

The “China Virus” Meme and the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election

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In this essay, I argue that in the run-up to the 2020 U.S. presidential election, “China virus” became a meme that connected traditional media spaces, online spaces, and policy spaces. The template for the meme was created by repeating terminology that fixed a link between SARS-CoV-2 (and its attendant disease COVID-19) and China. I trace the co-production and circulation of the meme within the modern-day version of a conservative echo chamber, comprising the President, his administration, Fox News hosts, Republican politicians, informal Trump advisers, and Trump supporters. As the meme reverberated through the echo chamber, it was assigned the function of an identity marker and the connotation of an “irresponsible China,” which ultimately built toward the national security narrative of China as a threat. The meme was also employed in two election strategies: the domestic policy of blaming China and the foreign policy of tough-on-China. Outside the echo chamber, however, the China virus meme was seen to function as a means of pandemic othering, and it connoted the return of the “yellow peril.”

The “China Virus” Meme and the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election

Through 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic dominated people’s lives and commandeered the mediascape. The pandemic and the presidential election composed two “intense, yearlong storylines” in the news in the United States (Mitchell et al. 2021, 21). In this essay, I focus on the controversy that intersected both of these storylines: the naming of SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus as the “China virus.” I argue that the “China virus” terminology became a *meme* that was co-produced and circulated—partly, but not exclusively—in an *echo chamber* comprising the Trump

administration, Fox News hosts, Republican politicians, informal Trump advisers, and Trump supporters.

Limor Shifman (2014, 7–8, italics in the original) defines memes as “(a) *a group of digital items sharing common characteristics* of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created *with awareness of each other*; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed *via the Internet by many users*.” Accordingly, the “China virus” terminology provided the shared form, or the template of the meme, which was then discursively populated by shifting meanings, identities, and functions. Here, “China virus” terminology refers to all variations of the term denoting the Chinese origins of the coronavirus and its attendant disease. Whether the terms in use were, for example, the “Wuhan virus” or the “Chinese Plaque,” I consider these as variations of one and the same “China virus” meme template. While Shifman analyzes memes as socially constructed discourses traveling the internet, the “China virus” meme traversed and connected online spaces as well as traditional media spaces and policy spaces. As I will show in this essay, the meme was circulated, repeated, mimicked, and modified in the run-up to the election. It became the cornerstone of Trump administration’s COVID-19 response, was adopted as an identity marker, functioned as part of Trump’s presidential election strategy, and formed a building block of the emerging national security narrative of China as a threat. Effectively, the meme coalesced domestic and foreign policy.

The essay is based on an analysis of selected online, media, and policy sources from 2020.^[i] I have identified and selected tweets from Donald Trump’s now defunct Twitter feed, episodes from prominent Fox News programs,^[ii] and speeches made by Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in which the “China virus” terminology, COVID-19, and China were addressed.

Making of the Meme

By the end of December 2019, news about a new infectious disease in the city of Wuhan, China, began to make the rounds worldwide. In January 2020, the disease was confirmed as being caused by a novel coronavirus, and experts alerted the world about the potential outbreak of a pandemic. Trump’s trade advisor, Peter Navarro, sounded an alarm in his January 29 memo to the National Security Council, noting that the coronavirus could reach the United States and cost countless of lives and dollars (Osterholm and Olshaker 2020, 16). Two days later, the World Health Organization (WHO 2020a) declared “a public health emergency of international concern over the

global outbreak of novel coronavirus,” and on March 11, the WHO (2020c) characterized COVID-19 as a pandemic. By that time, Navarro’s predictions had already materialized, and 24 U.S. states had declared a state of emergency over COVID-19 (Razek 2020).

Over the spring, the “China virus” terminology was notably embraced on Fox News. Media Matters for America—a politically left-leaning media watchdog organization—noted that from January to March, “Fox News personalities and their guests have used derogatory language to describe the disease 144 times” (Savillo 2020). Tucker Carlson, Sean Hannity, and Laura Ingraham, in particular, were prolific users of different variations of the terms “Wuhan virus” and “Chinese virus”. However, before the WHO (2020b) issued COVID-19 as the official name for the disease on February 11, the term “Wuhan Coronavirus” also appeared on CNN, for example (Provalis Research 2020).

The terminology was also adopted by President Trump, as was evident on his communication platform of choice—Twitter. A search for the term “virus” in Trump’s Twitter feed reveals that in the early months of 2020, he tended to refer to “Coronavirus” and “CoronaVirus.” The President muddled the conceptual distinction between the virus and the attendant disease and referred to both as “covid,”^[iii] especially in conjunction with mentions to “Covid Relief Bill” or “Covid drugs.” Occasionally, he clarified that by “COVID-19” he meant the “China Virus” (e.g., on July 7). Then, during and after March, President Trump gravitated more and more toward the terms “Chinese Virus” and “China Virus” in his tweets.^[iv] In May, the President adopted another variation: “the Plague,”^[v] and used it repeatedly thereafter.

The similarity between the vocabularies of President Trump and Fox News hosts was hardly a coincidence. In fact, Matthew Gertz (2018) from Media Matters claims that during Trump’s presidency, there existed a “Trump–Fox Feedback Loop” that covered a wide variety of topics. Gertz posits that this loop was formed in stages: first, Trump live-tweeted Fox News programs; second, his tweets upended the news cycle for the rest of the day; and third, the tweets were then reported on Fox News. Along similar lines, Brian Stelter characterized the relationship as symbiotic, in which “Trump props up the network and the network props up Trump” (Stelter 2020, 23).

While the idea of the Trump–Fox loop is informative for understanding how the “China virus” meme was co-produced, how it traveled, and what discursive contents were attached to it, in this

essay I will show that at times the loop broke down and that the meme was anything but exclusive to it. Representatives of the Trump administration, the Republican Party, and the conservative media and movement all participated in the production and circulation of the meme. And yet, so did news outlets and political actors with no connections to the loop; by criticizing the meme, they participated in assigning meanings and functions to it. Perhaps more instructive would be to view the Trump–Fox loop as part of an echo chamber—a modern-day extension or modification of the conservative echo chamber that was created by the conservative media in the 1990s and 2000s (Jamieson and Cappella 2010). Like its earlier conservative predecessor, the echo chamber of 2020 represented “homogenous clustering” (Breuer and Johnston 2019, 435) or a space in which individuals are exposed to only like-minded people and information that is ideologically consonant and confirms their pre-existing opinions (Kitchens et al. 2020, 1622).

In the early spring, the President and some Fox News hosts contended that the new coronavirus was not a threat, and there was no need to foment panic or hysteria (Chiu 2020a; Shephard 2020). Among the main news outlets, Fox News stood out in terms of the tendency of its hosts to characterize the threat of the pandemic as overstated (Provalis Research 2020). Yet, some actors within the echo chamber contested this line of thought. Tucker Carlson (2020a), for example, emphasized the seriousness of the COVID-19 threat very early on in his opening monologues. He criticized both sides of the political aisle for not taking proper action to counter the threat, but especially those who claimed that the virus was not a serious problem. Carlson conjectured that maybe these people did not know any better, or maybe it was because of the presidential and congressional elections that were coming up. Whatever the reason, he concluded, they were wrong: “The Chinese coronavirus is a major event. It will affect your life. And by the way, it’s definitely not just the flu” (Carlson 2020a). Similarly, Maria Bartiromo and Senator Tom Cotton (R-AR)—a political Trump ally and frequent Fox News guest—raised the alarm over the virus (Fordham 2020).

The echo chamber sent mixed messages on the gravity of the issue and on how to respond to the pandemic. This was reflected in the reactions of the Trump and Fox News audiences. Some reacted by wearing a protective mask, or by practicing social distancing, while others eschewed all COVID measures. In fact, one study showed that Tucker Carlson’s audience took protective measures against the virus “much earlier than Hannity viewers” (Sullivan 2020b). However, as March progressed, Trump changed his tone. On March 18, Trump tweeted that he had “always

treated the Chinese Virus very seriously” and had done “a very good job from the beginning.” This turnaround has been largely attributed to the influence of Tucker Carlson (Shephard 2020; Sullivan 2020a). Other Fox News hosts fell in line around the same time. Sean Hannity claimed that the news network had been telling their viewers “from day one” that the “virus is serious” (Gabbatt 2020).

In trying to make sense of COVID-19 and debating the nation’s response to it, the template of the meme was slowly forged through repetition of “China virus” terminology. And by March, the meme was in full circulation.

The (Identity) Politics of Naming

Once the template of the meme had been established, it quickly stirred controversy. Headlines in, for example, the *New York Times* (Rogers et al. 2020), NBC (Yam 2020a), *Vox* (Scott 2020a), the *Washington Post* (Chiu 2020b), and CNN (Filipovic 2020) criticized the President’s use of the “China virus” terminology, while Media Matters (Savillo 2020) took aim at Fox News. The meme was condemned for its linkages to xenophobia, racism, and anti-Asian bigotry. According to reports compiled and published by the Stop AAPI (Asian American Pacific Islander) Hate Reporting Center, people of Chinese background—and people of Asian background in general—faced verbal harassment, shunning, physical assaults, and potential civil rights violations in connection with COVID-19 (Stop AAPI Hate 2020a). Anti-Asian American discrimination was very real and nationwide in the United States during the pandemic.

President Trump paused at the criticism. In a press briefing on March 24, he pledged his support for U.S. citizens with Asian heritage (MSNBC 2020). Trump chose not to use the term “Chinese virus” in the briefing. He explained his decision later that day in an interview with Bill Hemmer on Fox News: “You know, everyone knows it came from China, but I decided we shouldn’t make any more of a big deal out of it” (Fox News 2020c). The pause, however, was short-lived. On March 25, he congratulated his administration in a tweet for getting “great reviews on our handling of Covid 19, sometimes referred to as the China Virus.”

Meanwhile, in his opening monologues, Tucker Carlson (2020b) insisted on using the “China virus” terminology and denounced other alternatives as dangerous euphemisms at a time when “accuracy and clear language in the way you talk about the threat” was essential. He claimed that

the risks of the virus had gone unheeded because the situation had been politicized with the controversy on naming:

One of the reasons that Americans may have missed the significance of this virus is because unfortunately, it came enmeshed with politics. On television, talking heads have wasted hours upon valuable hours yammering not about the virus and its potential victims, but how it is racist to tie the coronavirus to China, where it came from. (Carlson 2020b)

Similarly, Sean Hannity accused the “media mob” of politicizing the issue at a time when a unified response was most called for (Fox News 2020b). According to a text analysis comparing transcripts of different television news broadcasts, blaming the media and Democrats for politicizing the COVID-19 was a distinctly Fox News theme (Provalis Research 2020).

Fox News hosts and President Trump had two main lines of defense against the criticism they faced. The first line was encapsulated by Maria Bartiromo, who in her March interview with Senator Cotton claimed that the virus originated in China, and hence the term “Chinese virus” was perfectly applicable. Senator Cotton agreed. (Blitzer 2020a). For both Fox News hosts and President Trump, this line was fortified by the point that there are a host of viruses and diseases named after their place of origin (Fox News 2020b; 2020c). Persisting in using the term “Chinese virus” on grounds that it came from China ignored the best practices for naming human infectious diseases issued by the WHO years earlier. The 2015 WHO guidelines urged the creation and employment of “scientifically sound and socially acceptable” names that would not incur “negative effects on nations, economies and people.” The guidelines were to apply to new diseases only. Thus, although older, established names, such as “swine flu” and “Middle East Respiratory Syndrome,” clearly stigmatized particular economic sectors and communities, the WHO had no intention of changing or censoring those names. (WHO 2015.)

In light of earlier naming practices, Hannity declared that it was an “insane talking point,” propagated by the “social justice warriors in the media mob,” to claim that “using the word China or Wuhan virus to describe the Wuhan virus is racist” (Fox News 2020b). Hannity’s comment touched upon the second line of defense: to dismiss the criticism as identity politics. Carlson (2020b), for example, pleaded that such a moment of crisis was not the “time to indulge in the lowest and dumbest kind of identity politics”. Conservative or right-wing critique of identity

politics is nothing new (Scott 2020b). Yet, while Fox News hosts and President Trump accused the media and the left of identity politics, they at the same time forged the “China virus” meme into a marker for political identity. The President himself urged his supporters at a rally to refrain from using the term “coronavirus,” because “corona” sounds like a beautiful place in Italy. Instead, he argued his supporters should opt for the term “China virus,” which “the radical left” refused to use (CNBC TV18 2020). In other words, the “China virus” meme was used as a deliberate taunt to liberals and progressives. The “China virus” meme functioned as a symbol for standing with President Trump, essentially not that different from wearing a red Make America Great Again hat. The “China virus” meme firmly established what the Trump camp was not (i.e., radical, left-wing Democrats), suggesting that they were the exact opposite (i.e., conservative, right-wing Republicans). This speaks to Corey Robin’s (2011) argument that conservatism is forged in reaction and negation. Using the meme prompted a backlash, to which the 2020 echo chamber reacted by accusing the critics of making the naming of the virus about identity politics. At the same time, they embraced their own form of identity politics, and employed the meme to drive home the distinction between themselves and the critics.

Blaming China

The Trump administration defended the “China virus” terminology by claiming that it was not targeted at U.S. citizens with Asian heritage, but rather it was “an indictment of China for letting the virus get here” (Yam 2020b). Thus, the administration employed the “China virus” meme to blame China for the outbreak of the pandemic. This, I would claim, was an intentional election tactic, purported to counter domestic criticism over the administration’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Before President Trump fully embraced the “China virus” terminology, he utilized the words “Coronavirus” and “CoronaVirus,” most notably in tweets in which he emphasized the good relations and cooperation between the United States and China. For example, on March 23, Trump tweeted about having a conversation with Xi Jinping, the President of the People’s Republic of China, discussing “in great detail the CoronaVirus,” and added that the U.S. was working closely with China on the issue. Soon, however, the President’s tweets, speeches, and interviews flipped, and criticism of the Democrats and the media playing identity politics was joined with criticism of China. “Blame China” was a strategy put forward in a memo sent by the National Republican

Senatorial Committee to the Republican campaigns. The memo, dated April 17, urged Republican candidates to evade questions on the President's handling of the pandemic, except for the "China Travel Ban" he issued on January 31. Instead, the memo advised them to direct their attention to China, arguing that "Coronavirus was a Chinese hit-and-run followed by a cover-up that cost thousands of lives". If questions of racism arose, those were to be rejected by assuring that "No one is blaming Chinese Americans" (Isenstadt 2020).

In March, Trump was still hesitant, granting in a press conference that "I don't know if you'd say China is to blame" (Chiu 2020a). And on April 19, he mused in a press briefing that the spread of the virus may have been a mistake on the part of the Chinese, but adding, "if they were knowingly responsible, yeah, I mean, then sure there should be consequences" (Rourke 2020). However, by April 28, he was faithfully following the script set out in the memo and laid the blame for the coronavirus outbreak squarely on China (Davidson and Rourke 2020). Again, in a Rose Garden speech in May, he stated that "China's cover-up of the Wuhan virus allowed the disease to spread all over the world, instigating a global pandemic" (White House 2020a). He reiterated the theme on Fox News (Olson 2020) and took his "blame China" message to the world stage as well. In September, he addressed the United Nations General Assembly and faulted the Chinese government and the WHO for the worldwide spread of the virus—which he again termed the "China virus" (White House 2020b).

Fox News hosts had turned to blame-shifting well before the campaign memo. On March 18, the same day that newspaper headlines were deploring the use of the "China virus" term, Tucker Carlson claimed that the pandemic had happened only "because China hid the truth" from the rest of the world (Fox News 2020a). Laura Ingraham stated that the Chinese had "blood on their hands" (Garcia 2020). Sean Hannity (Fox News 2020b) sent "a very serious message for China's hostile dictatorship," blaming their "months-long cover-up" for "death and destruction and carnage all over the world". He also praised the President's travel ban, defining it as a decision that bought time and saved "countless thousands of Americans from being exposed" to the virus, just as the Republican campaign memo later advised.

At first, utilizing the "China virus" meme to blame China may have been a simple tactic of blame-shifting to counter any criticism of Trump administration's COVID-19 response in the run-up to the election. But it tapped into a wider negative sentiment regarding China that was shared by some Trump administration officials, the president's political allies, and Fox News hosts—and

increasingly also the public, as shortly after the pandemic outbreak, the share of especially Republicans who considered China an “enemy” rose dramatically (Bruce 2020).

The “China Threat” Narrative

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had issued an alarm over China in his speech at the Hudson Institute in 2019, describing the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as “truly hostile to the United States and our values” and China as a national security risk (Pompeo 2019). Then, in March 2020, he repeated that the CCP posed a “substantial threat to our health and way of life,” which now “the Wuhan virus outbreak clearly has demonstrated” (Pompeo 2020c). Pompeo also appeared on Fox News, talking through the Trump Administration’s response to the pandemic and slamming China for suppressing information and spreading disinformation (e.g., Blitzer 2020b; Fox News 2020b). Pompeo was an avid propagator of the “China virus” meme, using the term “Wuhan Virus” in his speeches and tweets (see, e.g., Pompeo 2020b).

Maria Bartiromo, Tucker Carlson, Senator Cotton, and Peter Navarro were also long-time critics of China and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in particular. Bartiromo, for example, featured in a YouTube clip presented by the Committee on the Present Danger: China—an interest group established in 2019, with former Trump advisor Steve Bannon as one of its founding members. In the clip, she interviewed Attorney General William Barr and characterized the CCP as rich, powerful, dangerous, and an enemy of the United States (Committee on the Present Danger China 2020). Carlson has criticized China for years (Shephard 2020), and Senator Cotton concluded in 2019 that China was building a “new evil empire” (Gehrke 2019). Navarro has built much of his literary career on composing wake-up calls to people ignoring the threat posed by China, such as *The Coming China Wars: Where They Will Be Fought and How They Can Be Won* (2006) and *Death by China: Confronting the Dragon—A Global Call to Action* (2011). All four actors sounded an early alarm over COVID-19, perhaps precisely because it was associated with China. And then they made this connection explicit. In an interview with Maria Bartiromo, Senator Cotton argued that the unleashing of COVID-19 was a “deliberate and conscious choice by the Chinese communist leadership, because they didn’t want to see their relative power and standing in the world decline” (Cotton 2020). Carlson dubbed China a “dangerous Cold War adversary” (Carlson 2020c) and repeatedly claimed that COVID-19 is “part of a larger geopolitical struggle for control

of the world” that China is determined to win (Carlson 2020d; 2020e). He warned that the Chinese perceive the pandemic as a “beginning of a new Chinese century” (Halon 2020).

Adam Breuer and Alastair Iain Johnston (2019) have introduced the idea that memes are also smaller components of narratives. Breuer and Johnston explain that in the social and online media era, the story arc of a narrative “is composed of short discrete items (text and/or images) that users of the meme connect to make a coherent story (or sub-narrative). Mutually consistent combinations of these sub-narratives help create a master narrative.” In other words, memes are discursive building blocks of sub-narratives—“the elements that ensure narratives propagate and spread”—and, in turn, sub-narratives are the building blocks of a master narrative. All three do not necessarily emerge simultaneously. Thus, we can have a meme not yet connected to a sub-narrative, or a sub-narrative, only later connected to an emerging master narrative. (Breuer and Johnston 2019, 431–33.) Narratives are vital for society and politics. As Jelena Subotić (2016, 612) notes, through narratives people make sense of the world and their own role in the world. Narratives are manipulated, “highly selective and purposefully constructed,” and they grant “ideological and emotional value to what we hear and how we choose to act on that knowledge” (Subotić 2016, 612–13).

Following Breuer and Johnston (2019), I argue that the “China virus” meme was a component of a (master) national security narrative of China as a threat (see, e.g., Pan 2015; Turner 2013; Yuan and Fu 2020). The meme added the connotation of China as an irresponsible international actor that was culpable of failing to handle the virus in its initial phase, suppressing vital information, lying and spreading disinformation, threatening to sever critical supply lines, and manipulating the international media. Such claims were frequently made by Carlson, and the silver lining of the pandemic, he claimed, was that now the whole U.S. saw clearly that China was “an imminent threat” (Carlson 2020b; 2020c; 2020d). “Irresponsible China” was joined with other sub-narratives building up to the “China threat.” These were most notably propagated by Mike Pompeo. Pompeo suggested that China was striving for hegemony; conducting an aggressive military build-up; challenging the rules, laws, and norms of the international order; and “cheating” in the economic and trade realm (Pompeo 2020a; 2020c; 2020d). In addition to these geopolitical storylines, Pompeo claimed that the Chinese Communist Party in power was ideologically alien to the U.S.: a totalitarian, repressive, and human-rights-abusing regime (Pompeo 2020c; 2020d). Some of these sub-narratives were reiterated also, for example, by Tucker Carlson (2020d; 2020e; Halon 2020).

During the early phase of the pandemic, President Trump appears to have wavered over employing the “China virus” meme to promote the “China threat” narrative, just as he wavered over blaming China for the virus. At the time, his focus was on the Phase One Trade Deal and cooperation with China over COVID-19. Eventually, however, he jumped on the bandwagon. In an interview with Maria Bartiromo in August, Trump explained: “It’s before plague and after plague. Right now, I view China differently than I did before plague” (Conklin 2020). The significance of national security narratives is that they provide grounds for legitimization of certain policy options and grounds for mobilization and action (Yuan and Fu 2020, 421, 426). Indeed, by the time of the August interview with Bartiromo, Trump’s foreign policy actions had aligned with some of the “China threat” sub-narratives: the President had signed executive orders banning U.S. companies from doing business with TikTok and WeChat and ending preferential economic treatment for Hong Kong, and he was issuing sanctions relating to China’s treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang (Conklin 2020; White House 2020a).

The idea of an “irresponsible China” in conjunction with COVID-19 was shared well beyond the echo chamber. Observers of international politics commonly criticized China for being slow to report the COVID-19 outbreak, for lacking transparency, and for refusing to cooperate with foreign scientists (see, e.g., Patrick 2020, 4, 49). However, the Trump–Fox loop linked that discussion directly to the presidential election. Hannity, for example, interviewed President Trump’s informal China advisor, Michael Pillsbury of the Hudson Institute, who made the claim that China was fueling criticism of Trump’s handling of the coronavirus because they wanted Joe Biden to become the next president (Fox News 2020b). The same talking points were later mouthed by President Trump. In late April, Trump claimed in an interview that “China will do anything they can to have me lose this race,” including using the coronavirus situation to meddle in his reelection bid (Holland 2020).

Thus, through the “China virus” meme, domestic and foreign politics became conjoined. This was reflected in an ensuing contest between Trump and Biden over who was “tough” and who was “weak” on China when it came to a host of issues, ranging from holding China accountable for the pandemic to policies for countering the perceived “China threat” (Kessler 2020; NPR 2020). For Trump and Republicans, the “China virus” meme functioned as a sign of their “toughness”. It should be noted, however, that “tough on China” was hardly a new election tactic. For the past two decades, both Republican and Democratic congressional candidates have blasted China and

attacked their opponents for being “soft” on China (Wichowsky and Chen Weiss 2021), and the same goes for presidential candidates on the campaign trail (Chang 2015, 244–47).

Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that in 2020 the “China virus” became a meme that seamlessly connected traditional media spaces, online spaces, and policy spaces. The template for it was produced by repeating terminology that fixed a link between SARS-CoV-2 (and its attendant disease COVID-19) and China.

Reverberating through the 2020 edition of a conservative echo chamber, the meme was assigned multiple meanings: most notably it connoted the irresponsibility of China in global politics and ultimately it functioned as a building block for a national security narrative of China as a threat. The meme was also assigned multiple other functions. The meme was employed in two intertwined election strategies: blaming China for originating the virus—in order to counter criticism of the Trump administration’s COVID-19 response—and advocating for a tough-on-China foreign policy. Even in its template form, devoid of any additional discursive elements besides the claim that the pandemic had Chinese origins, the meme also functioned as an identity marker, distinguishing President Trump and his supporters from the “radical, left-wing social justice warriors.” To be sure, the national security narrative of the “China threat” was also about identity. And just like the identity of Republicans, this identity was a negation of *the other* it portrayed.

In encountering the global pandemic, the Trump-Fox loop was initially in disarray. While it soon aligned, weaponizing the “China virus” meme to win the presidential election as well as the great power competition against China, outside the loop and the echo chamber the meme was met with sharp criticism. Critics argued that the racialized and stigmatizing language of the “China virus” played a distinctive role in discrimination, noting that “the history of Asian Americans in the U.S. is dotted with evidence showing that such rhetoric has laid the groundwork for violence and shameful policies” (Yam 2020b). Effectively, the “China virus” meme functioned as a means of pandemic othering, or designating a specific—often marginalized—group as a source to blame and avoid during a pandemic (Dionne and Turkmen 2020).

The Stop AAPI Hate Reporting Center (2020b) also connected the “China virus” meme with the “return of the ‘Yellow Peril.’” In nineteenth- and early twentieth-century U.S. and Europe, the “yellow peril” was imagined as not one but a series of threats emanating from the “yellow races”:

a military and naval threat of Japan (or Japan and China combined); a global commercial and industrial threat of the “westernized East”; and a domestic U.S. threat of Chinese immigrants “underliving” U.S. laborers and tainting the “civilized” society (Pennanen 2020, 70–71). One specific variation of the “China virus” meme firmly entangled the present with past instances of pandemic othering and racial fears of the “yellow peril.” Once the President started tweeting about the “China Plague” (e.g., October 12, 2020; November 16, 2020), the immediate association was with the outbreak of the bubonic plague in Chinatown in San Francisco in 1900–1904. Labeled as the “Chinese plague,” the outbreak was a culmination of the Sinophobia and anti-Chinese discrimination prevalent in California at the time, and it fixed a connection between Chinese heritage and disease (Urbansky 2019, 77, 80).

As the “China virus” meme moved beyond the echo chamber, it was assigned wholly different functions and meanings from those assigned within. In the end, the Trump–Fox loop could construct, propagate, and manipulate a meme, but the inherent dynamism of the meme form ensured that they could not control and dominate it.

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Notes

¹ All the references to Donald Trump's tweets in this essay are from the online archive of his Twitter account: <https://factba.se/trump/topic/twitter>.

¹ The programs include *Hannity*, *Sunday Morning Futures with Maria Bartiromo*, *The Ingraham Angle*, and *Tucker Carlson Tonight*. When the citation to the program episodes is made to an online article, not to a stand-alone video clip, the reference is made first to the video clip embedded in the article and only secondly to the text, which is usually a summary or a transcript of the episode.

¹ A search for the term "covid" in President Trump's original tweets in 2020 reveals that it was used on the following dates:

Term: covid
<p>Mar: 14 (multiple), 23, 31 Apr: 4, 13, 21, 22 (multiple) May: 16, 24, 25, 27 (multiple) Jun: 9, 15, 22 Jul: 6, 7 Aug: 3, 23 Oct: 1, 2, 5, 6 (multiple), 9, 12, 19, 22, 23, 26, 27 (multiple), 28, 30 Nov: 1, 14, 19, 21 (multiple) Dec: 27</p>

¹ A search for the term "virus" in President Trump's original tweets in 2020 shows that he used the terms "virus," "coronavirus," "Chinese virus," and "China virus." Here are the dates on which he used the terms:

Term: virus, coronavirus	Term: Chinese virus, China virus
<p>Jan: 27 Feb: 7, 25 Mar: 19, 23 (multiple), 27 (multiple), 29, 30 Apr: 6, 17 May: 3, 10, 20</p>	<p>Mar: 16, 17, 18 (multiple), 21, 22, 25 Jul: 5, 6 (multiple), 7, 8, 20, 21, 26, 28, 30 Aug: 2, 3 (multiple), 7 (multiple) Sep: 3 (multiple), 7, 8 (multiple), 18, 30 Oct: 7, 13, 26 Nov: 16 Dec: 6, 9, 18, 19, 24, 26, 29</p>

¹ A search for "plague" in President Trump's original tweets in 2020 yields the following dates when he used the term:

Term: plague**May:** 2, 3, 5, 13, 16, 17, 20**Aug:** 11,**Sep:** 16**Oct:** 3, 5, 7, 12 (multiple), 21**Nov:** 16