

“THE CHINESE ARE SPYING ON US!”

Racialized discourse on cyber espionage



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U.S. NEWS

'Stay vigilant,' U.S. warns amid Chinese cyber espionage operation

China is spying on us, so what?

THE POST'S VIEW

Opinion | The U.S. needs to tame the cyber-dragon

When COVID-19 first broke out in the Global North, blame swiftly fell on China and this presented a political opportunity for journalists to frame the Eastern nation as the orchestrator behind the virus' spread in the Western world. While fear and unease were an understandable response to the virus, the political discourse surrounding the disease became increasingly racialized as former President Trump's labeling of COVID-19 as the "Kung-Flu" and "Chinese virus" exacerbated Sinophobic sentiments, fueling anti-Asian perspectives and violence. **Sinophobia**, simply put, is the irrational fear, prejudice, or hostility towards China or Chinese people.

The racialization of the COVID-19 virus is only the latest iteration of techno-orientalist depictions of China and persists in the harmful reporting of China's alleged cyber-espionage activities in the United States (US). **Techno-Orientalism** is a concept that depicts East Asian nations as representative of a futuristic, technologically dominant dystopia (1). Consider some of the headlines from the front pages of news reporting on China's data espionage efforts in the US on this page. The "cyber-dragon"? That sounds like a metaphor that seems more suited to the pages of a dystopian novel than the front pages of newspapers. Western news outlets have a knack for using techno-Orientalist imagery to construct the Eastern nation as the ultimate villain. Affirmed by the **yellow peril anxiety**, which regards East Asian identities as posing a dangerous threat to the lives of Western people (2), Western journalists seem to follow a script that reads, "When in doubt, just blame China!"

This zine will dissect Western media's penchant for perpetuating Sinophobic discourse regarding China's alleged cyber-espionage efforts and data-related practices in the US by using techno-Orientalist imagery, uncovering the harmful implications of these yellow-perilous narratives. We must consider how recent espionage incidents such as the Chinese balloon incident and TikTok's data harvest allegations shape perceptions of Chinese cyber espionage in the United States. What about the people caught in the crossfire, like Chinese international students or scientists? Let's ask ourselves why we're so quick to suspect China of foul play.

It's important to emphasize that this zine doesn't aim to exonerate or condemn China's involvement in cyber espionage. We're more concerned with how Western media perceives, frames, and interprets these alleged activities. We're not saying that China is entirely blameless either or that the West is just paranoid for no reason. But when it comes to China's perceived rise on the global stage – whether in military power, technological prowess, or economic clout – well, let's just say suspicion comes with the territory. We contend that every move China makes is cause for alarm in the West, and this zine will reveal the knee-jerk skepticism that governs Western reporting of China's cyber activities.

China Is Stealing AI Secrets to Turbocharge Spying, U.S. Says

U.S. officials are worried about hacking and insider theft of AI secrets, which China has denied

Global Intelligence Chiefs Warn Of 'Unprecedented' Chinese Spy Threat



AERIAL ENCOUNTERS

CHINESE BALLOON INCIDENT

In early 2023, the world watched with bated breath as news broke of a Chinese spy balloon traversing the skies above the US. The incident quickly tapped into broader anxieties in the US about China's rise as a global power, which manifested in the journalistic construction of the Chinese balloon as yet another symbol of the Eastern nation's ambition for global hegemony.

Here's a quick run-down of what happened:

January 28

The Pentagon first spotted a surveillance balloon near Alaska.

February 4

The balloon was shot down, revealing its cargo, which included intelligence surveillance, equipment, solar panels, multiple antennas & capabilities for maneuvering.

February 13

Recovery activities resumed, resulting in the retrieval of a significant part of the balloon's antenna array from the ocean floor which was sent off to an FBI lab at Quantico.

February 2

The US Defense Department announced it was monitoring the balloon over the continental US, after which, the balloon accelerated its movement towards the East Coast.

February 5

Recovery operations commenced. The FBI and Navy dive teams joined the search, locating the wreckage in relatively shallow waters.

February 13

Chinese Foreign Affairs spokesperson Wang Wen Bin stated that US high-altitude balloons had breached China's airspace on over ten occasions since 2022.

February 3

The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson asserted that the balloon was a civilian airship that was deployed for meteorological exploration & strayed far from its intended route.

Vice Foreign Minister Xie Feng lodged a formal complaint with the US Embassy, denouncing the shooting down of the balloon citing indiscriminate use of force against the civilian airship that was about to leave the US airspace.

US National Security spokesperson, John Kirby refuted claims of US surveillance crafts in China's airspace but declined to specify whether this denial extended to contested airspace claimed by China.

February 17

President Biden states that the US is not seeking to start a new Cold War with China.

June 29

Following extensive analysis, the Pentagon concluded that the balloon likely did not gather information while traversing the US airspace.

The media frenzy that ensued painted a picture straight out of science fiction. Government officials and authorities classified the balloon as an unidentified aerial/anomalous phenomenon (UAP) and branded it an extraterrestrial entity, likening it to UFOs rather than surveillance technology.

Lake Huron, fell squarely in the realm of unidentified anomalous phenomena (UAP), the latest name for UFO's that the Pentagon settled on last year.

Unidentified aerial phenomena, or UAP for short, is a term used in official circles for what are more commonly known as unidentified flying objects, or UFOs.

UAP is an umbrella term for objects spotted within US air, sea, and space whose presence cannot be easily identifiable or immediately explained. While some UAP sightings over the years end up having an innocent explanation without drumming up too much noise about national security concerns, such as weather balloons, drones, or small aircraft, others have remained a mystery. So it's interesting that despite assurance from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson that the balloon was, in fact, a weather balloon that meant no harm (although a certain level of skepticism should rightly be leveled), Western journalists insist on leaning into this techno-orientalist imagery of Chinese spies on a flying vehicle, bringing with them foreign technological power that could collect data from the sky, compromising US citizens' safety. Most headlines reporting on the Chinese balloon contained words such as "spy," "UFO," or premature assertions that the balloon did, in fact, gather intelligence when the US' own investigation later concluded otherwise.

WHAT'S BEHIND THE CHINESE SPY BALLOON

Chinese Spy Balloon Saga Shows UFOs Deserve Serious Investigations

Chinese spy balloon gathered intelligence from sensitive U.S. military sites, despite U.S. efforts to block it

Chang: Not shooting down balloon could embolden China

The issue with employing techno-orientalist language to describe the Chinese spy balloon in this way is that it lends a sense of legitimacy to the racialized fears surrounding Chinese aggression and espionage, perpetuating narratives of China as a global threat to technological, economic, and military dominance. In reality, there is a long history of mutual suspicion and activity between the US and China, set against the backdrop of long-standing animosity and mistrust. While US President Biden makes his intentions clear that he does not intend to start a new Cold War after recovering the balloon's contents, pre-existing tensions include residual Cold War geopolitics. Yet, as the finger-pointing and accusations flew back and forth, it's worth remembering that the US itself has a checkered past when it comes to surveillance activities, such as the infamous American U-2 that flew across and was shot down by the Soviet Union over their air space in 1960.

Skepticism permeates Western thought, shaping political strategies and influencing media narratives of the adversarial Chinese threat. In March of 2021, the Biden administration boldly proclaimed its intention to “prevail in strategic competition with China” (3). This sentiment was echoed in the finalized national security agenda of October 2022, which recognized China as the only competing nation with the motivation and capabilities to challenge the US for global hegemony across economic, diplomatic, military, and technological fronts (4). Skepticism is inherent in the US national security agenda, imbued into political strategies, disseminated via media framing, agenda-setting, and then inevitably percolating Western thought. It is no wonder that Western media follows suit, doing much to fuel the flames of hostility, continuing the legacy of framing their Chinese counterparts as aggressive thieves and an adversarial threat to US national security.

China's balloons are part of a strategy to beat the US on a new battlefield: 'near space'

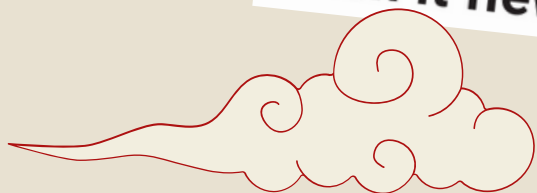
The racialization of the act of spying with the Chinese balloon in tandem with imagery equating it to alien machinery serves as yet another Sinophobic narrative crafted by Western journalists using techno-orientalist language to describe China's activities, aiding in the US-China rivalry. The balloon controversy has only widened the rift between the US and China, with possibly massive political ramifications moving forward. While the US has since come out with a statement concluding that the balloon did not collect data when it flew across the US, yellow perilous anxieties have prematurely plagued Western perceptions of China for five months between February and June of 2023, as Western media jumped the gun and decided to construct China as a thief, continuing the decades old Sinophobia in Western thought regarding China and Chinese individuals.



After five months of strained ties, US admits Chinese balloon did not collect information

POLITICS | NATIONAL SECURITY
What's Going On in the Sky? What We Know About UFOs and the Balloon Saga

Chinese spy balloon did not collect data when it flew over U.S.: Pentagon



FROM BYTE

Source: Vogue (<https://vogue.sg/shou-zi-chew-tiktok-profile/>)



TO BIAS

THE CASE OF TIKTOK



Earlier this year, the Senate Judiciary Committee convened, inviting major tech CEOs, including Meta, X, and TikTok, to discuss the issue of online child sexual exploitation. TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew faced Sinophobic and racist questioning regarding his residency, nationality (which, by the way, is Singaporean), and alleged ties to the Chinese Communist Party – reminiscent of similar treatment at a previous hearing he testified at in March 2023. US Senator Tom Cotton directed a series of questions at Chew, using techno-orientalist language to paint him as an evil foreign mastermind orchestrating TikTok’s purported data harvesting activities on behalf of its Chinese parent company, ByteDance, which has its headquarters in Beijing.

SEN. COTTON

MR. CHEW

Of what nation are you a citizen?

Singapore, Sir.

Are you a citizen of any other nation?

No, Senator.

Have you ever applied for Chinese citizenship?

Senator, I served my nation in Singapore. No I did not.

Do you have a Singaporean passport?

Yes, and I served my military for two and a half years in Singapore.

Do you have any other passports from any other nations?

No, Senator.

Have you ever been a member of the Chinese Communist Party?

Senator, I’m Singaporean, no.

Have you ever been associated or affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party?

No, Senator. Again, I’m Singaporean.

How did they get from online child safety to confusing two Asian nations?

Tom Cotton Goes Full Racist, Badgers TikTok CEO on Whether He's Chinese

Not all Asians are the same dude.

Sen. Tom Cotton faces backlash for repeatedly asking TikTok's CEO about his citizenship

TikTok CEO faces new grilling in US Congressional 'witch hunt'

Asian Americans are anxious about hate crimes. TikTok ban rhetoric isn't helping

The treatment of Chew during the congressional hearing sparked widespread condemnation online, with news media surprisingly reflecting this outrage. Many outlets called out Senator Cotton's choice of techno-orientalist language to insist on some connection between Chew and China despite repeated denials. Even the New York Times called Senator Cotton's questions "McCarthy-esque" (5), which refers to the use of fear tactics and sensationalized threats to assert guilt by association with China (in this case, we hypothesize Chew's likeness to a Chinese face). Some journalists go so far as to discuss online netizens' comments and responses to the hearing, rightfully critiquing the inflammatory rhetoric Senator Cotton used in his questioning. Many of these coverages highlighted how Chew's treatment may threaten the safety of Asian communities in the US by association, which may potentially lead to more anti-Asian violence, reminiscent of the hate crimes enacted against Asian people in the US during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and further fueling discriminatory policies.



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This is absolutely phenomenal in its revelation of how racist our government is, not just because the question itself is Sinophobic, but also because it's clear that Tom Cotton can't tell Asians apart even when they tell him.



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This line of questioning from Senator Tom Cotton is disgraceful, blatantly racist, and deeply dangerous.

While legitimate concerns exist regarding ByteDance's susceptibility to Chinese government pressure and what that might mean for US citizens' data security, the demonization of a homogenous China, as demonstrated in Senator Cotton's nonsensical lack of ability to differentiate Singapore from China, as a premature reaction to these yellow perilous anxieties is unjust and counterproductive. It is imperative that US policymakers refrain from irresponsibly using xenophobic and racialized rhetoric, especially when discussing venues for political struggle such as technology (6) and corresponding national security concerns.

The question remains...

Is TikTok really a danger to the West?

With over 150 million active US users on TikTok, the platform has become a worldwide cultural phenomenon. Despite this, TikTok and its CEO remain mired in controversy, particularly regarding their ties to China. News coverage of TikTok's data harvesting allegations remains relatively tinged with techno-orientalist language. In particular, the app's data collection practices are often framed in a way that emphasizes its connection to the Chinese Communist Party, racializing the platform and further feeding into the fears about Chinese government surveillance and control.

TikTok Struggles to Protect U.S. Data From Its China Parent

TikTok's ties to China: why concerns over your data are here to stay

Time for TikTok to cut its ties to China

TikTok has been accused of 'aggressive' data harvesting. Is your information at risk?

Because of TikTok's Chinese ownership, there is apprehension that the Chinese communist government could demand access to user data should they sanction it (which, might we add, remains speculative to this day). While Chew denies this and asserts that TikTok stores its data in the US and Singapore, concerns persist about the potential for government intervention.

In Chew's first appearance before Congress in March 2023, he went to great lengths to distance himself and TikTok from ties to China:

Let me state this unequivocally: ByteDance is not an agent of China or any other country. (There's an) inaccurate belief that TikTok's corporate structure makes it beholden to the Chinese government or that it shares information about US users with the Chinese government. This is emphatically untrue... The bottom line is this: American data (is) stored on American soil, by an American company overseen by American personnel.

Shou Zi Chew
Tik Tok CEO



TikTok's data collection practices are not necessarily more aggressive than that of Meta, a US-based company. A data privacy researcher working with the Washington Post actually discovered that, in some instances, TikTok gathers less data than Facebook (7). A 2022 study by Consumer Reports also concluded that TikTok's data-tracking practices are comparable to most US tech companies and other social media platforms (8). So, what's the differentiating factor here? What's unique about TikTok's data collection practices that it's causing such an uproar in the US? We speculate that it's because TikTok's parent company, ByteDance, is a Chinese entity. But does this warrant the concerns US policymakers are voicing about Chinese spies infiltrating the platform to steal US users' data? Even worse, does this justify the techno-orientalist language US policymakers directed at Chew during these congressional hearings?

What about Spotify? They're one of the largest music streaming platforms and currently ranks at number 1 for music applications on the App Store. Guess what? They're Swedish-owned! But do we see Spotify's foreign ownership and extreme popularity in the US elicit the same level of national security concern among US policymakers? (That's a rhetorical question, by the way.)

The reality is that many popular social media platforms collect vast amounts of user data regardless of ownership. Whether it's TikTok, Spotify, Meta, or X, the sheer volume of data gathered by these tech companies should give users pause for thought. But one can't deny that the US government is disproportionately concerned with TikTok's ties to China, regurgitating the same Sinophobic rhetoric of the evil, foreign technological power that's out to destroy the US, fostering skepticism of China's growing power and broader political tensions between the US and this Eastern nation.

We are afraid that, more and more, the actions and the language of the government is premised on the assumption that just because we are Chinese or have cultural ties to China that we could be disloyal, or be spies, or be under the influence of a foreign government.

— Zheng Yu Huang

President of the Committee of 100



**SO WHAT ABOUT THE CIVILIANS
CAUGHT IN THE CROSSHAIRS?**

In 2019, a Chinese electrical engineering graduate student at the Illinois Institute of Technology, Ji Chao Qun, was indicted for allegedly providing high-level Chinese intelligence officers information regarding US individuals who might be susceptible to recruitment as spies for China (9) and has since been sentenced to eight years in prison (10). The ethnic targeting of Chinese scientists rears its ugly head again later that year at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center, where five Asian researchers, three of whom were confirmed to be ethnically Chinese, whose employment was terminated after being accused of data theft (11). These are only two cases of over 100 Chinese nationals and immigrants who lost their jobs due to spying allegations during the China Initiative, a project run by the US Department of Justice (DOJ) that was operational between 2018 and 2022, designed to catch Chinese spies in the US STEM industry (12).

Chinese students are paying the price for US intelligence concerns

The U.S. Is Purging Chinese Cancer Researchers From Top Institutions

It's been two years since the DOJ's China Initiative ended, and yet its lasting implications will continue to be felt by Asian immigrants and Asian-Americans for years to come. From "Kung Flu" to "Chinese spies," Asian Americans (especially East-Asian presenting people), and particularly Chinese international students, find themselves caught in the middle of the US-China geopolitical rivalry. As tensions simmer between the two global powers in the wake of the spy balloon incident and TikTok's data harvesting allegations, we witness the repercussions seep further into the US post-secondary system, casting a cloud of suspicion and fear over Chinese international students seeking educational opportunities in the US.

Chinese students are still the largest group of international students to study in the US in 2023, yet they currently face longer than normal wait times for US visa applications. Even when they do have all their papers in order, immigration officers await them as they land at the US airport, detaining them for hours for questioning and, in some cases, even forcibly sending them back home and banning them from re-entry (13).

It's clear that China's ongoing data war with the US has worsened Asian people's lived experiences in the US as they bear the brunt of the techno-orientalist rhetoric the government has spewed over the last few years. Yet, amidst mounting anxieties, there is a risk of systematic anti-Asian discrimination seeping into policies, targeting Chinese nationals in the US under the pretext of strengthening national security. This not only threatens Chinese international students and immigrants, but also Asian Americans, who, despite their US citizenship, face the repercussions of yellow perilous anxieties based on their ethnic background.

It's important to realize that words matter and language has power. The words we choose to use when speaking about people, events, and in this case, technology, matter, especially in the context of political struggles between two incredibly powerful nations. In light of the racialized discourse on cyber espionage in the US there is an urgent call for a more nuanced and open approach to navigating US-China political relations to devise cybersecurity strategies that safeguard national security without resorting to dangerous and harmful rhetoric that demonizes Chinese people. After all, has this ever gotten us anywhere?



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- 1 Gong, C. (2019, December 28). Techno-orientalism in Science Fiction. *The Chloe Gong*. <https://thechloegong.com/2019/12/28/techno-orientalism-in-science-fiction/>

A blog about techno-orientalism and how it manifests in some popularized tropes in Western-produced science fiction films.

- 2 Said, E. W. (1979). *Orientalism*. Vintage Books.

A book about the concept Orientalism, coined by Edward Said, which serves as the basis of the notion of techno-orientalism used in this zine.

- 3 Fung, B. (2023, March 27). Asian Americans are anxious about hate crimes. TikTok ban rhetoric isn't helping. *CNN*. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/26/tech/asian-americans-tiktok/index.html>

An article about the implications of techno-orientalist rhetoric about the TikTok ban on Asian Americans' lived experiences in the US.



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- (12) Gilbert, N. (2023, February 27). China Initiative' shadow looms large for US scientists. *Nature*. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-023-00543-x>
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