

“INFORMATION EFFORTS OF THE CHINESE GOVERNMENT TO REMOVE ACCOUNTABILITY FOR THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC”



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SUMMARY

Against the backdrop of serious accusations with regard to the origin of Covid 19 and the global pandemic caused by it, China has launched a large-scale information campaign in order to deflect the accusations. Many different methods were employed for these purposes. Some researchers believe that China successfully adapted the Kremlin's information warfare methods.

It is worth noting that by the time of the start of the Pandemic, Beijing already had a substantial experience of information warfare gained in the Uyghur issue. But what China demonstrated during the pandemic shows how, within in a short period, the Chinese authorities were able to deploy their propaganda machine.

From humanitarian aid to the use of fictional European "scientists", everything is at the service of Chinese propaganda.



In the spring of 2012, 6 men who worked clearing bat guano from an abandoned copper mine near the town of Tongguan, Yunnan Province, fell ill with severe respiratory disease. They were admitted to a university hospital in Kunming, which sent blood samples from four of the men to the lab of Shi Zhengli, the head of the Wuhan Institute of Virology's Center for Emerging Infectious Disease. Shi is China's most famous researcher of bat coronaviruses. She even came to prominence in the popular press as "Batwoman".¹ Between 2012 and 2015, Shi and her team regularly travelled to the Tongguan mine, about a thousand miles from Wuhan. In the evenings, the researchers pulled up a foggy net at the entrance to the mine and waited for dusk when the bats flew out to eat. Throat and faecal swabs were collected from 6 different species of bats. Ultimately, Shi's team brought back more than 1300 samples to their lab.

In 2016, Shi and her colleagues published a paper on this work. According to the findings, bats were infected by 2 or more different coronaviruses at the same time. Because bats live in ever-changing colonies, they spread viruses endlessly, even between species, allowing different viruses to recombine, creating new strains of coronavirus. In the end, Shi's lab would sequence portions of all nine SARS-related coronaviruses found in samples taken from the Tongguan mine. Shi's discoveries on the origin of SARS earned her international recognition.²

In February 2020, China took a different turn. The ads began boosting state media coverage of the coronavirus, with dozens of ads praising Xi Jinping for his leadership and emphasizing

¹ Jane Qiu, "How China's 'Bat Woman' Hunted Down Viruses from SARS to the New Coronavirus," January 6, 2020, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-chinas-bat-woman-hunted-down-viruses-from-sars-to-the-new-coronavirus1/>.

² John Sudworth, "Covid: Wuhan Scientist Would 'welcome' Visit Probing Lab Leak Theory," December 21, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-55364445>.

China's ability to contain the disease. They incorporated hashtags such as #UnityIsStrength and #CombatCoronavirus, promises of a quick economic recovery, and stories in which leaders of Italy, Serbia and etc. express their gratitude to China. Intense advertisements appeared in the mix promoting coverage that President Donald Trump was using the term "Chinese virus" on March 2020.³

Nevertheless, China tried all its power to launch an infowar and hinder the efforts by researchers and journalists to hold China accountable. Here we are going to explore the information efforts of the Chinese government regarding the subject.

China employed assistance from several researchers and in return highlighted and amplified their voices through official media propaganda channels. The elements of this campaign go like this: There are doubts about the origins of the virus, and China has demonstrated its effectiveness in managing the crisis. Its authoritarian system is borne out by the alleged ineffectiveness of democratic values.⁴ Dexter Roberts, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Asia Security Initiative and author of the report, "China's Disinformation Strategy" portrayed it as such: "Another core defining concern is, of course, the Chinese leadership's now obvious desire to build up China as a model for the world, one that provides a credible alternative to the West and particularly the United States. China's leaders, however, have struggled to date to define what exactly constitutes the China model, and why other nations should be interested in following it. Instead, much of their focus has been on trying to point out the flaws in China's most obvious ideological rival, the United States—a task made much easier recently with the country's mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic response and the recent chaos that followed the presidential election."⁵

As it appears, not unexpectedly, China copied the Kremlin playbook. Communist Party is seeking to highlight America's faults and weaponize the culture wars and identity politics currently buffeting the West. Just like the Russian disinformation campaign, Chinese propagandists try to focus on the problems of racial injustice and income inequality in the U.S. and Western Europe — a move to distract attention from COVID-19 Pandemic responsibility, Beijing's own rights abuses, including the internment of more than a million ethnic Uyghurs.⁶

One of such propagandists is Herman "Ka Mentong" Tiu Laurel. Despite sharing the same surname with the famous Laurel family of the Philippines, who produced senators, vice-presidents and presidents for the country; Herman Tiu Laurel is an ethnic Chinese. However, being a second-generation, he identified himself as Filipino. Being involved in leftist and Chinese nationalist activism from his student years, he was recruited to Kapulungan ng mga

³ Renée DiResta, "For China, the 'USA Virus' Is a Geopolitical Ploy," November 4, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/04/chinas-covid-19-conspiracy-theories/609772/>.

⁴ Valérie Niquet, "China's Coronavirus Information Warfare," March 24, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/chinas-coronavirus-information-warfare/>.

⁵ Dexter Roberts, "China's Disinformation Strategy," December 15, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CHINA-ASI-Report-FINAL-1.pdf>.

⁶ Jamie Dettmer, "China Adopts Kremlin's 'Information War' Tactics," May 4, 2021, https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific_china-adopts-kremlins-information-war-tactics/6204171.html.

Sandigang Pilipino (Assembly of Philippine Organizations or KASAPI) by Jose C. Blanco.⁷ A member of Philippine-BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) Strategic Studies, he is involved in the information war, promoting the Chinese Communist Party. 'Promoting' himself from leftist activist to columnist and then pro-Chinese 'political analyst' was not uneventful, he has been heavily quoted by mainstream Chinese media⁸ and even MFA.⁹ Herman called Pfizer's promotion as part of "US Vaccine Imperialism",¹⁰ went so far lengths that even denied Tiananmen Square Massacres ever happened, saying "NO ONE DIED THERE".¹¹

However, Chinese disinformation doesn't stop at real people, on the contrary, the apparatus even invents fake scientists to defend their propaganda. One such 'scientist' is Wilson Edwards, allegedly a Swiss researcher.¹² CGTN cited Wilson alleging he and his fellow researchers have faced pressure and intimidation from the United States and some media outlets for supporting the findings of a joint study by China and the World Health Organization on the origins of COVID-19. The embassy in Beijing expressed its suspicions about the scientist on their Twitter account. "If you exist, we would like to meet you!" the embassy jokingly (!) tweeted.¹³ After the tweet several Chinese media took down the articles referring to 'Wilson', but some retained still.¹⁴

Chinese propaganda campaign also started a conspiracy claim about Covid-19 virus, allegedly it was originated from an American military base in Maryland; which has gained popularity in China ahead of the release of a US intelligence report on the virus origins.

Chinese propagandists have put forward a conspiracy suggesting that the Covid-19 coronavirus was created and leaked from a military base in Frederick, Maryland, about 49 miles north of Washington. A rap song by Chinese nationalist group CD Rev, which suggests the lab is hatching nefarious plots, was recently endorsed by Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian - a wolf-warrior diplomat. The rhythms of the song - "How many plots came out of your

⁷ Caroline S. Hau, *The Chinese Question: Ethnicity, Nation, and Region in and Beyond the Philippines*, p. 122 (NUS Press, 2014) <https://books.google.com/books?id=1eBBgAAQBAJ&pg=PA122#v=onepage&q&f=false>

⁸ "Philippine Columnist Urges Stopping Politicization of COVID-19 Origin Tracing," July 25, 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/asiapacific/2021-07/25/c_1310083922.htm.

⁹ For example, see "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on July 30, 2020" https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1896459.shtml

¹⁰ Herman Tiu Laurel, "US Vaccine Imperialism Backfires 1/2," January 22, 2021, https://philbrics.medium.com/us-vaccine-imperialism-backfires-f0bd92e7da9f?source=user_profile-----3-----.

¹¹ Herman Tiu Laurel, "West's Weapon of Mass Disinformation: How Tiananmen Truth Was Massacred," September 6, 2020, <https://philbrics.com/2020/06/09/wests-weapon-of-mass-disinformation-how-tiananmen-truth-was-massacred/>.

¹² Didi Tang, "China Invents Swiss Expert for Wuhan Lab Propaganda," December 8, 2021, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/china-accused-of-coronavirus-lab-leak-fake-news-over-non-existent-swiss-biologist-g6rxv2gm2>.

¹³ "Embassy of Switzerland in Beijing," October 8, 2021, https://twitter.com/SwissEmbChina/status/1425042973289504770?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw.

¹⁴ "Switzerland Asks Chinese Media to Delete Quotes from 'fake' Swiss Scientist about COVID-19 Origins," December 8, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-08-12/swiss-chinese-media-quotes-fake-scientist-covid19-wuhan-lab/100322522>.

lab/How many dead bodies hanging a tag/What are you hiding/Open the door to Fort Detrick" - are awkward, but its sentiment "speaks our mind," Zhao wrote in a tweet in August.¹⁵

A piece on Global Times said "Chinese netizens and experts urge the US authority to release health and infection information of the US military delegation which came to Wuhan for the Military World Games in October to end the conjecture about the US military personnel bringing COVID-19 to China", further aiding the Chinese conspiracy theory that the US was actually behind the virus. Chinese state media copied the story from internet chat rooms and turned it into an international conspiracy theory involving not only official media channels but influential diplomats and politicians as well. Chinese state media have taken this story from internet chat rooms and forums, turned it into an international phenomenon, involving not only official media channels, but also influential diplomats.¹⁶

However, in reality, "Chinese netizens" were subject to persecution by the Chinese government. One of those was independent journalist Zhang Zhan. A former lawyer, Zhang travelled to Wuhan in February 2020 to talk to people about how they were coping in lockdown. She shared a video and talked about what her observations, even noting that the fear people felt towards the government was actually greater than of the virus. Zhang was sentenced to 4 year imprisonment in late December for the crime of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble".¹⁷ Law professor Xu Zhangrun was detained by police for a week after writing articles critical of Chinese President Xi Jinping, and then fired from his position at a university. He remains under surveillance and is prohibited from leaving Beijing, but he continues to author articles.¹⁸

Coming back to the beginning, although China's so-called "Bat Woman", virologist Shi Zhengli, has said she would welcome a visit by a WHO team to the lab, leaked government documents tell a different story. According to documents released by the Associated Press in January 2021, the Chinese government is monitoring the scientists' findings and demands that any study be approved by a new task force under the direct command of Xi before publication.¹⁹

Zhang's case illustrates how the problems of official narrative are currently being addressed in China. It also shows that Chinese citizens do not always find official versions convincing, and propagandists can not make them believe in official line of thought. Forced silence on critics does not mean that people believe in the official party line. This could be an important asset while trying to combat Chinese propaganda and trying to recruit internal aid. However, as Yan C. Bennett suggests,

¹⁵ "Wuhan Lab Leak Theory: How Fort Detrick Became a Centre for Chinese Conspiracies," n.d., <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-58273322>.

¹⁶ Leng Shumei and Wan Lin (2020/3/25) US urged to release health info of military athletes who came to Wuhan in October 2019 <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1183658.shtml>

¹⁷ Jacob Fromer, "US and EU Demand China Release Citizen Reporter Zhang Zhan, Locked up for Covering Wuhan Coronavirus Outbreak," December 29, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3115749/eu-demands-china-release-citizen-reporter-zhang-zhan-and-12>.

¹⁸ Geremie R. Barmé, "Cyclopes on My Doorstep," December 17, 2020, <https://supchina.com/2020/12/17/cyclopes-on-my-doorstep/>.

¹⁹ Dake Kang, Maria Cheng, and Sam McNeil, "China's Top-Secret Search for the Origins of Coronavirus," February 1, 2021, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/asia/china-s-top-secret-search-for-the-origins-of-coronavirus-20210102-p56rar.html>.

it's not yet clear whether the Biden administration understands the full extent of China's willingness to protect and defend CCP narratives.²⁰

In addition to accusations of concealing the emergence and spread of the coronavirus, the Chinese authorities often face accusations of massive human rights violations during the implementation of the general quarantine and isolation measures.

Based on the facts presented in this report, the Tarand expert group came to a conclusion that although the pandemic inflicted serious reputational and economic losses to China, it also allowed Beijing to strengthen and improve its informational influence and propaganda capabilities.

The Tarand expert group believes that the ties between Beijing and WHO,²¹ in particular the Director General Tedros Ghebreyesus and his inner circle, deserve a more detailed and comprehensive analysis.

There is a suspicion that the WHO, by its actions or inaction, actually contributed to advancement of Chinese propaganda.²² There are also serious suspicions regarding Chinese activity and role in the election of Tedros Ghebreyesus as head of WHO.

Aid to a number of third world countries, including aid to the countries seriously affected by the pandemic, has also been used by Chinese propaganda to deflect accusations of China's responsibility for the spread of the virus.

Against this background, strengthening of China's capabilities in dissemination of its propaganda, as well as in creation of a "parallel reality" could be predicted.

In the foreseeable future, in the event of a conflict or a crisis situation with Taiwan, Beijing will undoubtedly use the experience of the information war, gained in connection with the "Uyghur issue" and during the pandemic.

²⁰ Yan C. Bennett and John Garrick, "Investigators Must Counter China's Disinformation Campaigns, Including on the Origins of Covid-19," January 28, 2021, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/investigators-must-counter-chinas-disinformation-campaigns-including-on-the-origins-of-covid-19/>.

²¹ Hinnerk Feldwisch-Drentrup, "How WHO Became China's Coronavirus Accomplice," February 4, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/02/china-coronavirus-who-health-soft-power/>.

²² Abhijit Iyer-Miltra, "WHO and China Covered Tedros' Past — but What Is Worrying Is How India Fell for It," n.d., <https://theprint.in/opinion/who-and-china-tedros-past-worrying-how-india-fell-for-it/400945/>.

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