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Yellow Perils: Pandemic imaginaries and the contest for global power

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In the popular children's game Chinese Whispers players stand in a line. The first person whispers a message to the person standing next to them who then passes it on to the next person. The fun comes from comparing the original message to the version announced by the last person in the line incorporating changes made as words were not heard or understood properly. In a modified version, Mahjong Secrets, named after the ancient game, players only hear the first word or phrase of the message and have to complete it with their own inventions. These inevitably draw on images and narratives carried in common culture. As their names suggest, both games present distorted or invented communication as characteristically Chinese. During the COVID-19 pandemic this assertion has been played out across digital platforms and print and broadcast media in the leading western powers.

Influential voices, led by Donald Trump, during his term of office as President of the United States, have repeatedly asserted that the infection originated in the virology laboratory in Wuhan, where the first cases were identified in the city's wet market. Accounts of how the virus escaped vary, from accidental leaks to deliberate release and, in the most extreme versions, the manufacture of biological weapons, but there is general agreement that the Chinese authorities conspired to suppress evidence and deflect blame elsewhere. President Trump's insistence on naming the infection the 'Chinese virus' and 'kung flu' joined 'Wubonic plague', 'Flu Manchu', 'chickenpox', and multiple other racist descrip-

tions to embed China's responsibility securely in popular consciousness¹. Chinese authorities have responded by asserting that the virus originated in the United States and was carried to China by visiting Americans.

This battle to apportion blame for the worst public health crisis in over a century is rooted in the wider contest between the US and China for primacy within the global economic and political system. The United States is assailed by fears that a century of American ascendancy is ending. China is intent on regaining its historic position as the world's leading civilisation.

Posts on social media platforms have played a central role in both the United States and China in promoting government-endorsed explanations of COVID-19's origins and it is all too easy to see their rise as marking a sea-change in the organisation of political communication. I want here to argue against this and point up the continuities between current contests over the origins of the COVID-19 and previous global pandemics and show how the dominant motifs in present debates draw on deeply rooted reservoirs of mutual distrust and suspicion. These date back to the mid-19th century when the Opium Wars of 1839–1842 and 1856–1860 forced China to open its markets to the trading circuits of global capitalism.

Despite having imposed humiliating treaties, Western imaginings rapidly coalesced around fears of China as a latent force intent on undermining and ultimately displacing Western global ascendancy. This spectre crystallised in images and discourses clustered around the idea of the Yellow Peril. Originating in government circles, this phrase, and its rich baggage of associations, circulated continuously through multiple media channels from news reports to popular fiction and cartoons². The Wuhan laboratory conspiracy theories are its latest expression. On the Chinese side, responses draw on accounts of the 'Century of Humiliation' at the hands of the United States and other Western powers and the brutal war against Japanese occupation during World War II.

The dragon awakens

The deployment of imperial force during the First Opium War ended China's relative isolation and established western trading settlements along the coast. The sustained military assaults of the Second Opium War completed China's integration into global capitalism by opening the interior. Western entrepreneurs arrived to find the self-proclaimed brother of Jesus Christ, Hong Xiuquan, leading a popular peasant uprising, the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. Launched in 1851, it occupied much of central China and the upper and lower Yangtze. Aiming to depose the ruling Manchu dynasty and restore the historic supremacy of the Han people, it precipitated a bloody civil war leav-

¹ See A. Lillo, "COVID, the beer flu, the disease of many names", *Lebende Sprachen* 65, 2014, no. 1, pp. 411–438.

² See Ch. Frayling, *The Yellow Peril: Dr Fu Manchu and the Rise of Chinaphobia*, London 2014 and J. Kuo, W. Tchen, D. Yeats, *Yellow Peril: An Archive of Anti-Asian Fear*, London 2014.

ing twenty to thirty million dead before its final defeat by British, French and American intervention in 1864.

The relative weakness of China's ruling dynasty was underlined by the decisive victory of Japan's newly modernised army in the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895, but the sheer size of China's population and the potential for mass mobilisation demonstrated by the Taiping rebellion was a continuing focus of anxiety among the imperial powers. In 1895 Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany called for a united front against the threat from Asia and commissioned the artist Hermann Knackflus to produce a dramatic image. His painting, titled *The Yellow Peril* pictured the nations of Europe assembled on a cliff top, led by the Archangel Michael, who had defeated Satan in the war in heaven recounted in the Book of Revelations, facing a fire breathing Chinese dragon across a narrow strip of sea. Copies were sent to the crowned heads of Europe and US President William McKinley. Lithographic reproductions ensured its wide circulation in popular culture.

The threat of armed struggle was confirmed by the Boxer Rebellion when, for two years, from 1899 to 1901, anti-imperial insurgents attacked Western property and residents in China culminating in a fifty-five day siege of foreign legations in Beijing. The uprising was savagely repressed by European forces but the spectre of a sleeping dragon waking and wreaking havoc continued to haunt the Western imagination with “the Boxers widely viewed as the Yellow Peril Personified”³.

Fears that the centre of world power was migrating to Asia had been gaining currency for some time. In his 1893 book, *National Life and Character*, Charles Pearson saw the energy that had fuelled initial European growth and expansion rapidly ebbing away and nominated “the non-European peoples, especially the Chinese” as the rising source of dynamism in the world system⁴. His argument attracted considerable attention. Readers included Britain's Prime Minister, William Gladstone and America's future President Theodore Roosevelt⁵. It was reinforced by Japan's defeat of Russia in the 1904–1905 Russo-Japanese War, the first time a modern, industrial European power had been defeated by an Asian state, but again it was the latent power of China that provoked most concern. The image printed in May 1904 in the French magazine *Le Grande Illustre*, was typical. Headed “The Yellow Peril” it pictured a dragon vomiting a mass of armed Chinese with a caption suggesting that the war may “result in the awakening of four hundred million Chinese from their secular torpor. If this formidable mass, penetrated by Western Ideas, were to make progress as rapid as that achieved by Japan, it would weigh enormously on the destinies of the world”⁶.

³ S.M. Lyman, “The ‘Yellow Peril’ mystique: Origins and vicissitudes of a racist discourse”, *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 13, 2000, no. 4, p. 717.

⁴ M. Hearn, I. Tregenza, “Managing ‘self-preservation’: Charles Pearson's *National Life and Character* and the early Australian Commonwealth”, *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 62, 2019, no. 1, p. 23.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

⁶ Quoted in B. de Perthuis, “The Yellow Peril through caricature according to René Pinon”, *Societies & Representations* 27, 2009, no. 1, pp. 249–265, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-societes-et-representations-2009-1-page-249.htm>.

In 1912 a revolt toppled the Qing dynasty ending centuries of imperial rule in China. The declaration of a republic and the promise of modernisation prompted renewed concern in Western government circles. A magazine article widely distributed around the British Home Office, responsible for domestic security, warned of “a vast and convulsive Armageddon to determine who is to be the master of the world, the white or yellow man”⁷. Headed “The Chinese in England: A growing national problem”, it presented migration and settlement as sources of corruption, with lurid depictions of opium dens, mysterious foods, and miscegenation.

Alien infections

The author, Herman Scheffauer, had grown up in California where the image of the Chinese as an ‘enemy within’ had long been a focus of concern. China’s forced opening to global capitalism combined with the disruption of the Taiping insurgency prompted mass migrations. In 1852, at the height of the Californian gold rush Chinese accounted for 30% of new arrivals to the state. The general tone of suspicion and fear was set by one of America’s most popular authors, Bayard Taylor, in a best-selling travel book of 1855. Recounting his stay in the Treaty Port of Shanghai with the Taiping rebellion gathering momentum in the interior, he confided his unshakeable “opinion that the Chinese are morally the most debased people on the face of the earth”, whose vices “constitute the surface-level, and below them are deeps on deeps of depravity so shocking and horrible that their character cannot even be hinted”, adding that “justice to our own race demands that they should not be allowed to settle on our soil”⁸. For a time Chinese migrants provided a ready pool of cheap manual labour for the infrastructural projects essential to America’s post-Civil War modernisation. In 1867 Chinese made up 90% of the workforce building the Central Pacific Railroad⁹, but in 1882 pressure from white workers forced the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act, stopping any additional Chinese labour from entering the US and reinforcing their residential confinement to recognised Chinatowns in the major cities.

Projections of military conquest continued to feature in popular fiction. H.J. West’s 1893 novel *The Chinese Invasion* was typical in presenting the Chinese in California as “the advance guard of numberless legions that will [...] one day overthrow the present Republic”¹⁰. Increasingly however, images of armed struggle jostled for attention with deep-seated fears of Chinese as sources of contamination, as authors elaborated on

⁷ Quoted in J. Lovell, “Review: The Yellow Peril: Dr Fu Manchu & the Rise of Chinaphobia by Christopher Frayling”, *The Guardian*, 30.10.2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/oct/30/yellow-peril-dr-fu-manchu-rise-of-chinaphobia-christopher-frayling-review> (accessed: 29.10.2022).

⁸ B. Taylor, *A Visit to India, China and Japan in the Year 1853*, New York 1855, p. 354.

⁹ D. Shim, “From Yellow Peril through model minority to renewed Yellow Peril”, *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 22, 1998, no. 4, p. 387.

¹⁰ Quoted in S.M. Lyman, “The ‘Yellow Peril’ mystique”, p. 690.

Taylor's accusation that "their touch is pollution"¹¹. The devastating smallpox epidemic recounted in Atwell Whitney's 1878 novel, *Almond Eyes*, joined a growing genre of popular fiction portraying Chinese migrants spreading fatal diseases among an unsuspecting population. In a later, influential speculation, contamination did not even require physical contact. It was transmitted through the atmosphere.

Explaining contagion: Toxic dust and American troops

In November 1889 the London *Times* reported that a severe outbreak of what was thought to be influenza was spreading from its origin in St. Petersburg. From there it moved rapidly across Europe to England and onwards to the United States across the Atlantic. Altogether it was responsible for around a million deaths including 13,000 Americans¹². It was the first modern pandemic, travelling at speed over the new rail and steamship routes and tracked in real time in reports distributed over the new global telegraph network.

Its popular designation as the 'Russian flu' was mistaken on both counts. It was not flu. Recent investigation has traced its origins to a coronavirus that jumped from cows to humans in a classic zoonotic chain of transmission¹³. Given the state of medical research at the time contemporaries could not have known this, but a significant body of professional opinion located its origins in China rather than Russia. Writing in the *British Medical Journal*, James Cantile, a doctor working in Hong Kong, claimed that the condition was "endemic in certain parts of China, and occasionally during the present century has spread to the rest of the world"¹⁴. More immediately influential was a theory advanced by one of England's leading medical authorities, Symes Thompson, in an open lecture in London in January 1890. As *The Times* reported he suggested that the "terrible inundations which had taken place in China seem to have some sort of causal relationship to the outbreak of the disease"¹⁵.

The 'terrible inundations' occurred in 1887 when the dykes around the Yellow River, China's second major waterway and the world's fourth largest, were swept away in a huge storm surge. Between 1 million and 2.5 million people perished by drowning, starvation, epidemic diseases or exposure in one of the world's worst ever natural disasters¹⁶. Thompson developed his argument at length in his exhaustive history of British influ-

¹¹ B. Taylor, *A Visit to India, China and Japan in the Year 1853*, p. 354.

¹² G. Daugherty, "The Russian flu of 1889: The deadly pandemic few Americans took seriously", *Inside History*, 23.03.2020, <https://www.history.com/news/1889-russian-flu-pandemic-in-america> (accessed: 29.10.2022).

¹³ L. Vijgen, E. Keyaerts, E. Moës, I. Thoelen, E. Wollants, P. Lemey, A.M. Vandamme, M. Van Ranst, "Complete genomic sequence of human coronavirus OC43: Molecular clock analysis suggests a recent zoonotic coronavirus transmission event", *Journal of Virology* 78, 2005, no. 3, pp. 1595–1604.

¹⁴ J. Cantile, "The first recorded appearance of the modern influenza epidemic", *The British Medical Journal* 2, 1891, no. 1600, p. 491.

¹⁵ "The Gresham Lectures on influenza", *The Times*, 7.01.1890, no. 5, p. 14.

¹⁶ P. Ball, *The Water Kingdom: A Secret History of China*, London 2017, p. 24.

enza epidemics. Noting that the powdery yellow soil in the region is regularly blown by dry summer winds “in such quantities as to almost hide the sun” it is possible that “countless millions of organic spores, developed in the marshy water of the flooded area which must have been saturated with dejections and refuse” left by decaying human and animal corpses were carried into the air and widely disseminated by strong winds¹⁷. His conclusion, that “dust may be the vehicle that serves to transmit the contagion” has “elements of possibility, not to say probability”¹⁸ was strongly contested by contemporaries. They included the well-known science writer, Rollo Russell, the son of the Prime Minister Lord Russell. He had originally endorsed the ‘dust’ theory in a letter to *The Times* in January 1890, but two years later was adamant that the evidence now clearly indicated that infection was spread by social contact with transmission following the lines of modern communications networks. As he noted, “it spreads much more rapidly where there are railways than where there are none, and where communication is by steamship than where only sailing ships touch”¹⁹. He nominates Bukhara, a major centre on the old Silk Road trading route linking China to Europe, “as the definite starting point of the disease” arguing that it then “travelled westwards along the Central Asian Railway”, reaching St. Petersburg in October²⁰. In an aside he notes reports of outbreaks in Greenland in May 1889, months before *The Times* story from St. Petersburg, but adds that it is difficult to “estimate their weight” since they are “partly anonymous and partly by correspondents”²¹. Evidence that infection may have originated in the West rather than the East has played a more central role in arguments over the next global pandemic.

In 1918, in the last months of World War I, a virulent form of influenza spread through western troops in France. Dispersed globally by soldiers returning home after the armistice, it killed at least 50 million people, and according to some estimates—twice as many. Recent research has confirmed that the 1918–1919 influenza virus was a zoonotic infection, originating in wild ducks and transmitted to humans either directly or through an intermediate animal host, most likely pigs²².

An early, and widely accepted account traced its origins to the American army base at Haskell in Kansas, a major agricultural centre, and its transmission to France by troops shipped to the front²³. Recent research however suggests that infection may have originated in China and been carried to America and onwards to Europe by the Chinese Labour Corps recruited to dig trenches along the battle front²⁴.

¹⁷ E.S. Thompson, *Influenza or Epidemic Catarrhal Fever: An Historical Survey of Past Epidemics in Great Britain from 1510–1890*, London 1890, p. 416.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 415.

¹⁹ R. Russell, *Epidemics, Plagues and Fevers: Their Causes and Prevention*, London 1892, p. 180.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 183–184.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 183.

²² M.O. Humphries, “Paths of infection: The First World War and the origins of the 1918 influenza pandemic”, *War in History* 21, 2003, no. 1, p. 58.

²³ E.O. Jordan, *Epidemic Influenza: A Survey*, New York 1927, p. 60.

²⁴ K.F. Shortridge, “The 1918 ‘Spanish’ flu: Pearls from swine?”, *Nature Medicine* 5, 1999, no. 4, pp. 384–385.

The origins of the 1918 pandemic remain an open question among historians. Some view the case for Chinese transmission as highly plausible but accept that “the evidence remains circumstantial”²⁵. Others insist that the pandemic was caused by a lethal respiratory disease that has been circulating among western troops for months, even years, before the arrival of Chinese labour²⁶.

Echo chambers

Disputes over the origins and transmission of COVID-19 have played a central role in the contest between China and the United States to apportion blame for the crisis. As with the first global pandemics, competing accounts have circulated within communication systems linking official pronouncements and medical opinion to news media and popular imagery and fiction. Social media have provided a common platform for multiple voices, but instead of a new openness we see the construction of echo chambers. Assertions are taken up and recycled within closed and self-reinforcing systems. China’s domestic social media posts are rigorously policed, dissenting opinion rapidly removed, and access to western sites blocked. In the United States Donald Trump’s continuous use of Twitter recycled narratives from the margins of the internet, including conspiracy theories, which were further promoted in partisan media outlets, led by Fox News. The boundaries of this echo chamber were reinforced by Trump’s dismissal of mainstream news organisations as ‘fake’ news to be ignored and disregarded.

Tales from two laboratories

The lab conspiracy theory began circulating in the United States four days after the first COVID-19 case was confirmed in the country on January 22nd, 2020. On January 26th *The Washington Times*, published by the conservative fringe religious group (the Unification Movement), carried a story headed “Coronavirus link to China’s bio-warfare program possible” quoting a former Israeli intelligence officer²⁷. It circulated widely on social media and was joined on February 16th by a Twitter post highlighting a passage in Dean Koontz’s popular novel *The Edge of Darkness* identifying a Wuhan laboratory as the source of a deadly new virus²⁸. The first edition had situated the lab in Russia but following the Soviet Union’s collapse the 1989 reissue moved the location to China to capitalise on rising

²⁵ M.O. Humphries, “Paths of Infection”, p. 80.

²⁶ G.D. Shanks, “No evidence of 1918 influenza pandemic origin in Chinese laborers/soldiers in France”, *Journal of the Chinese Medical Association* 79, 2016, no. 1, p. 48.

²⁷ B. Gertz, “Coronavirus link to China’s biowarfare program possible, analyst says”, *The Washington Times*, 26.01.2020, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/jan/26/coronavirus-link-to-china-bio-warfare-program-poss/> (accessed: 30.10.2022).

²⁸ N. Hinton, “A Dean Koontz novel written in 1981 predicted the outbreak of the coronavirus!”, Twitter, 16.02.2020, <https://twitter.com/NickHintonn/status/1228896027987660800> (accessed: 30.10.2022).

anxieties around a resurgent Yellow Peril. As one character notes, “They call the stuff ‘Wuhan 400’. It is China’s most important and dangerous new biological weapon in a decade”²⁹.

Despite the absence of concrete evidence, the laboratory conspiracy theory steadily gained traction on social media with variants logging over five million views in the first week of April. The majority of initial postings came from groups associated with the QAnon conspiracy theory alleging a ‘deep state’ plot to discredit President Trump³⁰. When asked by researchers, 29% of Americans said they believed that COVID-19 had originated in the Wuhan laboratory³¹.

The claim that China, aided by forces within the United States, was conspiring to deny the ‘true’ origins of the virus was vigorously promoted by the media outlets operated by the religious group, Fulan Gong. Banned in China and implacable opponents of the Communist regime, it had forged close links with Donald Trump’s political circle³². The group’s newspaper, *Epoch Times*, carried prominent items endorsing the Wuhan laboratory conspiracy and on April 7th, 2020 their New York broadcast arm, New Tang Dynasty Television, released a video on YouTube titled “Tracking down the origins of the Wuhan coronavirus” challenging every aspect of the Chinese government’s official account. To date it has been viewed more than five million times. On April 30th the US Intelligence Community issued a joint report endorsing the scientific consensus that COVID-19 was a natural mutation and “not manmade”³³. President Trump pointedly disagreed, telling a White House briefing on the same day that he “had a high degree of confidence” that the virus originated in the Wuhan lab but could not disclose his source. Days later, the *Telegraph* newspaper in Australia, owned by Rupert Murdoch, a strong Trump supporter at the time, printed a major story headed “China’s batty science” citing an unpublished intelligence dossier as confirming the lab hypothesis. The lead journalist, Sharri Markson, was then interviewed on Donald Trump’s preferred US television channel, Fox News, another Murdoch subsidiary, with the program host, Tucker Carlson, informing viewers that the dossier provided, “the most substantial confirmation of what we’ve suspected”³⁴. On 18th June, *The Wall Street Journal*, another of Ru-

²⁹ Reuters Staff, “Partly false claim: A 1981 book predicted the coronavirus outbreak”, Reuters, 28.02.2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-factcheck-coronavirus-koontz-book-idUSKCN20M19I> (accessed: 30.10.2022).

³⁰ T. Graham, A. Bruns, G. Zhu, R. Campbell, *Like a Virus: The Coordinated Spread of Coronavirus Disinformation*, Canberra 2020, <https://apo.org.au/node/305864> (accessed: 31.10.2022).

³¹ K. Schaefer, “Nearly three-in-ten Americans believe COVID-19 was made in a lab”, Pew Research Centre Fact Tank, 8.04.2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/08/nearly-three-in-ten-americans-believe-covid-19-was-made-in-a-lab/> (accessed: 31.10.2022).

³² See S. Van Zuylen-Wood, “MAGA-land’s favourite newspaper”, *The Atlantic*, 23.02.2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/01/inside-the-epoch-times-a-mysterious-pro-trump-newspaper/617645/> (accessed: 31.10.2022).

³³ J. Brewster, “A timeline of the COVID-19 Wuhan lab original theory”, *Forbes*, 24.05.2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackbrewster/2020/05/10/a-timeline-of-the-covid-19-wuhan-lab-origin-theory/> (accessed: 31.10.2022).

³⁴ K. Rudd, “The Murdoch media’s China coronavirus conspiracy has one aim: get Trump re-elected”, *The Guardian*, 8.05.2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/may/08/murdoch-media-china-coronavirus-conspiracy-trump-kevin-rudd> (accessed: 5.11.2022).

pert Murdoch's newspapers, published an interview in which Trump speculated that China had encouraged its citizens who had been infected to travel overseas "to spread economic consequences around the globe" and punish the United States for imposing import tariffs on Chinese goods³⁵.

As this brief account confirms, contemporary Yellow Peril discourse in the United States increasingly circulates now within a self-reinforcing communications system anchored in authoritarian populist imaginaries of economic decline and cultural threat amplified by militantly partisan conservative press and broadcast outlets and proliferating online conspiracies. Counter-evidence and argument is dismissed as further proof that the unaccountable bureaucratic and expert elites ranged against the 'real' people are intent on deflecting attention and denying evident truths.

The Chinese communication circuit is simpler, with the Party state apparatus rigorously censoring alternative accounts and aggressively using online posts alongside official news media to promote preferred narratives that will defuse domestic criticism and secure attention in the international arena. The result is commentary on COVID-19 that presents a mirror image of US constructions.

Almost immediately after the outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan became public knowledge multiple postings, with only minor changes to wording, appeared on Chinese social media insisting that the virus had been introduced by American athletes attending the World Military Games in Wuhan and claiming that:

While carrying out its trade war with China, the U.S government took advantage of the Military Games, where many American athletes had interactions with Chinese, hiding the novel coronavirus in their equipment with the aim of infecting the people of Wuhan [...] so as to realize its evil goals of containing China's economy and thwarting the rise of the New China³⁶.

It is not clear who composed these posts, but the central claim received official endorsement on March 12 when Zhao Lijian, Deputy Director of the Information Department of the Ministry of Foreign affairs posted on his Twitter page: "When did patient zero begin in US? How many people are infected? What are the names of the hospitals? It might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan. Be transparent! Make public your data! US owe us an explanation!"³⁷.

Twitter is banned in China. The message was aimed at a global audience and overseas Chinese. The obvious question of where exactly the virus had originated in American was answered when Zhao named Ford Detrick—the former centre of the US biological weapons program, now the site of laboratories researching a range of viruses. In

³⁵ "Transcript of President Trump's interview with the Wall Street Journal", *Wall Street Journal*, 18.06.2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/transcript-of-president-trumps-interview-with-the-wall-street-journal-11592501000> (accessed: 5.11.2022).

³⁶ Quoted in J.-B. Nie, "In the shadow of biological warfare: Conspiracy theories on the origin of COVID-19 and enhancing global governance of biosafety as a matter of urgency", *Journal of Bioethics Inquiry* 17, 2020, no. 4, pp. 567–574, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11673-020-10025-8>.

³⁷ Quoted in D. Wallbank, "Twitter applies another fact check—this time to China spokesman's tweets about virus origins", *Fortune*, 23.05.2020, <https://fortune.com/2020/05/28/twitter-fact-check-zhao-lijian-coronavirus-origin/> (accessed: 5.11.2022).

July 2020 he published a Tweet asking “What’s behind the closure of the biolab at Fort Detrick? When will the US invite experts to investigate the origins of the virus in the US?”³⁸. The claim was widely promoted within China through mainstream media channels. The state broadcaster CCTV screened an hour long documentary *The Dark History Behind Fort Detrick* emphasising failures of containment. The Party tabloid the *Global Times* launched an online petition soliciting signatures for an open letter to the World Health Organisation calling for an investigation into Fort Detrick.

Chinese claims that COVID-19 was manufactured in America have been renewed in response to President Biden’s insistence on further investigation of the possible role of the Wuhan virology laboratory. The recent propaganda offensive within China has employed the full range of media, including a rap song by the nationalist group CD Rev which begins as follows: “How many plots came out of your lab. How many dead bodies hanging a tag?”. The message was immediately endorsed by Zhao in a Tweet on August 11th, 2021; “open the door to Fort Detrick. Shed light on tightly held secrets. This RAP song speaks our minds”³⁹.

It is tempting to attribute popular support for the Fort Detrick and Wuhan laboratory conspiracies to the manipulative expertise of political leaders commanding the full range of available media. As with all top-down models of ideology this downplays their secure anchorage in deeply held fears, anxieties and antagonisms.

Disease as a weapon of war against China has been a long-standing theme in western fictions. In M.P. Shiel’s influential 1898 novel *The Yellow Danger*, the English hero, Hardy, having defeated the invading the Sino-Japanese forces, sends “Chinese captives injected with pestilence back to their camp” to eradicate any last resistance⁴⁰. Rather better known is the 1910 short story “The unparalleled invasion” remembered now, in the shadow of the Holocaust, for proposing a ‘final solution’ to ethnic conflict. Written by Jack London, one of America’s most popular novelists, and set in 1976, it imagines the United States, having failed to defeat China militarily, resorting to bacteriological warfare and dropping multiple glass vials of deadly infection on the civilian population: it was these bacteria, and germs, and microbes, and bacilli, cultured in the laboratories of the West, that had come down upon China in a rain of glass [...]. China had laughed at war, and war she was getting, but it was ultra modern war, twentieth century war, the war of the scientist [...] with the micro-organic projectiles hurled from the laboratories, the messengers of death, the destroying angels that stalked through the empire of a billion souls [...]. And so perished China⁴¹.

More immediately, the Ford Detrick conspiracy evokes Chinese memories of the bacteriological warfare installations established across China by the occupying Japanese in World War II and the ‘field tests’ conducted against civilians⁴². It also speaks powerfully

³⁸ Quoted in “Wuhan lab leak theory: How Fort Detrick became a centre for Chinese conspiracies”, BBC News, 23.08.2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-58273322> (accessed: 5.11.2022).

³⁹ Quoted in *ibidem*.

⁴⁰ Y. Hashimoto, “Germs, body-politics and Yellow Peril: Relocation of Britishness in *The Yellow Danger*”, *Australian Victorian Studies Journal* 9, 2003, p. 52.

⁴¹ Quoted in J.N. Swift, “Jack London’s *The Unparalleled Invasion*: Germ warfare, eugenics and cultural hygiene”, *American Literary Review* 35, 2002, no. 1, p. 61.

⁴² J.-B. Nie, “In the shadow of biological warfare”.

to the dominant Chinese understanding of history as the story of the world's preeminent civilisation subjected to a 'Century of Humiliation' at the hands of Western capitalist powers who are now intent on preventing it regaining its rightful place.

The Wuhan laboratory conspiracy views this same history through the other end of the telescope. It trades on long-standing constructions of China as a threat to American pre-eminence in the world system, a 'Yellow Peril', willing to use any means possible to undermine its strength and on the acute contemporary sense of declining power summed up in Donald Trump's central electoral promise to "Make America Great Again".

Manufacturing pandemics: Deforestation and fast foods

The precise origins of COVID-19 may never be established, but the weight of available evidence confirms that together with the pandemics of 1890 and 1918 and the two most recent coronavirus viruses, SARS and MERS, it has followed a zoonotic path of transmission, from animals to humans. In which case the problem lies with the accelerating clearances of forests and woodlands for cattle ranching and palm oil and soya plantations to service a global food system increasingly organised around meat-intensive fast and convenience foods. McDonalds and KFC may have originated in America, but their brightly lit outlets are now a familiar sight in Chinese cities servicing a shared urban lifestyle that supports the unsustainable consumption that is driving the present climate and environmental emergencies.

If this analysis is correct, responsibility for COVID-19 and the likelihood of future coronavirus pandemics lies primarily with the corporations promoting the intensified industrialisation of global agriculture. These companies form a complex agribusiness network connecting US and Chinese enterprises and driving deforestation and habitat destruction across the world. By escalating contacts between displaced species and humans these interventions significantly increase the likelihood of zoonotic transmission. Addressing this threat requires transformative changes to prevailing priorities for global production and consumption. Confronting the embedded cultures of distrust and antagonism generated by successive abrasive encounters between China and the West is an essential step towards recognising that the major perils now facing humanity are universal and in urgent need of a common and collaborative response.

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Yellow Perils: Pandemic imaginaries and the contest for global power

Summary

The precise origins of COVID-19 may never be established, but the weight of available evidence confirms that, together with the pandemics of 1890 and 1918 and the two most recent coronavirus viruses, SARS and MERS, it has followed a zoonotic path of transmission—from animals to humans. In which case the problem lies with the accelerating clearances of forests and woodlands for cattle ranching and palm oil and soya plantations to service a global food system increasingly organised around meat intensive fast and convenience foods. McDonald’s and KFC may have originated in America, but their brightly lit outlets are now a familiar sight in Chinese cities servicing a shared urban lifestyle that supports the unsustainable consumption that is driving the present climate and environmental emergencies.

If this analysis is correct, responsibility for COVID-19 and the likelihood of future coronavirus pandemics lies primarily with the corporations promoting the intensified industrialisation of global agriculture. These companies form a complex agribusiness network connecting US and Chinese enterprises and driving deforestation and habitat destruction across the world. By escalating contacts between displaced species and humans these interventions significantly increase the likelihood of zoonotic transmission. Addressing this threat requires transformative changes to prevailing priorities for global production and consumption. Confronting the embedded cultures of distrust and antagonism generated by successive abrasive encounters between China and the West is an essential step towards recognising that the major perils now facing humanity are universal and in urgent need of a common and collaborative response.