

Politics

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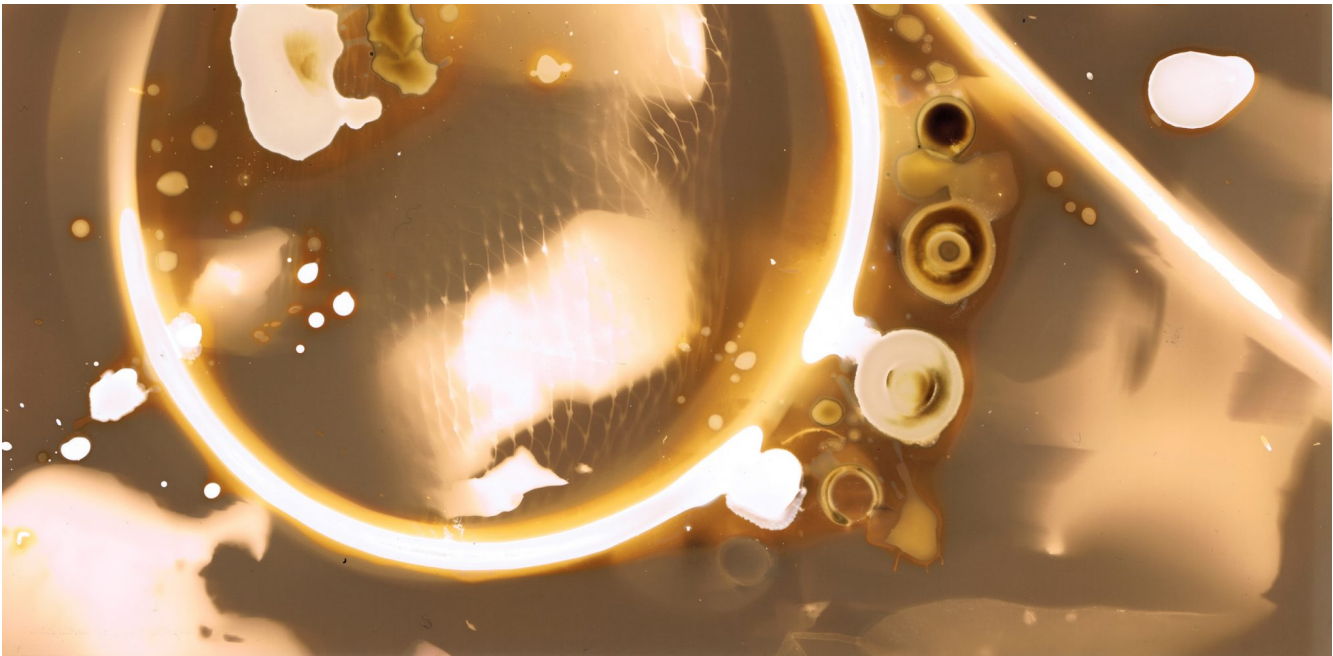
Lab-Leak Theory and the “Asiatic” Form

What is missing is a motive

Published in: Issue 42 : Vanishing Act

Publication date: Spring 2022





Laurie Kang, *Guts*. 2016, photogram. 8 × 10". Courtesy of the artist and Franz Kaka, Toronto.

WHEN THE PANDEMIC FIRST HIT the United States in early 2020, scientists and journalists debating the origins of Covid-19 settled upon a theory of natural transfer. Covid, they concluded, had naturally emerged at the Huanan Seafood Market in Wuhan, China, and crossed over to humans from a wild animal, most likely a pangolin carry-ing diseases from bats. By April 2020, talk of wet markets suddenly dominated news cycles.

Most of the talk was xenophobic in tone. A *National Review* editorial claimed wet markets in China “butchered” meat in “unsanitary” conditions and explained that unhygienic practices stemmed from superstition. An editorial in *USA Today* claimed wet markets were insulated by the “scale of China and the combination of its cultural traditions of medicine, animal husbandry and culinary tastes that render it a unique incubator of terrible diseases.” To the author, their barbarism reflected poorly on Chinese people: “It is said that a society’s attitude towards animals is often a bellwether for its sense of justice and kindness. I found these attributes sorely lacking in China.”

These were not merely fringe voices either. “It boggles my mind,” said Anthony Fauci, “how, when we have so many diseases that emanate out of that unusual human-animal interface, that we don’t just shut it down.” “If we don’t take care of nature, it will take care of us,” offered a senior UN official. Sixty US lawmakers wrote to the World Health Organization calling for a ban on wet markets, describing conditions where animals urinate, defecate, bleed, and salivate onto one another. A governor in northern Italy was more blunt: “We have all seen the Chinese eating mice alive.”

But pushback to the wet-market theory soon gained traction. Critics pointed out that the same “unusual” practices could be found across Europe and the US, and that the treatment of animals within industrial supply chains was likely worse than in wet markets. In one popular rebuttal, the anthropologists Lyle Fearnley and Christos Lynteris argued that wet markets were being portrayed “as emblems of Chinese otherness: chaotic versions of oriental bazaars, lawless areas where animals that should not be eaten are sold as food, and where what should not be mingled comes together (seafood and poultry, serpents and cattle).” This portrayal, they argued, “fuels Sinophobia.” By June 2020, a *Lancet* piece challenged wet-market bans by citing the specters of xenophobic racism and “anti-Asian sentiments.” That the wet-market theory is Sinophobic became liberal common sense.

In the two years since, health organizations have tried to destigmatize specific origin points of new variants by eschewing terms like *China virus* in favor of neutral Greek letters. (The WHO tellingly skipped the Greek letter xi—spelled identically to China’s leader Xi Jinping—when it named the omicron variant.) There is remarkably little mention of Wuhan in the news anymore. The lone exception is an alternative theory, resurgent last summer, that claims Covid-19 was designed in the Wuhan Institute for Virology and leaked into the populace.

The lab-leak theory came to legitimacy by a circuitous path. It was first auditioned by Donald Trump and Mike Pompeo shortly after lockdown started, but journalists were quick to distance themselves from its overtones of crude Trumpian racism. Nevertheless the theory gained new life last spring, when some of those same journalists—abetted by a chorus of concern trolls—began to question if they had been blinded by liberal partisanship. By May 2021, *lab leak* was circulating more widely in the mainstream news than *wet market* ever had,

leading to new Senate hearings, an investigation by the Biden Administration, and an endorsement by the conscience of safe liberalism, Jon Stewart. A December 2021 poll indicated that the lab-leak theory is now believed by 72 percent of Americans.

The lab-leak theory offers the public a straightforward scenario: Covid-19's unusual properties emerged from experiments in the Wuhan Institute. For a decade, its proponents claim, Chinese virologists led by the renowned researcher Shi Zhengli collected samples of various coronaviruses from bats in southwest China and genetically manipulated them, combining them with viruses designed to infect human cells or with cell cultures of different species, a process known as serial passage. Such controversial research has come to be classified as *gain of function*, a term first coined in 2011 to describe experiments that involved infecting ferrets with the H5N1 avian influenza virus until the strain gained new evolutionary features. In Wuhan, allegedly, the novel coronavirus accidentally escaped from the lab through an employee, entering the city and showing the first signs of outbreak by December 2019. Exactly how the safety breach occurred has not been discovered. For the theory's proponents, this is largely irrelevant; a laboratory escape was only a matter of time given the inherent dangers.

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What reporting exists on the lab-leak theory has revolved around apparent attempts to conceal evidence that US agencies helped fund the Wuhan Institute's dangerous work. Special scrutiny has been applied to Peter Daszak of EcoHealth Alliance in New York, which funds global virus research, including for the Wuhan Institute, and Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and

Infectious Diseases. In June 2021, the Kentucky senator and ophthalmologist Rand Paul directly accused Fauci of lying about his role, “obscur[ing] responsibility for four million people dying around the world from a pandemic.” In September, the Intercept published details of an unearthed grant proposal from 2018, in which Daszak’s agency sought to conduct gain-of-function experiments on coronaviruses in the US. This January, it reported on redacted emails that hinted at a conspiracy to suppress the lab-leak theory, led by university researchers and federal officials including Fauci.

On the surface, proponents aim their accusations at an exceedingly dangerous form of research, lax safety standards in Wuhan, and a cover-up by global elites. What is missing is a motive. If such research is so self-evidently dangerous, what could have justified it? What exactly were the Wuhan scientists aiming to do with these viruses in the first place?

The obvious implication is that Chinese researchers were pursuing something unnatural and therefore immoral. “Gain-of-function research,” Paul told Fauci, “is juicing up naturally occurring animal viruses to infect humans.” An article in *New York* described gain of function as “hot-wiring genomes” and “hot-swapp[ing] mutant spike proteins.” Such terms may be dismissed as sensationalism, but they also reveal an underlying judgment about the hubris of science.

Among the most prominent lab-leak theory proponents are the scientists Richard Muller and Steven Quay, who published an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* in October 2021 claiming the coronavirus was “cooked up in a lab.” Like others, they pointed to the “smoking gun” embedded within the virus itself: the presence of a “furin cleavage site” that makes Covid-19 more infectious and lethal than viruses without it, including all previous related coronaviruses in its class, such as the 2003 SARS virus or MERS. The spike proteins of Covid-19 work by fusing with human cell membranes, but they can only do so when the proteins are cut apart. Covid-19 appears “designed” to be cleaved by an enzyme called furin, which occurs naturally throughout the human body. “This mutation is sufficiently complex that it couldn’t have been the result of spontaneous changes,” Muller and Quay claimed. “It could, however, have been inserted by nature or by humans,” as in through serial passage. They concluded their op-ed with florid language about a Chinese conspiracy:

Let China keep its firewall of secrecy; a suspect who refuses to testify can still be convicted. We have an eyewitness, a whistleblower who escaped from Wuhan and carried details of the pandemic’s origin that the Chinese Communist Party can’t hide. The whistleblower’s name is SARS-CoV-2.

Muller and Quay further explicate their thoughts in *What Really Happened in Wuhan* by the Australian journalist Sharri Markson, published in September 2021. *What Really Happened* is a comprehensive account of the lab-leak theory as it took shape last year, featuring interviews with scientific authorities and security officials in the US and Australia. In Markson’s book Muller offers another theory, this time centered on the properties of the first Covid samples collected in Wuhan in December 2019, which he hypothesizes were altered by someone on the inside, perhaps a Chinese scientist with a conscience sending out a message to the world. “As someone who has worked in national security for a long time,” he tells Markson, “the more obvious explanation is that someone in the Wuhan laboratory was a whistleblower.” To explain, he asks Markson if she has read *The Da Vinci Code*:

“In it, someone leaves a clue behind that can only be read by the right expert. Here’s my fantasy. Someone at the Wuhan Institute of Virology was really upset they were developing a bioweapon. They went into virology because they wanted to save lives, to stop pandemics, but now the military had taken control of part of the laboratory and they were weaponizing viruses. That person has no direct way to get the word out. If you have a sample of the vaccine and you happen just for ten seconds to get access to the patient’s sample, you put a little bit of the vaccine in there hoping that someone in the West will notice. It went unnoticed until Steven Quay looked for it. If a vaccine was in there it indicates this was being weaponized. It’s a great way to spike the sample in a way the process of publication would bring the message to the West but it would only be read by the right person. That someone would say, ‘Oh my god, there’s a vaccine in there.’”

In Muller’s “fantasy,” Wuhan Institute virologists had access to a Covid-19 vaccine from the beginning—perhaps a traditional live-attenuated virus vaccine—and dropped it into samples taken from Covid-positive Wuhan patients to communicate to scientists around the world that the virus had been manipulated for nefarious ends. Here, in other words, is one of the scientific

authorities behind the lab-leak theory positing multiple scenarios, one of which includes sabotage from within: a fantastical hypothesis in line, he boasts, with the plot of Hollywood movies based on best sellers.

Muller is not alone. *What Really Happened* also features speculation from Chinese émigrés, retired officers, Australian and American security analysts, the CIA, MI6, and US State Department officials, including Miles Yu, who served as China expert under Mike Pompeo. Last February, Pompeo and Yu coauthored another *Wall Street Journal* opinion piece detailing the startling rise of a bioweapons program in China as conjectural evidence for the lab-leak theory.

This is a curious reversal: the wet-market theory of natural transfer, backed by almost all scientists and health organizations, quickly became taboo, while the lab-leak theory transcended its illicit fringe status and entered the political mainstream. This inversion has taken place with little new concrete evidence for either scenario: even as preprint papers continue to filter into the public, investigators have yet to discover the crucial missing link, be it the intermediary host pangolins sold in the seafood market or the infected employees from the laboratory. I could not direct you to the key evidence that exonerates the Wuhan Institute, and it might not exist. But this is also the crucial point. There are too many lacunae in the lab-leak explanation for the theory to stand on its own: proponents must fill the gaps with their own projections and beliefs.

When the lab-leak theory reappeared in spring 2021, skeptics in the US warned it was just another racist trope invented to scapegoat China and, by extension, Asian Americans. The organization Stop AAPI Hate reported that in spring alone, 2,478 incidents of anti-Asian racism were recorded across the country, the most infamous of which occurred in Atlanta in March when a white gunman killed six female massage-parlor workers—Chinese and Korean immigrants—along with two white customers. In a national survey of Asian Americans conducted in the aftermath of the Atlanta spa shooting, the plurality of respondents reported that they perceived anti-Asian violence as a by-product of Trump’s “China flu” rhetoric and general racial scapegoating by his constituents. The *New York Times* science reporter Apoorva Mandavilli proclaimed the lab-leak theory had “racist roots.” Leana Wen, a Chinese American physician, wrote in the *Washington Post* that the lab-leak theory had also spurred an “uptick in racist hate mail” and new “frantic messages” from Asian Americans “terrified” of civilian violence. “Words matter,”

she cautioned, and “unproven speculation” into the Wuhan Institute’s role would “fuel anti-Asian hate.”

Certainly any sort of racial scapegoating for Covid-19 belongs to a broader trajectory of white supremacy and xenophobia. But what to make of the fact that condemnation of wet markets was pushed out of polite society in the early pandemic while the lab-leak conspiracy became politically permissible not long afterward? As many critics—including the anthropologists Fearnley and Lynteris—have pointed out, mainstream descriptions of wet markets reflected the classic mode of Orientalism described decades ago in the work of Edward Said. What fewer critics have acknowledged is just how *antiquated* and out of touch visions of “Oriental” wet markets were—barbaric, diseased, superstitious—compared with the world’s otherwise prevailing image of 21st-century China. It’s clear that projections of Asia are influencing Americans’ understanding of how Covid-19 came to infect humans. But which “Asia” are they talking about, exactly?

AS A COLLEGE STUDENT, I was introduced to Said’s work in countless humanities classes, from Asian American literature to African civilizations to Chinese and Indian history. Taught as a self-reflexive critique of Eurocentrism and exoticization, it served an important basic purpose. It also seemed a little easy: in extreme cases, Said’s critique of Orientalism was abused and stretched to fit essentially any non-European context, a kind of liberal anti-racist homogenization that was not without its own Orientalist assumptions. As the years passed, I found it increasingly difficult to overlook the mismatch between Said’s framework and the Asia I actually study—the Asia that dominates most contemporary US conceptions, as in Obama’s famous “pivot” to the region.

In Said’s canonical work, the Orient was a product of the 19th-century British and French colonial imagination, and the East it exoticized was primarily the Islamic world. The function of *this* Orientalism was to justify political domination, alternately romanticizing the Orient for inspiring the earliest

civilizations while also diminishing it as stagnant and fit for conquest. China, on the other hand, was never a proper colony in the vein of India and the Middle East, and Said’s classic Orientalist framework has always been an awkward fit with the Asia-Pacific. A different Orient inspired a different Orientalism.

Today, the world consumes much of its imagery of East Asia through pop cultural forms, which are saturated with what scholars call a “techno-Orientalist” style. The region is largely depicted as a collection of high-tech, productive societies, with Japan representing the brains and China the muscle: think films such as *Blade Runner*, *The Matrix*, or *Ex Machina*—or, these days, the Korean techno-dystopia of *Squid Game*. But really, these are all variations of a deeper pattern—what the scholar Colleen Lye calls the “Asiatic racial form,” which first grew dominant in modern US literature at the turn of the 20th century, when the US pushed its westward frontier across the Pacific Ocean. Originally specific to the US’s neocolonial ties to China and Japan, it has been flexibly transposable to other Asian groups and diasporas, from Korea to Vietnam to Singapore. Rather than being tied to any concrete place, the “Asiatic” racial form offers fetishized abstractions of life under capitalism, substituting the turbulent dynamics of capital accumulation with static representations of race, such as the Confucian coolie or Japanese samurai spirit, thereby enabling the “management of social [class] struggle.” This function of race, as with nation, is to simplify economic complexity into discrete cultures, offering just-so explanations to make sense of the disjunctures of the modern world.

Starting in the 1850s, Chinese migrants to Northern California were scapegoated by white politicians as super-cheap superhuman workers with an alien, machinelike biology. In the new century, Japanese farmers along the West Coast, from Vancouver to the San Fernando Valley, were targeted as unassimilable monopolists who had taken control of produce and dairy markets. Such views resulted in policies of exclusion and internment, respectively, typically seen as dark stains on the record of domestic American race relations. But politics at home were also inseparable from concurrent international anxieties over “yellow peril.” The rapid ascent of Meiji Japan, culminating in victory over Russia in 1905, inspired fantastical speculation about the region’s threat to the white race. Covering the Russo-Japanese war firsthand, the novelist Jack London penned an article titled “If Japan Awakens China” (1909), which warned that a marriage of “martial Japan” with “industrious China,” in Lye’s formulation, would pose an

existential threat to a decadent, aging industrial US. It was precisely this fear that reemerged at the turn of the 21st century, when Deng Xiaoping's China joined in the Japan-led economic miracle of the postwar Asia-Pacific.

If the Orientalism described by Said was consolidated in the age of European, especially British, empire, then Asiaticism belonged to the American century. Within this racial form, Lye writes in *America's Asia*, the distinguishing trait of East Asian peoples has been excessive economic efficiency. Certainly this belongs within the Orientalist tradition of exoticization, but the temporal assumptions stand in stark contrast to those of earlier modes. As a shorthand, we can distinguish between the traditional “Oriental,” fit for conquest by the West, and the hypermodern “Asiatic,” feared for its conquest of the West.

Modern representations of Asia and its diaspora have taken on the properties of capital itself: abstract, intangible, mobile, borderless.

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Whereas classic Orientalism understood the East by foregrounding its despotic rulers, the “Asiatic” is represented through a plural figure, coolies, who—from railroad workers in Utah to sweatshop workers in Guangdong—are seen as a faceless mass and personify the logic of capitalist exploitation. Whereas the “Oriental” was traditional, the “Asiatic” is postmodern; whereas the “Oriental” was irrational and superstitious, the “Asiatic” is calculating. The “Oriental” referred to a geographically contained culture; the “Asiatic” points toward a transpacific, even global, flow of goods, capital, and people. The “Oriental” was archaic and conservative; the “Asiatic” is future-oriented and progressive. If, in short, the “Oriental” meant exclusion from the march of progress of capital, then the “Asiatic” represents its full realization as well as its dark excesses.

In geopolitical terms, “Oriental” stereotypes provided an explanation for the stagnation and degradation of Asia, rendering it predisposed to colonization.

“Asiatic” stereotypes point in the opposite direction. East Asia is either a hypermodern civilization that reflects the degradation of Euro-America, especially the US—think viral tweets comparing Chinese subways to New York’s MTA—or, conversely, it is an economic threat that will one day overtake Euro-America, subsuming it within itself, completing the circuit of Hegel’s *Weltgeist*, from East to West then back to East. To much of the world, Meredith Woo has written, the region signifies both miracle and menace.

The distinction between “Oriental” and “Asiatic,” it seems to me, maps roughly onto the difference between the two Covid-19 origin theories. The wet-market theory amplified antiquated, vulgar ideas about the barbarity of an uncivilized people, but because it stood in contradiction with the economic reality of China as an ascendant global power, its purchase and resonance were limited. By contrast, the lab-leak theory rings true for many, tapping into recurring suspicions that the China of today, behind its inscrutable armies of cheap labor and lab coat-wearing scientists, is up to something fishy.

This distinction also casts debates over anti-Asian racism in a new light. Confronted with accusations that Covid-19 is a “Chinese virus,” for instance, many have been reflexively tempted to separate the bad, authoritarian China from good, freedom-loving Asian Americans, who serve the country as doctors, business owners, and public officials. This domestic reflex has been matched internationally too, inspiring many to romanticize Asia’s pandemic response. The same week as Muller and Quay’s “whistleblower” editorial last October, the *New York Times* reported triumphantly that vaccinations in South Korea, Japan, and Malaysia were quickly outpacing those in Europe and the US, for “Asians have trusted their governments to do the right thing, and they were willing to put the needs of the community over their individual freedoms.” Such examples attempt to repudiate racist stereotypes of Asian disloyalty and backwardness by foregrounding Asian modernity and collectivity. In so doing, however, they also mirror the trajectory of the lab-leak conspiracy this past year, upending Orientalist stereotypes of barbarism in favor of reified ideas about economically productive “Asiatic” behaviors.

From the outset, the “Asiatic” subject, for Lye, has been distinguished not by its archaic residues but by its forward-looking orientation. Today, the lab-leak theory does not posit any empirical evidence of bioweapons but only the supposition

that they are coming sometime soon. *This* version of China does not suffer from superstition, but rather boasts an exceptional ability to develop new technologies and advance research that originated in the US. The natural proclivity to master technologies of the West, from sedans to silicon chips, is precisely what makes Asia so dangerous.

The geographic scope of this “Asiatic” form thus addresses the most obvious rejoinder to accusations of racism by lab-leak proponents, namely, that much of the critical heat is being aimed less at China than at white American scientists such as Daszak and Fauci. But unlike the provincial “Oriental,” the “Asiatic” is already imagined as part of a global network of elite control, reminiscent of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories from 20th-century Europe. Modern representations of Asia and its diaspora, as Iyko Day puts it, have taken on the properties of capital itself: abstract, intangible, mobile, borderless. In the Gilded Age, Chinese and Japanese migrants were accused of colluding with monopoly capitalists and railroad barons; today, Australian security hawks accuse China of siphoning US money and pressuring foreign scientists to keep their mouths shut. For lab-leak theory proponents, it is the invisibility and inscrutability of Chinese actions themselves that serve as evidence of guilt, both for China and its collaborators, confirming suspicions of furtive plans for domination. As Markson, author of *What Really Happened*, concludes:

So was this a cover-up to hide culpability for a virus leak from a laboratory or just evidence of the new world order? And was all the activity ... of late 2019 simply a coincidence, or is it a sign of something more sinister?

These, again, are not just outliers. Underlying fears of China’s secret aspirations have been floating around in mundane form for a while now, surfacing periodically in general debates over its role in the pandemic. In April 2020, Brazil’s education minister stated that Covid-19 was part of China’s “infallible plan for world domination.” The same month, arsonists in the UK set fire to nearly eighty wireless towers and attacked dozens of telecom workers, provoked by an internet theory that Covid-19 had spread through wireless 5G technology built by the Chinese telecom giant Huawei. In the US, the Department of Justice has for years racially profiled scientists of Asian origin, including two professors in New York University’s medical school who were fired for their ties to China without legal process or evidence of harm.² And in December, it was revealed that Trump’s

allies had intended to invalidate the 2020 election results—laid out in a PowerPoint slideshow at the time—by claiming that “the Chinese systematically gained control over our election system.”

From bioweapons to espionage, such accusations take us back to the days of cold war conspiracy thrillers, wherein the specter of a global communist China appears motivated by a thirst for power for its own sake. What is rarely said aloud, precisely because it is tacitly, even subconsciously understood, is the congruence between national security fears and economic ones. By all reports, public opinion of China has plummeted among the wealthiest nations in concert with their perception of its unique, unstoppable capitalist ascension. In a Pew survey of residents from advanced economies in Europe and Asia, the majority of respondents in nearly all the surveyed countries originally held positive views of China two decades ago; by last year, evaluations were resoundingly negative, reaching historic lows across the UK and US, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, South Korea, Spain, and Canada, with the worst in Japan. Notably, the same survey asked respondents which country they felt was now the world’s dominant economic power. Though a handful selected the US, China was chosen by the overwhelming majority, including by those in Australia, Canada, and nine Western European countries. In a separate survey, it was discovered that in a number of European countries, the lab-leak theory is as popular as that of natural transfer.

Although there are many reasons for the lab-leak theory’s wide acceptance, it is hard to ignore just how neatly its abstract, worldwide contours align with burgeoning global animosity toward China as an omnipotent economic force. It is the plausibility of *this* China, rather than a generic, foreign Orient, that I believe serves as the major basis for stereotype and the resonance of the lab-leak theory. I have lately begun to wonder if the best way out of this endless loop of racial stereotypes, alternating between demonization and romanticization of China and Asia, is to question the very status of these geographical and cultural categories in the first place. The “Asiatic” form does not refer to any specific, concrete place in the world but is an abstraction formed in response to a dwindling sense of economic agency and the waning of Euro-US hegemony. To challenge expressions of racism through individual demands for tolerance and respect may be a good start. But such demands leave untouched the underlying social dynamics that have made racial explanations so plausible and tempting to

begin with.

THE CHINESE ECONOMY is, undeniably, a hypermodern growth machine challenging the supremacy of the US and its allies. However, this does not indicate that China is an exotic and omnipotent society—only that it has all too much in common with those very countries that fear it. As with the rest of the world, the Chinese economy is subjected to impersonal competitive forces beyond its control, and it is this stubborn condition of mutual interdependence and competition that can serve as the basis for an alternate analysis. Rather than naturalize the “Asiatic,” what if we examined China in all its concrete contradictions, opening up our view onto the contours of the world-system itself?

Most outside commentary on China focuses on the encroaching power of the state. In the realm of politics, this takes the form of human rights discourse about the abject treatment of its peripheries and ethnic minorities in Hong Kong, Tibet, Mongolia, and Xinjiang—criticisms that, to be clear, are fully valid. In July 2021 the US government levied sanctions on Chinese officials, and in December it banned imports from Xinjiang and announced a diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics: somber geopolitical moves that have been filtered into popular culture through NBA center (and defensive liability) Enes Kanter Freedom, an outspoken conservative critic of China.

In economic reporting, similarly, publications like the *Wall Street Journal* fixate on the gradual state takeover of the private economy, especially since the rise of Xi Jinping. But the US was much less troubled by human rights claims and state power during times of nascent economic cooperation. The sociologist Ho-Fung Hung has pointed out that after the Tiananmen massacre in 1989, George H. W. Bush assured Deng Xiaoping that Tiananmen would not stand in the way of promising commercial ties between the two countries.

Really, hostility between China and the rest of the world—and between China

and the US especially—is the by-product of the 2000s, especially the 2008 financial crisis. In the '90s, pro-liberal reformers in the Chinese Communist Party Jiang Zemin and Zhu Rongji pushed for accession into the World Trade Organization. They reshaped the economy in line with neoliberal standards of governance, cutting tariffs, enabling foreign investment, reducing social protections, and rewriting the legal system to enforce intellectual property rights. Simultaneously, the Chinese state lobbied and received support in the US from Wall Street firms and Silicon Valley, who saw, correctly, that access to Chinese labor and consumers would be economically transformative. But in the mid-2000s, as the political scientist Yeling Tan has shown, China underwent a reverse movement toward state intervention into the private sector, embodied in the phrase *guojin mintui* (“the state advances, the private sector retreats”). Pro-state factions successfully pushed back against market liberals, especially after the 2003 transfer of power to Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao. The 2008 crisis had an analogous effect to previous major depressions, heightening China’s disillusionment with free market capitalism. The Chinese state staved off collapse through a massive fiscal stimulus, in China worth about ¥4 trillion (\$580 billion). Over the next four years, assets owned by state-owned enterprises doubled from ¥12 trillion to ¥25 trillion.

China’s state interventions since 2008 may reflect a desire for more centralized power, but they also reflect a sense of self-conscious vulnerability. By the 2010s, signs were emerging of an overaccumulation crisis, in which an abundance of capital would be stymied by lack of productive, profitable outlets. The response was the excessive construction of railway systems nobody was willing to ride and housing developments where nobody was willing to live, memorably captured in widely circulating imagery of China’s so-called ghost cities: glamorous new urban projects that remain empty even today. Such fears of crisis also explain the state’s efforts to expand into developing overseas markets, embodied in the controversial Belt and Road Initiative. While Euro-US commentators one-sidedly castigate Chinese investment as imperialism, as CK Lee has pointed out, they overlook the parallels between China’s actions and their own home countries’ histories of capital investment in Africa or South Asia. In truth, Chinese capital pursues imperialist investments for much the same reason as its counterparts in other rich countries do: not just to grab power for its own sake, but also to stave off domestic slowdown. This, of course, does not make it

any less brutal to locals who suffer the consequences.

If this past decade was one marked by state-backed stimulus and overinvestment, then the Chinese state of 2021 asserted even greater control, reining in market forces, targeting corporate debt, regulating labor in the technology sector, and pursuing de-carbonization. Headline-grabbing stories, such as the scrapped IPO for Ant Group in 2020 and the 2021 collapse of the China Evergrande Group, the country’s second-largest (and most indebted) developer, can be seen as part of the state’s new resolve to enforce fiscal discipline. The global perception of Chinese omnipotence is out of joint with the actual, existing reality of unevenness and constant deferral of crisis.

The same is true when we probe into the story of global supply chains. The pandemic initially inspired calls for the US to decouple from China, as the pandemic laid bare the fragility in global supply chains for countless goods including lumber, chemicals, textiles, footwear, and—poster child for the shipping crisis—semiconductor chips that power automobiles, computers, phones, and much else. Covid delays were exacerbated by just-in-time logistics strategies, first pioneered in postwar Japan’s Toyota system and omnipresent throughout the world today. Just-in-time emphasizes lean and flexible systems that cut costs by constantly keeping in motion the flow of goods from overseas, rendering the world especially vulnerable to any tiny delays along the intricate, transnational supply routes. But calls to decouple proved impossible to heed.

By late 2020, China’s economy had returned to near pre-pandemic levels of 5 to 6 percent growth, the first major economy to do so, deepening the rest of the world’s dependence on Chinese manufacturing. By summer 2021, one logistics analyst had declared China “the big winner of the Covid era.” At the time, Chinese consumer exports and raw materials imports had surpassed pre-pandemic levels, and as shipping exhausted current freight inventory, companies ordered more ships and containers. China’s share of shipbuilding increased to over 40 percent of the market, and remarkably, China manufactures 96 percent of the world’s containers.

But optimism for China peaked in late summer 2021. As the Delta variant spread worldwide, supply chains finally snapped. Infections and restrictions in Malaysia hurt global access to palm oil and tin, outbreaks in Vietnam curbed apparel and

footwear production, Indonesian coal had a waiting list of nine months, and shutdowns and labor shortages in Thailand undermined its auto parts industries. At the center of all this was China. Spectacular demand from the US overburdened and overwhelmed Chinese manufacturers with orders, and containers stuck in US ports meant Chinese orders would take months to clear. “If it wasn’t on the water four weeks ago,” said one supply chain firm in Melbourne last October, “it’s not going to be here for Christmas.” Meanwhile, Chinese ports imposed draconian “zero Covid” quarantines, slowing inbound and outbound traffic. Costs to ship between China and North America skyrocketed up to 500 percent year-over-year, while overseas bottlenecks, local labor shortages, and state-imposed power cuts all hurt factories’ bottom lines.

Even the short-term gains of heightened global demand carry dangers for China’s long-term prospects. Observers have long warned that China’s aggressive reliance on exports would result in lowered domestic consumption and widening inequality. The state has recently announced reform measures and new slogans to rebalance the economy (“dual circulation” and “common prosperity”), but massive overseas demand has made China’s own “decoupling” from export-based growth unlikely. Such dependence exposes people in China to the vicissitudes of global markets, exacerbating domestic inequality and bringing its economy closer to another overaccumulation crisis. After a decade of stimulus to defer crises of demand, the state now pursues austerity policies, incurring short-term pain because it hopes to avoid even deeper damage in the long run.

Such observations gesture toward an alternative account of China’s place in the world, far less exotic and omnipotent than imagined by the lab-leak conspiracy theorists. But it would be unhelpful to dismiss those racialized fears of Asia as a cynical ploy, as a spurious kind of representation that can be contrasted against the so-called reality of political economy. Race and capital are, as ever, inseparable. In its history, the “Asiatic” form has symptomatically captured certain real dynamics that animate the international division of labor: an endlessly complex and unrepresentable totality that we typically experience through its surface appearances, particularly in its racial and national forms. Especially in the 21st century, the resonance of Asiaticism is as powerful as ever; decades of industrialization and accumulation in the Asia-Pacific region have brought to life the 19th-century nightmare of an awakened China.

But conspiracies organized around races or nations lose coherence once we probe their internal contradictions and external linkages. It should be clear that the Chinese model does not stand apart from the world economy—that it is more productively imagined as a theater in which global forces interact and crystallize. Just as we should not pathologize Covid-19 as a virus of degenerate “Oriental” culture, neither should we entertain fantasies of an exceptionally dominant China, be it as dystopian threat or even utopic exception by self-avowed Western anti-imperialists. The best rejoinder to such projections is to clarify how, for the Chinese state and economy moving forward, there will be few easy ways out of the current crises: a condition of finite agency shared in common with the rest of the world. +

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