



# THE REED

SPRING 2020

The COVID-19 Pandemic

Photo by Benjamin Guggenheim



Photo by Spencer Cohen

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## WEAI in a COVID-19 World



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When we first began planning to release *The Reed* in a new themed format, curated around a pressing issue facing Asia today, we expected submissions to focus on familiar problems: climate change, geopolitical tensions, or the changing international order. No one expected that over the course of a few short months, the world as we knew it would become an entirely different place.

COVID-19 has proven to be one of the most consequential challenges in recent decades for Asia and the world at large; its repercussions, both negative and positive, will reverberate for years to come. Although the situation is still evolving and some outcomes of the crisis are yet to be seen, this issue of *The Reed* seeks to address the ways in which COVID-19 has affected the region, as well as its impact on East Asian studies.

Two important student contributions set the tone for this issue. An essay, “The Coronavirus and US-China Relations,” by Jaimee Prass (GS ‘21), tackles the deterioration of the already strained US-China relationship during the pandemic. A photo essay by Benjamin Guggenheim (CC ‘22) titled “Xenophobia, Racism, and the Virus: A Contextual History of Sinophobia in the United States” explores the history of anti-Chinese sentiment in the US through images of San Francisco’s Chinatown.

Other features of this issue of *The Reed* include an in-depth analysis and response to the issues outlined in Prass’ essay by WEAI Professor Thomas Christensen. An essay by PhD student Tianyuan Huang raises questions about the inaccessibility of knowledge before and after COVID. And two personal pieces highlight perspectives from life in Japan: one article from WEAI Professor Paul Kreitman, who currently resides in Osaka, takes a critical look at the government’s handling of the crisis. The other, from alumnus Spencer Cohen (CC ‘18), offers a snapshot of life in Tokyo.

Since the start of the outbreak, East Asia has been in the spotlight as the first known epicenter of COVID-19. Countries in the region were the first to identify cases of the virus and the first to institute containment measures. Now many of them are on their way towards recovery. Their successes and failures provide lessons for the rest of the world moving forward.

We are fortunate to have at the Weatherhead East Asian Institute a diverse community of scholars and students with close ties to Asia, many of whom have dedicated their lives to understanding and spreading knowledge about the region. Some of their perspectives are shared here throughout the following pages. As we continue to navigate this often disorienting COVID-19 world together, we hope that you find this collection of articles, essays, and images insightful and enjoyable.

Sincerely,

Lien-Hang Nguyen  
Acting Director, Weatherhead East Asian Institute

## FEATURED STUDENT ESSAY

# The Coronavirus and US-China Relations

JAIMEE PRASS, SCHOOL OF GENERAL STUDIES '21

**A**s of writing this essay, COVID-19 is adversely affecting the global economy and the lives of millions of people around the world. Noting that the virus originated in China, it remains to be determined the impact the pandemic will have on US-China relations, and the relations between China and other nations that have been adversely affected by the coronavirus.

The world has become dependent on China and its labor force to produce an array of goods. Within the context of the global pandemic, there is evidence of a disruption in the global supply chain of vital medical supplies such as masks and other PPE needed to keep medical workers and first-responders safe from potentially contracting the virus. China, utilizing this equipment to help combat the spread of the virus within their own borders contributed to the issue of shortages of masks in other countries around the world now seeking access to these supplies as the virus spreads.

Despite the controversy surrounding China and its responses to the coronavirus, China has been actively working to bolster its relations with other countries by donating supplies, funding efforts to aid

in the discovery of a vaccine for the virus, and sending medical personnel to affected areas such as Italy and Iran to help combat the spread of COVID-19. A form of soft power and a tactic to improve foreign policy relations even as the world is ravaged by this pandemic, China seems intent on influencing any narrative surrounding its involvement in the pandemic. The effectiveness of this strategy can only be determined in the aftermath of the pandemic. The ever-evolving nature of this phenomenon requires researchers to rely on news sources as a means of information, and deeper analysis into the situation may only be possible after the pandemic has subsided.

In the aftermath of COVID-19, and noting the significant impact its spread has had on the global economy, an important question regarding how this will influence China's foreign policy is raised. In his book, *Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power: The China Challenge*, Thomas Christensen explores the issues regarding China's growing influence on the world stage, the potential threat it poses to American national security, and its contribution to the international system. Christensen further discusses the potential impact on the global economy should either China or the United States suffer a major economic downturn (220).

While this discussion had focused on the 2008 financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has required China to shut down and stall most of its operations in an effort to combat the spread of the virus. Currently the United States and the rest of the world is following suit.

As a new phenomenon, the most up-to-date literature on the pandemic can mostly be found within newspapers, and the ever-evolving nature of the pandemic and the choices made by governments (and the pace at which they make their decisions) are unpredictable. However, exploring the repercussions of a global pandemic that evolved from China, how it will impact national security in the future, and how it may change international trade and commerce is imperative to the development of US-China relations in the future.

China has gradually begun to lift its quarantine, encouraging citizens to cautiously resume normal life. The United States, comparatively, continues to grapple with a host of other issues raised in its efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19. These issues include determining appropriate measures to implement in order to salvage the economy, catering to the overwhelming needs of its population in terms of healthcare and unemployment benefits,



defining what protections citizens have from their debtors, evaluating the ability of individuals to access food, and ensuring that critical resources such as medical equipment are adequately provided. Observing the US response to COVID-19 calls into question the country's ability to recover economically. It is crucial, then, to study the differences between the United States' and China's responses to COVID-19 over time, and the repercussions of the virus, as this could potentially signal a shift in the determination of the United States as a leading world power.

Should China successfully restore its economy and society to a sense of normalcy, and control the narrative as the United States continues to grapple with the virus, this may potentially place China in a position to establish itself as a leading power on the world stage without intervention from the United States or other Western powers. The world would be dependent on the strength of the Chinese economy to continue providing essential goods and services if other nations continue to suffer from the spread of the virus. Alternatively, should there be a resurgence of the virus and the need to reinstate shutdown measures, this would continue to affect the global economy and international supply chains reliant on China. Studying these possibilities can aid in the development of policies that would enable the United States to evaluate its standing within the global economy, and determine whether it emerges from this disaster as a weakened or re-established world power.



JAIMEE PRASS



**THOMAS J. CHRISTENSEN**

# A Modern Tragedy?

## COVID-19 AND US-CHINA RELATIONS

The term “tragedy” is not generally used in contemporary discourse the way that it was originally intended in literature and theater. Nowadays anything awful is labeled a “tragedy”: from the criminal—such as a mass shooting—to the accidental—such as a train wreck or bus accident. In ancient Greek theater, the outcomes of tragedies were usually very bad as well, but it was not just the negative outcome that made them tragedies as opposed to comedies. A tragedy requires that the personal characteristics of the key players—often summed up as “tragic flaws”—and how those players interact with one another in a certain context lead them unwittingly, but not simply accidentally, to a crescendo of pain and suffering. In some instinctive sense, the tragic outcome seems avoidable. But puzzlingly, it also seems inevitable once one drills into the personalities and flaws of the key players and the context within which they interact.

It is in this sense of the word that I see COVID-19 as a potential tragedy in US-China relations and a potential tragedy for the world. The nature of the two countries’ political realities in 2020 have led to mismanagement of the crisis on both sides of the Pacific. The interactions between the two sides, and with other actors, such as the World Health Organization, have so far squandered historic opportunities for cooperation to tackle a common enemy. And other than the metaphorical invasion of earth by space aliens, we are unlikely to meet a more common enemy in our lifetime than this coronavirus. If great powers, including strategic competitors like the United States and China, cannot cooperate on countering this threat to the entire globe, then how can we expect to cooperate on other issues?



**S**o why has COVID-19 so far proven to be a source of greater friction, rather than greater cooperation, between the People's Republic of China and the United States of America? Here is where the tragic flaws of the two political systems collide. In China, where the epidemic began, it seems that the government handled the original outbreak of the virus very poorly. The local governments in the city of Wuhan and the surrounding Hubei province apparently suppressed the bad news that a virus was spreading in the city, silencing through coercion the voices of doctors who were blowing whistles and pointing to the dangers of an epidemic. Until January 20 of this year, the Chinese government did not even recognize publicly that the disease was clearly being passed among humans. But the disease has proven itself so contagious in multiple countries, it seems impossible to believe that health care workers in Wuhan were not among the early patients, which would be a very clear sign of human-to-human transmission. After all, with full knowledge of the contagion and very careful practices in place today to fight the spread in hospitals in the United States, many health care workers and hospital staff have still come down with the disease while treating COVID patients.

At a minimum, then, it seems that there was a local cover-up of the dangers of the disease. Chinese nationals I spoke with in America were fully aware and not surprised that concerned doctors in Wuhan were stifled by strict regulations against "spreading rumors" or "revealing secrets" without prior permission from higher authorities. The lack of a free press in China also hampered the prompt dissemination of knowledge about the disease to the general public in Wuhan and beyond. Local officials' reluctance to draw attention to problems is predictable in a system that blames and often punishes such officials for bad outcomes, even if forces that were generally outside of their control were the cause. Added to the mix is the massive anti-corruption drive launched by current President Xi Jinping. Most officials in a broadly corrupt political system fear being selected for a "disciplinary investigation" that has only one predictable end. If there is no independent justice system and most officials have at least some black marks in their dossiers, then local officials try to avoid missteps like taking maverick, public positions on negative occurrences such as disease spread. For these reasons, local officials sweeping bad news under the carpet and the early and quite consequential paralysis in responding to something like COVID-19 should not come as a surprise to scholars of contemporary Chinese politics.

Most likely there were also further cover-ups at higher levels in the Chinese Communist Party. Central government elites do not want to see the PRC's reputation tarnished on the international stage, and more importantly, want to ensure that the CCP's legitimacy at home is not harmed by coverage of the origins of the pandemic and the weak and even destructive early responses to it. And there is real reason for the CCP leadership to worry. The local problems that I describe above are not really local, but rather the natural outcome of a single-party authoritarian state without institutions, like a free media and an independent court system, that could protect the individual rights of citizens, including whistleblowers, against state repression. Chinese nationals in America with whom I discussed these issues in late January and February did not know what to think as the crisis escalated, but some expressed fears for their families back home based on one shared perception: the CCP government could not be trusted to tell the public the truth about what was actually happening.

Once the central government recognized the spread of the contagious disease and locked down Wuhan on January 23, the Chinese government appears to have been quite effective at limiting the spread of the disease, expanding hospital capacity in a hurry, distributing protective gear to health care workers, expanding testing protocols, and isolating, often forcibly, those with proven disease and even those suspected of having been exposed to the disease. Chinese doctors and health care officials almost certainly have learned valuable lessons to share with the outside world, including the United States. This is true even if it is the case that the same system in which they work caused tremendous damage early on by allowing a large, international city like Wuhan to become a giant incubator for a highly contagious and dangerous disease that would spread through the country and around the world.

The reluctance of the World Health Organization to label COVID-19 a global health emergency until the end of January, a full week after the lockdown of a large, international Chinese city, may also have caused significant damage. While later investigations will likely reveal more fully why this delay occurred, it does seem probable that what was at work was some combination of Chinese political pressure on WHO member states or WHO's top leadership to preserve the PRC's reputation on the international stage and the WHO's overreliance on official reports from member states like China.

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**“Other than the metaphorical invasion of earth by space aliens, we are unlikely to meet a more common enemy in our lifetime than this coronavirus.”**

While the WHO's slowness in coming to that conclusion may have delayed reactions to the coming catastrophe in various part of the world in consequential ways, oddly the one place that this does not seem to have been the case is the United States. And ironically, it has been Washington that has become the loudest critic of the organization. Here is where the American tragic flaws come into play. During the Trump administration, the US government has downgraded the importance of science and expertise in its decision-making processes and, under the banner "America First," has generally avoided using multilateral organizations and agreements to protect and assert US interests. Under President Trump, fewer government health experts were on the ground in the US mission in China than in past administrations. Deep expertise combined with long government experience is associated in top administration political circles with the so-called deep state that Trump has accused of trying to undermine his presidency. The president himself clearly prefers making decisions based on his gut instincts and on his hopes rather than on the results of careful research. So he claimed early on that the disease posed limited risk to the American society or economy; that it would disappear soon "like a miracle," perhaps when there was warm weather; and, more recently, that injecting disinfectants could be explored as a potential cure for the disease.

Even after the disease appeared threatening to the world, including the United States, the Trump administration largely dismissed the danger as overblown or, worse, inflated intentionally by the administration's political opponents. It is very difficult to see how an earlier recognition by the WHO that the novel coronavirus constituted a global health emergency would have changed that flawed American reality. Critically important weeks were lost in implementing serious policies to combat the disease. And the much touted ban on travel from China at the end of January, however sensible, apparently did little to stem the tide of the disease in the United States, since it had already arrived earlier and had begun spreading. In the case of New York, the disease apparently arrived indirectly from China via Europe, before the travel bans on both regions were established. Subsequent repeated claims that tests were universally available and were being provided in sufficient numbers to meet the challenge were patently untrue, and, early on in the crisis, governors were often left to fend for themselves and compete with one another in acquiring protective gear and medical equipment for physicians, in some important cases from China.

When the history of COVID-19 is written, South Korea, New Zealand, and Taiwan will likely be seen as the best examples of free societies that wrestled effectively with the virus in its early phases. Unfortunately, the United States almost certainly will not. For its part, Beijing's international reputation has apparently taken a big hit not just in the United States but in Europe and the Asia Pacific because of the issues raised above. Despite some impressive reactions in China after the epidemic was publicly recognized and despite efforts to assist other countries with medical equipment and expertise—and thereby boost China's international image—it appears that COVID-19 will prove much more of a liability than an asset in the PRC's diplomatic portfolio.

And here is where the systemic insecurities of the Chinese Communist Party and the political and psychological insecurities of the Trump administration seem to be playing off each other in a classically tragic manner. The tragedy is evident in Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian forwarding conspiracy theories about the U.S. Army planting the disease in Wuhan (he has not been fired and there is no evidence that he was even disciplined for this outrageous accusation). The CCP has also named all new cases of the disease in China as foreign, leading to discrimination against foreigners around the country, especially African migrants in the area in and around Guangzhou. This poor treatment of Africans who have lived in the area for years has done severe harm to China's reputation in Africa, which had been fostered over many years through economic interaction and infrastructure investment.

The tragedy is also present in President Trump's race-baiting description of the disease as the "Chinese virus," once he began taking it seriously, and his apparent celebration on Twitter of a corrected increase in the Chinese official death totals. One can only surmise that he saw the reports of increased Chinese suffering as good because it might somehow make his own government look somewhat more effective in comparison. The president has subsequently stopped using the "Chinese virus" label, but leaked guidance to Republican senators on how to respond to questions about COVID-19 in a presidential election year instructs them to blame China and the WHO for all problems in the United States and to praise Trump for limiting travel from China. Such deflection and scapegoating might impress the president's political base at home but will almost certainly further harm America's reputation on the international stage and make future cooperation with China harder to establish.

Potentially compounding and catalyzing the tragedy, the

Biden campaign has decided that attacking Trump for being too soft on China is the best way to leverage the pandemic for political gain in the 2020 elections. This cynical move is akin to Hillary Clinton's shift to economic nationalism and rejection of the Trans Pacific Partnership in her 2016 campaign. It appears patently disingenuous and destined to derail the US national interest, even if it seems like "good politics" in the toxic domestic political climate in the United States today.

So now we have the makings of a tragedy full of characters with tragic faults: one domestically insecure government (the CCP) with a legitimacy crisis that plays out in the form of domestic repression under a single authoritarian leader who can never be questioned or criticized; one insecure administration (the US) under a vainglorious president who is running for reelection and demanding that his partisan troops never criticize his response to the COVID-19 crisis, but instead blame China and the WHO for all problems in America; and one traumatized opposition party (the Democrats), who still can't believe Trump won in 2016 and who have decided this time around that "when they go low, we should go even lower." While China was clearly to blame for the crisis in this partisan narrative, so was Trump for being Beijing's patsy. One criticism that Biden supporters have raised is that early in the crisis Trump permitted the sending of "our [protective] masks" to China. This puts down a marker for the president that any future Sino-American cooperation on the virus in this election year might be called out by the Democrats as somehow traitorous.

I believe that all of the characters in this tragedy would like the virus to go away, but they have all chosen to protect their own reputations by placing blame squarely on others in ways that make much needed international cooperation to combat the virus more difficult. A good dose of self-criticism on all sides will be needed to improve future responses to similar challenges (which will almost certainly arise). More urgently, a good dose of humility and self-reflection might allow for greater international cooperation in this ongoing crisis. Failures of international cooperation will likely cost hundreds of thousands, or more likely millions, of additional lives through disease, hunger, and economic deprivation. Angela Merkel, chancellor of a wealthy and well-equipped Germany, and a responsible and internationally oriented leader of the first order, recognized recently that we are only in the early stages of this crisis. When one thinks of a much less well-equipped and much poorer sub-Saharan Africa or South Asia, one can only shudder about the number of people who could die later because of fighting now among great power rivals and among the two major political parties in the richest nation on earth.

Whatever mistakes and cover-ups occurred in Wuhan early on, China is now a repository of useful knowledge about the virus and how best to control its spread. It also has a very strong scientific community studying the origins of viruses and their medical treatment, who can cooperate with our own experts both to find a vaccine and to develop effective treatments short of a vaccine. This is true even if it turns out that the virus actually leaked from a scientific facility in Wuhan with insufficient safeguards. There will be time later to assess the early mistakes of China and others in greater detail, but the disease is out there now and we should be tackling it together. And the WHO and other multilateral institutions like the G20 should be bolstered to help address the medical and economic challenges that are likely to spread around the globe, particularly in countries with weak medical infrastructures and poor economies that will almost certainly suffer massive debt defaults. Again this is true, even if international politics and institutional weakness delayed the WHO's initial response to COVID-19. It simply does not follow any logic (except a tortuous political one) that the proper response to any earlier failures by the WHO should



be to cripple the major vehicle of international public health during a global pandemic.

Here are six areas of cooperation that the United States and China can pursue in both bilateral and multilateral settings that would serve their national interests and the interests of the planet, even if they do not necessarily fit the domestic political logics of leaders in Washington and Beijing. The list is suggestive and not intended to be exhaustive and can include cooperation among governments and non-governmental actors.

1. Share best practices. The two sides should share and learn best practices for how to slow the spread of the disease, including mistakes to be avoided. While it might be too soon to expect Beijing and Washington to agree to a probe of their early mistakes, it would be very helpful if each side would commit in principle to conduct such a probe after the virus has been brought under control and eliminated. This is unlikely to be our last epidemic. We all need to learn lessons for the long run and it would reduce political tensions between the two nations in the near term to recognize the eventual need for such a probe.

2. Cooperate on vaccine creation. The United States and China should work on vaccines together and should pledge to share any breakthroughs with each other and the rest of the world promptly when they are made. This can be done on a government-to-government basis or in cooperation between universities and companies. One sign of hope on that score is that Chinese and US scientists, including at Columbia University, have managed to perform collaborative research on the disease despite the conflicts between the two governments.

3. Prepare in advance for massive vaccine production and global vaccine distribution. Vaccinating everyone everywhere will be a massive logistical undertaking that will require great forethought before a vaccine is invented. Delays in distribution of even several months could easily cost astounding numbers of lives. If political fighting over who gets vaccines and when were to occur, it would be devastatingly destructive to international cooperation on any matter for years to come.

4. Assist the poorest nations in battling the disease. Cooperate to remediate suffering in the developing world by boosting the medical response capacity in highly vulnerable areas like sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, etc. In 2014, the United States and China cooperated effectively alongside many other countries to address the Ebola crisis in Africa. And the WHO should be a major actor in this cooperation regardless of any problems related to the organization's public response in January 2020. And to the degree that the epidemic is accompanied by famines in some places, as seems likely, the United States and China should support the efforts of the World Food Programme to distribute provisions and eliminate distributional bottlenecks slowing the delivery of needed aid.

5. Cooperate to manage debt defaults in the developing world. The possibility of systematic debt defaults in the developing world seems quite real and this could have ripple effects in the entire global financial system. More multilateral cooperation will clearly be needed. The then brand new G20 responded rather well to the 2008 financial crisis and should be called upon again to address this global recession. The COVID-19 crisis should also provide an opportunity for global bankers to push China to join international development financing groupings like the Paris Club, which reduce conflicts among lenders when debt crises occur around the globe. Without cooperation on debt restructuring, the international economy could be severely harmed by beggar-thy-neighbor strategies among lending institutions. In this context, the many

## **“The PRC and the United States should be behaving like confident great powers, not like insecure and tragically flawed players in an ancient Greek drama.”**

nontransparent, bilateral infrastructure development loans made by China as part of the Belt and Road Initiative could loom particularly large.

6. Prioritize development of strategic reserves over economic nationalism. Nations are now more acutely aware of their dependence on foreign supplies of needed products in a world of globalization and transnational supply chains. But we should also recognize that global trade has generally been a very positive factor for the world economy and that significant reductions in global trade will likely lead to more, not less, poverty and more, not less, vulnerability to disease and hunger. Two potential solutions to protect global trade would be the diversification of global supply chains so that a single country, like China, is not so essential to supply final manufactured goods. This would mean even more complex economic interactions around the world than we have today, but it would provide a much more efficient solution than each nation trying to produce many products entirely at home to reduce vulnerability. To supplement such a globalist strategy, individual countries should be encouraged to create larger strategic reserves of needed medical and other supplies as an alternative to simply moving all production of such products back to their own countries. Economic nationalism as an alternative to strategic reserves would carry huge opportunity costs for global efficiency and wealth and could also infect international security politics in destabilizing ways. Similar approaches to stockpiling of internationally purchased products for security purposes have long been used effectively in the energy sector.

In order to pursue such a constructive agenda, all countries should call a ceasefire on blaming others over the early outbreak and global spread of the disease. To help facilitate this diplomatic ceasefire, all countries should commit to eventual international investigations into how they responded to the crisis, including mistakes and misdeeds done along the way. The WHO should be involved in such an investigation, and the United States should be actively involved with the WHO to participate and help guide its involvement. For the reasons discussed above, it appears that neither the PRC nor the United States will likely be pleased to hear the eventual results of such an inquiry. But if they fail to cooperate now and continue to fight, and hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of additional deaths occur as a result, each country will suffer even greater losses to its reputation and diplomatic standing than it would by accepting in advance that it will eventually receive some criticism. The PRC and the United States should be behaving like confident great powers, not like insecure and tragically flawed players in an ancient Greek drama.

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[This policy brief was first published by the Brookings Institute in May 2020.]



PAUL KREITMAN

## Corona as Kaijū: A View from Japan

**H**ow many days has it been now? These days I mainly count time using empty wine bottles lined up on the kitchen floor. When recycling day rolls round I get to assess the psychological state of the neighbors too. Our building had a pretty rough stretch round about mid-April, but as we ease into May it looks like people might be starting to pull themselves together a bit more.

It's particularly hard to keep track of time because here in Japan the sky has been falling slowly. In NYC corona arrived in a fury, storming through the city like some invisible kaijū: hurling fireballs of viral droplets, raining fomites down on the city, its tentacles lashing down Broadway while the populace cowered inside. In Japan it arrived at an almost lazy pace. First it popped its head above the water to ensnare a cruise-ship in Tokyo Bay, sucking a dozen-plus holiday-makers into the maw while they hammered on the porthole windows to get out. Then it submerged again, and for a while we hoped it had moved on.

The government did take some action, to be fair. At the start of March Prime Minister Abe ordered the schools to close, sending parents into a tizzy (I say parents, it's been mainly mothers of course) as they struggled to work with their kids bouncing off the walls of shoebox apartments. But otherwise life seemed to go on as normal. The izakaya stayed open, station attendants kept on shoving commuters into subway carriages, and when the cherry blossoms bloomed the revellers crowded into parks to enjoy what is, for many Japanese, the most delightful proof that the earth still spins on its axis. The floating world still floated as well, with the salarymen, the bureaucrats and politicians slinking through the allies of the red light districts into snack bars, massage parlours and the more shadowy pleasure establishments. Even the pachinko parlours kept on jingling, with their ranks of bronchitic old men chain-smoking cheek-by-jowl before slot machines.

And despite all this, the infection rate only spread slowly. While the pandemic lashed the rest of the world, for a few tremulous weeks we seemed to be an island in the storm. Was Japan special? Might we be reaping the dividend of all that bowing, the mask-wearing, the alleged obedience to authority? The government certainly seemed to think so. For nearly two months they did virtually nothing to ramp up testing or expand Japan's intensive care capacity, which is less than half that of Italy's and one-sixth of Germany's. Instead the Abe cabinet devoted the bulk of their energies to an elaborate kabuki-dance with the IOC over the Summer Olympics (which even the most credulous Pangloss could tell was clearly doomed). The air of complacency was palpable. Not a single of my neighbors here in suburban Osaka placed any confidence in the official contagion figures. Theories swirled as they have elsewhere. COVID deaths, we suspected, were being misdiagnosed as regular flu, and hospitals were refusing to take suspected cases so that victims

died at home, uncounted. Some of our neighbors even subscribed to a far-fetched conspiracy theory that the government was deliberately covering up deaths from the virus.

Personally I don't believe there was any concerted coverup. The government was merely complacent. And because they were complacent they squandered precious time when Japan might have learned from the rest of the world and made some attempt to strengthen the seawalls against the kaijū. Only when the numbers in Tokyo began to spike did they begin to panic. It was the metropolitan governors who sounded the alarm first, pleading with Abe to lockdown, turn on the money taps, or at least show some kind of god-darn leadership beyond the corporate schmoozing and half-baked macroeconomic tinkering that, after ten years in power, he thought was the only thing the top job would ever require.

Abe is the scion of the most powerful political dynasty in Japan's history: he sweats privilege like a





runner lapping the Imperial Palace on a still afternoon in August. But somehow he has perfected a sort of man-of-the-people schtick that made him seem, to a crucial majority of voters, relatable. But during the current crisis the mask has slipped. In an attempt to convince people to stay home he put out a video on Twitter showing him preening on a cream chaise longue, stroking a fluffy dog like some Bond villain skulking in the Palace of Versailles. The mockery was swift and vicious. Man of the people? Sure, pal. The atmosphere of panic that coronavirus instilled sent world leaders' approval ratings soaring, no matter how ineptly they handled the crisis. Even Trump got a bump. Only Abe's sagged. Let that sink in for a second.

Still, it has to be said that his government is now doing something. Maybe belatedly, but something. On April 7, after infection rates began to spike in Tokyo, Abe finally announced a State of Emergency covering Japan's major cities, and after some arm-wrestling from provincial governors

reluctantly extended it to the whole country. In the week or so after the state of emergency was declared, shops, cafés, restaurants, and brothels slowly closed. Even the pachinko parlors eventually stopped jingling, though only after local governments publicly shamed them. Some companies have shifted to teleworking, though not nearly to the extent seen elsewhere. A stimulus package was passed—hardly money printer go brrrrrrr like in other countries—but at least a stuttering spigot of cash into people's pockets to help them weather the pandemic. School closures have been extended, and no one seriously believes they will reopen again until September. Testing has ramped up somewhat, though again it lags China, South Korea, Europe and the US. Mask-wearing in public space, already widespread in the early days of the crisis, has become pretty much universal, despite the difficulty of obtaining the cursed things. Japan has slipped into a mild version of the lockdowns that have been imposed in most of the rest of the world.

And for the moment at least, these efforts seem to have paid off. Since April 17 the number of recorded cases has dropped steadily, and also more sharply than in countries such as the US and UK. That have implemented stricter lockdowns. For this, I think we can thank the fact that, for whatever reason, coronavirus has spread relatively slowly in Japan. As a result, the official daily death toll in Japan peaked at 33, compared to nearly 1,000 in Italy and Britain and 2,000 in the US. So far we have gotten off very lightly indeed.

Nor, to be honest, can I complain that much about my personal situation. While my colleagues in Manhattan huddle in their apartment buildings, some afraid to even saunter half a block to Broadway—let alone into claustrophobic plague pits like bodegas or West Side Market—out in the Kansai 'burbs I have it pretty easy. The archives may be closed, but otherwise I can still enjoy my sabbatical in peace. I'm not hunched over a laptop like the other Columbia profs, struggling to deliver lectures to panicked students over flickering Wi-Fi. Sure, my son is driving me stir-crazy, but at least he can go out and play in the park every day. The sun shines, the first shoots of rice saplings will soon poke from the paddy-field next door, birds warble in the grove of the shrine across the road, and koi carp flags celebrating Children's Day flutter overhead. Life here is, in the grand scheme of things, not half bad.

Still, when I lie awake at night with my Merlot-addled mind spinning and think about the advantages squandered, I want to put my fist through a wall. I think of those yawning weeks in February and March (both 20-bottle months, since you ask) when trivial expenditures on testing, quarantining and contact-tracing could have chopped off the kaijū's tentacles as swiftly as a sushi chef sashimis an octopus. The South Koreans were right next door across the Tsushima Strait, showing us all how it's done. And do I believe that the government has an exit strategy? Not for a moment. With the possible exception of China, nowhere does really, does it? Everyone is still on the back foot, winging it week by week. In Japan as elsewhere the state of emergency, in some form or another, stretches on to the horizon as far as the eye can see. How many more bottles till the kaijū passes? Damned if I know.

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Illustration by Tatsuji Kajita, Asahi Sonorama All Monsters Attack Sonosheet (1969) pp.3-4





Spencer Cohen  
**An American in Tokyo in the Time of COVID**



### SPENCER COHEN

is a 2018 Columbia College alumnus. He is currently a graduate student at the University of Tokyo.

**F**orced inside by the spread of COVID-19, I spend most days in my Tokyo apartment at a small desk by the window. In the mornings, I undertake my duties as a graduate student at

The University of Tokyo, where I research the history of Tokyo's wartime cityscape. In the afternoon, I write about contemporary Tokyo, struggling to articulate the contours and happenings of a city that I now only see on short walks through my neighborhood. The most adventure I have had in two months are shorts walks down the street; for weeks, I have dreamt of a longer stroll to Tokyo Station.

I am left asking: How do you write about a city where normal life is suspended, the streets are deserted, and human contact is abhorred? Though I am a student of history—I write on Tokyo and the inflection of war upon the historic cityscape—my research is informed and shaped by life in the metropolis.

Hours spent in cafes, commutes on packed subways, and days occupied strolling the streets of Tokyo enable me to understand the ebb and flow of the city, a knowledge that works to strengthen and elevate my writing on the city past and present. Though I am a lifelong New Yorker, I never understood my city until I began to wander the streets unsystematically. The same has been true of Tokyo.

One afternoon before the global descent into a pandemic, I sat in a cafe with a striking view of the Tokyo station's facade. An espresso and the printout of pages from a 1946 *Asahi Shimbun* and *The Stars and Stripes* sat upon the small table. In an image, nearly identical in the two papers, uniformed Americans marched down a broad boulevard in central Tokyo. The caption

listed the building from which the photographer took the image. I began to trace the contours of the street and make out landmarks: I realized that this building was just a short walk away. In espresso-fueled excitement, I stuffed my papers in my bag and darted to the building.

I came upon a towering and monumental structure, just across from the Imperial Palace. On the street, I retraced the steps that the American soldiers would have taken in the early years of the occupation. Days later, I made my way inside and to the upper floor. I could not believe my eyes: I had found nearly the exact view from which the photographer made the image. I documented the sight. As I stood there, I began to imagine the *Stars and Stripes* and *Asahi* photographers and the onlookers that thronged the street below. I thought of the rubble-laden images from around the same time of the Shinbashi area, just down the street. I recalled the deaths wrought by the bombs from above. For someone in occupation era Tokyo, what could this have been like to see the occupying army march through the city after years of war? What would this have meant to see the uniformed Americans march adjacent to the Imperial Palace, the city's symbolic center?

While I would not be able to answer these questions without recalling the voices of those present through archival research, to traverse the streets and see the remainder of the built environment offers something different. To write on Shinbashi of 1905 in Shinbashi of 2019 was surely a telling experience. When writing about city past in city present, intangibles peek through the present topography and cityscape in a way that they never quite seem to in documents, photographs, or even movies.

I think of Robert Caro and his interviews with Sam Houston

Johnson, Lyndon Johnson's younger brother. Caro had the younger Johnson sit at the dining room table in the family home, close his eyes, and imagine his family at dinner decades earlier. Caro learned something he could never recover in documents, nor ever quite capture with interviews: the 36th president's fraught conversations with his father as a child. When writing of the city, experiences in the contemporary cityscape have helped me to capture the intangibles.

Yet, with COVID-19, this is all now impossible. I can no longer walk the streets as I once did. Over the past two years, I delayed the rigor of graduate work in the United States in favor of time in Tokyo. Locked inside over the past two months, I am left trying to undertake fieldwork without access to the field, discover a city that now feels distant. I sometimes forget that I am in Tokyo, reminded only during strolls through Todai's campus. I can no longer talk to the people I photograph; instead, I must shoot from afar.

Now, I am left with no choice but to endeavor to discover new ways to conceptualize and capture the city and the voices of its inhabitants. I now find myself captivated by movies on the city that I previously watched to check the box. I have rediscovered *Tokyo Story* and *Enchanted Flower*, but also find myself more and more interested in contemporary depictions of the cityscape. I have also returned to Natsume Soseki's *Sanshiro* and jealously read of Sanshiro's travels through the city via streetcar. While COVID-19 has closed off the actual cityscape, it has forced more to rediscover Tokyo in text and movies.

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**“How do you write about  
a city where normal life  
is suspended, the streets  
are deserted, and human  
contact is abhorred?”**

*The interior of the Meiji Seimei Kan building, where the uniformed Americans were photographed by the Asahi and Stars and Stripes newspapers. Photo by Spencer Cohen.*





# WHEN KNOWLEDGE CANNOT EVEN BE BOUGHT

## IS COVID-19 TRULY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE INACCESSIBILITY OF KNOWLEDGE?

TIANYUAN HUANG

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As a PhD student in Japanese history, I had naively imagined that the coronavirus lockdown would have, in comparative terms, minimal impact on my personal life. After all, I have always stayed at home pretty much all day and every day, reading and writing. The library system of Columbia University, along with that of its partner institutions, has always had my back and delivered the research materials I need—however rare they are—from all corners of the continent, if not the world.

Yet I now profoundly regret having laughed out in amusement when I saw the memes circulating online about how social distancing has always been a norm for academics. Indeed, I am used to not seeing so many people, but I am definitely not accustomed to being surrounded by so few books.

What you see in the photo, an amateur shot of my laptop screen, is but one of the many titles I need for my research. The New York Public Library has a physical copy, but I cannot risk my visa status (I am an international student here) by sneaking into the closed building like a possum. The catalog of

the HathiTrust Digital Library shows that the University of Michigan and the University of California system both enjoy search-only viewability, which means a digital edition does lawfully exist somewhere. Yes, I asked our (awesome) Japanese Studies librarian outright if we could spend the money and buy access to a digitized edition or a hard copy. But no, unfortunately, Hathi Trust is not a commercial vendor, so it cannot just sell access to copyrighted items. In addition, the commercial vendors such as Maruzen E-book collection do not carry the title. Nor can we purchase a hardcopy from Japanese bookstores—they are deemed “non-essential,” and by now all have been shut down.

Do not get me wrong. I respect the tremendous effort put into the production of knowledge and the importance of protecting intellectual property rights. In fact, I am willing to pay my share of the price. Last summer, and thanks to the generous support from the Weatherhead East Asian Institute, the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, and my own department, I was able to visit the Tokyo branch of the National Diet Library in person. Earlier this year, I likewise budgeted and planned a summer research trip to Japan, so I can read the

already digitized but “Available only at the NDL and partner libraries” and “Available only at the NDL” materials.

Now, that trip is also on halt.

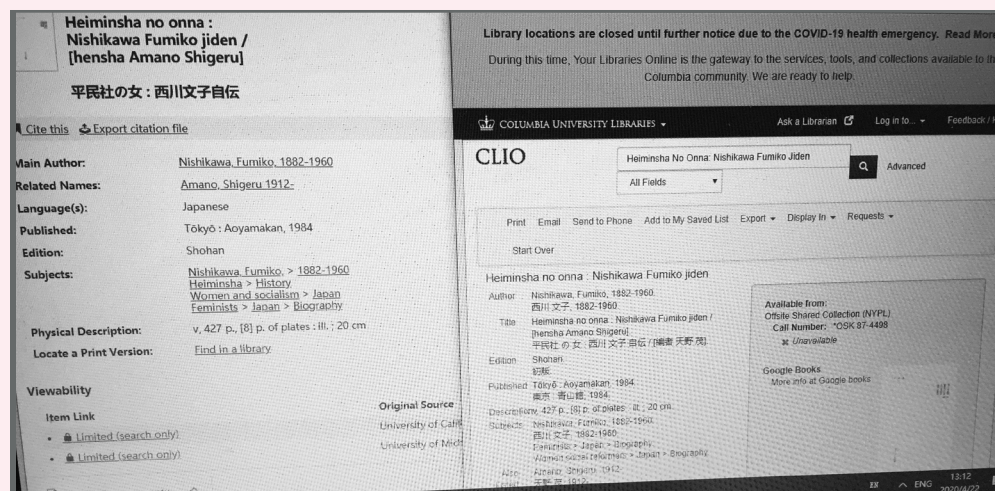
The Preamble of the National Diet Library Law speaks of the firm conviction that “truth makes us free,” a mission statement also engraved in the great hall of the library building. Before COVID-19, merely the memory of that motto would make me feel empowered, but now, not anymore.

No one mentioned that truth itself is not free during the coronavirus pandemic, even when someone would be desperate enough to pay for it, or willing to imagine themselves as a possum.

To be sure, I am deeply grateful for all the library systems around the world who continue to support students and academics despite the global public health crisis. The Hathi Trust Emergency Temporary Access is a blessing, and Columbia University’s willingness to purchase the digital editions of the hard copies it already owns is commendable.

However, the real question remains. What should true collaborative efforts look like when we think about the production, reproduction, and sharing of knowledge in a digital age? The coronavirus has not killed all research activities, for sure, because the curious minds thirst for knowledge are tenacious, resilient, and strong themselves. Yet the pandemic has certainly disabled academics, especially junior researchers and students who have come to realize their real vulnerability.

The guardians, preservers, and producers of knowledge, now I humbly ask of you, what exactly must we do to be afforded lawful access to the knowledge that contains the truth promised to us, so we can all be free, if not yet equal?









# Xenophobia, Racism, and the Virus: A Contextual History of Sinophobia in the United States

**PHOTO ESSAY BY  
BENJAMIN GUGGENHEIM  
COLUMBIA COLLEGE '22**

The current COVID-19 pandemic has revealed just how much the US needs to improve in its preparation for, and handling of, public health crises. At the same time, racially-charged assaults in response to the virus have exposed the level of Sinophobia in relation to both Chinese Americans and nationals still harbored in this country. This photo essay attempts to contextualize recent events within Chinese American history, and highlights recurring patterns of discrimination.

San Francisco's Chinatown (pictured on the opposite page) is the first of its kind in the Western Hemisphere. It was established during the early 1850s, as tens of thousands of Chinese immigrants flocked to Northern California to take part in the Gold Rush. From 1863 to 1869, the enclave's population grew rapidly, when as many as 20,000 Chinese immigrants helped to build the western portion of the Transcontinental Railroad. Today, there are many Chinatowns across the country, with more historic ones located in San Francisco, Seattle, Los Angeles, Portland (Oregon), and New York.



China Camp Village, nestled by Marin County's San Pablo Bay, is representative of the small Chinese immigrant communities that existed outside of cities. In the 1880s, this site was home to 500 Chinese immigrants, who made their living fishing and netting shrimp that were dried on the hillsides behind their homes. Today the village is a part of China Camp State Park.



With an increase in national unemployment in the 1870s, racial tensions in California escalated to full blown violence, as Chinese immigrants were blamed for the bad economy. The Chinese Massacre of 1871 was a race riot that occurred in Los Angeles on October 24, 1871, when a mob of around 500 people pillaged the city's Chinatown, murdering an estimated 17 to 20 residents. Following national sentiment, the US Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, which prevented Chinese laborers from immigrating to the US. In 1924, the policy was expanded to apply to all Chinese nationals, becoming the first US law implemented to ban all members of a specific ethnic or national group. Located in San Francisco Bay, Angel Island, pictured to the right, served as an immigration station from 1910 until 1940, and is where Chinese nationals seeking entry to the country were detained and interrogated. Prior to 1924, when wives and children of Chinese laborers already living in the US were allowed to enter, those seeking to immigrate were detained much longer than the Europeans entering through Ellis Island. One Chinese woman was detained for 22 months, from 1916 to 1918, while many others were denied entry and forced to return to China.



Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, which is believed to have originated in Wuhan, China, Chinese nationals and Chinese Americans are being subjected once again to increased levels of discrimination and verbal and physical abuse. Even before any cases of the virus were reported in the US, while sports stadiums and music festivals were still in full operation, Chinese-run American restaurants and shops were losing business and being forced to layoff employees or close down. The left picture shows a normally crowded commercial street in San Francisco's Chinatown entirely shut down due to the virus. People of Chinese ancestry have been called names, criticized for spreading the virus, spat on, chased, and beaten. The Asian American Pacific Islander Civil Rights Organization has recently recorded more than 100 such hate incidents each day.



Similarly, many Americans have been quick to blame China and the Chinese Communist Party for the destruction of American lives and the economy. While China should be criticized for the propagation of disinformation pertaining to the virus, including its initial cover-up of the virus and subsequent government-directed fake text messages and social media posts about

its severity, it should be clear that many of those in leadership who seek to hold China responsible for the continued spread of COVID-19 are trying to avoid being blamed for their own inadequate responses. US disapproval of China and the absence of cooperation between governments has disadvantaged both countries in the fight against the virus. There has been more competition than collaboration in trying to develop

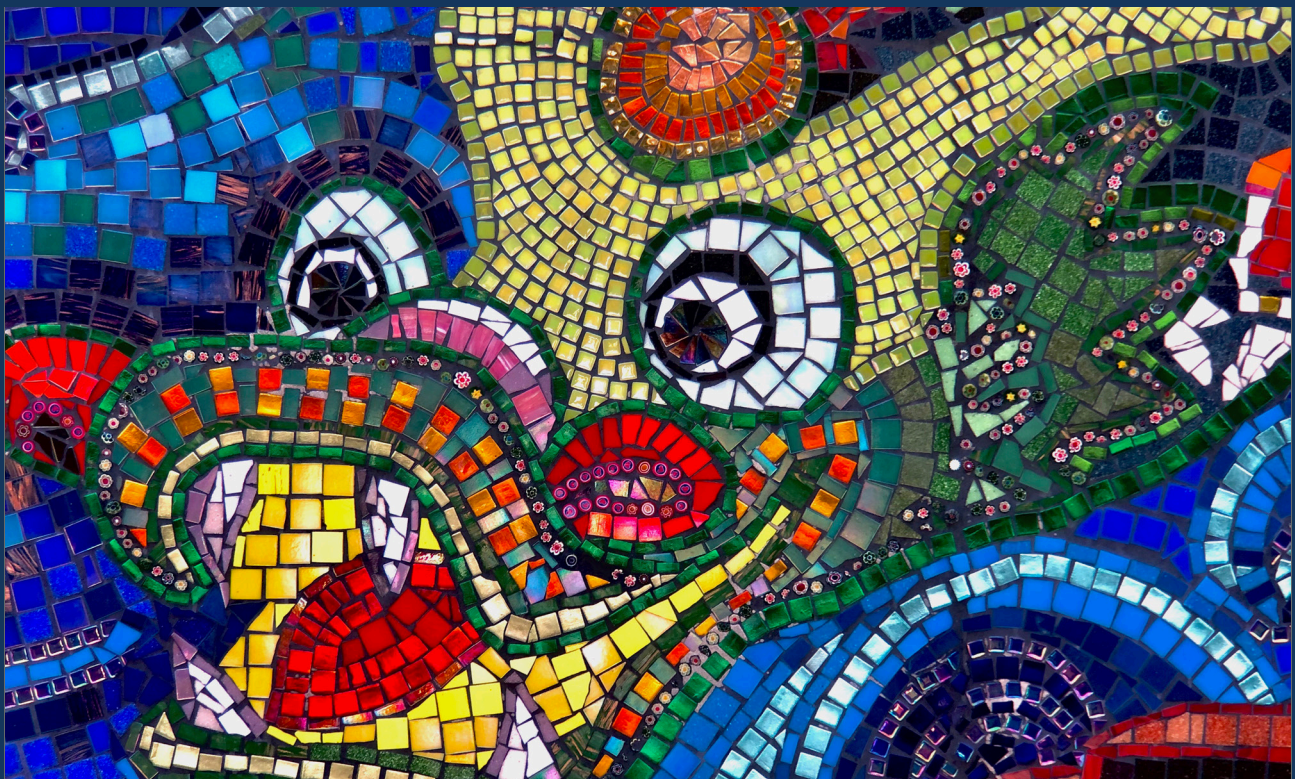
a cure. Additionally, when US hospitals lacked sufficient quantities of personal protective equipment, and the federal government failed to coordinate the manufacturing of such equipment, state governments were forced to arrange for their own shipments of such equipment from China, among other places.



On the left, the Port of Oakland, one of the main passageways for commerce between the US and China.

In addition to being a global health emergency, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed a resurgence of long-standing Sinophobia, which also is sickening the country. Going forward, US-Sino relations must be improved, through both diplomatic dealings and the treatment of Chinese Americans and nationals on US soil. Significant progress in this regard will be necessary to redress both viruses.

Below, a mosaic in San Francisco's Chinatown.







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