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The Rise of Made-in-China Diplomacy

While political leaders trade threats, the pandemic has made Americans even more reliant on China's manufacturers.

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store in China

After the U.S. government issued stimulus checks, “the next day we saw an increase in sales,” a Chinese businessman said. Photograph by Guligo Jia for The New Yorker

On Amazon.com, if you search for running shoes, drop the price point to around thirty dollars, and scroll past the initial pages, you’ll eventually encounter brands that you’ve never heard of. Some seem to follow an alphabetic theme—Zocavia, Zocania, Zonkim—while others are pure etymological puzzles: Biacolum, Qansi, NYZNIA. Study the product images, and pieces of the puzzle start to connect. The Qansi Men’s Sneakers Mesh Ultra Lightweight Breathable Athletic Running Walking Gym Shoes look exactly the same as the Biacolum Men’s Running Shoes Non Slip Gym Tennis Shoes Slip Resistant Air Knitted Sneakers Walking Workout Sport Shoes, which in turn appear to be identical to the Zocavia Men’s Running Shoes Ultra Lightweight Tennis Gym Shoes Slip On Mesh Fitness Slip Resistant Walking Workout Shoes. The language

of these listings could be described as Amazonglish: awkward but basically intelligible, redundant but highly searchable. Often, a product description has just enough linguistic accuracy to sail past a computer's grammar check. Zocavia: "Ultra lightweight material leaves few weight on your feet." Zocania: "Your feet can breathe easy in the latest iteration of fabric upper."

One word that almost never appears in Amazonglish is "China." Marketplace Pulse, which analyzes e-commerce, has said that nearly half of Amazon's top sellers—those with more than a million dollars in annual sales in the U.S.—are in China. An Amazon spokesperson recently described this as inaccurate, although he declined to disclose the number of Chinese sellers, saying only that the majority of third-party vendors on the U.S. site are based in America. On product pages, Chinese sellers rarely advertise their location, and the Zocavias and Zocanias don't mention where they are manufactured. For more information, it helps to head over to the Web site of the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, whose registrations are full of useful details. ("The wording 'Biacolum' has no meaning in a foreign language.") On the trademark site, Zocavia and Zocania, which sound a little like tennis-playing twins from Serbia, are in fact registered to the same person in Guanting Village, Danling County, Sichuan Province. These brands, along with Zonkim, Biacolum, NYZNIA, and dozens of others, are under the purview of a company called Kimzon Network Technology. The Kimzon headquarters are on the sixteenth floor of an office building in the city of Chengdu, where, in the pandemic spring of 2020, the owner told me that he was reconsidering his approach to the American market.

It was April 26th, and Li Dewei wore a black Bluetooth headset, a black long-sleeved T-shirt, black trousers, and black sneakers that had not been made in any of his three factories. Li, who owned the company with a partner, was only in his mid-thirties, but he had the serious demeanor of an older man. Chengdu, like all Chinese cities, had already brought the pandemic under control, and Li told me that a week earlier he had stopped requiring masks in the workplace. But he had just started coping with the economic fallout of the virus. The previous month, Li had laid off fifty workers—a third of his Chengdu staff.

Li said that things would have been worse if not for the stimulus checks sent out by the Trump Administration under the cares Act. Because Li sold directly to Amazon customers, he could track sales closely. "We check the statistics every day," he said. "After the American government started issuing the money, the next day we saw an increase in sales." By the time I visited, two weeks into the stimulus program, Kimzon's American sales had almost doubled, although they were still slightly lower than usual. "We don't know whether the current consumption with the U.S. government aid is a short-term trend," Li said.

Not long before, Li had had a series of discussions with his partner and some other export entrepreneurs. They had determined that June, 2020, would be a critical month. "If by June the virus is totally under control in the U.S. and the E.U., then we can rebound to the normal level," Li told me. But the entrepreneurs had all concluded that it was unlikely that the U.S. and other Western countries would handle the pandemic well. Li was also concerned about the ongoing political conflict between China and the U.S.

In a typical year, seventy per cent of Kimzon's sales were in the United States, with another twenty per cent in Europe and ten per cent in Japan. Kimzon sold nothing in the Chinese market. For Li and his partner, the solution seemed obvious: reduce American exposure by selling Zocavia, Zocania, and the other brands to Chinese consumers. "Many things in China are not being badly affected by the pandemic, like logistics," Li explained. His staff had already redesigned some shoes and was preparing a domestic marketing campaign; the goal was to

have as much as a third of their business in China within a year. Li expected that after three months he would know whether the plan might succeed.

In August of 2019, I had moved with my family to Chengdu, where I teach journalism and English at Sichuan University. It was the second time I had arrived in the region during a period of troubled U.S.-China relations. In 1995, the two countries had entered a tense phase after the U.S. State Department granted a visa to Lee Teng-hui, the President of Taiwan, who had been invited to give a speech at Cornell, his alma mater. The Chinese government responded furiously, conducting a series of missile tests in waters near Taiwan. In March, 1996, the U.S. sent ships to join two aircraft carriers in the region—the greatest show of American military strength in Asia since the Vietnam War.

That summer, I arrived in Chengdu as a Peace Corps volunteer. Along with another young American, Adam Meier, I was assigned to teach at a college in a remote part of Sichuan. Bill Clinton was running for reelection, and he was frequently attacked by the Chinese state-controlled media. Years later, one of my students wrote a letter in which she described her feelings at the time: “Not long after you became my teacher, I read a piece of news comment that said [if] Mr. Clinton took presidency, one of the reasons was that he would take stronger measure on China. Those days, I hated to see you and Mr. Meier.”

But any such opinions were kept quiet. In Sichuan, people generally took a pragmatic approach to politics, and the college accepted the risk of American teachers as part of Deng Xiaoping's “reform and opening” policy. Most students came from poor rural families, but they had tested well enough to major in English. Along with language classes, they took mandatory political courses with throwback titles like Marxism-Leninism and Building Chinese Socialism. Yet even a glance outside the classroom showed how quickly Chinese socialism was being dismantled. During my second year, the government stopped providing graduates with guaranteed jobs, and the local housing market was privatized, a process that was happening across the country. Some of my most ambitious students left for provinces like Guangdong and Zhejiang, where the export economy was starting to boom.

Bill Clinton turned out to be better for China than anybody would have predicted. In his second term, Congress granted China permanent trading privileges, and Clinton began the process of negotiating for China's admission to the World Trade Organization, which happened in 2001. Throughout successive Administrations, the U.S. mostly followed a strategy of engagement with China. Even President Obama's “Pivot to Asia” policy, which was intended to counter China's growing influence in the region, seemed to have little real effect.

When I returned to Chengdu, the material benefits of the reform era could be seen everywhere: an extensive subway system, a brand-new Sichuan University campus, a high-rise business district where Kimzon and other companies were situated. In my classroom, I felt the change at the most visceral level. My students laughed when I showed class pictures from 1996—at five feet nine inches, I had towered over my students. Now, because of rising living standards, it seemed that I was shorter than most of the boys I taught. Last year, a study in *The Lancet* reported that, out of two hundred countries, China has seen the largest increase in boys' height, and the third largest in girls', since 1985. The average Chinese nineteen-year-old male is now more than three and a half inches taller.

Almost all of my students came from urban middle-class families. The majority were enrolled in a program that sent them to the University of Pittsburgh for their final year or two, joining the nearly four hundred thousand Chinese who study in the U.S. every year. But, at Sichuan

University, even students bound for America still took political courses with throwback names: Basic Principles of Marxism, Introduction to Mao Zedong Thought and Socialism with Chinese Characteristics. Next to the building where I taught, a recently completed structure had a gleaming four-story glass façade and a row of enormous golden characters that read “Marxism Institute.” The building reminded me of my students: bigger, stronger, better dressed. The institute had been designed with a large parking garage in the basement, because nowadays a lot of Chinese Marxists buy cars.

The Communist Party’s control was even more powerful than I remembered, and relations with the United States were even worse. Before Donald Trump took office, a consensus had already been building in Washington that the Chinese had benefitted too much from the bilateral relationship. Trump Administration officials frequently advocated “decoupling”—separating from China in economic and technological realms. In the spring of 2018, Trump started imposing high tariffs on Chinese products, and China countered with measures of its own. Exchange programs also came under pressure, in part as a response to a brutal Chinese crackdown in Xinjiang and the suppression of pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong. During my first year at Sichuan University, Trump abruptly ended the China Peace Corps program, along with all Fulbright exchanges with China and Hong Kong.

In Chengdu, most people seemed to respond as they always had. Li Dewei told me that he had no strong opinions about American politics, and that, after tariffs were imposed on his shoes, he simply raised his Amazon prices by fifteen per cent. “The tariff is paid by the customer,” he said.

In my department, all instructors helped out at a writing center, where students could make appointments for tutoring sessions. Before I arrived, there had been a plan to purchase scheduling software from an American company. But the deal fell through, and an administrator told us in meetings that he believed the reason to be fallout from the trade war. So the department found a U.K. company, Fresha, that provides software for salons, spas, and massage parlors. Whenever I received notice of a tutorial, the student was described as a “customer,” and promotional e-mails pitched me on added features like special settings for “Mani-Pedi or Couples Massage.” In April, the massage e-mails suddenly got a lot more urgent: “The covid-19 crisis has triggered a tsunami of Salons and Spas switching to Fresha from their current expensive scheduling solutions.”

On May 14th, I met Li Dewei for dinner, and he told me that Kimzon was struggling with the shift to the domestic market. “Sales aren’t good yet,” he said. He thought that style might be an issue, so Kimzon was producing shoes with white soles instead of black, believing that these would appeal to Chinese consumers.

In March, when the pandemic first began to have an impact in America, Kimzon had reduced its production to five hundred pairs a day. But now it was up to two thousand, close to normal. Although Li had laid off people in design and marketing, he never downsized assembly-line workers. He told me that the top priority was to protect the supply chain.

Despite all of Li’s business on Amazon, he had never visited the U.S. His background was modest: his parents had grown up in farming families, and their educations ended with primary school. Both of them found assembly-line work at a blanket factory, and eventually they started their own small blanket workshop. They spent much of their disposable income on educating Li and his two siblings. Li excelled in high school, and he was admitted to Sichuan University. After graduating, he went to work for a family friend who ran a shoe factory in Fujian Province, where Li learned the trade.

We always communicated in Mandarin, but Li read English well. He used a virtual private network to skirt the Chinese firewall and access sites like Google Trends, in order to research the American market. “It would help to go to America, but from the Internet we can learn a lot,” he said. “America is a free place—so much information is open. That’s different from China.” Li had developed some long-distance ideas about American characteristics, and he expressed them diplomatically. “Of course, you have more experience, but my thinking is that Americans don’t save much,” he told me once, after describing the way that sales increased in response to the stimulus payments. “Whenever they have money, they’ll spend it.”

The Chinese government had botched its initial response to the coronavirus, which first began to spread in Wuhan, a city about seven hundred miles east of Chengdu. After covering up details about the virus, and detaining and punishing early whistle-blowers, the government eventually instituted effective policies aimed at eliminating the spread of infection. But relatively little direct economic support was given to citizens. During the first financial quarter of 2020, the Chinese economy shrank by nearly seven per cent, the first time the government had reported a contraction since the Mao Zedong era. Nevertheless, the government didn’t issue across-the-board stimulus payments. “If the Chinese government did that, people would just put it in the bank,” Li told me.

In fact, many Americans had done the same. Scott R. Baker, an economist at Northwestern University, told me recently that the cares Act prompted spending patterns that were unlike what resulted from stimulus programs in 2001 and 2008. “The big difference was less spending on durables,” Baker said. “People weren’t buying new cars and refrigerators.” He continued, “It seems that a majority of checks were saved.”

Along with four other economists, Baker had analyzed high-frequency bank-transaction data for more than thirty thousand consumers. They concluded that the 2020 stimulus was less effective than previous programs, in part because of the unique nature of the pandemic, which had caused consumers to be wary of visiting a car dealership or having appliances delivered by strangers. “If you can send out a thousand-dollar check and it prompts the purchase of a car, that has a big effect,” Baker said. “Versus the purchase of thirty-dollar shoes from overseas—that’s not doing a lot for the economy.”

I had described Li Dewei’s post-stimulus sales. “I’m not surprised that he sees that surge so clearly,” Baker said. “We see that the majority of spending that does happen goes out in the first week or so after receiving the check.” He noted that, while most Americans seemed to have saved their stimulus checks, people with less money in their bank accounts were more likely to spend. These consumers tended to buy food, nondurables, and other inexpensive items—often, the kinds of products manufactured by Chinese entrepreneurs like Li Dewei.

In Chengdu, Li and his staff combed through Amazon reviews every day. He described them as a kind of jiaoliu—an exchange or conversation. Early in the pandemic, many American consumers complained about shipping delays, and, on May 6th, a buyer rated one of Li’s products with a single star: “They were late. Then they were stolen off my porch. I would like a refund immediately.” Li eventually contracted with a more expensive shipping service, and he made other adjustments. When a number of customers complained about a narrow toe box in the Zocania brand of shoes, Li had changes made at the factory.

Part of the Amazon jiaoliu was a glimpse of pandemic life for lower-income Americans. Reviews rarely mentioned exercise or sporting activities; it seemed more likely for customers to buy Li’s

shoes to wear at jobs that required them to stand. On May 16th, a customer gave one star, on account of the “non-slip” tread: “I’m a cook at dennys and I almost busted my face just from water on our kitchen floor! Super scary!” Others referred to jobs that had vanished. June 14th, five stars: “I got them for work but just found out my work won’t be opening back up but I still like them.” As the summer wore on, other points of stress emerged. July 13th, five stars: “Bottom tread doesn’t last very long. I was only chased by the police twice while wearing these and they’re down to half the tread life!” August 1st, one star: “Bought two pairs, didn’t return because of the whole pandemic thing (was honestly afraid to get them in mail *nervous chuckle*).”

Periodically, Li and his staff tinkered with product photos or Amazonglish descriptions. (“The soft insole fits well and protect your ankle, tongues and feet from hurt.”) Li followed the American news closely, and he always seemed to know the current number of coronavirus cases. “Two million six hundred and fifty thousand,” he told me on July 2nd, when I asked about the situation. “Every day it goes up another thirty to forty thousand. These are not optimistic numbers.” But, even as the pandemic worsened across the Pacific, Li kept an eye out for other opportunities. In June, after Li’s research on Google Trends gave him a new idea, he hired an American lawyer to register yet another application with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. Like the others, the new brand name was a puzzle: Pemily12.

In late January last year, the U.S. Embassy and five consulates in China, including the one in Chengdu, decided to evacuate non-essential American staff, along with all spouses and children. Many other embassies and foreign companies across China made similar decisions. My wife, Leslie, and I opted to stay, along with our twin daughters, who attend a local public school. Our decision had nothing to do with an estimation of which country was likely to handle the disease better. We simply didn’t grasp the seriousness of the pandemic, and the Chengdu lockdown, which lasted for about a month and a half, struck us as overkill. In a city of more than sixteen million, there were only a hundred and forty-three symptomatic cases reported by the end of February. Afterward, there weren’t any recorded instances of community spread for the rest of the spring. There didn’t seem to be a real risk of catching the disease, so we saw no reason to leave.

At the end of March, the Chinese government banned the entry of almost all foreign-passport holders, even if they had valid work visas. Officials believed that as long as they could quarantine the relatively few Chinese nationals who returned, and maintain testing and contact-tracing across the country, daily life could proceed with few restrictions. By early May, our daughters’ third-grade section of fifty-four kids was back in the classroom, and within a couple of weeks they stopped wearing masks. That month, when I took a domestic flight for the first time since the lockdown, there wasn’t an empty seat on the plane.

Initially, I had assumed that in China we would undergo the pandemic first, and then the rest of the world would follow, step by step: outbreak, lockdown, recovery. But now it became clear how much our experiences had diverged, and Chengdu’s month-and-a-half lockdown began to seem shorter in my memory. I hadn’t missed a single barbershop haircut, and all of our favorite restaurants had reopened completely. The only reason we ever used videoconferencing was to communicate with family and friends in the U.S., mostly out of solidarity. In early May, some old college friends arranged a Zoom meeting, talking about their American lockdown experiences. Afterward, I closed my computer and biked across town to a night club to do some reporting. The club was packed; out of dozens of people on the dance floor, only one woman wore a mask.

By the second financial quarter, the Chinese economy was growing again. In July, exports rose 7.2 per cent compared with the same month a year earlier, and I made a long trip across Zhejiang Province, one of the centers of foreign trade. Most entrepreneurs I met there said the same thing: they were surprised by how quickly sales were bouncing back. They also indicated that they had never suffered much from the effects of the U.S. trade war. A couple of small-scale exporters told me that they underreported the value of goods, in order to avoid tariffs, but others said that this practice was too risky for large businesses. In general, they passed at least some of the cost on to American customers, and the Chinese government had a long-standing policy of tax rebates for exporters.

Entrepreneurs mentioned other ways to avoid negative attention. In Yuhuan, a city near the coast, I met a woman who managed foreign trade for a company that manufactured precision parts for automobiles. She said that U.S. clients had her sign contracts that prevented her from listing their names on her company's Web site. "We can't say publicly that we do business with this American company," she said. "They don't want people to know they're getting this part from China."

She no longer travelled abroad for trade fairs or meetings, but the lack of direct contact wasn't much of a problem. Even in Yiwu, the site of China's largest wholesale market, people had adjusted quickly. Usually, the city is home to around ten thousand foreigners, along with many more who arrive on short buying trips, and neighborhoods cater to various nationalities and regions. But now these places felt abandoned; on one street, I walked past ten Indian restaurants that were closed.

Nearby, on a block of shipping agents that specialized in Russian and Central Asian trade, only one was open. The boss, Mao Yuankui, told me that the pandemic had shifted everybody's working hours. "They're closed in the morning, because it's too early in Russia," he said. "We're mostly on the phone and WeChat nowadays. Customers aren't coming to the stores."

Mao shipped cargo to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Russia. In a normal year, he relied on planes for urgent orders, but flight schedules had been slashed. In the years before the pandemic, China's Belt and Road Initiative had invested in the longest freight rail line in the world, which runs for more than eight thousand miles, from Yiwu to Madrid, passing through Central Asia. Mao said that now he was using trains to move a lot of cargo. During the pandemic, shipping rates rose, and traffic was unbalanced: for every three shipping containers that left China, only one returned, because export sectors in other countries had been decimated. Even before the pandemic, China had produced ninety-six per cent of the world's shipping containers, and now that industry was also in overdrive. Mao told me to come back late at night, to see how the neighborhood functioned. When I returned, the cargo shops were lit up. Inside, agents were busy on phones and computers, all of them working on Central Asian time.

Children had taken over the hallways of Yiwu's wholesale market. The sprawling structure has nearly ten times the square footage of the Pentagon and is home to some hundred thousand merchants. In past years, I had visited when the market was busy with foreign traders; now it was so empty that many Chinese sellers had brought their children for the summer vacation. Packs of kids rode bikes and scooters down the empty corridors, and they had set up badminton nets and basketball hoops.

Most merchants there specialize in a single product sold in bulk. Nothing was more depressing than the hallways dedicated to luggage dealers—lines of glum-faced people sitting next to roller bags that weren't rolling anywhere. Folks who sold tourist trinkets were also out of luck. But

business was booming for dealers who stocked L.E.D. curing lamps, for customers who did their nails at home, and it was also a good year to sell plastic pump heads for hand-sanitizer bottles. Bicycle dealers couldn't keep product in stock, and a woman with punching bags told me that her sales had doubled. A place called Henry Sport, which specialized in yoga mats, had back orders through September. On the second floor, merchants selling inflatable back-yard pools were also doing great.

The Yiwu market niches were so specific, and the pandemic's effects so unusual, that even products with ostensibly logical connections had different prospects. Near the inflatable-pool dealers, other stalls featured swim caps and goggles, but their sales had plummeted. One dealer explained that in fact goggles have almost nothing to do with back-yard pools. "That's something people do at home," she said, gesturing at the pools. Then she pointed at her own products: "They use goggles when they go out. And people aren't going out now."

A large section of the second floor was newly dedicated to P.P.E. dealers. Many of them had been manufacturing toys or jewelry before the pandemic; they said that with such small products it was relatively easy to retool assembly lines and retrain workers. A woman named Shi Gaolian had a factory that had manufactured bracelets until February, when she abruptly changed the product line; now she exported between two million and three million surgical masks every month. Like most people in the market, Shi wasn't wearing a mask herself. She didn't worry that P.P.E. might turn out to be a short-term business. "At the least, it will take two years for the world to manage this," she said. "After that, I'll find something else to manufacture."

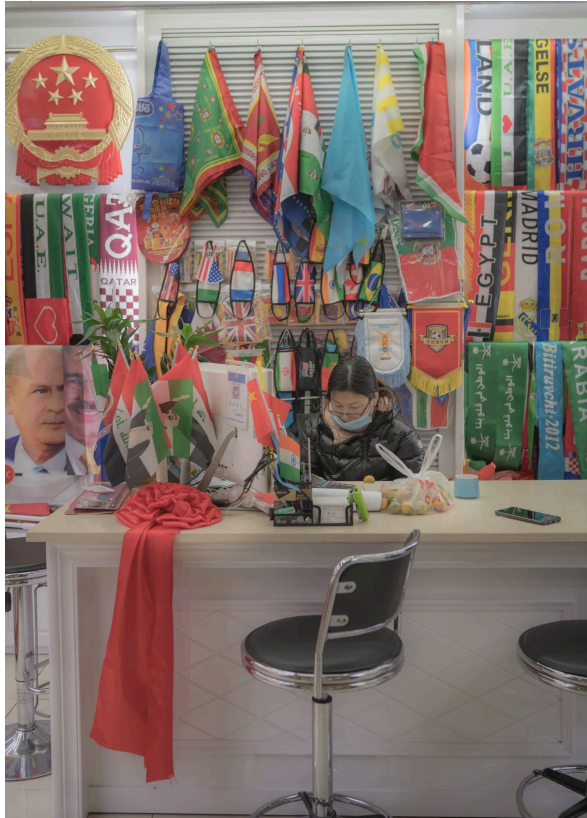
On the same floor, merchants were preparing for the upcoming American election. Baseball-cap stalls had maga stock, and flag manufacturers were receiving orders for Trump and Biden banners. I talked with a middle-aged dealer named Li Jiang, who first went into business in 1995, producing the inexpensive red scarves worn by Young Pioneers, the Communist Party's primary-school organization. In 1997, Hong Kong returned to Chinese control, and the wave of patriotism led to new demand for national flags, so Li expanded his assembly line. Four years after that were the attacks of 9/11, and Li started manufacturing the Stars and Stripes. That was his entry into the international market, and, ever since, his business has been shaped largely by what happens abroad. On the day I visited, he had just sold a few thousand Trump flags—from the Young Pioneers to maga in the span of a quarter century. "If people want it, we make it," Li said. On his desk, a small gay-pride flag sat next to one featuring the face of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan.

After leaving Yiwu, I stopped at a large flag factory called Johnin, in the city of Shaoxing. A young manager named Jin Gang gave me a tour. On the assembly line, dozens of women sat at sewing machines, stitching flags that read "North Dakota for Trump," "Keep America Great," "Trump 2020," and "Trump 2024." Since the start of the pandemic, everything seemed to happen first in China, and now I wondered if Johnin knew something that I didn't.

"That's what they asked for," Jin said, when I inquired about the 2024 banners. "I guess they have this idea that he will be President again."

Jin was coy about his customers, though he said that the orders didn't come directly from Trump's companies or the Republican Party. During the 2016 campaign, Johnin sold between two million and three million Trump flags, at roughly a dollar each. Now, with the election less than four months away, Trump products represented about seventy per cent of Johnin's business. There were some orders for Biden flags, but not many.

In general, the pandemic had been bad for Johnin, because flag-waving events like European soccer tournaments were cancelled. But there were scattered moments of high demand. In June, in the wake of George Floyd's death, Johnin received a spike in orders of blue-line police flags. Shortly after that, there was a sudden interest in the state flag of Mississippi. "Many customers were telling us, 'We need Mississippi flags,'" Jin said. "We made forty thousand. It happened really fast, and then it was finished." He continued, "I think the people who bought those flags were Black."



Flags and banners for sale at Yiwu's wholesale market. Photograph by Guligo Jia for The New Yorker

Jin had read that Mississippi has many Black residents. He was accustomed to manufacturing flags for both sides of foreign elections, sports matches, and other events, so it seemed logical: police supporters had their blue-line flags, while Blacks had Mississippi flags. In Mandarin, it took me a while to explain a counterintuitive fact about democracy: the state with the highest percentage of Black residents might also be the last one to get rid of a Confederate symbol.

Jin disliked Trump, but he wasn't worried about November. "After the election, we'll make flags for somebody," he said. "Americans always want flags." He showed me how the factory double-stitched seams. "A lot of other companies don't do that," he said. Cut-rate manufacturers also tried to save on fabric for Trump flags, which have a standard size of ninety centimetres by a hundred and fifty centimetres. Jin said that, if you measure some of the cheap ones, you'll find that everything has been shaved down by about two per cent: eighty-eight centimetres by a hundred and forty-six. In the most literal way imaginable, Chinese manufacturers were working the margins on Trump.

At the beginning of July, Li Dewei told me that he and his partner had abandoned their plan to sell in the Chinese market. “The investment is too high,” Li said. “And domestic competition is too fierce.”

He had also concluded that U.S.-China tensions were unlikely to have any impact on Kimzon’s business. Trump Administration officials often blamed China for its early handling of the pandemic, but there didn’t seem to be any consumer backlash. In the span of three months, Li’s ideas about risk had completely reversed: now he believed that the poor handling of the pandemic in the U.S. was likely to benefit his sales. “A lot of businesses are closed,” Li explained. “People are afraid of going to shops, because of infections, so they want to buy online.” Even the Amazon reviews of his shoes told him which way the wind was blowing. May 14th, five stars: “I purchased them to wear during the day at work delivering packages for a big online order company that rhymes with am-a-John. So far so good on 10-hour shifts.”

According to an Amazon spokesperson, the company has hired more than four hundred thousand frontline employees worldwide since the start of the pandemic. In Shanghai, I met a young Chinese woman who worked in advertising for the company, and her division had doubled its staff in the past year. She asked me not to use her name, because Amazon hadn’t given her permission to talk. She had returned to China after living abroad, and she often had to explain the Chinese mind-set to Amazon co-workers in Seattle. She said that American entrepreneurs tend to be obsessed with branding. “You want to have a great brand-name story to convince your customers,” she said. “In China, it’s the opposite. They sell things first. And then they think about brand.”

Zack Franklin, an American consultant who has worked for years with Amazon sellers in Shenzhen, told me that Chinese online entrepreneurs had figured out a different way to scale up their businesses. In addition to expanding product lines or exploring new markets, they simply sold the same thing in the same place under different names.

“You want to take up as much space on the shelf as possible,” Franklin said. “Just get a different label.” He continued, “You are making money through this illusion of choice.” He explained that in order to get access to a brand registry it’s necessary to apply for a trademark, so Chinese applicants were flooding the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.

Li Dewei had registered about seventy brands, and some of his applications had been handled by a law firm called Ni, Wang & Massand, in Dallas. Hao Ni, one of the firm’s founders, told me that it represents Chinese clients in eighty to a hundred brand applications every month. Ni said that Chinese choose odd brand names because those applications tend to be approved faster by the trademark office, which might reject a name that’s too close to an established brand. “We’ve so far never had a conflict with a Chinese company,” Ni said.

Ni had handled the application for Li Dewei’s most recent brand, Pemily12. On July 2nd, Li showed me the new Web site he was setting up. This time, he hoped to bypass Amazon and sell directly to consumers. But the product names still used Amazonglish: Pet Dog Toy Dog Leakage Food Toy Ball. There was also an introduction to the brand:

Why is Pemily?

This is a combination of pet family

Why is it 12?

12 = 12 month = 1 year = forever

Why is Pemily12?

pemily12 means we will always be a family

Earlier in the pandemic, Li had noticed on Google Trends that a lot of Americans were searching for products connected to the word “pet.” “Pet clothes,” he said. “Pet toy. Pet health.” A friend in Shenzhen manufactured pet accessories, and he was expanding the product line and partnering with Li on the Web site. They believed that clothes for pets were particularly promising. I asked Li if it had been stressful to make so many major decisions in recent months, but he shrugged it off—as far as he was concerned, he was simply reacting to the situation. “The market decides for us,” he said. “It’s not us deciding.”

American shoe orders were still increasing, and now Kimzon was shipping three thousand pairs every day. “The U.S. government has been sending out more money recently,” Li said.

I told Li that he was mistaken—there hadn’t yet been a second stimulus program. But he swore that government money was reaching consumers: he could see it in sales, and other entrepreneurs had mentioned the same thing. The following day, I received an e-mail from the young woman who was living in our family’s house in rural Colorado. She sent me a list of things that had appeared in our mailbox, including a cares Act debit card labelled “Economic Impact.” It was in the amount of thirty-four hundred dollars.

I learned that during the past couple of weeks the government had been sending debit cards to people who had been missed in April, often because their bank information wasn’t on file. I had wondered why we hadn’t received a stimulus check, but I was too distracted by life in China to look into it. Now I realized that Zocavia and Zocania could have kept me updated on the U.S. government’s payment schedule.

Near the end of July, my daughters’ only American friend still in Chengdu left. Most other Americans had been evacuated in January or February, and as time passed the isolation grew harder for the few families who stayed. In a normal summer, we would have visited Colorado, but now, if we left China, we couldn’t reënter.

As a Peace Corps volunteer, I hadn’t returned to the U.S. for two years, and now we seemed likely to repeat that experience. But, in the nineteen-nineties, Sichuan still felt remote, and even American commerce seemed a world away; I never saw a McDonald’s during those two years. By 2020, there were more than seventy thousand American companies doing business in China. Meanwhile, the Chinese were producing much of the P.P.E. and many other goods that were bought by Americans during a time of crisis. Almost any event in the U.S.—a protest, a lockdown, a stimulus program—had an immediate economic ripple effect somewhere in the People’s Republic. Decoupling had been envisaged as an economic process, but the market links were stronger than ever: in 2020, U.S.-China trade increased by nearly nine per cent. The separation was happening almost entirely at the human level.

On July 24th, the Chinese government announced that it was closing the U.S. consulate in Chengdu and expelling all remaining American staff. The Chinese were retaliating for the recent actions of the Trump Administration, which had shut down the Chinese consulate in Houston, citing espionage. A State Department official told me that, while there was no question that the Chinese had been spying in Houston, the American response could have been less self-defeating. “We have ways of dealing with this stuff, to get the message across without being so absolute,” he said. He believed that in a normal situation the Americans would have expelled some individual Chinese diplomats, rather than closing the entire consulate.

He said that, earlier in the year, White House officials had proposed an even more radical move. “There were people in the Trump Administration who suggested shutting down all of our consulates in China,” he said, “with the idea that it would give us free rein to kick the Chinese out of their consulates.” A similar strategy had been applied to the press. In March, the Trump Administration sharply limited the number of Chinese who were allowed to work in America for state-run news organizations. The Chinese foreign ministry countered by expelling almost all Americans who worked for the Times, the Washington Post, and the Wall Street Journal. By the end of the year, there were only about thirty American journalists left in China.

In Chengdu, after the announcement was made about the consulate, I biked over to the site a couple of times a day. The area was heavily policed, but by the second day large numbers of civilians started to appear, in order to take selfies in front of the building. I overheard one woman tell her companions to hurry up with their photos so that they could make it to Dujiangyan, a tourist site outside the city. They told me that they were on vacation from Wenzhou, and they had added the consulate to the day’s itinerary.

Inside the compound, the Americans were executing what’s known as a “destruction plan.” Along with some hurried packing, they were also shredding documents and smashing computers and telecommunications equipment. The Chinese had given them exactly seventy-two hours, the same amount of time that the Americans had allowed in Houston. The exchange had the ritualized air of a sporting event: each side had one home game and one away game, and everybody collected whatever he could for propaganda. In Houston, U.S. security agents tailed Chinese consular staff on visits to the Home Depot, where they purchased barrels in which to burn documents. American television news carried images of smoke plumes rising from the consulate’s courtyard.

In Chengdu, the consulate’s highest building was six stories. When it opened, in 1994, it was the tallest structure in the neighborhood, and rice fields bordered the consulate walls. By the time I first visited, in 1996, the city had already started to grow around the compound. Two decades later, buildings of twenty or more stories loom on three sides. It was an architectural version of my classroom experience: relatively speaking, the Americans were getting shorter.

The high-rises had always presented a security risk, and now the Chinese government arranged cameras on the upper floors, in order to live-stream any activity in the consulate’s courtyard. “They were clearly set up to get a shot of us burning documents,” the State Department official told me. “They wanted that picture.”

Somebody in the consulate had the idea to commission a local print shop to make a couple of banners, one of which said “Ganxie Chengdu”—“Thank you, Chengdu.” They figured that this would send a more dignified message to viewers, but they knew that any staffers would be followed, like the barrel boys at the Home Depot. The order was made by a private citizen, but, shortly after the banners were supposed to be ready, more than a dozen security officers took her into custody. When she was finally released, after seven hours and an extensive interrogation, the banners were nowhere to be found.

In the end, the Americans finished their destruction before the clock ran out. Shortly after dawn on the third day, the last diplomats in the U.S. consulate unlocked the front door, turned around, and left through the back, driving off in unmarked vehicles. The Chinese seemed to miss that shot, which wasn’t featured on state-run media. Nobody ever saw the banner, either.

On September 25th, Li Dewei told me that sales were still strong. This was true for many businesses in China: in the third financial quarter, the nation's economy grew by nearly five per cent. In recent months, Li had hired a few new employees, but he didn't plan to return to his pre-pandemic staff numbers. As far as he was concerned, this was a good opportunity to improve efficiency. At the age of thirty-four, Li was the oldest person in his office.

Every day, the Pemily12 Web site was receiving four hundred unique visitors, and daily sales were in the thousands of U.S. dollars. Li believed the business's potential for growth was excellent, given all the pandemic pets in America. As usual, he was diplomatic, but he told me that he was disappointed by the way the virus had been handled in the U.S. He compared it with India, where the numbers were also bad. "India doesn't have the ability to handle this," Li said. "But America has the ability. America didn't have to do it like this."

He believed that Trump would win the election, which was the opinion of most Chinese I knew. In early November, Jin Gang, the flag-maker in Shaoxing, told me that a flood of recent Trump orders had convinced him that the Republican would be victorious. At Sichuan University, I polled my students, and fifty-four per cent thought that Trump would win.

A number of students followed the election coverage on Fox News. In a detail that is unlikely to appear in any of the station's promotional materials, the Communist Party didn't bother to block Fox's Web site, unlike those of CNN, the Times, and other American sources. In class, my students and I discussed what they were seeing on Fox, and I introduced them to Lauren Boebert, who was campaigning in Colorado to represent me and my family in Congress. All November, a student in the front row of my journalism class wore a "Trump: Keep America Great" baseball cap. He referred to the President as Chuan Jianguo, an ironic Chinese nickname that pairs the Trump surname with a Communist-era patriotic moniker—essentially, Make-China-Great-Again Trump.

Most students said they were personally interested in the outcome of the election. "Yes, because it is related to China and my future life, to study in the USA," one engineer wrote, in an assignment. "Also, now the politicians are not as polite as in the past. I want to see how crazily the failed candidate's party will do."

Others had already abandoned plans for overseas study. In some cases, their parents made the decision, out of concern about diplomatic tensions, the pandemic, and Black Lives Matter protests, which the Chinese media often portrayed as violent. Even with Joe Biden's victory, it seemed unlikely that the U.S.-China relationship would change quickly. People I spoke with in the State Department were hopeful that at least some academic and cultural exchanges might be reestablished, but even this would take time.

Meanwhile, the inequality in information was obvious to anybody who had stayed in China. All educated Chinese had studied at least some English, and they could access American culture through Hollywood movies, television shows, and other sources. Many export entrepreneurs, like Li Dewei, used virtual private networks—the Chinese government deliberately allowed such holes in the firewall in part because they were important for business. When I visited Yiwu, my entire hotel was wired through a V.P.N., so that buyers could access Google, Facebook, and other open-society resources. But, for Americans, China was essentially closed. Once the U.S. started losing the small core of diplomats, journalists, and businesspeople who were based in China, the already limited knowledge of the country was bound to be diminished.

From the perspective of the Chinese government, there seemed little incentive to reopen. China was the only major economy that had grown in 2020, and domestic support for the pandemic policies had become stronger as the year went on. Officials were clearly emboldened; in the fall, the crackdowns in Xinjiang and Hong Kong ramped up. Any serious investigations into the early mistakes in Wuhan were censored, and seven journalists and commentators who had reported on the crisis were either in detention or missing. The government had approved for emergency use four vaccines developed by Chinese companies, but there hadn't yet been a push for mass vaccinations—probably, officials were waiting to see how the situation developed overseas. They could afford to be patient, because there was very little virus spreading in China. When I talked to friends and family in the U.S., people always mentioned the vaccines, but the topic rarely came up in Chinese conversation.

Increasingly, our version of 2020 felt like an alternate reality. I had spent an intense year teaching, travelling, and conducting face-to-face interviews, but there had never been a moment when I considered the possibility of contracting the virus. In August, after reporting for a week and a half in Wuhan, I had flown to Hangzhou, where, the following day, I attended a lecture in an auditorium packed with unmasked people. Afterward, I was one of twenty or more who exchanged handshakes—the old-fashioned kind, where you touch your face afterward—with Jack Ma, who had long been known as the richest man in China. Almost nothing had changed in the ways people interacted, and I never heard a Chinese person mention “pandemic fatigue.” Of the thirty million university students who attended in-class sessions during the fall, I could find only two reported infections.

In many ways, the Chinese system and society were uniquely well suited to handle the pandemic, while the opposite was true of the U.S. For a number of Chinese, the contrast seemed to reflect a permanent change in the world order, but more thoughtful individuals worried about overconfidence. “The pandemic is a very exceptional situation,” Gary Liu, an economist and the founder of the National Affairs Financial Review Institute, a private think tank in Shanghai, told me. “You can't make a long-term conclusion based on an exceptional situation.” He feared that the pandemic could vindicate certain authoritarian structures.

My last journalism class of the term was on New Year's Eve. I asked the students a question: For you, was 2020 a good year or a bad year?

Earlier in December, the university had restricted all students to campus, because Chengdu had experienced its first outbreak since February. As the weather grew colder, there were scattered infections across the country. In most instances, the spread started with Chinese citizens who had quarantined after returning from abroad. Chengdu's outbreak was believed to have begun after an elderly person handled contaminated garbage near a quarantine facility. The first case was reported on December 7th, and, in the following five days, the city tested more than two million residents. Despite having had only a hundred and forty-three non-imported symptomatic cases up to that point, Chengdu had a hundred and forty-one testing locations—a ratio of almost one testing facility for every symptomatic infection. In December, thirteen new symptomatic cases of community spread were reported, and there were targeted lockdowns, but most of Chengdu remained unaffected. In the middle of the outbreak, the city opened five new subway lines.

Almost seventy per cent of my students said that it had been a good year. The same was true for many others. Li Dewei told me that Zocavia, Zocania, and the other shoe brands had enjoyed their best holiday sales ever, and the year's total revenues had increased by about fifteen per cent compared with 2019. For Pemily12, Li believed that the future might involve pet

beauty products. “It will be just like beauty products for people,” he said, when we met in early 2021. He showed me an online image of false eyelashes for dogs. “We haven’t started this yet,” he said. “But we can see that other people are making this product. Maybe in two or three years it will be a big market.”

After the Capitol was stormed, on January 6th, Jin Gang, in Shaoxing, reported a spike in orders for Trump flags. He sent me pictures on WeChat of the new designs that were being manufactured by the Johnin assembly lines: “Trump 2024: The Revenge Tour,” “Trump 2024: Take America Back,” and “Trump 2024: Save America Again!”

Every Monday, my daughters wore red Young Pioneer scarves to school, as was required of all students. Sometimes they complained about not being able to visit Colorado, and they missed our cat, which was being cared for by our tenant. But increasingly that life felt far away. One afternoon, the twins found an abandoned kitten on the banks of the Fu River, and they took him in and named him Ulysses. That was the best way to cope—one reality here, one reality there. Certain family photographs hung in both our homes, and some pieces of ikea furniture were also duplicated. In Colorado, our black Honda CR-V was parked in the barn; now we bought another black Honda CR-V for Chengdu. Our Chinese CR-V had been manufactured in Wuhan. Even there, it had been a good year for assembly lines; Honda reported that, in 2020, its automobile sales in China increased by five per cent over the previous year. We called it our covid car. On campus, I parked in the basement of the Marxism Institute. ♦

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