relationship. This can be couched, though sarcastically, as a matter of "who knows you" and not "whom you know" (see Sondheim et al 2010).

For the traders who were accompanied by experienced traders, their navigation in China was usually directed by the experienced traders and their networks. They led and made available to the novices the services of other alters to facilitate their airport pick-up, accommodation and, most

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<sup>5</sup> A line in a network which provides the only path between points [the nascent and the experienced trader] (Harary, Norman & Cartwright (1965:198).

<sup>6</sup> A contact who is not related to a party in any strong relationship such as kinship ties.

importantly, the guided errands in China. This role of networks is consistent with the existing literature in migration studies. In particular, a migrant network is credited for making it possible for resource-poor people to gain the wherewithal to migrate and, once they do, to get socially and economically integrated into the host society (see Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993: 1327). Because of the socially binding relationship that exists between these parties [i.e. between TETT and the novice], for most of these traders, procuring the services of these people [TETTs] came with no direct financial cost. This observation vindicates Granovetter's criticism of the atomistic position of the formalist economists who have argued that actions of people in modern societies, unlike in the traditional small scale, are guided purely by individual utility maximisation usually framed in financial benefits (Asante, 2013).

In the case where the preferred option of embarking on the trip with an experienced importer failed, as it did for a couple of traders, a more detailed process was employed by the traders. Key among the strategies was the need to secure a contact person in China. These contact persons were secured mostly through other traders. The rest were secured through the help of visa contractors or their travelling agents, whilst others searched the internet for them.

Irrespective of how the traders got to China, to be able to make purchases they had to procure the services of an itinerant agent at a financial cost. The services of these agents are fundamental to their businesses. They assist the traders to navigate the business territory, make purchases, package and convey procured items to Ghana. The need to have this network is further anchored on the reported potential threat of theft, abuse and even police high-handedness (Caiyu, 2017; Lan, 2015). This observation is shared by the Chinese currently in Africa. Haugen (2011; 167) reports that the Chinese in Cape Verde see the Africans:

... as lacking both the skills and the zeal necessary to succeed in a *treacherous Chinese business environment which required extreme vigilance as well as good bargaining skills for a successful purchase, lest you end up with goods of different quantity or quality than what you paid for* (Emphasis mine).



As a result of these factors, all traders arranged with their network member to be picked-up at the airport upon arrival. The navigation process thus typically begins at the arrival hall of the Baiyun International Airport in Guangzhou and ends at the departure hall of the same airport. Chronologically, the activities of the itinerant agent continue with the icebreaking meeting used to determine the structure of the work and the modalities and also to plan schedules and ultimately to finalise the terms of payments. Next are the city tour and procurement processes. The procurement stage is usually determined by the type of importer, whether large or small scale.

The rest of the mediated activities are the arrangement with the shipping house or the cargo section of the airline. The nuances of the relationship are discussed next, with emphasis on the longevity of network relationships.

#### *Longevity of formed Networks*

The literature on networks remains silent on how networks, when purposely procured, get terminated (Herz and Olivier, 2013). Peter Blau, in his social exchange analysis, viewed social exchange as contingent on rewarding reaction from the actions of others. He argues that relationships will cease when the expected reactions are not forthcoming. Once the initial ties are forged, the rewards they provide to each other serve to maintain and enhance the bonds. The occurrence of disequilibrium weakens or breaks such a relationship. In the case of this study, disequilibrium, may occur in two forms, namely accusations of thievery and the lack of commitment and dedication on the part of procured network. The reverse is also applicable on the part of the importers. In this instance, the traders are accused of failing to pay or not paying promptly for the services rendered by agents.

On accusations of thievery, the traders cited instances where itinerant agents took or attempted to take advantage of them by conniving with a Chinese supplier to pad up the trader's bill. The agents then receive the extra money secretly when payments are made by the unsuspecting traders, in addition to the agreed service charge. Some traders also recount situations where the cost of services procured on their behalf was deliberately inflated. A case in point is when an agent deliberately inflated the cost of transportation required to cart goods from the factory to the warehouse so

that he could hire a bigger van to accommodate another trader's goods at the expense of the first trader. Not convinced about the huge sums to be paid, she quizzed the agent as to why such a huge amount was to be paid for a delivery van. This interrogation revealed the dubious intention of the agent.

Beyond this unethical charge is the issue of lack of dedication to their supervisory roles when the traders entrust them with their ordered goods. With ordered commodities, the agents are expected to ensure that they are delivered in the agreed quality and quantity. The agents, thus, play an important role in the activities of the traders in the form of gate keeping. Any demonstration of lack of commitment could result in a huge financial loss to the trader. Mrs. Masanba recounts unprofessionalism on the part of an agent and how it almost ruined her business as follows:

I checked and gave the suppliers a sample of what I wanted, but the production was to take more days than I was going to be available, and so I asked my agent to follow up and ensure that it was properly done. When they brought it to me in Ghana, it was of a different texture altogether. So I had to reduce the price to get rid of it because it was of a poorer quality than I had showed them. Again it was close to the expiry date, so I decided to reduce the price to get a little bit of my money. I lost about \$7,000...

When asked if she meant seven thousand dollars, Mrs Mansaba remarked as follows:

Yes, I nearly went out of business, because, look at the money I put into the business and I needed to get rid of it before the expiry date so I had to reduce it and I lost the \$7,000 in the process.

Beside the subject of (dis)equilibrium, which is consistent with Blau's proposition, the findings of this study further reveal relevance and necessity as basis for determining the length of network relationships. As indicated, one of the fundamental reasons for procuring the services of agents is the traders' lack of information and familiarity with the Chinese business terrain. With time the services of agents become irrelevant and an avoidable cost. For rational beings, terminating the relationship becomes a logical option because networks no longer served as "a means to an end". Consistent with the rational choice theory, these traders choose the alternative that is likely to give them the greatest satisfaction, in this case, disposing of the agent who,

only adds to the cost with little or no return (Heath 1976; Coleman 1973). As Blau (1998) puts it, if one had the ability to achieve one's goal alone, or through any other non-specific individual, then there would be no need for another to aid them in the pursuit of those goals. For instance, when Obuaba was asked whether he still employs the services of his agents, he responded:

Ah! Now that I can communicate with the people directly, why should I continue using him [the agent]? In the early days I did not know where to buy the items but now that I know I don't need him anymore. I just pick the taxi or the train and then I am gone.

In the case of Obuaba and others like him, the decision to sever their relationships with their agents was not made because these agents had failed to do their part, but rather because, overtime these traders had learnt to navigate the business district independently of their agents. This is in sharp contrast with the justification of Mrs. Mansaba who dispensed with the services of her agents for their lack of dedication to duty which resulted almost in the collapse of her business.

#### *Context of Network Cessation*

Although people were prone to sever networks with the occurrence of disequilibrium in all its forms, the study revealed that this did not occur automatically. Instead, the decision to cut or keep the ties was determined by the characteristics of the trader in question. Examining the decision taken by traders, two substantive conclusions emerge. These are the capacity of the trader and relevance of the agent to the business of the principal. Whereas it is easy for the small scale importers to terminate the working relationship based on capacity and exigency achieved through experience, the same cannot be said for the bulk buyer. Key to this differences is the mode of procurement that is adopted by the different types of traders.

#### *The Small Scale Importers and the Cessation of a Network Relationship*

For the petty trader who buys in small volumes and from retail outlets in the main business districts of Guangzhou and Yiwu, all it takes is to be conversant with business in China is a combination of vigilance, the ability to use simple phrases in the Chinese language, and a working calculator.

These skills and tools must be supported properly with knowledge of the exchange rates between the Ghanaian currency, the dollar and the Chinese Yuan or RMB. Adequate knowledge in these and three to four trips to China may render an agent irrelevant. The trader may then opt to terminate the engagement. The appropriate usage of these tools and techniques is what Bodomu (2012) refers to as ‘calculator communication’: the traders’ ability to use a combination of the calculator, pidgin Chinese and body cues to transact business with their suppliers without an agent. Three important phrases stand out in this process. The first is: *tiga do sa* [*duo shao qian*<sup>7</sup>] to ask for the price of an item. Next is *tudi tudi*, properly translated to mean “your last price”. This is, however, used by traders to mean “reduce the price”. The third is *haundu haundu*, which translates literally into “many many” but used by the traders to mean “offer me a wholesale price since I will be buying in bulk”.

In practice, these phrases are usually interspersed with English. For instance, a trader who wants to ask of the price of an item will point to the item and, with a combination of body cues, tell the shop owner “this, *tiga do sa*?” The trader may respond by quoting the price, but realising the non-fluency of the trader in the Chinese language, may quickly pick the calculator and punch the price and then show it to the buyer. The trader may then ask for a reduction in price by saying: *tudi tudi*, or pick the calculator, clear the figure and punch in a lower amount. He will quickly tell the supplier that he intends buying in bulk by saying “me buy *haundu haundu*”. The process will continue until there is an agreement between the parties or the trader decides to move on if he/she is unable to get it at the desired price.

The constant refrain *haundu haundu* is used as a bargaining strategy because, in the market, there exists a clear working system between retail and wholesale pricing which rewards wholesale buyers. For example, a trader is able to get items retailed in the same shop down from \$100 to about \$20, if s/he buys in bulk. What constitutes wholesale quantity, nonetheless,

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<sup>7</sup> Although the Chinese respondent and my consultant on basic phrases in Chinese used this phrase, all the traders in the market visited and during the interviews in Ghana used the former to imply ‘how much’ in Chinese.

differs from one shop to the other. Acquiring these competences is the first step to becoming independent.

The second is one's ability to know the various shops and how to move from one shop to another in the various suburbs using a taxi, a bus or the motorised tricycles. The traders have devised two related strategies: first, identify and locate the potential business area and, second: the particular outlet to make the purchases. With respect to the former, the most utilised strategy is taking note of definite landmarks at the destination and the appropriate means of transportation. The landmarks are crucial because of the language barrier. With regard to locating a specific outlet, the approach entails the collection of complimentary cards from the visited shops and making notes behind each card indicating the items of interest and the bargained prices. This is done because most of the complimentary cards have their inscriptions in Chinese.

With these strategies, any time a trader feels conversant with the intricacies mentioned above, he/she may either sever the working relationship during a trip by notice or just ignore the agent on the next visit. The ease with which the relationship can be terminated notwithstanding, some traders continue the relationship, in spite of their familiarity with and the potential corrupt practices of the agents. Often, they review their terms of engagement by putting the agents in a situation where they are allowed to exercise little or no discretion on the basis of which they could exploit the trader financially. They are assigned responsibilities which are mostly in the form of supervising the delivery and shipping of purchased goods. This is an exercise ordinarily outside the control of the importers and must necessarily be carried out on the traders' behalf — a function that embeds the large scale importers in a seemingly perpetual importer-agent relationship.

#### *The Large Scale Importer and the Cessation of a Network Relationship*

The large scale importers, unlike the small scale ones, hardly completely sever their relationship with their agents. Two constraining factors inhibit their ability to do so. First is the mode of purchase and the near impossibility of realising their objectives independently of the agents. These traders buy in bulk through the placement of orders, which sometimes entails travelling to a factory on the outskirts of the city. The growing international stature of

Guangzhou and Yiwu has compelled a number of Chinese suppliers to either learn English or engage the services of assistants who can speak some rudimentary English to facilitate transactions between themselves and their foreign clients. On the outskirts, however, there are barely people who can serve as intermediaries during the traders' visits to the factories. In fact, some respondents felt harassed and emotionally tortured upon visiting the outskirts, even in the company of those who spoke the language. The narratives below help to contextualise the setting of the outskirts and how challenging it could be for an unfamiliar trader to import in such a homogenous society. First, Gertrude:

... When we got to the village I was shocked at the attitude of the people, some immediately moved back whilst the rest stared at me continuously. The few who drew closer were all over me and they were touching my braided hair because they had not seen braids before. It is a small town...a purely indigenous community and there are very few or no foreigners but obviously no black people.

Mawutor, who teaches English in one of such communities in China, was not only shocked by the community's reception but very infuriated to the point where he almost attacked them physically:

I got very angry; maybe if it was in Ghana, I would have beaten somebody up. I was with a colleague who understood the language and heard them talking and speaking quite rudely, but because I did not understand the language, I did not know what they were discussing. So later, I asked the friend and he said they wanted to know whether I was also a human being and that if they cut me they would find blood and whether the blood would be red or black. Hmmm, it was a terrible experience.

The above narrations and experiences of these respondents are in sharp contrast with what pertains in the cities, which makes it easier for the small scale importer to navigate the territory with or without the company of an agent. The situation on the outskirts thus makes the services of the intermediaries very essential, as they become the pivot around which businesses are conducted. There are, however, factories with customer service officers who speak either French or English or both. These officers are usually not in the factory and can only be reached via phone, which does not help enough when it comes to negotiating business deals.

Closely related is the post-order activities which further entrench this relationship. The large scale importers are ordinarily unable to transport their imports on-board the flight because of the large volume of imports as well as the delay that characterises the ordered commodities. In this instance, the agents are entrusted with the task of supervising and ensuring that the commodities are received and shipped to Ghana after the traders have left.

These operational constraints make it impractical for the large scale importer to function in the absence of the agent. This, however, does not mean they do nothing to avoid losses. Rather, instead of ending the relationship, they devise varying strategies aimed at minimising their potential vulnerability. These include replacing a culprit with a new agent; and avoiding outlets suggested by the agent, as it is suspected that the recalcitrant agent might have prearranged prices with the supplier. Where the trader buys from the agent's preferred supplier, the traders will bargain below the agent approved price, failure of which may lead the importer to refuse to accept the offer.

Closely related to the above are the importer's decision not to have the agent serve as a middleman, particularly during price negotiation. The agent may lead the trader to the destination and, even to the particular factory or shop, but would be side-lined in the procurement. This option is only applicable to the very experienced traders but even this is subject to the language skills of the suppliers which determine whether the importer's rudimentary bargaining strategy in the form of "calculator communication" will be enough to transact business.

### **Conclusion**

This study contextualises the literature on transnational networks in two ways. First, it argues that networks are purposely procured with the intention of achieving a given results. Using the experiences of Ghanaian traders who import commodities from China, the study argues that people who desire a given outcome will consciously search and procure the services of others at a cost, if they realise that they personally lack the competence to achieve it. Secondly, the paper contends that in addition to the lack of personal capacity, people also establish networks out of opportunity cost. This refers to a situation where a person, though personally competent to accomplish a given

task, finds it more rewarding to let another person perform that task on his/her behalf. This is done because the cumulative benefits of using a proxy outweigh the cost involved in doing it in person. The latter is an addition to the need-driven or necessity postulation of Peter Blau (1984). With this understanding, this study further proposes that deliberately procured relationships, which are sustained by the state of equilibrium, could get terminated when it becomes apparent that the services of a party are no longer required to accomplish the said task. The study, however, argues that the occurrence of disequilibrium does not automatically result in the cessation of a network relationship. Cessations are subject to the context in which the network relationships are executed. The study therefore contextualises the rational choice theory by positing that whereas all human economic activities can be said to go through the cost-benefit analysis as advocated by theorists within this paradigm, what actually constitutes rationality is situationally and contextually determined. Whereas in a given context, rationality may imply the cessation of a network relationship with the occurrence of disequilibrium, as in the case of the small scale importers, given the context in which the large scale importers operate, cessation may be irrational and rather the re-engagement or replacement of a particular agent with less opportunity to exercise discretion becomes the most economically rational thing to do. For a small scale trader, a few trips to China and strategic planning could suffice in developing the personal competence needed to navigate the unknown business territory, and thus such a trader may consider the cost of an agent's services unnecessary. With such a possibility the occurrence of disequilibrium is more likely to result in network cessation. However, the same cannot be said for large scale importers. This is because they import mainly from the homogenous outskirts and also require the services of an agent, even after their departure, to carry out post procurement activities, such as warehousing and shipping. In such an operational context, the occurrence of disequilibrium in forms such as theft or lack of dedication, though significant, may not be substantial grounds to sever the relationship permanently, irrespective of the number of trips made or years of importing. The context thus embeds the agents into a seemingly perpetual network relationship. Under such conditions, rationality will require a redefining of the terms of engagement or the



replacement of a guilty agent rather than an outright cessation of the networks.

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