

China Spins Tale That the U.S. Army Started the Coronavirus Epidemic

After criticizing American officials for politicizing the pandemic, Chinese officials and news outlets have floated unfounded theories that the United States was the source of the virus.



By **Steven Lee Myers**

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BEIJING — China is pushing a new theory about the origins of [the coronavirus](#): It is an American disease that might have been introduced by members of the United States Army who visited Wuhan in October.

There is not a shred of evidence to support that, but the notion received an official endorsement from China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, whose spokesman accused American officials of not coming clean about what they know about [the disease](#).

[Read: [As its coronavirus cases dwindle, China is turning its focus outward.](#)]

The intentional spreading of an unfounded conspiracy theory — which recirculated on China's tightly controlled internet on Friday — punctuated a downward spiral in relations between the two countries that has been fueled by the basest instincts of officials on both sides.

The insinuation came in a series of posts on Twitter by Zhao Lijian, a ministry spokesman who has made good use of the platform, which is blocked in China, to push a newly aggressive, and hawkish, diplomatic strategy. It is most likely intended to deflect attention from [China's own missteps](#) in the early weeks of the epidemic by sowing confusion or, at least, uncertainty at home and abroad.

Mr. Zhao's posts appeared to be a retort to similarly unsubstantiated theories about the origins of the outbreak that have spread in the United States. Senior officials there have called the epidemic the "Wuhan virus," and at least one senator [hinted darkly](#) that the epidemic began with the leak of a Chinese biological weapon.

[Read: [Two women fell sick from the coronavirus. One survived.](#)]

"The conspiracy theories are a new, low front in what they clearly perceive as a global competition over the narrative of this crisis," said Julian B. Gewirtz, a scholar at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard.



Workers disinfecting a residential area as a precaution against the spread of the coronavirus in Beijing on Friday. Roman Pilipey/EPA, via Shutterstock

“There are a few Chinese officials who appear to have gone to the Donald J. Trump School of Diplomacy,” added Mr. Gewirtz, who recently [published a paper](#) on China’s handling of the AIDS epidemic, after a similar disinformation campaign. “This small cadre of high-volume Chinese officials don’t seem to realize that peddling conspiracy theories is totally self-defeating for China, at a moment when it wants to be seen as a positive contributor around the world.”

The circulation of disinformation is not a new tactic for the Communist Party state. The United States, in particular, is often a foil of Chinese propaganda efforts. Last year, Beijing [explicitly accused](#) the American government of supporting public protests in Hong Kong in an effort to weaken the party’s rule.

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The old tactic has been amplified by more combative public diplomacy and a new embrace of a social media platform that is blocked in China to spread a message abroad.

Victor Shih, an associate professor at the University of California at San Diego who studies Chinese politics, said that while the campaign was very likely an attempt to distract and deflect blame, a more worrisome possibility was that some officials fabricated the idea and persuaded top leaders to believe it.

“If the leadership really believes in the culpability of the U.S. government,” he warned, “it may behave in a way that dramatically worsens the bilateral relationship.”

China’s leader, Xi Jinping, has faced sharp criticism for the government’s initial handling of the outbreak, even at home. [Public anger erupted](#) in February when a doctor who was punished for warning his colleagues about the coronavirus died, prompting censors to redouble their efforts to stifle public criticism.

A vigil for Dr. Li Wenliang in Hong Kong last month. Dr. Li had warned his colleagues about coronavirus before dying. Lam Yik Fei for The New York Times

Chinese officials have repeatedly urged officials in other countries not to politicize what is a public health emergency. Conservatives in the United States, in particular, have latched on to loaded terms that have been criticized for stigmatizing the Chinese people. Secretary of [State Mike Pompeo referred to the “Wuhan virus,”](#) while Representative Kevin McCarthy, Republican of California, called it the “Chinese coronavirus.”

In response, Chinese officials and state news media have stepped up their criticism of American officials’ comments.

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Only days before Mr. Zhao’s latest post, the Xinhua news agency published a commentary denouncing “Washington’s poisonous coronavirus politics” and warning that spreading rumors simply encouraged “fear, division and hate.”

“Their dangerously irresponsible statements are highly counterproductive at this drastic hour that demands solidarity and cooperation,” [the commentary](#), written by Gao Wencheng, said, “and could be much more menacing than the virus itself.”

The coronavirus, according to all evidence, emanated from Wuhan, China, in late December. Scientists have not yet identified a “patient zero” or a precise source of the virus, though preliminary studies have linked it to a virus in bats that passed through another mammal before infecting humans.

A senior official of China’s National Health Commission, Liang Wannian, said at [a briefing](#) in Beijing last month that the likely carrier was [a pangolin](#), an endangered species that is trafficked almost exclusively to China for its meat and for its scales, which are prized for use in traditional medicine.

The first cluster of patients was reported at the [Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market](#), and studies have since suggested that the virus could have been introduced there by someone already infected. Wuhan and the surrounding province of Hubei account for the [overwhelming amount](#) of cases and deaths, so there is no scientific reason to believe the virus began elsewhere.

Mr. Zhao's assertion began with a post linking to a video of the director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Robert R. Redfield, testifying before the House on Wednesday and suggesting that some flu deaths might have been caused by the coronavirus.

The Huanan Seafood Market in Wuhan was disinfected and closed in January after it was linked to the coronavirus outbreak. Hector Retamal/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

“When did patient zero begin in US?” Mr. Zhao wrote on Twitter, first in English and separately in Chinese. “How many people are infected. What are the names of the hospitals? It might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan. Be transparent! Make public your date! US owe us an explanation.”

Mr. Zhao appeared to refer to the [Military World Games](#), which were held in Wuhan in October. The Pentagon sent 17 teams with more than 280 athletes and other staff members to the event, well before any reported outbreaks. The Pentagon has had confirmed cases in South Korea and Italy and is [bracing for more to emerge](#), but no illnesses have been tied to American service members from October.

Mr. Zhao's remarks were spread on China's most prominent social media platform, Weibo, under a hashtag: [#ZhaoLijianPostedFiveTweetsinaRowQuestioningAmerica](#). By late afternoon on Friday, that hashtag had been viewed more than 160 million times, along with screenshots of the original Twitter posts.

The State Department summoned the Chinese ambassador on Friday to protest Mr. Zhao's comments, officials in the Trump administration said.

At the regular briefing at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Friday, another spokesman, Geng Shuang, sidestepped three questions about whether Mr. Zhao's suggestion had politicized the crisis and reflected official Chinese policy.

He instead noted the statements made by American officials and lawmakers to “smear and attack” China.

“We are firmly opposed to this,” he said. “In fact, the international community, including the United States at home, have different views on the source of the virus. What I have been saying in recent days is that the Chinese side always believed that this is a scientific issue and requires scientific and professional opinions.”