

EDGE OF EMPIRES: TRANS-REGIONAL KNIFE-MAKING NETWORKS FROM THE SILK ROADS TO THE PRESENT

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Abstract

This article reconstructs how knife designs, steels, and workshop techniques moved across Central Asia from the medieval Silk Roads into the present, using the Uzbek *pichoq/pchak* tradition as a focal case. I treat knives as “knowledge objects” whose blade alloys, motifs, and maker’s marks encode trade ties and shifts in political economy. Evidence triangulates object study, documentary sources, and contemporary programs: (1) archaeo-metallurgical and materials scholarship to situate steel technologies and object mobility; (2) museum collections and historical records that anchor cross-regional flows; and (3) present-day craft institutions, fairs, and policy tools (notably the new Uzbek framework for geographical indications and the registration of “*Chust pichog’i*”). Findings show a long-run network in which nodes (Chust/Andijan, Bukhara–Samarkand, Kashgar, Mashhad, Tabriz) waxed and waned with imperial and Soviet realignments, while design lineages persisted and re-surged after 1991. I argue that heritage craft acts as soft infrastructure: a repeatable, trust-building channel that supports contemporary cultural diplomacy and trade, evidenced by museum partnerships, joint exhibitions, and measurable tourism and export effects. The conclusion offers a replicable method for mapping craft networks (GIS + typology + interviews) and a policy playbook for heritage-led regional cooperation under the Silk Roads framework.

Keywords

Silk Roads; Uzbekistan; pichoq/pchak; material culture; metallography; cultural diplomacy; geographical indications

1. Introduction

Central Asia’s knife craft sits at the intersection of trade, technology, and identity. Across caravans and courts, blades traveled with steels, stamps, and stories—linking artisans from the Fergana Valley to Iran and Xinjiang. Today, those lineages are visible in workshop practices, fairs, and museum collaborations and are being formalized through policy tools such as geographical indications (GIs).

This article maps those ties diachronically and argues that craft heritage functions as cultural and economic statecraft in the region.

2. Background and Literature

Recent archaeo-metallurgical and network-analytic studies show how metals and techniques moved along Asian corridors well before written “*Silk Road*” histories; such methods support reconstructing object mobility and workshop relations. Parallel work on Central/Inner Asian metalwork and swords demonstrates the value of micro-structural analysis (e.g., neutron diffraction) to identify production choices and circulation.

3. Materials and Methods

- (1) *Object typology & materials*—blade geometry, single-edge grind, handle forms (horn, bone, wood), sheath ornament, and maker marks; cross-checked against metallographic findings where available.
- (2) *Documentary anchors*—museum catalogue records and historical entries (including gifts/diplomatic objects) to locate nodes and edges in the network.
- (3) *Contemporary programs*—policy documents and public announcements on GIs and craft exhibitions, used to connect historical lineages to present economic/cultural initiatives.

4. The Pichoq Tradition: Form, Function, and Variants

The Uzbek *pichoq/pchak* is typically single-edged with a straight or slightly upturned “*willow-leaf*” profile; handles often flare slightly and may end in a beak-like tip; sheaths are straight and can be richly decorated. Subtypes (e.g., *osh-pichoq*, *kassob-pichoq*) correlate with kitchen and butchery uses, while decorative work signals status and region. This technical profile is consistent across ethnographic and heritage accounts and underpins the blade’s role as both tool and identity marker.

5. Historic Networks (1200–1900): Hubs and Flows

Workshops in the Fergana Valley (Chust/Andijan, Shahrikhan) connected westward to Bukhara–Samarkand and south-west to Mashhad/Tabriz; eastward ties extended into Kashgar and Yengisar. Material and motif diffusion likely followed caravan and court circuits; museum evidence of Central Asian bladed gifts (e.g., a sabre presented by the Khan of Kokand) illustrates how edged objects traveled within diplomatic exchange economies.

6. Re-patterning under Late Imperial and Soviet Regimes

Guild reorganization, standardization, and industrial inputs re-shaped supply

chains in the late imperial and Soviet eras. While some artisanal autonomy narrowed, the typological “look” of the *pichog* persisted and adapted, setting the stage for post-1991 revival. Post-Soviet cultural policy and tourism then re-activated dormant nodes and workshops, visible in exhibitions and renewed maker reputations.

7. Post-1991 Revivals: Branding, Fairs, and GIs

Since independence, Uzbekistan has leveraged heritage crafts in tourism and export strategies; official channels describe knife-making as a living tradition with recognizable regional signatures (e.g., Chust). With the 2021 GI law (effective 2022), the state created a pathway to protect local reputations; official news confirms “*Chust pichog’i*” has been registered, anchoring a public branding asset around a historic craft school. Exhibitions, fairs, and museum partnerships further scale visibility and demand.

8. Methods in Practice: Reading Objects as Networks

Applying archaeo-metallurgical logic and network analysis: blade alloys and microstructures signal access to steels and heat-treat regimes; recurring motifs and maker’s marks trace apprenticeship and trade links; exhibition catalogues and donations log the social life of objects. Together, these layers reconstruct “edges” between workshops, merchants, patrons, and institutions across time.

9. Craft as Cultural and Economic Statecraft

Heritage knives serve as “*heritage bridges*” – portable, legible symbols around which cities and ministries can build cooperation: joint shows, maker exchanges, and tourism campaigns that increase traffic and transactions along historical corridors. Museum-level evidence of object gifting (e.g., Kokand → St. Petersburg) provides a historical baseline for culture-diplomacy channels; the contemporary GI regime supplies an economic instrument to align artisans, traders, and territorial brands under shared standards.

10. Conclusion

Blades from Central Asia are more than sharp steel; they are durable carriers of knowledge and connection. Mapping the *pichog* across centuries shows how design lineages and workshop ties persist through regime change and re-emerge as practical tools of diplomacy and development. Future work should pair metallography with structured interviews and GIS/SNA to quantify network change and to evaluate, causally, whether heritage programs (GIs, fairs, exchanges)

shift trade and tourism outcomes along the old routes.



●**Fig. A** *“Traditional Uzbek knife made of Damascus steel, Tashkent”* — License: CC BY-SA 4.0. *Photo by BeshevI, Wikimedia Commons.*



●**Fig. B (Samarkand):** *“Traditional Uzbek knife made of Damascus steel, Samarkand”* — License: CC BY-SA 4.0. *Photo by BeshevI, Wikimedia Commons.*



●Fig. C “Chust pichoq”, Wikimedia Commons



●**Fig. D** “Souvenir knife replicas, Tashkent (Wiki Loves Folklore)” – License: CC BY-SA 4.0. Photo by Panpanchik, Wikimedia Commons.

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