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# Ways of seeing and discourse strategies of naming the novel coronavirus in the US and Hong Kong

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**Abstract:** The naming of the novel coronavirus was notably one of the most politically sensitive aspects of the pandemic. After former US President Donald Trump began using the term “Chinese Virus” in March 2020, partisans with different tribal affiliations in various countries and regions rushed to formulate arguments for and against using geographically marked and racially charged labels when referring to the virus. Informed by the principles of critical discourse analysis, this article analyses the naming of the virus in the US and Hong Kong, where similar practices of naming served the interests of very different political tribes and ideological agendas. It focuses on different aspects of meaning, i.e. analytic and synthetic, and the argumentation strategies various interpretive communities used to legitimize particular naming practices. It argues that it is not just certain practices of naming, but also certain practices of *reasoning* about names that comes to index different tribal loyalties.

**Keywords:** tribal epistemology; ways of seeing; professional vision; ideological square; politics of naming

## 1 Introduction

The naming of the novel coronavirus was notably one of the most politically sensitive aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Prieto-Ramos et al. 2020). On March 6, 2020, former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo referred to the novel virus as ‘Wuhan Virus’ in response to the People’s Republic of China (PRC)’s claim that the virus was originated from the US (Bolsen et al. 2020; Lee 2022), and after that President

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Trump began regularly using the term ‘Chinese virus’ in tweets and at press briefings. Perhaps unsurprisingly, partisans on different ends of the political spectrum in different countries rushed to formulate arguments for and against such nomenclature, resulting in various episodes of what might be called “competitive naming”, in which the names people assigned to the virus became emblems of their political loyalties or ideological positions. Such debates were reminiscent of similar conflicts about how to discuss other potential existential threats to humanity such as climate change. Climate journalist David Roberts (2017) coined the term “tribal epistemologies” to describe the phenomenon where both left-wing and right-wing partisans encounter a widening communication gap as they rely more heavily on the values of their political tribes than on a common standard of reasoning to talk about scientific issues.

The naming of the virus is a prime example of how different tribes adopt rather narrow “ways of seeing” to carve out meanings that are in line with the tribe’s values. In this paper we will explore the discursive practices of naming the novel coronavirus in two different political contexts: The United States and Hong Kong. Specifically, we will focus on how geographically oriented naming practices, e.g. “China virus” and “Wuhan virus”, engaged in by public figures were received by members of different ideological tribes by examining readers’ comments on both left-leaning and right-leaning news websites. Our focus will be on the argumentation strategies people use to legitimize their preferred naming of the virus.

## 2 Theories of meaning and naming

*Naming* is more complicated than simply matching a physical entity to a name. Names can carry particularly consequential meanings that can affect how people perceive things in the world. Work in the philosophy of language has laid the cornerstone for our understanding of the meaning of naming. In one of the most quoted examples of the contingency of names, Frege (1948) notes that both “morning star” and “evening star” can be used to refer to Venus, but the different expressions require a totality of designations to be understood. While the designation “Venus” conforms to the “truth value” of the name, the terms “morning star” and “evening star” communicate more accurately the *subjective experience* of the phenomenon. Modern empiricists, as Quine (1951) points out, tend to emphasise the former over the latter. In his critique of this bias, Quine draws on Kant’s distinction between analytic and synthetic truths. A statement is considered analytic when it is “grounded in meanings independently of matters of fact” and is synthetic when it is “grounded in fact” (Quine 1951: 21). Even though both expressions – “morning star” and “evening star” – analytically refer to Venus, the synthetic meanings

those names are trying to communicate are certainly different. Quine criticized modern empiricists for ignoring synthetic meaning and only considering analytic truth that is independent of matters of fact, resulting in a communication gap between people who focus on different aspects of meaning. Such a communication gulf is often observed between science and social science, and in a wider sense, between professionals and laypeople, a fact which will be illustrated in our discussion of the naming of the novel coronavirus. In our case studies, many names of the virus like “Wuhan virus” and “SARS-CoV2” share the same reference, yet carry different synthetic meanings across different “tribes” of speakers. Quine maintains that “our statements about the external world face the tribunal of sense experience not individually but only as a corporate body” (Quine 1951: 41), by which he means that we cannot isolate any single statement (or label) and verify or falsify it by observation, but rather we have to consider how it fits with our larger “webs of beliefs” or “tribunals of sense experiences”. While, for Quine, these “tribunals” are not necessarily social, i.e. determined by the opinions or judgements of others, but rather shaped by our own prior experiences, beliefs and theories, Quine does recognize that our beliefs are influenced by linguistic and cultural practices, which are inherently social. In this way, Quine’s “naturalized epistemology” is in many ways compatible with the more social approaches to epistemology reflected in this special issue. Indeed, some of Quine’s followers (e.g. Goldman 1979; Kitcher 1992) have developed more “social” versions of naturalized epistemology.

A similar distinction can be found in Searle’s concepts of “brute facts” and “institutional facts”. He argued that institutional facts assume the existence of human institutions, which constitute rules that only make sense within that tribal system. For example, currency only works as the medium of exchange in a money economy, not in a barter economy (Searle 1969: 51–52). The practice of naming, e.g. calling a piece of paper “money”, is an act that signifies the constitutive rules of the tribe, which is synthetically grounded in institutional facts. Similarly, different ways of naming of the virus, reflect the different institutional rules of various professional and ideological tribes that use these names. These institutional rules imply a commitment to the use of language in which, echoing Robert’s (2017) idea of “tribal epistemologies”, the way people legitimize and reason about their naming practices comes to index different tribal loyalties. Using journalism in the US as an example, Roberts explains that these institutional rules operate at a *professional* level (as norms of accuracy and fairness) and an *ideological* level (as norms of liberal democracy in which the media are positioned as providing a check on the actions of leaders). This article follows a similar vein of analysis, focusing both on the naming practices of various professional tribes, i.e. politicians, journalists and

scientists, and on the ideological implications of these practices, especially as they are either embraced or rejected by participants in online discussion threads that accompany left-leaning and right-leaning media reports about virus naming.

These observations from the philosophy of language are not meant to belittle the notion of a “truth-value” associated with names. Rather they are meant to highlight how tribal *sensory* naming can also carry distinctive institutional meanings. As Saussure (1986) points out, signs derive their meaning based on their relations with other signs within a system of distinction. Relational identity is negatively defined by the relations with other signs used by another tribe, i.e. the naming of the virus is used to identify tribal members from out-group. This relational nature refutes naming as a matter of universal concepts: not only does the signified vary across tribes, but the signifier is also subject to change under the influence of time (Culler 1976: 20). Below we will apply these concepts, showing how different aspects of meaning, i.e. analytic and synthetic, are emphasised by the naming practices of different tribes.

When we speak of different “tribal” approaches to naming, however, it is important to resist *a priori* assumptions about the naming practices of political professions or political groups, and to assume, for example that there is a “medical” way of naming the virus, or a “conservative” way or a “progressive” way. Within the medical community, for example, there are at least two approaches, one which comes from the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses (ICTV), whose Coronavirida Study Group proposed to include host, location, isolate and date in the name of the virus in order to facilitate the study of the viruses at a species level (Gorbalenya et al. 2020), and the other which comes from the World Health Organisation (WHO), who cautions that names of diseases may *not* include geographic species of animal, geographic locations and people’s names in order to minimize negative social impacts on travel or tourism (WHO 2015: Table B). In other words, the ICTV prefers a name that emphasises the *analytic* meaning based on material matters of fact, e.g. host, location, while the WHO prefers a name that does not contain negative *synthetic* meanings that may cause negative social impacts. In a similar vein, different virus naming practices have also been identified within other communities such as the journalistic community (Prieto-Ramos et al. 2020). While different professional and ideological ways of seeing are categorized in the analysis, the dynamics of naming *within* these communities is also highlighted. For example, in the our disscision of official US discourses, both ways of seeing advocated by the Trump administration and by the governors of different states are included to demonstrate the dynamics between different levels of the US officialdom.

The study reported here seeks to answer two main research questions:

- (1) Which aspect of meaning, i.e. analytic and synthetic, is emphasised in the different naming practices of various professional and political tribes? and

- (2) What are the argumentation strategies members of these tribes adopt to legitimize their naming practices?

### 3 Context, data and research methods

The origin of the pandemic is still unknown apart from the fact that the first outbreak was reported in Wuhan, China in December 2019 (Prieto-Ramos et al. 2020). On the 11th of February 2020, the ICTV named the novel virus ‘Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome CoronaVirus 2’ (SARS-CoV2), a name similar to the SARS virus due to the genetic base of the virus. On the same day, the disease that the virus causes was dubbed ‘COVID-19’ by the WHO. Although this nomenclature quickly came to be adopted by governments and mainstream media outlets, some journalists, politicians, and even scientists chose to deviate from these names and instead engage in a range of alternative and sometimes incendiary naming practices. Two such incidents, one taking place in the US and the other in Hong Kong, are the subject of our study.

Our first case involves Donald Trump, former US President, adopting the term “Chinese Virus” on the 18<sup>th</sup> of March, 2020 in a series of tweets (Moynihan and Porumbescu 2020; Stankiewicz 2020). In response to public condemnation of this nomenclature, Trump claimed during a White House Coronavirus Task Force press briefing that “it is not racist calling it where it came from”.<sup>1</sup> Our second case also took place on the 18th of March, 2020, when Hong Kong microbiologists David Christopher Lung and Kwok-Yung Yuen published an article in the Hong Kong newspaper *MingPao* entitled ‘*Pandemic originated from Wuhan: The forgotten lesson of 17 years ago*’ 大流行緣起武漢 十七年教訓盡忘), arguing that the name “Wuhan coronavirus” is a lay term that is “simple and direct” and so suitable for daily and media usage (Lung and Yuen 2020). This also met with a backlash on social media. After less than 24 h, the article was retracted, and the scientists apologized for their choice of expression. Both of these incidents precipitated lively debates around practices of naming the virus in these two political contexts, debates which played out in the media, and on social media, and in the discourse of scientists and politicians, revealing not just how different social actors – politicians, journalists, scientists and laypeople – preferred to talk about the virus, but also the ideological principles and forms of reasoning they used to legitimate their naming practices.

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<sup>1</sup> The official recording can be found on the US Department of State YouTube Channel via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W7AI0FwWrUE>.

The data for this study consist of the transcripts of the White House Coronavirus Task Force press briefing referred to above, Trump's tweets, and Lung and Yuen's article on the origin of the virus in *MingPao*, as well as news reports of these incidents from various news outlets and the online comments left by readers of these reports. In the case of the US, the stories and online discussion threads from *Fox News* and *MSNBC* were selected to represent the conservative and progressive perspectives (Mitchell et al. 2014). For the Hong Kong data, articles from two Chinese newspapers, *on.cc* and *Apple Daily* were selected to represent pro-government and pro-democracy camps respectively. The top 100 comments in the online discussion threads of each news report were collected, amounting to 400 entries in the dataset.

Our analysis focuses on the argumentation strategies adopted by different interpretive communities – politicians, journalists, and scientists – and how these discursive practices of “professional vision” (Goodwin 1994) were collectively reinterpreted and reconstructed by the public in the discussion threads. These processes of reinterpretation and reconstruction reflect how different “ways of seeing” are reinforced or rejected by members of different communities as they travel from the original scene to the news reports and later to various discussion threads (Jones and Li 2016; Scollon 2008). The comparison of the argumentation strategies by various tribes is meant to demonstrate that, not only is there a clash in the naming between tribes, but there are also *internal* debates within individual tribes in both the US and Hong Kong cases.

Our analysis is informed by principles of critical discourse analysis (CDA) (van Dijk 2006b). CDA uncovers the relationship between language, power, ideologies, and social realities through analysing the “opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in the language” (Wodak 1995: 204). For many years, CDA researchers have demonstrated how political discourse and specific language choices by different news media can shape people's attitudes and even their political decisions (Teo 2000). One important insight from CDA is the way political discourse relies heavily on the discursive construction of distinctions between “Us” and “Them”, the overall strategy being to maintain a positive presentation of “Us” while maintaining a negative presentation of “Them” (van Dijk 1998, 2006a). Negative construction of others can be linguistically realized by attaching labels to the out-group, or through negative moral evaluation of them (Wodak 2008). Our analysis draws on van Dijk's ideological square to study the following argumentation strategies:

**ACTOR DESCRIPTION:** Are there positive descriptions of the people who share the same nomenclature of the virus, and are there negative descriptions of members of the “out-group” who adopt a different naming of the virus? These questions echo van Dijk's ideological square to understand if there is an emphasis on “our good things” and “their bad things”.



**AUTHORITY:** What kinds of authority, e.g. scientists or tribal leaders, are called on as a legitimation strategy (van Leeuwen 2008) to justify the naming of the virus? In addition, when referring to different authorities, do different tribes draw on analytic or synthetic meanings?

**NATIONALISM:** Given the controversial naming strategies in question involve explicitly linking the virus with a particular nation or region, it is important to ask what role nationalism – whether it be ethnic nationalism, which focuses on the preservation of ethnic distinctiveness, or civic nationalism, which is rooted in shared values and expectations (Smith 1991) – plays in construction tribal identities and the formulation of tribal epistemologies.

**POLARIZATION:** To what degree do the epistemologies and argumentation strategies adopted by different tribes make available a “middle ground” when it comes to talking about the virus, and to what degree are naming practices polarised between “Us” and “Them” so that that the members of the tribe must adopt the tribal language in order to demonstrate their loyalty (Roberts 2017).

## 4 Ways of seeing and discursive strategies of naming

In this section, we analyse the various argumentation strategies adopted by the different stakeholders in these naming controversies – the politicians, scientists, journalists, and members of the public – and the ideological forms of reasoning or “ways of seeing” they used to legitimize their naming practices. In addition, we will consider how these naming practices and “ways of seeing” were related to tribal identities and loyalties.

### 4.1 US politicians

The first interpretive community we would like to investigate is that of the top officials of the Trump administration, who adopted geographically linked names such as “Wuhan Virus” (in the case of Pompeo’s CNBC interview) and “Chinese virus” (in the case of Trump’s tweets and other public statements throughout the pandemic). Of course, these naming practices were not characteristic of all of the public discourse coming from the Trump administration. In “official” government statements, in which Trump was speaking as “The President” – for instance, his proclamation that “the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States constitutes a national emergency” – the naming of the virus did not follow the naming of Wuhan Virus. While acknowledging the virus was first detected in Wuhan, the announcement merely referred to the virus as novel coronavirus and SARS-CoV2 and the disease as COVID-19.

The *political* effect of Trump's calling SARS-CoV2 the "China virus" or the "Chinese virus" is consistent with van Dijk's ideological square, that is, it served to help him emphasize "our good things" and "their bad things". For example, Trump's March 16 tweet read:

The United States will be powerfully supporting those industries, like Airlines and others, that are particularly affected by the Chinese Virus. We will be stronger than ever before.

In this example we can see both the strategies of national self-glorification and polarization that positively evaluate the actions of the United States and its strong industries, while at the same time portraying the virus as an agent of the PRC which was affecting US industries. The polarized image of the "good", i.e. US industries, and the 'bad', i.e. Chinese virus, is reinforced by the invocation of the notion of "strength", in which the relationship between the "good" and the "bad" is framed in terms of a contest or conflict in which strength leads to victory over one's opponent. This, of course, is a common discursive move in the political realm (van Dijk 2006a). Shifting the blame to the out-group, the PRC, for the vulnerabilities of US industries to the pandemic distracts readers' attention from unresolved domestic issues (Krebs and Levy 2001), in this case, the US government's own (less than ideal) response to the virus. Such statements also fit into a larger narrative of trade warfare between the US and the PRC, as, just months before, Trump had imposed tariffs on steel and aluminium from China under a national security exemption of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) (Galbreath et al. 2021: 28).

When Trump was asked about using the term 'Chinese Virus' in a news briefing on 17<sup>th</sup> March, he replied:

Well, China was putting out information, which was false, that our military gave this [virus] to them. That was false. Rather than having an argument, I said I have to call it where it came from. It did come from China. I think it's a very accurate term. But no, I didn't appreciate the fact that China was saying that our military gave it to them. Our military did not give it to anybody.

Part of Trump's justification for his naming practices is an attempt to present them as grounded in matters of fact ("It did come from China. I think it's a very accurate term"). This analytic point of view, however, depends on the truth-value of the claim that the virus came from the PRC, and since this cannot be scientifically verified, this reasoning constitutes a weak analytical basis for the name. But in many ways that does not matter, since Trump's analytical justification is secondary to his more synthetic reasoning that calling the virus the "Chinese virus" is an appropriate form of retaliation in response to the claim by Chinese propaganda sources that the virus originated with the US military. In other words, the naming is justified not in terms of its truth value, but in terms of its *rhetorical* value. What matters is not whether the

virus actually came from China, but that calling the virus the “Chinese virus” is a legitimate “counterpunch” in a fight that the PRC “started”. Within Trump’s “way of seeing” and the “way of seeing” adopted by many of his followers, the fact that the naming is explicitly justified not as a statement of truth, but as an act of “name calling” does not in any way weaken its legitimacy. Indeed, time and time again Trump and his followers have assigned value to statements mostly on the basis of their effectiveness in highlighting the polarisation between them and their opponents rather than on the basis of their factual accuracy (Hartley 2023).

Interestingly, though, Trump used the term “Chinese virus” not just to construct an “Us” versus “Them” distinction between the US and the PRC, but also to create polarized categories *within* the US, in particular between the Trump administration and various state governors: On the same day that he released his first tweet calling SARS-CoV2 the “Chinese virus”, Trump sent the following tweet in response to the statement by then New York Governor Andrew Cuomo that the federal government had “been behind from day one on this crisis”:

Cuomo wants “all states to be treated the same.” But all states aren’t the same. Some are being hit hard by the Chinese Virus, some are being hit practically not at all. New York is a very big “hotspot”, West Virginia has, thus far, zero cases. Andrew, keep politics out of it ...

In this example, by framing the situation in New York as a result of it being “hit hard by the Chinese Virus” instead of a result of lack of resources or an insufficient federal response, Trump not only deflects responsibility from himself, but also subtly implies that Cuomo is being insufficiently patriotic in response to a foreign threat. Trump’s exhortation to Cuomo to “keep politics out of it” is particularly interesting as it reflects the use of the idea of tribalism itself as both a form of othering and as a way of undermining Cuomo’s assessment of the situation – attributing it to the distorted “epistemologies” of Cuomo’s political tribe – the Democratic Party. It also serves to reinforce the wider “Us” versus “Them” construction of the US-China relationship, effectively saying to Cuomo that, in order to be considered a loyal member of the US tribe that he should avoid criticising him. Again, the legitimacy of the naming practice here is based not on its truth value, but on its value in the context of a retaliatory rhetoric, this time aimed both at the PRC and at Cuomo.

## 4.2 The US press

While some of the opposition to Trump’s use of the term “Chinese virus” came from Democratic politicians and community leaders, especially in Asian American communities, much of it came from the press, who, in their challenges to Trump, advanced a different “way of seeing” when it came to naming. After the press briefing

of 17<sup>th</sup> March referred to in the last section, Trump used the term “Chinese Virus” in four additional tweets and then kicked off the 18<sup>th</sup> March press conference with the phrase “the war against the Chinese Virus”. In response to Trump’s recurrent use of term “Chinese Virus” (likely partly in order to “bait” liberal politicians and the press) journalists advanced their own argumentation strategies, as illustrated below:

Why do you keep calling this the Chinese Virus? There are reports of dozens of incidents of bias against Chinese Americans in this country. Your own aid, Secretary Azar, says he does not use this term. He says, “Ethnicity does not cause the virus.” Why do you keep using this?

As with Trump’s initial strategies of legitimation based on analytical reasoning (“It did come from China”), this reporter seems to ground her objections to Trump’s naming practices in matters of fact (“ethnicity does not cause the virus”). This analytical basis, however, depends on the synthetic contextualisation of the term “Chinese virus” as a racial slur, not just a statement about geographical origin, and the connection of it to “incidents of bias against Chinese Americans”. In effect then, like Trump, for this reporter the primary basis for the legitimacy (or, in this case the illegitimacy) of the name is not its accuracy (or lack of accuracy), but its *rhetorical* effect and the real world consequences of that effect. By framing the term “Chinese Virus” in this way, a different set of Us-Them distinctions is set up, this time not between the US and the PRC, but rather between the “tribe” that discriminates against minorities and the “tribe” that does not.

The journalist, however, also uses another strategy to argue against the name: the fact that Trump’s own Secretary of Health and Human Services, Alex Azar, did not use the term “Chinese virus”, and, in fact, attributing the analytical justification against using the name to Azar himself (“He says, ‘Ethnicity does not cause the virus’”). This observation is, on the one hand, a form of authorisation whereby the legitimacy of the reporter’s stance is supported by the authority of the Secretary. At the same time, it is also a subtle strategy of polarisation, a way of constructing an “Us” versus “Them” relationship *within* Trump’s administration. A similar strategy is illustrated by another exchange at the same press conference:

Journalist: Do you know the concerns about Chinese Americans in this country? To the aids behind you, are you comfortable with this term?

Trump: I have great love for all of the people from our country. But as you know, China tried to say at one point, maybe they’ve stopped now, that it was caused by American soldiers. That can’t happen. It’s not going to happen, not as long as I’m president. It comes from China.

Considering the media has a role to provide checks and balances to liberal democratic governments (Hallin and Mancini 2004), Trumps use of names like “Chinese Virus” and “Kung flu” were seen as acts that reporters felt obliged to “call out”, based

on the purported professional commitment to accuracy and fairness (Roberts 2017). Trump, on the other hand, bases his justification on his political commitment to “strength”, arguing that his practices of “retaliatory naming” are consistent with his role as President.

### 4.3 Hong Kong scientific seeing

In the examples above there is a tendency towards strategies of polarization, emphasizing how practices of naming are used to strengthen the distinctions between “Us” and “Them”. The Hong Kong microbiologists Lung and Yuen, on the other hand, took a more middle-ground approach, acknowledging the legitimacy of both the scientific jargon, i.e. SAR-CoV-2, and the more “everyday” practices of naming the virus based on where the first outbreak started.

On the same day that Trump was criticized for ignoring the negative social impacts brought by his use of the term “Chinese Virus”, Lung and Yuen published a newspaper article in *MingPao*, explaining the scientific naming logic of ICTV and WHO and arguing for convenience of calling the virus ‘Wuhan coronavirus’ for daily usage.

社會上就此疫之命名爭議甚多，事實上疾病之名由世衛起，病毒之名由 ICTV 起，而俗名則是約定俗成，清楚明白便可。科學研討或學術交流，必須用官方名字 COVID-19 稱此病或 SARS-CoV-2 稱呼病毒。市民日常溝通及媒體用語，則可以武漢冠狀病毒或武漢肺炎稱之，通俗易懂，方便溝通。

‘There are many controversies in terms of the naming (of the pandemic). While the disease is named by the WHO and the virus is named by the ICTV, a common name is decided by common usage that is judged to be clear and easy to understand. Of course, we need to use the official names, i.e. COVID-19 and SARS-CoV-2, while conducting academic discussions. Yet for daily communication by the public and the media, it is more convenient and easier to refer to the disease as “Wuhan coronavirus” or “Wuhan pneumonia”.’

(Lung and Yuen 2020: para 3)

Unlike the US political and journalistic “ways of seeing” described above, this argument about an appropriate “everyday” way of seeing coming from these two scientists is based on meta-discursive claims that not make the judgment that the scientific naming is superior to the lay practices of naming. In a sense, this is an unusual argument coming from scientists. Indeed, it might have come from Quine, who rejected the rigidity of empiricists and insisted on the legitimacy of more subjective naming practices. At the same time, they also bring to bear a “scientific argument” for the appropriateness of the name “Wuhan coronavirus” by providing

what is framed as “evidence” from their own research for the causal relationship between the virus and the wild animal eating culture in the PRC. The article notes that there is no way to verify the natural host and the intermediate host of the virus as the wild animal market, since the market has been sterilised, but despite this, the authors offer the fact that the coronavirus strain (*Rhinolophus sinicus*, RaTG13) found in bats in Yunnan province, shares 96 % genetic similarity with SARS-CoV-2. They also note that the spike receptor-binding domain of SARS-CoV-2 also shares a 90 % genetic similarity with virus strain from *Manis javanica*. These discoveries led them to believe the Wuhan wild animal market was indeed the epicentre of COVID-19. Their analysis relies on a “scientific approach” to justify the truth-value of the naming ‘Wuhan Virus’, calling upon their own scientific authority to evaluate the hypothesis that the Wuhan wild animal market was the origin of the virus as very likely. In other words, rather than relying on an argument for the legitimacy of synthetic naming, they attempt to assert that analytical “truth” of the name: *it did* come from Wuhan.

At the same time, Lung and Yuen go on to add a “synthetic spin” to their argument by erecting a cultural “Us” versus “Them” distinction in critiquing practices of wild animal consumption in the PRC:

沙士後沒有雷厲風行關閉所有野味市場乃大錯，欲戰勝疫症，必須面對真相，勿再一錯再錯，謗過於人。武漢新冠狀病毒乃中國人劣質文化之產物，濫捕濫食野生動物、不人道對待動物、不尊重生命，為滿足各種欲望而繼續食野味，中國人陋習劣根才是病毒之源。如此態度，十多年後，沙士3.0定必出現。

‘It was a grave mistake not shutting down all wild animal markets (in China) after SARS. We have to face the reality [that COVID-19 is heavily related to wild animal eating]. In order to combat the pandemic, there is no point in making more mistakes by shifting the blame to others. Wuhan coronavirus is the product of the poor Chinese culture, indiscriminate hunting and eating of wild animals, treating animals without respect. These bad habits of the Chinese people are the source of the virus. If this attitude persists, SARS 3.0 is bound to happen’.

(Lung and Yuen 2020: para 9)

This negative actor description of “the Chinese people” and “bad habit” of wildlife eating which caused the outbreak of SARS in 2003 and the global pandemic in 2019 is meant to distinguish “the (Mainland) Chinese” not just from other nationalities, but also from other Chinese who do not eat wildlife. In this regard, the term “Wuhan coronavirus” takes on a synthetic meaning which is more associated with *culture* than with *geography*, and, by implication, is framed as an appropriate sign of shame that should be worn by “the Chinese people” as punishment for their bad behaviour.

In these examples, then, we can see multiple possible “Us” versus “Them” distinctions arising from the same sign, with the name “Wuhan Virus” potentially signifying a state-to-state struggle, racism and undesirable cultural practices of wildlife eating.

## 4.4 Ideological seeing

This section examines how these diverse ways of seeing perceived by the public, focusing on the acceptance and rejection of naming practices by members of both the left-leaning and right-leaning tribes, based on our analysis of comments from news reports from *Fox News* and *MSNBC* in the US and the two Hong Kong newspapers *on.cc* and *Apply Daily*. Rather than approaching the comments based on a general ideological categorization of, for example, *MSNBC* readers as left-leaning and *Fox News* readers as right-leaning (Mitchell et al. 2014), we also seek to understand how, within different readerships, commenters align themselves with different “ways of seeing” and rehearse the different practices of legitimation used in the public discourse.

In the *Fox News* dataset, 58 % of the comments analysed indicate a clear stance regarding the name “Chinese/Wuhan virus”, among those, 67 % arguing for the appropriateness of the name, and 33 % arguing that it was inappropriate. While this fits the right-leaning categorization of *Fox News* and its audience, many of the commenters expressed a more ambivalent stance, as seen in the comment below:

While I have no issue calling it the “Wuhan Virus”, my concern is people might target the Chinese-Americans and Asian-Americans. Since many Americans are uneducated or under-educated, they might believe that the Chinese-Americans or even Asian-Americans have the virus. What he [Trump] says and how he says matter. He could have said that he wouldn't tolerate a racist discrimination.

While this comment clearly expresses concerns about the rhetorical effect of geographically-based naming practices, echoing the “ways of seeing” expressed by the journalists quoted above who opposed Trump, this stance is packaged in the language of tribal loyalty. The commenter begins, for instance, by establishing that she/he has “no issue” using the term, personally dis-aligning himself from those who criticised Trump. He then goes on to ascribe the blame for the possibly negative rhetorical effect of this name not to Trump, who was promoting it, but to “uneducated and undereducated” people who might misunderstand him.

In other words, what is presented is a meta-discursive argument against synthetic naming which is based on the hypothetical subjectivities of “epistemologically deficient” others rather than the writers' own subjectivity and downplays

the illocutionary force Trump's naming by framing it as him not being sufficiently "careful" in his selection of words. Even this mild critique is couched in a positive actor-representation of Trump as someone whose words "matter". Most importantly, by presenting this critique wrapped in these layers of meta-discourse, the commenter is able to distance himself from it (even as he advances it), thus maintaining the epistemology of the tribe: the notion that there is nothing "inherently" wrong with this name.

Other commenters displayed similar strategies of ambivalence, such as arguing that "calling it 'Chinese Virus' is racist while calling it 'Wuhan Virus' is not". Such comments suggest that even *within* the reader base of *Fox News*, there were different degrees of acceptance regarding the term used by the political leader of the tribe. This, however, was rarely expressed as a criticism of Trump himself, and even concerns about the possible racist implications of the term had a nationalistic spin – focusing not on racism against Chinese or Asians, but rather discrimination against Chinese/Asian Americans.

Among comments collected from *MSNBC* that stated a clear stance regarding the use of the term 'Chinese virus', only 15 % aligned with the stance of the article which criticised this term and Trump for using it, contradicting expectations based on the ideological categorization that *MSNBC* and its readers as left-leaning. 85 % defended Trump's naming practices. It is important to note that 22 % of the pro-naming comments also adopted negative actor descriptions of *MSNBC*, calling it 'fake news', indicating that at least some of the pro-Trump comments were from people who were not actually *MSNBC* viewers, but rather what might Trump supporters who visited *MSNBC* to "troll" the network: One commentator wrote, echoing Trump's anti mainstream media rhetoric:

China is trying to blame the US Military and Trump is just setting the record straight by calling it the Chinese Virus. Now the media knows this. Yet, in their own little way they're going after Trump and trying to protect China. Why would they do that? Trump was right, the media is the enemy of the people. That's another thing he set the record straight on.

Here the poster is not just reproducing Trump's rhetoric, but also his "way of seeing" the world as polarized between "Us" and a "Them" which, in this case, includes not just the Chinese, but also *MSNBC*. Another commenter wrote:

While we're debating whether the term 'Chinese Virus' is racist, China just knocked the US out of the #1 spot as the world's top superpower. A communist/socialist America is right around the corner.

While this comment also prioritizes national pride and patriotism, framing the PRC as a threat to the US's superpower status, what is interesting is that it does



this through an implicit critique of “rhetorical” debates and an appeal to “concrete facts” – not the facts about the origin of the virus, but the “facts” about the political threat posed by the Chinese.

Similarly, the systems of distinctions reproduced by the comments on the stories in the Hong Kong press also made use of nationalistic discourses deployed in the service of drawing boundaries based on political affiliation, in this case the degree of affiliation commenters’ felt with the Chinese government. 71 % of the comments which took a stance regarding the name on *on.cc*, a pro-government outlet, opposed the term, 84 % of the comments which took a stance regarding the name on *Apple Daily* – a pro-democracy outlet – supported the use of the term.

One of the obvious reasons that pro-China readers objected to the term ‘Wuhan virus’ is that was seen as an attack to the Chinese establishment. Not surprisingly, 42 % of the comments criticising the term *on.cc* used strong nationalist “Us” versus “Them” strategies that paralleled the kinds of arguments raised by Trump and his supporters. Just as pro-Trump commenters accused those who criticised Trump as siding with the Chinese, pro-Chinese commenters accused people who used the term “Wuhan virus” as siding with Trump, as can be seen in the two comments below.

同特朗普一個嘴型

‘They [Lung and Yuen] shared the same naming with Trump’.

特朗普發表聲明第一次講中國病毒呢四個字，跟住呢位好「愛國」噶袁教授即刻發表文章，時間配合得剛好呀，全世界最頂尖嘅班未有任佢一個病毒專家敢肯定發源地係武漢，我地香港呢位人才真係犀利，咁快搵到源頭

‘Trump just used the term ‘Chinese Virus’ for the first time in his official speech, then Professor Yuen, the “patriot”, published an article in support of the naming right away. What great timing. The world’s renowned scientists have yet to be certain that Wuhan is the origin of the pandemic, and our great talent has figured it out in such a timely manner’.

While the “Us” versus “Them” distinction in these comments allows the commenters to attack Lung and Yuen’s use of the term “Wuhan virus” as “unpatriotic”, they also attack the “scientific” basis of their arguments, noting that their conclusions were at odds with “the world’s renowned scientists.” The sarcastic use of the term “patriot” is possibly an intertextual reference to Yuen claiming that he was “a Chinese patriot” after he retracted his article that criticized the “poor Chinese culture” of wild animal eating (Cheung and Cheung 2020). While Lung and Yuen consider criticizing “poor Chinese culture” as an act of patriotism, 71 % *on.cc* anti-naming audiences clearly think otherwise. Specifically, by exposing the purportedly “harmful practices” of the in-group, they are portrayed as disloyal to their tribe.

These nationalistic “Us” versus “Them” distinctions were not found in the pro-democracy media *Apple Daily*. Instead, a different set of “Us” versus “Them” distinctions are introduced, namely this distinction between Hong Kong (where, at the time at least, people were still “free” to use such terminology), and Mainland China (where people had to “toe the party line”). This distinction is illustrated in the two comments below.

兩位教授你以後唔洗返大陸啦!大陸要人讚賞話佢抗疫能力強抗疫能力快,就Very good 啦

‘The professors can no longer travel to mainland China! In order to be seen as ‘very good’ from the PRC’s perspective, one needs to praise their swift and effective response to the pandemic’.

治本才能真正解決問題核心

多謝袁教授道出根本。

慶幸香港重有丁點兒言論空間

大家請守住這僅有自由

‘The pandemic can only be solved when the root cause [of wild animal eating habit] is addressed. Thanks Professor Yuen for bringing it out, and [I’m] thankful that there is still some degree of free speech to get this message out. Please stand your ground for the limited amount of freedom we have’.

In these comments, while the “scientific truth” of the term and the logic of Lung and Yuen’s argument are asserted, the main argument for the legitimacy of the term is political. The use of the term becomes a symbol of the free speech that many Hong Kongers felt they were in danger of losing as the Chinese government asserted itself more strongly in local affairs.

At the same time, a large number of *Apple Daily* commenters also asserted “cultural” differences with Mainland Chinese. 45 % of *Apple Daily* comments that supported the use of the term “Wuhan virus” highlighted the differences, in terms of both values and practices, between Hong Kongers and “the Chinese”, playing into a wider debate about identity in Hong Kong (Li 2018). According to Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute (HKPORI), those who identified as Chinese and those who identified as Hong Kongers were at a very similar level (31.5 % and 31.9 % respectively) in 2002, but by the time of the pandemic those who identified as Hong Kongers exceeded those who identified as Chinese by 21.4 % (HKPORI 2022).

Of course, part of what was driving these comments was the political polarization in Hong Kong that grew out of the Anti-Extradition Bill protests which started in 2019 and continued through the early days of the pandemic until the Chinese government imposed a new National Security Law on the city, effectively banning

political dissent and shuttering pro-democracy news outlets, including the *Apple Daily*, which ceased operations on 23rd June 2021. And so, in many respects, the naming of the virus and one's opinions about it functioned as a surrogate for deep seated political divisions and conflicts.

## 5 Conclusions

In this paper, we have explored how various strategies for naming the novel coronavirus were adopted and rejected by various political “tribes” in the US and Hong Kong and the different strategies they used to legitimize their naming practices. The important point that we make is that different “tribal” affinities were claimed and imputed not just on the basis of the particular name social actors adopted for the virus, but also through the promotion of particular “ways of seeing” associated with those names. Although these “ways of seeing” ranged from more analytical to more synthetic arguments about the appropriateness of different names, the dominant “way of seeing” in all of the examples was based on a view of the world as a struggle between “Us” and “Them”. The roles of “Us” and “Them” were constructed differently by different stakeholders depending on their positions in their societies; they included the US and China, the Republicans and the Democrats, “people who are racists” and “people who are not”, “real” news outlets and “fake” news outlets, Mainland Chinese and Hong Kongers, and “patriots” and “traitors”. As a result, different argumentative strategies and “narrative battles” (Jaworsky and Qiaoan 2021) about the origins of the virus or the rhetorical consequences of different naming practices almost always devolved into questions about “whose side” one was on: “naming” almost always became a matter of “name calling”. In such circumstances, “tribal epistemologies” do not just signal the siloed “ways of seeing” practiced by different tribes, but also the fact that tribalism itself can become an epistemology, a way of knowing based more on creating distinctions between “Us” and “Them” than on advancing a particular set of reasons or telling a particular story.

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