

## CHAPTER 7

# Covid-19

### 7.0 Introduction

*How Wee Ng and Séagh Kehoe*

When we reflect on the profound ways in which Covid-19 impacted our lives in 2020, it is difficult to know where to begin. Much has been written about how the pandemic has disrupted, halted, and even transformed ‘normal’ everyday life in the form of millions of deaths, economic loss, as well as unprecedented curbs on social interaction. Rupture, however, is only one part of the story. Integral to the ongoing devastation of Covid-19 are the continuities and retrenchments of many deep-seated patterns of oppression and exploitation (Hagen and Elliot 2021). We saw this in the PRC when the public anger and frustration that ensued after the tragic death of Li Wenliang, the doctor who first warned of the outbreak of a new deadly virus and was told by police to ‘stop making false comments’, was swiftly met with a familiar pattern of censorship, crack-down, and nationalist reframing by the state (Zhang 2020). We also saw it in Hong Kong, where the government’s restriction of public gatherings through disease control regulation became the latest in a string of measures designed to securitise and criminalise protestors as part of the ongoing political crisis (Ismangil and Lee 2020). And we saw it again in the orientalist rhetoric across politics and media about the management of the pandemic by the PRC, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, the use by Trump and many others of racist terms to talk about the virus, and surge of Sinophobic attacks around the world on people who ‘look Chinese/Asian’, all of which put into sharp relief longstanding

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racisms in the UK, US, and across Europe. Indeed, disasters are not ‘bolts from the blue’ but have long histories with deep roots within social life (Turner 1978).

The articles in this section examine how these dynamics of rupture and continuity have unfolded across Chinese and Sinophone worlds in 2020. From celebrity politics to economic pressures of Tibetan migrant workers, to the discourses and feminist activism around menstruation, what is explored here are the many ways in which pre-existing polarities and divisions have been further illuminated and exacerbated because of the ongoing pandemic.

During the early days of the pandemic, WeChat group chats and other social media spaces became key sites where citizens of the PRC, both at home and abroad, found and shared information with friends and family about case numbers, prevention and treatment strategies, governmental efforts, rumours, and much more (Chen 2020). Influencers and other celebrities occupied an important part of this discourse. Some, for example, used social media to initiate vernacular trends to protect against Covid-19, such as social distancing and good hygiene practices (Abidin, Lee and Miao 2021). Others, however, received backlash for boasting about overseas travel experiences, even when mass isolation regulations were in place, and for their ‘donation stinginess’ to the Covid-response. As Xu and Jeffreys argue in the first article in this section, such activities provide a remarkable context for thinking about celebrity-government-public relations and celebrity politics in China. By exploring both the wave of public support for and the tsunami of criticism of celebrity behaviours during the pandemic, they demonstrate how the PRC’s legacy of state controls over mass media entertainment, the promotion of socialist role models, and informal fan networks all collude to ensure that celebrity behaviour is regulated and used to promote government policy agendas.

The intersection of power, media and Covid-19 is seen again in Fan Yang’s article in this section. Yang explores how during the pandemic menstruation became a site of power negotiations between the state, hospital managers, and feminists. She describes how hashtag activism helped to mainstream the discourse of menstruation in order to challenge a pervasive culture of period shaming. Yang also draws our attention to the ‘hero’-making project, and its distinctly masculinity dimensions, at the core of so much state propaganda during the pandemic. Indeed, as Xie and Zhou (2021) have explored, state narratives of China’s ‘ordinary heroes’ are a well-established state narrative that seek to rewrite public memory during moments of national disasters.

While Fan Yang’s piece reflects on some of the gendered dynamics of the pandemic, Sonam Lhundrop examines the ways in which ethnicity and migration have converged in rTa’u, a Tibetan area of western Sichuan. In February 2020, rTa’u became a centre of attention in China and around the world due to the large number of coronavirus cases in the area. While some Tibetans saw the spike in cases as a form of karmic retribution for the economic activities of local residents, Lhundrop argues that this response was not only rooted in

prejudice, but also concealed the many ways in which the spread of the virus in the area was directly connected to migratory practices as a result of poor economic opportunity. This resonates with much of the work we have seen on how the already precarious lives of migrant workers have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. Che, Du and Chan (2020), for example, have shown that at least 30–50 million migrants lost their jobs in late March 2020, far more than the local urban workers. For Song, Wu, Dong and Wang (2021) such experiences illustrate the systemic economic vulnerabilities, labour market inequalities and gender inequalities that migrant workers experience and the ways in which such oppressions have been exacerbated by Covid-19.

The relative neglect of the ways in which, during the pandemic, pre-existing inequalities have left some in far more precarious positions than others is far from unique to the PRC. Here in the UK, we have heard much about Covid-19 as the ‘great equaliser’ and of endless lockdowns as a story of everyone ‘being in this together’, but nothing could be further from the truth. Covid-19, like all disasters, has intensified socioeconomic inequalities (Wilson, Dwivedi and Gámez-Fernández 2020) as well as racial and class-based health disparities and vulnerabilities around the world (Sandset 2021). Sam Phan, in his article in this section, turns our attention to the ways in which Covid-19 has been linked with China and with people who ‘look East Asian’ and how this has enabled some to justify and normalise their racism towards China and East Asians in the UK and around the world. Phan’s article echoes observations by Yeh (2020) that such problems facing Chinese communities worldwide – and responses to them – today ‘cannot be contained within the borders of Chineseness’.

The more things change, the more they stay the same? Covid-19, far from a clean rupture with the world as we knew it, has re-entrenched many of the same, old patterns of power and oppression. None of this has gone unchallenged. Grassroots activists have adapted to the realities of the pandemic, as they always have done, by finding creative ways to continue confronting structures of injustice. We see this in this section in the case of the collective critiques of celebrity exceptionalism, tax evasion and wealth, the hashtag movements that challenged and sought to reframe the gender dynamics in China, the production of health information videos in rT’au local language in an effort to stem the spread of the virus, and the call for action to name and end Sinophobic rhetoric around the world. The fight to build a different world may have been forced to change tack, but it continues onwards, nonetheless.

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### 7.1 Celebrity Politics in Covid-19 China: 'Celebrities Can't Save the Country'

*Jian Xu and Elaine Jeffreys*

The Covid-19 pandemic provides a remarkable context and compelling case for thinking about celebrity politics in China. International celebrities have played an important role in poverty alleviation and disaster-relief efforts historically. Yet celebrity humanitarianism is often criticised as a 'self-serving' personal

branding exercise that promotes 'neoliberal capitalism' and perpetuates 'global inequality' (Kapoor 2012).

Celebrity humanitarianism has attracted major media and public attention in the context of the global Covid-19 pandemic. The most notable instance is perhaps the all-star 'One World: Together at Home' virtual concert organised by pop star Lady Gaga in April 2020. The concert raised US\$127 million for the World Health Organisation and its coronavirus response efforts (Beaumont-Thomas 2020). Around the same time, Madonna attracted negative publicity for describing the pandemic as a 'great equaliser' while sitting in a bathtub filled with rose petals (Lewis 2020).

Celebrity responses to Covid-19 in the People's Republic of China (PRC) have attracted a wave of public support and a tsunami of criticism on social media. Singer Han Hong, founder of the Han Hong Love Charity Foundation, became a national heroine for raising over US\$19 million in donations from hundreds of celebrities to support healthcare efforts in Wuhan—the original epicentre of the coronavirus outbreak (Zheng 2020). However, many other celebrities have been accused of lacking patriotism and social responsibility, as we explain below.

What do online discussions of PRC celebrities in the Covid-19 context reveal about celebrity-government-public relations and celebrity politics in China?

Disgruntled netizens immediately started questioning the patriotism of celebrities as national public figures because some celebrities had left or allegedly 'deserted' China at the start of the coronavirus outbreak. In late January 2020, the PRC government called on Chinese citizens to quarantine themselves or self-isolate at home during the lunar New Year holidays. Yet many celebrities had travelled overseas with families or friends around the same time, and were accused of trying to escape the virus. Some celebrities, including actors Lu Yi and Xiang Zuo and singer Yang Chaoyue, posted their vacation photographs while expressing support for people living in Wuhan on their Twitter-like Weibo accounts. Their actions sparked an online outcry from fans and other interested audiences quarantined in China (Sina 2020a).

The online criticisms increased in scale when netizens started posting photographs taken at airports of alleged 'celebrity deserters' returning to China as the pandemic escalated overseas and the domestic situation improved (Sina 2020b). Such celebrities, including singers Cai Xukun, Han Geng and Wu Yifan, were negatively contrasted with Han Hong, who had stayed at home and raised money to assist the medical workers who were saving people's lives at the risk of losing their own. Netizens condemned the celebrities who had left and then returned to China as 'renegades' and 'traitors', whereas Han was upheld as a patriot and good social role model, and called for a ban on the public dissemination of products and performances associated with the so-called traitors.

Online outcry subsequently centred on the question of whether celebrities' donations to the Covid-19 response matched their sky-high salaries. Netizens

compiled a list of celebrity donors, ranking them according to the extent of their donations (Jiemian 2020). The Weibo accounts of celebrities who were identified as not donating, or not donating enough, were then bombarded with posts accusing them of ‘donation stinginess’. Such criticisms replicated public complaints about the perceived limited nature of celebrity donations when compared to their astronomical salaries following the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake. They also reiterated public criticisms of high celebrity salaries when compared to the salaries of ordinary Chinese workers surrounding the 2018 Fan Bingbing tax evasion scandal. Celebrity salaries became a renewed hot topic in the coronavirus context as netizens rebuked super-rich stars for failing to support China and the Chinese people through publicised donations in a time of national crisis.

Online calls for cuts to celebrity salaries, and higher salaries and public esteem for professionals in medicine and the sciences, coalesced around the slogan ‘Celebrities can’t save the country’. Professor Li Lanjuan, a Chinese epidemiologist who is regarded as a Covid-19 heroine, coined this slogan during a press interview. She said, ‘I hope that after the pandemic, the government will give high salaries to frontline scientists ... Celebrities can’t make our country stronger ... The prosperity of [China] doesn’t depend on celebrities, but rather on the talented people in science, education and medicine’ (Daynews 2020). In other words, celebrities are overvalued; their failure to ‘step up’ at a time of national crisis shows they do not deserve the income derived from public acclaim.

The recent expansion of formal controls over the PRC’s celebrity and entertainment industries, and the political importance of online public sentiment, adds weight to what might otherwise be viewed as simply ‘sour grape’ criticisms. In October 2014, President Xi Jinping delivered a speech stating that literature and arts should promote ‘core socialist values’, be creative and people-orientated, and serve the political agenda of the Chinese Communist Party. Artists and cultural workers are expected to pursue ‘professional excellence and moral integrity’ (*de yi shuang xin* 德艺双馨), an ideal that the Communist Party has promoted since the Mao era (Xu and Yang 2021). However, Xi’s speech was followed by new regulatory initiatives designed to promote professional ethics and social responsibility in the entertainment industries. Regulations issued in 2014 enjoined film, television, and radio employees to disseminate ‘positive energy’ by providing excellent products and presenting a good public image, and banned the appearance on broadcasting platforms of ‘misdeed artists’ (*lie ji yi ren* 劣迹艺人), that is, actors, directors, and screenwriters convicted by the public security forces for engaging in drug, prostitution or other offences (Reuters 2014). The PRC’s first Film Industry Promotion Law of 2017, for example, stipulates that actors, directors, and other persons in film should uphold virtue and art, comply with laws and regulations, respect social morality, abide by professional ethics, adopt self-discipline measures, and establish a positive social image (China Daily 2017). China’s first draft radio and

television law released in March 2021, which is currently seeking public advice, stipulates the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) has the right to restrict broadcasting of programmes associated with misdeed artists (Sohu 2021), which has made the comeback of the misdeed artists to the public eye harder than ever.

Government demands that celebrities display a positive social persona in exchange for a continuing career are reinforced by similar public expectations. The tax evasion scandal associated with Fan Bingbing, once China's highest-paid movie star, is a case in point. Online outcry over Fan's alleged use of 'yin-yang contracts' to evade tax, and thus failure to meet her citizen obligations, prompted a government investigation and resulted in Fan being ordered to pay US\$ 129 million in late and evaded taxes (Gittleson 2018). The NRTA then issued a Notice recommending major pay cuts for radio and television stars. The strength of public condemnation has ensured that efforts by Fan to re-establish her online presence have not been received positively to date. Public anger over the perceived failure of high income-earners to 'give back' to society has been reignited in the Covid-19 context because many people have lost their jobs or had their salaries reduced.

The dual exercise of top-down government regulation and bottom-up online public supervision ensures that China's celebrities have inherent 'star vulnerability' rather than 'star power' (Yu 2012). Scholars of celebrity politics in western societies have variously refuted the argument that celebrities are a 'powerless elite' because they have limited access to real institutional and political power (Alberoni 1962). Instead, they contend that contemporary celebrities have economic and social power that extends to the political realm because they can influence audiences and political agendas through media publicity, especially given the mediatisation of western democratic politics. In contrast, the PRC's legacy of state controls over mass media entertainment and promotion of socialist role models has ensured that even contemporary celebrities are expected to promote government policy agendas. This expectation is being reinforced not only through regulatory frameworks, but also through the informal means provided by digitally equipped netizens – fans, anti-fans and other interested audiences – who are keen to supervise celebrity behaviours.

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## 7.2 Mediated Menstruation: A Gender Perspective in the Time of Coronavirus

*Fan Yang*

Throughout the medical response to Covid-19 in the People's Republic of China, over 50% of doctors and 90% of nurses were women. However, across the rhetoric of 'soldiers fighting in the national crisis', representations of medical workers across mainstream media sidelined and even erased femininity in order to serve the masculine cause. There was much publicity around female medical workers having their heads shaved before their departure to Wuhan, the city in China that experienced the highest number of Covid-19 infections, and around a nurse coming back to work 10 days after experiencing a miscarriage and claiming the title of 'macho-man' for self-encouragement. In this masculinised morale-boosting propaganda that circulated nationwide, the physiology of female medical workers was rendered expendable, thus invisible and unattended. It was not until the hashtag activism # Sisters Fight Against Coronavirus in Comfort that was launched by feminist blogger Liang Yu on Weibo, the most popular social media platform in China, that companies and philanthropic funding began to deliver sanitary goods to hospitals in Hubei province. This hashtag activism not only catered to the real needs of female medical workers, but also brought women's menstruation to the fore of public discussion. I will argue that during the pandemic, menstruation became a site of power negotiations between the state, hospital managers and feminists. The hashtag activism helped to mainstream the discourse of menstruation and was intended to challenge the culture of period shaming. However, as we will see, the discussion of menstruation did not take place in an inclusive way, failing to take account of women who do not menstruate and people of other genders who do. In this way, the cisgender binary remained unchallenged across these public discussions.

Chinese state media ignored and sidelined the issue of menstruation among female medical workers. On February 17th, a nurse in Wuhan mentioned menstruation during her interview on CCTV13 but this reference was later cut out in the afternoon re-run. On the one hand, non-menstruating female medical workers fit the narrative of the masculine hero across publicity campaigns. 'Girl talk' such as menstruation should be confined to the private sphere rather than being made public, it appeared. On the other hand, if the menstruation of female medical workers was not visible, their material need for sanitary goods could thus be neglected. Sanitary goods for women were not included in the

governmental supply of anti-pandemic necessities. These necessities prioritised personal protective equipment, which claimed to be gender neutral, yet were actually based on male standards. For instance, the supply of only large sized protective clothes failed to take into consideration small-sized women, which increased their risk of infection given that the poor fitting protective gear allowed in air.

Hospitals functioned as legal recipients for donations of sanitary goods. But the elimination of menstruation from mainstream media representations blinded hospital managers, usually male, to the needs of female medical workers. As pointed out by Liang Yu, hospital managers at first turned down offers of sanitary goods by saying that 'these are not necessary' (Pan 2020). It was left to hospital managers to decide whether sanitary goods could be successfully distributed to female medical workers who were in urgent need of them but felt too awkward to bring it up. The power dynamics between male superiors and female inferiors as well as masculine ideals over 'shameful' female physiology were intensified across hospital spaces during the crisis. The interference by male hospital managers in the distribution of sanitary goods also included re-distribution of some sanitary goods intended for women to male medical workers. Period diapers were taken away by men for use during long working hours, despite the fact that they were not intended to be used in that way. Female medical workers had to ask Liang to request donations of sanitary pads instead of period diapers, as the latter would only end up going to male colleagues, causing a scarcity of sanitary resources for women. From rejecting to dividing up donations of sanitary goods, hospital managers inherited the logic from the state, that is, of ignoring women's physiology. The masculinisation strategy from the state to hospitals during the Covid-19 crisis neglected the particular needs of female medical workers.

The hashtag activism # Sisters Fight Against Coronavirus in Comfort was launched by Liang Yu, a feminist blogger on Weibo, on February 6th. After the case of the Feminist Five in 2015, in which five feminist activists were arrested because of their public campaign against sexual harassment, feminist activism in China shifted from offline to online. Weibo became the major social media platform for hundreds of thousands of grassroots feminist bloggers, with different scales of followers discussing and debating women issues. As of March 22nd, the hashtag mobilisation of donating sanitary goods succeeded in collecting 2,532,044.88 RMB, benefiting over 84,500 women (Liang 2020). The volunteers involved in fundraising the purchase and delivery of sanitary goods were mostly women. This female alliance was formed under the slogan 'sisters save themselves', which emphasised the marginalised status of female voices and the absence of governmental support for female medical workers during the pandemic. The highly efficient hashtag activism was credited by China Women's Development Foundation, the official charity organisation for poverty-alleviation and women's development under All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), in its post on Weibo. The dialogue between the grassroots and

the state could also be seen in ACWF's announcement of its agenda to include sanitary goods in the list of official emergency provisions (Huang 2020). The resistance against this instance of feminist activism was not from the state, but from anti-feminism networks on Weibo. These male bloggers attacked Liang and female volunteers for their high-profile campaign highlighting women's rights, which, to them, equated with man-hating. Although their verbal attacks bothered women involved in the hashtag activism, they were not discouraged, as they received discursive and emotional support from numerous feminist bloggers fighting back against misogyny on Weibo.

Since the wide circulation of the hashtag, feminist activism on social media has put menstruation, or 'the trifle under women's pants' (a comment on Liang's Weibo from a male blogger), on the table, and the donation of sanitary goods has even extended into a new campaign against menstruation-shaming. Various hashtag campaigns were launched on Weibo, such as # I'm a Woman and I Menstruate and # Menstruation Not Hidden to normalise the visibility of menstruation. Corporate powers, such as Libresses, also participated in and helped mainstream the campaign by exhibiting new commercials about sanitary pads under the slogan of 'menstruation not hidden.' The blue water used in previous commercials, exposed by feminists as a symbol of menstrual blood taboo, was replaced with red.

The visibility of menstruation is significant because, for many, it represents the visibility of femaleness, thus the visibility of women. In the publicity surrounding medical workers fighting like macho soldiers in a battle against the virus, female medical workers could only be seen when wearing masculine masquerade. The power negotiations around women's menstruation rested on the legitimacy of femininity in the masculine cause of fighting coronavirus. The related erasure of femininity led directly to the erasure of the contributions made by female medical workers, as shown in the all-male publicity of 'anti-pandemic heroes' and state nominations of anti-pandemic heroes in which 20% male medical workers seized over 50% of awards. To restore femaleness, feminist bloggers on Weibo launched hashtag activism. They not only successfully collected donations for sanitary goods, but also disseminated feminist discourses to resist the period shaming of patriarchal culture. These numerous sporadic grassroots feminist activities were the pivotal power to reframe the gender dynamics in China during the Covid-19. The binary categorisation of gender that dominated both state and feminist discourse, however, should also prompt reflection in order to further feminist critique of gender essentialism in patriarchal society.

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### 7.3 The ‘Wounded Weanling’: An Introduction to Daofu, the Epicenter of the Coronavirus Epidemic in the Tibetan Regions of China

*Sonam Lhundrop*

The name rTa'u (Daofu in Chinese) means ‘weanling’ – a young foal that has just been weaned. This county in the Tibetan area of western Sichuan is not well-known, but has recently become a centre of attention in China and around the world, due to the large number of coronavirus cases there. Suddenly, the county’s name seems apt: the place and its people have become fragile and vulnerable, like an unsteady weanling.

Until February 19th, the only information on the situation in Daofu consisted of daily government reports of the number of people infected in the county. But on February 19th, the Central Television News published an interview transcript titled ‘One Prefecture, 62 Reported Cases! Why Is There Such a High Concentration in Daofu (Ganzi Prefecture, Sichuan Province)?’ (Ganzi Daofu yangguang shui an 甘孜道孚阳光水 2020).

The following is an excerpt translated from the published transcripts, containing an interview with the head manager of the Ganzi coronavirus prevention team of Daofu county.

*17th February. Ganzi Prefecture, Sichuan, has 5 newly-reported cases, all from Daofu County. As of midnight on the 17th of February, there have been a total of 62 reported cases, among which 57 are from Daofu County.*

**Question:** What is the current coronavirus situation in Ganzi prefecture, and particularly in Daofu County?

**Answer:** Outside Daofu, there are five cases in total in three counties, which are Kangding, Seda, and Daocheng, all of which came from Wuhan (i.e., non-natives). As of midnight on February 17th, 57 cases have been reported in Daofu: two have been discharged from hospital. Additionally, there are 11 suspected cases and 16 asymptomatic cases, which may well turn into infected cases soon. All cases reported from Daofu belong to five townships and one town: Mazi, Kongse, Gexi, Geka, and Wari townships, and Xianshui Town, the county seat.

*Upon discovering the first case on the 24th of January, inspection work has been systematically conducted, including identifying and separating those who had close contact with the infected. This work has enabled us to identify two sources for the initial spread of the epidemic. One is from a Mr. Luo who, before experiencing symptoms, traveled to places like Chengdu, Nanchong and Meishan, and returned to Daofu on the 18th. Subsequently, he attended multiple gatherings, resulting in several families becoming infected. This is identified as the main source of the epidemic. Another source is a truck driver, Mr. Jiang, who traveled to places like Ya'an and Chengdu around the 20th of January and who infected his co-driver.*

**Question:** *What are some preventive programs that have been implemented?*

**Answer:** Based on initial data, all intimate and distant social contacts of the infected people from the above five townships and one town have been separated either in hospitals or at home. Thus, to prevent further infection, by midnight on the 17th of February, 339 intimate social contacts had been quarantined and medically inspected; 1,908 distant social contacts were being quarantined at home and medically inspected. A total of 8,463 social contacts, with or without symptoms, were medically examined. We have modified our 'wait until symptoms' method to 'Check all in advance,' so as to identify all sources of infection in the shortest possible period.

*According to the medical examination results, since February, all infected individuals were identified among the 8,463 contacts. Until midnight on the 17th of February, a total of 7,018 contacts were medically examined, among whom there are 57 with initial symptoms. Results for 1,445 contacts are yet to come out.*

*Starting from the 17th of February, to enforce preventive measures, all in-coming and out-going vehicles are prohibited from driving through Daofu County; within Daofu County, all routes from and to those five townships and one town have checkpoints.*

Daofu is located about 550km west of Sichuan's provincial capital, Chengdu, and about 250km northeast of Ganzi's prefectural seat, Kangding. It is on the southeast edge of Tibetan Plateau, and borders Kangding Municipality to the southeast, Danba County to the east, Luhuo County to the west, and Jinchuan County of Aba Prefecture to the north. It had a population of 56,943 in 2015, of whom 89% were Tibetans, and almost a third (27.4%) were urbanites (*Daofu xian renmin zhengfu* 道孚县人民政府 2017). The county has an average altitude of 3,245 meters and is divided into three ecological zones: in the east of the county are the Bamei grasslands and hills, inhabited by both nomads and farmers; in the south are the Zhaba canyons, occupied by farmers, and in the north are the Yuke high altitude grasslands, occupied primarily by nomads.

The coronavirus crisis has seen an outpouring of generosity from all corners of society, including efforts to disseminate public health information. Amongst Tibetans, an important part of this effort has been dedicated to translating public health information to people who speak minoritised languages that are different from standard Tibetan (Yu 2020). There have been several videos directed to Tibetans in Daofu who speak a language named after the county—rTa'u—a Tibeto-Burman language that is incomprehensible to neighbouring Tibetans, who refer to the language as 'Ghost Language' (Tunzhi 2019).

These videos are of great benefit to the 45,000 Tibetans who speak rTa'u. As a speaker of rTa'u language, I have conversed with several people from Daofu about these videos (*Zangdi yangguang* 藏地阳光 2020). Most of them expressed surprise, since there is practically no media in the language. One person said, 'It is such a wonderful feeling that people we do not even know would make such an effort to produce these videos in our mother-tongue, to educate us about this epidemic.' Another elderly man told me he was genuinely excited to hear the information in his mother-tongue, because it sounded more trustworthy.

There has been an outpouring of love and support towards Daofu people from other Tibetan areas, since Daofu has not only the highest infection rate in Tibetan areas, but also ranks second in the whole of Sichuan province, right after Chengdu City, the provincial capital. The following is a translated poem that was written to show support for Daofu people (*A Guoluo yangguang geci pingtai* A果洛阳光歌词平台 2020).

Daofu: The Delightful Dharma-holder  
by Tshering Norbu

Franky, I call this place The Delightful Dharma-holders  
It is an achieved name:

where Dharma is wholeheartedly adored and karma is protected as the eyes  
where unity is as undifferentiated as the fingers of one hand,  
where wild animals befriend humans, and thus are conferred freedom,  
where fathers behold wisdom and mothers soften the wildest souls,  
where sons engage in trading and daughters are prized for their elegance.  
Often, when the pilgrims (to Lhasa) arrive in Daofu  
they are struck by the beauty  
and wishes are made to be reborn in this place.  
Oh! A snowless, sorrowful winter,  
a terrifying epidemic engulfs this place,  
daily increasing numbers reflect your worried face,  
like an increasing flame slowly diminishing.  
—continuing

Many Tibetans have sought answers as to why Daofu, in particular, has emerged as the epicentre of the coronavirus outbreak. Unfortunately, many of

their explanations are rooted in prejudices and shrouded in misunderstandings of Buddhist philosophy, which constitutes the core of the perceptual and ideological world of Tibetan farmers and nomads. In WeChat discussions, many Tibetans have interpreted Daofu's misfortune as karmic retribution for inhabitants' supposed lack of piety, as reflected in their economic activities: many Daofu Tibetans are traders and entrepreneurs.

It is true that Daofu people are good at business, but it is not clear whether this has anything to do with the spread of the coronavirus in Daofu. Perhaps instead we need to look at local history to understand the situation. In the 1980s, when the local economy first opened to the outside, Daofu became home to a booming timber industry. Although the lumber companies were owned by outsiders, people in Daofu exploited this opportunity by transporting logs to Chengdu. Then, when this industry was closed down in the early 2000s by strict environmental regulations, many Daofu people stayed in the transport industry, working for local mines and other industries.

In this context, it is certainly significant that both of Daofu's 'patient zeros' were local people who had been travelling for business immediately before they brought the epidemic home. It is perhaps a lack of local economic opportunity, rather than a fatal character flaw, which has wounded the weanling, and left this place and its people particularly vulnerable.

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## 7.4 Reflections on the Racialised Discourse Surrounding Covid-19

*Sam Phan*

The language that we use is extremely powerful and can influence the ways in which we perceive reality. Think about those times when immigrants have been intentionally referred to as ‘swarms’ or ‘invasions’, resulting in the dehumanisation and discrimination of millions of immigrants across the world. It was this same phenomenon that produced ideas of a ‘Chinese Invasion’ in the 1800s (San Francisco Chronicle 1873) that eventually led to the exclusion of Chinese people from the United States. We see the same old fears newly revived today.

Donald Trump, as well as a string of other Republican politicians, have adopted the term ‘Chinese Virus’ despite the World Health Organisation intentionally naming it Covid-19 in order to avoid the stigmatisation of a certain ethnic group or country (Kuo 2020; Gabbatt 2020). This racialisation of the virus stokes xenophobia and flames the already growing racism against Chinese people, home and abroad. It also echoes centuries-old ideas of the ‘Yellow Peril’ trope that depicts people of East Asian descent as an existential threat to the Western world. It was this fear that ultimately allowed U.S. Congress to pass the Page Act of 1875, a law that restricted Asian immigration, as well as the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, the first American law that explicitly prevented all members of a specific group from immigrating on the sole basis of their ethnicity. In the present day, calling Covid-19 the ‘Chinese Virus’ can be just as dangerous.

Despite the epicentre of Covid-19 moving away from China months ago and the virus not being confined to a particular place or people, Covid-19 is still being linked with China and with people who look East Asian. The virus has been painted as an inherently Chinese phenomenon which has consequently enabled some people to justify and normalise their racism towards China and East Asians. This has then resulted in various instances of racism, including White House officials referring to the virus as the ‘Kung-Flu’ (Jiang 2020), Mike Pompeo tweeting that ‘China has a history of infecting the world’ (Pompeo 2020) and Donald Trump telling an Asian American reporter that she ‘should ask China’ when faced with a question concerning the coronavirus (ITV News 2020). If government officials adopt this racialised rhetoric when talking about Covid-19, then the connection between the virus and Chinese people will be reinforced.

It is precisely this racialisation of Covid-19—the linking of an entire ethnic group with a virus that has killed hundreds of thousands – that has led to the verbal and physical discrimination of East and Southeast Asians across the globe. In my own experience (Phan 2020), I have been verbally abused by strangers asking ‘if I liked to eat Chinese bat soup’ and have even had someone raise their hand to hit me whilst shouting ‘don’t give me the coronavirus!’ In my two decades of living in Britain, I have never felt so alien or violently discriminated against. And I am not alone in feeling like this.

Around the world, attacks against East Asians have been a common occurrence during this pandemic. Examples in Britain include Chinese takeaway owners being spat at (Ng 2020), an NHS nurse attacked on her way to an overtime shift (Staples 2020) and students being beaten up in racially motivated attacks (BBC News 2020; Bains and McGee 2020). Recent police data revealed that in Britain, hate crimes against Chinese people have tripled during the coronavirus outbreak (Lovett 2020). One thing has become clear, a racialised virus has resulted in racialised attacks.

Towards the beginning of the outbreak, some newspaper headlines were quick to racialise the virus, with French newspaper *Courrier Picard*’s headline ‘coronavirus chinois: ALERTE JAUNE’ (Chinese coronavirus: YELLOW ALERT) (Courrier Picard 2020), the German newspaper *Der Spiegel* running the headline ‘Corona-virus: Made in China’ (Der Spiegel 2020) as well as a headline from *The Wall Street Journal* calling China the ‘Real Sick man of Asia’ (Mead 2020). These derogatory headlines draw specifically on historical language that make reference to concepts and ideas of China being subordinate, inferior and a threat to the world.

Moreover, the speculation around how Covid-19 originated is also heavily tinged with racist ideas of Chinese people being the ‘exotic’ and ‘uncivilised’ other who have caused this pandemic. It is still a commonly held belief that it was the ‘exotic eating habits’ of Chinese people that led to the emergence of Covid-19. Michael Caputo, the spokesperson for the US Department of Health and Human Services wrote in now-deleted tweets ‘millions of Chinese suck the blood out of rabid bats as an appetiser and eat the ass out of anteaters’ (Kaczynski et al. 2020). For Asians everywhere, these misguided perceptions are not unfamiliar, and it is clear how patterns of Sinophobia and racist ideas have been recycled to fit current narratives.

Another consequence of racialising Covid-19 is that it shifts the blame towards China, and thus fails to look introspectively at the failures and shortcomings of our own governments in addressing the pandemic. The pandemic has revealed so much about the underlying systemic racism and inequality that exists within our own structures. Finger-pointing only acts as a distraction from these problems and adds to the plethora of misinformation and misunderstandings that surround the coronavirus.

The implications of the coronavirus are already exhausting enough for East Asians without having to face coronavirus-related racism. The choice to racialise

the virus is intentional and has devastating real-life consequences. We are all impacted by the coronavirus and it is important that we work together to end it, rather than allowing divisive language to incite blame, fear and xenophobia.

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