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(Yellow) perilous perceptions of the (viral) Other:
Bio-orientalist discourse of China in the age of COVID-19

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Introduction

In the earlier months of 2020, several reports of what seemed to resemble an outbreak of severe cases of pneumonia emerged globally. The world witnessed an unprecedented international health crisis at the convergence of racialized media discourse disseminated by mass communication systems. News reporting of the initial cases of this contagion, for instance, faced the difficult task of constructing an unbiased narrative of a virus of unknown and, quite possibly, deadly consequences without resorting to xenophobic anti-Asian racialization of the pathogen. To no avail, many failed this pursuit of journalistic objectivity and non-partisanship, proliferating the politicization of the virus due to its origins, later traced back to Wuhan, China (Hart et al., 2020). Nowhere is this more evident than in the Western coverage of this seminal event, resulting in damaging perceptions of East Asian cultural identities, instigating violent actions fuelled by dangerous anti-Asian rhetoric plagued by the pervasive influence of techno-orientalism, a concept pertaining to the Western imagination of East Asia as a hyper-technological agent of an Asianized high-technological future (Roh et al., 2015; Morley & Robins, 1995). In fact, the sudden surge in racially motivated hate crimes involving verbal assault and physical attacks on Asian Americans in the United States (US) during this time was linked to the initial emergence of the COVID-19 virus in Western societies (Vachuska, 2020; Lim et al., 2023). The rhetoric of the illness-ridden, disease-carrying Chinese prevails in the 21st century as yet another iteration of the yellow peril anxiety and medical scapegoatism of viral diseases in the broader context of public health issues in US history.

As the world grapples with the aftermath of the global COVID-19 pandemic, this thesis ventures into the racialized terrains of news texts to critically explore the bio-orientalist narratives woven into news coverages of the COVID-19 virus that not only construct East Asian

bodies as Other but also as a distinct biological threat to immune Western life. With reference to the latest derivation of the traditional Saidian orientalism, Lester's (2021) discourse of bio-orientalism, this study navigates news media as a site of identity politics to conduct a critical discourse analysis of American news coverage of the pandemic positing East Asian countries and identities as an adversarial threat to Western humanity. News articles reporting the COVID-19 outbreak that were published between March 2020 and May 2020 by mainstream news outlet, *Fox News* are analyzed, illustrating patterns of implicitly pernicious and explicitly insidious portrayals of East Asian countries and identities as hyper-biological in relation to the racialized virus. This work aims to illuminate how these news representations are embedded within a broader yet less overt systemic power structure that conceals xenophobic and hegemonic dominance in American society within the fabric of everyday communication, such as news media.

Literature Review

The intersection of media representation and the construction of inter/transnational and cultural identity is a prominent area of scholarly inquiry and has only grown more salient since the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct a comprehensive review of the background against which resulting anti-Asian discourses are produced. The critical examination of relevant literature weaves together insights from three distinct yet interconnected bodies of scholarship on race and health, tracing the intricate relations between historical structures of societal power and racialized discourse of media representations perpetuated within the contemporary context of a global health emergency.

Research indicates that current scholarship on medical racialization and news representation of the COVID-19 contagion primarily draws upon Morley & Robins' (1995) contestably outdated techno-orientalism, which explores the Western vision of East Asia and their cultural identities as a techno-Orient, that they are hyper-advanced agents that will usher in a dystopian future controlled by technology. Techno-orientalist imagery vilifies a collective Asia believed to be armed with foreign technological power, constructing Asian life as intrinsically mechanical and non-human, thereby emphasizing how closely "high technology" is "associated with Japaneseness" (Morley & Robins, 1995, p. 168), as representative of Asia. In tandem with the "yellow peril" anxiety, an ideology referring to the alleged threat Chinese people pose to Western life (Siu & Chun, 2020), the literature reviewed in this section concluded that the racialization of the COVID-19 virus in 2020 needs to be contextualized against this backdrop of the US-China rivalry, where the Eastern nation has become "a screen on which the West projects its fears of being colonized, mechanized, and instrumentalized in its own pursuit of technological dominance" (Roh et al., 2015, p. 4).

This study is situated within an existing body of literature on racial othering, attempting to bridge this gap by exploring news coverage of the COVID-19 virus through the latest derivation of Saidian Orientalism, Lester's (2021) concept of bio-orientalism, which will be further explored in the following section of this study. This review explores studies that have been conducted that are adjacent to this topic of study and is organized into three thematic categories, synthesized to give a brief overview of relevant literature: the historical repertoire of medical scapegoatism in the US, anti-Asian sentiments in response to the COVID-19 contagion, and US news media representation of China.

Historical repertoire of medical scapegoatism in the US

Throughout US history, scholars have examined how health crises were weaponized to perpetuate racialized discourses, in particular, how racial boundaries were socially constructed and enforced through public policy issues (Trauner, 1978; Shah, 2001; Molina, 2006). Drawing upon historical accounts of public health issues in the West illuminates how the racialization of the COVID-19 virus is not a new phenomenon but is the latest iteration of medical scapegoatism of East Asian Others in the US. Chinese immigrants and other ethnic minorities in San Francisco, for instance, were rendered medical scapegoats for epidemic diseases that plagued the vicinity, such as the leprosy scare of the 1870s, the smallpox epidemic of 1876-1877, and the bubonic plague of 1900-1901 (Trauner, 1978). Scientific findings were misrepresented by public health officials to impose discriminatory regulations that targeted Chinese communities and their living quarters (Shah, 2001). Public health officials implemented sanitation measures to curb the spread of diseases and "rationalized the failure of (these) programs by tracing all epidemic outbreaks to living conditions among the Chinese" (Trauner, 1978, p. 70). Despite evidence that there were infectious outbreaks declared in non-Chinese communities, San Francisco's Chinatown was

labeled a “laboratory of infection” (Trauner, 1978, p. 73), where viruses were believed to have come to fester. This determination overlooked how the city’s sanitation and health services were not extended to the areas where Chinese immigrants reside.

Shah's (2001) historical account of the same period chronicles how Western perceptions of Chinese communities evolved, but only instrumentally. Shah (2001) reveals how the Western perception of Chinese immigrants is, in part, malleable, particularly when it aligns with hegemonic convenience. In the nineteenth century, Chinese immigrants were branded as harbingers of contagious viruses that posed a threat to Western humanity. By the mid-twentieth century, however, this cultural narrative shifted dramatically. No longer were they regarded as menacing threats in Western thought; Chinese immigrants were perceived as struggling foreigners in need of salvation from the West (Shah, 2001). This shift was aided by the promise of assimilation into Western norms, prompting Chinese communities to recalibrate narratives about their hygiene practices, aligning themselves as closely to Western standards of 'cleanliness' to gain acceptance into American society (Shah, 2001). The medical racialization of ethnic minorities in the US extends beyond Chinese immigrants, as Molina (2006) illustrates in the racial fluidity in the hierarchical positioning of Mexican, Japanese, and Chinese immigrants in Los Angeles. This hierarchy uplifts one group while vilifying others, serving the hegemonic interest of American society. These works collectively demonstrate how amenable Western perceptions of their Eastern counterparts have been throughout history and continue today as they harden in the face of a global health crisis, such as the COVID-19 virus.

American society’s history of racializing diseases and leveraging health crises to perpetuate racialized discourses highlight a persistent pattern of medical scapegoatism. Establishing this pattern is crucial to understanding the basis of the discursive concept of bio-

orientalism, which is a central theoretical framework underpinning this study. By investigating medical scapegoatism's latest iteration in the COVID-19 pandemic, this thesis draws a parallel by exploring how anti-Asian sentiments surged, and violence against Asian communities escalated, driven by Western anxieties over a perceived biological and contagious threat of a virus racialized during a health crisis.

Anti-Asian sentiments in response to the COVID-19 contagion

The global outbreak of the COVID-19 virus yielded several scholarships investigating the prevalence of anti-Asian sentiments in Western thought, employing a range of methodologies, including online surveys, discourse analysis, structural topic modeling (STM) analyses, and framing & syntactic analysis to arrive at this conclusion (Reny & Barreto, 2022; Ivíc & Petrović, 2020; Zhang & Trifiro, 2022; Chenri & Al-Shaibani, 2021; Santia et al., 2022; Deng, 2023; Kang, 2020; Yu & Liu, 2023; Sun & Cheung, 2022). Reny & Barreto (2022) conducted a large-scale online survey on a sample of 4311 participants in the US between March 12 and 15, 2020, to discover whether the prevalence of elite blame-rhetoric at the onset of the pandemic “activated pre-existing xenophobia and anti-Asian sentiment” (p. 210). The survey asked questions regarding concerns about contracting the virus, measures taken in response to the virus, and policy-related questions about immigration regulations and travel bans concerning Asian individuals (Reny & Barreto, 2022). The authors found that anti-Asian attitudes manifested in anxieties about the virus and policy preferences that emerged only in perceptions of Asian peoples and did not hold true for other ethnic groups (Reny & Barreto, 2022). In establishing a direct link between the COVID-19 virus and the rise of anti-Asian sentiment, Santia et al. (2022) go a step further to explore that it is through racialized news coverage of Asian people that these xenophobic attitudes are shaped. Employing an online survey in May 2020 with 878 participants,

the study incorporated experimental design and manipulated news stories about Asian countries and anti-Asian racism to explore their effects on opposition to immigration. Positive news about South Korea's COVID-19 response reduced opposition to immigration, fostering positive attitudes toward Asians, while exposure to anti-Asian racism stories increased opposition to immigration (Santia et al., 2022). These findings prompt reflection on media responsibility in addressing racial topics during global crises.

As demonstrated by Santia et al. (2022), xenophobic attitudes and anti-Asian sentiments brought by the COVID-19 virus materialize with exposure to racialized news coverage, even more so in the Western reporting of East Asia's response to the global pandemic, particularly contextualizing the logic of techno-orientalism. In another study, Deng (2023) conducted a cultural discourse analysis to investigate how East Asia's anti-pandemic efforts were represented in news articles and opinion pieces published in Western media through the lens of techno-orientalism. This study concluded that while Western media have generally responded positively to East Asia's anti-pandemic measures, there was some evidence of rhetorical strategies employed that were fuelled by the logic of techno-orientalism, manifesting in the form of questions, comparisons, and assumptions, particularly referring to East Asia's arguably invasive datafication of communication technologies (Deng, 2023). While this work analyzed news as discourse, it falls short in establishing a criterion to rationalize the sample selected for the study, as both opinion pieces and news reports published in French and English were included in the analysis. With similar concerns of surveillance and data colonialism under the banner of techno-orientalism, Kang (2020) turns to the digital contact tracing deployed by the South Korean government during the COVID-19 pandemic and how these efforts were portrayed in Western media such as the *New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *Guardian*, and the *Wall Street Journal*

amongst many others. This study illustrates how Western media attributed South Korea's success in handling the global pandemic to the culture of "Confucian collectivism of obedience and conformity" (Kang, 2020, p. 591), situating South Korean citizens as intellectually primitive drones of a totalitarian regime.

Dominant characterization of China as the ideological Other has continued to plague Western news discourse. Sun & Cheung (2022) utilized a syntactic analysis of 60 news headlines published in *The Economist* framing China vis à vis the COVID-19 virus outbreak. Their findings highlight a distinctive three-part structure with catchy headlines, "main headlines and sub-headlines constructed as full sentences" (p. 2028), which leaves them open to interpretation. In doing so, the authors posit that while *The Economist* avoids overtly hostile language, they subtly convey "largely unfavorable views of China in Anglo-American contexts that pre-date the pandemic and have been perpetuated by it" (p. 2029). Similarly, Chenri & Al-Shaibani (2021) conducted a critical discourse analysis of 167 news headlines from *CNN*, *Fox News*, and *China Daily*. They concluded that the two US news outlets reported on the COVID-19 virus "in divergent manners for the parties they respectively support to win the 2020 presidential election", with *CNN* favoring the Democratic Party and *Fox News* indirectly supporting the Republican party "which protects Trump's image by shifting the blame to China" (p. 14).

Due to the small sample size, Sun & Cheung's (2022) and Chenri & Al-Shaibani's (2021) studies only offer a limited glimpse into Western media's portrayal of China. Yu & Liu (2023) provide a more comprehensive analysis by comparing US and Chinese media representations of the COVID-19 pandemic based on the discursive news values of complete reports published by *The New York Times* and *China Daily*. The authors found that both countries' media portray the state of their "domestic crises... as less negative [and]... least impactful", while the state of the

other nation as “the most negative, the most impactful, the most severe, and the least positive” (Yu & Liu, 2023, p. 1257). Their study reveals a reciprocal process of othering in media representations, where US media frames China as the Other and vice versa. This dynamic is influenced by underlying anti-Asian sentiments reflecting the pre-existing tension between the two nations. This reflects the US media’s dilemma in “balancing the interests and needs of their local audience with the pursuit of newsworthiness” (Yu & Liu, 2023, p. 1271).

Existing scholarship has explored news discourse as a site for the resurgence of anti-Asian sentiments in Western media following the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting ideological othering of East Asians. These studies reveal the techno-orientalist representation of Eastern nations following the virus outbreak in 2020, uncovering the prevalence of Sinophobia, the irrational fear and prejudice that results in hostility towards East Asian people. Despite this, the absence of bio-orientalist exploration in these news discourses is acutely felt. This study aims to address this gap by examining not the fear of Asian people’s technological power or mechanical bodies, but rather the biological threat and contagiousness of Yellow Life.

US news media representation of China

To contextualize the framing strategies that US news utilized in the reporting of China in the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak, it becomes necessary to establish the systematic pattern of othering that has long plagued the representation of China as culturally and morally inferior across various geopolitical contexts outside of medicine and health crises ranging from international student migration to cyber espionage. The US news maintains “that something large looms in China” (Fishman, 2005, p. 1). Communication scholars have explored this area of study, primarily employing a discourse analysis of publicly accessible sources, predominantly focusing on US news texts (Ooi & D’Arcangelis, 2017; Yin, 2023; Song et al., 2021; Yang &

Wang, 2023) with outliers Ban et al. (2013) conducting an ideological analysis of one particular US news source. While the focus of analysis differs from one study to another, these findings collectively demonstrate a consistent use of othering strategies and the perpetuation of an us vs. them dichotomy in the US representation of China, regardless of the nature of the crises at hand.

In their examination of US political rhetoric and news media coverage of the risk China poses to the US economy and security, Ooi & D’Arcangelis (2017) draw from official policy documents, news texts, statistics, academic works, and various online media statements to identify three recurring Orientalist tropes mobilized in the news framing of the Eastern nation: China as a ‘cheat’, attempting to manipulate its currency valuation, a ‘thief’ committing cyber espionage, and a ‘lawless’ aggressor in maritime territorial conflicts. The devaluation of the yuan in 2015 was framed in US media as a manipulative move to gain economic advantage, invoking historical representations of Chinese people “as cunning, sneaky, and immoral” (Ooi & D’Arcangelis, 2017, p. 273). The sensationalization of China’s data collection practices in the US is often framed as a form of economic thievery, which portrays the Eastern nation “as a rule breaker flouting international norms and thus posing a security threat” (Ooi & D’Arcangelis, 2017, p. 275) to US citizens and their right to data privacy. This narrative extends to demarcate China as inferior, uncivilized, and lawless, particularly in maritime disputes in the Western Pacific, reinforcing the centrality of the US as a necessary arbiter in the region (Ooi & D’Arcangelis, 2017). These three areas of contention highlight how China has been positioned within the American collective consciousness as a potential adversarial Other.

Exploring another topic of dispute that is particularly relevant in today’s socio-racial climate is Yin (2023), in a critical discourse analysis of news reporting on Chinese international undergraduate student migration in the US, uncovering an alarming pattern of othering in these

representations. Yin (2023) found two processes shaped by the myth of Western supremacy: the creation of an us/them dichotomy, where negative stereotypes are ascribed to the out-group, the student's home country, China, while positive attributes are assigned to the in-group, the US, and the emergence of a (neither) us/(nor) them dilemma, where students' identities are manipulated within the confines of the us/them paradigm. China is depicted as having "repulsive pedagogical traditions and poor educational quality... [with] a dangerous ideological agenda" (Yin, 2023, p. 5) threatening global relations. Yin (2023) argues that the (neither) us/(nor) them dilemma is explained through two themes: the educational path and ideological flow, both of which are rooted in the us/them paradigm. The former theme focuses on media representation of Chinese students' educational experiences before and after enrolling in US academic institutions, depicting them as "problems" in the US and "malcontents" of China (Yin, 2023, p. 7-8). The latter theme depicts students with cultural ties to China as disloyal spies who are under the influence of the Chinese communist government. As such, students are portrayed as "threats" to the US and "victims" of China (Yin, 2023, p. 8). In fact, Siu & Chun (2020) emphasizes this phenomenon in the prevalence of the Chinese "scientist-as-spy" trope in Western hegemonic discourse in their comparative analysis of the racialization of the COVID-19 virus to the scientific virus of espionage. This trope has led to the "targeted criminalization of... [a] highly educated class of ethnic Chinese scientist and engineers" resulting "in a disproportionate number of [espionage] allegations against Asian American scientists across the" US (Siu & Chun, 2020, p. 430). Yin's (2023) (neither) us/(nor) them dilemma is also keenly felt in Ross' (2021) work, which reveals that the Trump administration views American universities as a popular entry point for Chinese economic espionage, and consequently, "does not welcome the presence of Chinese... students" in the US (p. 229, 236).

In a similar vein, both Yang & Wang (2023) and Ban et al. (2013) analyzed China-related stories in *The New York Times*, employing different methodologies to uncover how Western media constructs China's image. Yang & Wang (2013) conducted a corpus-based discourse analysis of China-related environmental news stories, finding that *The New York Times* portrays China as a powerful country that prioritizes economic growth over environmental protection, setting ambitious goals it cannot achieve. With reference to both the framework of Orientalism and techno-orientalism, Ban et al. (2013) conducted an ideological analysis of news regarding China's rise, identifying three themes: (1) "The Shoppers' Republic of China," which utilized neoliberal frames to highlight the excessive consumption of the new Chinese elite and its contrast to Western modernity; (2) China's perceived moral responsibility to consume and aid global economic recovery; and (3) the characterization of "China as the space outside international law," echoing historical depictions of the nation as an "international truant" (p. 288, 290, 291). Despite China's perceived advanced image, these studies suggest that it has not succeeded in gaining the favor of the Western public (Manzenreiter, 2010).

The literature reviewed has revealed a pattern of othering in the depiction, portrayal, and coverage of China in US news. While previous analyses have identified the use of techno-orientalist and othering tropes in the news framing of China, there remains a gap in examining bio-orientalist themes in depictions of China and its people. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate whether and to what extent the selected news source in this study, *Fox News*, incorporate bio-orientalist discourse, particularly in light of the recent COVID-19 health crisis. This moment presents an opportunity to examine how such narratives influence perceptions and representations of China, particularly as health and medicine have become arenas for contentious discourse and hegemonic narratives in today's society.

Theoretical Frameworks

This study is informed by several theoretical frameworks that govern the dimensions of belonging within the Western construction of the Asian diaspora, drawing upon concepts that underpin the representation of Asia in news discourses during the initial stages of the COVID-19 virus outbreak. These frameworks include the othering theory, Saidian (1979) Orientalism, and its latest derivation, Lester's (2021) bio-orientalism. The othering theory will serve as a conceptual lens through which group-based inequalities are characterized in news texts based on racial differences, which are then catapulted into the media via the racialization of the COVID-19 virus. Edward Said's critical concept of orientalism has, since its inception, evolved into a more culturally relevant strand of orientalism, bio-orientalism, that operates on the establishment of familiar identification of oneself and the self-distancing from the 'other' in the Asian diaspora. By adopting a postcolonial lens grounded in the interplay of these critical theories, these frameworks will dissect news text as a critical venue "that wrestles with some idea of the 'other' as that against which [one] define[s themselves]" (Cole, 2004, p. 578).

The Othering Theory

Othering is the process of determining the us/them dichotomy by constructing an imbalanced and unequal relation between the self and other "in which the juxtaposition towards the other constitutes the self" (Grove & Zwi, 2006; Jensen, 2011, p. 64). While no one theorist can definitively be attributed to the creation of this postcolonial concept, its mechanism heavily draws upon several philosophical works. Georg W. F. Hegel's (1807) master-slave dialectic situates the theory within the context of two independent and self-conscious beings who, when confronted with each other, strive to assert their selves as the standard of normality while perceiving the other as an existential danger to itself (Cole, 2004). Each being regards its own

essence as objective, absolute, and “self-equal through the exclusion from itself of everything else... What is “other” for it is an unessential, negatively characterized object” (Hegel, 2007, p. 28). Through subordination, the unessential consciousness of the slave is only established when they realize that the master’s power is dependent on their recognition. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1985) delineates three examples of the othering process: (1) worlding, where the self is consolidated with power; (2) debasement, where the other is systematically degraded as inferior, described as such with the use of derogatory labels, and (3) separation, where knowledge, among other resources, are deemed the property of the hegemonic self, excluded from the other (Jensen, 2011). This understanding of othering is multidimensional in that it recognizes the interconnectedness of various axes of domination. Simone de Beauvoir’s (1949) notion of the ‘other,’ for instance, diagnoses the plight of women and their perpetually subordinate position in society. Women are consistently defined by their recognizable otherness that becomes the sole determiner of their social condition - their sex. In this feminist context, the ‘other’ is constructed in stark opposition to the perceived dominant, natural sex, the male.

Following this understanding of othering, this study investigates how the West constructs itself as a “superior self/in-group in contrast to” East Asian identities, particularly Chinese people as “an inferior other/out-group” (Brons, 2015, p. 70) during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the virus being first discovered in Wuhan, China in 2019. This research explores this relationship and identifies the prevalent use of the othering discourse in self/other categorizations of the pandemic in American news, set against the backdrop of residual Cold War geopolitics, which manifests in yellow peril anxieties, Sinophobia, and anti-Chinese sentiments in the US. The logic of othering undergirds the “set of common processes and conditions that propagate group-based inequality and marginality” (Powell & Menendian, 2016, p. 17). This phenomenon manifests

through the “stereotyping and stigmatizing” of the out-group, leading to “antagonism against people on the margins of the in-group” (Mudavanhu, 2017, p. 23, 24).

Orientalism

The othering of East Asian people in US news during the COVID-19 virus outbreak was enforced by the mechanism of Orientalism and as will be explored, its two derivations: techno-orientalism and bio-orientalism. Edward Said (1979) introduced the concept of Orientalism to describe how the West asserts its hegemonic dominance over the East. Said (1979) characterizes Eastern countries and/or the identities of the people living in those locations as the Orient, a construct of the European imagination, where notions of ancient mystique, exotic fascination, and captivating landscapes abound. By exploring the Euro-western world’s engagement with the Islamic world, such as that of Middle Eastern countries, Said (1979) argues that the West’s construction of the Orient is a product of Western hegemonic discourse, serving not only as a means of affirming their own culture’s centrality and superiority but also as a justification for the imperialist and colonialist marginalization of the Middle East. Through Orientalism, Said examines the strategies of ideological validation of the West to ‘other’ the Orient that reflect political actuality. For Said (1985), it is essential to consider “the subject doing the studying as well as the object or realm being studied” (p. 128). To that end, Said (1979) underscores three conditions characterizing the Orient/Occident relationship: “(1) the Orient should not be thought of as just an idea or creation but instead a conscious, metaphysical construction bolstered by resilient consistency, (2) the recognition of the mechanisms of hegemonic power that are intricately woven into and cannot be divorced from the fabric of cultural, social, and historical ideas, and (3) the structure of Orientalism is built on a premise of falsity that is not rooted in facts” (Atmadja, 2023, p. 21). The construction of the Orient/Occident binary highlights how, in

Said's (1985) case, Western scholarship about Arabs propagated a false and distorted image of Islamic culture, which shaped and sustained the Occident's domination over the Orient.

Bio-orientalism

Whereas techno-orientalism highlights the characterization of East Asia as a technological threat to the West, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the entanglement of the Asiatic racial form to constructions of Yellow Life as a biological threat to the immunity Western life seeks, that the exposure to racialized otherness risks "the violation of" a possessive individual's "boundaries through contagion and infection" (Lester, 2021, p. 4). The white possessive individual, as described by Macpherson (2010), retains the right to claim ownership of their own agencies, "owing nothing to society for them" while simultaneously exerting dominion over "all other forms of life" (p. 3, 4). For the racial other who is not afforded this privilege, Lester (2021) contends that their lives since early yellow peril literature have been characterized as "hypo- or hyperbiological" (p. 6), perpetually reproducing, growing, and surpassing the natural limits of a life form. The bio-orientalist phenomenon similarly adopts the othering theory, where white possessive individuals are categorized as the in-group/self, and the contagious, invasive, and expansive yellow lives are situated as the out-group/other of Western society. Within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, bio-orientalism reveals the yellow perilous anxieties of Western life of being engulfed by the unrestrained biological growth of yellow lives and resulting Asian futures. Yellow Life, precisely that of Chinese people, is perceived as a relentless "swarm", an infectious "disease", and a "ceaseless advance" (Lester, 2021, p. 2). When understood in this way, bio-orientalism brings pre-existing fears of East Asian mechanical bodies as perpetuated by techno-orientalism to a new light in the image of contagious, diseased bodies of Chinese people.

Methodology

Research Method

Critical Discourse Analysis

This study will analyze the discursive formation of text by conducting a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the othering tropes employed in Western news coverage of the COVID-19 virus utilized to construct bio-orientalist narratives of East Asian cultural identities. With its origins in critical linguistics, CDA is an interdisciplinary qualitative research method concerned with deconstructing the hidden hierarchical power structures embedded within language (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak, 2001; Machin & Mayr, 2012; Berger, 2020). Building upon the Foucauldian genealogy of governmentality, CDA approaches discourse as dialectically constructed, conveying meanings that are simultaneously configured by the current social realities it shapes (Cameron & Panović, 2014). CDA explores the relationship between texts “(spoken or written, and including visual images)... the contexts in which written language is used, and the role those texts play in society.” (Berger, 2020, p. 188). These texts are comprised of distinct word choices, strategically written using specific styles and language to convey the information as intended (Fairclough, 2001; Berger, 2020). As such, the principles of CDA are uniquely equipped to address social issues of an intersectional nature, which will be most pertinent to this research study in examining news representations and cultural identity politics of East Asian people during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the context of news, Van Dijk (1988) applies the rubric of CDA to the news genre, asserting that the method is particularly well suited to explore how power structures manifest in the language used in news media text to report on social topics of a political nature. As a supposed neutral conduit for information dissemination, news media embodies a unique site where discourse can be analyzed within a broader context of interpretive meaning-making (Van

Dijk, 1988). This approach to analyzing news as discourse extends the parameters of social inquiry to encompass the ways in which journalists “persuade people to think about events in a particular way, sometimes even (seeking) to manipulate them while at the same time concealing their communicative intentions” (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 1). Considering the sociopolitical implications of Western news media on diasporic identity politics and formation, CDA of news texts systematically investigates the Western reporting of the Other where the perpetuation of a bio-orientalist narrative of East Asian cultural identities “represents a choice they make (where) each word is used to create a deliberate impression” (Berger, 2020, p. 192) of an adversarial threat.

This research will follow Fairclough’s (1992, 1995) discourse model, which he contends consists of three components that make up the functional linguistics of the system: text, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice, with each dimension requiring a different approach of analysis: text (description), processing (interpretation), and social (explanation) analysis. In order to effectively deploy CDA as a research tool, Janks (1997) improves upon Fairclough’s three-dimensional analytical framework, proposing that “different types of analysis (should occur) simultaneously rather than sequentially” (p. 330).

Research Design

Sample Selection & Criteria

In order to answer the research question: “How does American news coverage of China perpetuate bio-orientalist narratives of Chinese cultural identities during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic?” this study will conduct a CDA to comprehensively examine news texts published by *Fox News* regarding the COVID-19 virus over three months, between March 2020 and May 2020. This timeframe was selected as it closely parallels other pertinent studies explored in the

literature review, which captures the initial stages of shock and alarm triggered by the emerging COVID-19 outbreak. This period reflects the immediate and arguably automatic response to news concerning the virus and its ties to China.

Fox News was chosen for this study due to the news agency's significant impact on its audience during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hoewe et al., 2020; Hans, 2023). Known for its right-leaning political commentary and ideological positioning, *Fox News*' reporting is predictably not neutral, and often categorized as propaganda (Bauer et al., 2022). Scholars argue that the outlet was the primary conduit through which misinformation about COVID-19 was spread (Motta et al., 2020). Conservative Americans predominantly rely on *Fox News* for political information, which shapes their views about the world and attitudes toward policies compared to audiences of other news sources (Feldman et al., 2012; Hoewe et al., 2020; DellaVigna & Kaplan, 2007). Research indicates "a reciprocal relationship... between *Fox News*, its viewers, and the [Republican Party]" (Hoewe et al., 2020, p. 383), wherein the network's content and viewers' perspectives mutually reinforce policy stances and agendas. In analyzing articles published by *Fox News* that addressed the COVID-19 virus in relation to China, this study examines how Western journalists point to the Eastern nation and their people as bio-Orients and medical scapegoats for the global pandemic that came about.

The sampling process involved extracting articles from *Fox News*' online database that were published between March 1, 2020, and May 31, 2020, by inputting relevant keywords such as "COVID-19", "pandemic," "China," "coronavirus," "Chinese," "virus." The articles selected are freely accessible and not hidden behind a paywall, those that are accessible, and does not need a subscription. The nonprobability purposive sampling method is utilized to select the news text of interest, which involves choosing articles that meet an appropriate predetermined criteria

outlined “as relevant to addressing the research question” (Saumure & Given, 2008, p. 562). This sampling criteria involves the article’s covert and explicit mention of China, which includes but is not limited to the Eastern country’s anti-COVID-19 efforts, the origin of the virus (which is traced back to Wuhan, China), speculations and conspiracy theories regarding the Chinese government’s role in the spread of the virus, the associated Chinese residents who live in China, and diasporic Chinese identities who reside within the US.

Procedure of Analysis

The sample selected is analyzed in accordance with Fairclough’s (1992, 1995) three-dimensional analytical framework, as previously outlined. First, a textual analysis is conducted to deconstruct the linguistic features and textual signs of the news texts in question into four components: vocabulary, grammar, cohesion, and text structure (Fairclough, 1992; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Consequently, the relationship between these textual descriptions and discursive practices is then explored as characterized by the production, distribution, and consumption of text shaped by sociocultural practices (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). The processing analysis includes the operationalization of theoretical frameworks of Lester’s (2021) bio-orientalism and the instances in which language adhering to these ideologies surface in the production and distribution process of the selected news texts. Finally, by contextualizing the appearance of these linguistic formulations within the broader geopolitical, socio-historical, and cultural conditions that shape discourse, thematic categorizations, patterns, and dialectical relations may emerge across articles that can illuminate the consumption process of interpreting meanings that are situationally structured within news text (Janks, 1995). The social analysis will highlight the ways in which power relations and ideological assumptions manifest within news discourse as reinforced by sociocultural structures and practices.

Analysis

During the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, *Fox News* constructed China and the US as perpetually at odds with one another by using the logic of othering to further bio-orientalist narratives steeped in yellow perilous anxieties of China's rise and technological dominance. This portrayal can be encapsulated by one *Fox News* writer's opinion, Carafano (2020), who asserts that "China sees the US as the big obstacle on its long march to become the world's most dominant military and economic power" (para. 6, 7). In stark contrast to this vilification, *Fox News* lauded former US president Trump's handling of China and the coronavirus, praising the "courageous decision[s]" (Navarro, 2020, para. 12) he had to make. By emphasizing the imminent danger that is China, *Fox News* journalists employed several discursive strategies to collectively paint the Eastern nation and its people as a horde of infections that endanger the perceived immunity of the Western world. This study, while theoretically anchored in Lester's (2021) bio-orientalism, demonstrates that the mechanisms of orientalism operate not in isolation but in conjunction with one another, in this case, concurrently with its previous derivation, Morley & Robins' (1995) techno-orientalism. This interplay amplifies the potency of the three frames that emerge in selected news reports of the COVID-19 pandemic published on *Fox News* between March 1, 2020, and May 31, 2020: China/Chinese life as a swarm, a viral contagion, and a deadly threat. Furthermore, this analysis draws historical parallels to how America's history of medical scapegoating, as explored in the literature review, has now been reinforced through news media and agenda-setting to racialize diseases during times of public health crises. The tropes identified are not an entirely new phenomenon in American history (Siu & Chun, 2020; Gover et al., 2020), as *Fox News*' treatment of China/Chinese lives exemplify a recurring pattern of racializing and blaming ethnic minorities for the spread of viral diseases.

China/Chinese life as a swarm

The characterization of Chinese people as a swarm overwhelming the West reflects a racial imagination that polarizes the world into a dichotomy of whiteness versus the perceived threat of Yellow Life. In multiple articles, *Fox News* journalists make explicit the in/out-group of the controversies surrounding the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic by constructing China as an all-powerful nation without allies, pitting the country against the US and the world. With the use of several textual strategies, such as the use of metaphors, emotive vocabulary, and an emphasis on China as the active agent, *Fox News* unequivocally affirms the US' centrality as a victim of China's ceaseless advance. China is relegated to the out-group, while the US and the rest of the world are constructed as the in-group. This China vs. US/world dichotomy serves to alienate the Eastern nation, derived from the Western consciousness of an ominous looming threat of a yellow swarm, making the network's conservative antipathy apparent in the COVID-19 blame game. The findings show that *Fox News* constructs a narrative of China and the COVID-19 pandemic as signaling a dangerous and unrestrained reproductive futurity of Asian life, characterizing Chinese people and their interchangeability with the COVID-19 virus as a perpetual danger, threatening "to engulf, poison, and kill the white world" (Lester, 2021, p. 2).

There is a consistent use of powerful vocabulary that works to intentionally evoke strong reactions from the reader. Lexical items like "sea" (Chakraborty, 2020a), "seed" (DeMarche, 2020), "hoard" (Olson, 2020c), "ravaged" (Baier, 2020), and "unleashed" (Olson, 2020b) are employed to not only heighten and intensify the sense of urgency in response to the COVID-19 virus but also allude to the magnitude of the contagion's threat and measure of China's power as the disease invaded the West. These terms carry bio-orientalist connotations that echo longstanding stereotypes of the "yellow peril" characterized by selfishness and greed and the

overwhelming force of “the vast, faceless, nameless yellow horde: the rising tide, indeed of color (Dower, 193, p. 156). This narrative portrays China as leading the world into a future dominated by Chinese lives, poised to surpass their Western counterparts once the COVID-19 effectively wipes out the Western world. A clear cause-and-effect relationship is also established in the excerpts, where China or the COVID-19 virus is portrayed as the active agent whose actions directly lead to global suffering (see Figure 1). With a focus on the widespread impact of China's actions, *Fox News* frames the health crisis as exacerbated by China's negligence, which contributes to a coherent but biased narrative of blame. These textual strategies raise the question of whether such language extends beyond the scope of neutral news reporting and ventures into partisan political agendas.

China/Chinese life as a swarm		
Date	Author	Excerpts
March 13	Chakraborty, 2020a	• “China could impose pharmaceutical export controls which would plunge America into the mighty sea of coronavirus” (para. 2)
March 31	Olson, 2020b	• “a country that unleashed a pandemic on the world through its negligence” (para. 3)
April 17	Baier, 2020	• “The virus has infected and killed hundreds of thousands of people and ravaged economies across the globe.” (para.15)
April 21	Olson, 2020c	• “China worked to hoard personal protective equipment (PPE) needed by health care workers to treat coronavirus patients” (para.14)
May 18	DeMarche, 2020	• “[China] sent hundreds of thousands” on aircraft throughout the world to “seed” the spread of the virus” (para. 1)

Figure 1. Collection of excerpts that construct China/Chinese life as a “swarm”

In one *Fox News* article, Chakraborty (2020a) references a report in Mandarin from Xinhua News, China's state-run media agency, to depict the current state of pharmaceutical exports from China to the US, where the virus is described by the lexical term, “mighty sea” (see Figure 1). This metaphor acts to amplify the perceived scale of the pandemic, suggesting that the US could be so overwhelmed by the sheer volume of the COVID-19 threat that they could be “plunge[d]” into their demise (Chakraborty, 2020a, para. 2). By magnifying the perceived

enormity of the pandemic, these metaphors work to evoke an image of a vast and vague horde of Asian life, characterized by the overwhelmingly massive Chinese population, which looms so large that it overshadows the US, that it could metaphorically lead the Western nation to extinction. This apocalyptic imagery suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic heralds a cataclysmic end to the Western world brought about by an unstoppable force of the Chinese racial form. Despite placing the lexical items “mighty sea” and “plunge” in quotations, *Fox News* fails to supplement the original Xinhua article that describes the US and the virus in such ways, thus omitting the crucial context regarding China's purportedly boastful stance on the state of their pharmaceutical production. Further research into the Xinhua source leads this researcher to a Twitter (X) post from Yan Zhong Huang's account, a senior fellow for global health at the Council on Foreign Relations, who tweeted the metaphor, along with a link to the Xinhua website, but not the article of interest (Huang, 2020). Although verifying the accuracy of whether Xinhua News uses such a metaphor to describe the US is beyond the scope of this study, it is interesting to note how Chakraborty (2020) swiftly and conveniently appropriates the metaphor to highlight the dependence of the US "on China for the production of critical goods... needed to fight COVID-19" (para. 4). In describing the virus in this way, the use of the terms "mighty sea" and "plunge" suggests that China holds the fate of American lives, safety, and well-being, and should the Eastern nation choose to halt their pharmaceutical exports into the US to "hoard" these critical goods for themselves, Western life could be at China's mercy.

In a similar fashion, China is accused of having "unleashed" the pandemic onto the world by deliberately and maliciously sending ""hundreds of thousands" on aircraft... to "seed" the spread of the virus" (Olson, 2020b, para. 3; DeMarche, 2020, para. 1). A metaphor is also employed here in the use of the term "seed" to imply the intentional and malicious dissemination

of the virus, further invoking the yellow peril trope that dehumanizes the Chinese racial form. The “seed” rhetoric implies an insidious life form, likening the Chinese to a plague that infiltrated Western health infrastructures so inconspicuously that it went months unnoticed before erupting into contagion. The author’s choice of the word “seed” also illustrates the Asiatic racial form’s close association with plants – a living species whose rapid growth over a large surface area is attributed to their seeds’ dispersal and subsequent germination. DeMarche (2020) nods to the image of a seed sprouting when planted on healthy soil, digging its roots further into the ground as it blossoms. These narratives accentuate the sheer quantity of Chinese people as carriers and spreaders of the disease as a vast and uncontrollable force, comparable to the “ravaging” overgrowth of weeds that results from a hypothetical garden if left unchecked. China and Chinese individuals are then perceived to possess the capacity to “unleash” a biological contagion to “ravage” the global economy (Olson, 2020b, para. 3; Baier, 2020, para. 15).

A critical reading of the excerpts reveal that the use of such textual strategies allows for “multiple interpretations,” which becomes “particularly useful in a repressive political climate.” (Allen, 2003, p. 235). On one level, the lexical choices in *Fox News* may innocently be interpreted as descriptors of China’s authoritative actions as a straightforward account of the Eastern nation’s handling of the pandemic as perceived by the West. Another interpretation, however, may suggest that the selected verbs were strategically used to shape the reader’s perception of the virus and China by extension. These strategies tap into the deep-seated yellow perilous anxieties in Western consciousness, with a particular emphasis on the scale of the perceived danger of the COVID-19 virus, contributing to the racial imagination of Asiatic life as a swarm. At the sociopolitical level, these discursive strategies reflect broader tensions between the US and China against the backdrop of Cold War geopolitics, possibly aligning with the

Republican party's political agendas concerning this relation. The depiction of a "ravaging" "sea" of Yellow Life that "hoards" critical equipment in order to "seed" and "unleash" a viral contagion that could "plunge" America to its death is a narrative not rooted in the visceral fear of "being made obsolete, but a threatening reproductive futurity eclipsing the white future" (Lester, 2021, p. 2).

China/Chinese life as a viral contagion

Personification of the Chinese virus

Perhaps the most significant point of political contention in the racialization of the COVID-19 contagion is the naming of the disease the 'Chinese virus,' 'Kung flu,' and the 'Wuhan virus' by news anchors, lawmakers and, most influentially, the former US president, Trump. These racialized expressions personify the threat of a viral contagion, a biological and abstract entity that, once named in this way, becomes a life form that embodies the animate and organic nature of the Chinese racial form. During the selected period of this study, "Tucker Carlson emerged as the highest-rated host on *Fox [News]*" (Stelter, 2020, p. 13), and he exclusively referred to the disease as a 'Chinese virus,' rationalizing this choice of wording based on the contagion's origin, which is thought to be a wet market in Wuhan, China (Carlson, 2020). "The Chinese coronavirus really is Chinese," Carlson said (Wood, 2020, para. 6). Similarly, Trump also followed suit and regarded the disease as the 'China virus,' 'Chinese virus,' and 'Wuhan virus' in multiple Twitter (X) posts despite protest (Trump, 2020a; Chakraborty, 2020c). "*Fox [News]* was Trump's viewfinder – his primary way of seeing the world around him. He took directions from *Fox [News]*. And the network's anchors took full advantage of this power" (Stelter, 2020, p. 2). By personifying the contagion with the use of metaphors, Trump endorses a

particular worldview that constructs a malignant foreign out-group that is the Chinese people, likening them to carriers of the foreign virus (or the contagion itself) rather than real people.

The excerpts pulled from *Fox News* were littered with racially charged vocabulary linking the COVID-19 virus directly to China and its people (see Figure 2). In an effort to rename the virus in the American public consciousness, geographic identifiers such as the adjective ‘Chinese,’ ‘Wuhan,’ or an adjacent Chinese descriptor, ‘Kung Fu’ are used in conjunction with the term ‘virus,’ ‘coronavirus,’ or ‘flu’ creating a cohesive narrative that thematically focuses Chinese people’s ethnic and racial interchangeability with the disease. China or Chinese people are often placed as the subject, with the virus as a predicate, effectively establishing a cause-and-effect relationship (see Figure 2). This linguistic framing that links race to disease is at the core of the design for the American construction of the Chinese racial form during the COVID-19 pandemic. When described in this way, “the disease, which... have personified, becomes the person himself, and the person therefore loses his personhood” (Schlozman, 2014, para. 26). The repeated use of such language reveals an intention to associate the virus closely with the Chinese racial form, stripping these individuals of their personhood. Bio-orientalist interpretations of these “biological and disease metaphors... characterize [the] Asiatic racial form as nonhuman life by drawing attention to that “bios” of life itself in biopolitics” (Lester, 2022, p. 5). This reflects a broader strategy on the part of *Fox News* to use metaphors that highlight the geographical origin of the virus despite the contentious and Sinophobic nature of these descriptors (Ho, 2020; Aardema, 2020). This tendency to personify the COVID-19 virus through such national identifiers implies that the contagion has “sentience, volition and personality” (Aardema, 2020, p. 2), which materializes in the American imaginary in the form of the toxic, ‘barbaric,’ ‘unhygienic’ (Yee, 2020), illness-ridden, disease-carrying Chinese.

China/Chinese life as a viral contagion: <i>Personification of the Chinese virus</i>		
Date	Author	Excerpts
March 19	Casiano, 2020a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Trump... have come under intense criticism for referring to the pandemic as the Chinese virus of Wuhan virus.” (para. 4) • The Chinese government and some Democrats have tried pressuring Trump and other lawmakers to stop using the term” (para. 8)
March 18	Olson, 2020a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “...American officials continue to tailor their language... to call it the “Wuhan virus” or “Chinese coronavirus” over the objections of China and American liberals who have said that calling the coronavirus anything that indicates it is from China or Wuhan, the city in China where the virus is from, is racist” (para. 13)
March 18	Chakraborty, 2020c	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “President Trump... continued to call COVID-19, the “China virus”, and said he doesn’t think labeling the novel coronavirus is racist or puts Asian-Americans at risk” (para. 1)
March 12	Wulfsohn, 2020a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “CNN appeared to take the position this week that... the “Wuhan virus” or the “Chinese coronavirus” is racist but had a much different tone before the outbreak hit the US” (para. 1) • “Numerous journalists from MSNBC, CNBC, PBS News, and CBS News were also heard using similar terminology” (para. 8)
March 27	Lauder, 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [COVID-19 is] “a disease caused by a virus that knows no political or social boundaries” (para. 2) • “Holding Asian-Americans responsible for the coronavirus merely because it originated in China is deeply offensive and a genuine threat to them” (para. 3).
May 8	Aoro, 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Council members unanimously passed a resolution that specifically addresses anti-Chinese COVID-19 references... “Chinese virus” or “kung fu virus,” claiming such language encourages hate crimes... against Asian-Americans and Asian immigrants” (para. 2) • “The resolution asserts the coronavirus was not created or caused by any race, nationality or ethnicity” (para. 6)
May 21	Nelson, 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Sen. Tom Cotton... objects to Sen. Kamala Harris’... resolution to deem the phrase “Wuhan Virus” xenophobic, arguing it shows the Democrats’ overall lack of a strategy to deal with China as a threat to the United States” (para. 1)
May 20	Phillips, 2020b	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Duckworth accused Trump of “inappropriate and racist efforts” to “rebrand” the disease” (para. 8)
April 11	Wulfsohn, 2020b	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “This isn’t about vilifying a culture, this is about facts.” (para. 8) • “SARS came from China. And the bird flu. And the Hong Kong flu. The Asian flu.” (para. 12)

Figure 2. Collection of excerpts that construct China/Chinese life as a viral contagion: *Personification of the Chinese virus*

While the use of such geographic labels is factually accurate to identify the origin of the virus, doing so without considering the broader context of systemic racism and persistent anti-Asian sentiments that run rampant in the US is naïve (Ho, 2020). After all, these racialized labels

do not exist in a vacuum; they are not neutral descriptors of the virus' existing condition in a world where racial prejudice has been overcome. Instead, they are imbued with the power to shape public perception and incite cognitive impact. Metaphors work as a shorthand to construct knowledge and truth; it forms one's world view (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). The network's reluctance to firmly dissociate the geographic descriptor and Chinese individuals from the virus suggests a lack of concern with maintaining political correctness and instead furthered a viewpoint that was not only "conspiratorial" but also "propagandistic" (Stelter, 2020, p. 24). To assert that the national identifier for the virus is devoid of racist connotations and does not Other a collective China requires the acceptance of a post-racial world – one where systemic inequality no longer exists, and anti-Asian racism has been eradicated (Ho, 2020). As a result, the network inadvertently maintains the myth that Asian people in the West have "fully assimilated into the American mainstream" (Campbell, 2017, p. 15), which overlooks and diminishes the ongoing challenges these communities face in a society still grappling with racial bias.

The structure of the articles selected follows a discernable pattern that allows *Fox News* journalists to present a contentious issue, acknowledge criticisms, and then provide a defense to the aforementioned censures, thereby crafting a balanced narrative that allows for multiple interpretations but is biased nevertheless. First, a controversial statement or action is presented, which was often the calling of the COVID-19 virus the 'Chinese virus' by prominent right-leaning political figures like Sen. Tom Cotton and Trump (Nelson, 2020; Chakraborty, 2020c; Phillips, 2020b; Casiano, 2020a; Olson, 2020a). Next, the authors acknowledge the resulting backlash from public health officials (Phillips, 2020b; Olson, 2020a; Casiano, 2020a), Democratic lawmakers such as Sen. Kamala Harris (Aoro, 2020; Nelson, 2020), or liberal media such as CNN, "MSNBC, CNBC, PBS News, and CBS News" (Wulfsohn, 2020a, para. 8) and

their disapproval of such terminology. However, they do so only superficially, in a manner that does not take into account the severity of the stigmatizing effects such disease-naming practices have on certain ethnic communities, nations, and their people (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2015). When wrongdoing is recognized, the authors typically cite the opinions of the aforementioned figures who denounce these labels (Phillips, 2020b; Nelson, 2020; Aoro, 2020; Wulfsohn, 2020a; Olson, 2020a; Casiano, 2020a). Finally, the authors often conclude two different ways: (1) a justification for the use of these identifiers via a direct quote from right-leaning figures, regurgitating the rehearsed defense that the terms refer to the virus' geographic origin – a determination that does not place blame on the actors using the term but does not necessarily make allowances for them either (Chakraborty, 2020c; Wulfsohn, 2020a; Nelson, 2020); or (2) a call to action to Americans (the in-group), citing a direct quote from right-leaning figures, to hold the Chinese government responsible for the havoc they have wreaked on the global economy and health, recalling the Eastern nation's malevolent and perceived mishandling of the outbreak (Phillips, 2020b; Nelson, 2020; Wulfsohn, 2020b; Olson, 2020). These two concluding strategies shape the lasting impression the authors intend their readers to have after reading their articles. The vagueness in the channel's stance on the personifying term 'Chinese virus' is a form of complacency, which in itself contributes to the dangerous bio-orientalist narrative and anti-Asian rhetoric plaguing Chinese people during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In one particularly radical and strongly worded article, Wulfsohn (2020b) covers "Real Time" host Bill Maher's defense of the 'Chinese virus' label, where Maher argues that the term follows a precedent of infectious diseases named after their places of origin, "such as the West Nile virus, Spanish flu and MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome)" (para. 4) and that "SARS came from China, And the bird flu. And the Hong Kong flu. The Asian flu" (para. 12).

Maier repudiates the racist connotations that come with attaching a national identifier to the virus, asserting that the label “isn’t about vilifying a culture, [it’s] about facts.” (Wulfsohn, 2020b, para. 8). For most of the article, Wulfsohn (2020b) primarily cites Maier’s monologue without substantial commentary. This lack of meaningful contribution suggests an alignment with Maier’s defense of such disease-naming practices that portray these illnesses as the “disease of the Other” (Ivić & Petrović, 2020, p. 421) that personifies a biological threat linking the Chinese racial form to the viral contagion. This researcher argues that *Fox News* condones the use of such bio-orientalist terms by presenting conveniently right-leaning news and commentary as the channel’s viewpoint. Lauder’s (2020) opinions piece stands out as the only exception to this rule, which draws attention to the fact that COVID-19 is “a disease caused by a virus that knows no political or social boundaries” (para. 2). Lauder (2020) calls to attention the history of ethnic communities being cornered into medical scapegoats amidst a health crisis, such as Jews during the bubonic plague in the 14th century Europe (para. 5) – a viewpoint that is sorely lacking on other articles published by *Fox News* during this time. More often than not, *Fox News*’ silent agreement on the personification of the COVID-19 virus furthers an understanding that the contagion is meant to be positioned as a “life form... that... not only threaten the physical body, but also the self” (Aardema, 2020, p. 2). The self/in-group, in this binary, refers to the American lives whose health and existence stand to be violated and contaminated upon direct contact with the personified life form of the COVID-19 virus. This interpretation only persists, however, on the basis of *Fox News*’ complacency in associating Yellow Life with toxicity, where Asian bodies are perceived as “ontologically different at a chemical level and able to immediately deform any white body through various contacts” (Lester, 2020, p. 9).

This method of reporting reflects a strategy that *Fox News* journalists utilize, where the network features prominent figures like Maher (Wulfsohn, 2020b), Sen. Tom Cotton (Nelson, 2020), or Trump (Chakraborty, 2020c; Phillips, 2020b; Casiano, 2020a; Olson, 2020a) to be the spokespeople of the network's right-leaning viewpoints. By simply quoting the Sinophobic sentiments held by these figures without any purposeful addition of their own, *Fox News* journalists invoke their figurative right to remain silent and complacent. The network's silence manifests through repetition, which can be interpreted as ideological acceptance. The linguistic implications of such textual strategies become apparent when right-leaning perspectives are presented within ostensibly neutral reporting despite underlying biases. As a result, *Fox News* is then able to maintain a façade of neutrality. The failure to explicitly condemn such naming practices, coupled with a reliance on quoting right-leaning figures, reveals a troubling pattern of complacency and complicity in the portrayal of Chinese racial form as a viral contagion.

Genocidal violence against Asian bodies

Fox News' defense of the 'Chinese virus' label linking the COVID-19 contagion to the Chinese racial form makes the violence against Asian individuals that ensued in the US unsurprising. The network's influence on the American public's perception of Asian Americans in the US is inadvertently tied to the anti-Asian discrimination cases during the period of this study (Hoewe et al., 2021; Han et al., 2023; Gover et al., 2020). The network's use of metaphors and personification, along with the textual strategy of complacent repetition, played a role in fueling the wave of anti-Asian violence that came about in the US, underscoring the importance of avoiding such racialized associations when naming communicable diseases (WHO, 2015). In the critical early days of the outbreak, the institutional-level response from the American government, notably that of Trump, othered Asian communities into effective medical

scapegoats for the illness and setting a dangerous tone for public discourse (Gover et al., 2020), which later “did real damage” and “provoked physical pain” (Stelter, 2020, p. 6). A UC San Francisco study found that in the week following Trump’s tweeting of the term ‘Chinese virus’ (Trump, 2020a), the number of COVID-19-related tweets containing anti-Asian hashtags surged dramatically (Hwsen et al., 2021). A few days after the tweet, Trump announced that he might reconsider using the term, although he maintained that there was nothing wrong with it (Phillips, 2020a). Even as he professed support for the Asian American community and vows to protect them from racialized harm (Trump, 2020b), his tepid response to prevent anti-Asian violence proved “negligent at best, and destructive at worst” (Gover et al., 2020, p. 655). The correlating spike in anti-Asian violence during this time proved that “the Trump-Fox feedback loop had life-and-death consequences” (Stelter, 2020, p. 6).

Five articles were extracted from *Fox News*’ online archive that directly reported on cases of anti-Asian violence during the selected period of this study (see Figure 3). The reporting frequency on anti-Asian violence by *Fox News* during the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak is notably sparse. This lack of coverage invites critical interpretation. Among the handful of articles that did report on the attacks, many relied on references from other news sources, such as CBS News and KCBS-TV, effectively repurposing what was already written by other networks (Betz, 2020b; Wallace, 2020). Recognizing that anti-Asian attacks did not drastically soar until towards the end of 2020 and nearly doubled in 2021 (Pagonis, 2022; “More than 9000”, 2021), the selected period of this study also coincides with the Black Lives Matter protests following George Floyd’s unjust death, which may have influenced the network’s focus and resource allocation. It remains concerning that early cases of anti-Asian violence went underreported when “over 400 cases of anti-Asian discrimination related to COVID-19 [was

found] between February 7 and March 9” (Phillips, 2020, para. 3). This scarcity in coverage is open to interpretation and cannot be entirely justified. However, it does suggest that a form of censorship or selective agenda-setting may be at play.

China/Chinese life as a viral contagion: Genocidal violence against Asian bodies		
Date	Author	Excerpts
March 10	Betz, 2020a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “When students of Asian descent appear in the assembly, one... shout[ed], “Coronavirus.” (para. 4) • “one... tells a student of Asian descent wearing a face mask, “Hey, b----,” before appearing to hit the student in the mouth” (para. 6) • “increasing reports of racism directed towards Asians in the United States... over the spread of the coronavirus... which originated in the Chinese city of Wuhan” (para. 17)
March 12	Betz, 2020b	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Asian Americans who fear being attacked over the outbreak of the coronavirus” (para. 1) • “a man on a New York City subway spraying Febreze at an Asian subway straphanger, the New York Post reported” (para. 2) • “an Asian woman was attacked at a New York City subway station. A man noticed that she was wearing a face mask and called her a “diseased b----”” (para. 3) • “surge of [gun] sales in recent weeks from Asian American customers who are concerned over the possibility of similar attacks” (para. 4)
March 27	Aitken, 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “People have reported a number of cases... from direct assault with people spitting or coughing on them, to being told to leave stores or seeing Uber and Lyft drivers refuse to pick them up” (para. 3)
April 2	Wallace, 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “A man who allegedly tried to kill an Asian family... to prevent them from spreading the coronavirus could be charged by the FBI for a hate crime” (para. 1) • “The suspect indicated that he stabbed the family because he thought the family was Chinese, and infecting people with coronavirus” (para. 3) • “the FBI expects an uptick in hate crimes around the US as the coronavirus pandemic persists, “endangering Asian American communities”” (para. 8)
May 20	Phillips, 2020b	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The resolution claims a study found over 400 cases of anti-Asian discrimination related to COVID-19 between February 7 and March 9” (para. 3)

Figure 3. Collection of excerpts that construct China/Chinese life as a viral contagion: Genocidal violence against Asian bodies

The genocidal violence exacted towards Yellow Life was not limited to Chinese people living in the US but extended to anyone of Asian descent or those who were Chinese presenting (Wallace, 2020; Betz, 2020b; Betz, 2020a; Aitken, 2020). Further investigation leads this researcher to a Pew Research Center study indicating that one-third of Asian adults report

personally knowing “an Asian person in the US who has been threatened or attacked because of their race or ethnicity since the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020” (Ruiz et al., 2023, p. 10). The ethnicities of these victims were reported to have included non-Chinese communities, including Filipino, Indian, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese people (Ruiz et al., 2023). The absence of these ethnic origin groups in *Fox News*’ reporting of such hate crimes was keenly felt. Apart from Betz’s (2020a) reporting of Vietnamese students who were subject to assault related to the COVID-19 virus at a California high school, there is no mention of other non-Chinese ethnic or regional origin groups to identify the victims of the racially charged hate crimes. This lack of ethnic differentiation in *Fox News*’ reporting of anti-Asian hate violence presents a homogenous image of “Asians as a group-collective” (Lester, 2022, p. 6), reminiscent of the yellow horde/swarm metaphor as previously explored in this study. By denying Asian people their right to individuation, *Fox News* contributes to the bio-orientalist imagination that vilifies a collective Asia “as an aggregate or multiplicity of the barely differentiated whose singular undecidability appears through its constant transformations” (Lester, 2022, p. 6).

As Trump and *Fox News*, by extension, maintained that there is no harm in naming the virus after its place of origin (Phillips, 2020a), it seems ironic that in the network’s coverage of several anti-Asian hate crime incidents, the authors often point toward the motives of why such violence was enacted, which was overwhelmingly reported to be the victims’ racial and ethnic association to the COVID-19 virus (see Figure 3). Certain individuals were targeted because they were thought to have been “Chinese, and infecting people with coronavirus” (Wallace, 2020, para. 3) – the same sentiment is echoed in all the reports (see Figure 3). As well, while the focus of these articles was to report on the racially charged attacks that transpired, most of the authors reference Trump’s calling of the contagion the ‘Chinese virus’ (Phillips, 2020b; Aitken, 2020;

Wallace, 2020) in some capacity, clearly acknowledging the gruesome repercussions of naming the virus in this way (Siu & Chun, 2020). *Fox News* had a hand in equipping the American consciousness with the linguistic devices needed to racialize the contagion, fostering the very environment that led to such attacks. Once this bio-orientalist rhetoric promulgates into widespread American vocabulary, yellow perilous fears of “Asian contact becomes a causal vector of disease for white populations” (Lester, 2022, p. 10), where othering is amplified, and racial prejudice transforms into real-life violence (Gover et al., 2020).

It is abundantly clear that Asian racial bodies have become the agent through which the COVID-19 virus is personified, highlighting “the prominence of the biological in casting Asian life as an existential threat requiring genocidal violence to end it” (Lester, 2022, p. 2). In fact, Aitken (2020) draws attention to the precarious position the Asian racial body occupies amidst this global health emergency, affirming that the anti-Asian violence during the COVID-19 outbreak “is the latest chapter in a long history of anti-Asian sentiments in the US, from the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 to the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II” (para. 9). While this reflexive view is not consistent across all reports, there is some level of recognition, no matter how superficial, of the effects between othering perceptions of the Asian racial body as the carrier of or the viral contagion itself and anti-Asian violence (Phillips, 2020b; Betz, 2020a; Betz, 2020b; Wallace, 2020). This link even manifested in the surge in gun sales amongst Asian American customers in the US “who fear being attacked over the outbreak of the coronavirus” (Betz, 2020b, para. 1). Medical scapegoatism, as explored in the literature review, in its most recent iteration materializes in the bio-orientalist phenomenon of racialized violence which follows a pattern of the Western imaginary conjuring “the threat of Yellow Life... whenever there is a crisis in the imagined security of Western life” (Lester, 2022, p. 3). As such,

the personification of the virus emerges as a vehicle that transports the renewed intensity to “re-racialize Asian Americans as not only eternal outsiders to the American body politic, but a toxic and contagious threat internal to that body’s biopolitical health itself” (Lester, 2022, p. 2).

China/Chinese Life as a deadly threat

While this study is theoretically grounded in Lester’s (2022) bio-orientalism, it is impossible to completely divorce this latest rendition of Orientalism from its predecessor, Morley & Robins’ (1995) techno-orientalism when examining *Fox News*’ news discourse of China during the COVID-19 outbreak. These two variations of Orientalism cannot be isolated in silos; instead, they exist concurrently, and this interplay is what makes its mechanisms so potent in the construction of China and its government as a deadly threat in news discourse. While the prevalent rhetoric of blame identified in *Fox News* is partly accounted for by the American consciousness’ racialized fears for their survival and the nation’s biosecurity (Lester, 2020), it is the foundational techno-orientalist imaginary that has long permeated the US that paved the way to the powerful animation of the Chinese racial form (Siu & Chun, 2020). Situated against the history of Asian racialization and the backdrop of lingering yellow perilous fears from the Cold War, *Fox News* successfully reignites such anxieties to configure China “as the chief enemy-threat” (Siu & Chun, 2020, p. 423). “If any country is going to supplant the United States in the world marketplace, China is it.” (Fishman, 2005, p. 17). The network leans into this competitive rivalry, regarding the Eastern nation as an advanced technological society to reproduce a viewpoint at the intersection of technophobia and Sinophobia (Mahoney, 2023). Coupling the bio-orientalist portrayal of a hyper-biological China as inseparable from the techno-orientalist reproduction of the mechanical Asian laboring body, *Fox News* makes coherent the rhetoric of the evil China that brings with them foreign technological power to destroy the US.

China/Chinese as deadly threat		
Date	Author	Excerpts
March 13	Chakraborty, 2020a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Chinese “Communist Party is ratcheting up threats against the West, with a particularly nasty warning about access to life-saving drugs aimed at the United States” (para. 1) • “...the scary consequences if that threat becomes real highlight just how tight China’s grip is on the global supply chain” (para. 3)
March 17	McKay, 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Beijing’s capacity to control the market and the critical drug flow” (para. 13)
March 19	Casiano, 2020b	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “China’s monopoly on key pharmaceutical ingredients” (para. 1) • “China has tried re-casting itself as ahead of the coronavirus curve after months of muzzled responses and silencing doctors who sounded early alarms about the illness” (para. 8)
April 1	Chakraborty, 2020d	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “...Dr. Li Wenliang, the whistleblower doctor who tried to issue the first warning about the deadly coronavirus but was painted by China’s propaganda machines as a liar who didn’t know what he was talking about” (para. 5)
April 15	Baier, 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [COVID-19] “likely originated... as part of China’s attempt to demonstrate that its efforts to identify and combat viruses are equal to or greater than the capabilities of the [US]” (para. 1)
April 29	Kaplan, 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Classic communist disinformation” (para. 1)
May 1	Givas, 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “the silencing or “disappearing” of doctors who tried to speak up, the destruction of evidence in laboratories and refusal to provide live samples to international scientists working on a vaccine” (para. 3)
May 28	Carafano, 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [China] “has shown its willingness to bully and bluff to get its way” (para. 16) • “In dealing with the Beijing bullies...” (para. 18)
May 31	Blitzer, 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [CCP’s] “recent actions show that its officials are actively seeking to harm the US and its Western allies” (para. 1)

Figure 4. Collection of excerpts that construct China/Chinese as a deadly threat

The authors employ a range of linguistic devices that construct China/Chinese life as the malevolent out-group, with the technological and economic capacity to destroy the US and the propensity to kill the immune, pure, in-group/self. Using lexical terms such as; “ratcheting up threats,” “nasty warning,” “grip” (Chakraborty, 2020a), “control the market” (McKay, 2020), “monopoly,” “muzzled responses,” “silencing doctors” (Casiano, 2020b), “propaganda machines” (Chakraborty, 2020d), “communist” (Kaplan, 2020), “destruction of evidence” (Givas, 2020), “bully and bluff” (Carafano, 2020), and “harm the US” (Blitzer, 2020) contribute to this portrayal. *Fox News* portrays China as a dangerous, hyper-advanced society with rapidly growing influence on the world stage (Fishman, 2005), whose technological dominance

supplements its hyper-reproductive aims. The authors predominantly use a declarative tone to create a sense of authority and certainty, crafting most of the excerpts in active voice, which makes the actions described feel current and ongoing. A coherent narrative of othering is established within the excerpts, specifically that which divides the West/East, self/Other, and us/them dichotomy between China and the US. Life-threatening repercussions to the US biopolitical health often follow closely behind references to China's early handling of the COVID-19 outbreak, control over critical pharmaceutical resources needed by the US, and censoring of "doctors who sounded early alarms about the illness" (Casiano, 2020b, para. 8). This textual structure furthers a narrative of China as a nation that will resort to any method to deliberately injure the US, whose aggression and manipulation must be contained and controlled.

Fox News' coverage of the current socio-political moment reveals a "consolidation of racial tropes that have constructed Chinese bodies as presenting multiple forms of threat" (Siu & Chub, 2020, p. 437). A critical reading of the excerpts reveals a concerted effort to use the language of penetration to describe not only the personified life form of the COVID-19 contagion as a biomedical threat to the American body politic but also to mark Yellow Life as a hyper-technological force "threatening [the US'] national strength through techno-orientalist dreams of overly productive labor" (Lester, 2020, p. 10). Such narratives are built on pre-existing political tensions between the US and China, which actualizes the American imaginary's racialized fears of China's evil power, which inescapably transforms into political manifestations of such geopolitical anxieties. With China steadfastly positioned as the adversarial Other challenging Western hegemony and American centrality, it becomes clear that *Fox News* is unable of constituting the US "without excluding, devaluing and then hating the [Asian] Other" (Morley & Robins, 1995, p. 170).

Conclusion

This thesis has discursively identified three frames that emerge in the selected *Fox News* reports of the COVID-19 outbreak in relation to China: China/Chinese life as a swarm, a viral contagion, and a deadly threat. The findings illustrate that a pattern of bio-orientalism persists in *Fox News*' definition and construction of the Eastern nation, which becomes politically representative of the othering Western cultural imaginations of the East amidst an unfolding global health crisis. Through various textual strategies, including metaphors, personification, and emotive vocabulary, this study provides overt evidence of the bio-orientalist discourse regarding Chinese lives in *Fox News* during the period under study. Prominent bio-orientalist themes in the selected reports were the perceived enormity of China's population as a "nameless mass of vermin" (Dower, 1993, p. 90) and the notion that the Chinese racial form and bodies are interchangeable with the personified life form of the COVID-19 contagion. The linguistic implications of speaking about the COVID-19 contagion in such ways linking the virus to the Chinese racial form materialize when physical harm and violence are enacted upon these ideological beliefs, which is exactly what happened during the period of this study. This study also confirms the interplay of the logic of bio-orientalism and techno-orientalism in the journalistic construction of Chinese people "that are now coalescing to forge the consolidated phantasm of the Chinese contagion... and technological behemoth" (Siu & Chun, 2020, p. 437). This researcher argues that providing US citizens news free from partisan political motivations rooted in bio-orientalist and techno-orientalist discourse could have potentially limited the magnitude of anti-Asian violence that resulted in the onset of the COVID-19 outbreak. After all, "COVID-19 is a public health matter, not a racial one" (Gover et al., 2020, p. 662).

This study at hand effectively contextualized Lester's (2020) concept of bio-orientalism within *Fox News* discourse, highlighting the re-emergence of Sinophobia and yellow perilous fear of China that has long pervaded the Western world. Permitting a larger sampling size and more extensive scope of study, the mechanisms of bio-orientalism can also be examined across different phases of the COVID-19 pandemic to identify whether such portrayals intensify, and at which point they obstinately imbue news discourse. Further research on this topic of study could involve a comparative analysis of bio-orientalist news discourse between liberal and conservative networks in the US, audience studies of *Fox News*' publicly available comment section of the selected articles to investigate how readers interpret and respond to such bio-orientalist portrayals of China, or a historical analysis comparing the portrayal of China during the COVID-19 pandemic with past instances of racialized disease outbreaks (e.g., SARS, the Ebola outbreak). Nevertheless, the findings from this research provide a novel contribution to the under-researched field of East Asian diaspora studies in media.

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