Raines Fellowship Deliverable

Siege Mentality in the Shadows of History: A New Perspective on Chinese Anti-Western Discourse During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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I. Introduction

Around half a year after COVID-19 began spreading across the world, a poll conducted by the Pew Research Center found that American attitudes towards China had grown unprecedentedly negative. While just 35% of respondents in the US looked at China in an unfavorable light in 2005, that number had soared to 73% in mid-2020. In fact, American distaste extended to multiple dimensions of Chinese society, from its one-party political landscape, to its missteps early in the pandemic, to its economic and technological prowess.

At the same time, Chinese antipathy towards its chief rival across the Pacific has also surged to historic highs. Based on an on-the-ground poll conducted by York University professor Cary Wu, "the average favorability toward the U.S. dropped from 5.77 in June 2019 to 4.77 in May 2020 [on a scale of 1 to 10]." Indeed, even the elite globetrotters from the country's most dynamic urban hubs, who lived in close proximity to Western culture and ideals, have been increasingly swayed by waves of nationalist retrenchment. After the country braved its February coronavirus wave, nearly 50% of the respondents from Professor Wu's study professed that their trust in the CCP-dominated national government had increased, and 90% of respondents claimed that they were satisfied with how Xi and his fellow technocrats handled the virus outbreak.

These statistics make one fact particularly clear. Namely, during an unprecedented pandemic that should have been the catalyst for international cooperation, the great schism between the two contemporary geopolitical heavyweights has opened wider than ever. But what went wrong? And in an era where the discursive landscapes of both states have become increasingly insulated from each other (mostly due to CCP censorship, partly due to enduring cultural gaps), how can we better understand China's perceptions of the world, and its political discourse vis-à-vis the US?

My paper approaches these incredibly nuanced questions by looking at Chinese anti-western rhetoric in the digital space during the pandemic. In recent years, the Internet--and social media in particular--has become a fast-paced and dynamic breeding ground for China's aggressive, anti-western brand of nationalism. However, this paper's core contention is that despite the novel and digital media for communication, the ideologies that undergird modern political discourse in China remain firmly anchored in century-old historical memories.

Indeed, when China's hawkish rhetoric amid the pandemic is situated within the expansive canvas of history, it becomes evident that much of today's anti-western discourse revolves around an enduring "siege mentality," driven by a desire to escape the "Sick Man of Asia" epithet as well as an aversion towards imperialist encroachment during the infamous "Century of Humiliation."

II. Literature Review

A good number of scholars have attempted to interpret Chinese nationalism during the COVID-19 pandemic--particularly its manifestations in cyberspace.

For example, Wang Zhenyu and Tao Yuzhou used semantic network analysis (SNA) to analyze two expressions of Chinese nationalism: a "Suppression of Ambivalent Attitudes" towards the nation, as well as a "Feeling of National Superiority." Similarly, Zhao Xiaoyu concluded that "quotidian expressions of nationalism" in China during the pandemic is at once "confident and rational," but also "confrontational" and "xenophobic." Yang Yifan and Chen Xuecheng examined media reports to argue that China's official discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic featured a paradoxical mix of globalist and nationalist sentiments. By using content and thematic analysis on Zhihu posts centered around UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson's hospitalization, Altman Peng et al. investigated China's "gaze" at Western democratic systems.

Specifically, the scholars noted that while the pandemic is running its course throughout the globe, China's perceptions towards British management of the public health crisis--as well as towards Western democratic politics in general--have become decidedly more negative.

Bernadette Jaworsky and Runya Qiaonan viewed the surges in nationalism in both China and the US as a "narrative battle." With regards to the Chinese side in particular, the authors noted that its people and government are adamant about how the country has escaped its "Century of Humiliation" and will no longer be "bullied" by foreign powers. Moreover, for both Jaworsky and Qiaonan, recognizing the "performative function" of this ongoing narrative battle is the first step towards reconciliation.

However, the crucial intersection between anti-western discourse during the pandemic and historical narratives rooted in biology (e.x. memories pertaining to the "Sick Man of Asia" epithet) has not been extensively studied. In fact, only Ruth Rogaski and Marta Hanson gave very cursory overviews on how the historical narrative of Chinese physical deficiency--and a sense of self-positioned victimhood--drives pandemic-fighting in China and abroad. This means that no scholar has delved in-depth into how historical memories centered around the body color China's evolving perceptions of the West, particularly within the context of the ongoing pandemic. This paper intends to fill that gap by examining to what extent China's "siege mentality" today is couched in biological insecurities emanating from the past.

III. Methodology Overview

The research methodology for this paper includes three major components--a qualitative phase, a quantitative phase, and an interview phase.

To better grasp the deeply nuanced historical context of contemporary Chinese public discourse, this project relies heavily on archival documents, existing literature from Chinese and

Western historians, as well as state media publications. Specifically, my primary sources feature a corpus of seminal writings credited for molding the modern Chinese consciousness. Among these are Liang Qichao's *New Citizen* and *Observations on A Trip to America*, Yan Fu's "On the Origin of Strength," Lu Xun's *Call to Arms*, as well as shorter pieces by Chen Duxiu and Mao Zedong. Additionally, this project also draws extensively from the CNKI database for Chinese scholarly literature, and it frequently monitors *People's Daily* and *Global Times* for state-run media's perspective on current events.

However, the core of my research entails a quantitative exploration of Chinese social media as a means of probing public discourse. With more than one billion users, Chinese social media dwarfs the reach of any other platform and constitutes a readymade arena for political conversations. Moreover, social media represents a curious convergence of bottom-up popular opinion and government-sanctioned narratives. This project makes extensive use of Sina Weibo, the Chinese equivalent of Twitter, as it is one of the largest social media platforms and also a hotbed for controversial, fiercely nationalistic rhetoric.

The sheer amount of data that flourishes on Weibo makes qualitative observations inadequate. As such, this project turns to data scraping, as well as machine learning-driven natural language processing (NLP) algorithms (e.x. LDA topic modeling and naive Bayesian sentiment analysis, which will be explored in detail in later sections).

One of the key challenges that this project encountered has to do with data collection. Specifically, Weibo's API limits search output to roughly 1000 posts and is notoriously difficult to navigate from outside China. To bypass the API restrictions, this project leveraged the powerful Data Miner Chrome extension, which was able to directly interact with the browser and

scrape posts filtered by Weibo's advanced search capabilities. Subsequently, all data analysis was carried out on Python.

In many ways, this project surveys China's intricate socio-political landscape by drawing from a unique blend of applied history and computational linguistics. Given the interdisciplinary nature of this project, expert guidance throughout the research process also proved helpful. Within the realm of applied history, I had the privilege to interview Professor Yang Jui-sung on the metamorphosis of the "Sick Man of Asia" narrative, as well as Professor Ruth Rogaski on the import of "hygienic modernity" in China. As I waded into the quantitative field, I was able to learn from the expertise of three George Washington University researchers who worked for the Social Feed Manager initiative. Furthermore, Professor Kelly McFarland of Georgetown University gave immensely helpful guidance on how I should grapple with the implications of my findings, as well as how this project can fit into--and draw from--scholarly literature pertaining to applied history.

IV. Historical Context

Chinese indignation at international scrutiny during the pandemic can be tied to indelible historical sensitivities. Particularly, seeking to kickstart an ambitious modernization project and rejuvenate a nation under the clutches of imperialism, an elite cohort of Chinese thinkers during the late-Qing and early Republican eras constructed a narrative of Chinese deficiency, emasculation, and racial inferiority. Intended to serve as a rallying cry for casting off decadent traditions and embracing self-empowerment, this unflattering portrayal of the Chinese individual has been internalized by successive generations as an enduring insecurity. As such, during a pandemic of epic proportions that originated in Wuhan, such insecurities could have jumped to

the foreground and manifested themselves as hawkish, bristling rhetoric against China's former imperialist overlords.

1) The Chinese Narrative of Physical Deficiency

At the heart of this powerful narrative of inferiority is the charge that the Chinese are helplessly frail, sickly, and unhygienic.

Some of the most piercing critique of the Chinese physique could be found in the works of Liang Qichao (1873-1929), who is perhaps modern China's most influential intellectual. The following passage from his seminal *New Citizen* is particularly scathing:

> "[The Chinese people] remain completely sedentary, exhaust their eyesight and become blind, and become hunchbacked even though they are not yet withered and old … Effeminacy is taken to be a praiseworthy trait; frailty and timidity are taken to be signs of grace and nobility. A delicate prettyboy, too weak to withstand a gust of wind, is called a man … He becomes emaciated and pallid, his gait becomes wobbly, and his blood stops flowing. His face looks like he is near to death, his body flaccid, and his breathing feeble. And if one were to gather all of China's 400 million people one would not be able to assemble even a single whole and healthy body [from their parts]."

Chen Duxiu, a leader of the May Fourth movement as well as a founder of the Chinese Communist Party, corroborated Liang's remarks. "All our country's youths glorify the term pale-faced scholar," he lamented. "Our nation is degenerating, and because of this sickliness … we all take on the fragile posture of the willow and harbor no martial aspirations."

In another publication, Chen pummeled Chinese hygienic practices of his time with unrelenting criticism: "There are no national standards for public hygiene. People spit carelessly everywhere. Defecation and waste cover the roads. People rarely shower. [The Chinese] give off an even worse scent than the Westerners' livestock, and their unkempt kitchens are far less sanitary than the Westerners' toilets."

The narrative of physical deficiency also found its way into one of the most iconic novelettes within the Chinese literary canon, Lu Xun's (1881-1936) *The True Story of Ah Q*. The

text, dripping with heavy satire, features an inept and immoral protagonist, Ah Q, who personifies a microcosm of early 20th century China and all of its flaws. Importantly, Lu Xun's construction of this colorful character included an unflattering physical portrayal.

> "... In the past, at some uncertain dare, shiny ringworm scars had appeared [on his scalp]. Although these were on his own head, apparently Ah Q did not consider them as altogether honourable, for he refrained from using the word "ringworm" or any words that sounded anything like it … for he refrained from using the word "ringworm" or any words that sounded anything like it. Later he improved on this, making "bright" and "light" forbidden words, while later still even "lamp" and "candle" were taboo. Whenever this taboo was disregarded, whether intentionally or not, Ah Q would fly into a rage, his ringworm scars turning scarlet. He would look over the offender, and if it were someone weak in repartee he would curse him, while if it were a poor fighter he would hit him. Yet, curiously enough, it was usually Ah Q who was worsted in these encounters, until finally he adopted new tactics, contenting himself in general with a furious glare."

Evidently, Ah Q is haunted by an identity that is intimately tied to his physical blemishes. Moreover, in his ridiculous attempts to defend his vanity and an imagined sense of honor, he is frequently outmatched by more virile opponents. Although Ah Q's shortcomings run far deeper than ringworms and martial ineptitude, physical deficiency features heavily in the reader's first impressions of the protagonist and thus constitutes the most visible symptom of late-Qing Chinese "malaise" (at least according to Lu Xun and his fellow intellectuals).

In fact, the narrative of Chinese physical frailty even seeped into segments of Maoist thought. As an avid swimmer who staged ambitious crossings of China's major rivers even in old age, Mao exalted a practical, hands-on philosophy of life and detested his country's disempowering Confucian heritage. According to Mao, "the unfortunate consequence" of a decadent tradition that holds scholarly achievements above physical prowess "has been that [the Chinese people] bend their backs and bow their heads; they have 'white and slender hands'; when they climb a hill they are out of breath, and when they walk in the water they get cramps in their feet."

Chinese physical deficiencies were in turn juxtaposed against Western virility. For example, Chen Duxiu (1879-1942), a leader in the May Fourth Movement and a founder of the

CCP, wrote in a 1916 issue of New Youth that the Chinese nation was "degenerating" because "the whole country's youths embrace a feeble stature, with no hint of virility." At the same time, however, youths in the West delight in "competitions of virility and strength." "[Westerners] are powerfully built and lively," Chen noticed, "and their whole nations make great strides towards progress."

Here, it is important to note that although a large part of the image of Chinese inferiority is a social construction intended to garner support for a nascent nationalist movement, the elite thinkers of this age nevertheless found snippets of reality in which to anchor their harsh claims. An opium epidemic that had its roots in British contraband trade ran amok all the way until 1949. Foot-binding, which compromises women's ability to walk, was acceptable practice during a similar time frame. Moreover, poor medical technology relative to Western standards may have made China seem like a hotbed of infectious diseases, as evidenced by the deadly Manchurian Plague of 1910-11.

2) Chinese Deficiency as "Chosen Trauma"

The question of whether Chinese physical frailty is fictionalized or real is ultimately immaterial if our focus remains upon understanding Chinese historical consciousness. Rather, how the nation remembers its past and perceives itself today is almost always determined by artificial narratives instead of scientifically-verified facts.

At the center of these thinkers' diagnoses of Chinese national weakness is the label the "Sick Man of Asia." As per historian Jui-sung Yang, this loaded term, along with the "Chinese people and dogs may not enter" sign, are akin to the Wagnerian *leitmotifs* that undergird China's traumatic "Century of Humiliation." Professor Ruth Rogaski concurs. "A great deal of the rhetoric of Chinese deficiency and Western superiority revolved around modern biomedicine,

science, and the body: the very items encompassed by the term weisheng [hygiene]. China was made into the Sick Man of Asia, his deficiencies measurable in terms of mortality rates and the number of bacteria (from a sample of indigenous feces or sputum) that could be cultured in a laboratory petri dish."

As will be discussed in the following sections, the "Sick Man of Asia" narrative (as well as the "Century of Humiliation" in general) lingers in Chinese historical consciousness until today. Its incredible staying power can be attributed to the fact that collective psychology is highly compatible with what historian Paul Cohen calls "chosen trauma." According to Cohen, nationalist ideologies and their proponents frequently curate heavily embellished (or even fictionalized) accounts of painful historical memories to build emotional resonance for their cause. In this case, the idea that the sickly and frail Chinese populace has been trampled upon, exploited, and repeatedly humiliated serves as a more stirring rallying cry for self-empowerment than any uplifting discourse.

3) "Strengthening the Nation is Contingent Upon Strengthening its Seeds"

For many of these thinkers, Chinese malaises stemmed from its people's shoddy genetic make-up. In fact, Liang Qichao and many of his brilliant contemporaries were swayed by Herbert Spencer's social Darwinism as well as the eugenics movement. These racially-tinged ideologies, then enjoying their heydays in the West, constituted the theoretical foundations for how early-20th century thinkers envisioned national rejuvenation.

As a case in point, Liang wrote in *New Citizen* that "in the great game of life, the fittest survive. I hope my brethrens will cultivate their physique, improve their martial prowess, and not degenerate in their languid stupor."

These strains of thought also found their way into Yan Fu's (1852-1921) seminal essay "On the Origin of Strength," which similarly espoused a Darwinian worldview and proclaimed that "if there is [a species] that was able to survive and to ensure the continuation of its kind … this means that it [has proven itself to be] the fittest."

Evidently, Liang, Fu, and their fellow thinkers believed that a cruel "survival of the fittest" dogma governed the global landscape, and China needed to muster up a fit and virile population in order to keep pace with the sort of physical vitality that flourishes in the West. As such, "strengthening the nation is contingent upon strengthening its seeds" became the mantra of the day that powered China's modernization projects.

In fact, even as the eugenics movement faded out of fashion after WWII, it seemed to enjoy a quiet yet vibrant afterlife in China's socio-political landscape. According to Professor Yuehtsen Chung, as the CCP began promulgating the One Child Policy in 1979, the objective of lowering the birth rate became intertwined with aspirations for healthier births (i.e. "strengthening the seeds"). As such, a 1980 *People's Daily* publication considered breeding between the mentally retarded, haemophiliacs, and the color blind a menace to society. A 1981 eugenics conference that saw the attendance of 71 experts and national representatives passed a motion to bestow enhanced technological resources to professional eugenics workers; moreover, the event also sought to rehabilitate the image of the movement and integrate its principles into primary school curricula.

4) Decadent Traditions and Spiritual Malaise

However, for China's pioneering thinkers and reformers, even more crippling than the people's physical and hygienic deficiencies were the spiritual and cultural degeneration that permeated the nation. In this sense, the "Sick Man of Asia" was not only diagnosed for being

weak and emasculated, but he also displayed lackluster moral conviction, a propensity to choose superstition over science, a stubborn loyalty to the clan that precluded any loyalty to the nation, and an embarrassing craving for subjugation molded by millenia of despotic rule.

"The people give no thought to public good because they have dwelled in a state of enslavement and robbery for so long," Liang wrote in *New Citizen*. "And their state of enslavement and robbery originates from successive tyrants regarding all under the heavens to be their own…"

Upon taking a trip to the US, Liang hardened his conviction that the Chinese were physically stunted, culturally backwards, and politically subjugated. Comparing his fellow countrymen to their more democratic Western counterparts, Liang wrote;

> "Our character is that of clansmen rather than citizens. Chinese social organizationis based on family and clan as the unit rather than on the individual, what is called 'regulating one's family before ruling the country' … We have a village mentality and not a national mentality … We can accept only despotism and cannot enjoy freedom … When I look at all the societies of the world, none is so disorderly as the Chinese community in San Francisco. Why? The answer is freedom … at home they are governed by officials and restrained by fathers and elder brothers … and so they are docile."

Renowned eugenicist Pan Guangdan (1899-1967), who classified Chinese inferiorities along racial lines, notably tasked the his people to grapple with and rid themselves of four innate defects that impede the nation's progress: "soft physical attributes," "lack of interest and abilities in science," "lackluster organizing skills," and "selfishness."

Yan Fu, thinking along similar lines, claimed that "Chinese wisdoms all pour into vain and frivolous pursuits, yet Western wisdoms are harnessed towards very real purposes."

Clearly, the "Sick Man of Asia" narrative came to encompass the Chinese people's physical deficiencies as well as their constrained corpus of knowledge and their feeble moral convictions. This meant that the missions of biological and hygienic self-empowerment became further entangled with aspirations for cultural and national renewal. In other words, the provision

of public health and hygiene was not only a cure for the frail Chinese body, but it was also the first step in repairing the corrupted Chinese soul. This endeavor was therefore a golden opportunity for the populace to mobilize en masse and prove that they can transcend clansmanship, cultural decadence, and an aversion towards scientific knowledge. In this sense, public health is a near-sacred pillar of Chinese modernity--a benchmark for how far the nation has come from its "Century of Humiliation" days.

Since late-Qing and early Republican thinkers lashed out at their own people for their many deficiencies, decades have passed, and the Chinese socio-political landscape has endured tectonic shifts. However, the painful "Sick Man" narrative continues to ring true for successive generations of CCP leadership. Indeed, during the National Hygiene and Health Summit in 2016, President Xi declared that public health must be safeguarded "through all means and at all times" and "placed at a strategic position in [Chinese] developmental priorities."

One could even argue that the Chinese interpretation of public health carries Foucaultian undertones. Particularly, the notion that national revival comes from strengthening the population's physique bears resemblance to Michel Foucault's "biopower," or the practice by which modern nation states exert control over the human body. Moreover, similar to how Foucault articulated his famous concept of "governmentality," safeguarding public health in China meant that its people must set aside their clan affiliations and sync their behaviors with a loftier national interest.

V. The Rise of Siege Mentality

The most prominent instance during which the Chinese state actively regulated the human body and mobilized its people en masse to safeguard public health first came during the Korean War. In February 1952, a front-page *People's Daily* editorial broke the news that the

“American imperialists” had committed the “appalling crime” of waging germ warfare against northeastern China (particularly the Manchuria region). Although the reliability of this allegation continues to be disputed until today, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its Government Administration Council leapt into action and launched the sweeping Patriotic Health Campaign, which has never been discontinued since its inception. Soon, all levels of society were whipped into a frenzy, and people were told to maintain hyper-vigilance, massacre disease-carrying insects, clear the streets of garbage, and submit to vaccinations.

In many ways, the CCP’s preoccupation with speckless public health infrastructure was built upon the “Sick Man of Asia” narrative. But more importantly, the Korean War also marked a watershed moment where this narrative of weakness and self-empowerment had metamorphosed. Specifically, according to Chinese historian Wu Xiaoyi, who echoed CCP rhetoric in the 1950s, the US supposedly prophesied that China’s backward healthcare system would buckle under new waves of infectious diseases. As such, it set out upon a sinister biowarfare campaign seeking to cripple the Chinese state--and the frail Chinese body--once and for all. Here, one could pick up upon an emerging “siege mentality” permeating Chinese consciousness and sending nationalism into hyperdrive.

No longer were the Chinese people safeguarding health and hygiene to overcome certain self-given deficiencies, to strive towards self-empowerment, or to emulate the glitzy modernity of Western societies; rather, the provision of public health became a powerful weapon that counteracts an external, existential threat--the “American imperialists,” who would supposedly stop at nothing to impose the “Sick Man” epithet upon their Easter counterparts. This heavily modified narrative--that the “Sick Man” was Western defamation as opposed to honest

self-criticism--lays the foundation for an exploration of the decidedly anti-western rhetoric that dominates Chinese public discourse today.

1) The "Micro-Parasitic" Dimension of Chinese Siege Mentality

Even before the novel coronavirus leapt onto its first human host in Wuhan, siege mentality mixed with ultranationalism was already a prominent feature of the Chinese discursive landscape (largely thanks to the rising geopolitical tensions across the Pacific). Grievances about how the US was channeling its old imperialist self, attempting to stifle Chinese economic growth, and meddling in China's domestic affairs were abound. However, the pandemic and its ripple effects across the world stage re-legitimized fears surrounding American sabotage of Chinese public health, which had laid dormant after the Korean War ceasefire. In other words, as COVID-19 cases ballooned, so did the number of people who believed that the US was not only hostile to the Chinese state, but it was also gearing up for an assault upon the Chinese body.

While characterizing the geopolitical dynamic between the East and the West, Chinese historian Hu Yi invokes William McNeill's theory that ruling powers (in this case the imperialist West) often weaken its subjects (in this case the semicolonial China) via macro- and micro-parasitic exploitation. The former often refers to conquest, unbalanced markets, encroachment upon national sovereignty, and the like. Micro-parasites, on the other hand, points to Western pathogens that devastate colonial populations, as well as labels like "the Sick Man of Asia" or "Yellow Peril" used to denigrate the Eastern body. Additionally, Hu also claims that when ruling powers undergo a "crisis in their survival", they may turn to micro-parasites as a "last resort." Although Hu's arguments hardly maintain historical objectivity, the categorization of macro- and micro-parasites nevertheless provides a helpful lens into contemporary Chinese discourse.

Specifically, the outbreak gave credence to Chinese paranoia that American hostilities have finally ventured from the macro-parasitic to the micro-parasitic realm. The revival of this "biological" dimension in Chinese siege mentality is significant if we take into account the centrality of health and hygiene in the nation's historical consciousness.

As Hu implied, Chinese imagination of a micro-parasitic attack can be further segmented into two parts. First, public discourse in China proclaims that the US seeks to denigrate the Chinese body by reviving racist metaphors. This allegation is best exemplified by the *WSJ*'s "Sick Man of Asia" controversy. Additionally, social media platforms like Weibo have cooked up a powerful narrative that the US does not shy away from biological warfare against its rivals. This claim can be better understood in the context of prominent conspiracy theories that label COVID-19 as a byproduct of American military labs. Each of these two cases will now be parsed and explored in detail.

VI. Case Study I: *WSJ* and the "Sick Man of Asia" controversy

1) "Deep Culture"

Perhaps the greatest challenge in exploring how the "Sick Man" narrative makes its mark on Chinese public discourse is the fact that this enduring strand of historical memory represents what historian Wang Zheng refers to as "deep culture." In other words, the image of Chinese deficiency does not usually belong in ubiquitous expressions that are casually thrown around in new media or everyday conversations; rather, it undergirds "unconscious frameworks of meaning, values, norms, and hidden assumptions that we use to interpret our experiences." As such, a typical sweep of Chinese public discourse would be hard-pressed to excavate this segment of "deep culture" and evaluate its influence on modern Chinese worldviews.

A solution to this challenge would be to zero in on a particular (possibly explosive) event that concentrates scattered discussions of "deep culture" and brings internalized historical memories to the foreground. In this sense, the *Wall Street Journal* controversy in February 2020 (to be explored in detail below) provides an ideal lens to investigate not only how the "Sick Man" epithet is interpreted today, but also how these interpretations evolved during the tumultuous opening stages of the pandemic.

2. Chronology of the *WSJ* Incident

On February 3, 2020, immediately following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Professor Walter Russell Mead published an article in the Wall Street Journal entitled "China is the Real Sick Man of Asia." The opinion piece--and particularly its sensationalist headline--promptly stirred up a firestorm all across Chinese social and state media. Ironically, the article's contents, which offered tentative (and rather pessimistic) prognoses on China's supposedly fragile economic bubble, paled in comparison to other journalistic takedowns of the CCP. But for the outraged Chinese populace, the substantive sections of the article were immaterial and did not vindicate its "racist" title laden with "imperialist" undertones.

Indignant netizens were the first to air their grievances. Indeed, by mid-February, the hashtag "WSJ humiliates China" (#华尔街日报辱华) was trending on Weibo and had racked up tens of millions of views. In a lengthy post, one verified user explained the painful connotations of the "Sick Man" label and urged his followers to "persist and fight on, and make [the US] regret their rhetoric today!"

The central government quickly followed suit. On February 19, the raucous clamors in Chinese public discourse escalated into a high-profile political confrontation when the CCP expelled three *WSJ* reporters, a maneuver that Secretary Pompeo deemed a manifestation of

China's continuous, relentless crackdown on free speech. However, the government did not stop there. Five days later, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) demanded an apology from the *WSJ* and proclaimed that China would not be a "silent lamb awaiting slaughter" in the face of American insults.

Major state-run media outlets also took this time to express their fiery nationalism. "We will not allow racists to spew falsehoods," the *People's Daily* thundered on February 26. "Racism and humiliation will face retribution." A *People's Daily* article published the following day echoed these sentiments and lambasted the *WSJ* for "fanning the flames of racism" while also "proliferating rhetoric that humiliates China." As such, the article proclaimed, the *WSJ*'s journalism is "cruel, twisted, and conceited, trampling upon the bottom line of having any humanity."

3. Decoding the "Sick Man of Asia"

As discussed in the previous section, the "Sick Man of Asia" is a "chosen trauma" intended to cement the people's allegiance to a nationalist modernization project. Moreover, the narratives surrounding this label are highly malleable. In the writings of Liang, Yan, Chen, and their contemporaries, the image of the "Sick Man" was a rallying cry for Chinese society to embrace the ideals of modernity. However, during the mid-20th century, a new interpretation of the "Sick Man" label emerged and was actively propagated by the nascent CCP. This narrative, undergirded by a sort of siege mentality, proclaims that the imperialist West actively seeks to mold China into the "Sick Man of Asia" and perpetuate Chinese weakness via macro- and micro-parasitic exploitation. In this sense, the "Sick Man" image in contemporary Chinese discourse has taken on dual meanings that are locked in a dialectic. One narrative speaks of

self-empowerment and emulating Western modernity, whereas another focuses on a perennial aggressor-victim struggle and the importance of opposing Western imperialism.

In fact, historian Jui-sung Yang explored this exact duality in his monograph "From Discourses of Weakness to Discourses of Empowerment: The Topos of the 'Sick Man of Asia' in Modern China." For Yang, this omnipresent label, formerly an "epithet that was supposed to encourage self-criticism and self-reproach among the Chinese people," has been fashioned into "a vision of the Orient … held by China's 'Other'..." As such, the enduring narrative of Chinese deficiency possesses a "peculiar and complex dual nature," and it reflects "two contradicting, complex emotions of the Chinese people regarding [the West]."

4. Enter the *WSJ* article

This was the intricate ethnographic landscape which the *WSJ* article happened to intrude upon. The fact that a Western media powerhouse evoked the "Sick Man" label and slapped it on top of an opinion piece about China upset the duality of this traumatic narrative. In other words, the *WSJ* controversy seemingly gave ironclad proof to the anti-Western connotations of the "Sick Man of Asia"--namely, that the offsprings of bygone imperialist powers continue to subjugate China and scrutinize the Chinese with a racist, Orientalist gaze.

At this point, it is crucial to note that when we isolate the *WSJ* incident from its broader socio-political context, the controversy becomes a rather inconsequential side note in the vast and complex landscape of Chinese anti-Western discourse. In other words, the metamorphosis of the "Sick Man" narrative cannot be solely attributed to the *WSJ* piece. In fact, the rise of a siege mentality rooted in biology is primarily driven by older and more powerful undercurrents--namely, insecurities carried over from the late-Qing era, revived by the pressure of global scrutiny during the onset of the pandemic. This means that responses to the *WSJ* article

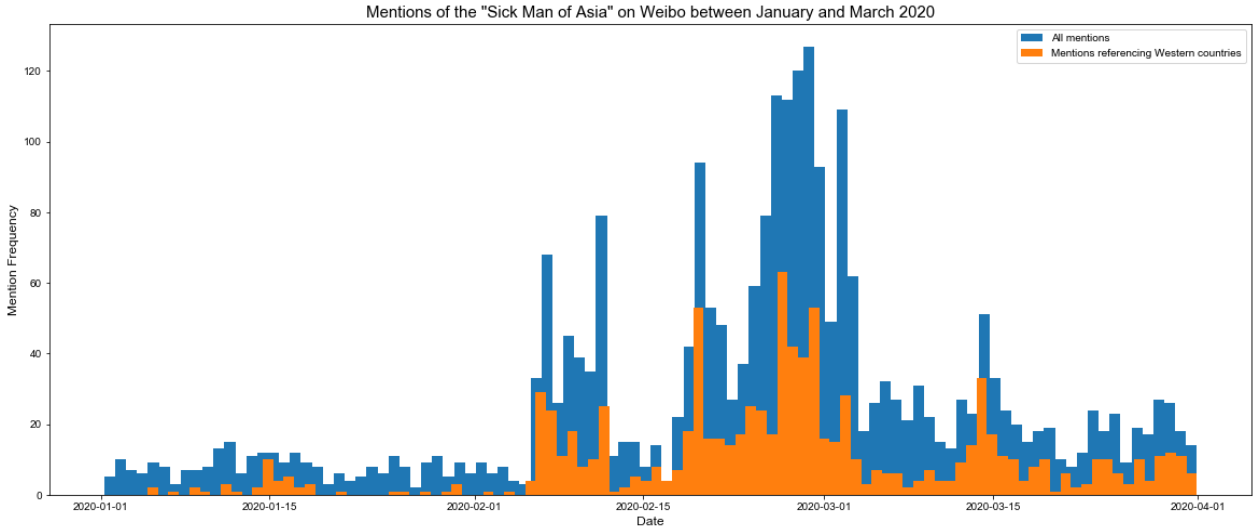
are just an “observable spectrum” of a much vaster set of historical memories tucked into the depths of Chinese national consciousness.

5. The Importance of Quantitative Research

In the weeks following the publication of Professor Mead’s article, Weibo posts pertaining to this incident likely climbed to the tens of thousands (as a matter of fact, the Weibo hashtag “revoke the permits of three Beijing WSJ reporters” had been used by nearly 10,000 posts). The sheer volume of data presented makes a comprehensive qualitative exploration nearly impossible. On the other hand, quantitative methods more compatible with big data, driven by natural language processing (NLP) techniques, prove much more attractive.

6. Data Collection

For this case study, all “original” (原创) posts containing the words “Sick Man of Asia” (东亚病夫) from January 1, 2020 to March 31, 2020 were scraped from Weibo. Figure 1 maps the mention frequency of all posts in this dataset, as well as those referencing the US, Europe, or the West, as two overlapping time series.



Evidently, both time series demonstrate “bursty” features almost immediately following the publication of the *WSJ* article, and mention frequencies of the “Sick Man” trope plateau between late February and early March. Moreover, although mentions of the West in conjunction with “Sick Man of Asia" were sparse throughout January 2020 (with an exception around mid-January), they become a much heftier slice of the whole corpus of data after February 3. This small observation constitutes some indication that the “Sick Man” image’s outward-oriented, anti-Western connotations had exploded in the foreground, in sync with China’s growing public health insecurities during the nascent stages of the pandemic. Nevertheless, because these time series pay no attention to the texts of the Weibo posts, their descriptive power is naturally limited. To remedy the shortcomings of this temporal analysis, this paper makes use of an NLP-driven technique--namely, Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modeling--to demonstrate the profound shifts in the “Sick Man of Asia” narrative.

7. Topic Modeling

LDA is a generative statistical model designed to detect “latent themes” in a body of “documents” (or in this case study, Weibo posts). The model assumes that each document is composed of a small set of “topics,” whereas each topic is a distribution of words found in all the documents. The primary rationale for implementing LDA topic modeling, as opposed to keyword extraction (such as a tf-idf algorithm), is rooted in the fact that the former considers words in context or in relation to each other, thanks to its bag-of-words (BoW) approach to text vectorization. In this sense, a topic model makes it easier to pick up on more complex narratives (rather than solely keywords) undergirding a corpus of documents.

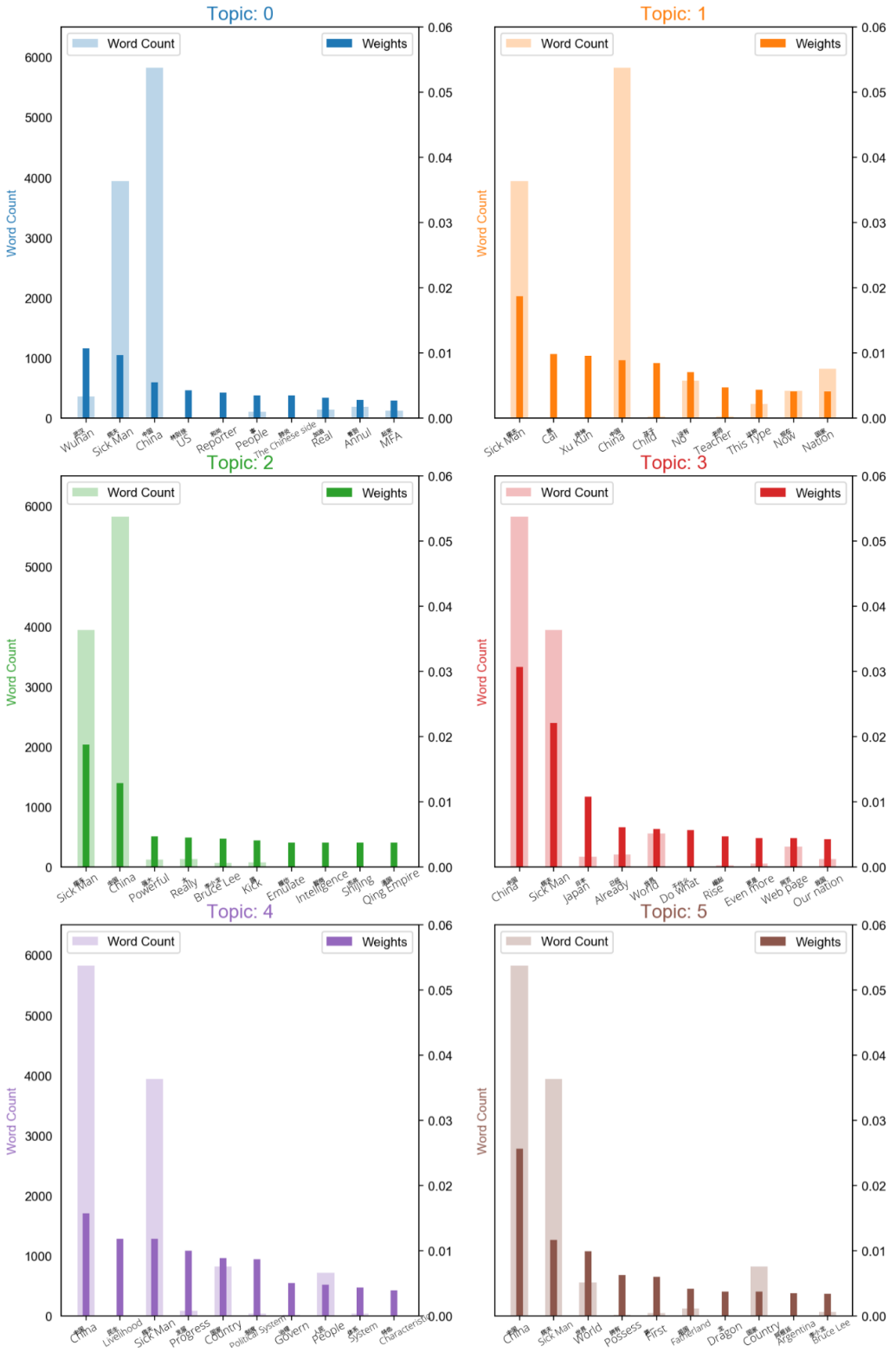
Data preprocessing for the topic model constitutes the following steps. First, all the documents were tokenized (or segmented into individual words and phrases) with Jieba after the

removal of all stopwords, or ubiquitous words including prepositions and conjunctions. Subsequently, relevant collocations (words that co-occur at a higher-than-expected frequency) were detected and taken into account. Overly common words or phrases that passed through the stopwords filter were then removed based on a tf-idf weighting scheme. Finally, the entire corpus of text was vectorized as a BoW model.

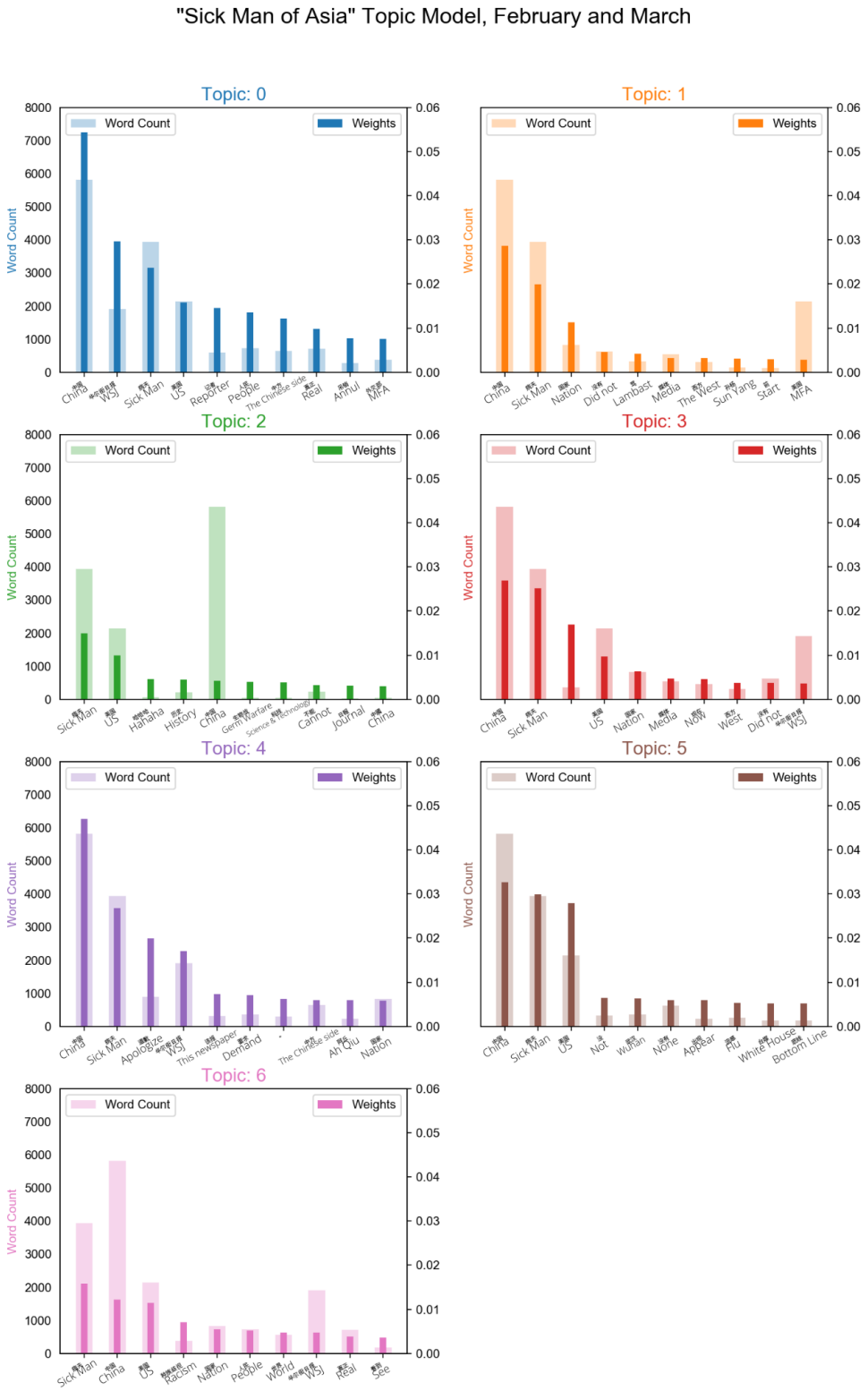
With regards to the LDA model itself, the hyperparameters were set to their default values, and the algorithm would iterate over the entire body of text 20 times during the training process. Importantly, to determine the optimal number of topics (k) for the model, the coherence scores as well as the complete models for $k \in \{1, 10\}$ were obtained and compared, as the effectiveness of the model for the given datasets generally tapered off when k exceeded 10. It was determined that $k = 6$ provided the most sensible topics for the January Weibo posts, whereas $k = 7$ yielded the optimal model for the February and March dataset.

The LDA topic model for the January data is summarized in Figure 2 (note that the topic numbering starts from 0):

"Sick Man of Asia" Topic Model, January



And the model for the February and March data is laid out in Figure 3:



The two models offer further evidence that early February was an inflection point in Chinese public discourse surrounding the "Sick Man of Asia" label.

Figure 1 features a heavy domestic focus. For example, topics 3 to 5 in the January model all include terms that taut China's miraculous "rise" (崛起) or "progress" (发展), as well as its political and technological superiority, which are made salient by words such as "[political] system" (制度), "governance" (治理), and "number one" (第一). One Weibo post, particularly representative of the word distribution in topic 5, boasts that "the steady march forward of Chinese livelihoods is emblematic of the advantages of China's political system and governance … [and] the progress in public health and hygiene will soon relegate the "Sick Man of Asia" label to the chapters of history." Here, one can argue that the "Sick Man" label has been leveraged as a "barometer of progress" that juxtaposes the relative strength of modern China with the narrative of deficiency and weakness concocted by thinkers from the "Century of Humiliation." As such, Weibo posts featuring topics 3 to 5 are able to prop up a rosy picture of China's near-miraculous rejuvenation from its traumatic, semicolonial past.

Meanwhile, Figure 1's topic 2 reference Bruce Lee (李小龙), who is fondly remembered for putting a knee through a "Sick Man of Asia" plaque and "kicking" (踢) it away in an iconic movie sequence. Many Weibo posts who mention Bruce Lee juxtapose his martial arts prowess with the supposedly embarrassing behavior of some contemporary figure (for example, the idol Cai Xukun, who landed himself in hot water in January and appears in topic 1). As such, the traumatic connotations surrounding the "Sick Man" label could also be leveraged as a sort of "naming and shaming" mechanism, intended to expose those who supposedly turn their backs to the mission of self-empowerment mandated by the late-Qing thinkers.

Additionally, the January model's topic 0 is dominated by terms such as "pneumonia" (肺炎), "Wuhan" (武汉), and *fight on* (加油). "This majestic realm [China] is abound with capable healers," several of the posts that heavily feature topic 0 thundered in unison. "When has there ever been a 'Sick Man' in China?" The eager denial of the "Sick Man" label is often followed by an exclamation that encourages Wuhan to "fight on." However, it becomes evident from the topic model that few of these posts put the West under the spotlight and participate in a savage blame game driven by siege mentality. Of course, this was to change in the coming month.

Indeed, by the time February rolled around, grievances riled up by the "Sick Man" epithet had begun to turn outward. While none of the January topics mention the US, Europe or any Western entity, "the US" (美国) is featured in almost every topic in February and March, while "the West" (西方) appears in topics 1 and 3.

Of particular interest is topic 1, which speaks of "Western media" (西方媒体) "lambasting" or "denigrating" (骂) China. According to a Weibo post from *Beijing Weekly*: "Foreign media's attack, denigration, abuse, and slander against China has never ceased to dominate the Internet, and the rhetoric speaking of Chinese decline has been a timeless constant." Topic 6 airs grievances along similar lines, as it encompasses the texts pointing fingers at American media for putting out content colored with "racist" (种族歧视) undertones.

Interestingly, topic 2 demonstrates that outrage at American appropriation of the "Sick Man" label had also been used to prop up biowarfare conspiracy theories. "Everyone has the right to expose and strike back against American media discrimination towards the 'Sick Man of Asia,' [American] double standards when it comes to information transparency, and the US's dismal record in waging biological warfare," several Weibo posts proclaimed in unison. "This pandemic reminds us of the imperative to place biological security as a higher strategic priority."

Here, it becomes increasingly evident that a new brand of siege mentality is coalescing around China's lingering self-doubt in the realms of public health and hygiene. Thus, symbolic denigration epitomized by the "Sick Man" trope, along with emerging suspicions of American biowarfare, have been roped into a broader narrative that calls for national vigilance in the face of the West's alleged "micro-parasitic" exploitation.

In fact, compared to the indignant reactions to Professor Mead's *WSJ* article, accusations that American military labs leaked the coronavirus to Wuhan constitute a much more prominent segment of China's biological siege mentality during the pandemic. The following case study thus centers around China's revisionist narrative on COVID-19's origins--touted by netizens, state media, and the central government alike.

VII. Case Study II: Allegations of American biowarfare/lab leak

1) Untangling the Conspiratorial Narrative

Conspiracy theories about the novel coronavirus's American origins began to circulate in early January. But none gained much traction, and they remained fringe narratives that dotted the new media landscape.

However, in late February, a new theory began to snowball and eventually took Chinese social media by storm. In fact, it became so dominant that both the central government and mainstream media outlets picked it up as a useful talking point.

The genesis of this popular theory can be traced back to Chinese social media scrutiny of the Fort Detrick military lab in Frederick, Maryland, which temporarily shut down in July 2020. Supposedly, at around the same time, a mysterious "vaping" illness (which is respiratory in nature) had begun to proliferate in the same area. By mid-August, it had allegedly infected a

hundred people, and by late September, the disease had racked up more than eight hundred cases in 46 states.

Then, in October, an American delegation set foot in Wuhan for the Seventh Military World Games, whose venues were incidentally not far from the seafood markets where the virus was initially thought to have originated. Finally, the novel coronavirus broke out in December and soon ran amok across the globe.

Eager conspiracy theorists lurking on Chinese social media decided to put these disjointed events side-by-side, stitching them together into a seemingly compelling, sensationalist case for the pandemic's covered-up origins in American military labs.

Two of the first Weibo posts laying out this theory that truly gained traction within Chinese cyberspace (i.e. garnering more than 5000 "retweets") were published on February 25 and 28. Subsequently, the narrative of COVID-19's American military lab leak origins began to turn mainstream. On March 12, 2020, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) spokesperson Zhao Lijian seemingly threw his weight behind the theory. "It might be US Army [sic] who brought the epidemic to Wuhan," he thundered on Twitter. "Be transparent! Make public your data! US [sic] owe us an explanation!"

Twelve days later, a major state-run media outlet picked up the story. "Trump is covering up a drastically worsening health crisis," the title of a *People's Daily* article proclaimed. "This is the most scandalous news in American history!" The piece then went on to speculate about the "dubious" origins of the virus and hinted at American culpability by citing Fort Detrick's "mysterious" closure.

On May 9, MFA spokesperson Hua Chunying further lent credence to the theory when she publicly demanded the US to "open Fort Detrick" during a press conference. By this point,

the narrative that COVID-19 originated in an American lab could no longer be dismissed as a fringe theory, as it had seeped into and anchored itself in all three major domains of Chinese public discourse--new media, mainstream media, and rhetoric emanating from the central government.

As such, when President Biden decided to renew the scrutiny around the Wuhan Institute of Virology and its links with COVID-19, the American lab leak narrative became China's most effective--and most virulent--rhetorical riposte. After rejecting the new phase of a WHO probe just recently, the MFA doubled down on its calls for the US to open up Fort Detrick. Similarly, mentions of this fairly obscure American lab exploded across new media. In fact, the hashtag "American Fort Detrick biological lab" (#美国德特里克堡生物实验室) alone had garnered around 1.5 billion views to date. In many ways, the possibility of an American lab leak has become an ultranationalist rallying cry--a powerful alibi that China is not the "Sick Man of Asia" infecting the rest of the world, as well as a compelling case that the West's incessant micro-parasitic aggression has finally reached its heyday.

2) The Historical Dimension of Conspiracy

This wildly popular conspiracy theory constitutes a useful case study because it is propped up by heavy historical undercurrents. Indeed, buzzwords such as "Fort Detrick" and "American bioweapons" are shrouded in emotionally-charged historical memories, which is possibly a contributing factor to this narrative's incredible contagiousness.

The most important piece of history that this theory draws from is the traumatic experience of Japanese invasion during WWII--perhaps the final and most violent episode in the "Century of Humiliation." In fact, the war in Chinese memories serves as a powerful justification for the dichotomy of macro- and micro-parasitic exploitation, as laid out by McNeill and Hu.

Particularly, the micro-parasitic dimension of the war centers around a covert military division of the Imperial Japanese army that specialized in biological and chemical warfare R&D--Unit 731. Allegedly, this "sinister" branch of the Japanese forces conducted bone-chilling experiments on live human subjects (often Chinese and Korean victims) and purposefully unleashed epidemics that ravaged unoccupied Chinese territories. As such, Unit 731 occupies a particularly dark corner of Chinese historical consciousness, and it very likely epitomizes the painful "Century of Humiliation" motif where some virile imperialist power assaults and mutilates the frail Chinese body.

During the pandemic, the specter of Unit 731 has become an emotionally-charged motif permeating pockets of Chinese public discourse. However, much of the anti-Japanese sentiment associated with this buzzword has been transferred onto the US. Chinese netizens are particularly obsessed with the fact that in the aftermath of WWII, the US allegedly struck an under-the-table deal with Unit 731, acquitting the group of their heinous war crimes in exchange for their biowarfare capabilities and expertise--a large part of which were subsequently transferred to Fort Detrick. Then, according to Chinese historical memory, the US emulated Japan and began pummeling Manchuria with disease-infested insects in 1951, prompting the CCP to kickstart the ambitious Patriotic Health Campaign.

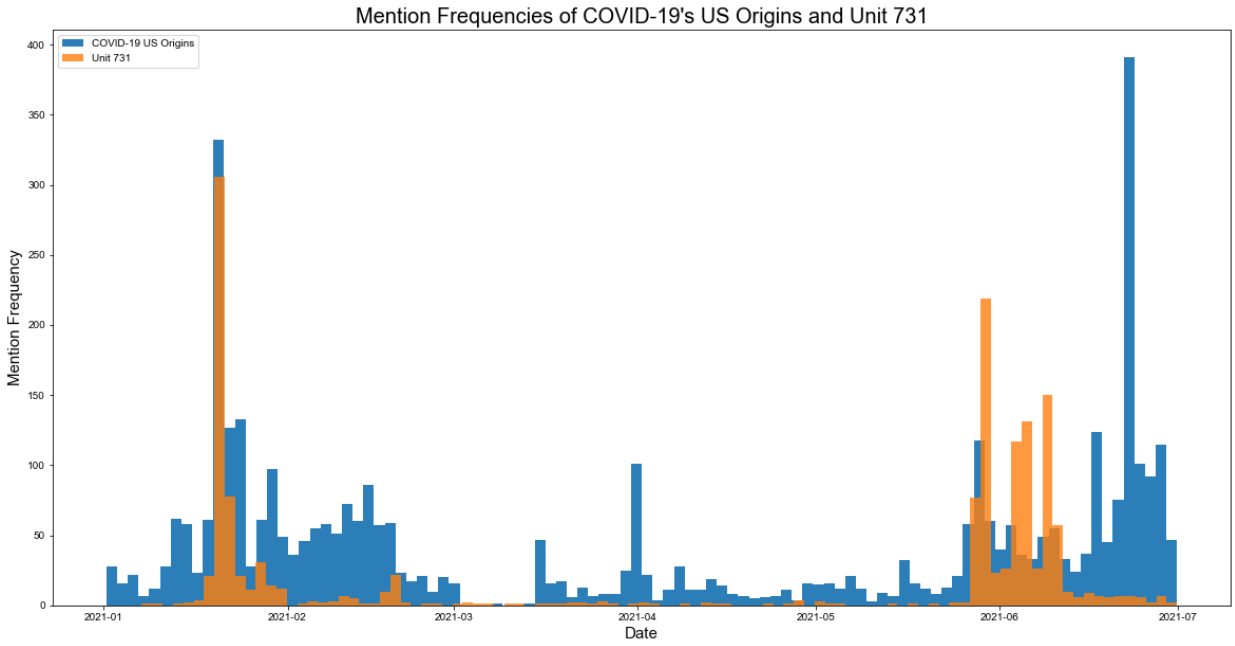
Although it is hard to claim that COVID-19 is an intentional bioweapon, popular conspiracy theories can nevertheless color the pandemic with historical trauma. In this sense, it becomes tempting for the Chinese populace to interpret the ongoing public health crisis through the lens of an anti-western siege mentality--specifically, the belief that COVID-19 is in one way or another linked to the tumultuous lineage of imperialist micro-parasitic aggressions. As a case in point, the Weibo hashtag "Unit 731 official was once a Fort Detrick consultant" (which is just

one among many similar viral hashtags) has periodically trended and garnered more than 220 million views.

3) Quantifying the Impact of Historical Memory

Once again, given the immense body of relevant social media content, this project seeks to explore the relationship between historical memory and COVID-19 conspiracies through NLP.

Weibo data from January 1, 2021 to June 31, 2021 were scraped based on the following keyword queries: 1) “COVID-19 origins US” (新冠溯源美国) and 2) “Unit 731, virus” (731部队病毒). Figure 4 maps two time series constructed based on these datasets.



The figure makes evident some obvious correlations between the two datasets. Particularly, one can observe that both sets of keywords experienced spikes in mention frequency in late January and after late May. The former can be explained by a fiery press conference on January 18, in which MFA spokesperson Hua Chunying renewed calls for the US to open Fort Detrick, striking back against Secretary Pompeo’s new “bombshell” evidence suggesting that the

Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) might be the source of the pandemic. Incidentally, two days later, RT China dropped a chilling documentary on Unit 731, which quickly garnered widespread attention on Weibo.

The bursts in both time series during late May can be primarily attributed to the US's renewed interest in the WIV, as well as President Biden's disclosure that he had tasked the intelligence community to delve deeper into the lab leak hypothesis.

Interestingly, the Unit 731 dataset and the COVID-19 US origin dataset have very little overlap (of course, Unit 731 is still frequently mentioned alongside Fort Detrick or American biowarfare). This is plausible, as the atrocities of a defunct Japanese army unit could hardly explain the novel coronavirus's ambiguous genealogy. Nevertheless, the time series demonstrate that at several key moments in the past year, both sets of buzzwords are closely intertwined. In this sense, even though historical memories could never serve as ironclad proof to indict the US, they could infuse discourse surrounding the West's biological aggressions, as well as the "suspicious" Fort Detrick, with a dark sentiment conducive to fear-mongering and sensationalization.

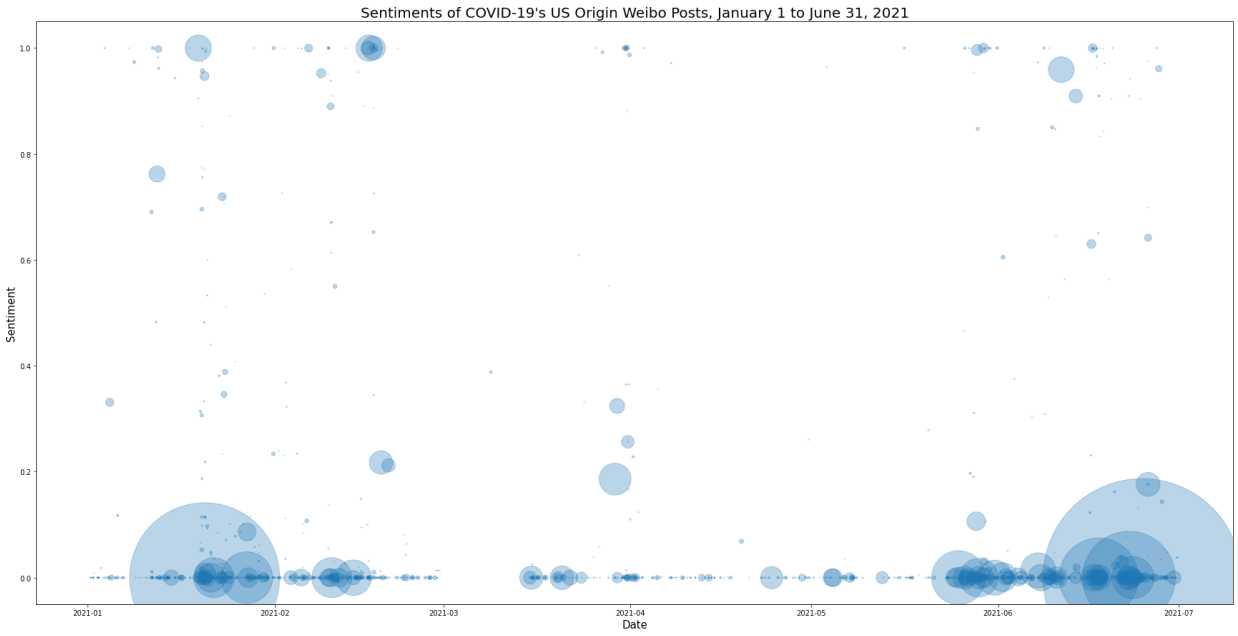
4) Sentiment Analysis

To evaluate this claim, my paper enlists sentiment analysis, a widely popular NLP method that helps determine whether a text skews towards positive or negative language. Specifically, I hypothesize that not only are there similarities between the mention frequencies of "COVID-19 US origins" and "Unit 731", but the historical memory-heavy dataset (i.e. Unit 731) comes with a significantly more negative average sentiment.

This project relies upon the open-source Python library SnowNLP to work with the vast corpus of Mandarin Weibo posts. SnowNLP's sentiment analysis is driven by a machine learning

algorithm based on a naïve Bayes probabilistic model, which classifies each piece of input text along a spectrum from 0, or most likely to carry negative sentiment, to 1, or most likely to carry positive sentiment. Moreover, training data were drawn from the SentiWeibo project and contained 407,058 positive-sentiment Weibo posts and 263,995 negative posts.

Figure 5 illustrates the sentiment of every post in the COVID-19 US origins dataset over time. Additionally, the size of each point is proportional to the number of likes the corresponding Weibo post received. One might note that the widely popular posts almost all cluster around two time frames that have already been explored--namely, late January, as well as late May and June. In addition, these more viral posts, like the vast majority of their counterparts, all settled at the bottom of the scatterplot and are overwhelmingly negative.



Meanwhile, figure 6 maps the distribution of sentiment scores for both datasets on a logarithmic scale.

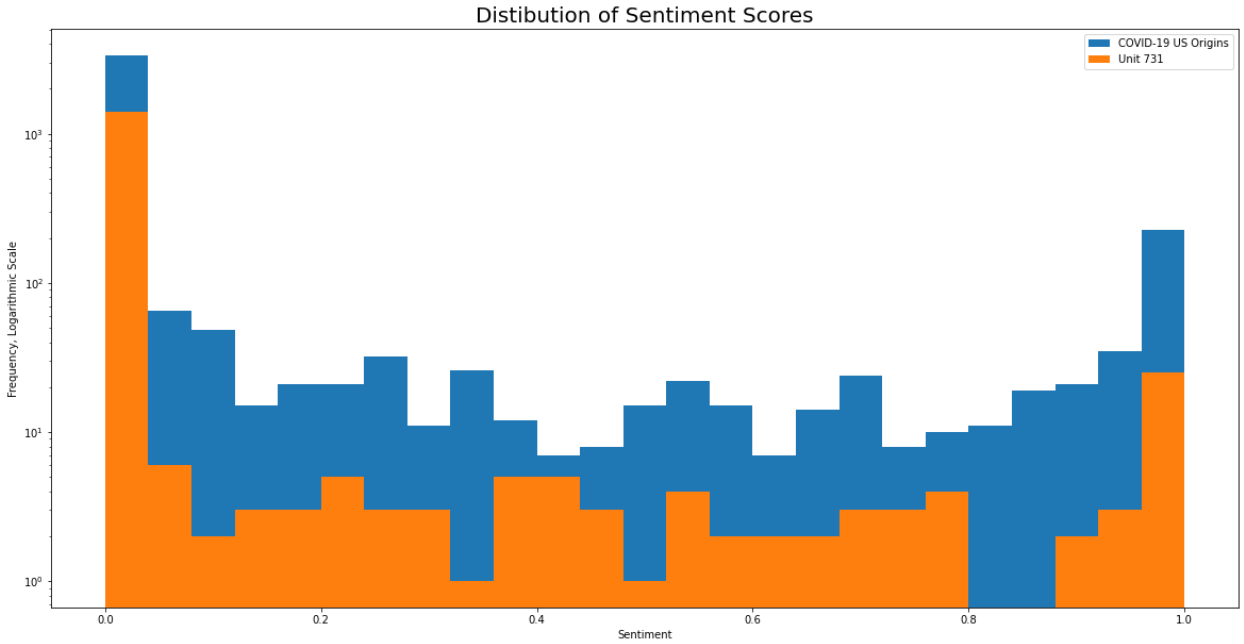
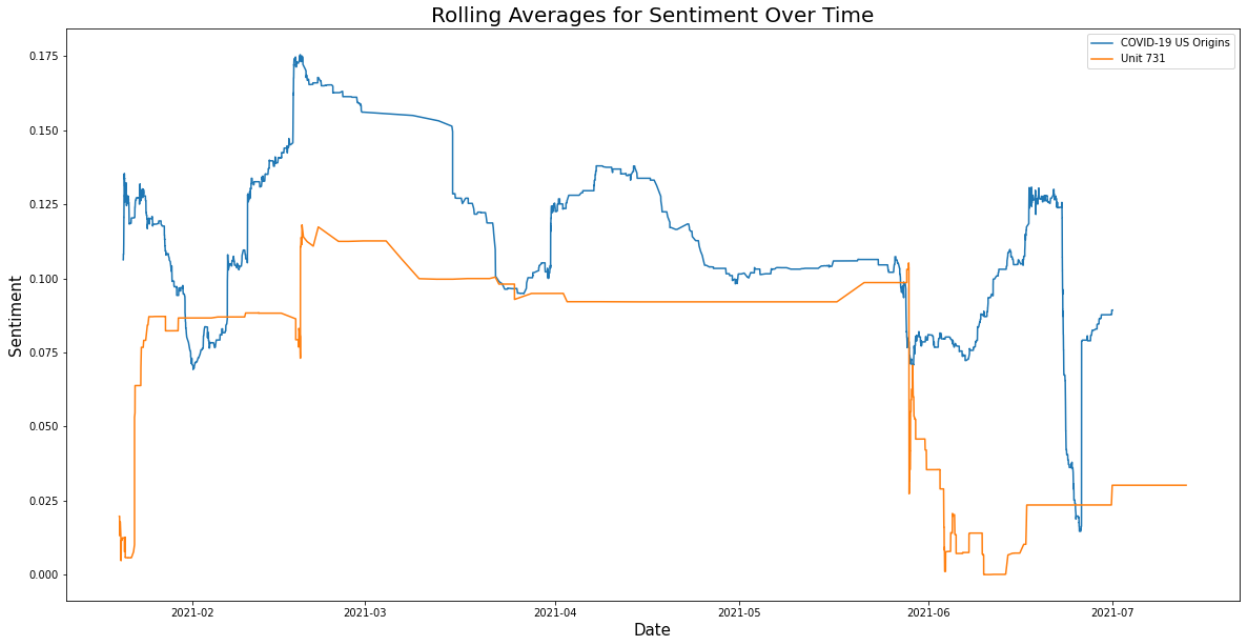


Figure 7 traces the rolling average of the sentiment scores for both datasets.



Two insights become salient through these visualizations. First, flares in mention frequencies of both sets of buzzwords are often accompanied by plummeting average sentiments. More importantly, based on both figures 6 and 7, it is clear that sentiment scores associated with

posts that evoke historical memory (i.e. Unit 731) are--on average--considerably lower than those of texts discussing the pandemic's American origins. Indeed, while the mean sentiment score for the COVID-19 origins dataset is 0.106, the corresponding value for the Unit 731 dataset is only 0.036. The magnitude of this gap can be further illustrated by a non-parametric statistical inference test.

Specifically, a one-tailed Mann-Whitney U test (most suitable for unpaired non-parametric data) is applied to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference in sentiment scores between the "COVID-19 US Origins" dataset and the "Unit 731" dataset. Moreover, considering the fact that the corpus of Weibo posts propping up COVID-19 conspiracy theories is much more extensive and criss-cross a variety of topics, all posts containing the term "Detrick" (德特里克) were extracted and made into a smaller dataset (the mean sentiment for the Fort Detrick dataset is approximately 0.057). The Mann-Whitney U was then applied once more on the "Unit 731" and "Detrick" datasets for an apter comparison. The differences in sentiment values were statistically significant on both occasions, and the results for the two inference tests are as follows.

Datasets	**U Statistic**	**p-value ($\alpha = 0.05$)**
"COVID-19 US Origins" vs. "Unit 731"	2156500.5	2.942×10^{-68}*
"Fort Detrick" vs. "Unit 731"	804901.5	4.487×10^{-9}*

Although the traumatic memory of WWII and Unit 731 is not necessarily "ironclad proof" for COVID-19 conspiracy theories circulating on Weibo, the time series as well as the inference tests make it clear that both strands of discourse are likely created and consumed alongside each other. In many ways, the dynamic between the datasets explain why misinformation and sensationalization are making waves in Chinese public discourse. Namely, while rather obscure terms such as "Fort Detrick" might not catch on easily with a broad audience, shared history has the potential to be much more resonant, and as such, buzzwords linked to the past are frequently modified by fiery expressions not found in posts that solely deal with the present. Indeed, according to several popular Weibo posts, Unit 731 is guilty of "crimes that mount up to the skies" (罪恶滔天) and reeks of "brutal inhumanity" (惨无人道). Thus, while relatively little is known about the US military's biological research today, the Chinese populace are still predisposed to scrutinize Fort Detrick with suspicion in light of its supposedly shady inheritance from Imperial Japan. In the words of a viral Weibo hashtag with over 190 million views, Fort Detrick and Unit 731 once shook hands on a "dirty deal."

VIII. Discussions and Implications

Based on these two case studies, the "biological" siege mentality that drives China's fiery anti-western discourse takes on a clearer shape. As discussed in previous sections, the *WSJ* controversy is a manifestation of enduring Chinese fears that the West, clinging on to its imperialist ambitions, is hell bent upon pinning the "Sick Man" epithet on their Eastern counterparts. On the other hand, conspiracy narratives centered around the mysterious Fort Detrick feed off of Chinese historical memory of being biowarfare victims.

Evidently, these sensationalized theories also serve as easy defense mechanisms against accusations that China botched the early pandemic response. By unshouldering all responsibility

and highlighting the culpability of a rival, the Chinese state and its people seek to evade being labeled as the vectors of microbial killers (i.e. the "Sick Man of Asia"), all the while safeguarding their image of hygienic modernity.

At the heart of China's fiery public discourse in the age of COVID-19 is its indelible sensitivity towards the emasculated--and colonized--Chinese body. This fragment of "deep culture," often unobservable at the surface, potentially magnifies Chinese virulence in mid-pandemic political rhetoric, which then manifests as disturbances rippling across the geopolitical landscape.

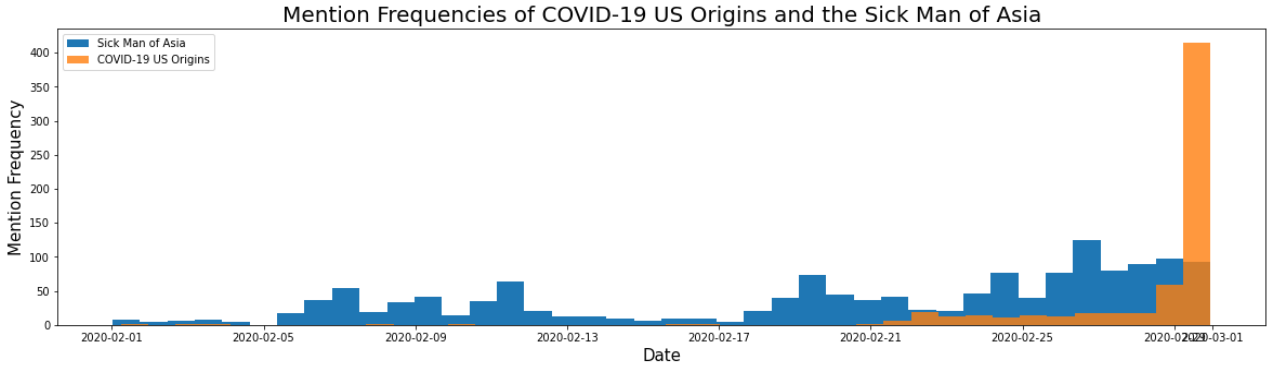
1) Chinese Nationalism as a "Dialogue"

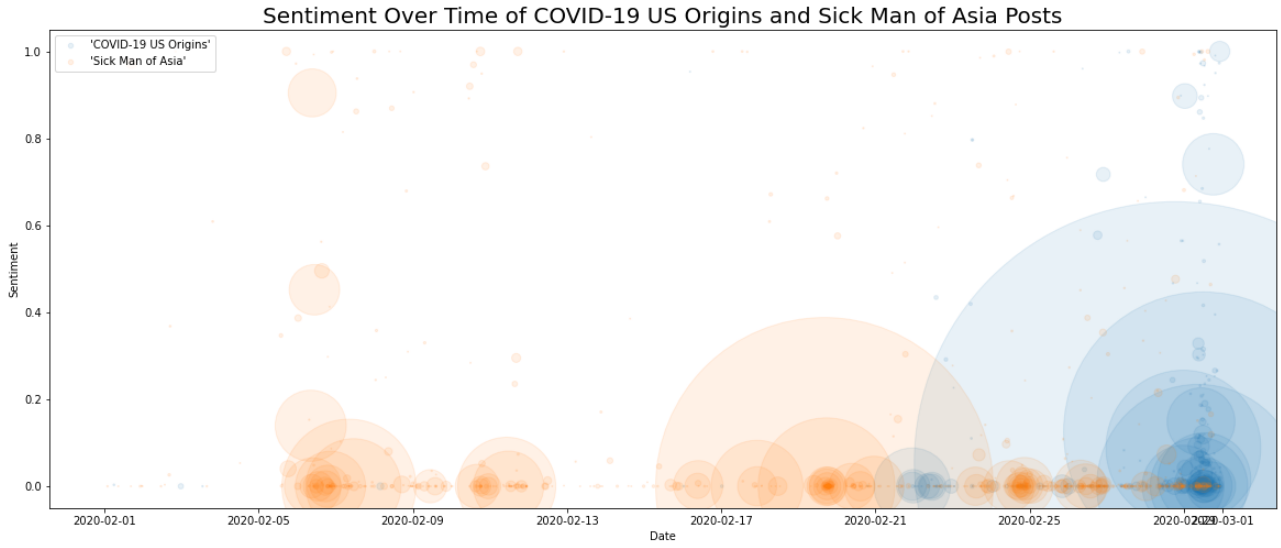
Beyond evidencing the surge in biological siege mentality, the case studies explored by this paper also corroborate the argument that Chinese nationalism--which has become an increasingly digital phenomenon--is by no means a top-down dictate.

Of course, China's bureaucratic juggernaut aggressively censors content that it deems unfavorable in cyberspace, all the while flooding social media with nationalistic rhetoric. In fact, CCP manipulation of public opinion is so prevalent that the "army" of online bloggers who are paid to do the government's bidding have been humorously nicknamed *wumao* (or "fifty cents", the approximate compensation for each pro-CCP post). The government's omnipresence in cyberspace makes it particularly difficult to distinguish between narratives that organically emerge from the masses and ideologies force-fed by the top. However, with regard to the COVID-19 origins case study in particular, the sequence of events that proliferated these conspiracy theories give fairly strong indication as to who "masterminded" this social media phenomenon--and it likely was not central authorities.

Indeed, on February 9, 2020, authorities in Inner Mongolia arrested a young influencer for allegedly misleading the public after he posted a popular Kuaishou clip claiming that the virus is an American bioweapon. The incident briefly trended and elicited some discontent murmurs across the more patriotic segments of social media (according to one user, the "overly severe penalties" by Inner Mongolian authorities "is suspected of being ill-advised and an abuse of power," which "damages the credibility of the government during these extraordinary times"). Two weeks later, however, conspiracy theories along a similar vein began gaining serious traction on Weibo (as well as WeChat). On March 12, MFA spokesperson Zhao Lijian tweeted his suspicions that the coronavirus may have been brought to Wuhan by the US army. Within just a few days, similar rhetoric began appearing in state-run news media, and in early May, Hua Chunying leveraged the conspiracy in an MFA press conference (the popularization of the COVID-19 origins narrative is laid out in detail in previous sections). By late July of 2021, the government, along with wide swaths of the Chinese populace, have thrown their full weight behind what was once a burgeoning fringe narrative.

One potential takeaway from the progression of events outlined above is that late February of 2020 marked an "inflection point" in Chinese perceptions of the West, at least with regards to the pandemic (figures 8 and 9 evidence the bursts in Weibo posts pertaining to both case studies in late-February). Indeed, while a conspiracy theory on the virus's American origins warranted a widely-publicized arrest in early-to-mid February, a narrative propping up similar claims was cited by a government official in early March and soon strutted into mainstream discourse. Incidentally, this shift in government posture coincided with the most dramatic burst in criticisms trained upon the *WSJ* (as per Figure 1), even when the controversial article was published as early as February 3.





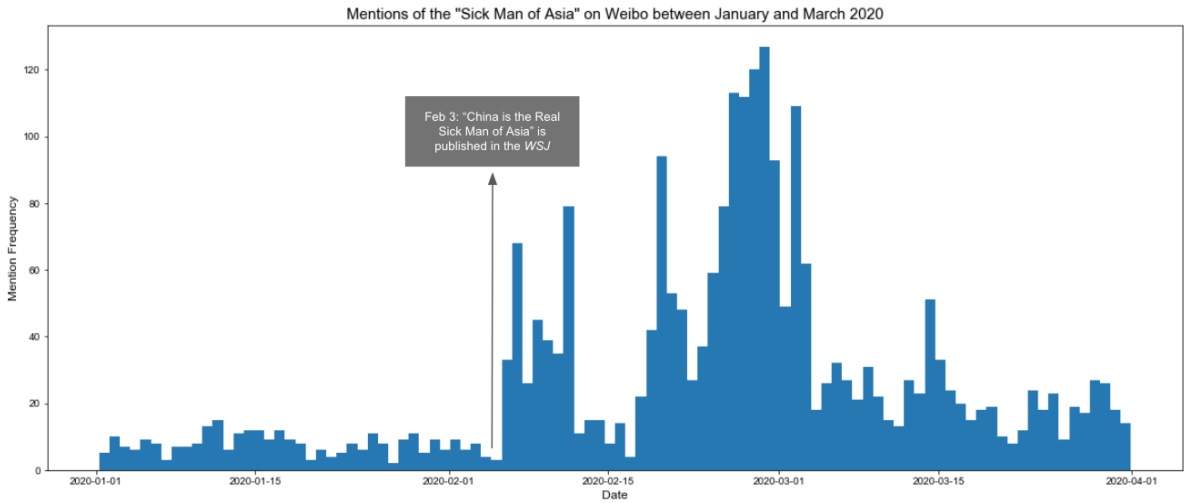
The "convergence" of key moments from this paper's case studies may be a coincidence. Alternatively, this apparent "inflection point" might be explained by the sharp drop in domestic COVID-19 cases (along with the rapid proliferation of the pandemic abroad) at around the same time. This epidemiological development may have scattered the public spotlight on Wuhan and channeled the nation's focus outwards.

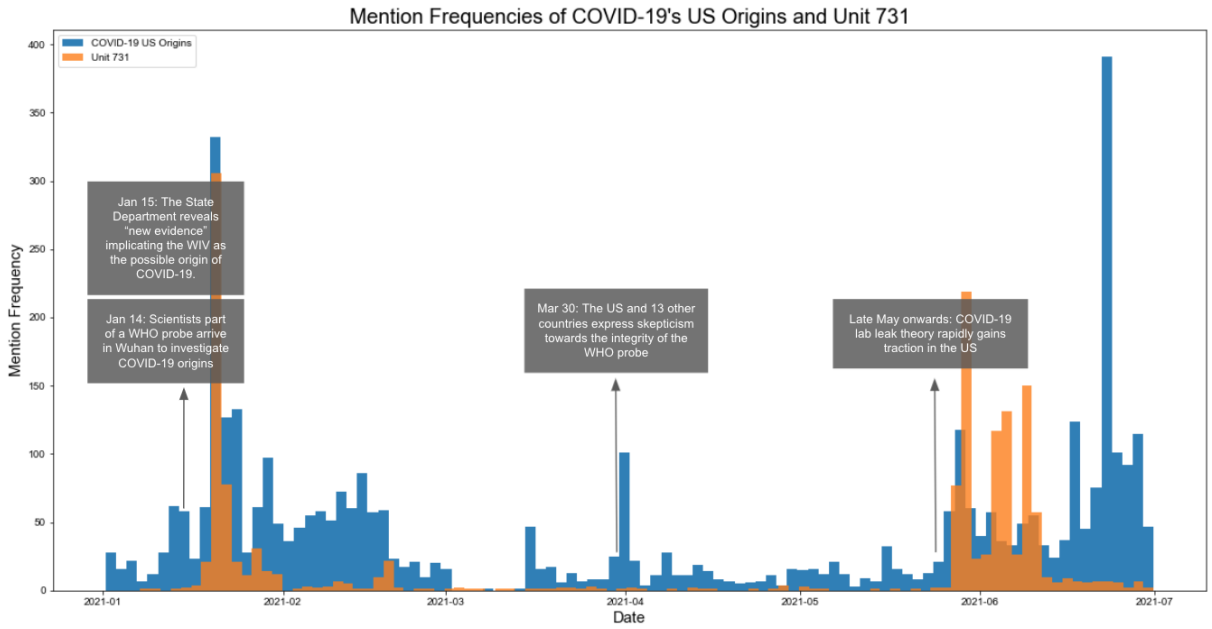
Whatever the case, one fact remains quite clear. Specifically, the late-February shift in the government's stance regarding COVID-19 origins is at least partly inspired (or legitimized) by voices emanating from the bottom. In turn, the government's tacit "endorsement" turned this conspiracy theory mainstream, fueling even louder anti-western clamors from the Chinese populace as March rolled around.

In this sense, modern Chinese ultranationalism may be the product of a "dialogue" between run-of-the-mill netizens, the technocratic governing body, and profit-oriented social media giants putting hyperbolized narratives into circulation. Florian Schneider corroborates this argument in *Chinese Digital Nationalism*. "It would be a mistake to conclude that nationalism is simply a form of 'top-down' indoctrination…" he wrote. "National histories and patriotic sentiments are not passively consumed but are actively constructed in a creative interplay between different stakeholders.

2) Tit-for-Tat Patterns of Chinese Anti-Western Discourse

Another crucial piece of insight that becomes salient through the two case studies is the "reactive" nature of Chinese public discourse. In other words, the CCP and ordinary social media users most often concoct sensational, anti-western narratives as a retaliatory response to perceived threats from abroad. Figures 10 and 11, which note key "inflection points" in the context of the time series used in both case studies, illustrate this tit-for-tat pattern of anti-western rhetoric quite well.





In fact, nearly all the "bursty" features in the figures above can be explained by some exogenous event--whether it is purported "new evidence" from Mike Pompeo that casts the WIV as a guilty party, or a surge in the lab leak theory's popularity in the US. Given the centrality of siege mentality in Chinese national consciousness, the reactive tendencies that characterize public discourse isn't at all surprising. Indeed, entrenched insecurities and paranoia typically lay dormant without an external "stimulus." On the other hand, when there is a perceived provocation, Chinese fears of an imperialist biological assault seem legitimized and leap into the foreground, powering renewed waves of virulent rhetoric sported by citizens and government alike.

China's hawkish diplomatic posture, bolstered by hypernationalist sentiments flooding popular media, may then be interpreted by its rivals as unwarranted hostility. As a case in point, two weeks after the CCP's expulsion of *WSJ* journalists following the "Sick Man of Asia" flashpoint, Washington cut its own quota of Chinese nationals working for state-run media by nearly half. In mid-March, the MFA escalated this stand-off once more, ordering journalists from

three major US newspapers (*New York Times, Washington Post,* and *Wall Street Journal*) to return their media passes, effectively expelling them from the country.

Thus begins a vicious cycle of mistrust and hawkish posturing. Moreover, what is particularly interesting (and somewhat troubling) about this diplomatic tug-of-war is the fact that nearly all levels of Chinese society are razor-focused on the ebb and flow of American politics (for example, the hashtag "American general election," or #美国大选, has garnered more than 14 billion views). Indeed, as the two case studies demonstrate, any rhetoric or action in the US that is potentially unfavorable to China could immediately snowball on platforms like Weibo. Ultranationalist netizens may then parade these developments as fresh evidence for imperialist aggressions, which in turn sends siege mentality into hyperdrive. The US, on the other hand, does not quite harbor reciprocal obsessions with Chinese public discourse. As a result, much of the hawkish clamors in Chinese cyberspace that legitimize the CCP's "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy (e.x. the COVID-19 US origins conspiracy theory) goes unacknowledged or underreported across the Pacific.

3) The Shadows of the Past in Contemporary Foreign Policy

This troubling gap in understanding--coupled with rising geopolitical tensions during the pandemic--means that an in-depth understanding of Chinese history is more important than ever. Moreover, what is at stake here is not only the study of cold, hard historical facts, but also how the past can be reshaped, appropriated, or even weaponized in contemporary political discourse.

Granted, historical memory is far from the only explanatory variable for China's hawkish rhetoric (and diplomacy) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Factors that aggravate anti-western sentiments abound. For example, according to Harvard political scientist Graham Allison, Chinese antipathy towards the US could be understood as symptoms of the infamous

"Thucydides Trap," in which structural forces push a rising power and a *status quo* power onto a collision course.

Nationalism accompanied by intensifying xenophobia could also be examined through the lens of the CCP's ploy for legitimacy. By channeling the population's discontents to an "outgroup" (i.e. the US), the central government diverts scrutiny away from challenges at home, offers a shared rallying cry for a fracturing society, and thus solidifies its grip on power.

According to a paper by Zhenyu Wang and Yuzhao Tao, China's soaring nationalism can also be attributed to "a feeling of national superiority." Indeed, while China emerged from its worst stretch of the pandemic shaken but relatively whole, Western governments were flailing, their prized political systems seemed to be torn by partisan bickering, and their public health infrastructure buckled under the weight of new COVID-19 cases. At these moments, it is not entirely surprising that many Chinese people felt smug that their nation--with its uncompromising authoritarianism and draconian lockdowns--had outperformed all the glitzy democracies of the West. (Here, one might notice that Chinese nationalist ideologies are rife with contradictions. Soaring nationalist rhetoric betray at once an air of self-importance as well as underlying currents of insecurities and trauma. Similarly, as mentioned before, Chinese national consciousness is also defined by the tug-of-war between its simultaneous infatuation and hatred of the West).

Amidst the myriad of reasons that drove the surge in Chinese anti-western discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic, my paper chose to focus on the role of historical memory. This is because unlike the other explanatory variables, the power of the past often goes under-appreciated, particularly among decision-makers who chart the course of the US's engagement with China. Indeed, as Graham Allison and Niall Ferguson put it in an *Atlantic*

article, “most Americans”--along with their policymakers--dwell in “the United States of amnesia.” Richard Neustadt and Ernest May open their iconic work, *Thinking in Time*, with a similar thought: “... we sensed around us—in our classes, in the media, in Washington—a host of people who did not know any history to speak of and were unaware of suffering any lack, who thought the world was new and all its problems fresh … and that decisions in the public realm required only reason or emotion, as preferred.”

But too often, the past that we ignore is the missing puzzle piece in the great jigsaw of understanding our counterparts and making sensible judgements. In that same book, Neustadt and May coined a thought-provoking concept for up and coming decision-makers: “placement,” or the imperative “to anticipate and take into account the different ways in which different actors see the world and their roles in it—not only organizationally but also humanly as individuals.” To do so, they recommended that readers construct “*timelines* arraying *events* and *details*” for the actor in question.

As such, any effective engagement with China is contingent upon our willingness to probe crucial fragments of the modern Chinese identity that lie beyond the superficial presumptions about what is “here” and “now.” Rather, the Middle Kingdom’s intricate worldview--as well as its surging anti-westernism--is fundamentally shaped by the interplay between historical memories and contemporary crises.

In this sense, accurately “placing” China takes a keen awareness of the many myths and realities that make up the full spectrum of the nation’s tumultuous timeline, and this paper is an attempt to tackle a small chunk of this sweeping endeavor.

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