

The Coronavirus

James Miller
Editor

The Coronavirus

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James Miller
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INTRODUCTION

China's knowledge of contagious, epidemic, and pandemic disease is long and deep. The *Shuowen* dictionary (second century C.E.) defines the term *yi* 疫 as “[the situation] when all people are sick.”¹ Early Chinese medical thought theorized that such diseases could be caused by a form of “evil Qi” (*eqi* 惡氣), including demons, “winds,” or other external forces that could invade the body and disturb the delicate balance of energies that leads to long life and well-being. However, the development of Chinese medicine saw the increasing rationalization of etiology, and the general rejection of demonology as a widespread cause of disease. Instead, a much more holistic and systematic understanding of disease developed under the rubric of “stimulus and response” (*ganying* 感應). According to this fundamentally cosmological theory, all phenomena are related to each other through a process of resonance or correspondence. Social, political, medical, and astronomical phenomena were thought to influence each other so that activity in one domain would entail a necessary transformation in another domain. Changes in the seasons or the rotations of the constellations in the night sky, could bring about the downfall of a dynasty or the upsurge of a deadly disease. Taken to its logical conclusion, in such a system nothing happened completely by chance.

One of the main applications of this framework to the origin of disease lay in the etiological theory of what we might today call climactic fluctuation. Such fluctuations were thought to produce “pestilential qi” (*liqi* 癘氣) that developed in the air itself, and could be transmitted from

one person to another.² Climatic fluctuations were understood to be that period where the weather is unseasonably warm in winter or cold in summer. Such irregularities in the overall gradual transformation of qi from cold to warm from winter summer were thought to bring about “cold disorders” (*shanghan* 傷寒) or “warm epidemics” (*wenyi* 瘟疫). In such cases, we might observe, it is the air (qi 氣) itself, the very substance that enables us to have life, that is both the origin and vector of disease. No wonder such plagues evoke deep terror in human society.

The terror of an airborne disease that lodges in one’s respiratory tract producing fever, coughing, and shortness of breath has by now been well documented by survivors of the coronavirus and their doctors and nurses. This volume, however, aims to document and reflect on the entanglement and porosity that such an airborne disease makes clear. It is a truism that the virus knows no borders, and the transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus across the world has revealed the uncomfortable truth of our planetary entanglement, prompting calls for “decoupling” and the end to the economic miracle that “Chimerica” brought to the world. It is all the more relevant, then that scholars at a very young Sino–United States joint venture university should come together to offer initial reflections on the coronavirus, from political, social, and cultural perspectives.

In January 2020, Duke Kunshan University’s undergraduate program was in the middle of only its second year of operations. The university, a joint venture between Duke University in the USA and Wuhan University in China was in the midst of a growth phase, recruiting students, faculty and staff, to work in its impressive facilities in Kunshan, a prosperous city located between Shanghai and Suzhou. As news of the outbreak spread, many faculty and students were traveling home for the lunar new year’s break. Those who left campus were not able to return, and as we prepared for the transition to online classes, a number of faculty relocated to Durham, NC to work with colleagues at Duke University.

The origins of this volume lie in a conference on the human, cultural, and political implications of the coronavirus, held at Duke University’s Franklin Humanities Institute, and jointly organized with Duke Kunshan University’s Humanities Research Center. It was the first Zoom conference that I had ever planned, and as the 200 participants joined the call at 8.30 am on Tuesday March 3, 2020, it was hard to ignore the sensation that we were marking something of a momentous event. The 90-minute webinar was followed later that day by a more traditional seminar, the last live meeting that I attended. The remarks presented at the webinar and

seminar formed the initial seeds that led to the short essays and reflections presented in this volume.

The justification for this interdisciplinary and humanistic approach to the coronavirus developed from my incipient understanding of this disease as a planetary phenomenon that would expose the deep porosity of our bodies and our psyches, and one whose effects would first be felt in a Sino–United States joint venture university. Sometimes it felt that we were being strangled at birth, the immense audacity, vision, and enterprise necessary to give birth to an innovative liberal arts and science university in an increasingly illiberal China seemingly powerless in the face of an invisible enemy. At other times it felt that in the very work that we were doing together, China, United States, and other nations could join together to forge a deeper and more perfect humanity. Little could I foresee what the consequences of this apocalypse would be, but I knew that it would be something that would change the nature of our living together on our planetary home, and that to understand this change required the work of the humanities and social sciences.

This short volume brings two styles of work together. Part I focuses on memory and individual experience. It begins with a story of high drama related by Denis Simon, then executive vice chancellor of Duke Kunshan University. Simon relates how the university worked in collaboration with Chinese and United States partners to grapple with and mitigate the effects of the pandemic, and offers insights into the nature and value of collaborative relationships in times of crisis. This has implications not only for joint venture universities or business, but on a larger scale relate to the interactions between national governments.

The focus on memory and personal experience of what was first known as “the Wuhan virus” continues with the work of the next three contributions. Benjamin L. Bacon and Weijing Xu describe their work organizing and archiving the experiences of students at Duke Kunshan University who were under lockdown during the height of the crisis in China. Yanping Ni analyzes the online diaries of Wuhan residents and recounts both the everydayness and the crises that shaped the common identities of Wuhan residents during lockdown. Moving from China to United States, we read the work of Chen Chen, an undergraduate student at Duke University, who writes movingly of the “hyper-visibility and invisibility” of being Chinese in the United States during the outbreak: “When people, including my friends, talked about China as if it were on a different planet,

I felt myself internally screaming, “Why don’t you see me? I’m right here.”

The first part of this book ends with a dramatic intervention by Zairong Xiang that seeks to excavate the epistemological issues underlying the frequent attitudes and acts of anti-Chinese racism that the virus has brought forth. Noting the pointed criticism of China’s supposedly “dirty” wet markets as an origin of the virus, Xiang recalls his experience of those markets when he was growing up in China and launches both an economic critique of globalization and also a epistemological critique of those who would assert the supposed superiority of European rationality.

Part 2 of the book seeks to put the experience of the Coronavirus pandemic into historical, cultural, and political perspective, and to offer some tentative assessments of its impact in those areas. Nicole Barnes shows firstly how a “double erasure of women’s work” during the Coronavirus outbreak contains echoes of similar erasures in the history of war and disease in the twentieth century. She follows this with a historical analysis of race in times of plague and disease, exposing the bigotry in the familiar racist trope of China as “the sick man of Asia.” The next two essays focus on problems of reasoning and knowledge. Carlos Rojas focuses on the fact that the apparently unforeseen “black swan event” of the coronavirus outbreak was in fact widely predicted, modeled and anticipated by both the US government and the United Nations. Ignoring these predictions and models is a means for governments to justify their failure to respond adequately to the viral outbreak.

The final two papers focus on the significance of the virus for the legitimacy of the Chinese government. Melanie Manion’s essay on information politics focuses on the key issue of information transparency in China’s communist government. Local governments fail to report problems upwards, and the central government tightly controls the spread of information downwards. This “endemic lack of transparency *within* China” entails failures of governance that the communist party refuses to acknowledge. Despite these evident failures of governance, Andrew W. MacDonald argues, the authority of the communist party in general and Xi Jinping in particular does not face a serious existential threat. However, MacDonald cautions us to pay attention to the unsustainable

borrowing of local governments and a potential rise in corruption among local officials as serious challenges to the party's legitimacy.

James Miller

NOTES

1. Volkmar, Barbara, "The Concept of Contagion in Chinese Medical Thought: Empirical Knowledge versus Cosmological Order," *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences* 22.2 (2000), 148.
2. Volkmar, "The Concept of Contagion," 150.

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EDITOR AND CONTRIBUTORS

About the Editor

James Miller is Associate Dean for Interdisciplinary Strategy, co-director of the Humanities Research Center, and Professor of Humanities at Duke Kunshan University. He is the author or editor of six books on religion in China including, most recently, *China's Green Religion: Daoism and the Quest for a Sustainable Future* (Columbia University Press, 2017).

Contributors

Benjamin L. Bacon is a computational media artist, designer, and musician who creates work at the intersection of sound, computation, networked systems, and mechanical life. His works have been exhibited in the United States, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. He is an Associate Professor of Media & Art and Director of Signature Work at Duke Kunshan University. He is also a lifetime fellow at V2_Lab for Unstable Media.

Nicole Elizabeth Barnes is an Assistant Professor of History at Duke University. Her open-access book, *Intimate Communities: Wartime Healthcare and the Birth of Modern China, 1937–1945* (University of California Press, 2018), received the 2019 Joan Kelly Memorial

Prize from the American Historical Association and the 2020 William H. Welch Medal from the American Association for the History of Medicine.

Yuexuan Chen is a rising senior at Duke University who is studying public policy, biology and journalism. Her family connections to Wuhan and her childhood spent straddling the United States and China guided her writing on the COVID-19 epidemic in Wuhan.

Andrew W. MacDonald is an Assistant Professor of Social Science at Duke Kunshan University. He received his B.A. in History and M.A. in East Asian Studies from Stanford University and his M.Phil. and Ph.D. in Politics from Oxford University. His research focuses on political beliefs, attitudes toward minorities, government promotion patterns, and online privacy issues in China.

Melanie Manion is the Vor Broker Family Distinguished Professor of Political Science at Duke University. Her research focuses on contemporary authoritarianism, with empirical work on bureaucracy, corruption, information, and representation in China. Her most recent book is *Information for Autocrats* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

Yanping Ni is a graduate student in East Asian Studies at Duke University. She is currently a graduate fellow in the Duke Ethnography Lab and a Research Assistant in the “Revaluing Care in the Global Economy” network. Her research interests focus on the intersection of the environment, health, and visual culture in China.

Carlos Rojas is Professor of Chinese Cultural Studies, Gender, Sexuality, & Feminist Studies, and Arts of the Moving Image at Duke University. He is the author, editor, and translator of numerous works, including *Home-sickness: Culture, Contagion, and National Transformation in Modern China*.

Denis Simon is Senior Adviser to the President for China Affairs at Duke University. He also is Professor of China Business and Technology in the Fuqua School of Business. From 2015 to 2020, he served as Executive Vice-Chancellor of Duke Kunshan University, a Sino–United States joint venture sponsored by Duke, Wuhan University and the city of Kunshan. He holds an M.A. in Asian Studies and a Ph.D. in Political Science from UC Berkeley.

Zairong Xiang is the author of the book *Queer Ancient Ways: A Decolonial Exploration* (Punctum Books, 2018). He is the Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature and the Associate Director of Arts at Duke Kunshan University. He curated the “minor cosmopolitan weekend” at the HKW Haus der Kulturen der Welt (2018), and is the editor of its catalogue *Minor Cosmopolitan: Thinking Art, Politics and the Universe Together Otherwise* (Diaphanes, 2020).

Weijing Xu is a media artist, designer, and researcher who works at the intersect of computation, cybernetics and network systems, biomedica and wearable technology. She has exhibited in Asia, America, Europe, and Australia. Her *Silkworm Project, Spun Silk Artifact* is permanently collected by the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science. She is Assistant Professor of Media & Art at Duke Kunshan University.