Aleppo in China, China in Aleppo

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Abstract This talk explores the transregional mercantile connections that have tied Aleppo and the Syrian economy 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 socialist ecumene. It also documents some of the more recent connections fashioned by Aleppine merchants with China’s export manufacturing sector since the early 2000s, through the activities of importers who visit and in some cases are stationed in the commercial hub of Yiwu in Zhejiang province. I argue that the availability of Chinese credit channelled through commercial hubs such as Yiwu led to the emergence of a new social group in Syria – entrepreneurs without a background in trade who were able to challenge the dominance of the established commercial bourgeoisie in Syria. The trans-Asian channels established by Syrian merchants visiting China have also shaped the trajectories of some Syrians who have fled the conflict in their country since 2011.

Speaker Dr Paul Anderson is Acting Director of the Centre of Islamic Studies, Prince Alwaleed Lecturer in the Department of Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of Darwin College, Cambridge. He trained as a social anthropologist and is interested in the study of trading networks and the moral and social aspects of trade within and beyond the Arab world. He gained his PhD in social anthropology at the University of Edinburgh and his BA in Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Oxford.