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### The Viral Ideology: Media and its Portrayal of Coronavirus, Communism, and China

The United States of America today is a country convinced its ideology is superior to those in other areas around the world. This can have a number of consequences on the way Americans interact with the world around them, especially when media pushes anti-communist agendas that lean towards xenophobia. In the ever-changing global discourse on identity, Americans love to talk about inclusion in our post-racial ideology, as if we truly “don’t see race.” However, when major crises occur around the world, such as the coronavirus, we tend to be the first to point fingers. Mass media, especially mediums that rely on drama and controversy for a profit (such as magazines and tabloids,) use this tendency to their advantage. *TIME* magazine is known for its iconic left-leaning and red-bordered covers. Its artists are skilled in making images that attract a viewer’s eye while simultaneously conveying an encoded message. *The Epoch Times’s China Insider*, on the other hand, is known for its wild conspiracy theories, anti-communist party sentiment, and tendency to lean far right. While they identify with drastically different ends of the political spectrum, their messages encoded in their covers are the same; these magazine covers use the recent hysteria over the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, China to boost an anti-communist and xenophobic sentiment by combining signifiers of illness, China, and communism and building association between the three.

The cover of *TIME* magazine, volume 195 issue six, features the face of Xi Jinping sporting an antiviral mask in the style of a communist print political poster (Appendix A). While the cover itself does not say anything about communism, Xi is the acting General Secretary of the Communist Party of China and the red dots over the black and white rays that branch out

from Xi are reminiscent of old communist print posters. The bold colors pop and make a statement of aggression while his body language signifies pride. Red is a bold color that's connotation varies from culture to culture. For Chinese, red is a color of good fortune, but its connotation in America is a bit different. Here, it is associated with anger, failure, impulse, and communism. The color choice in this mock-propaganda is far from coincidental. The color choice associates the image of Xi with communism, failure, et cetera. The white antiviral mask pops out against Xi's bright red face. An antiviral mask's denotation is simply a barrier that prevents the wearer from taking in airborne or fluid particles. But the connotation is one of illness. Rather than this being an image of illness prevention, the assumption is the wearer is ill. In this case, the implication is that Xi himself is sick. On the anti-viral mask are the words "China's Test," "Preventing the Next Outbreak," and "The Economic Threat." Without the text over the mask, this art could be read as a PSA for health and safety—one that suggests Xi is simply protecting himself from the virus. The words "China's Test," "Preventing the Next Outbreak," and "The Economic Threat" anchor an interpretation of fear and defensiveness to the image, implying that Xi and China as a whole are sick, lacking in control and poses an economic threat to our capitalist society, which feeds into anti-communist ideals. Xi's eyes suggest he may be smiling, despite his mouth being obstructed because the illustrator, Edel Rodriguez, includes the presence of "laugh lines," a glimmer in his eyes, and slightly raised eyebrows. These features help the viewer see the preferred decoding of the message without realizing it, as we recognize all of these things as indicators of happiness. His chin is also slightly tilted upwards as he gazes into the distance, body language that serves as a signifier of pride. This body position is also reminiscent of an old communist poster.

The *China Insider* cover uses the words “Communist Cover-Up” to anchor the anti-communist ideology to the image of a presumably sick child (Appendix B). Had the image been of an adult rather than a child, perhaps the decoding of this signifier would shift more towards that of *TIME* magazine. The child, like Xi, sports an antiviral mask. The connotation of this mask, unlike the sinister one of Xi’s, is sad. It seems that illness, in this case, is the preferred decoding of this indexical sign. The image is dark, one that makes the viewer feel on edge, or as if someone is about to die. The image of a mother carrying her sick child towards the entrance of what looks like an airport or transit center while the child clings to her little dinosaur stuffed animal gives the viewer a sense of dread and hopelessness. It also can seem alarming to Americans as a huge fear is that the coronavirus will invade the United States and endanger the citizens of the country. The image as a whole marks a kind of weakening and contamination of innocence; when combined with the text, it can be reasonably assumed that this contamination is caused by the communist state. This image pulls at heartstrings and plays towards pathos. Instead of suggesting that the communists are a threat to the United States, or proud of the way the virus has spread, it implies that the communist government is trying to conceal the horrors of the coronavirus and the way it impacts civilian women and children.

One of the important societal consequences of public exposure to these covers is subconscious anti-Chinese sentiment in a post-racial ideological society. If a passerby sees the images on the covers without the headlines, they may not get the preferred decoding and instead read a completely different message from the image. But with these very intentional and political headlines that anchor such clear meanings to the covers, the decoded message is quick and easy: communism is a plague that is at fault for the coronavirus. For those uneducated about the crisis,

this message could very well shape their idea of what it means to identify as Chinese. This can be a source of xenophobia, which is far less uncommon than most people realize. According to *The LA Times*, for example, Asian drivers and customers alike face discrimination in the ride-sharing world because of media hysteria like this. Many drivers have rides canceled when riders find out that they are Asian, despite the fact they have not left the country. Asian riders have also had rides rejected. One even had to have a white friend explain that she has not been to China. These examples show how quick Americans turn on those who appear “other,” which is where xenophobia stems from. The post-racial ideology in America is so dangerous to those who interpret messages like the ones encoded in the magazine covers because the messages are so subliminal and contribute to the mistreatment of other ethnicities.

The widespread fear of coronavirus and Chinese in the US stems greatly from the media’s portrayal of the crisis. From *TIME*’s message that Xi and the Communist Party of China are a threat and proud to spread this virus and that China itself is put to the test, to *China Insider*’s message about the secrets of the Communist party, and how women, children, and even Americans could be put at risk by their ideologies, the overall idea being spread is that Americans are in danger of being infected with this Communist attack. While this may not be true, it certainly can feel real to those who see headlines of “Coronavirus in US!” or “Communist Xi Jinping Seen in Mask!” everywhere they look. When the implication pushed on the public by media is that the public should be scared of Communists who are Chinese, sick, and dying, people tend to believe what they hear. Though this may be unfair, it certainly shows the power of media and its semiotics.



## References

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Appendix:



Appendix A:



Appendix B: