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Logistical Territories

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The Place of All Things: Shenzhen, Alibaba, and the Oriental Bazaar

Matthew Hockenberry

When Western eyes follow the snaking path of the supply chain to its distant ends, they find there surprising familiar things. In what should be a diverse and many-faceted site, there is a reliable regularity. It is as though there is a single assemblatoric aperture through which the world can truly be seen. They sometimes find factory floors, rows of workers, hands gloved and faces masked, and they attempt, then, to offer an unmasking. But the site I am concerned with is the one comprised of massive markets filled with endless items, stored in booths and boxes waiting in preparative purchase. It is here that we find the liminal site of global logistical assembly. In the space of the Shenzhen markets in southern China and the digital designs of Alibaba, we find a history of Western fascination with the “Oriental bazaar” that has produced the imagination of a logistical territory which promises an approach to the otherwise inaccessible landscape of global supply.

It would be difficult—if not impossible—to identify the first reference to the Shenzhen markets in the contemporary discourse of global production. The one presented by bunnie huang at the beginning of 2007 has at least some claim to an originary moment. The frequency with which huang is referenced in later accounts is suggestive, as is his inclusion of many of the markers that would constitute the site’s production as a well-formed logistical imaginary. Along with the genre-defining tour of the market’s vast space and the obligatory litany of the the market’s merchandise, there is a soon-to-be familiar fascination with the illicit promises of unauthorized assembly and unsanctioned supply. The Huaqiangbei Market, huang explains, has every kind of electronic component imaginable, “reels of resistors and capacitors, ICs, inductors, relays, pogo pin test points, voltmeters,” and—in a fitting turn of phrase—“trays of memories.”¹

It may be surprising that huang details the market’s components, rather than its composed. But indeed, most accounts of Shenzhen begin not with manufacture ready-made, but with it in-the-making. While one can find the emblematic objects of global assembly for sale here—the mobile phones, tablets, power banks, and drones that saturate commercial advertisement—this is not, we are told, an entirely ordinary site of consumption. Amid the “fast . . . whirling . . . chaos” of the market there is the promise of a more unexpected sort of encounter, one where any hapless consumer might be swept up into a wholly unfamiliar world of parts and pieces, only to emerge further down the supply chain than where they had been when they first began. The distinction between wholesale and retail has always been more ambiguous in China, with markets serving as both distribution centers and consumer outlets. But in the “electronics capital of the world” we are presented with a place so flexible that it seems that anyone “can build a smartphone from scratch in a couple of hours,”

Matthew Hockenberry’s research examines critical developments in the epistemology of assembly. His current book project, *Far Corners of the Earth*, narrates the history of logistics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by tracing the impact of media forms and material practices like paperwork, telecommunication, and computation on the development of decentralized production. As a visiting scientist with the MIT Center for Civic Media and Tangible Media Group he developed SourceMap, a collaborative platform for mapping supply chains and sharing “where things come from.” He is currently Lecturer in Digital Technology and Emerging Media at Fordham University, having previously taught at New York University’s Media, Culture, and Communication and Integrated Digital Media programs.

hock@nyu.edu

¹ bunnie huang, “Akihabara, Eat Your Heart Out,” *bunnie:studios* (January 31, 2007)

where an otherwise casual consumer might “walk into a multi-story component mall on Huaqiang North Road, point at a few things...and in half an hour [be] a phone manufacturer.”² Shenzhen is imagined as a consumptive space capable of containing the global system of production, but this is not to suggest that it makes it comprehensible. As Huang would later write of the SEG Building Market, “my eyes fell out of my head when I saw it.”³

Stories of the Shenzhen markets have become a recurring point of entry for accounts of global electronics supply chain. With appearances in periodicals as varied as *Wired*, *Technology Review*, *Businessweek*, *Vice*, and *The New York Times*, articles that begin with a visit to the imagined space of this logistical landscape have become so numerous they could fill a few market stalls of their own, their framing so consistent that they might as well constitute a new genre of logistical inquiry. They’ve even been adapted to other mediums, where lists of shops and subassemblies are exchanged for Youtube videos composed of shaky camera shots twisting and turning through floors of wildly variable brightness.

The effect of these accounts is to produce Shenzhen as a site of almost otherworldly mystique, some combination fairy-tale, science-fiction future, and ancient origin myth. Deng Xiaoping drew a circle around a southern fishing village, the legend goes, and carved out a free market in socialist China. In these “rags to riches” stories, Shenzhen’s transformation from the parochial to urbane, and from the local to the global, becomes something like a Chinese version of the American dream. But it also becomes part wild west and outlaw fortress. Beholden only to the free market, it is imagined as a place devoid of legal restriction. After all, there are objects here that come in colors never originally offered, with features never before advertised. Indeed, the nature of the merchandise on sale seems to stretch a more conventional understanding of authenticity. In the space of shanzhai the original and the copy can stand in close proximity. Customers might choose between imitations of established designs and novel, but unauthorized, assemblies borne of creative acts of reconfiguration. As a genre, the stories of Shenzhen seem to draw from both Rossetti’s *Goblin Market* and Leiber’s *Bazaar of the Bizarre*—a place of forbidden delights just as it is an alien encampment of dubious design. In either case, stories of the markets take on a dreamlike quality. Shenzhen becomes the place where “tech dreams come true,” a most fantastical “gadget paradise.”⁴

These characterizations have only become more pronounced with each new encounter that features them. Shenzhen’s Huaqiangbei district is presented as an almost impenetrable space, its air filled with a cacophonous “babel” of languages emanating from the thousands of people working in the thousands of stalls—alongside the thousands of customers that patronize them. Images can’t help but linger on the sight of banners adorned with words in English, Chinese, and Japanese, or on the monitors, neon signs, and LED lights that bathe the booths in every color of the RGB spectrum. Few accounts neglect to mention that there is an entire multi-floor shopping mall that sells nothing but phone cases, or the one that specializes in smartwatches, or surveillance cameras. The chaos of the space becomes oppressive and overwhelming. Structures like the SEG Building similarly gigantic and bewildering. Indeed, they are not merely massive, they become something beyond the very scale of human understanding. No matter what you need, we learn, for each and every thing imaginable the market’s accommodating merchants can ensure that “somebody there can get them for you.” This is

2 Matt Rivers, “Inside China’s Silicon Valley: From Copycats to Innovation,” *CNN Business* (November 22, 2018); Brandon Green, “Made In China: Meet The Guy Who Built An iPhone Using Only Shenzhen’s Cell Phone Markets,” *Forbes* (August 16, 2017); Andrew Orlovski, “Visit a Components Mall in China... 30 Minutes Later, You’re a Manufacturer,” *The Register* (January 2, 2016).

3 bunnie huang, “Mobile Phone Mega-Market in Shenzhen,” *bunnie.studios* (February 24, 2009).

4 Jenna Lau, “Shenzhen, China: Where Tech Dreams Come True” *Hackernoon* (December 25, 2017); Richard Lai, “Shenzhen mobile phone market,” *Engadget* (June 15, 2011).

not just any place of commerce, it is “an Aladdin’s cave where almost everything” is available.⁵

This evocation of the Arabian Nights is not incidental. It is part of an overt Orientalist orientation that positions the market as an opening to the distant lands of the supply chain. But they are spaces of consumption that are both familiar and unfamiliar. They are “souks” rather than shops, markets before they are malls. What is critical in their presentation is the knowledge that somewhere—though we may never find it—among the “hundreds of shops and stalls, spread across multiple buildings and many floors” the sprawling uncertainty of the global supply chain could at last be made manifest.⁶

Images of the Orient have long been objects of European fascination. In many respects, the genre of Shenzhen shop stories are merely a more recent incarnation of an imaginative strategy that goes back to the birth of global capitalism. As Huang notes at the beginning of his own account, the same fascination now directed to Shenzhen’s Huaqiangbei had once been exclusive to Tokyo’s Akihabara. Both had participated in the same imaginative operation, where one particular sort of image—that of the Oriental bazaar—serves as the means to encapsulate the ends of an increasingly estranged sense of supply.

As a site of consumption, the Oriental bazaar is an imagined logistical territory that served to reify the mystery of global connection even as it offered an orientation to it. Full of terror as much as wonder, the bazaar was a place where fantasy and control could coexist—a recombinant resource for easing anxieties attached to the early era of globalization. The consequence of this operation is that the bazaar cannot be present beyond its realization as an apparatus for the imagination of assembly. As Said had said, while “every writer on the Orient...assumes some Oriental precedent, some previous knowledge of the Orient, to which he refers and on which he relies,” it is “at most” the case that “the ‘real’ Orient provoked a writer to his vision; it very rarely guided it.” The construction of the Oriental bazaar as an imagined logistical space is, then, a claim to authority rather than the demonstration of it. If the bazaar trades on a kind of “Techno-Orientalism,” as David Morley and Kevin Robins have put it, the effect is that a site which might otherwise “come to exist within the Western political and cultural unconscious as a figure of danger” is reconfigured as a space of forbidden desire.⁷

The most relevant iteration of this space as a site for the logistical imaginary comes from the nineteenth century—when textiles, rather than technology, were the emblematic objects of supply. Then, as now, Western readers were fascinated by stories of these distant markets. Alfred Russel Wallace recorded one notable account of the “Chinese bazaar” in the Singapore of 1869. Other than the merchandise for sale there, it is an uncanny resemblance. The Chinese bazaar was the site of “hundreds of small shops,” a “miscellaneous collection of hardware” where much is sold “wonderfully cheap.” Here too, the shopkeeper “is very good natured; he will show you everything he has, and does not seem to mind if you buy nothing.” Rather than electronic assemblies and mobile phone parts, Wallace’s market offered objects like penknives, corkscrews, gunpowder, and writing-paper gathered incongruously together. In place of engineers, fabricators, and logistics specialists, his stalls were home to smiths and carpenters. But one can also find the food-sellers that surround the bustle of market space—with meals of fish, rice, and vegetables that have changed in little else than cost.⁸

The place that Wallace described was not just a distant object of imagination. Nor was it one that would remain confined to the pages of magazines and newspapers in which it first appeared. The

⁵Charles Arthur, “Huaqiangbei: The Mega Market with Every Smartphone Part,” *The Guardian* (June 13, 2014).

⁶Mark Pesce, “In the Pearl River Delta’s Electronics Souks, AI Lets the Haggling Happen,” *The Register* (July 25, 2017);

⁷Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 20–22; David Morley and Kevin Robins, *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes, and Cultural Boundaries* (London: Routledge, 1995), 159–160.

⁸Alfred Russel Wallace, *The Malay Archipelago: The Land of the Orangutan and the Bird of Paradise* (London: Macmillan, 1869), 21–22.

Oriental bazaar became, itself, a retail architecture imported from the reaches of supply to the spaces of English life. These “Victorian bazaars” adapted the Oriental image of a covered shopping space to the cosmopolitan conditions increasingly common to Victorian life. Characterized by the variety, rather than the cost, of goods, the decoration of the Victorian bazaar was distinct from its predecessor, though perhaps “provoked” by a vague Oriental inspiration more like to include Islamic and Indian motifs. The most famous of the form was perhaps the Crystal Palace bazaar. With multiple entrances, the market featured a spacious interior composed of cast-iron columns “painted light blue, white, and red in their upper sections with dark maroon, light blue and white below.” “With the abacuses of each column and the gallery railing gilded” the effect, *The Illustrated London News* reported, was to bathe the merchandise in a cascade of colors—a “gem-lighted hall” with “golden and silvery” glow made possible not by the light of LEDs, but by gas lamp.⁹

The bazaar was, in the Victorian imagination “the place of all things.” Though all that the objects it housed had in common was “that they were all for sale,” the effect, Peter Gurney suggests, was that it came to seem that everything “could be bought at the Bazaar.” Even “the culture and politics of the movement itself were thoroughly commodified.”¹⁰ For the European imagination, the “image of the bazaar,” Elisabeth Oxfeldt writes, “prompts associations to a distant, exotic market with all its sensual experiences.” It is a place where technology, trade, and fantasy combine and reconfigure influences from otherwise oppositional geographies. Functioning as a world of uncertain but “graspable” dimensions, the bazaar “reveals the preconditions” for a meeting between local consumption and global production. But that is not all that is on offer. It is the bazaar that is “the object of sale.”¹¹ And in agreeing to its price, what is accepted is the idea of global capitalism itself.

If what was at stake here was the production of a logistical space through which global capitalism could be made manifest, this is surely a project that has moved from the imagination of the Oriental bazaar to the whole of contemporary consumption. Indeed, there seems little difference between the high streets of England or the malls of America and what had been assembled in Singapore and Shenzhen. The critical connection is in our recognition of their place in the logistical imaginary. In this, each location is equally familiar and otherwise, equally intangible and imaginative. The function of these spaces, as territories of the imagination, is to represent a product—and, indeed, a process of production—that is otherwise unrepresentable. And in some respects, Shenzhen does represent a more novel adaptation of the trope. Spaces of consumption have become now less familiar. The shopping mall is no longer just the fictional site of a zombie apocalypse, it increasingly resembles a literal one. To speak of the Shenzhen markets is no longer to provide an image with which to imagine global production, but to recall the moment when we had had ability the ability to imagine it at all. As the physical space of the market fades into otherworldly inhabitation on the network, we find a newly digital bazaar of the bizarre—with accessible promises of a now unaccessible materiality.

As the digital bazaar in closest physical proximity to the Shenzhen markets, one might assume that Alibaba would take part in the same sort of imaginative operation. Indeed, in deciding on a name for his e-commerce venture, Jack Ma simply wanted something that “traveled well.” The story of Ali Baba opening a cave of treasure with the words “open sesame” resonated with Ma, who saw himself as opening up the international market for China. There were more fundamental logistics at stake

9 aul Dobraszczyk, “Victorian Bazaars,” *Rag-Picking History* (May 11, 2011). See also John Timbs, *Curiosities of London: Exhibiting the Most Rare and Remarkable Objects of Interest in the Metropolis* (London: D. Bogue, 1855).

10 Peter Gurney, “The Sublime of the Bazaar: The Religion of Free Trade and the Making of Modern Consumerism,” in *Wanting and Having: Popular Politics and Liberal Consumerism in England, 1830–70*, 220–56. (Manchester University Press, 2014).

11 Elisabeth Oxfeldt, “Discovering His Inner Turk: Hans Christian Andersen’s Commodification of the Exotic,” in *Journeys from Scandinavia: Travelogues of Africa, Asia, and South America, 1840—2000*, 6–30 (University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

too. Like Jeff Bezos before him, Ma wanted a name that would appear near the top of an alphabetical index. But as Duncan Clark recalls, “the widespread recognition of the Alibaba name has saved Jack a lot of money.” Not only in marketing expenses, but by furnishing the company with “a ready supply of imagery.”¹²

Alibaba is sometimes called the Amazon of China, and there are good reasons for this comparison. Both firms are the product of the current age of supply chain capitalism, with digital portals to the vast array of objects coming out of the sprawling network of global supply. But they are less alike than one might imagine. Despite the growing presence of gray-market products and partners, Amazon is more clearly connected to the objects it sells. Most sit in Amazon warehouses, waiting in Amazon boxes on Amazon’s shelves. They are sometimes even delivered by Amazon’s own flexible labor force. Amazon may be the “everything store,” but it is still a store—more mundane and more material. And this is how it is imagined. Alibaba has come to be more like the Shenzhen markets, more Oriental bazaar than general store. The directory listings of AliExpress sketch out a site where any company can set up shop and open up its factory floor to a consumer on the other side of the planet. It is a place brimming with the potential of illicit productions of uncertain origins, where one can wander into the great global supply chain on one end and come out on the other.¹³ It may be accessible, but it remains unknowable. For Western visitors, the promises of its production are bound up in the imagination of control for a world divorced from the knowledge of its own material assembly. That it is a website rather than a crowded market only makes this all the richer. It is one networked imaginary layered on top of another. As a logistical territory, it may not be the place of all things, but it is the place one can imagine them to be.

12 Duncan Clark, *Alibaba: The House That Jack Ma Built* (New York: Ecco, 2016), 90–94.

13 Jenny Odell, “There’s No Such Thing as a Free Watch” (Oakland: Museum of Capitalism, 2017); Alexis Madrigal, “The Strange Brands in Your Instagram Feed,” *The Atlantic* (January 10, 2018).