



**Aleppo in Asia: Mercantile Networks between Syria, China  
and Post-Soviet Eurasia since 1970**

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3 **Aleppo in Asia: Mercantile Networks between Syria, China and Post-Soviet Eurasia**  
4 **since 1970**

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10 **Abstract**

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12 An expanding body of scholarly work inspired by Indian Ocean and Mediterranean studies  
13 has highlighted the limitations imposed on our understanding of the dynamics of West Asia  
14 by the paradigm of area studies and the category of the “Middle East”. But less attention has  
15 been paid to how expansive perspectives that do not invoke an explicitly maritime geography  
16 might enrich our understanding of the region’s formative connections. This article seeks to  
17 locate the modern city of Aleppo in a trans-regional Asian geography by tracing the shifting  
18 history of mercantile networks that connected Aleppo to other parts of Eurasia – notably,  
19 parts of the formerly Soviet world and the city of Yiwu in southeast China (see Marsden  
20 2015 and Marsden and Henig 2018a). The article shows the critical role played by the trans-  
21 regional flow of Soviet patronage, and then Chinese state subsidies and credit, in embedding  
22 Aleppo into these expansive circuits of exchange. It also argues that the most recent of these  
23 trans-regional flows – of Chinese state credit after the 2007 global financial shock – has  
24 fostered the emergence of a new and hitherto unstudied business class in Syria.  
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27 **Key words**

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29 Trade, migration, inter-Asia, transregionalism, Aleppo, Syria.  
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## Introduction

This article seeks to locate the city of Aleppo in a trans-regional Asian geography and geopolitics. Empirically, it focuses on some of the trans-regional mercantile connections that tied Aleppo to other parts of Eurasia, and traces their historical development from the 1970s until the present. It reviews the history of Soviet patronage of Syria, and of post-Soviet central Asia, during the era of Hafez al-Asad (1971-2000), highlighting the ongoing significance of trading relations between Aleppo and the formerly Soviet world. It also documents some of the more recent connections fashioned by Aleppine merchants with China's export manufacturing sector, through the activities of importers who visit and in some cases are stationed in the commercial hub of Yiwu in Zhejiang province.

I consider these connections in relation to scholarship that has sought to reimagine the conceptual geography of the Middle East. An emerging body of work has argued that fixed geographical categories such as "the Middle East" often obscure the formative interactions that cut across their boundaries. This has drawn our attention to existence of alternative, global and connected histories, highlighting the importance of diasporic religious, intellectual and commercial networks in shaping the region's dynamics (Green 2014, Willis 2009, Ghazal 2014). Much of this scholarship has privileged maritime spaces of connection – the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean – leaving the relationship of modern Middle Eastern cities to other expansive circuits of exchange relatively unremarked upon. In bringing Aleppo's post-socialist and Chinese circuits into focus, I seek to add another trans-regional dimension to this critique of the area studies paradigm. This builds on the scholarship that has found the category of "West Asia" helpful in transcending the geographical silos of the Cold War, and supports arguments that connections between West Asia and Eurasia should not simply be seen as novel or only through the lens of security studies, but as historically rooted and embedded in everyday life (Marsden and Henig 2018a).

Another aim of the article is to identify the critical role that Chinese state subsidies and credit have played, both in drawing Aleppo into a trans-Asian economy since the early 2000s, and in reorganising the social field of Syria's commercial bourgeoisie<sup>1</sup>. Much of the

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<sup>1</sup> I use "commercial bourgeoisie" to refer to class strata which own and operate trading businesses from commercial premises. In Syria, this comprises a middle stratum of retail store-owners; an upper-middle stratum of small commercial, industrial and merchant capitalists who dispose of enough capital to participate in manufacturing and wholesale trade; and an upper stratum comprising merchants and industrialists who, because

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3 literature on Syria's political economy has emphasised the unevenness of economic  
4 liberalisation since the early 1990s, documenting the emergence of business networks whose  
5 fortunes are wholly dependent on the regime's willingness to grant them monopolies and  
6 opportunities for rent (Kienle 1997). Haddad, notably, has drawn a distinction between an  
7 genuine established commercial bourgeoisie and a state-dependent bourgeoisie<sup>2</sup>. My  
8 fieldwork among Aleppine businessmen in 2008-09 and 2016, however, suggests the  
9 emergence of a new social group – entrepreneurs without a background in trade who,  
10 empowered in large part by the availability of Chinese credit channelled through commercial  
11 hubs such as Yiwu, have been able to challenge the dominance of the established commercial  
12 bourgeoisie in Syria. Finally, the trans-Asian channels established both by older and new  
13 Syrian merchants visiting China have also shaped the trajectories of some Syrians who have  
14 fled the conflict in their country since 2011.

### 22 23 **Perspectives on Aleppo: Beyond the “Oceanic Turn”**

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25 In August 2016, Abduh Salakji, a Syrian-born merchant, sat most evenings at a table  
26 outside the café he owned in the Night Market area of Yiwu, a city in China's commercially  
27 dynamic south-eastern Zhejiang region<sup>3</sup>. The café advertised itself to passersby in bright neon  
28 dots as “Aleppo restaurant”. It had a menu to match, offering Arabic desserts, juices and  
29 nargileh pipes to a mixed international clientele who gathered to sample a taste of Aleppo on  
30 the pavement terrace which was carpeted with green synthetic grass. Aleppo restaurant was  
31 one of several Syrian eateries that clustered on a short stretch of road, the evening nargileh  
32 smoke breathing a Levantine atmosphere in the midst of this bustling downtown street  
33 market. A nearby shwarma café, run by a Druze family from the Jaramana suburb of  
34 Damascus, advertised itself using the name of a famous shwarma business in the old Midan  
35 quarter of the Syrian capital. “Let's go to Midan”, one young Syrian man suggested to his  
36 friends as they relaxed in a café a couple of miles away – meaning this place by the Night  
37 Market. For those with the local knowledge to interpret it – knowledge of suburbs the other  
38 side of Asia – this name layered a distinctly Syrian geography onto the city of Yiwu.

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51 of the extent of their capital investments, are recognised as important players in the markets in which they  
52 operate.

53 <sup>2</sup>Haddad (2012) distinguishes between a “commercial bourgeoisie” who operate in competitive markets, and a  
54 “state bourgeoisie” (Haddad 2012) who enjoy political and economic monopolistic power in a given field as  
55 clients of the ruling family or of its networks of high-ranking security and intelligence personnel.

56 <sup>3</sup> on Yiwu, see Marsden (2015, 2016, 2017).

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3 Such establishments attracted merchants of Syrian and other Arab nationalities, but  
4 also Chinese customers who sometimes stayed till the early hours of the morning. They had  
5 the money to consume, having benefited from the prosperity that Yiwu's Futian market had  
6 brought to the middle-class entrepreneurial strata in the city. The Futian market houses some  
7 70,000 booths which serve as wholesale outlets for Chinese manufacturers of small  
8 household items, ranging from toothbrushes and stationery to tools and kitchenware. Along  
9 with the nearby Huangyuan clothes market which houses around 5,000 outlets, Futian makes  
10 Yiwu a significant node in the global trade in low-grade commodities: around 1700  
11 containers are estimated to leave the city each day. These two mega-markets also make the  
12 city a hub where diverse trading networks intermingle, with several thousand merchants,  
13 principally from central and south Asia, Russia, the Arab world and Africa, resident in the  
14 city, and many more visiting on wholesale provisioning trips, sometimes several times per  
15 year, with each visit typically lasting between two to three weeks – during which time they  
16 would visit the market, inspect and order goods, and often visit the Night Market area and  
17 sites of hospitality like Abduh's in the evenings to relax, exchange information and establish  
18 new connections.

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20 It was the Futian market that first attracted Abduh to China. His main business then as  
21 now was not the café, but the trading office in the floors above. He arrived in China in 2001,  
22 four years after the country joined the WTO, and just at the time that the Syrian regime was  
23 starting to the country to Chinese consumables. Having inherited in Presidency the previous  
24 year, Bashar al-Asad was embarking on a period in which he would negotiate free trade  
25 agreements and remove import tariffs on a variety of consumer goods – thus instituting a  
26 “neoliberal autocracy” in which citizens were hailed as consumers, and where the desire for  
27 commodities and aspirations toward upward mobility replaced the personality cult of the  
28 leader as the primary mechanism of disciplinary control (Wedeen 2013). The connection to  
29 China was a vital part of this new era of ideological interpellation, and Aleppo's established  
30 commercial bourgeoisie were among the first to see the opportunities it presented. After a  
31 number of visits to select goods and arrange their cargo, Abduh settled in Yiwu and opened  
32 an export office organising the shipment of consumer commodities that were to become  
33 central to the images of “the good life” (Wedeen 2013, 842) newly circulating in Bashar al-  
34 Asad's Syria.

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36 The Suwaiqa market in Aleppo was one of the points through which these  
37 commodities were channelled. Literally, the “small market”, Suwaiqa was a historic

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3 wholesale hub that lay just to the north of the city's covered bazaar. With Bashar's consumer-  
4 oriented economic opening, Suwaiqa was soon established as one of the main distribution  
5 nodes for Chinese commodities entering Syria. It became one of Futian's outpost markets in  
6 west Asia, as well as a staging post for small low-grade commodities from markets in the  
7 Chinese city of Guangzhou. Abduh was one of the first to establish these connections  
8 between Futian and Suwaiqa. He hailed from an old merchant family in Suwaiqa, one of a  
9 group of five intermarrying extended families who had been based in the market for  
10 generations. By moving to Yiwu, he gave the family a foothold in a highly profitable supply  
11 chain. Others were to follow; by the time I conducted fieldwork in Suwaiqa in 2008, every  
12 family was said to be sending sons to China, on short provisioning trips. Often these men,  
13 many in their twenties and thirties, had minimal Chinese language skills, but were able to  
14 deal with the market through offices like Salakji's, and others in the city, which provided  
15 services such as translation, checking of goods at the warehouse, and customs clearance.

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25 This account of connections across Asia, which link Futian to Suwaiqa, and Aleppo to  
26 Yiwu, provides a different picture of Aleppo, and Syria more broadly, than that which is  
27 commonly found in scholarly literature in anthropology and history. This literature tends to  
28 privilege the framework of the nation state, in emphasising Aleppo's status as a second city  
29 to Damascus and a site of historical opposition to the Baathist regime (Shannon 2006, Pinto  
30 2011, Rabo 2005), or in describing the dynamics of the Syrian conflict as a regionally  
31 isolated "war economy" (see Anderson 2018 for a critique). Aleppo has often been portrayed  
32 as a provincial city, a shadow of its former glory as a trading post on the "silk road", plagued  
33 with an inferiority complex in relation to Damascus or as a former bastion of Islamist  
34 opposition. But rather than pioneering resistance to the Baathist regime, merchants in Aleppo  
35 fashioned the city under Bashar al-Asad as a translocal trading space, connecting local and  
36 regional commodity markets with the emergence of China's export manufacturing sector.  
37 Viewing Aleppo from the night market in Yiwu, through the career trajectory and trading  
38 networks of men such as Abduh, highlights these Asian dynamics. It locates the city in a  
39 different framework from the nation state – one of expansive, trans-Asian connectivity. My  
40 aim in this article is not to provide an ethnographic account of mercantile life in Yiwu, but to  
41 treat it as a vantage point from which to rethink Aleppo, as a node – connected to other nodes  
42 such as Yiwu – in trans-Asian circuits of exchange.

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55 One body of scholarly work that I have found helpful in describing the significance of  
56 these routes is literature in history and anthropology that seeks to reimagine the conceptual  
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3 geography of West Asia. Some of this work has sought to historicise and critique the  
4 paradigm of area studies, and the associated category of the “Middle East”, arguing that these  
5 belong to a meta-geography of the Cold War, which looks increasingly outdated and which  
6 makes it difficult to give due recognition to connections and interactions that transcend these  
7 areas. The critique of an “area studies” approach to West Asia has proceeded in two  
8 directions. One line of argument is that the notion of “the Middle East” elides the formative  
9 role played by Muslim networks in shaping Europe. In particular, historical networks  
10 connecting the Levant, Egypt, Anatolia, South Europe and South East Europe into a single  
11 Mediterranean arena of exchange are ignored or marginalised in favour of a narrative which  
12 draws sharp borders between the “European” and “Muslim” worlds (Green 2014, Low 2014).  
13 Another line of argument has been that an area studies paradigm obscures connections with  
14 the Indian Ocean, and that the Red Sea, the Arabian peninsula and the Gulf are best  
15 understood as having been formed by historical connections – of empire and diaspora –  
16 linking them to East Africa, Iran, South West India and the Malay archipelago (Ghazal 2014,  
17 Willis 2009, Alavi 2015, Ho 2004, Tagliacozzo 2009, Limbert 2014). This work has sought  
18 to retrieve an “Indian Ocean Middle East”, long marginalised within area studies approaches  
19 which have privileged a post-Ottoman “core” of Egypt-the Levant-Anatolia in narrating the  
20 history of the region (Low 2014).  
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33 Of these two lines of argument, one proceeds north and west across the  
34 Mediterranean, and the other proceeds south and east across the Indian Ocean. Both have  
35 been valuable in allowing a wider set of formative connections to come into view, in a part of  
36 the world long marked by trans-regional flows (Kurzman 2007). But it is also true that, since  
37 much of this scholarly energy for rethinking the region’s boundaries comes from Indian  
38 Ocean studies, it has tended to privilege maritime arenas and models of connection. Green for  
39 example argues that “shifting the primary geological marker of space from land to sea is one  
40 of the most productive means of formulating geographies of interaction” since as  
41 Mediterraneanists have long argued, “foods, lifestyles, diseases, architectures, commodities”  
42 circulate in a way poorly understood by land- and nation-based models” (Green 2014, 558).  
43 Others have suggested the smoother surface of water is more likely to foster expansive  
44 geographical imaginations and universalisms than the more rugged terrain of land (see e.g.  
45 Ho 2004).  
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54 Productive as this “oceanic turn” has been, the interactions that I identify here -  
55 between Syria, post-Soviet Eurasia and East Asia - are not adequately illuminated by spatial  
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3 models that take their inspiration from maritime circuits of exchange, or those that locate  
4 Syria primarily in a Levantine and therefore Mediterranean arena (see e.g. Green 2014). Nor  
5 are these interactions made visible by the category of the “post-Soviet world” - as such  
6 studies have rarely incorporated the “Middle East” despite the fact that Soviet and Russian  
7 patronage and influence have been a significant dynamic in this region since the 1950s. Yet,  
8 as I argue below, Syria’s northern- and eastern-facing connections have remained significant  
9 and even grown in importance since the end of the Soviet era. Syrian merchants continued  
10 throughout the 1990s to play a critical role in provisioning markets in Russia and central  
11 Asia, thus linking these regions to wider flows of trade. And the mercantile networks built by  
12 Syrian traders in this period, particularly in Moscow, became a base for establishing  
13 commercial networks on China’s eastern coast in the 2000s. After China joined the World  
14 Trade Organisation in 2001, Syrian traders such as those I introduce in this article played an  
15 important part in turning Aleppo’s wholesale bazaars into an outpost for Chinese commodity  
16 markets in Yiwu and Guangzhou. The trans-Asian connections they fostered came to shape  
17 local self-understandings in Syria, as Aleppo’s merchants styled their city “little China” (al-  
18 Sin al-sghira), and developed notions of success predicated on the city’s emerging status as a  
19 regional forwarding market for commodities imported from China.  
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31 So this article seeks to put Aleppo in a broader frame than the nation state or a putative  
32 cultural area defined by Arabness or Islam. In this sense it harnesses the winds of the  
33 “oceanic turn”, but it also seeks to look elsewhere than the Mediterranean in order to identify  
34 Aleppo’s recent arenas of connectivity, and to argue that not all expansive formative  
35 connections need to be formulated through the medium of the ocean. It considers the routes  
36 of merchants and commodities across two trans-regional circuits which, over the past forty  
37 years, have served to connect it, not westwards to the south of Europe, but northwards and  
38 eastwards. In doing so, I am indebted to literature that highlights the role dynamic trans-  
39 regional networks and “circulation societies” have played in fashioning alternative  
40 geographies to those premised on nation states and bounded culture areas (Marsden 2016,  
41 Amrith 2015, Freitag and Von Oppen 2010, Erkin 2010)<sup>4</sup>. I also find helpful perspectives that  
42 focus not on the transmission of cultural forms between discrete regions, but on the  
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52 <sup>4</sup> In identifying circuits of exchange that are not premised on maritime models of geography, I am drawing  
53 attention to the limitations of the (otherwise productive) oceanic turn in enabling trans-regional connections to  
54 come into view. I am not seeking to explain the formation of trans-Asian routes by distinguishing between  
55 terrestrial and maritime modes of transport. I am grateful to an anonymous History and Anthropology reviewer  
56 for clarifying this point.  
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3 “recurring circulations that result in interpenetrated societies” (Marsden and Henig 2018a:7).  
4 Henig, for example, demonstrates that Sufi networks blur the regions of the Mediterranean  
5 and the Middle East, by tracing the active connections of a brotherhood based in Bosnia with  
6 sites of religious experience in Mashhad, Istanbul and northern Syria (Marsden and Henig  
7 2018b). Marsden makes a similar argument about the interpenetration of Eurasia and West  
8 Asia, showing that trading families from Central Asia have for centuries circulated between  
9 this region, the Arabian peninsula and Anatolia (ibid).  
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### 15 **Aleppo Looking North and East: Soviet and Post-Soviet Eurasia**

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17 The first of the circuits I consider connects Aleppo to the Soviet and post-Soviet  
18 world – Eastern Europe, Russia, and Central Asia. When I conducted fieldwork in Suwaiqa in  
19 2008-09, one of the merchants who was then in his sixties told me that he had started  
20 imported kitchenware from Czechoslovakia in the 1970s, having travelled there as a young  
21 man on an extended tour of Eastern Europe. Socialist countries were also an important  
22 destination for Syrian exports in the 1970s and 1980s. As Volker Perthes has documented  
23 (1992, 219-220), Syria had amassed considerable debts to the Soviet Union – the large bulk  
24 of which were for weapons – and lacking foreign exchange, agreed in 1973 to settle these  
25 through the barter of goods. Under these payment agreements, the USSR and other countries  
26 in the socialist bloc would buy Syrian textiles – fabrics, carpets, clothes – as well as  
27 foodstuffs and accessories, and a corresponding amount would be taken off Syria’s national  
28 debt. The Syrian central bank then paid the local manufacturer in local currency. Since the  
29 bulk of these debts were settled through clothes, it was often textile manufacturers in Aleppo  
30 who benefited the most. Many I knew in 2008 recalled the 1980s as a period when huge  
31 profits of two or three hundred percent could be made fairly easily. Russia was the most  
32 significant market, estimated at a third or more of all Syria’s private exports; when the  
33 Eastern European bloc and other countries with payments agreements with Syria are  
34 included, that figure rises to 80% in 1989. In that year, Syrian exports to the USSR reached  
35 \$1 billion (ibid: 220, 229).  
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49 Official figures show that exports to the formerly socialist bloc declined dramatically  
50 after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Abboud 2010, 10; Abboud and Arslanian 2009, Jooni  
51 2001). But I met entrepreneurs in Aleppo in 2008 who told me that many of the connections  
52 survived the collapse of the USSR. Some said that, after 1991, Russia lacked established  
53 commercial and financial relations beyond the ex-socialist bloc, and so continued to depend  
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3 on Syrian factories for the first few years. Syrian entrepreneurs did however tell me in 2008  
4 that the Russian export market, which had once been known for its relatively low quality  
5 standards (see also Perthes 1992, 219), became increasingly difficult for Syrian  
6 manufacturers to penetrate a few years after the break-up of the USSR. Some said that Syrian  
7 exporters had started to acquire a reputation for profiteering and poor quality; others noted  
8 that Russian consumer tastes went upmarket. In its place, some of Aleppo's textile exporters  
9 found demand for their relatively low-quality goods in post-Soviet central Asia, in newly  
10 independent resource-rich countries that were developing middle classes and markets for  
11 imported consumer goods. A former manager of one of the Aleppo's largest fabric factories  
12 claimed that he had been the first to sell into the market in Uzbekistan in 1993, and that a  
13 week after his first sale, the aeroplane from Tashkent was full of merchants seeking Aleppine  
14 fabrics, from clothes and carpets to sofa furnishings and curtain fabrics. Some of these  
15 markets continued to be important some fifteen years later: to take one example, a textile  
16 industrialist who employed around eighty workers in his factory in the north of Aleppo was  
17 seeking to open a sales office in Tashkent in 2009.  
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28 In part, the significance of these connections needs to be understood against a  
29 backdrop of barriers to other possible spaces of economic integration. In 1995, a Euro-  
30 Mediterranean Partnership was proclaimed between the fifteen member states of the European  
31 Union and twelve southern Mediterranean countries, with a vision of security and economic  
32 cooperation. But Syria did not ratify its participation until December 2008. This was partly  
33 because of concerns that the partnership would be unequal, imposing neoliberal economic  
34 governance on the Syrian economy, while failing to remove trade barriers associated with the  
35 European Common Agricultural Policy (Aita 2004, Hourani 2004, Habeeb 2002, Abboud  
36 2010). But just as important, joining the Euro-Mediterranean partnership meant that Syrian  
37 exporters, the vast majority of whom were small and medium businesses, would need to  
38 accept costly industrial standards, which was feasible only for the largest enterprises. Some  
39 of the Aleppine textile entrepreneurs who did export to EU countries told me that they  
40 regarded it as hazardous, because their manufacturing processes were often not able to  
41 guarantee the quality standards required by European markets.  
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52 Syrian merchants and policy makers, then, were faced with common question in the  
53 1990s and 2000s: how to internationalise their commercial positions in a post-Soviet era,  
54 when European markets were difficult to penetrate. In the early years of Bashar al-Asad's  
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3 Presidency, the regime established bilateral trading agreements with Turkey and various Arab  
4 countries, and entered a Greater Arab Free Trade Area (2005). These developments played an  
5 important role in fostering what entrepreneurs referred to Aleppo's "industrial renaissance"  
6 (*al-nahda al-sina'iyya*). This renaissance was centred on textile and clothing exports, which  
7 according to official figures tripled from 2005 to 2006 (Said 2010, 40). But these bilateral  
8 agreements and the Arab Free Trade Area should not be understood simply as securing  
9 Syria's entry into a southern and eastern Mediterranean arena of connectivity. One of Syria's  
10 most significant trading agreements in the early 2000s was with Iraq (Arslanian 2009, 67).  
11 Subsequently, the 2003 allied invasion was to displace Iraqi capital and entrepreneurs into  
12 Syria. Aleppine businessmen told me in 2008 that the turmoil in Iraq and the decimation of  
13 much of its industrial base meant that Aleppo had become an important industrial and  
14 commercial node for supplying Iraqi markets. Moreover, Syrian entry into the Greater Arab  
15 Free Trade Area attracted Chinese, Korean, Russian and Iranian investments, which were  
16 seeking to exploit Syria's position as a "conduit of broader regional and international trade"  
17 (Abboud 2010, 28). As well as attracting investment into the car manufacturing industry, the  
18 establishment of Free Trade Zones enabled Chinese firms to import goods into Syria and then  
19 re-export them to other Arab countries (Suleiman 2005).  
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32 Syria, then, increasingly looked east and north for its commercial fortunes. Aleppo's  
33 commercial bourgeoisie also adopted a similar model, fashioning their city as a hub of trans-  
34 border trade. In the 2000s, Aleppo became a manufacturing hub and a resale centre for  
35 Chinese small commodities, attracting wholesale customers from across the Arab world.  
36 Aleppo became a regional outpost of Chinese commodity markets, known locally as "little  
37 China". Some of the wealthier Syrian merchants invested in Chinese factories, designing and  
38 specialising in particular product lines. Stories circulated of Aleppine merchants purchasing a  
39 factory's entire annual output in advance, as they sought to monopolise a market; some  
40 claimed to be able to offer goods for sale in Aleppo at the same price or cheaper than their  
41 rivals could purchase them in China. One Armenian merchant from Aleppo was said to have  
42 monopolised the market in certain car spare parts in this way, selling Chinese products via  
43 Aleppo to customers across the Arab world, in the early 2000s; on a smaller but still  
44 significant scale, Abduh Salakji claimed to have established Aleppo as a wholesale centre  
45 supplying Iraq, Turkey and Syria with Chinese manufactured Christmas decorations and  
46 artificial flowers in the mid 2000s. He was proud, he said, to have made Aleppo the "little  
47 China" (*al-sin al-sghireh*). These narratives of business success invariably proclaimed the  
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3 regional significance of Aleppo as a resale centre supplying the rest of Syria and countries  
4 across the Arab world.  
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7 The yarn economy shows Aleppo playing a similar role as a trans-border and  
8 transasian hub. Textiles and clothes had long been the mainstay of Aleppo's manufacturing  
9 base (Cornand 1994; Arslanian 2009). While cotton production remained largely in the hands  
10 of the state until 2011, polyester and mixed yarns were often imported by private merchants.  
11 When I conducted fieldwork in 2008-09, much of this was imported from Taiwan, Malaysia,  
12 China and India. These imports also formed the basis of a futures market centred on the Khan  
13 Ulabiyya caravanserai towards the southern end of Aleppo's historic bazaar. Through this  
14 market, merchants committed in advance to buy wholesale quantities of yarn at a fixed price,  
15 and then sought to sell on the contract at a profit, often without ever seeing the yarn. The  
16 main material underlying this financial market was a Taiwanese polyester, the principal  
17 component used to weave fabrics from bedsheets to shirts for school and army uniforms.  
18 Malaysian yarn was a close competitor that some merchants had recently tried to use to  
19 displace the Taiwanese yarn. But the attempt failed; Taiwanese remained the most popular of  
20 the Far Eastern yarns, and formed the basis of a vibrant speculative economy, in which  
21 fortunes were both made and lost. Some merchants talked of buying and selling the same  
22 shipment dozens of times before it found its way onto a loom.  
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34 The transition of this Taiwanese yarn from a financial to an industrial circuit was a  
35 key moment in its "biography" (Kopytoff 1986, Appadurai 1986). Brokers described  
36 Taiwanese 316 as a "virgin girl" which was "pure" and, like "water" in universal demand;  
37 once it entered the manufacturing process and was put onto the loom, it "got married" and  
38 became harder to sell, "like stock". The futures market in virgin yarns was still operating  
39 every afternoon in a caravanserai in Aleppo's bazaar in 2008/09, as brokers gathered to make  
40 verbal contracts to buy and sell commodities that had not yet arrived in Syria. But Aleppo  
41 was not the only site where Taiwanese yarn "got married". Some of the Syrian principal  
42 merchants who commissioned these brokers to buy on their behalf also exported the yarn to  
43 Egypt, where it was sold on to textile manufacturers. Thus, Aleppo was a site of trans-  
44 regional connectivity, where Egyptian demand for Far Eastern commodities was brokered.  
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54 Other Syrian merchants, both resident in and visiting Yiwu, supplied markets in  
55 Russia, the Caucasus and central Asia with Chinese manufactured goods after 2000. By the  
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3 1980s, there was a significant community of Syrian merchants in Moscow, many of whom  
4 had been educated there under the Soviet patronage of Syria. Others migrated there in the  
5 1980s, organising the importation of Syrian goods into the USSR under the bilateral  
6 payments agreement; some also fled to Russia out of fear that they might fall under suspicion  
7 during the Asad regime's crackdown on Islamist opposition in 1979-82. Still others, of  
8 Circassian background, migrated from Syria to Russian cities in the Caucasus – Sochi,  
9 Nalchik and Kras – in the early 1990s during the Circassian national return movement after  
10 the fall of the USSR. After the Russian market for Syrian imports peaked in the mid-1990s,  
11 some moved back to Syria; others sought to open new markets in the central Asian ex-Soviet  
12 republics; and others moved to China in the early 2000s, where they opened export offices in  
13 Yiwu and Guangzhou, supplying markets in the Russia, the Caucasus and central Asia with  
14 cheap commodities, often through networks of Syrian and other Arab merchants resident in  
15 those locales. Cosmetics were a particularly important small commodity supplied to the  
16 Russian market via Yiwu in this way; but clothes, fashion accessories and household goods  
17 such as nargileh pipes were also shipped in significant quantities.  
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29 It is hard to overestimate the significance of the Russian market for establishing a  
30 Syrian mercantile presence in China in this period, prior to 2005. In 2005, Syria began  
31 establishing free trade agreements with neighbouring countries which enabled it to act as a  
32 regional conduit and forwarding market for Chinese imports. The Syrian merchants in China  
33 who were able to dominate this import trade were invariably those who had already  
34 established themselves in Yiwu thanks to the Russian market, and their networks and history  
35 there. The commercial circuits connecting Syria to the rest of Asia shifted, then, with  
36 different scales of political and economic transformation: the decline of Soviet bloc  
37 manufacturing; the emergence of China's export-oriented manufacturing; and a more open  
38 embrace of trade liberalisation within Syria. But these shifts did not signify the replacement  
39 of one set of trading routes with another. What emerged instead was a layering of different  
40 trading circuits: in this case, of a new China-GAFTA route onto an older circuit of mobility  
41 and trade between Syria, Russia and post-Soviet central Asia. This layering shows the  
42 dynamic fluidity of trans-regional connections, and the "dense imprinting" (Green 2014, 558)  
43 of an earlier arena of Soviet-bloc connectivity onto an emerging trans-Asian route between  
44 China and the Arab world.  
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### Chinese Credit Reshaping Aleppine Society

Aleppo was also an important distribution and resale site for consumables imported from China. Much of this activity was centred just north of the bazaar, in the Suwaiqa or “little market”. Despite its diminutive name, this was, until 2012, a hub for the wholesale of goods ranging from toys, decorations and ornaments to shoes, fashion accessories and kitchenware. Merchants such as Abduh effectively established it as an outpost of wholesale markets in Yiwu and Guangzhou. They were facilitated in this by Chinese export policies, which incentivised foreign merchants by allowing them to recoup their purchase tax plus a bonus – worth up to 4% of the total shipment – when the goods arrived at their international destination. This export bonus was designed to establish the dominance of Chinese manufactured goods in Asian markets, and enabled importers in outpost markets from Suwaiqa to Aleppo to the Dragon Market in Dubai to pursue aggressive pricing strategies – in some cases offering Chinese commodities for sale in these sites in the “Middle East” at virtually the same price that they could be purchased in China. In this sense, they were indeed able to make Aleppo a “little China”, as Abduh had claimed. If his “Aleppo café” transposed a Syrian geography into China, his trading office above the café aimed to recreate part of Yiwu’s Futian market in Syria. China’s policy of subsidising its manufactured exports by rewarding foreign importers with a bonus was a key dynamic in establishing these sites as its outposts in West Asia.

Among Aleppine merchants in both Yiwu and Aleppo, these pricing strategies were underpinned by a wholesale ethos – the notion that “wholesale is beautiful” (al-jumla jamileh). In Aleppo in 2008, one Suwaiqa merchant put this ethos as follows, “buy at ten and sell at ten, and find blessing in the middle”. In Yiwu in 2016, those who had left Suwaiqa still invoked this ethos to distinguish themselves from their Damascene counterparts, arguing that while Damascus traders measured the success of their business by the size of their profit margins, they used to measure it by volume. They recalled with pride Aleppo’s former status as a primary wholesale hub. Hamudeh, Abduh’s younger brother, now managed a mobile phone and accessories shop in Yiwu’s downtown boulevard, Chouzhou Beilu. He recalled the flourishing of the Yiwu-Aleppo route before the crisis broke in Syria: “we were doing sixty containers a year!”, he said, remembering volume not profit as a measure of the good times. Some Damascene traders in Yiwu recognised a similar distinction between Aleppine and Damascene approaches to reckoning success, but cast it in a different moral register. Salam, a Yiwu-based merchant in his early twenties, said “in Aleppo, they are very traditional; they

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3 are happy with small margins and sell the same thing they were ten years ago. In Damascus,  
4 we innovate and add value...” He saw a large profit margin as a measure of success in a  
5 moral register of invention (*al-ibtikar*) and modernity.  
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9 In Aleppo, the wholesale ethos and pricing strategies that I have described helped to  
10 ensure the continued dominance of established merchant families in the import trade.  
11 Aggressively low pricing strategies and the ethos that moralised them heightened barriers to  
12 new entrants, and reduced the incentive for their customers, whether in Syria or Russia, to  
13 seek to bypass them by travelling to China themselves. The entrenched position of the  
14 established families was however open to challenge particularly in the wake of the global  
15 economic shock caused by the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2007. The financial stimulus  
16 policies pursued through China’s state banking system channelled extra credit to export  
17 manufacturers. The Chinese announced a financial stimulus plan in Autumn 2008 which  
18 included a loosening of credit policies and bank loans to revitalise designated industries  
19 including the light industry sector (Tong 2010, Zhang 2015) which supplied the Futian  
20 market. These policies led to a “massive increase in bank lending, particularly in the first half  
21 of 2009” (Lardy and Subramanian 2011, 1). In order to tackle the slowdown in export  
22 growth, in December 2008 the government also requested the four major state-owned banks  
23 to increase their lending to small and medium enterprises in particular; they duly extended  
24 around half of their additional credit to this sector in first five months of 2009 (Schüller and  
25 Schüller-Zhou 2009). Additionally, the government supported export demand through VAT  
26 rebates on low-cost goods which proved “popular in the cost-conscious emerging markets” of  
27 Asia, Africa and Latin America (ibid, 171).  
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40 This credit and the VAT rebate were increasingly passed on to foreign importers. In  
41 Yiwu, the credit and rebates were organised and channelled through foreign trading  
42 companies. Many of these were listed on the Futian market’s register, providing  
43 manufacturers and their agents with some means of assessing customer credit risk. Several of  
44 the trading companies I spoke to in 2016 spoke of free credit being offered by manufacturers.  
45 Others observed that the willingness of some foreign trading companies to extend this credit  
46 to newcomers who had little or no commercial or credit record had transformed the market,  
47 claiming it had enabled individuals to visit Yiwu “with five or six thousand dollars” in their  
48 pocket, and to walk away with a container load of commodities worth \$25,000 or more.  
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3 The availability of this credit had in turn attracted merchants from relatively modest  
4 backgrounds in Syria to enter the domain of international trade. It increased the number of  
5 merchants moving between Aleppo and Yiwu. Many of the Syrians I knew who had imported  
6 from China dated their first experiences in China to 2007 or later. Some settled in Yiwu, as  
7 Abduh had done years earlier, to establish trading companies in order to unlock access to the  
8 credit. Often these were young men sent abroad by their families in order to channel credit to  
9 relatives and networks within Syria. Another development which had facilitated the entrance  
10 of new players was the establishment of a market in cargo companies, which rented out space  
11 in shipping containers by the square metre (see also Pliez 2012). This removed the burden of  
12 filling an entire container – which for higher value goods such as cosmetics or tools could  
13 require a capital of \$100,000 or more. Some dated the establishment of this market to 2007.  
14 Those who could afford to purchase an entire container saved costs, and often clubbed  
15 together with trusted partners in order to do so. But cargo companies enabled individuals who  
16 were not yet embedded in such networks to find an entry point into the market.  
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26 These developments altered the social field of wholesale commerce in Aleppo,  
27 facilitating the emergence of a relatively new social group of merchants, without an  
28 established family heritage of commerce. Abu Tayyan is an example – a man who was in his  
29 late forties when he first visited Yiwu in 2008. He had been born in Aleppo of Circassian  
30 descent to a father had held an administrative post in the military; he had learned accounting  
31 as an adult, and freelanced for various textile entrepreneurs, getting to know other men who,  
32 like himself, often did not hail from merchant families but who were, after 2000, fashioning  
33 careers as factory managers and in some cases as owner-manufacturers during the  
34 “renaissance” of Aleppo’s textile industries. With access to these new business networks, he  
35 was able to establish informal capital-pooling partnerships, to finance his entry into  
36 international trade. After his first trip to the Futian market, he returned every three months,  
37 importing goods ranging from artificial pearls to executive massage chairs – which he used  
38 his now proliferating business networks to distribute. He spent extended periods – sometimes  
39 more than one year – living abroad, in Malaysia and Russia – where he also established  
40 distribution networks. As he established a reputation in these international networks grew, he  
41 was also able to act as a broker and commission worker for Aleppo’s textile exporters,  
42 putting them in touch with foreign importers for a cut of the deal.  
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54 Many of the entrepreneurs for whom Abu Tayyan acted in this way were, like him,  
55 newcomers to Aleppo’s commercial bourgeoisie. They had worked their way up – as  
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3 labourers, professional accountants or as managers – before becoming business partners or  
4 sole traders. The merchants imported consumables from China into Syria; the industrialists  
5 sold textiles within Syria but also in some cases exported to Turkey, Central Asia, Russia, the  
6 Emirates and the horn of Africa. These networks were often based outside the historic bazaar  
7 complex and Suwaiqa, in industrial zones on Aleppo’s urban periphery. Before the conflict,  
8 Abu Tayyan would spend much of his working day visiting factories in these areas, renewing  
9 and extending his business acquaintances. These business networks represent a little studied  
10 social group, relatively unremarked upon in the scholarly literature on Syria’s political  
11 economy and business landscape. This literature often draws a distinction between an  
12 authentic, autonomous commercial bourgeoisie active in sectors such as textiles, consumer  
13 imports and light manufactured goods, and a state-dependent bourgeoisie whose wealth  
14 depends solely on political connections to the regime and opportunities for rent and  
15 monopoly control that these create. While the latter are said to be from “mixed” and often  
16 “humble” social backgrounds, the former hail from long-established merchant families, and  
17 urban backgrounds; and there is tension between the two. Yet the networks to which Abu  
18 Tayyan and his associates belonged represent a third group: outside of the state bourgeoisie  
19 and active in the textile and light manufactured sector; yet seen by many in the established  
20 commercial bourgeoisie as unwelcome newcomers and as outsiders to their own networks of  
21 credit and political support. Some of the more established trading families responded to this  
22 competition by foregrounding their own genealogies as a claim to moral (rather than purely  
23 social) distinction: talking dismissively of the “crowd” (*al-zahmeh*) who had lowered the  
24 ethic of commercial “interaction” (*al-ta’amul*).

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39 Crucially, it was the trans-Asian connections – notably with China, the Emirates and  
40 Central Asia – that enabled this group to emerge and flourish. Abu Tayyan credited China  
41 with his entry into international business; when I asked him about the Futian market in Yiwu,  
42 he said “that is where all my money came from!” China’s response to the global financial  
43 crisis of 2007/08 was a transforming moment: it made credit cheap and accessible enough to  
44 entice relatively inexperienced businesspeople and small traders into trans-Asian trade. In  
45 doing so, it helped to reshape Aleppo’s mercantile hierarchies. It was not the only factor –  
46 others included the growing market for consumption in Syria that was fed by an influx of  
47 Iraqi refugees and capital, and of excess liquidity from the Gulf, that led to a real estate boom  
48 and its associated “wealth effect” (Abboud 2010). But the increasing accessibility of China’s  
49 export markets was a critical development. It also led to a diversification of tastes within  
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3 Syria. In 2008, Mahmood left the family business in Suwaiqa after a dispute in which his  
4 family sought to block his marriage to his fiancée. With a business partner, he opened a new  
5 kitchenware outlet in one of Aleppo's affluent western suburbs, taking Hamzi, a young  
6 teenager who had been working in the Suwaiqa shop, with him. At first, he provisioned the  
7 business through Suwaiqa's wholesalers, but soon realised that more money could be made in  
8 the affluent suburb by offering new designs and catering to different tastes. In a bid to  
9 establish a unique line of goods, Mahmood began travelling direct to Yiwu to provision his  
10 store independently. He invested in a warehouse in the east of Aleppo near Hamzi his  
11 assistant's neighbourhood, and later expanded by opening a new store in the town of al-Bab,  
12 sixty kilometres East of Aleppo. Unmediated access to the wide range of goods in Yiwu's  
13 wholesale market allowed him to make his own decisions about how to meet and shape  
14 consumer tastes<sup>5</sup>. And cheap and accessible Chinese credit and cargo companies enticed new  
15 entrants into the export market and allowed retailers and petty wholesalers to experiment with  
16 new styles and tastes.  
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### 26 **The Syrian Conflict and Trans-Asian Mobilities**

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29 The Chinese state's injection of credit post 2007/8 drew more of Aleppine society into  
30 an Asian economy of circulation. We see this played out in some of the trajectories that  
31 emerged in response to the Syrian conflict four years later. Mahmood opened his third  
32 kitchenware store in downtown Aleppo, less than a kilometre from the Suwaiqa complex, a  
33 week before the Arab protests of 2011 reached Aleppo. When I met his assistant Hamzi five  
34 and a half years later in Yiwu, he recounted to me how he had experienced the first three  
35 years of the crisis in his country. Broadly speaking, the conflict divided the city into a  
36 government-held area covering the affluent Western suburbs, and a rebel-held area to the east  
37 of the citadel. This geography roughly coincided with a line that mercantile elites, who  
38 mostly lived in the west, used to draw before the conflict, between "sophisticated" (*raqi*) and  
39 "working class" or "popular" (*sha'bi*) areas. While it would be easy to assume that such a  
40 geography would have divided Hamzi and Mahmood, since they hailed from different sides  
41 of the divide, in fact the conflict intensified their connections. Rather than simply returning  
42 home to live with his family in the East, Hamzi spent many nights in the west of the city,  
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53 <sup>5</sup> Some Syrian merchants resident in and visiting the city said that Yiwu allowed them to innovate market tastes  
54 in Syria by sourcing new products and designs; and stressed the importance of keeping new products secret  
55 from their competitors until they had reached the market. For this reason, some were reluctant to deal with  
56 trading offices in Yiwu which acted as suppliers as well as agents for the Syrian market.  
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3 sleeping on the floor of one of Mahmoud's stores. One of his tasks was to travel to the  
4 warehouse in the east of the city, and transport its contents to the shops in the west, one  
5 handtrolley at a time. This was a journey that involved navigating a perilous kilometre-long  
6 crossing between rival checkpoints, sometimes passing underneath sniper fire. He did not  
7 seem to have made these journeys unwillingly; but referred to Mahmoud as "more than a  
8 brother" – a man who had even gone to the extent of inviting him to celebrate the eid festival  
9 with his own family.  
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15 Hamzi also ran considerable risks for Mahmoud by making several trips to provision  
16 the store in al-Bab. Business here could be brisk: he remarked that far from holding up trade,  
17 the various checkpoints and crossings into Free Syrian Army and Daesh territory often  
18 imposed fewer tariffs and sought fewer bribes than those controlled by the regime. He spoke  
19 in 2016 of a fairly vibrant trade from Mersin in Turkey, across into a region north west of the  
20 Euphrates tributaries controlled by the Free Syrian Army, and then into Daesh territory and  
21 northern Iraq. Electrical goods, engines and spare parts were particularly good business, as  
22 were chickens to feed the fighters. There was also a marriage economy in Daesh territory  
23 which created demand for trousseaus of kitchenware and household goods. Hamzi recalled  
24 the ease with which he could blend into Daesh territory, simply by letting his beard grow for  
25 a few days, hitching his trousers up above his ankles, and heading straight for the mosque  
26 when the azan was called. What he really feared, he said, was being arrested at a regime  
27 checkpoint for evading military service. One day he was caught, and beaten continuously for  
28 an hour, and extracted only after some payments were made. Mahmoud decided he should  
29 leave the country. He found him a position in a trading office in Yiwu, and took his passport  
30 and arranged a visa, before presenting Hamzi with a *fait accompli*. "He didn't ask me first",  
31 Hamzi said, "he opened a project for me, he sent me" – literally, he "travelled" me (*saffarni*).  
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43 The closeness that drew two men together from rival sides of the city, which led  
44 Hamzi to run these risks and to accept Mahmoud's decision to "travel" him, might at first  
45 seem surprising. It needs to be understood at least in part in the context of the promise and  
46 possibility held out by the two men's incorporation into Yiwu's export economy. Their close  
47 relationship was born in 2008 out of the import of Chinese commodities, and it held together  
48 after 2011 in part because of the shared sense of a future that might revolve around the Yiwu-  
49 Aleppo axis. Hamzi told me that while he was not shipping many goods to Mahmoud now,  
50 he remained close to him and envisaged a future partnership, in which the knowledge he was  
51 acquiring of Chinese and of the Yiwu market would help Mahmoud. He could have gone  
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3 west to Europe, he said, where he had relatives. But he had travelled to China because he  
4 thought that it would be helpful for his future once the war had ended in Syria. China did not  
5 offer citizenship, as Europe did. But citizenship in Europe meant waiting for years for papers,  
6 during which time it was not possible to leave the country or travel back to Syria. It also  
7 meant assuming the status of “refugee”, which among young Syrian men in Yiwu was  
8 understood as closing off possibilities for mobility and work. To be in China meant to be part  
9 of an Asian economy of movement, that allowed individuals to travel back and forth  
10 including to Syria – between, we might say, West and East Asia<sup>6</sup>. Unlike Europe, which was  
11 seen as relatively impermeable to the kinds of commodities in which they specialised<sup>7</sup>, these  
12 Asian connections were understood to provide opportunities for trajectories of work and  
13 personal mobility.  
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21 Hamzi, then, did not travel to Yiwu as a refugee. Like many of the young Syrian men  
22 in their late teens and early twenties who worked in Yiwu’s shops, restaurants and trading  
23 offices, he spoke of avoiding “the army” (*al-jaysh*) – or military service – as an important  
24 reason for leaving Syria. But no-one I knew identified themselves as a “refugee” (*laji*), and  
25 Yiwu was not a refuge in the sense of a detached locale situated at the end of a linear  
26 trajectory of flight. Instead, Hamzi’s decision to travel east to Yiwu – or to let himself be  
27 “travelled” there – was informed by a range of economic and personal considerations,  
28 including his relationship with Mahmoud, all of which were premised on the likely continuity  
29 of the trans-Asian ties that Aleppo’s merchants had already established. Like other young  
30 Syrian men, he came to Yiwu came not just for refuge, but as part of a strategy – often a  
31 family strategy – of putting a foothold in China that would be useful when the war ended. In  
32 the meantime, Yiwu remained connected to Syria in important ways. Many were sending  
33 remittances, some had made return journeys to Syria to visit family and assess the changing  
34 economic situation. Some commercial links remained active: a majority of the advertisements  
35 for cargo companies in the city’s Arabic-language trade magazine promoted Syria as the  
36 main destination. Their patterns of mobility after 2011 reinscribed an Asian arena of  
37 circulation, which had been fashioned by a previous generation of merchants who had  
38 brought China to Aleppo, and Aleppo to China.  
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53 <sup>6</sup> In the case of Syrian traders, the scope of this mobility included sites which afforded opportunities to renew  
54 visas and travel permits – notably Malaysia and Sudan.

55 <sup>7</sup> see Marsden (2016:16) for similar distinctions drawn by Afghan merchants between Asia and the formerly  
56 Soviet world, on the one hand, and Western Europe, on the other  
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## Conclusion

This article has sought to bring scholarly attention to shifting mercantile networks that have, over the last forty years, connected Aleppo to countries in the formerly Soviet bloc and, more recently, to Chinese cities that act as wholesale hubs for the global trade in low-grade commodities, on the other. International merchants during this period fashioned Aleppo as a trans-local trading space which fed Soviet demand for textiles; the same mobile merchants then connected post-Soviet commodity markets in Russia with the emergence of China's export manufacturing sector. Their trans-Asian forms of mobility and investment also helped to secure Aleppo's status as a regional commercial and manufacturing hub supplying markets in Turkey, the Caucasus and the Arab world. By focusing on these trans-regional connections that had shaped the city's social and economic dynamics, I have sought to offer an alternative perspective from the usual framing of Aleppo as a second city to Damascus, whose wings had been clipped by the nation state which cut it off from its Anatolian and Iraqi hinterland. Many scholarly accounts of Aleppo under Baathist rule have portrayed it as a shadow of its former glory, plagued with a second city complex in relation to Damascus. Others had cast Aleppo as a bastion of political antipathy or former Islamist opposition to the Baathist regime. Rather than thinking in terms of the nation state, or the resistance that tradition could offer to Baathist modernity, Aleppine merchants sought with some success under Bashar al-Asad to establish the city as an outpost of the emerging Chinese markets in low-grade consumer goods.

This article shows that a consideration of shifting, overlapping, long-distance trading connections is vital in order to understand changes in local political economies in the "Middle East" or rather West Asia. A historical and trans-regional perspective also helps to explain the resilience of Syrian entrepreneurship in different parts of Asia. The demise of the Soviet Union made Syrian traders even more important to a post-socialist economy in the 1990s. A decade later, the response of China's state banking system to the 2008 global economic shock pumped cheap credit into its trans-Asian networks, which in turn allowed Syria's small wholesalers, retailers and those without any background in trade to become international importers. They were thus able to play an increasing role in mediating Syria's emerging relationship with the Chinese state, and their rise reshaped existing hierarchies in the country's commercial bourgeoisie. The circuits of trans-Asian mobility that they established took on renewed significance during the Syrian conflict, as Yiwu became a destination for some Syrian men seeking to escape military service, and envisaging economic

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3 strategies which they dreamt of implementing after stability returned. Methodologically,  
4 focusing on their career trajectories and on their physical paths of mobility, both before and  
5 after the Syrian uprising and subsequent conflict, enables us to place Aleppo in an Asian  
6 arena. It allows us to contemplate expansive trading connections without invoking a maritime  
7 imagination, and to rethink the conceptual geography of the region without having to confine  
8 Syria to the Mediterranean world.  
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