

Digital Nationalism in the Shadows of History: A New Perspective on Chinese Anti-Western Discourse During COVID-19

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Abstract

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, hostilities and misinformation targeting the West have exploded across Chinese social media. This paper argues that contemporary anti-Western nationalism in the digital space must be interpreted in the context of popular historical memory. Namely, international scrutiny over COVID-19's origins brings to the forefront an enduring "siege mentality" whereby China perceives a West that continuously denigrates the Chinese populace as the "Sick Man of Asia"—frail, disease-ridden, and unsanitary. To qualify the importance of historical memory, this paper analyzes an extensive corpus of Weibo data through natural language processing (NLP) algorithms. By applying LDA topic modeling to Weibo posts mentioning the "Sick Man of Asia" during the early stages of the pandemic, it is possible to demonstrate that connotations surrounding this epithet has shifted from introspective self-criticism to an anti-Western "siege mentality." Moreover, Bayesian sentiment analysis of Weibo posts discussing COVID-19's origins show that posts alluding to historical memory are frequently the most emotionally-charged.

In late May of 2021, President Biden ordered a new probe into the origins of COVID-19, and Chinese social media struck back with fire and fury. What is particularly interesting—and concerning—is that tens of thousands of angry retorts from bloggers, news outlets, and government spokespersons alike all seemed to throw their weight behind a mind-boggling conspiracy theory: that the pandemic traces its origin back to Fort Detrick, which houses a military biology lab in the heart of Maryland.

Building upon this premise, the plot of this viral narrative thickens. Fort Detrick inherited a hefty stock of biological weaponry from the sinister Unit 731, an arm of the Japanese military that ravaged China during WWII, and the clandestine facility has supposedly deposited its germs and bioweapons in China during the Korean War, as well as on the eve of the coronavirus outbreak. When recounting this theory, social media users would concurrently issue a ringing proclamation: “never forget national humiliation.”

As Chinese public opinion vis-à-vis the US plummets across every authoritative survey or indicator, narratives like the one mentioned above makes it clear that the discursive landscapes of the two countries (particularly in the digital space) have become more insulated from one another than ever (Feng 2020). Indeed, a narrative that the Chinese public takes for granted may be baffling for their American counterparts. In an era where bilateral relations deteriorate and anti-Western nationalism soars, how can we better understand the core drivers that are pushing virulent discourse in Chinese cyberspace to its zenith during the pandemic?

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.”

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 on social media: a “Suppression of Ambivalent Attitudes” towards the nation, as well as a “Feeling of National Superiority” (2021). By using content and thematic analysis on Zhihu posts centered around UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s hospitalization, Altman Peng et al. (2020) 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 (2021) viewed the surges in nationalism in both China and the US as a “narrative battle,” in which the Chinese people and government are adamant about how the country has escaped its “Century of Humiliation” and will no longer be “bullied” by foreign powers.

However, the crucial intersection between online 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 (Hanson 2020; Rogaski 2021). This means that no scholar has delved in-depth into how historical memories centered around the body animate China’s digital nationalism and its by-products of conspiracies and misinformation. . 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.

Methodology Overview

This paper is organized into two major parts: an analysis of China’s historical sensitivities surrounding health and the body, as well

as two case studies on how history manifests itself in contemporary digital space.

Case Studies

In the first part, I will show that seminal thinkers in China over the past century constructed a narrative of Chinese physical deficiency, which later evolved into a “siege mentality” labeling the West as a perennial aggressor and parasite preying upon the Chinese body.

Subsequently, the two case studies integrate applied history and computational linguistics methods to probe Chinese cyberspace. With more than one billion users, Chinese social media dwarfs the reach of any other platform and constitutes a readymade arena for political conversations. My first case study centers around Weibo’s (Chinese Twitter) virulent response to the explosive *WSJ* publication “China is the Real Sick Man of Asia,” and it leverages LDA topic modeling to demonstrate how popular memory surrounding health and biology took an anti-Western shift during the early stages of the pandemic. This part of the paper builds upon social media data between January 1, 2020 and March 31, 2020, which extends across the one and a half months before and after the *WSJ*’s controversial op-ed.

The latter case study parses a wildly popular conspiracy theory alleging that COVID-19 originated from the US, embraced by the government and the populace alike. Specifically, I will use sentiment analysis to corroborate the fact that this sensational narrative is legitimized by popular memory, and Weibo posts specifically discussing the historical dimensions of this conspiracy contain the most negative sentiments.¹ My second case study delves into data collected during the middle of the pandemic, between January 1, 2021 and June 31, 2021, which roughly coincides with the zenith of the COVID-19 conspiracy in cyberspace.

¹ All replication materials for this paper are hosted on the author’s Github repository, available at: <https://github.com/alinx/China-COVID19-Weibo-Discourse>.

Government Interference in Public Discourse

Of course, one key limitation in examining social media discourse is that it may be difficult to determine which narratives pervading cyberspace are aggressively sanitized and shaped by the government, and which are organic products of public opinion. Indeed, not only does China’s “Great Firewall” censor content that it deems inappropriate, but the government also employs a vast army of bloggers (humorously dubbed “wumao,” or “fifty cents,” a reference to their alleged compensation for every piece of content they churn out) to flood social media with patriotic posts and tear down dissenters.

Government interference, however, will not significantly detract from the value of our findings for two primary reasons. First, censorship and wumao spams should exert a relatively consistent effect on cyberspace, which means that “bursts” of mentions related to a certain topic—whether it is the “Sick Man” trope or a pandemic conspiracy—are still manifestations of grassroots sentiment. Moreover, as will become evident in the second case study, one might also appreciate the power of public opinion upon studying a timeline of how the government can decide to shift its rhetoric to align itself with the popular, nationalistic bandwagon.

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.

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 ... 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 ... 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 ...” (Qichao 1916).

Chen Duxiu, a leader of the May Fourth movement as well as a founder of the Chinese Communist Party, corroborated Liang's remarks. “Our nation is degenerating,” he lamented, “and because of this sickness ... we all take on the fragile posture of the willow and harbor no martial aspirations” (Chen 2005).

In another publication, Chen pummeled Chinese hygienic practices of his time: “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” (Chen 1916).

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” (Schram 1992).²

Chinese Deficiency as “Chosen Trauma”

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 is akin to a Wagnerian *leitmotif* that undergirds China’s traumatic “Century of Humiliation.” Professor Ruth Rogaski (2014) concurs: “A great deal of the rhetoric of Chinese deficiency and Western superiority revolved around modern biomedicine, science, and the body...”

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 (Cohen 2014). 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.

For many of these thinkers, Chinese malaises stemmed from

² 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.

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 "the fittest survive whereas the weak are eliminated. I hope my brethren 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 (Wang and Zhang 1984). Indeed, the painful "Sick Man" narrative continues to ring true for successive generations of CCP leadership.³ During the National Hygiene and Health Summit

³ 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

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” (Xinhua 2016).

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) (Chen 2009; Rogaski 2014). 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 (Rogaski 2014).

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 (Wu 2019). 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

integrate its principles into primary school curricula.

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 Eastern counterparts. In fact, historian Yang Jui-sung explores the paradoxical and fluid qualities of the “Sick Man” motif in his monograph “From Discourses of Weakness to Discourses of Empowerment.” 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]” (Yang 2020).

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.

“Micro-Parasitic” Dimension of Chinese Siege Mentality

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 (Yi 2016). 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. 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.

Case Study I: *WSJ* and the “Sick Man of Asia”

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” (Mead 2020). 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!”⁴

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 (Stevenson 2020). 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 (Zhen and Wang 2020).

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” (Yang and Yi 2020). As such, the article proclaimed that the *WSJ*’s journalism is “cruel, twisted, and conceited, trampling upon the bottom line of having any humanity.” An article published by the same outlet the following day echoed these sentiments, lambasting *WSJ* coverage for its “humiliation of China” and its “naked promotion of racism” (Wu 2020).

Touching Off a Landmine in Chinese Historical Memory

The *WSJ* publication gained notoriety in China because it intruded upon a “Century of Humiliation” *leitmotif* that connotes both self-criticism and anti-Westernism. The fact that a Western media powerhouse evoked the “Sick Man” label and slapped it on top of an

⁴ 魂满中华, “东亚病夫’不仅仅只是个辱骂的名称...” Weibo, February 10, 2020.

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.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.

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.⁶

⁵ 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.

⁶ This dataset can be found in the “Data” folder of my Github repository, spread throughout three files labeled by month: Weibo_SMOA_Jan_2020.xlsx,

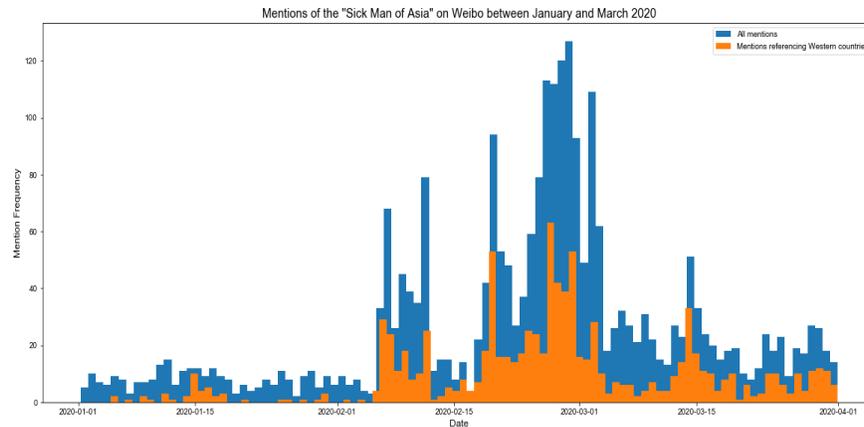


Figure 1: Mentions of the “Sick Man of Asia” on Weibo (January 2020-March 2020)

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.

Weibo_SMOA_Feb_2020.xlsx, and Weibo_SMOA_Mar_2020.xlsx

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 (Blei, Ng, and Jordan 2003). 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. Overly common words or phrases 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, 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

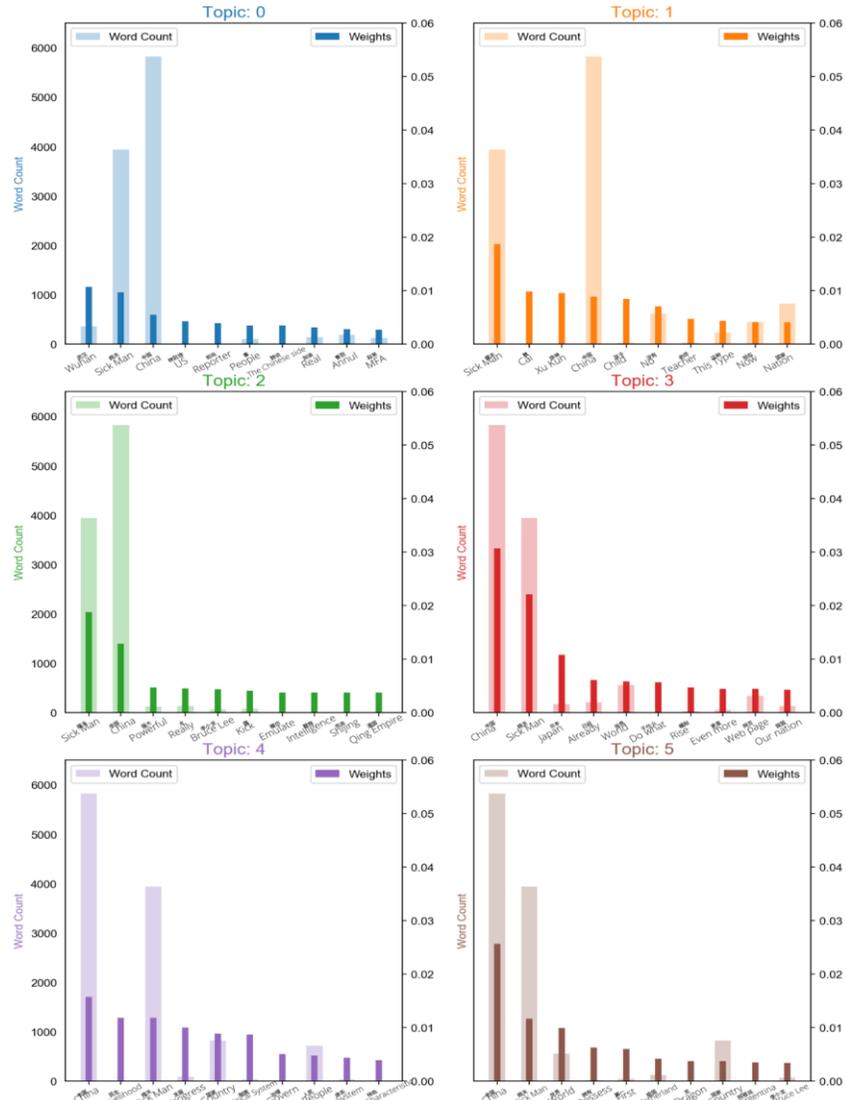


Figure 2: "Sick Man of Asia" Topic Model, January

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

"Sick Man of Asia" Topic Model, February and March

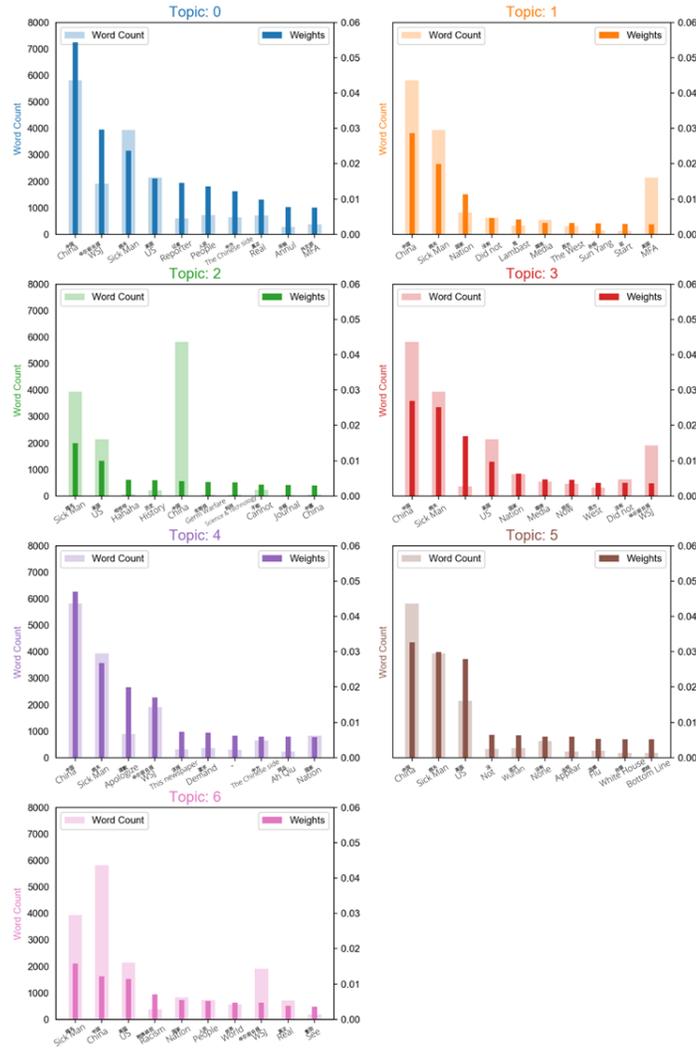


Figure 3: “Sick Man of Asia” Topic Model, February and March

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). 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.

However, 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.”⁷ 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. In the words of one widely-shared post, “the piece by American media outlet WSJ intended to humiliate China has actually pushed itself into hot water ... the article’s title, with such glaring racism, elicited outrage from people with good conscience all across the globe.”

Nevertheless, 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.

Case Study II: Allegations of Biowarfare/Lab Leak

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 2020.⁸

⁷ All Weibo posts mentioned in this section are taken from my original dataset; moreover, all translations are also original.

⁸ “联署突破2000万! 更多疑点浮现!” *Global Times*, July 31, 2021.

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.⁹

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.¹⁰

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 28.¹¹ 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!” (Zhao 2020).

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!” (Zhang and Ren 2020). The piece then

⁹ 民生文旅, “下半场的, 牌, 已经打明! 川总全招!” Weixin, February 27, 2020.

¹⁰ A helpful piece of scholarly literature that parses this conspiracy theory in detail is Jing-Bao Nie, “In the Shadow of Biological Warfare: Conspiracy Theories on the Origins of COVID-19 and Enhancing Global Governance of Biosafety as a Matter of Urgency,” *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry* (August 2020): 1–8.

¹¹ 魏岳钦禹, “近日, 美国的研究者经过对美国病例研究, 在病毒里发现了一个人工元素...” Weibo, February 28, 2020.

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 8, MFA spokesperson Hua Chunying further lent credence to the theory when she publicly demanded the US to “open Fort Detrick” during a press conference.¹² 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.¹³ 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 (Wen and Chang 2021). 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.

The Historical Dimension of Conspiracy

This wildly popular conspiracy theory constitutes a useful case

¹² Foreign Ministry of the People’s Republic of China, “2020年5月8日外交部发言人华春莹主持例行记者会,” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China to the Republic of Singapore, May 8, 2020.

¹³ “Covid Origin: Why the Wuhan Lab-Leak Theory Is Being Taken Seriously,” *BBC News*, May 27, 2021.

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 (Kristof 1995). 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.¹⁴

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

¹⁴ “日本专家：731部队罪行铁证曝光 日本政府掩盖不了历史真相,” *Global Times*, September 3, 2021; Unit 731’s grip on Chinese historical memory becomes evident at first glance when one glances at the long list of topics (or hashtags) decrying the group’s war crimes on Weibo.

subsequently transferred to Fort Detrick.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

Although it is hard to claim that COVID-19 is an intentional bioweapon, popular conspiracy theories can nevertheless color the pandemic with historical trauma. 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.

Quantifying the Impact of Historical Memory

Once again, given the immense body of relevant social media content, this paper 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).¹⁷ Figure 4 maps two time series constructed based on these datasets.

¹⁵ “隐藏的罪恶：美军德特里克堡实验室与731部队的肮脏交易,” *Xinhua*, June 4, 2021.

¹⁶ “铁证! 美国曾在朝鲜战争中使用生物武器,” *Global Times*, September 18, 2021.

¹⁷ Although the conspiracy theory had already begun to proliferate online in 2020, my research only focused on data between January and July 2021 for the following reasons: 1) the Fort Detrick narrative gained by far the most traction in 2021, which means applying sentiment analysis on the posts during this particular time frame would produce the most informative results, and 2) there are limitations in my scraping software/methodology that would prevent collecting a substantially higher number of documents. Both datasets can be found within the “Data” folder of my Github repository. The former is labeled COVID_Origins_and_sentiments.xlsx, while the latter is under the spreadsheet U731_and_sentiments.xlsx.

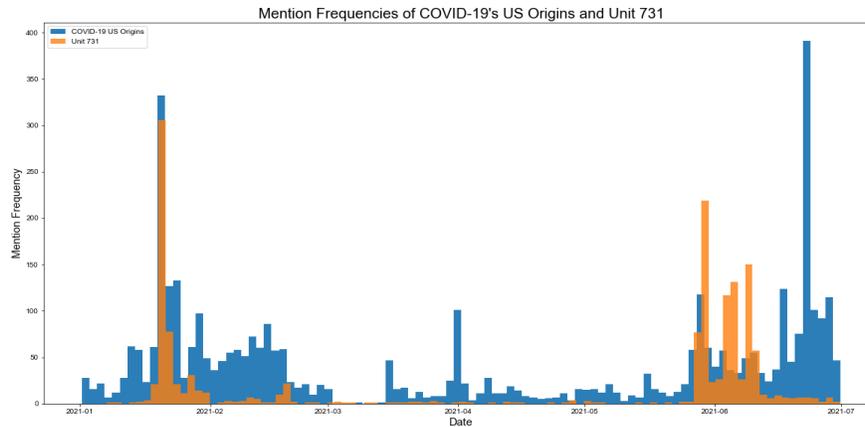


Figure 4: Mentions of COVID-19's US Origins and Unit 731

Figure 4 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.¹⁸ Incidentally, around the same time, RT China dropped a chilling documentary on Unit 731, which quickly garnered widespread attention on Weibo.¹⁹

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

¹⁸ Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China, "2021年1月18日外交部发言人华春莹主持例行记者会," Foreign Ministry, January 18, 2021; Katie Davis, "America's 'Proof' COVID-19 Leaked from Wuhan Lab," *News Corp Australia*, January 17, 2021.

¹⁹ 今日俄罗斯 RT, "谋划生物战之地——日本的秘密部队731," Weibo, January 16, 2021.

delve deeper into the lab leak hypothesis.²⁰

Sentiment Analysis

To evaluate the claim that this viral conspiracy is buoyed by emotionally-charged historical narratives, my paper enlists sentiment analysis, a widely popular NLP method that helps determine whether a text skews towards positive or negative language (Jurafsky and Martin 2008). 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.²¹ 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.²²

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.

²⁰ “Covid Origin,” *BBC News*.

²¹ Snow NLP’s Github repository can be found here: <https://github.com/isnowfy/snownlp>.

²² The SentiWeibo project’s Github repository can be found here: <https://github.com/wansho/senti-weibo>; moreover, my sentiment analysis code can be found under the “Weibo Sentiment” Jupyter Notebook.

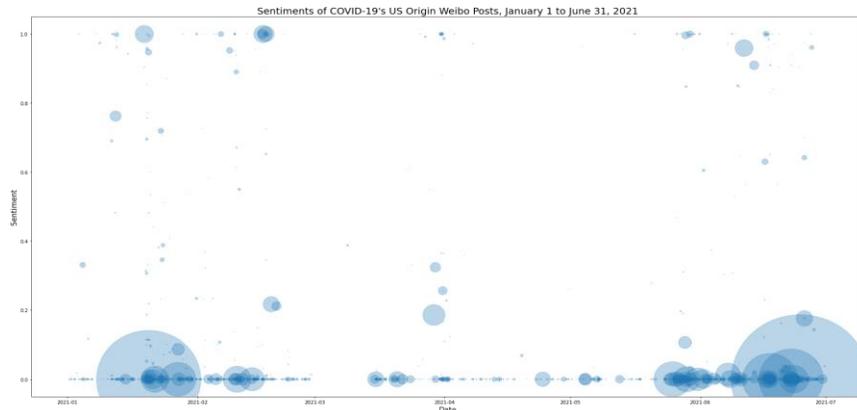


Figure 5: Sentiments of COVID-19's US Origin Weibo Posts (January 1- June 31, 2021)

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

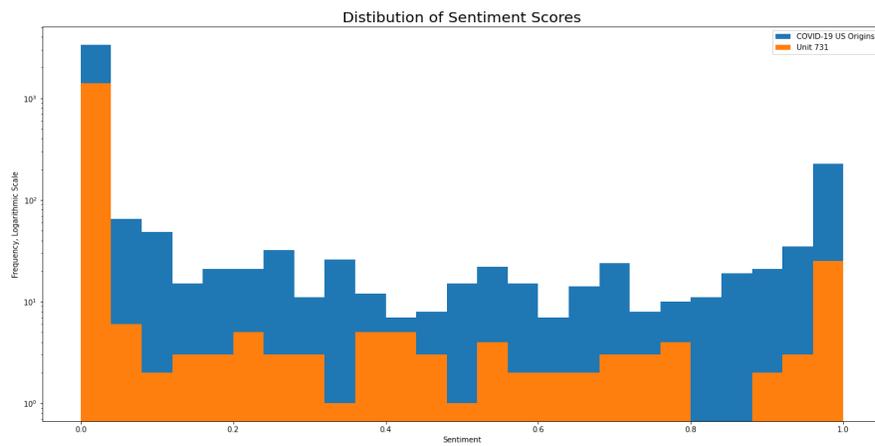


Figure 6: Distribution of Sentiment Scores, COVID-19 Origins and Unit 731 Datasets

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

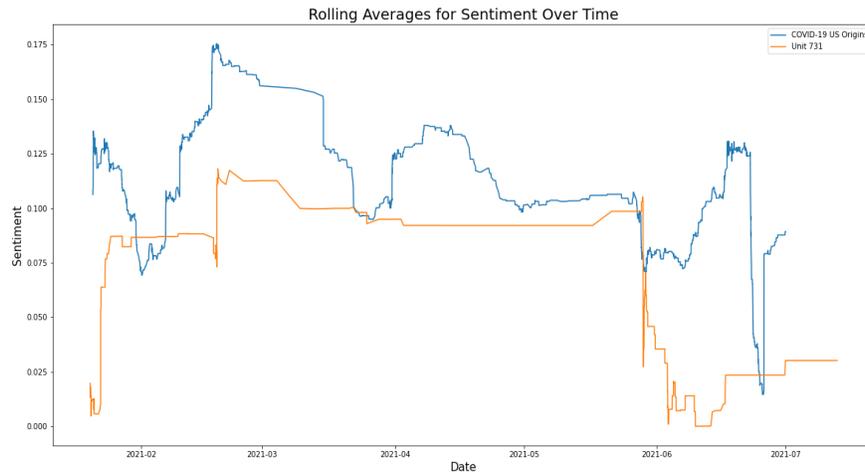


Figure 7: Rolling Averages of Sentiment Over Time, COVID-19 Origins and Unit 731 Datasets

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 (Lamorte 2017). 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 a more apt comparison. The differences in sentiment values were statistically significant on both occasions, and the results for the two inference tests are as follows in Table 1.

Table 1: Statistical Inference Tests, COVID-19 US Origins vs. Unit 731 Dataset Sentiment

Datasets	U Statistic	p-value ($\alpha = 0.05$)
“COVID-19 US Origins” vs. “Unit 731”	2156500.5	<0.001
“Fort Detrick” vs. “Unit 731”	804901.5	<0.001

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 explains 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 reeks of “brutal inhumanity,” and “its crimes mounting up to the heavens are inextricably linked with the biology lab at Fort Detrick.”²³

²³ The Weibo posts referenced in this section can all be found in the COVID-19

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.”

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.

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

origins and Unit 731 datasets in my Github repository.

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 enlisting armies of wumao bloggers (as mentioned in Section IV) to flood social media with nationalistic rhetoric. This means that when it comes to the control of public discourse, the government’s censorship and propaganda arm continues to occupy a vaunted and nearly unchallenged higher ground, flipping the kill switch on any content that it deems threatening while ramming through talking points it has endorsed.

However, according to Peter Gries and Tao Wang, the legitimacy of the CCP is still very much beholden to the ebb and flow of broad-based, popular nationalism, which means that the party is obliged to respond to, or even play “catch up” with, virulent grassroots opinions that reach unrestrained boiling points (Gries and Wang 2022). This is true for the COVID-19 origins case study in particular. In fact, 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 (a short video sharing platform similar to TikTok) clip claiming that the virus is an American bioweapon.²⁴ 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

²⁴ “男子编造新冠病毒是美国基因武器，被行拘十日,” *People’s Daily*, February 9, 2020.

March 12, MFA spokesperson Zhao Lijian tweeted his suspicions that the coronavirus may have been brought to Wuhan by the US army.²⁵ 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).²⁶ By late July of 2021, the government had thrown its full weight behind what was once a burgeoning fringe narrative, thus playing a pivotal role in pushing it to wider and wider swaths of the Chinese populace. 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.”²⁷

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 8 and 9, 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.

²⁵ Lijian Zhao (@zlj517), “2/2 CDC was caught on the spot.”

²⁶ Mengxu Zhang, Zhong Ren, “美媒：特朗普正掩盖日益迫近的公共卫生危机”；Foreign Ministry of the People’s Republic of China, “2020年5月8日外交部发言人华春莹主持例行记者会。”

²⁷ Florian Schneider, *China’s Digital Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 5-6.

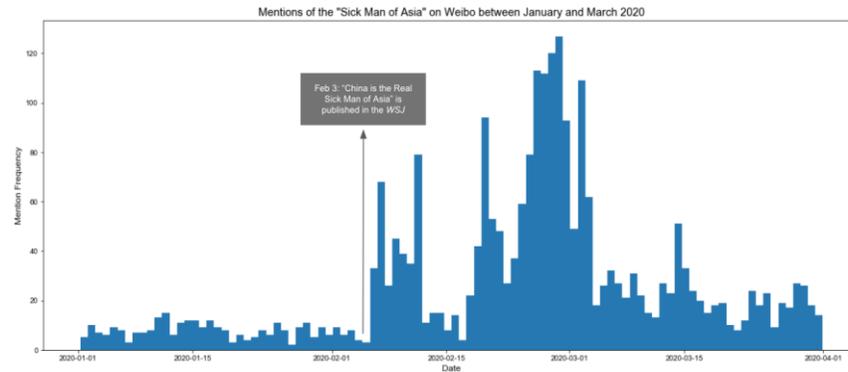


Figure 8: Mentions of the “Sick Man of Asia” on Weibo Between (January 2020-March 2020)

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.

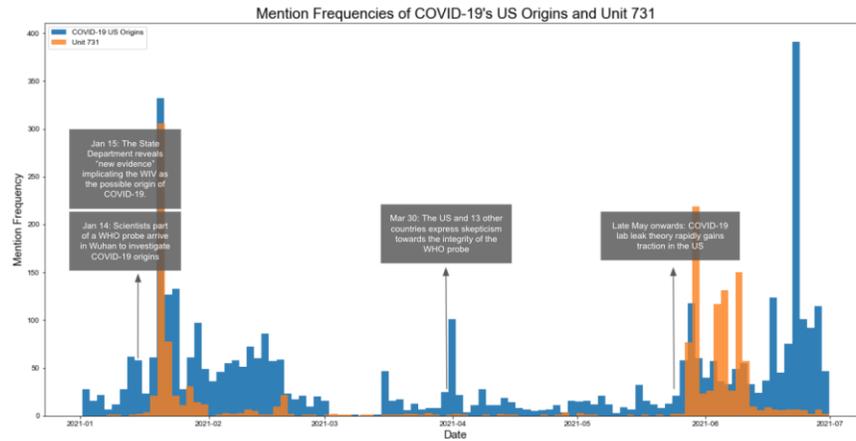


Figure 10: Mention Frequencies of COVID-19's US Origins and Unit 731 (Data Source: Gran 2021)

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.²⁸ 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 (Munroe 2020).

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

²⁸ AFP in Washington, "Washington Slashes Chinese Journalist Quota After Beijing Expels US Reporters," *The Guardian*, March 2, 2020.

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. Ultrationalist 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.

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 (Graham 2017).

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 (Bishop 2020).

According to a paper by Zhenyu Wang and Yuzhao Tao, China's soaring nationalism can also be attributed to "a feeling of national superiority."²⁹ 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" (Graham and Ferguson 2016). 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

²⁹ Zhenyu Wang and Yuzhou Tao. "Many Nationalisms, One Disaster."

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” (Neustadt and May 2011). 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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Appendix: Sample Weibo Posts

Author	Original Text	Translated Text	Date Posted	Likes
Tie Ba Jun (贴吧君)	重大消息啊：有报告显示新型冠状病毒实际来自于美军生物武器实验室：德特里克堡 (...)这个病毒叫“美国肺炎”或者“德特里克堡病毒”似乎比“COVID19”更为合理。 (...) 美国把从日方获取的细菌战情报作为内部情报处理，而不作为“战犯罪证”来追究。 (...) 德特里克堡还有一座名为731的大楼，专门供这位被美国雇佣为生物武器顾问的731部队部长做“研究”。	Breaking news! There are reports that the novel coronavirus actually came from the US military's biological weapons laboratory: Fort Detrick (...) It seems that it's actually more fitting to call this virus the "American respiratory illness" or "Fort Detrick virus." (...) The United States treated the germ warfare intel obtained from Japan as classified information, and did not prosecute it as "grounds for war crime." (...) There is also a building named after 731 in Fort Detrick, specifically dedicated to the head of Unit 731, who was hired by the US as a bioweapons contractor, to conduct his "research."	2021/1/19	414,092
Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson (外交部发言人办公室)	美国以豁免侵华日军“731部队”战犯战争责任为条件，获取“731部队”进行人体实验、细菌实验、细菌战、毒气实验等方面数据进行生物武器研究。德特里克堡基地正是在此基础上快速发展成为美国生物武器研发基地。 (...) 我们很想知道，美国在境内外开展生物军事化活动的重重疑云什么时候才能揭开？美国什么时候能给国际社会一个交待？	On the condition of pardoning the "Unit 731" of the Japanese invaders from war crimes, the United States obtained data from "Unit 731" on human experiments, bacterial experiments, bacterial warfare, and poison gas experiments, etc. to further their biological weapons research. It is on this basis that the Fort Detrick military base rapidly developed into a U.S. biological weapons R&D hub. (...) We really want to know, when will the doubts clouding the US's biological militarization activities at home and abroad be lifted? When will the United States give an explanation to the international community?	6/4/2021	1,516
The Southern Daily (南方 日报)	在病毒溯源问题上，美国到底想掩盖什么？中国外交部起底美国德特里克堡基地与731部队交易。截至北京时间16日凌晨，美国累计新冠肺炎死亡病例超过60万例，位居全球首位。美国政府最近却开始了新一轮关于病毒溯源的炒作，再次用所谓	On the issue of the virus's origins, what exactly is the United States trying to cover up? The MFA exposed the deal between Fort Detrick and Unit 731. As of the early morning of the 16th, the cumulative deaths from the novel coronavirus in the US exceeded 600,000, which ranks highest in the world. The U.S. government has riled	6/16/2021	1,362

	的“新冠病毒实验室泄漏”说法，把矛头对准中国。	up a new round of scrutiny into the origins of the virus, and once again used the so-called "lab leak theory" to point their fingers at China.		
Knowledge of Chang'an Street (长安街知事)	疫情当前恶意辱华的外媒记者，惩罚到了！因刊发辱华文章《中国是真正的“亚洲病夫”》，《华尔街日报》三名驻京记者的记者证被吊销！刚刚，外交部发言人耿爽在记者会上宣布了上述消息，他表示，对于发表种族歧视言论、恶意抹黑攻击中国的媒体，中国人民不欢迎。	Foreign media journalists who want to humiliate China amidst the epidemic, punishment is served! The press credentials of three Wall Street Journal reporters based in Beijing were revoked for publishing an insulting article titled "China is the Real Sick Man of Asia!" Just now, Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang announced the above news at a press conference. He said that the Chinese people do not welcome foreign media that propagate racially discriminatory rhetoric and attack China with smear campaigns.	2/19/2020	263
Zhangyouzho u1688 (张迎洲1688)	美帝胆大妄为，嘲笑我们是亚洲病夫。事态严重，勿忘国耻！请看我朋友圈第一条，跟我一起转发分享出去，中国人热爱和平，但从不惧怕，每一次转发都是正能量传播，请和我一起接力下去！让更多的人抵制美货！	American imperialists have the audacity to ridicule us as the Sick Man of Asia. During these dire circumstances, never forget the national humiliation! Please see the first post in my Weibo story, retweet and share it alongside me. The Chinese people love peace and are always fearless. Every retweet spreads positive vibes. We'll carry on together! Get more people to boycott American goods!	2/25/2020	1