Surface and Retreat

The China Virus in Three Lunar Years

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Abstract This essay is an experiment in figuring the pandemic through its reconfigurations of Chineseness. It departs from the Sinophobic cliché that conflates race, geopolitics, and epidemiology: the "China Virus" and its cloud of cognate slurs. It considers the slogan-slur as both an epithet and a conceptual and political challenge to imagine the pandemic as it is lived, still, as a disorientation of Asian and Asian American life, time, and death. The essay pauses at each of the three Lunar New Years of the pandemic, so far, to consider how Chineseness—as a national example, as a mode of racialization, and as a site of racial suspicion—might upset a US-based accounting of the pandemic, which frames it only through its arrival on American shores.

Keywords COVID-19, Asian hate, Asian North Americans, temporality, China

China Virus, in Sun and Moon

The first time someone called me "Coronavirus," it was midway through the first Wuhan lockdown and still a month before the first wave of stay-at-home orders on the US West Coast. We were walking through a drugstore parking lot. The Lunar New Year had passed, and as my family peered into Wuhan through lockdown livestreams before they were wiped by censors, I learned for the first time that coughing with a face like mine, with eyes like mine, with family dispersed in a transcontinental splatter pattern like mine, was a kind of self-indictment. In the days when the pandemic was not yet global, and therefore not yet a pandemic, it was a Chinese curiosity that straddled oceans. "Coronavirus!," still morphing from a viral designation into a racial slur. Northern California. I yelled "Fuck you!" back at him, reflexively, and laughing, he stepped into his truck.

This essay is an experiment in figuring the pandemic through its reconfigurations of Chineseness. It begins in the scene of viral-racial address and departs from the sinophobic cliché that conflates race, geopolitics, and epidemiology: "China Virus" and its cloud of cognate slurs. It considers the slogan-slur, in its rabid circulation and presidential amplification, as both an epithet and a conceptual and political challenge to figure the pandemic as it is lived, still, as a disorientation of Asian and Asian American life, time, and death. Contra the flattening of race into contagion

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that the China Virus demands in its most straightforwardly racist deployments, I wonder over how the phrase could orient and disorient scholarly and popular accounts of the pandemic, by leaning into the crevice between *China* and *Virus* and holding open the possible meanings and terms of their relating. I trace various iterations of Chineseness across China and its diasporas and in the Asian communities gathered through racist misrecognition under the viral address. The essay pauses at each of the three Lunar New Years of the pandemic to consider how Chineseness—as a national example, a mode of racialization, and a site of racial suspicion—might disorient a US-based accounting of the pandemic through its arrival at American shores.

To track the virus in lunar years is to situate it in relation to another calendar and in the glimpse of an adjacent cultural universe—one that tracks alongside and also idiosyncratically offsets the universality of Gregorian time. It is a way of thinking in the parallax revealed in the slight misalignment of apparently shared time, disjoined from its uniformity into the specificity of an Asian ritual, racial, political, and cultural calendar. This adjacency and disjointment of calendars is perhaps also a way of accounting for life in diaspora: a choreography across unaligned times. It bears remembering that before the pandemic was a pandemic, it was a drama of Wuhan, a Chinese crisis. And before SARS-CoV-2, the formal name of COVID-19, there was its political and epidemiological precursor: the SARS outbreak of 2002–4, SARS-CoV-1, which remained largely an "Asian" epidemic, in both epidemiological and cultural terms. This uncanny near simultaneity of lunar and solar untimelinesses allows us to consider the pandemic from the underspecified concreteness of *China* as a term that, with the coronavirus itself, must be approached through its variants.

I am compelled to posing the question this way because I think it stages the work of spinning open other accounts of the racial politics of what is now understood, across the Anglophone world, as a coterminous pandemic of "Asian hate." The popular sense, in Asian American activism, that racism and coronavirus are twinned vectors of damage, a "syndemic,"[1] opens questions over how to account for the relation between racialization and epidemiology, between *China* and *Virus*. If the two are flattened into one another, we risk perpetrating the same conceptual reduction as the slur itself, subsuming ourselves into the murderous intelligence of a racial logic that, following Anne Anlin Cheng, confuses the will to grievance with the demand of grief.[2] The responses to the sense of and actual events of racial violence have been varied: grief, anger, the demand of Asian love as a corrective force that counters such Asian hate. This last demand is steeped in the stultifying demands of racial liberalism. But the range of responses, especially in Asian America, all grapple with the elaborate modes of vulnerability gestated in the suffocating space of the China Virus. These, following Mel Y. Chen, proceed "quite beyond questions of personification."[3] Of course, *China Virus* is only the most recent term in the long history of the association of Asian, and especially Chinese, bodies in the Americas with worries over contagion, in its convergent racial and viral deployments.

My thinking here is shaped in relation to the writings of the Bosnian Canadian poet and literary scholar Ada Smailbegović and the Asian American cultural theorist Summer Kim Lee. I suggest that the virus, in its multiple racializing

figurations, should be understood as what Smailbegović has called a surface, a term she introduces in her materialist poetics of interacting forms. She helps me think of the virus as a scene of dangerous contact in her attention to the diversity of corals, whose geometries "fold and proliferate in their curlicued undulations" and whose "expanding surface area multiplies the possibilities for the kinds of relations that can open up between the entity in question and what surrounds it."[4] She helps me see how the refusal of viral address might be understood as part of a technical, poetic, and political practice that works through the attempt to reshape the surfaces—political, historical, between and beyond bodies—through which the epithet "China Virus" is lived as a problem of unruly relation; a mode of dangerous availability to violence, infection, and the violence of racial identification as infection.

For both viral transmission and racial violence are questions of the exposure of some bodies to others, in ways that are conditioned in the long histories of public health, racial violence, and transpacific geopolitics. The soft aerosol and political interface between bodies thus can be approached through attempts at managing its shape, "opening up or closing down their capacities for future encounters" in a racioscape,[5] where the racial conflation of many non-Chinese Asians into Chineseness interleaves with the widening openness of bodies to assault.

Since 2020 crowds of Asian demonstrators have marched across the Anglophone Americas under signs that read "I am not a virus." The slogan is a pointed rejoinder to the lethal viral-racial knot that the "China Virus" fastens. Such protests both mark the insistence that Asian bodies in diaspora occupy public space and underscore the pervasive feeling that being outside, for protest or at all, is to expose oneself fully to the broad surface of possible violence. These questions of the management of space, availability, sociality, and vulnerability deeply resonate with Summer Kim Lee's essay "Staying In." In it she writes of an Asian American aesthetic practice that reconfigures the obligation of minoritarian subjects to exhausting demands to liberal sociality into various figures of retreat. Lee surprisingly locates relational possibility in the modes of asociality that such retreats from the demands to relation impressed on "good" minority subjects, and in the withdrawal from prevailing norms of liberal relatability. The demand to love that appears as the acceptable and defanged answer to Asian hate, in this thinking, is also a demand that those most exposed to violence acquiesce to that possibility as a condition of a barely tolerated existence.

Such asociality does not refuse relation so much as it unlatches its geometry of polite accommodation to social norms that function to manage difference, contorting it into a post-Orientalist figure of Asian inscrutability.[6] In an anterior echo of coming lockdowns, to avoid infection and violence, Lee glosses this mode of retreat as "staying in"—staying in, for Kim revels in "mismatched modes" of social existence, pausing the scene of call and obligatory response. I understand it, vis-à-vis Smailbegović, as a bundle of experiments in subtle social, bodily, and conceptual reorientations that seek to deform the surface of viral-racial contact into other shapes. It works through deflection and redirection, not the muscular clean break of refusal but a minor practice that works through loosening the tethers of liberal political accord to torque open other possibilities for political and racial existence. Such practices of retreat take on racial character and become sites of racial

experiment, against the sense that in pandemic everyone is "staying in." They seek to "shift and reconstellate one's relation to others" in the China Virus's possible meshwork of hemispheres, atmospheres, species, and bodies.[7] They help me think of what might be necessary to introduce a hiccup between the Chinese and the Virus, recircuiting the reflexive "Fuck you!" to "Coronavirus!" by unmolding the directness of provoked reaction to the "curves of the nonencounter."[8] If the viral relation in the China Virus can be apprehended as a surface, a crenellating plane of contact that unfolds racial over-exposure to multiplex violence, then *staying in* offers a provisional template for considering ways of drawing away, if only briefly, from such interfaces.

For those for whom refusal of the viral epithet cannot escape from its terms, from its lethal force, what if the virus *is* Chinese? This is not a reappropriation that seeks self-empowerment against abjection but a tracing out of the impulse to live despite—that is, to live *in*—the term, without necessarily accepting its terms. And of course, not all of us have lived. Against the knotting of race and contagion, I seek to recover space and also grief in the charge of an address that cannot be refused but can be provisionally retreated from. If the tie cannot be cut, perhaps it can be pulled into forms that may fray the head-on racial fascism of the coronaviral address while also offering possibilities that dance away from the demands of racial liberalism.

The China Virus, un- and redone, moves us, across ethnic and national boundaries, as one lunar year gives way to the next. It discloses a space beyond China, and its high-key entanglement of racial and geopolitical worry. It figures Chinese diasporas as vectors of contagion and viral responsibility and thus floats beyond borders. In the inevitable racial slide toward the powerful misidentification of the virus with Chineseness, other Asian-presenting people are dragged into its wide maw, a grim reminder that the most high-profile murders of Asian American people in the United States have counted Thai, Korean, and other non-Chinese people among their bloody ranks. The first time I went outside again, in the uprisings in the wake of George Floyd's murder, I read "Fuck the China virus" scrawled on the tile of a Vancouver public toilet and felt my being turned open, overexposed to the graffito threat. I thus retreat into scenes of retreat to tilt attention toward the work of spinning open other accounts of the time and politics of coronavirus. So, against death and saturated in death, this essay moves with the China Virus, prying open modes of oblique relation and racial misrecognition. It traces, with each Lunar New Year, a widening circle in mutating variants of viral address, spilling across borders and bodies.

Year of the Rat

Two months before the first stay-at-home order in the United States was announced in California on March 21, the city of Wuhan announced a quarantine order on January 20, 2020. The order was to go into effect three days later, on January 23, the day before the eve of the Lunar New Year, effectively canceling the most important holiday in the Chinese year. The night before Lunar New Year (Danianye) is when many families traditionally gather and celebrate, and the days before it have historically been times of a massive annual human movement in China, as people, including the country's massive population of internal migrants, decamp from cities and people return to their hometowns, rushing back in time to meet their families for the

customary pre–New Year meal. As lockdowns went into effect in Wuhan, and the city entered an unprecedented quarantine to stem the spread of the novel coronavirus, officials hurried to stem the flow of people and contagion out of the city in a bid to protect the rest of the country by containing the virus in the city.

At the urging of a colleague in Wuhan, the writer Fang Fang began her *Wuhan Diary* on the first day of the Year of the Rat, released as a near-daily blog that documented the imponderabilia of daily life in the quarantined city through its seventy-six days of lockdown in early 2020. Her commentary, quickly translated into English and published outside China as a monograph, is a day-to-day account of the panic, terror, boredom, and sometimes wonder and relief in the world's first novel coronavirus lockdown.

The blog, in its moments of most direct address, is offered to a city Fang figures both as offering a heroic sacrifice against the virus's spread and as a sacrifice zone for a country whose various levels of leadership have failed to act in time. Even though it was subsequently repackaged as a monograph, the individual entries are episodic, without a consistent generic or narrative structure, much in keeping with the jarring swings of the lockdown itself, itself most directly experienced as the muddling of any clear arc of time. But continuously, especially in the first two weeks of the lockdown, Fang references the time of the novel coronavirus to the ritual calendar of the thwarted Lunar New Year celebrations. In Wuhan the two-week incubation period of the virus aligned almost perfectly with the thwarted two-week official observation of the Lunar New Year holiday. These two weeks also aligned almost exactly with the optimistic, but continuously pushed back, original time frame of the city's first lockdown, which was to end with the official holiday period. That is, Fang frames the temporal disorientation of the lockdown in relation to the parallel universe time line of the normally scheduled celebration of the Year of the Rat, still observed in a muted form elsewhere in China, Asia, and their relevant diasporas. Without a ready-made narrative form for making sense of the pandemic, *Wuhan Diary*'s chronotope takes shape with and against the customary festival calendar of the Lunar New Year.

Monica Huerta, reflecting on the Gregorian new year, writes of the difficulty of marking time in the pandemic. "*Swimming*," she writes, "with no sight or sense of shore or distance, because my body didn't know how to hold the choreography. . . . It was difficult, if not impossible, to *know*, as in to *feel*, time had passed at all."[9] For Huerta, the calendar proposes its own abortive landmarks against the chronological artillery of the time-killing virus. In Fang's account, the Lunar New Year celebrations offer a scaffold for making sense of staying in to wait out the viral incubation period. Staying in here appears as a dutiful retreat whose meaning becomes increasingly obscure as the quarantine is extended multiple times.

If Huerta swims in time without a view of the shore that she is being carried away from, Fang counts viral time by its specific distance from what should have been the predictable shoreline of the first two weeks of the Year of the Rat. Fang measures the days of quarantine as a daze of festival time. The canceled celebrations, with their customary sequence of events, conventions, special foods and gatherings, become the shoal against which the time of lockdown continually crashes.

"The fact that I know it is Day Nine of the Lunar New Year is already something of a miracle."[10] Time braids into a cultural, political, and epidemiological strand as the virus takes shape through its collision with the national calendar in the closed city. The two-week blocks repeat, in some inscrutable and inviting temporal coincidence: the length of the holiday, the incubation period of the virus itself, and the series of quarantine extensions that are proposed as the necessary time to keep the disease in Wuhan. The shoreline becomes vague.

Fang exhorts herself (and her Wuhan readership), "No matter what, I need to bear another week" on the ninth day of the lunar year.[11] When she anticipates the aftermath of the lockdown, she does so in relationship to lunar holiday. "Right now," she writes on what she notes is the second day of the Lunar New Year, "we are still in the middle of the Chinese New Year holiday, but it could get complicated when things start to affect work and school."[12] As Fang describes the formative breakdown of lunar time, she both explodes and grounds a figure of the not yet China Virus as a weave of time into confounding conjunctures: a "micropolitics of temporal coordination and social control between multiple temporalities."[13]

When Fang imagines a future remembering of the human toll of the lockdown, still taking fully for granted it will last about as long as the season of canceled festivities, she tangles viral, ritual, and political time into the same unstable frame: "I just hope we can remember: Remember those everyday people who have passed. . . . Remember just what it was that interrupted our lives during what should have been the joyous New Year holiday."[14] And two days before the Lantern Festival, the customary ending of the holiday on the fifteenth day of the Lunar New Year, when originally "disease control specialists said we might reach a turning point," the quarantine is extended *another* two-week window, another full viral incubation window. She laments, "The pain we suffer far exceeds just being trapped home and being unable to go outside."[15] The "we" that must stay in is a specific Chineseness. It is both an affirmative interpellation of a city undergoing hardship for a national cause and an exhaustion in being called on to play hero in the moment when coronavirus was still mostly a China Virus.

Year of the Ox

Across the United States, 2021's Lunar New Year celebrations retreated into private homes, and Chinatowns, usually bustling in the holiday season, went quiet. The Year of the Ox arrived in the tense wake of a series of assaults and murders of Asian American elders, captured in viral video: eighty-four-year-old Vicha Ratanapakdee, a Thai man in San Francisco; and an unnamed ninety-one-year-old man in Oakland's Chinatown.[16] For many Asians in diaspora, the second Lunar New Year in the relentless racial charge of the China Virus began in a palpable atmosphere of possible violence. Carl Chan, of Oakland Chinatown's Chamber of Commerce, described a neighborhood and community under attack, with more than twenty incident reports in the neighborhood and an explosion in reported cases of anti-Asian racism across the country. According to the group Stop AAPI Hate, which quickly began keeping a database of anti-Asian incidents in the United States, nearly four thousand cases were reported in the first year of the pandemic alone,

between the start of stay-at-home orders and February 28, 2021. Their report was released two days after the Lantern Festival, the traditional close of the Lunar New Year celebrations.[17]

Oakland's mayor, even in the midst of massive public protests demanding the defunding and redistribution of the city's bloated police budget, promised a surge of new police resources directed toward the city's embattled Chinatown, inflaming deep divisions in the neighborhood and broader Asian American community over the racial politics of policing. The surge in violence itself was attributed to a convergence of a year of anti-Asian rhetorics across America's political culture and also to a specific quirk of the ritual calendar of the Lunar New Year. The Oakland Police Department described the popular custom of handing out red envelopes as gifts throughout the festival season as a driver of robberies of Asian elders in public, who were targeted as potential carriers of large amounts of the cash that would stuff the envelopes. The attribution of a criminal cultural competence in knowledge about customs of the Lunar New Year—the notion that cultural literacy powers violence against Asian people through an understanding of the idiosyncrasies of Asian gift exchange customs—was pointed to both by the police, scrambling for resources to surveil the neighborhood, *and* by groups like the Chinatown Chamber of Commerce that demanded increased police patrols and security cameras during and beyond the Lunar New Year holiday.

That is, multicultural understanding here becomes figured as a criminal trait that is then wielded to justify increased overpolicing for the benefit of Asian communities where the question of policing remains an unsettled matter. "Culture" and its conflation into Asian racial embodiment here is glossed as a kind of vulnerability: an interface made in contagion, cash, and festival that requires the carceral intervention of a notoriously racist and anti-Black police department. Under the China Virus, the Lunar New Year's injunction toward the renewal of relations, refigures the bodies of Asian elders both as vectors of disease and money—literal cashflow. The apparent availability to theft was massively overrepresented as Black-on-Asian conflict, in a time when racially motivated assault on *both* Black and Asian people, overwhelmingly by white perpetrators, was on the rise. In these moments, the demand to stop Asian hate can function as a dog whistle calling for increased policing of Black communities.

A week into the Year of the Ox, Jacob Azevedo, a Latinx resident of Oakland, organized a GoFundMe campaign to raise money for personal alarms for Asian elders in Chinatown, and also organized a multiracial group of volunteers to escort Asian elders to deter robberies. In his GoFundMe, which quickly received more than $10,000 in donations, he notes, "Our focus is primarily on getting these first volunteers [escorts] onto the streets given that it is a busy week for the Asian community due to Lunar New Year."[18]

The demand for increased policing of the neighborhood by some members of the Chinatown community and the multiracial team of volunteer escorts might be understood as two attempts to manage the surfaces where viral and racial antagonism expose Asian bodies to vulnerability. They have different political horizons and conceptions of safety, but each responds to a world in which one can fully refuse neither the potential violence visited on the community's most vulnerable nor the

impulse to renew relations through the gifts of cash and regard—a reassertion of a mode of political and cultural continuation against and amid the erosions of overexposure and exhaustion and insecurity through the racial formation of the China Virus.

Year of the Tiger

The Year of the Tiger begins with the impossibility of unknotting. As I write, Christina Yuna Lee, a Korean American woman in New York City, has been murdered by a stranger who followed her into her apartment. A few weeks earlier Michelle Go was pushed off a platform into the path of a New York City subway train by another stranger. Disagreement over whether this steady stream of acts of racial assault can in fact be understood as racial in even the most basic sense still confounds me and all our friends who know no other way of living at viral surfaces. If staying in, in quarantine and in a vague sense of self-protection, promises the potential of a space removed from the social animus of the China Virus, for the murdered Lee and Go, no place was safe. That is, every place is a scene of possible forced contact. The attempt at retreat underscores its impossibility. Festival and the sheer ordinariness of still-survived life seem to invite it. Lee was followed into her own home, with no safety in the hope of extrication from viral danger and its racial violence. Go was murdered in a space of everyday outsideness. The subway platform, whose apparent normalcy is the standard against which the pandemic's end will eventually be evaluated, pulses with the threat of racial violence. No place is safe, no place is safe. The China Virus is a surface stretched across every place and every body insinuated into indiscriminate Chineseness. No place is safe. I hug the wall as I exit the subway platform. My cousin pays extra for my aunt's ride. I would like to stay in, if I knew where that was.

The Asian American rally slogan "I am not a virus" underscores the wish for the kind of sovereignty that one would need to have to be able to set the terms by which one is addressed. It is wishful, and it feels at the limit of self-naming. It speaks also to one's final incapacity to break the epidemiological hatred that collapses races and contagions, to the fragility of any concept of safety in the China Virus's racializing force. And so it arcs toward the impossibility of this extrication of terms and bodies and vulnerabilities. My refusal of the reduction of myself into a viral vector is also occupied by my sense that it is I who am *over*-exposed to those whose violence is authorized, recursively and lethally, by their sense of *their* vulnerability to me. And still we march, holding the signs that name ourselves only in the negative, seeking retreat without the fantasy of escape. We seek desperately to unmeet the terms of the China Virus, playacting our ability to escape from its knot until, maybe, someday the tie comes loose. In the meantime, no vaccine delivers us from living in and as the Virus, leaving us to wonder "what other horizons can be imagined, outlined, and reached—from inward and within" its crenellating surfaces and contacts.[19]

We might yet reconfigure the relation between the phrase's constituent terms—and the relations between bodies, entities, airways, and nations that they encompass and eclipse. In the name of grief and protection; in the name of a kind of love that does not imagine itself as the antidote to "Asian hate," a love that is not

already compromised in the charge to comport oneself to the deadly etiquette of liberal politeness.[20] Less like the police, who invite themselves in for a protection that only some of us have asked for. And more like the volunteers of all skin tones who, by their presence, crinkle the surface that the China Virus skins across our lives. Who warp it just enough so our elders can deliver the red envelopes and renew our relational universe before the Lunar New Year passes, so that some of us might see the Year of the Rabbit.

Postscript

Four lunar years in. The Year of the Rabbit came with bullets and smoke. In Monterey Park, California, on the eve of the Lunar New Year, a mass shooter opened fire in a dance studio, where he eventually fired forty-two rounds before he was wrestled to the ground in another dance studio by Brandon Tsay, a man who I later learned had gone to my high school. Police tape cordons the parade route and the congresswoman says her words. Monterey Park, where my grandfather died peacefully before we had to count these years. Some of us see the Year of the Rabbit, but none of us celebrate when the morning comes with its dead.

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Notes

1 Horton, "Offline."
2 See Cheng, *Melancholy of Race*.
3 Chen, "Toxic Animacies," 265.
4 Smailbegović, *Poetics of Liveliness*, 54–55.
5 Jackson, *Real Black*, 56. For the quotation, see Smailbegović, *Poetics of Liveliness*, 49.
6 Huang, *Surface Relations*, 5–10.
7 Lee, "Staying In," 27.
8 Lee, "Staying In," 33.
9 Huerta, "Essay."
10 Fang, *Wuhan Diary*, 36.
11 Fang, *Wuhan Diary*, 37.
12 Fang, *Wuhan Diary*, 6.
13 Sharma, *In the Meantime*, 7.
14 Fang, *Wuhan Diary*, 40.
15 Fang, *Wuhan Diary*, 57.
16 Lim, "Shocking Video."
17 Jeung et al., "Stop AAPI Hate National Report."
18 Azevedo, "GoFundMe."
19 Lee, "Staying In," 35.
20 See Rivera, *Model Minority Masochism*, 144–46.

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