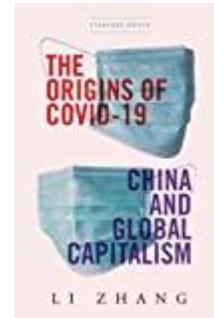




Li Zhang. *The Origins of COVID-19: China and Global Capitalism.* Stanford: Stanford Briefs, an imprint of Stanford University Press, 2021. 185 pp. \$13.99, paper, ISBN 978-1-5036-3017-8.



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Since first breaking out in Wuhan, China in December 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic has persisted for more than two years, fundamentally changing people's lives worldwide. *The Origins of COVID-19: China and Global Capitalism* offers a timely and succinct account of the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic in China and its deep entanglement with global capitalism. Understanding COVID-19 as “a world historical force reshaping the intertwined futures of China and global capitalism,” Li Zhang attempts to go beyond conventional economic, political, or biomedical frameworks (p. 2). Instead, she argues that we must understand the origins of emerging diseases “with pandemic potentials” such as COVID-19 and SARS through a complex web of “state-making, science and technology, and global capitalism” (p. 3).

Following a chronological order, *The Origins of COVID-19* is organized into six chapters and ends with a short epilogue. In the prelude, Zhang briefly revisits the 2003 SARS outbreak and points out that the COVID-19 pandemic is distinct from SARS in terms of case number and scale of spread.

Identifying economic growth and modernity as the driving forces of China's national development, Zhang contends that they are also at the root of the COVID-19 pandemic and other potentially emerging diseases. Specifically, Zhang includes a fascinating discussion about zoonosis, a heated topic concerned with the possible origins of COVID-19 and other infectious diseases. Zhang meticulously traces the racist discourse about Chinese people's “exotic” and “revolting” dietary habits, the wildlife consumption markets in China, and the global networks of scientific investigations of animal vector-borne diseases, adding a much-needed environmental and human-animal perspective to our understanding of the pandemic (p. 11).

In the body of the book, Zhang tracks different stages of the COVID-19 outbreak in China, from its emergence in late 2019 to the declared victory in 2020 and its persistence in 2021. Chapter 2 looks at its initial appearance in late 2019 and the failure of the Wuhan local government to act promptly to prevent its further spread. Zhang also provides us

with two hypotheses of the possible origins of COVID-19—farmed wild animals as the intermediary for the spillover to humans or “a direct spillover from a host animal species (such as bats) to humans” (p. 39). Chapter 3 then turns to the public health emergency in January 2020 and traces the Chinese government’s initial cover-up of the outbreak, increasing public pressure, and later the State Council’s call for prompt disclosure of epidemic information to the public at the end of the month. This chapter highlights the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) government’s dilemma of mediating between quick responses and causing unnecessary public panic.

Chapter 4 continues to investigate the surge of COVID-19, which led to the lockdown of Wuhan and tight restrictions on traveling, business, and individual activities all over the country. The collapse of the public health care system in Wuhan aroused anxiety and social tensions in China and overseas. In addition, this chapter also includes brief accounts about several famous figures, including the controversial writer Fang Fang and her diary during the Wuhan lockdown, as well as Dr. Li Wenliang and the public uproar unleashed by his death, which placed pressure on the legitimacy of the CCP state and pushed the central government to discipline officials nationwide. Zhang thus warns us that China’s victory over the COVID-19 epidemic is “fraught with tension” (p. 100).

The last two chapters center on China’s declared victory and economic recovery from the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak, despite its persistence in 2021. In chapter 5, following the successful curb of the epidemic in China and quick spread in Western countries, particularly the United States, Zhang analyzes the “geopolitical football game” between the Chinese and the US governments of blaming each other, and the resulting nationalistic zeal and unwarranted conspiracy theories about the origins of the virus (p. 104). Looking at China’s economic recovery since March 2020, Zhang primarily attributes it to “the advancement of sur-

veillance technology and the overlap of consumerism with renewed investments and faith in modern science and technology” (p. 122). The final chapter examines the persistence of the disease, the continuing global geopolitical tensions, measures to drive economic recovery, and the global capitalist competition. In the epilogue, Zhang reinforces her argument about the significance of the structural conditions of global capitalism to our understanding of the pandemic and the possible lessons to be learned from the disease.

Overall, Zhang successfully brings in distinctive perspectives to make sense of the ongoing pandemic and crafts an impressively comprehensive and rich account of its different stages. One question to consider, however, might be her use of “global capitalism.” While global capitalism is the fundamental concept of her argument, Zhang fails to provide a clear definition and thorough historiography. It is thus unclear to the reader whether Zhang refers to neoliberalism, global consumerism, or simply globalization when she constantly calls for attention to the “structural conditions of global capitalism.” In addition, whereas Zhang believes that we can benefit from considering the conditions of global capitalism and its entanglement with state-making, science, and technology, it is uncertain what exactly the lessons are that she believes can help prevent the emergence of pandemic diseases in the future. That being said, this is still a great book that is timely, relevant, and meaningful to scholars of medicine and public health and general audiences still living through the pandemic.

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