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Covid origins, nationalism, and diasporic heterogeneity: China, Chineseness, and Covid-19

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COVID ORIGINS, NATIONALISM, AND DIASPORIC HETEROGENEITY

China, Chineseness, and Covid-19

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Introduction

What is the “Chinese” experience of conspiracy theories, disinformation, and misinformation? And how does an analysis of this subject complex the idea of “Chineseness” and “China” as used to describe events occurring both inside and outside of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and within Chinese diasporas? This is a particularly important question to ask in a period of time characterized by US–PRC geopolitical rivalry during which China or Chinese is often used as a flattened, blanket term in anglophone media, politics, and academia to describe everything from the PRC, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Sinophone languages, and Chinese diasporas. To contribute some answers to these big questions, in this chapter, we examine Covid-19 conspiracy theories, disinformation, and misinformation related to China and Chineseness through an exploration of information that is predominantly written in Simplified Chinese and spoken in Mandarin Chinese (Sinophone language) circulating in the PRC’s physical and digital territories; information produced by PRC state representatives and state-affiliates circulating outside of PRC territories; and information predominantly circulating outside of PRC territories, particularly the United States, that is produced by explicitly anti-PRC and anti-CCP actors and institutions that either are ethnically Chinese or have very close ties to ethnically Chinese institutions and actors (Li 2022). In discussing the circulation of information around digital territory, we understand digital territory as an aspect of volumetric territory, with the development of territory – itself “a political technology” (Elden 2017, 8) – over “digital space,” a practice that “in many cases, [extends] the reach of the state” (Morris 2022a, 23) and aids the development of state sovereignty over digital relations.

While we feel that the complexity of Chinese narratives around Covid-19 should not be surprising and that such a point should ideally need not be

made, we are pushing back against a tendency for China, Chinese peoples, Chinese languages, and Chineseness to be flattened and homogenized into a singular identity/person/nation/experience. In doing this, we are highlighting that there is no singular narrative related to China, Chineseness, Sinophone languages, and Covid-19. Rather, the complexity of these narratives and the contradictions between them highlight the necessity to clearly identify what aspect of contemporary China or Chineseness is being analyzed, discussed, and described at any particular moment. In this chapter, Chineseness is ascribed to two things: the artefacts (conspiracy theories, disinformation, and misinformation) themselves and the actors producing, propagating, and consuming the information. Allen Chun's (Chun 1996, 2009, 2017) critique of Chineseness shows that the descriptor's shifting meaning depends on the historical and geographical contexts within which the term is deployed. Chineseness can capture how these artefacts travel across contexts though shared language, ethnicity, identity, and platforms across the globe, but it obscures how these artefacts mutate and are deployed differently. This is why Chineseness itself must be unpacked if we are to understand conspiracy theories, disinformation, and misinformation, rather than inadvertently contributing to misinformation through analytical slippage.

In the seminal article, *Fuck Chineseness*, Chun asks readers in the opening paragraphs:

What is the nature of Chineseness, and who are the Chinese? Finally, who is really speaking here? Something called “China” unquestionably exists, but, more importantly, there is a multitude of expressions to denote different aspects of China and Chineseness.

(1996, 111)

Chun goes on to show how China and Chinese mean different things to two different people, arguing that how words are used, what words mean, and how meaning change is important to people around the world, particularly if it is a term used to describe an individual's past, present, and future. Chun continues to unpack the complexities of Chineseness, noting that “ethnicity, culture and identity are analytically distinct notions whose meaning, and usage have been muddled in disciplinary practice” (2009, 331). More recently, Chun has pushed for readers to *Forget Chineseness* (2017), highlighting how the rise of the PRC has resulted in a move from the transnational idea of “Greater China” toward “New Greater China” that is defined by ongoing relations between the idea of Chineseness and the PRC, with the actions of the PRC influencing how Chineseness is understood around the world. Chun shows that these terms continue to have power and influence, something evident in the racism of the Covid-19 period and the use of China threat discourses in a variety of political projects. Following in the footsteps of Chun, this chapter will highlight how questions around China, Chineseness, and Chinese identity influence the everyday geopolitics of the ongoing US–PRC rivalry, a rivalry in which both US and PRC governments

have tended to flatten the meanings of China and Chineseness by creating “us” versus “them” binaries.

Following this introduction, we first examine Covid-19 disinformation and misinformation by focusing on information related to Covid-19 circulating primarily within the PRC. In the first empirical section, we focus on two key conspiracy theories: that Covid-19 was brought to Wuhan by US soldiers during the 2019 Military World Games, and that Covid-19 was produced in the US Army Base, Fort Detrick (Detrick). The section ends with extracts from interviews that were conducted as part of a research project by one of the coauthors. During this project, 15 interviews were conducted (online and offline), and the project was designed to understand how surveillance is imagined in the PRC and the UK during Covid-19. In the second empirical section, we move our analytical enquiry outside of the physical territory of the PRC, instead looking at how institutions and actors with strong links to the idea of China, the PRC, its state representatives and affiliated media; *The Epoch Times*, a Falun Gong-supported media organization, as well as Guo Wengui and the associated media network built up around him. Through these cases, we show how the Chinese and China in disinformation and misinformation engage a variety of audiences and are involved in a variety of political projects, and that through an examination of this we are able to have a better understanding of a multitude of political imaginaries as well as the contours of an emerging geopolitical rivalry between the PRC and the United States. In doing this, we are particularly interested in highlighting how CCP and PRC disinformation and misinformation target diaspora and anglophone non-PRC citizens by leveraging existing conspiracy theories; how conservative, anti-CCP diasporic discourse strategically tap into potentially racist discourse to discredit CCP and find potential allies; and how multiple political agendas are entangled yet easily lost through the label China because it is simultaneously a race, a state, a culture, a language, and an imaginary.

The Military World Games and Fort Detrick

On March 12, 2020, Lijian Zhao (2020a), Deputy Director of Foreign Ministry Information Department of the People’s Republic of China, tweeted: “How many people are infected? What are the names of the hospitals? It might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan. Be transparent! Make public your data! US owe us an explanation!” This comment by Zhao was shared alongside a video, edited by the Chinese state media outlet Global Times including Chinese subtitles and a sinister background music, of the director of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Robert R. Redfield, stating that some people who died of influenza were later diagnosed as having Covid-19. Earlier in the day, Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs, Chunying Hua (2020), had already jumped on Redfield’s comments, tweeting that “Some cases that were previously diagnosed as Flu in the US were actually #COVID19. It is absolutely WRONG and INAPPROPRIATE to call this the Chinese coronavirus,” while sharing the

C-Span version of the same discussion. As Hua's comment implies, all of this followed hostile comments from the Trump administration, and Donald Trump himself on Twitter, regarding China's response and relationship to Covid-19 or the "China virus" (Marlow 2020).

Setting aside the broader geopolitics of this interaction – this happened during escalating US–PRC tensions, including trade tariffs, the Huawei ban, and the TAIPEI Act – for now, within Zhao's tweet is a reference to the conspiracy theory that the US army brought Covid-19 to Wuhan. This popular Covid-19 origin theory was widely discussed on social media and focused on the idea that during the 7th International Military Sports Council Military World Games, US soldiers brought Covid-19 to Wuhan. Following Zhao's tweets on the subject, state-affiliated media outlet, *The People's Daily* (2021), shared a video of Zhao on Weibo, the Sina-operated microblog site that is hugely popular in the PRC, under the hashtag “#U.S., release health and infection information of the US military delegation which came to Wuhan#.” According to interviewees for this chapter, the Military Games theory rapidly became one of the most widely discussed conspiracy theories on the original transmission of Covid-19, with the support of this transmission theory by state representatives giving the theory a greater visibility.

While the Military Games transmission theory became a large talking point on and off the Chinese Internet as well as the cornerstone of what would become a disinformation campaign supported by Chinese state representatives and state-affiliated institutions, transmission requires a starting point. The lodestone of this disinformation campaign was the idea that Covid-19 was created in US military base, Detrick. That Detrick, located in Maryland, became embroiled in a Covid-19 conspiracy theory is not completely surprising, as there is a long history of Detrick-centered conspiracy theories. Detrick, home to the United States Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases, was a part of early HIV conspiracy theories, such as the “HIV-from-Fort-Detrick” conspiracy supported by the East German secret police, where it was theorized that AIDS was “genetically engineered” from two separate viruses in Detrick (Geissler and Sprinkle 2013; Knight 2003, 42). Detrick has numerous popular media appearances, including references in the feature films, *Outbreak* and *The Bourne Legacy*; the influential conspiracy television show *The X-Files*; and spy show *The Americans*. From this, Detrick slotted smoothly into a narrative built around US military transmission of Covid-19 to Wuhan.

The military games theory gained prominence very early in the pandemic, but it took longer for the Detrick origin theory to gain the same level of mainstream recognition. On January 18, 2021, following accusations from the United States of a Wuhan lab leak, Hua referenced Detrick during a press conference:

I'd like to stress that if the United States truly respects facts, it should open the biological lab at Fort Detrick, give more transparency to issues like its 200-plus overseas bio-labs, invite WHO [the World Health Organization] experts to conduct origin-tracing in the United States, and respond to the concerns from the international community with real actions.

(Li 2021)

With Zhao continuing to reference Detrick in 2022:

[B]iological military activities of the US in Ukraine are merely the tip of the iceberg. Using such pretexts as cooperating to reduce biological safety risks and strengthening global public health, the US has 336 biological labs in 30 countries under its control. 336, you heard me right. It also conducted many biological military activities at the Fort Detrick base at home.

(Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2022)

Detrick, as a space of viral-potential, began to be discussed in 2020, particularly in the Weibo hashtag and “Super Topic,” “#AmericanFortDetrickBioLab#” (Sina Weibo n.d.). To give an idea of this theories circulation, as of writing, this topic has been read 1.51 billion times, discussed 250,000 times, and had 27,000 people create posts using it (Yin 2020). This Super Topic became a space where ideas around the relationship between Covid-19 and Detrick were widely shared, but it was a topic managed by the Communist Youth League, meaning they either founded the hashtag or applied (and were granted) control of the topic. Being the host, they had the power to influence the way the topic grew and what the topic displayed as “Hot” posted on the main topic page. They also controlled the description of the topic, which reads: “In April 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic swept through the United States, and New York quickly became the ‘epicenter.’ Meanwhile, in Fort Detrick, some 240 miles away, the US government was conducting experiments with dangerous pathogens!” Numerous groups created content related to Detrick, including Shanghai-based state-controlled media outlet, *The Paper* (*Peng-pai*), one of China’s most innovative media outlets, an outlet that had in the past pushed the boundaries of what content is acceptable in China’s pro-state media environment (Repnikova and Fang 2019). One particular video *The Paper* created and shared in July 2020 was viewed by millions and, by creating links to Imperial Japan, suggested that Detrick was a sinister place where death could emerge (*The Paper* 2020). The video highlighted Detrick’s “dark” history, saying that Detrick inherited the technological legacy of the Imperial Japanese biological and chemical warfare research unit that carried out war crimes in North East China. The video ends by saying “there are big questions to be asked” about whether the research carried out in Detrick has applications outside scientific research and if the diseases researched at Detrick were appropriately managed. While not explicitly stating that Covid-19 leaked from Detrick, the video did suggest that nothing good could emerge from Detrick and that the management of Detrick could not be trusted. With affectively powerful disinformation and misinformation like this spread by state-affiliated organizations and news sources during 2020, Detrick became a useful concept for state officials to draw on as they engaged in a geopolitical game of conspiratorial one-upmanship with the Trump administration.

The support of the transmission and origin theories by state representatives and state-affiliated media aided the circulation of these theories and gave a veneer of acceptability to them, according to interviewees. One interviewee noted that endorsement from state representatives “made a really big impact in China as a lot

of people saw it as an official government endorsement of this conspiracy theory.” Another interviewee highlighted that Zhao’s English language comments were shared through screenshots, translated into Chinese, and shared on Weibo, resulting in people speculating where Covid-19 emerged. When the comments of state representatives are shared on social media, it becomes an invitation for others to speculate on numerous non-Chinese origins for Covid-19, both publicly on social media and privately online and offline. As one interviewee noted:

Although most of my friends don’t think it’s important to discuss the origins of the virus, as the pandemic is already ongoing, this [subject] is discussed by major Chinese media. They don’t put it as a concrete fact, they just bring [conspiracy theories] out as discussion topics: a possibility.

Recent scholarship by Guobin Yang (2022) finds a similar relationship between state endorsement and disinformation. By citing diarist, Melon Mass, who wrote on March 14, 2020, Yang highlights the effectiveness of official disinformation in China:

Zhao Lijian used his personal Twitter handle to question the US even if he did not have firm evidence [about the origin of the virus]. This seems somewhat inappropriate seen from the perspective of China’s traditional [diplomatic] style. But it had a critical role in reversing the overwhelming trend of the world blaming the virus on China and was a slap on the faces of the political leaders in the US and some other countries who kept talking about the “China virus” and “Wuhan virus,” despite the fact that WHO already named the novel coronavirus “COVID-19” on February 11.

(178)

From this, we begin to see a few trends in how conspiracy theories have been operationalized in the PRC during Covid-19. These theories center around transmission and spread of Covid-19, and while they may start off in the wild, they gain power through tacit state endorsement (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2021), when discussed by state-affiliated media and organizations but most powerfully through the words, in Chinese and English, of state representatives (Zhao 2020b; Romanoff 2020). The timing of state representatives discussing these theories suggests that they were involved in a tit-for-tat engagement with the United States. But the ideas around Detrick were spreading months before they were operationalized by state representatives, including through videos produced by state-affiliated media. When the theories were supported by state representatives, they grew lives of their own, spreading wildly on Chinese social media, and, it seems, shoring up support for the Chinese state in what might be perceived as a zero-sum ideological battle with the US. These are examples of what Yang (2022) describes as Covid Nationalism, and through the political technologies of conspiracy theory, disinformation, and misinformation, domestic support seemed to become solidified

as conspiratorial imaginaries around the major geopolitical rival were stoked. The ongoing visibility of this disinformation and misinformation must also be understood as an intentional and political choice, as, in the tightly governed PRC digital territory, many undesired large-scale public spectacles are quickly halted, bringing an end to protest cycles (Ruan et al. 2020; Morris 2022a, 2022b). This suggests that the circulation of this information is one part of a broader information strategy put in operation by PRC state representatives and affiliated media.

Complexing Chineseness Through Disinformation

The discussion of Chinese conspiracy theories has so far focused on conspiracies produced by PRC citizens for consumption by PRC citizens, although the content has sometimes not been in Sinophone languages. As PRC citizens are not confined within the physical territorial boundaries of the PRC, and even remain in the digital territorial boundaries of the PRC when outside of the physical borders of the PRC, these ideas rapidly moved around the world, being consumed by PRC citizens studying and working abroad as well as the Chinese diaspora more broadly. But moving outside of the PRC further complexes both the idea of a Chinese conspiracy theory and the binary geopolitical tensions – the US versus China – discussed earlier. In this section, we explore this by examining the English language material used in Covid-19 disinformation shared on social media outside of China’s digital territory, notably on Twitter and Facebook.

As noted earlier, the PRC and its state representatives produced content in both Chinese and English. The Chinese content was shared within China’s digital territory and on traditional media, but the English content was often shared outside of China’s digital territory, on Twitter, a digital space generally inaccessible within the PRC. While the English language content did reach PRC and Chinese-speaking audiences through translation and sharing, as Sinophone language content was actively produced for those within the PRC and the English content was shared outside of China’s digital territory, English language content was likely produced for non-PRC audiences. Importantly, while powerful rhetorical displays by Chinese state representatives in English can garner praise within China, a more combative approach to diplomacy described as “wolf warrior” (Yang 2022; Martin 2021), the accounts we share below move beyond the spectacular displays associated with wolf warrior politics and highlight a far more nuanced mode of misinforming and sharing disinformation. Therefore, it can be assumed that this content was produced and shared by state representatives and state-affiliated institutions in an effort to target English speakers with disinformation, particularly English speakers who were skeptical of the United States, the so-called “tankies” (Lanza 2021), and those who were skeptical of Covid-19 and vaccines in general, the so-called anti-vaxers and Covid-sceptics.

One particularly clear example of this is the case of Sichuanese rap group, CD Rev. In August 2021, the official PRC news agency, *Xinhua News* (2021), began sharing rap group CD Rev’s song, “Open the door to Fort Detrick,” and the

accompanying video on Twitter and Facebook. In this English language song and video, numerous ideas related to Detrick and US policy are touched on. The disinformation begins within the first seconds of the video, and the video opens with footage from an exchange between Senator Rand Paul and Dr. Anthony Fauci at a US Senate hearing. Paul says, “all the evidence is pointing that it came from the lab, and there will be responsibility for those who funded the lab, including yourself” before the video cuts to Fauci pointing to Paul saying, “I totally resent that, and if anybody is lying here, senator it is you.” But the two exchanges at the beginning of this video are in fact edited together from different parts of the hearing, with Paul’s footage – which was also shared in another edited form on Paul’s own YouTube channel (SenatorRandPaul 2021) – coming 90 seconds before the footage of Fauci. As this ambiguous beginning about an unnamed lab ends, a member of CD Rev says, subtitled onscreen in English and Chinese: “Typical political manipulation: Again and again; I’m so sick of these shows,” before showing the footage of a White House Press Briefing. Following this, the video enters into an English language rap asking “Fort Detrick; Why is it off limits; Nazi doctors were hired; War criminals from unit 731; Human experiments had been done; What kind of devil’s deal had been signed?” before eventually reaching the chorus: “Open the door to Fort Detrick; Because transparency is your favourite; Then great; America first; We want the, we want the truth.” On August 11, state representative Zhao (2021) also shared the video on Twitter, copying two lines from the song and saying “‘Open the door to Fort Detrick; Shed light on tightly held secre . . .’; This RAP song speaks our minds.” This sort of English language content is indicative of a broader attempt by PRC state representatives and affiliated media to spread disinformation and misinformation through English language resources to influence those outside of the PRC, something which is also achieved by journalistic writing and non-PRC, mainly white, YouTubers and social media personalities (Mozur et al. 2021).

But disinformation from Chinese sources is not limited to PRC state-affiliated actors, and two key actors involved in China related to disinformation and misinformation, who looked to influence people outside of the PRC were explicitly anti-CCP and anti-PRC forces: *The Epoch Times (TET)* and Guo. *TET* was founded by the Falun Gong, a religious/spiritual group exiled from and outlawed by the PRC in the 1990s. Founded in 2000, it was an obscure publication focused on publishing anti-CCP content until the mid-2010s, when it supported Donald Trump for Presidency and made use of new Facebook advertising tactics to grow its fanbase, eventually making *TET* a darling of the American alt-right (Roose 2021). With a strong anti-CCP agenda, it is unsurprising that *TET* ran an editorial line centered on the failings of the CCP, but this often blurs into the boundaries of disinformation. For instance, the publication regularly calls Covid-19 the “CCP Virus,” with the section, “CCP Virus,” one of the three (almost) always visible sections of the website when viewed on desktop (The Epoch Times n.d.). The articles highlighted by the editor of the CCP Virus section include stories of Covid-19 cover-ups in Northern China, studies on the damaging social and economic effects

of the Covid-19 vaccine mandates, and the information that vitamin D treats and prevents Covid-19 (Hao 2020; Anthrappully 2022; Lee and Jekielek 2022). One regularly touted aspect of Covid-19 discussed on *TET* is the Chinese lab-leak theory (Fu 2021b, 2021a; Phillips 2021). On the pages of *TET*, evidence of this includes that the Chinese military has touted biological warfare as further evidence of a potential leak, and many of the theories espoused by *TET* on Covid-19's origins appear in an hour-long documentary in April 2020 on the lab-leak theory that has been viewed by millions of people, including tens of millions of views on Facebook (BBC News 2020; NTD 2020). The lab-leak theory here gained support from a Chinese publication with anti-CCP and anti-PRC sentiment, a Chinese publication that was one of the key purchasers of pro-Donald Trump adverts, and a Chinese publication that wrote content critical of “John Liu, a Taiwanese-American former New York City councilman whom the group viewed as soft on China and hostile to Falun Gong” (Roose 2021). With *TET*, the notion of what a Chinese media publication could be is complexed, particularly as many of the content writers featured on its front page are white.

While *TET* became a Chinese disinformation and misinformation source that influenced English and German language audiences (Perrone and Loucaides 2022), it is Guo, a former PRC-based real estate tycoon and a billionaire who fled the PRC to avoid prosecution, and the media and political networks built up around him that are key to spreading Covid-19 disinformation and misinformation among the Chinese diaspora, in both Sinophone languages and English. Guo has successfully gained influence in the North American Chinese diaspora through video and media content, while also aligning himself with former White House Chief Strategist and Breitbart co-founder, Steve Bannon. Bannon, who was arrested while on Guo's yacht, cofounded a number of institutions with Guo, including the anti-CCP institution and political movement, New Federal State of China (NFSC). Guo is closely associated with the *GTV Media Group*, which includes *GNews*, and a leading figure in the Himalaya Farm and Himalaya Coin movements, the latter being an Ethereum token described as the official currency of the NFSC. The media networks around Guo regularly share video content of Guo – Guo's preferred medium of information sharing – alongside bilingual commentary and textual pieces. Central to the aim of these media ventures is the hope that PRC-managed media and information-sharing organizations will be banned in the United States, leaving “*Gnews* and *GTV* [as] the only platform and app to use for tens of millions of overseas Chinese and those within the CCP Internet firewall, to find out the truth about the CCP and the world” (Jiang 2021).

Through this content, Guo and the media network built around him offer insights into high-level PRC and CCP politics, corruption, identity politics, North American elections, and other current events. Unsurprisingly, Covid-19 – “the CCP Virus” – and vaccines are regularly discussed by Guo and within the media network. This includes extolling the virtues of alternative remedies to Covid-19, such as hydroxychloroquine, which, Guo says, helps people completely

recover from the virus and completely wipe it out (GNews 2021a). On the *GNews* network, bilingual videos and articles including Guo soundbites have discussed the profitability of vaccines for China while also describing Covid-19 as “a bio-weapon virus created in a [CCP] military lab [that] ravaged the world,” noting that the “CCP quickly developed and exported another biocheichal [sic] virus in the form of a vaccines” (GNews 2021b). Among the Guo media network, including on social media associated with the network, vaccine disinformation and misinformation is rife, with content such as screenshots from *GTV* and *GNews* shared with the text “DON’T TRUST THE VACCINE the medical industry is completely controlled by a special-interest” (Xiaolin 2021).

A key aspect of the Guo- (and also Bannon-) backed Covid-19 disinformation is the idea that Covid-19 was manufactured in a scientific facility, an additional lab-leak. These views are supported by scientist, Dr. Li-Meng Yan, whose scholarship on the issue has been debunked (Rasmussen 2021), but who has been featured on *GNews*, *GTV*, and *TET*, as well as being interviewed by Steve Bannon (multiple times) and Tucker Carlson (Philipp 2021; Dorman 2020). In early 2020, Dr. Yan originally shared her theory that Covid-19 had been released by the CCP to anti-CCP, Sinophone language YouTuber, Wang Dingnan (Lu De), an affiliate of Guo (Qin, Wang, and Hakim 2020). While Yan no-longer has an academic affiliation, after previously being associated with the University of Hong Kong, she is associated with Rule of Law Society, a non-profit founded by Guo and associated with Steve Bannon (Timberg 2021), which paid for her relocation to the United States and introduced her to a broader network of media commentators. Her papers related to the bioweapon and manufactured status of Covid-19 have been viewed over two million times and make up a core part of the scientific information shared across Guo-related media, Steve Bannon’s media, and other alt-right media, with the second of three papers using a title that “covers top keyword search terms for disinformation about bioweapons” (Donovan and Nilsen 2021), increasing its visibility as a seemingly academic source on Covid-19.

Building on this foundation, across Guo-related media, a number of strands of disinformation, some related to Covid-19, but many related to the CCP, are shared in Chinese and English, an attempt to move beyond the Sinophone language sphere in order to speak to multilingual audiences. This work is supported by the close connection between Bannon and Guo, with members of the Guo network, such as Yan, regularly appearing on Bannon-associated media. But Guo-associated media still conduct their most powerful work in Chinese, sharing disinformation with the Chinese diaspora and those within the PRC about a range of topics, from CCP corruption to Covid-19 vaccine fears. After content is produced in Chinese on Guo-associated media, it gradually filters into media outlets focused on English-speaking audiences, including outlets within the Guo media network. Amidst the disinformation generated by Guo and his associated media, his status as a truth-speaking enemy of the CCP is in turn aided by the actions of the CCP, with reports highlighting how a “pro-Chinese political spam network” (Nimmo et al. 2020) across Twitter and Facebook targeted Guo, his associates – including

Li-Meng Yan – and associated media. These attacks support Guo’s rebel status and provide a sheen of validity to the information shared by the media network (Strick 2020).

Conclusion

In the realm of everyday geopolitics, the conspiracy theories, disinformation, and misinformation discussed in this chapter offer a window into how two geopolitical rivals, the United States and the PRC, attempt to influence the imaginaries of one another, as well as the role that the Chinese diaspora plays in complexing this US–PRC geopolitical binary. The conspiracy theories discussed here are the most widely circulated Covid-19 conspiracy theories, disinformation, and misinformation in PRC territories, and through them we get an indication of how state representatives and state-affiliated institutions are attempting to portray the US. Through this contested imaginary, we also begin to see the ongoing geopolitical rivalry playing out domestically in the PRC, with state representatives circulating disinformation and misinformation about the US and PRC citizens reacting to this information in heterogeneous ways, providing insights into how the PRC wishes to portray the US to its own citizens. Through this disinformation, we see an increase in the combativeness of PRC propaganda and diplomatic efforts, the so-called wolf warrior strategy, both in public and behind closed doors. Yang (2022, 170) notes, referencing Zhao, that such comments were “less about facts and more a countersalvo to debunk unfounded claims coming from American media.” Through the use of Sinophone and English language disinformation, Chinese state officials, supported by state-affiliated media, were able to simultaneously project an image of the strong Chinese state, deflect criticism from Covid-19 mishaps within the PRC and by the CCP, while also attacking the country that many perceived of as being China’s main geopolitical rival, the US, leading people to reflect on the feasibility of not just the American Dream but also the US national project (Zhang 2019).

That combative, Sinophone media designed for PRC citizens was being actively produced and circulated around the PRC suggests that much of the anglophone information circulated by those affiliated with the PRC was for non-PRC audiences. With the PRC audience already well served, anglophone content is likely designed to both “tell China’s story well” (China Media Project 2021) and to offer alternative takes on current events. From this perspective, we capture a glimpse of how the PRC is attempting to actively influence the anglophone media sphere through disinformation that targets non-PRC citizens. While scholarship has shown active PRC influence operations in non-PRC territories (Bolsover and Howard 2019), the use of highly produced media content to engage in a war of imaginaries with a geopolitical rival indicates a new phase of the rivalry. Covid-19 information is currently central to this strategy, but this strategy has also been employed in relation to Xinjiang and the Uyghur population (Byler, Franceschini, and Loubere 2022; Mozur et al. 2021).

Finally, disinformation produced by the Chinese diaspora for both anglophone and Sinophone audiences suggest that Chineseness is not a static element in US–PRC relations. The diaspora actors and institutions producing and circulating Covid-19 disinformation and misinformation will continue to play a role in how the PRC, China, and Chineseness are defined and understood by those outside of the PRC. This is particularly true in the United States, with both *TET* and Guo aligned with alt-right actors. Both *TET* and the Guo-affiliated network are involved in a phenomenon where wider multi-language media networks of disinformation tap into a racist Chinese–virus discourse to discredit the CCP, with “CCP” operating as a code word in Sinophobic discourse. Through disinformation and misinformation, these right-wing authoritarian leaning anti-PRC and anti-CCP institutions are contributing to a flattening of Chineseness in ways that may harm individuals within the Chinese diaspora.

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