

Contagion and Dissemination

An Immunological Reading of Chang Kuei-hsing's *Elephant Herd*

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STEVEN Soderbergh's 2011 film *Contagion* opens with an American executive named Beth (played by Gwyneth Paltrow), who has just returned home from a business trip to Hong Kong and Macau, suddenly collapsing and dying—but not before having infected several others with a novel virus she picked up on her trip. This virus proves to be highly contagious and lethal, and within days clusters of deaths are being reported around the world. It is determined that the virus contains a mix of genetic material from existing bat and pig viruses. There is a desperate multinational attempt to trace the origin of the virus and to find a cure—and it is ultimately revealed that Beth was the pandemic's "patient zero," having contracted the virus in a Macau restaurant. The film concludes with a flashback depicting bulldozers razing a grove of palm trees in southern China, which upends the natural habitat of local community of bats. One bat takes refuge in a nearby pig farm, where a piglet becomes infected with a bat virus, which in turn becomes hybridized with different virus carried by the piglet. This hybridized virus is then transferred Beth via a Macau chef who had just touched raw pork (Soderbergh 2011).

The film *Contagion* contains many of the elements that literary scholar Priscilla Wald, in her 2007 book *Contagious*, associates with what she calls the new "outbreak narrative" (Wald 2007). Wald argues that this narrative began to

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gain traction in the early 1990s under the shadow of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, as the number of emerging infectious diseases (understood as diseases caused either by newly discovered microbes, or by an existing microbe that have become more dangerous due to changing conditions) began to increase significantly, with over fifty major outbreaks caused by emerging infectious diseases since 1998. Wald notes that the emerging disease narrative tends to include an emphasis on a virus's origins in the Global South, a spillover event (in which the virus is transmitted from an animal population to humans), an index case (the first identifiable human infection), and human superspreaders (infected individuals who spread the virus to many others). While the narrative often reflects an anxiety that these outbreaks may present an existential threat to humanity, it also voices an underlying confidence in the North's ability to use its superior medical knowledge and technology to bring the pandemic under control. This outbreak narrative has become increasingly ubiquitous not only in cultural works like *Contagion* but also in journalistic coverage and scientific texts, and it has important implications for how people perceive infectious disease and a set of corresponding geopolitical concerns.

In particular, Wald contends that the outbreak narrative stresses the North's perception of its vulnerability to infectious diseases originating from the Global South, while sidestepping the North's own contributions to underlying conditions that facilitate the emergence of these same diseases in the first place. In this respect, Soderbergh's film not only provides a concise illustration of the dominant narrative itself, it also offers an implicit critique of that same narrative along the lines suggested by Wald. In tracing the origin of the outbreak not only to Beth's contact with the Macau chef but also to the earlier chain of events that led to the virus's transfer from animals to humans, the film underscores the global socioeconomic forces that helped make the outbreak possible. In particular, the final flashback sequence reveals that the bulldozers razing the palm tree grove in southern China actually belong to the company for which Beth works—suggesting that she indirectly contributed to the emergence of the virus that took her own life.

In the following discussion, I use Soderbergh's film—and specifically the socio-epidemiological narrative with which it engages—as an entry point into an analysis of Malaysian Chinese author Chang Kuei-hsing's 1998 novel *Elephant Herd* [*Qunxiang*]. Whereas *Contagion* emphasizes how the Global North is ravaged by a deadly virus originating from the Global South (in this case, an under-developed region in southern China), *Elephant Herd* instead suggests how a region in the Global South itself (in this case, the Malaysian state of Sarawak) is impacted by metaphorically infectious agents linked to a powerful nation directly to North (namely, China). Also, whereas in *Contagion* the infectious

agent is a fictitious virus, in *Elephant Herd* the corresponding element is Communism—and although the novel initially presents this Communist influence in a sympathetic light, I argue that it simultaneously articulates a set of local concerns about this influence and its ramifications.

Although Chang's novel was published in 1998, on the eve of China's twenty-first-century campaign to fortify its economic ties with Malaysia and other nations in Southeast Asia, the novel's main diegesis begins in late 1973, at a crucial turning point in Sarawak's multi-decade Communist insurgency. Chinese Communism had been an important influence in Sarawak since the 1940s, but it was only in early 1963, following the failure of the Brunei Revolt led by the North Kalimantan National Army (which sought overthrow the Sultan of Brunei, and opposed Brunei's proposed inclusion in the Malaysian Federation), that the Sarawak Communist Organization adopted a policy of armed insurrection. The resulting Communist insurgency officially lasted until a peace agreement was formally ratified in 1990, but the insurgency underwent a major shift in 1973 when a key leader, Bong Kee Chok, surrendered to the government, and many of his followers also laid down their arms. Even after Bong's surrender, pockets of Communist resistance persisted in Sarawak for another decade and a half, and Chang's novel revolves around one such pocket.

Finally, just as *Contagion* concludes with a flashback that offers an implicit critique of the ideological perspective on which the entire outbreak narrative is premised, *Elephant Herd* similarly ends with a plot twist that overturns some of the key assumptions upon which the preceding narrative had appeared to be grounded. That is to say, while the main body of the novel is set against a backdrop of a struggle between the Communist insurgency and government forces, in which the narrative seems to ally itself with the Communist insurgency, the conclusion instead foregrounds the significance of a third element that complicates the work's apparent sympathy for the insurgency. This final twist involves the status of Sarawak's indigenous peoples, and particularly the Iban ethnic group, whose interests and allegiances are distinct from those of both the Communists and the government forces—and suggests that even as the Communist forces were resisting what they perceived to be the coercive actions of both external imperial powers and Malaysia's own government forces, they were simultaneously ruthlessly exploiting Sarawak's indigenous people.

Migration and Dissemination

ELEPHANT HERD has a rather complex narrative structure, but the work's central plotline is actually quite straightforward. In December of 1973, the nineteen-year-old ethnically-Chinese protagonist Shi Shicai embarks on a

journey up the Rajang River, accompanied by his former high school classmate, Zhu Dezhong, who is a Chinese-speaking member of the indigenous Iban ethnic group. Shicai, who has just spent a year working in the town of Daluo after finishing high school, is searching for his uncle, Yu Jiatong, the leader of an underground Communist group that is now hiding deep in the rainforest. On their trip upriver, Shicai and Dezhong are delayed at one point because of weather and illness, so they stay for several days at Dezhong's family home—where Shicai is hosted warmly by Dezhong's family, and becomes rather attached to Dezhong's younger sister, Fadiya. Once the weather improves, Shicai and Dezhong continue their journey upriver, and they eventually find some troops from Yu Jiatong's brigade who agree to take Shicai to see his uncle (on the condition that Dezhong stay behind, given that he has no direct relationship with Yu Jiatong).

Shicai ultimately finds Jiatong in a small camp that also includes a cohort of friends and comrades. He stays in the camp for several months, and it is eventually revealed that his attempt to locate his uncle was driven not by a sense of kinship ties or ideological commitment to the Communist cause, but rather by a desire to kill his uncle in order to avenge his elder brothers, who all died under Jiatong's leadership. Although in the end Shicai finds himself unable to follow through with this plan, his friend Dezhong unexpectedly appears at the base camp and decapitates Jiatong himself. The media subsequently reports that Shicai and Dezhong killed the Communist leader together, and they split the bounty the government had offered for the Communist leader's head.

Interwoven with this main diegesis, however, is an intricate series of flashbacks that provide information about the history of Shicai's family and of the general region. For instance, we learn that Shicai's maternal and paternal grandfathers had worked together to clear an area in the Sarawak rainforest, where they built what would become the family house. First, however, they dug a pair of wells, from which they unearthed a number of Chinese artifacts, as well as the skeleton of a baby elephant. We learn that Shicai's (paternal) grandfather was an opium addict and compulsive gambler whom the family eventually had to lock up in a shed. Eventually the grandfather managed to escape from the shed, and then killed his wife by drowning her in one of the family's wells. Similarly, we learn that Shicai's nominal father was also a compulsive gambler, while his mother was a mute who could only quack like a duck. Shicai's father would often prostitute his own wife to settle his gambling debts, and consequently each of the mother's children—including Shicai, his four elder brothers, and his younger sister—had a different biological father. Eventually, Shicai's father goes insane, and the family has to lock him up in a shed as well, and in his delirium he develops a peculiar addiction to eating paper, to the point that even the faint scent of paper makes him delirious with hunger.

This family history, meanwhile, is interwoven with allusions to the history of the semiautonomous Malaysian state of Sarawak, which—together with the Malaysian state of Sabah, the Indonesian region of Kalimantan, and the autonomous nation of Brunei—is one of the territories that make up the island of Borneo. Sarawak was designated a British Crown Colony since 1946, having previously been a British protectorate since 1888 (with the exception of a three-and-a-half-year period during WWII when the territory was ceded to Japan). Sarawak then gained its independence from Britain in 1963, and almost immediately joined the newly-established state of Malaysia. Sarawak's decision to join Malaysia was opposed by the neighboring nations of the Philippines and Indonesia, as well as by the local (and predominantly ethnically-Chinese) Sarawak Communist Party (SCP), which had been an important force resisting the British during the final decades of the colonial period. Consequently, after Sarawak joined Malaysia in 1963, many members of the SCP fled to Kalimantan, in the Indonesian portion of Borneo, where they received military training from the Indonesia Communist Party (ICP). Two years later, in 1965, Indonesia suffered a military coup, whereupon approximately two thousand SCP troops returned from Kalimantan to Sarawak, where they established three armed divisions that continued to challenge the government for years.

Alluding to this earlier regional history, Chang's novel also features a fictionalized version of more recent historical events. In particular, the work describes how, when the SCP troops returned from Indonesia in 1965, they established three armed divisions known as the North Kalimantan People's Army, the Flame Mountain Brigade, and the Sarawak People's Guerrillas, each of which was composed of six to seven hundred soldiers. Shicai's uncle, Yu Jiatong, became the leader of the North Kalimantan People's Army, which he renamed the Yangtze River Brigade because Sarawak's Rajang River—where the brigade established its base camp—reminded him of China's Yangtze River. Each of Shicai's four elder brothers joined their uncle's brigade, but they were all killed in military skirmishes. As a result, the Shi family became famous in the region for the extraordinary sacrifice it had made to the Communist cause. In 1973, the leader of the Flame Mountain Brigade, signed a peace agreement with the local government. After signing the peace agreement, Wang Dada—who in the novel is Jiatong's former classmate, but who is clearly modelled on the historical Bong Kee Chok—encouraged his troops and the region's other Communist troops to surrender to the government. The vast majority of them did so, including many members of the Yangtze River Brigade. With this, the novel concludes, “the once-powerful Yangtze River Brigade effectively ceased to exist” (113).

The novel's diegesis, accordingly, reflects two overlapping sets of southern

movement. First, Shicai's family represents the multiple waves of migration from China to Southeast Asia, and although it is not clear when precisely his ancestors arrived in the region, the ancient Chinese artifacts that are excavated when Shicai's grandfathers are digging their wells point to a much longer history of Chinese presence in the region. Second, the family's relationship with the novel's fictionalized version of the North Kalimantan People's Army points to the mid-century dissemination of Communist ideology from China to the Southeast Asian region. This process began in the 1940s under the auspices of a Chinese vision of socialist internationalism, and it accelerated after the Sino-Soviet split in 1960. For China, this process of ideological dissemination allowed the country to maintain and strengthen its ties with Southeast Asia, while for the Southeast Asian nations and territories themselves the Communist presence was initially perceived as useful counterbalance to Western imperialism. After decolonization, however, these same Communist forces came to be regarded as a threat to the newly independent Southeast Asian nation states of Malaysia and Indonesia.

These twin processes of human migration and ideological dissemination intersect in the sense that, in the mid-century period, most of the members of these Communist groups in Southeast Asia were ethnically Chinese, though they often maintained complicated alliances with local groups, including members of the regions' indigenous populations. In Borneo, this relationship between Communist forces and indigenous peoples was particularly important given the sheer size of the indigenous population. Many of Borneo's indigenous peoples are classified under an umbrella group known as the Dayak, which includes a number of subgroups. One of the largest of these subgroups are the Iban, also known as Sea Dayaks—a name that dates back to a period when the Iban still practiced piracy. Approximately three-quarters of Borneo's Iban reside in what is now the state of Sarawak, where 40% of the total population are Dayak, 24% are ethnically Chinese, and another 24% are ethnically Malay. Of the Dayaks, meanwhile, the Iban are the largest subgroup, accounting for approximately 30% of the total Dayak population (“Indigenous Peoples and Ethnic Minorities in Sarawak,” 2018).

For Shicai and many of the novel's other ethnically Chinese characters, the impact of Chinese Communism is intertwined with longer legacy of Chinese cultural influence. In *Elephant Herd*, this cultural legacy is most clearly embodied by the character Shao An, known as Teacher Shao. Teacher Shao, we are told, was “a mysterious character, of indeterminate age” (120). He was born and grew up in China, where he attended college, but in the early 1940s he “moved south,” eventually working for a Sarawak newspaper. He was later driven from the press on account of his political leanings, after which he established a Chinese elementary school in the Sarawak town of Daluo. In 1962,

after the Brunei Revolt, he was arrested by the British colonial government and was repatriated to China, but in 1964 he managed to sneak back to Sarawak, where he became the general commander of the three newly-established Communist brigades. In 1968, after his health began to deteriorate, Teacher Shao returned to Beijing, but continued to direct Sarawak's Communist insurrection from a distance (120-121). After Wang Dada signed the peace treaty with the government, for instance, Teacher Shao published an anguished critique calling him a traitor and praising Yu Jiatong's refusal to compromise.

In addition to his high-level position within the Sarawak Communist Party, Teacher Shao also played an important role in disseminating Chinese culture to the community. For instance, while serving as the principal of elementary school in Daluo that Shicai attended, Teacher Shao would often hold open lectures on Chinese culture that were attended by several dozen locals. The novel describes several of these lectures, and although on the surface they do not appear to have any obvious connection to contemporary politics, the novel nevertheless notes that there were portraits of Marx, Stalin, and Mao hanging on the classroom wall:

When Teacher Shao lectured on Chinese cultural history, he always found time to introduce those same three great men whose portraits were hanging from the classroom's rear wall. The men had been abjectly relegated to a corner of the classroom, and their features were dark and indistinct—like clouds in an overcast sky, a mountain ridge covered in mist, or writing on a chalkboard that had yet not been wiped clean but which could disappear at any time. The portraits hung there surreptitiously—sometimes remaining in place for one or two weeks but other times disappearing without a trace for an entire week, like a temple's Buddha statue that has been borrowed to help support disaster relief. The boy knew that two of these great men were from Russia, while the third was from China. The one whose Chinese name began with “Ma” resembled a broken-legged captain of a whaling ship, the one whose Chinese name began with “Lie” resembled a bear-killing mastiff, while the one surnamed Mao resembled a dragon-slaying jade-faced god of war. (28)

The novel later cites and discusses several of Mao's poems—attributing them, in each instance, to the “jade-faced god of war.”

These intertwined emphases on Chinese culture and Communist ideology, moreover, were not directed only toward the region's ethnically Chinese residents. For instance, while Shicai is visiting Dezhong's home, he pays a visit to the local Chinese elementary and middle school that several of Dezhong's younger relatives attend. During his visit, Shicai is told that Yu Jiatong had

previously taken an interest in the school, and at one point had even attempted to change it to a Chinese school—though in the end he merely donated money to the school, to help them hire Chinese teachers to promote Chinese-language education. One of the school’s teachers adds,

There was also Communism. . . . [Yu Jiatong] gave the school several books by Marx, Lenin, and Mao Zedong. But we didn’t dare display them. Besides, what would be the point? How could the students possibly understand them? . . . (80)

Later, when Yu Jiatong and his comrades decided to relocate their base camp to a location deep in the rainforest, they resolved to take Teacher Shao’s original lecture hall, including its entire library, and transport it upriver. Accordingly, when Shicai arrives at the base camp, he finds an almost perfect recreation of the lecture hall he remembers from his youth:

The boy [Shicai] walked into the room, and felt as though he were returning to Teacher Shao’s living room. Three of the walls were covered in book cases, and on the fourth there was a blackboard. Several dilapidated wooden tables and chairs were piled up in the corner of the room. Mounted on the upper corners of the blackboard there were a pair of five-star and black-dragon flags, and below the flags there were three enormous portraits. Several Chinese calligraphy scrolls were hanging from the walls. The boy leafed through some of the books. The same calligraphy, the same books, the same photographs, and the same atmosphere—it was as if Teacher Shao’s entire Chinese culture pulpit had been transplanted here! The only difference was that here there were far fewer books, the scrolls and photographs were more indistinct, and the classroom and blackboard were larger than before. (115-116)

As will be discussed below, the irony is that Shicai’s discovery of this simulacrum of the lecture hall of his youth occurs in the context of a series of reversals that ultimately question—and even overturn—some of the ideological messages contained in those lectures themselves.

Elephants and Crocodiles

JUST as contemporary discussions of emerging infectious diseases tend to focus on the zoonotic origins of viruses (as reflected in the nicknames given to many of these novel diseases, such as swine flu, bird flu, camel flu, and so forth) and the environmental conditions that promote these sorts of human-animal contact,

Elephant Herd similarly offers a distinctive pair of animal-based plot-lines as a counterpoint to the work's discussion of Communist influence in the region.

The novel's two primary animal-based plotlines unfold in a region that is teeming with life. Borneo's rain forest is the world's third-largest rain forest, and the oldest forest (it is 130 million years old, which is twice as old as the Amazon's rain forest). It is also one of the most biodiverse regions on the planet—including countless species of flora and fauna that are endemic to the island (meaning that they do not exist live anywhere else) (Shoumatoff 2017). Reflecting the region's abundance of wildlife, the first few sentences of *Elephant Herd* contain references to an abundance of creatures, including snakes, lizards, dragonflies, butterflies, spiders, millipedes, scorpions, crabs, red-winged flies, scallion-green rain frogs, and assorted water fowl.

Chang's novel gives particular emphasis to two types of megafauna present in the region: a mysterious herd of elephants that have apparently been roaming the local rainforest for centuries, and a population of crocodiles that live in the Rajang River. Although the latter two species are, in fact, actually present in Sarawak, the novel nevertheless presents them in a rather impressionistic way, thereby inviting a metaphorical reading of their significance. Elephants, for instance, appear in the novel primarily as skeletal remains or refracted through legend, and Shicai repeatedly describes them as being "positioned at the interstices of reality and imagination" (102). Similarly, one of the novel's first allusions to crocodiles occurs in the description of how Shicai, when he was two years old, "first saw an alligator spit out a rainbow. The rainbow flickered between a grove of redwoods, then followed the fecund water vapor, oscillating between red and purple like a swarm of impetuous red locusts" (13).

If read as political metaphors, the novel's elephants and crocodiles offer two inverse perspectives on Sarawak's Communist forces. On one hand, the view of the legendary elephant herd as benevolent creatures that have been forced into the shadows by rapacious poachers mirrors the way in which the Communist forces are perceived by their supporters. On the other hand, the view of the crocodiles as ruthless killers reflects the way those same guerilla forces are perceived by the Sarawak authorities. Both of these perspectives on the Communist forces are present in the novel, but given that the Sarawak authorities are only described from a distance, it is the comparison of the Communists to benevolent elephants that would appear to accord most closely with the novel's own orientation.

For Shicai himself, meanwhile, the elephants and crocodiles have a very personal significance. On one hand, Shicai has a set of inchoate childhood memories of having once gone on a hunting trip with his uncle Yu Jiatong, his elder brothers, and several other men. Shicai fell ill during the trip and started

running a high fever, whereupon he had to be carried by his uncle. He vaguely recalls tumbling off of his uncle's back and falling into a deep ravine, but then being rescued by a "large, soft, tube-shaped object was lowered down from the top of the cliff and began sniffing him" (27). The boy recalls how this tube-shaped object "was wet and pliable, like a placenta, and it calmly lifted him up and placed him back on Yu Jiatong's back. The boy vaguely saw that this thing had a large body with four tower-like legs, a pair of thin ears resembling whale fins, and a long, funnel-shaped trunk that hung down to the ground, like a quiet summer tornado. Everything was jumbled together" (27). It was only afterwards that Shicai belatedly realized the true objective of the hunting expedition had not been the rather modest assortment of small animals and birds that the men had managed to catch, but rather a legendary herd of elephants that had been roaming the forests of Borneo for centuries.

On the other hand, Shicai was deeply traumatized after his three-year-old sister Junyi, whom he had been watching, was devoured by a crocodile. Shicai, who was eight at the time, was determined track down the crocodile and kill it. He asked Jiatong to help him, but Jiatong replied that it would be impossible to find the crocodile in question—and, furthermore, even if they did find the animal, it still wouldn't bring Junyi back. Therefore, Shicai stole his uncle's hunting rifle and tried to hunt down the crocodile himself. Nine days later, Jiatong found Shicai unconscious and half-dead in a tree deep in the rain forest.

In addition to Shicai's personal encounters with elephants and crocodiles, the novel also offers several detailed discussions of the historical and cultural origins of these two sets of creatures. For instance, with the respect to the origins of Sarawak's mysterious herd of elephants, the work offers a couple of different explanations:

By one account, in the year 326 India's King Potus had two hundred elephants, which carried archers to defend against Alexander the Great on the banks of the Hydaspes River. Later, King Potus gave six of these war elephants to the king of Brunei as a symbol of the friendship between the two countries, and in return the king of Brunei gave him countless rare birds and animals. The king of Brunei couldn't bear to keep the elephants in confinement, and therefore he set them free in Borneo's rainforest. These six individuals became inseparable, quickly producing a large herd that has survived up to the present day. . . . By another account, during one of the southern expeditions led by the Ming dynasty court eunuch Zheng He, the tributary gifts that Zheng He brought back from East Africa included numerous lions and elephants, leopards and rhinoceroses, great stags

and kingfishers, celestial horses and albino monkeys. When Zheng He stopped in Borneo, he exchanged some of his elephants for local peacocks, guinea fowl, wildcats, and other indigenous birds and animals. Because the elephants were difficult to domesticate, however, the Borneo locals eventually released them into the rainforest, where they developed into a large herd that roamed through the forest at will. Over the following centuries, the exigencies of the local environment and food sources led the elephants to evolve into a more diminutive size than their African ancestors. The dense and humid rainforest and rivers decreased their need for large ears to dissipate heat, and consequently their ears became smaller as well. (31-32)

Irrespective of the herd's precise origins, it appears that over time they become the object of poachers, who hunted them for their tusks. As a result, over time the size of the herd was significantly reduced and the elephants became adept at hiding in the shadows, virtually invisible to the island's human residents.

Paralleling these descriptions of Sarawak's elephants, the novel also gives considerable attention to the crocodiles that populate the Rajang River. For instance, there is a lengthy flashback describing how Shicai, when he was six, once attended a community lecture in which Teacher Shao introduced a number of passages on crocodiles, alligators, and dragons taken from canonical Chinese texts. Teacher Shao then explained that,

According to paleometeorologists, before the Xia and Shang dynasties the climate of China's Central Plains region was similar to that of the Asian tropics, and this was particularly true of the middle and lower portions of the Yellow River and the corresponding alluvial fan region. This region was full of swamps and wetlands, with high humidity and heavy rainfall, and dense forests that were conducive to both herbivores and carnivores—thereby providing crocodiles with ideal living conditions. From the bones excavated from Yinxu, near the Yellow River, archeologists discovered tropical animals such as elephants, rhinoceroses, and bamboo rats. Abundant evidence reveals that in antiquity salt-water crocodiles were abundant in China's South Sea, East Sea, and Bohai Sea, as well as the alluvial regions of the Yangtze, Huai, and Yellow Rivers. A large number of crocodile fossils have been unearthed in the Fen River watershed in Shanxi, and these archeological discoveries are corroborated by the pictures of crocodiles that can be found inscribed on many ancient Chinese jade, porcelain, and bronze artifacts, on stone chimes and on

drums, bells, and silk paintings. Why are images of crocodiles so abundantly featured on these sorts of artifacts? (19-20)

Despite Shicai's distinctly negative personal associations with crocodiles, accordingly, Teacher Shao's lectures underscore the intimate links between crocodiles and China's legendary dragons.

The relationship between the novel's elephants and crocodiles, on one hand, and corresponding visions of Sarawak's Communist forces, on the other, is complicated after Shicai arrives at Yu Jiatong's Communist base camp. There, Shicai makes two sets of discoveries that effectively upend the apparent metaphorical significance the novel had previously appeared to assign to region's elephants and crocodiles.

First, Shicai observes that next to the camp there is a suspension bridge over a river full of crocodiles, and every day Yu Jiatong tosses several live ducks and chickens from the bridge down to the crocodiles in the river. This practice is particularly notable given that the camp's humans are not themselves not permitted to eat the camp's own livestock, and instead they have to rely on whatever wild game they manage to hunt. In fact, in the past, when the camp's livestock were more plentiful, Jiatong would feed the crocodiles one or two pigs and more than a dozen chickens and ducks every day. Jiatong, moreover, repeatedly alludes to how he would like to feed his enemies—and particularly the former rebel leader Wang Dada—to the crocodiles, implying that he views the crocodiles as an extension of his own rebel forces.

Second, at the base camp Shicai also discovers a large trove of elephant tusks, as well as a photograph of his uncle posing with a rifle on his shoulder and his foot resting on the rump of a recently-killed bull elephant. On the back of the photograph is an inscription that reads, "July 18, 1971, at 3:11 in the afternoon, at the headwaters of the Rajang River, on the border of Sarawak and Indonesia, I successfully hunted my first pair of elephant tusks. Isn't it delightful?" (116). From this photograph, Shicai belatedly realizes that the true objective of his uncle's earlier elephant expeditions had been not to merely verify the existence of the legendary elephant herd, but instead to kill the elephants and collect their tusks.

Whereas up to this point the novel had appeared to be generally supportive of Yu Jiatong's Communist insurgents (mirroring the work's positive characterization of the region's mysterious herd of wild elephants) and had appeared to be critical of the government's perception of the insurgents as dangerous killers (mirroring the work's negative characterization of the region's population of wild crocodiles), Shicai's discoveries at the base camp complicate these earlier metaphorical associations. That is to say, the suggestion that the

elephants functioned a stand-in for the work's sympathetic attitude toward the Communist rebels is complicated by the revelation that Jiatong and his soldiers have been ruthlessly hunting these elephants for profit. Conversely, the suggestion that the crocodiles symbolize the government's antagonist attitude toward the rebels is complicated by the revelation that Jiatong and his soldiers have been raising a population of wild crocodiles at their base camp, and even prioritizing them over the human rebels themselves. The implication of these twin revelations, accordingly, is that the Communist rebels are figuratively allied with the blood-thirsty crocodiles, and against the sympathetic elephants.

The full implications of this double reversal, meanwhile, are not developed until a final revelation at the end of Shicai's stay at the Communist base camp. As discussed below, the latter revelation involves an unexpected reappearance of Dezhong, together with a plot twist that complicates the political orientation that the work had appeared to adopt up to this point.

Heads and Beheadings

IN the inscription on the back of the photograph that Shicai discovers at the base camp, Yu Jiatong refers to slaughtering an elephant at the "river's headwaters" [Jiangyuantou]. Actually, just as the novel had followed Shicai's and Dezhong's trip toward the river's "headwaters," the entire work revolves around a focus on "heads" and beheadings. For instance, there is a discussion of Shicai's second-eldest brother being killed and decapitated by local Yiban warriors, after which Shicai "fantasized about taking his brother's bloody head and using his brother's tender and affectionate lips to give the girls who admired him a kiss goodbye" (63). Conversely, when Shicai's third-eldest brother was about to be executed by Huang Wenting, the leader of one of Sarawak's other Communist brigades, the brother had pleaded with his captors, "Please don't shoot me in the head, but rather in the heart. . . . My head contains a bit of knowledge, and in the next life I'll still be able to devote it to the Communist Party" (86). Some of the novel's most extended discussion of heads and beheadings, however, involves the Iban, who were legendary headhunters. For instance, while Shicai is visiting Dezhong's home, he notices a string of desiccated human heads, and Dezhong explains, "My ancestors fought for freedom and dignity, and in the process they chopped off quite a few Englishmen's heads. . . . Many of the field troops were Chinese and Malays, and some of their heads are here as well" (97-98).

These twin themes of political decapitation and Iban head-hunting, meanwhile, come together during Shicai's visit to the Communist base camp in the latter portion of the novel. At one point during the visit, Jiatong's former lieutenant Ma Guoxiong arrives and takes Shicai hostage—attempting to use him

as collateral to force Jiatong to surrender to the government, so that Ma could then collect the bounty the authorities were offering for Jiatong's head. Ma's attempt fails, but afterwards Jiatong reveals to Shicai that he has known all along that Shicai plans to kill him and collect the government bounty for himself. Yu Jiatong then observes that if anyone is entitled to kill him, it would be Shicai, given the devastating losses that Shicai's family has already suffered under Yu Jiatong's leadership.

In the end, however, Jiatong is executed not by Shicai but rather by Dezhong. It turns out that after the Yangtze River Brigade troops agreed to take Shicai to see Jiatong, Dezhong had secretly followed them to the base camp anyway. He then kept watch over the camp for months, and on multiple occasions had the opportunity to kill Jiatong, but had initially wanted to give Shicai the opportunity to do so. Finally, one day, after Shicai and Jiatong had been drinking, Dezhong snuck in and decapitated Jiatong. Dezhong subsequently explains that he had known all along that Shicai intended to kill his uncle, because when Shicai was staying at Dezhong's home he repeatedly alluded to this plan while drunk.

Shicai then asks Dezhong whether he killed Jiatong for the government bounty, to which Dezhong replies,

Yes . . . Our people will find that very helpful. That is one of the reasons. The Communist Party encouraged our people to the armed struggle, but used us a human shield and provided us with only the most inferior equipment. . . . They married our women, in order to realized their ambitions. (205-206)

Although this is the first time that the novel explicitly articulates this Iban critique of Yu Jiatong and, more generally, of Sarawak's Communist insurgency, there had been earlier hints of this underlying sense of resentment. For instance, during Shicai's visit to the school near Dezhong's home, one of the teachers tells Shicai that his uncle "didn't devote himself enough to doing ethnic work" (80).

Moreover, even when Jiatong himself is telling Shicai about his "ethnic work," there is a certain ambivalence in his own description. During Shicai's visit to the Communist base camp, for instance, as Jiatong is discussing the death of Shicai's eldest brother, who had married an Iban woman before he died, Jiatong remarks,

Ethnic work. . . . has always been the most important aspect of our process of organizing struggle, and also our greatest failure. I always wanted to expand our organization to include aboriginal nationalities, so that we could then mobilize them to participate in the struggle. . . . Our learning aboriginal language and encouraging

mixed Han-Aboriginal marriages are among the best means of helping the aborigines establish themselves. Therefore, I encouraged our troops to marry aboriginal women—not to mention the fact that there were very few female comrades in the brigade, and I didn't want to see our troops have to remain single their entire lives as they fought for revolution. (150-151)

Despite Jiatong's advocacy here of mixed marriages here, he later mentions that he has heard that Shicai has developed a good relationship with Dezhong's sister:

I hear that you and the younger sister of that Aborigine have developed a good relationship . . . Chinese-Aboriginal marriages are merely one option . . . You are the only remaining descendent of the Shi clan, so don't let the Aborigine's dirty, colored skin stain your pure, yellow skin. (173)

The implication is not that Jiatong has failed to carry out his "ethnic work" deeply enough, but rather that his underlying vision of what constitutes ethnic work in the first place is itself deeply conflicted. However, it is precisely in his advocacy that Shicai must retain his ethnic purity, that Jiatong inadvertently reveals the contradictory nature of his own political ideology.

Ultimately, it is Dezhong who articulates those contradictions most clearly, when he observes that Jiatong and the Communist movement have been using the Iban for their own advantage. Importantly, however, Dezhong's critique does not align with the government's anxieties about the Communist insurrection, and instead the essence of his critique could also be directed to the government itself. The Iban first moved into the region that is now Sarawak in the 1600s, but ever since the mid-nineteenth century they have been subject to multiple regimes of colonial control—and although the process of nation-formation in the 1960s was generally viewed as a process of decolonization, for the Iban and the region's other indigenous peoples, it arguably amounted to an extension of colonialism by other means. As a result, the Iban other indigenous peoples subsequently found themselves in a state of what Juno Salazaar Parreñas, in her study of Sarawak orangutang rehabilitation efforts, calls "arrested autonomy," which she defines as "arrested decolonization in the face of ongoing colonialism when colonialism is supposed to be over. It is the frustration of having the means intended to foster independence instead work toward continued dependence" (23).

Like the flashback at the end of *Contagion*, accordingly, Dezhong's assassination of Yu Jiatong at the end of *Elephant Herd*, combined with his tacit critique of Iban's condition of arrested autonomy, effectively overturns the ideological narrative that had appeared to dominate the main body of the work

itself. It expresses a perspective that, up to this point, had been largely hidden, overshadowed by the work's apparent focus on a set of false dichotomies of Communist vs. government forces, elephants vs. crocodiles.

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ABSTRACT

Taking inspiration from Priscilla Wald’s analysis of an influential contemporary “outbreak narrative”—and specifically a set of narratives that place the spread of infectious disease within a set of implicit North-South oppositions—this essay examines how Chang Kuei-hsing’s 1998 novel *Elephant Herd* (*Qunxiang*) characterizes the spread of Communist ideology and influence in Sarawak. In particular, this essay proposes that the novel uses two types of animals, elephants and crocodiles, to present two very different attitudes toward the region’s Communist guerilla fighters. Over the course of the novel, the characterization of each of these two sets of animals—as well as of the guerilla fighters themselves—is strategically inverted.

KEYWORDS: Chang Kuei-hsing, *Elephant Herd* (*Qunxiang*), contagion, Global South, Communist insurgency

傳染與傳播

對張貴興《羣象》的免疫解讀

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摘 要

普里西拉·沃爾德(Priscilla Wald)在其著作《感染》(Contagion)中，對於當代具影響力的「爆發敘事」進行一系列的分析。本文受到其分析的啟發，特別是一套將傳染病的傳播置於一系列隱含在南北對立中的敘述，進而研究在臺馬華作家張貴興一九九八年的長篇小說《羣象》如何描述砂拉越共產主義思想的影響和傳播。這篇論文指出，小說用大象和鱷魚這兩種動物來表徵砂拉越共產黨游擊隊戰士兩種截然不同的態度，而在敘述過程中，動物與游擊隊戰士這兩組刻劃對象的角色巧妙地易位。

關鍵詞：張貴興、《羣象》、傳染、全球南方、共產黨動亂

