

China and COVID-19: Assessing a State's Image Repair Strategies in a Global Crisis

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Abstract On 31 December 2019, China reported the emergence of a cluster of pneumonia of unknown cause in the city of Wuhan in the province of Hubei. As the novel disease turned into a global pandemic, China had to face a serious damage to its portrayed image of a responsible global power. Combining Benoit's Image Repair Theory (IRT) with a contextual framework singling out cultural, societal and political variables that influence Chinese Communication Strategies (CCSs), the article pioneers the analysis of strategies adopted to respond to public image's threats by adding an explicative nuance to their selection and reception.

Keywords China. COVID-19. Image repair. Crisis management. Chinese communication strategies. Diplomacy.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Image Repair Theory. – 3 Image Repair in Context: National and Trans-national Dimensions. – 3 Method and Data. – 4 Between Wet Markets and Whistleblowers: Denial, Evasion of Responsibility, Corrective Action and Compensation in the Early Response to the Outbreak of Covid-19. – 5 Crisis Containment: Transcendence and Bolstering of the Image of the Efficient Crisis Manager and Leader Committed to Global Governance. – 6 Fake News and Wolf Warrior Diplomacy: A Changing Chinese Public Diplomacy. – 7 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

On 31 December 2019, China reported to the WHO a number of cases of pneumonia of unknown origin in the city of Wuhan in Hubei's Province. Over a short period of time, the novel severe acute respiratory syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) spread across countries and provoked a global pandemic that has caused more than 5 million deaths so far. With the first epicentre of the infection located in Wuhan, China had to face accusations of early mishandling with damage to its projected image of a responsible and credible global power. With the aim of uncovering China's strategies to restore its reputation, the paper investigates China's response to public image threats in the aftermath of the outbreak of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) and during the first wave of the pandemic. In so doing, we rely on Benoit's Image Repair Theory (IRT) to single out which communication strategies Beijing selected to project a positive image. While IRT has been primarily applied to companies and individuals, it has gradually focused on states. As any actor retains that "maintaining a favourable impression is an important goal in interaction" (Benoit 2014, 306), states are not exempt from the felt need to cleanse their reputation through discourse when facing blame, criticism and complaints (307). Notwithstanding the importance of public image for states, most image repair research has revolved around American crises. According to Benoit (2014), studies of image repair occurring in other countries and studies of image repair "that cross borders, involving a clash of cultures" represent important contributions to the literature (87). An investigation of China's response to the spread of COVID-19 contributes to a growing literature on non-Western powers' image repair strategies in case of natural and man-made crises. Scholars have, indeed, resorted to IRT to investigate China's response to the SARS epidemic in 2003 (Zhang, Benoit 2009; d'Hooghe 2015), the Wenchuan earthquake (d'Hooghe 2015) and the 'Made in China' controversies in 2007 and 2008 (d'Hooghe 2015; Peijuan, Ting, Pang 2009). Furthermore, studies on crisis communication strategies have mostly focused on contextual variables such as crisis type and responsibility and they have often neglected the crucial role played by the cultural and political context in influencing communication strategies and their effectiveness (Huang et al. 2016, 203). Taking into consideration the political, cultural and societal context, this article aims to add a more explicative nuance to IRT analysis by suggesting causal inferences on how contextual factors influence strategies selection and effectiveness.

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The article is structured in five parts. In the first and second sections, we illustrate IRT key theoretical tenets and the contextual framework. Once the methodology is clarified, the subsequent three sections offer an empirical analysis of China's strategies in each crisis phase. However, a distinction between the stages of early warning and response, containment and mitigation, and management is not stringent, as the latest crisis management models envisage an often overlapping rather than linear succession of crisis phases. Finally, the article concludes with a summary of the main findings.

2 Image Repair Theory

Image repair discourse, as a sub-category of crisis communication, consists of messages aimed at improving image damage caused by criticism and suspicion (Benoit 2015, 304). As a state's favourable image has been traditionally associated with soft power, conceived as "the ability to affect others to obtain the outcome one wants through attraction rather than coercion and payment" (Nye 2008, 94), image constitutes an essential part of a state's strategic equity (Van Ham 2008, 3). It follows that states will adopt image repair messages to address responsibility and offensiveness, which are the two key components of an unfavourable state's image (Benoit 2015). In order to reject blame or reduce the perceived offensiveness of the action, Benoit (2015) provides a 'tool-box' of five image repair strategies.

The first strategy - denial - comprises the sub-strategies of either denying the performance of the act or shifting the blame of the act to another actor.

The second strategy - evasion of responsibility - consists of four tactics: provocation by response to the act of another actor, defeasibility caused by lack of information or ability, accident determined by a mishap and good intentions emphasising how the actor meant well.

The third strategy - reducing offensiveness of the event - comprises six sub-forms. Firstly, bolstering by stressing good traits. Secondly, minimization based on reducing the severity of the act. Thirdly, differentiation through a presentation of the act as less offensive compared to similar acts. Fourthly, transcendence by justifying the act in view of the protection of more important values. Fifthly, attack accuser by reducing its credibility. Sixthly, compensation envisaging the reimbursement of victims.

The fourth action is corrective action by planning to solve/prevent the recurrence of a problem. Finally, the fifth strategy is mortification best expressed by apologies.

As any form of strategic communication is aimed at influencing the behaviour of others, audiences are key in IRT. Benoit (2015) underlines that image repair deals with perceived threats retained to

reduce the actor's reputation in the eyes of crucial groups or audiences (307). The fact that audiences possess incomplete knowledge and different priorities and values entail that people often have different perceptions of an actor (309), thus envisaging the possibility that image repair efforts might not yield comparable homogenous effects. However, IRT gives little theoretical direction on strategies selection and reception. While conforming to the mostly descriptive nature of IRT, the article introduces a contextual framework to provide some explicative nuance to the analysis of China's strategies and their effectiveness to win audiences' hearts and minds.

3 Image Repair in Context: National and Trans-National Dimensions

Scholars have singled out "the 'context' in a given country as the significant factor that can influence communication in the country" (Low, Varughese, Pang 2011, 105). Hence, socio-cultural and political factors influence strategies' selection, so that we can talk of an "indigenization of crisis response strategies" (Pang, Hu 2018) or emerging Chinese public relations practices (Huang et al. 2016). In order to operationalise the complexity of the 'context', the research builds on the national and cultural context variables drawn from the state of research, while not ruling out the possibility to rely on context factors in a more explorative way (Schwarz, Seeger, Auer 2016, 3). In so doing, the research largely builds on the analytical framework elaborated by Huang et al. (2016) encompassing cultural and political contextual variables at the societal level that influence China Communication Strategies (CCSs) and their effectiveness (203).

Starting with the cultural context, Huang et al. (2016) suggest that Confucianism plays a crucial role in CCSs (203). Confucianism's emphasis on hierarchical authority, the legitimation of asymmetries in power and wealth and the focus on order and harmony contribute to explain some nuances in CCSs (Huang et al. 2016). The Confucian depiction of five classes of superior roles, each of these serving the role of 'father figure' to all the orders or roles beneath it structured power and authority relations giving rise to a patriarchal political culture that endures in Modern China (Huang et al. 2016, 203). Confucianism's focus on harmony has contributed to China's collectivistic culture in which the 'We' prevails over the 'I' identity (Hofstede 1984 quoted by Zhu et al. 2017, 488). The emphasis on harmony and belongingness influences CCSs as the government relies on the collective interest to express positions, make decisions and frame crises within the "national security" interest (Huang et al. 2016, 209). The preservation of a sense of harmony entails that Chinese communication also privileges the avoidance of direct confrontation (Ting-

Toomey 1999 quoted by Zhu et al. 2017, 488) and maintains an attitude that “the ugly things in the family do not go public” (Zhu et al. 2017, 488). If avoiding, obliging, and compromising communication styles are preferred (Cheng, Lee 2019), predominant strategies comprise prohibitions on reporting, deception, no comment and ‘face saving’ (Zhu et al. 2017, 488). This practice of “saving face for oneself and giving face to others, coupled with narrow obedience to the collective agenda, only intensifies the tendency to cover up a crisis situation” (Huang et al. 2016, 209). The idea of harmony can also be traced in the Chinese ‘Golden Mean’ approach defined as what is “half way between two extremes” (Ma 1988 quoted by Huang et al. 2016, 209). The philosophy of the ‘Golden Mean’ leads to a tendency of people conforming to the majority opinion (Ma 1988 quoted by Huang et al. 2016, 209), being more tolerant of contradictions and maintaining a soft attitude towards conflicts’ resolution (Huang et al. 2016, 209). It follows that avoidance of ‘extreme’ tactics such as attacking accusers and public apologising are common themes in Chinese crisis communication (Huang, Wu, Cheng 2016 quoted by Zhu et al. 2017, 488).

Cultural variables have influenced the political system. Confucianism’s focus on order, hierarchy, and a vertical exercise of power has married well with the Communist political system. Huang et al. (2016, 209) reveal that the Chinese Communist Party is still the most important organisation in China (203). During crises, the government plays the role of a patriarch with a symbolic responsibility to protect its “children” (209) and, in so doing, it has the power to intervene in the affairs of local governments, NGOs and corporations (203), but also mass media. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) owns the majority of mass media outlets and exerts control over all media (203). When facing a crisis, the government’s attitude to suppress uncertainty or instability contributes to the failure of crisis communication (209). While a collectivist logic to preserve a positive national image is at play in crisis communication, factors inherent to the hierarchical structure of the Chinese society also play a role. The central government exerts a great control and power over the allocation of personnel and resources to local governments (209). As the central government assesses the performance of local governments based on the severity of a crisis (209), local administrations tend to withhold or downplay information about crises (Huang, Leung 2005 quoted by Huang et al. 2016, 209). This highly hierarchical structure entails that central-local responses to crises often lack in transparency, promptness and flexibility.

When we incorporate contextual variables in the analysis of a country’s IRSs in a global crisis, the national dimension has to be coupled with a transnational dimension. China’s image repair strategies have been directed to both domestic and external audiences. While cultural, societal and political factors may influence strate-

gies' selection, the same is also true for their reception. In its efforts to repair its national image, China has dealt with Western countries where different cultural, societal and political variables affect response to IRSs. Without delving into a detailed analysis of Western cultural and political dimensions, we focus on a few cultural and geopolitical factors. Firstly, Western countries stand on the opposite side of the cultural and social spectrum. China is a high context culture, where members are deeply involved with one another, social hierarchies are strong, and individual self-control is high (Low et al. 2011, 221). On the contrary, Western countries are embedded in a low context culture, where individualism is high, individuals are less engaged with other members of the society and there are less social hierarchies (221). Elaborating on Hofstede's cultural dimensions, Low et al. (2011) reveal divergences between Asian and Western societies. According to the three scholars, Asian societies are oriented towards respect for tradition, fulfilment of social obligations, a higher acceptance of the unequal distribution of power and high uncertainty avoidance. On the contrary, Western societies are generally less tolerant of power inequalities, favour direct communication and show lower risk aversion. Beyond cultural and societal differences, an analysis of China IRSs cannot be devoid from the wider geopolitical scenario. The crisis emerged in a confrontational stage in U.S. - China relations. Since the beginning of the USA - China trade war in 2018, strategic competition between the two powers has stiffened. In this context, the EU has been fluctuating between the two powers, cooperating with China on trade while being wary of China foreign direct investments and its *'divide et impera'* inclination towards the EU. Geopolitical dynamics will clearly emerge in our analysis of China's IRSs directed to Western countries.

4 Method and Data

The research follows a qualitative research approach based on document analysis. Notwithstanding the fact that IRT studies mainly rely on rhetorical analysis, the selection of document analysis is based on considerations concerning the scope, object and nature of this research. Document analysis is a consolidate methodological approach in historical, cross-cultural and policy analysis research (Bowen 2009; Karppinen, Moe 2012). Given the growing and potential further application of document analysis to communication studies and political science, the approach is appropriate to research that is located at the crossroads of the two disciplines. Document analysis also suits a case study research design where the object of investigation consists in key events and/or a specific time frame (Karppinen, Moe 2012, 258). Departing from a broad concept of documents as "written or audio-visual remains

not produced or generated by the researcher" (Syvertsen 2004 quoted by Karppinen, Moe 2012, 180), we approach documents as 'sources' that can reveal the interests and intentions of their authors, uncover political interests or forces behind policy processes (Karppinen, Moe 2012, 180-5). Although the research mainly approaches documents as sources following a mostly descriptive approach, it keeps in consideration that documents are not neutral. Even when they perform a descriptive function, documents exert a "rhetorical function to legitimize political actions" (Karppinen, Moe 2012, 186). Hence, the use of documents as sources also entails some form of textual analysis (185-6) as the researcher is called to reflect on the intentions of the authors and to be aware of the social context surrounding the document (186). Far from lining up excerpts to support a researcher's idea, document analysis entails an iterative process of skimming, reading and interpreting documents to produce empirical knowledge (Bowen 2009, 32-4).

When doing document analysis, the researcher is confronted with the problem of sources' selection. Considering the highly sensitive and politicised nature of the crisis object of study, there are limitations in terms of low retrievability and biased selectivity of documents (Bowen 2009, 32). In order to contain flaws in data selection, we have opted for a wide array of written and audio-visual material in English diffused by Chinese and Western sources. Considering primary sources as documents produced by actors directly involved in the process under consideration (Karppinen, Moe 2012), we include WHO's press statements and reports, Chinese and Western political leaders and government officers' official statements, including comments on Twitter, transcripts of press conferences and transcripts of interviews to Chinese and international media outlets. Secondary sources comprise articles from Chinese state-run and international newspapers, transcripts of Chinese and international news broadcasting, Chinese independent blogs, international scholarly blogs and international not governmental research institutes' analyses, surveys and polls. The research also consistently draws on international and Chinese scholarly literature on public health, diplomacy and public relations.

Referring to a two-level document analysis adopted by Shen (2016; 2018), the study conducts an analysis and synthesis of secondary sources to place strategies in a historical and political context. Building on insights gained from this first step, the analysis integrates primary sources. This method has been successfully applied to studies on Chinese policies and strategies (Shen 2016; 2018; Hong 2017) as it suits research that examines a plan's major principles and goals, policies aimed at achieving such goals, the role of specific targets and the "interweaving links between text and the political-economic contexts" (Hong 2017, 1756). While such a document analysis might lack the rigour of a systematic empirical analysis, its flexibility suits the broad object and scope of the research. As the study aims to offer an overview

of China's strategies selection and reception, the method allows for the location and analysis of main facts or trends (Witkin, Altschuld 1995 quoted by Pershing 2002, 36), the identification of the links between contexts and strategies and the inclusion of diverse target audiences.

Having outlined the key theoretical tenets and method guiding the research, we proceed with an empirical analysis of Beijing's IRSs.

5 Between Wet Markets and Whistleblowers: Denial, Evasion of Responsibility, Corrective Action and Compensation in the Early Response to the Outbreak of COVID-19

China communicated the emergence of cases of pneumonia of unknown origin to the WHO on 31 December 2019. The following day, the WHO requested further information from national authorities to assess the risk (WHO 2020a). The Chinese government assured that all patients were isolated and receiving treatment in Wuhan medical institutions and response measures comprising close contacts follow-up, pathogen identification, retrospective investigation and environmental sanitation had been put in place (WHO 2020a). Reports revealed a link with a Wuhan's fish and live animal market that could indicate an exposure to animals (WHO 2020a) and the market was closed down on 1 January 2020. Although the first laboratory-confirmed patient had no link with the market (Wu et al. 2020, 218), 66% of 41 patients admitted to a designated hospital in Wuhan on 2 January had been exposed to Huanan market (Huang et al. 2020).

Wet markets, traditional markets serving fresh food retail occasionally offering the sale of wildlife, are often identified as unique epicentres for transmission of viral pathogens given the proximity of animals to humans (Woo et al. 2006). Furthermore, experts believed the virus likely came from bats through an intermediary animal in the same way that another coronavirus causing the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2002 passed from horseshoe bats to cat-like civets before infecting humans (Readfearn 2020). As the spread of SARS was linked to wet markets, international audiences started to question China's adoption of effective food safety standards and health regulations and to contest authorities' complicity with illegal wildlife trafficking. Although no conclusive evidence points the finger at wet markets, the international spotlight on wet markets represented the first blow to China's image. In a matter of weeks, Western media indulged in a portrayal of wet markets as:

chaotic versions of oriental bazaars, lawless areas where animals that should not be eaten are sold as food, and where what should not be mingled comes together. (Lynteris, Fearnley 2020, 3)

Lynteris and Fearnley (2020) correctly contend that Western imagery of wet markets is often marked by Orientalism, as most wet markets only offer a small selection of live animals mostly farmed in captivity. However, this might not apply to Wuhan's markets, where a wide variety of traded and caught wild species capable of hosting a number of infectious diseases were sold alive, caged, stacked and held in poor condition (Xiao et al. 2021). Images of wildlife suffering poor welfare and hygiene conditions diffused on global media. China reacted to growing accusations by declaring a temporary ban of the sale and consumption of wildlife in late January. On 24 February, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, or China's top legislature, adopted a decision to ban the illegal trading of wildlife and eliminate the consumption of wild animals to safeguard people's lives and health (*Xinhua* 2020b). Starting from the ban of illegal wildlife trade, legislation safeguarding wildlife flourished with tougher oversight of illegal wildlife trade via e-commerce and a ban of wildlife hunting and breeding in certain Chinese municipalities.

In observance of IRT insights, China opted for corrective actions with the adoption of preventive measures to avoid the recurrence of a crisis. Some Western audiences are still upset by regulations containing a number of loopholes, such as wild animals' consumption for unspecified traditional Chinese medicine purposes. However, China's communication on the adoption of new measures alleviated accusations, because it signalled willingness to address the potential triggers of a crisis, but it also communicated a move away from China's culture of traditional wildlife exploitation (Xiao et al. 2021).

However, wet markets did not represent the only challenge that China had to face in the early days of the disease's outbreak in Wuhan. On 5 January, the WHO released its first Disease Outbreak News containing the latest information and risk assessment. In the official statement, the WHO deemed information available to be too limited to determine the overall risk of the disease and the organisation opted for recommending the adoption of public health measures and surveillance of influenza and severe acute respiratory infections, but advised against the application of any travel or trade restriction to China (WHO 2020a). While Chinese authorities showed a cooperative attitude in their effort to adopt reactive measures and provide updated information, conflicting information on the outbreak of the disease and its epidemiology started to circulate. Scientists revealed that the disease onset of the first laboratory-confirmed case of COVID-19 infection was on 1 December in Wuhan and the subsequent cases started on 10 December (Wu et al. 2020, 218). Within a short time frame, a burst of cases spread from Wuhan to the whole Hubei Province and reached other cities and provinces, probably profiting from the intense transportation load on occasion of the upcoming Chinese Lunar New Year on 25 January (218-19).

On 30 December 2019, Dr. Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist at Wuhan Central Hospital, informed his medical school alumni group on the Chinese social media WeChat that seven people from a local seafood market showed SARS-like symptoms and they were quarantined in his hospital in Wuhan (Bociurkiw 2020). In collectivistic China, risk-related content is likely to circulate in a social network, as information assumes more credibility because of its endorsement by people contacts (Zhu et al. 2017, 488). In spite of the private character of the conversation, Dr. Li was summoned to the Public Security Bureau in Wuhan and pushed to sign a statement acknowledging the making of false statements that disturbed the public order (Green 2020). Once released, he went back to his hospital and was later diagnosed with the novel coronavirus at the end of January. A week later, Chinese media reported Dr. Li's death and popular rage sparked on social media. The news gained approximately 1.5 billion views and hashtags such as "Wuhan government owes Dr. Li Wenliang an apology" and "We want freedom of speech" became popular (*BBC News*, 7 February 2020). Chinese authorities erased most messages (*BBC News*, 7 February 2020) and posts calling for action (Yu 2020), while the Internet police tracked down critics to interrogate and force them to sign loyalty pledges for words often exchanged in private group chats (Mozur 2020). This is a common practice in China, where the President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping has enhanced the party's role throughout society (Fewsmith 2021) and surveillance of the population has continuously intensified (Tang 2016 quoted by Fewsmith 2021, 279). In so doing, the government often applies content censorship to stop criticism and discussions that could generate collective actions against governments (Cairns, Carlson 2016). Facing the risk of fuelling even greater criticism over lack of freedom of speech and authorities' crisis mismanagement, Beijing's best option was to jump on the bandwagon of national mourning and demand of responsibilities. On 7 February, the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee approved the National Supervisory Commission's decision to delegate an inspection group to Wuhan to investigate issues related to Dr. Li Wenliang (*Xinhua* 2020a). The investigative team arrived in Wuhan the following day. On 19 March, the investigation report was released. In a statement to the state-run news outlet *Xinhua*, an official in charge of the investigation revealed that "Li was not intended to disturb the public order by posting the messages in the WeChat group" (*Xinhua* 2020d). However, the official proceeded by stating that:

related department and experts had yet to make a definitive diagnosis for the cases of pneumonia of unknown cause and had not accurately understood the epidemic at that time. Under such circumstances, Li forwarded the messages without verification.

Part of the contents did not fully correspond with the reality.
(*Xinhua* 2020d)

While Dr. Li is praised for having posted information that “helped draw a high degree of attention to the epidemic and facilitated the prevention and control” (*Xinhua* 2020d), Beijing downplayed its own responsibilities. Suggesting that Li’s information could not fully reflect understanding of the disease at the time and making clear that “Li said it was wrong to send the SARS-related messages” (*Xinhua* 2020d), the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) resorted to an IRT strategy of evasion of responsibility through defeasibility motivated by a lack of information. However, the strategy could hardly be credible to a public requesting transparency in responsibilities. In the effort to move domestic discontent away from deeper criticism of the political system and CCP’s leadership, Beijing adopted a strategy of denial by shifting blame on low rank officers and local bureaucrats. In the final investigation’s report on Dr. Li, the team revealed that the reprimand letter to Li failed to respect law enforcement procedures (*Xinhua* 2020d) and suggested further investigation on those who “have been slow in their response to the epidemic, loose in their prevention and control measures and have failed to perform their duties” (*Xinhua* 2020d). Following the investigation report, the Wuhan public security bureau referred on its Weibo account that the deputy head of the police station and an officer had received a demerit and a warning and the bureau had apologised to Li’s family and promised to draw lessons (Davidson 2020a). However, Beijing’s strategy of shifting blame on local police officers could hardly win domestic support. This emerges in the comments posted on Weibo with a user asking if this was all and a top comment wondering how police officials at the bottom could bear the burden when they were just carrying out orders (Davidson 2020a). Indeed, local bureaucracies became the new target of Beijing’s blaming strategies. In an interview to the *Global Times*, Ye Qing, a deputy director of the Statistics Bureau of Central China’s Hubei Province, repeatedly affirmed that “bureaucratism can kill people as much as the virus, and even worse than the virus to some extent” (Cao 2020). According to Ye Qing, the problems in the early stage had been mainly caused by failure of the governments of Hubei and Wuhan, some hospitals and the public security department to pay enough attention to the outbreak (Cao 2020). Referring to the silencing of doctors acting as whistleblowers and episodes of local residents’ contestation of public authorities, Ye Qing shifted responsibilities to local bureaucracies but assured that “the situation has got much better now as the authorities have punished hundreds of high-level officials for negligence of duty” (Cao 2020). Indeed, Xi Jinping had already replaced the party leadership in Hubei Province and Wuhan with his protégés (Lee My-

ers 2020a). From a domestic perspective, Xi Jinping's move to shift blame on local bureaucracy appeared to be a winning solution. On the one hand, the strategy legitimised a reshuffle of officers that favoured an even stronger consolidation of Xi Jinping's power. This is a recurrent practice in Xi's agency to personalise power. According to Fewsmith (2021), the appointment of protégés to critical positions and the reduction and removal of the balances, that had once moderated the Party's worst impulses (279), allow Xi to centralise and personalise political power beyond anything seen since Deng Xiaoping (23). On the other hand, the tactic is likely to satisfy domestic public opinion. Cary Wu (2020) observed that Chinese citizens tend to express a hierarchical satisfaction pattern when assessing the government's performance, as they tend to be more critical towards the government at the local level. Preliminary research on Chinese citizens' satisfaction of the performance of the various levels of government during the COVID-19 crisis confirm this pattern as citizens expressed a lower level of satisfaction for levels of governments closer to the people (Wu 2020). Beijing's decision to shift blame on local officers was quite successful in containing domestic discontent, because the IRS conformed to Chinese perception of hierarchical authority. However, the strategy could hardly hold the same effectiveness beyond China's borders. Most international audiences perceive the Chinese system as strongly centralised, so any local bureaucracy's responsibility can hardly exempt Beijing's from major early mishandling. The words of Zhou Xianwang, Mayor of Wuhan, claiming that the rules imposed by Beijing had limited the disclosure of information about the pathogen (Chin 2020) did not alleviate international audiences' perceptions of Beijing's responsibility.

At the national level, Beijing's blame shifting tactics coupled with a sort of compensation strategy to win over domestic support. Beijing turned the 'whistleblower' Li into a hero by engaging in acts of commemoration. On 4 March, Dr. Li and other health workers were honoured by the National Health Commission and other related authorities (*Xinhua* 2020d). Beijing did not miss the opportunity to turn public tributes into a means to reaffirm the solidity of the system and overshadow criticism. As stated by an official member of the investigation team

some hostile forces, aiming to attack the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the Chinese government, have given Li labels including an anti-establishment "champion" - which is completely untrue. Li, a Party member, was not an "anti-establishment figure". Those hostile forces with ulterior motives, who tried to stir up trouble, delude people and instigate public emotions, are doomed to fail. (*Xinhua* 2020d)

At the beginning of April, Dr. Li and fourteen frontline workers in Hubei Province were proclaimed 'Martyrs', the highest title awarded by "the Communist Party of China and the country to its citizens who died bravely in service to the country, society and the people" (*Global Times* 2020a). The heroic celebration of Dr. Li became functional to image restoration at the domestic as well as international level. According to Yi (2021), heroic culture is becoming an integrative component of Chinese national image building efforts, as

Chinese hero culture not only inspires Chinese sons and daughters to strive for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, but also serves as an important vehicle and means to shape China's image, and is of great significance in enhancing China's influence. (Yi 2021, 9)

As heroes convey the splendour of the Chinese nation, manifest the Chinese story and the nation's pursuit of positive values (2-3), they exert an edifying influence at home, but they also contribute to project positive emotional attitudes and recognition of the country (3) abroad. From a certain perspective, compensation strategies targeted at COVID-19 frontline fighters ended up to bolster Chinese cultural values. This bolstering strategy pursues a simultaneous domestic and international aim. While the strategy boosts Chinese people's self-confidence after what is perceived as an age of great blow partly due to Western powers (Yi 2021, 3), Beijing mimics the American export of heroic culture to enhance the appeal of Chinese culture to foreign audiences (Yi 2021, 3). However, this strategy was more successful with a domestic rather than international audience, where attention was on the image of Dr. Li as the whistleblower silenced by an authoritarian regime. This external perception of Dr. Li was largely built on an interview the doctor gave to the *New York Times* via WeChat during his hospitalisation. Dr. Li revealed that he suspected a high risk of human-to-human transmission because her patient had already infected her family and patients were treated in quarantine by the end of December (*The New York Times* 2020). In reference to his accusation of spreading rumours and disturbing public order, Dr. Li stated that

the police asked me to acknowledge that I was at fault. I felt I was being wronged, but I had to accept it. Obviously, I had been acting out of good will. I felt very sad seeing so many people losing their loved ones. (*The New York Times* 2020)

While there are no clear-cut reprimands of authorities in his statement, criticism emerges as Dr. Li admits that "If the officials had disclosed information about the epidemic earlier, I think it would have

been a lot better. There should be more openness and transparency" (*The New York Times* 2020). Dr. Li's interview to the *New York Times* was symptomatic of a growing Western medias' interest in China's disease communication. Information disclosed by Dr. Li and fellow doctors and international news correspondents based in China raised credible doubts over China's transparency. Dr. Li's speculation on a high risk of human-to-human transmission long preceded China's suggestion of a human-to human transmission on occasion of a WHO delegation field visit in Wuhan on 20-21 January (WHO 2020b). A number of scientists and journalists started to question the initial outbreak of the disease tracing back the first case of someone suffering from COVID-19 to mid-November (Davidson 2020b).

With mounting evidence on China's cover-up of information and the disease turning into a pandemic, China's strategy of simple denial and reduction of offensiveness through defeasibility by sharing partial information hampered its state image severely. Such strategies represent a recurrent pattern in China's responses to crises as China usually denies responsibility when under attack and adopts decisive actions while still evading, reducing or acknowledging responsibility when there is enough public evidence pointing to Beijing (d'Hooghe 2013, 287). The case of COVID-19 emulates this script. The CPC has a consolidated practice of controlling and repressing images and information that could expose the system's flaws. According to Zheng and Lye (2004), the Chinese political system is embedded in a culture of "political correctness" meaning that government bodies should always

bear in mind the big picture and not behave in a manner that would jeopardize the interest of the party or government [...] [so] good things can and should be exaggerated, but bad things should not receive publicity and should even be hushed up if possible. (49)

This political culture influences relations among government levels and offers a first explanation of Beijing's failure in early response. During the SARS epidemic, local-central relations (Zheng, Lye 2004; Lai 2004) contributed to early mismanagement. In relations between central and local authorities there is a recurrent pattern of keeping the problem as local as possible by isolating the affected area and limiting information spill-over to other areas (Zheng, Lye 2004, 52). Central-periphery relations also impair the timing of proactive measures as local authorities can hardly act on their own, but they need central authorisation before taking dramatic measures (Lai 2004, 77). According to Ang (2020), the flow of information reached the central government with a relevant delay during SARS, on the contrary, communication was more rapid during the COVID-19 epidemic, but local authorities did not publicise the outbreak for a lack of leadership's

authorisation. Centralised control had its toll on early warning and response. As stated by Mayor Zhou Xianwang, the Law on Prevention and Treatment of Infectious Diseases prohibited local authorities from divulging information without proper authorisation (Yang 2021, 4). According to Yang (2021, 5), the countless ills entrenched in the Chinese officialdom are amplified by the complicated central-local relations and enhanced ideological control. Chinese bureaucrats acquire their legitimacy not from the Weberian rational-legal basis but from the ruling party, which exercises control through political mechanisms (5). Chinese officials are programmed to follow a political logic, so they are conditioned to be cautious to a fault, they are obsessed about preserving the status quo and they are aware that partisan loyalty is prized over technical expertise (5-6).

At the time of SARS, the localized approach to problem solving appeared less applicable in an age of globalisation (Zheng, Lye 2004, 52) as chances were that “a local problem could snowball into a national issue” (55). Seventeen years later, the local problem turned into a global avalanche. Under Xi Jinping’s rule, Chinese officials are discouraged from raising negative issues with central authorities in fear of jeopardising their careers (Fisher 2020). According to Ang (2020), such fear of taking risks and initiative is causing an institutional paralysis referred as “lazy governance” that hampers early warning as it impairs “not only civil society but also public officials to speak candidly about problems without fear of reprisal”.

Political and cultural factors inherent to the respect of hierarchical authority, poor central-local relations, an inclination to reduce uncertainty and spill-over of negative information to “save face for the country” led denial in the form of information cover-up and censorship to prevail in the early warning and response phase. In spite of the fact that China owns a larger arsenal to fight the pandemic compared to the response to the SARS outbreak (He et al. 2020, 254), variables inherent to its political system and political culture continue to account for the weaknesses of its crisis governance system. Compared to the response to the SARS outbreak, the “paternalistic campaign-style mode of crisis governance has not diminished in the current response to COVID-19, but has in fact strengthened” and it is evident that weaknesses within the early reporting and systematic response remain unmitigated (253). China’s poor crisis communication in the early warning and response phases fed Western audiences’ perceptions of cover up and deception. Such strategies damaged China’s image in the eyes of Western audiences, as

the image repair message should not lie or deceive: the truth often comes out, whereupon the organization is threatened not only by the original offensive act but also by having lied about it. (Benoit 2015, 310)

6 Crisis Containment: Transcendence and Bolstering of the Image of the Efficient Crisis Manager and Leader Committed to Global Governance

By mid-January, cases of infected patients emerged beyond Hubei Province and Chinese borders. In order to contain the infection, the initial strategy consisted in a national approach promoting universal temperature monitoring, masking and hand washing (WHO 2020b). As the disease spread, specific containment measures were adapted at the provincial, county and community level (WHO 2020b). On 23 January, the city of Wuhan was closed off and put on a lockdown. Within a few days, 16 of Wuhan's neighbouring cities in Hubei Province were included in the *cordon sanitaire* (Leung et al. 2020, 1382). Besides mitigation policies in the Hubei Province, China raised its national public health response to the highest state of emergency and decided to isolate suspected and confirmed cases, suspend public transportation, close schools and entertainment venues, ban public gatherings, carry out health checks on migrants and forbid travel in and out of cities (Tian et al. 2020, 638). Following the end of the Spring Festival holiday postponed to 7 February, stringent social distancing measures and mobility restrictions were implemented in several Chinese megacities (Leung et al. 2020, 1382). The adoption of a comprehensive package of non-pharmaceutical interventions substantially contained transmissibility of COVID-19 across the country and reduced the daily number of local COVID-19 cases to nearly zero in areas outside Hubei since late February (Leung et al. 2020, 1390). The WHO-China Joint Mission remained impressed by Chinese measures as newly confirmed cases dropped from nearly 2478 to 409 in just two weeks (WHO 2020b). Lockdowns, semi-lockdowns and physical distancing measures continued until early April in order to reduce the height of the peak and provide health care systems with more time to expand and respond (Prem et al. 2020). Wuhan's lockdown was eventually lifted on 8 April, while Shanghai reopened its schools from 27 April (*The Lancet* 2020). As social mixing and economic activities resumed in China, early detection and control measures were put in place and real time transmissibility closely monitored to keep the instantaneous reproduction number of cases below 1 to prevent a potential second wave of infections (Leung et al. 2020). In less than three months, China's aggressive public health interventions contributed substantially to the containment of the disease and set an example for other countries (*The Lancet* 2020). The WHO-China Joint Mission praised China for having "rolled out perhaps the most ambitious, agile and aggressive disease containment effort in history" (WHO 2020b, 16). Such a success is motivated on the basis of "the deep commitment of the Chinese people to collective action" and an "all-of-Government and all-of-society approach" (17). This ap-

proach has actualised both at a community level with the “solidarity of provinces and cities in support of the most vulnerable populations and communities” and at an individual level as

the Chinese people have reacted to this outbreak with courage and conviction. They have accepted and adhered to the starkest of containment measures. (17)

With the infection rate and death toll dropping down, Beijing relied on a communication strategy of stressing effective containment to restore a positive image of the country and shift global public attention away from early mishandling. In the case of SARS, the Chinese government showed its weaknesses in the early response, but demonstrated its strengths once the crisis escalated into a political issue (Hung 2008, 177). The same pattern emerges in the management of COVID-19, as China shows a strong reactive bureaucratic capacity when it comes to crisis management and its “whole-of-government” response appears to be a hallmark of its unique style of crisis governance as it was seventeen years ago during the SARS outbreak (He et al. 2020, 253-4). Taking hold of its strengths in crisis management, it is not surprising that top leaders made use of the crisis to demonstrate accountable leadership and push forward a grand reform agenda (Jing 2021).

The adoption of community's interventions, which are typically targeted, non-coercive and featuring sufficient transparency, public engagement and trust (Ebrahim et al. 2020) facilitated containment in a high context culture country, where members are strongly engaged with each other and maintain a high self-discipline (Low et al. 2011, 221). Interestingly, a number of Chinese media with a global outlook, especially the state-run Chinese Global Television Network (CGTN) and the allegedly independent South China Morning Post (SCMP) started to upload a massive number of emotional videos featuring collective efforts against COVID-19 on their official YouTube channels. Stemming from goals and values (Ning et al. 2020), the “whole-of-government” and “whole-of-society” response was depicted as “a must for epidemic prevention and control” (Jiang 2020), an effort invoked by the WHO to win the battle against the virus (Jiang 2020) and a model other countries might learn from (Ning et al. 2020). China succeeded in blowing away audiences with its capacity to recover better and faster than any other country in the world. In so doing, it boosted Chinese people's confidence in the goodness of their cultural and societal values and accrue the legitimacy of the political system. Western audiences were impressed by Chinese people's collective efforts, which reinforced positive pre-existing perceptions of Chinese as self-disciplined and organised. However, cultural differences might have prevented a full appreciation of Chinese commu-

nitarian engagement, as Western audiences tend to maintain a sceptical outlook on the non-coercive and transparent nature of Chinese community interventions.

Swift and effective containment of the crisis became the cornerstone of Beijing's bolstering efforts. Strategic communication of successful crisis management did not only signal that China was ready to resume 'business as usual', but it also served the CCP's aim to turn a crisis into an opportunity. Counting on the swift reprisal of business activities, the large-scale production of medical gear and experience in curbing the virus as "a valuable international public good that other countries can learn from" (Ruan 2020), China engaged in an intense global health diplomacy. With a number of countries entering the epidemic's peak and struggling with deficiencies in medical supplies, China intervened by sending medical equipment and doctors to countries in need. Beijing bolstered the image of the efficient crisis manager willing to cooperate and assume a responsible ideational leadership. China was ready to "share its experience with the rest of the world, and to clarify its ideas on the global battle" (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China 2020). Arranging phone calls or meetings with nearly 50 foreign leaders and heads of international organisations, President Xi

explained China's tactics and achievements in fighting the virus, and emphasized China's open, transparent and responsible approach towards releasing information and sharing its experience [...]. He called on all parties to build a global community of shared future. (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China 2020)

During the pandemic, Xi took the opportunity to reinvigorate key diplomatic initiatives, such as the Community of Common Destiny for Mankind² (CCD) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with its extension to the public health domain through the Health Silk Road (Gyu 2021; Moritz 2021; Huang 2022).

The CCD refers to "a group of states/nations bonded together by common interest and fate" (Zhang 2018, 197). While China initially adopted the concept to boost regional economic integration, it has gradually extended its application to the whole humankind to pursue

an open, inclusive, clean, and beautiful world that enjoys lasting peace, universal security, and common prosperity. According to the idea, countries should respect one another, discuss issues as

2 The concept of a "community of common destiny for mankind" is interchangeable with that of a "community of shared future for mankind".

equals, and resolutely reject a Cold War mentality and power politics. Countries should take a new approach to developing state-to-state relations with communication, rather than confrontation, and partnerships, rather than alliances. It calls for settling disputes through dialogue and resolving differences through discussion, coordinating responses to traditional and non-traditional threats, and opposing terrorism in all its forms. (*Xinhua* 2018)

Considering the CCD's loose conceptualisation, it comes as no surprise that the concept has revived during a pandemic that

has not only posed a major threat to the safety and health of the Chinese people but also brought a severe challenge to the global public health cause. Faced with the epidemic, no single country can prosper in isolation or meet all challenges on its own. It is the only choice for global society to uphold the vision of building a community with a shared future for humanity and fight the epidemic side by side. (*Xinhua* 2020c)

The concept of the CCD incorporated both a strategy of transcendence and bolstering. Transcendence accommodates the Confucian focus on harmony, order and conflict avoidance, so that Chinese political culture privileges "abstract, lofty, and essentially idealistic future and eternity-oriented rhetorical themes" (Pye 1990 quoted by Huang, Bedford 2009, 574). In the case of COVID-19, transcendence was used to deflect responsibilities "as a disease can break out in any part of the world because of all kinds of reasons [...]. Because viruses don't care about borders" (CGTN, 7 March 2020) and to move attention to higher values, such as international cooperation *vis à vis* global threats. In so doing, transcendence also served to bolster the image of China as a reliable actor. According to the CCD's vision, all states can provide valuable responses to global problems regardless of their differences in political and economic systems. Combining a Confucian vision of harmony without sameness with China Popular Republic's ideal of co-existence of a plurality of heterogeneous states (Smith 2018, 462), China responds to Western democracies' sceptical outlook on centralised political systems by stating that China can be a legitimate normative entrepreneur in shaping global governance. According to Beijing, the successful 'Made in China' containment model has proved that China can offer valuable responses to global threats via conventional institutions as well as Chinese supported initiatives. On the one hand, China has depicted itself as a credible and responsible actor within and with international organisations by stressing that

China has been tackling the epidemic in an open and transparent manner. China has shared epidemic-related information in a time-

ly manner, including sharing the genetic sequence of the virus. Also, China has established close communication mechanisms with the WHO, the European Union, African Union and other organizations as well as relevant countries. (*Xinhua* 2020c)

On the other hand, the Chinese model has been used to give new impetus to Beijing's initiatives. In the time of COVID-19, the corridors, ports and routes of the BRI were used to provide medical support to countries in an attempt to position Beijing as a global leader in healthcare (Shepard 2020; Huang 2022). According to Shepard (2020), "trains are the new pandas" as Beijing sends them to nations where it desires an enhanced partnership through the BRI. This seems confirmed by China's decision to deliver 1,440 tons of medical aid to Europe, especially Italy and Spain, via freight trains (CGTN, 21 April 2020). Two days after a phone call between the Chinese State Councilor Wang Yi and the Foreign Minister of Italy Luigi Di Maio, medical supplies were on their way to Rome (Braw 2020). Beijing's image benefitted from a lack of promptness and solidarity on the part of the European Union (EU). As Italy was the first European country to be dramatically hit by the pandemic, Maurizio Masari, the Italian Ambassador to the EU, asked

to activate the European Union Mechanism of Civil Protection for the supply of medical equipment for individual protection. But, unfortunately, not a single EU country responded to the Commission's call. Only China responded bilaterally. (Massari 2020)

The arrival of Chinese doctors and the delivery of medical supplies received ample coverage on Italian media. From a communication perspective, the Italian government went along with Beijing's bolstering strategies because of their instrumentality to the national political agenda. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs Luigi Di Maio portrayed China's aid as a consequence of Italy's decision to be the only G7 country to sign the New Silk Road with China. In addition, the Italian government might have encouraged communication conveying the message of closer relations to China to exert a certain leverage on the EU to take prompt, effective and cohesive action. China's communication also pursued political aims as the EU's early mishandling of the pandemic provided Beijing with an opportunity to take advantage of the EU's lack of cohesion to boost the BRI. In a phone conversation with Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte on 17 March, President Xi offered support to the Italian counterpart and contribution to international cooperation in the battle against the epidemic by creating a Health Silk Road (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Italy 2020). Xi also made similar proposals to other European Heads of States, including the French President Emmanuel Macron

(Allen-Ebrahimian 2020). While the concept of a Health Silk Road is as vague as the BRI and CCD, it carries geopolitical and global architecture revisionist aims. Reflecting on the Health Silk Road, Tang et al. (2017, 2600) revealed that China's Belt and Road Initiative, Ebola response, development assistance for health, and new investment funds are complementary and reinforcing, with China acquiring an increasingly powerful role in shaping the contours of global health.

In the attempt to turn a crisis into an opportunity, Beijing's bolstering strategies have not only tried to restore China's image, but also to upgrade it by carving out new spaces for China's leadership. Curiously, bolstering strategies have been predominantly used by Western cultures, mainly embodied by the USA (Low et al. 2011). From this perspective, resort to bolstering might be representative of the growing role of China on the global stage and a certain tendency to mimic the strategies of its powerful counterpart. While an in-depth analysis of bolstering strategies targeted at each European country is beyond the scope and reach of this paper, the case of Italy remains exemplary of Chinese 'communication protocols' quite evenly applied to all European states. Hence, most European countries experienced similar bolstering strategies conveying the message of China as an efficient crisis manager and a reliable and supportive partner in the fight against the pandemic. Reflecting on bolstering strategies' effectiveness, we can put forward overarching conclusions. Beijing's bolstering strategies benefitted from initial EU's deficiencies in solidarity and cohesiveness and achieved more resonance in countries where they could be functional to national agendas. While China was successful in conveying the image of an efficient crisis manager to Western audiences, this success had its limits. Beijing's revisionist geopolitical aims and its resort to bots to amplify consensus (Bechis, Carrer 2020) caused a certain concern to Western audiences. This picture seems to be confirmed by preliminary data collected by the Institute of International Affairs and the Laboratory of Social and Political analyses. The survey shows that 77% of the Italian interviewees retain that medical aid from China represented a gesture of solidarity and more than 63% believe that the Chinese government should be taken as a model of the epidemic management (Bechis 2020). However, 52% of the population consider China's aid policy as a move to expand Beijing's political influence in Italy and almost the whole of the Italian population demand China to be transparent in its responsibilities and is in favour of an international investigation on the causes of the virus (Bechis 2020). While the survey shows that China's effective containment won the favour of the Italian audience, it also demonstrates that bolstering strategies too embedded in revisionist geopolitical aims might nurture suspicions rather than trust. Finally, bolstering might not be always effective to deflect attention from lack of transparency and early responsibilities when a crisis is severe.

7 **Fake News and Wolf Warrior Diplomacy: A Changing Chinese Public Diplomacy**

The COVID-19 pandemic has spread in the midst of empirical data, but also not evidence-based suggestions. This communication climate has influenced China's strategic communication. Although China shared the genetic sequence of the virus on 12 January (WHO 2020c), epidemiologists have never identified the 'patient zero', the first human spreading the contagion, and are still researching the virus intermediary transmission. Hence, hypotheses on the origin of the infection flourished on the media. USA Republican Senator for Arkansas Tom Cotton was among the first to feed suspicions by stating that

this virus did not originate in the Wuhan animal market [...]. We don't know where it originated [...]. We also know that just a few miles away from that food market is China's only biosafety level four super laboratory that researches human infections' diseases. Now we don't have evidence that this disease originated there, but because of China's duplicity and dishonesty from the beginning we need at least to ask the question to see what the evidence says and China right now is not giving any evidence on that question at all. (*Fox News*, 16 February 2020, 4'16"-4'17"; 4'34"-4'35"; 4'38"-4'58")

Far from stating a laboratory origin of the virus, Senator Cotton, nevertheless, offered suggestions undermining China's image repair efforts centred on successful crisis containment. Such communication could serve well the American administration's purpose to shift attention away from domestic failure in prevention and early response by putting the spotlight on China's early responsibilities. From a more nuanced geopolitical perspective, the USA accusations could also serve to point out the unsuitability of China as a global leader. China reacted to the USA accusations by relying on attack strategies mimicking the content and tones of the messages of the American presidency, so that the American scholar Gewirtz commented that "[t]here are a few Chinese officials who appear to have gone to the Donald J. Trump School of Diplomacy" (Lee Myers 2020b). Zhao Lijian, China's Ministry of Foreign affairs' spokesperson might be the most prominent representative of this trend. The Chinese diplomat gained prominence for suggesting that the virus was brought by the USA Army on occasion of the Military World Games held in Wuhan in October (Lee Myers 2020b). On 12 March, Zhao published the following tweet: "When did patient zero begin in the US? How many people are infected? What are the names of the hospitals? It might be US Army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan. Be transparent! Make public your data! US owe us an explanation!". A few days later, Zhao tweeted a study suggesting a USA origin of the virus released

by the Global Research, the website of the Canada-based Centre for Research on Globalization considered as a 'proxy site' for Russia's disinformation and propaganda efforts and a talent pool for Russian and Chinese websites (U.S. Department of State 2020, 25). Zhao's message was promptly retweeted by China's Embassy in South Africa claiming that "more evidence suggests that the virus was not originated in the Wuhan seafood market at all, not to mention the so called Made in China" (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in South Africa 2020). Zhao's tweets captured the attention of international and domestic news outlets. Most Western media outlets classified Zhao's messages as fake news. Although 'fake news' constitutes a buzzword without a clear-cut definition, it usually refers to "fabrications that are low in facticity and high in the immediate intention to deceive" (Tandoc et al. 2018, 12). On the contrary, Chinese state-run media gave credibility to Zhao's suggestions. On 13 March 2020, the *Global Times* tweeted that

as the US Covid-19 situation becomes increasingly obscure, the Chinese public share the suspicion raised by Zhao Lijian that the US might be the source of the virus and that the US is obliged to explain the World.

The disinformation campaign provoked the USA administration's reaction. President Trump started to repeatedly refer to the virus as the "Chinese virus" or the "Wuhan virus" in spite of WHO's official naming of the virus as SARS-CoV-2. On occasion of a White House Press Conference on 18 March, the USA President dismissed accusations of instigating racism against Chinese-Americans by replying that

It comes from China [...]. It is not racist at all [...]. It comes from China, I want to be accurate [...]. As you know, China tried to say at one point, maybe they stopped now, that it was caused by American soldiers. That can't happen, it is not going to happen, not as long as I am President, it comes from China. (*Guardian News*, 18 march 2020, 0'16"-0'48")

Following a 'tit for tat' logic, the USA President relied on the inappropriate branding of the 'Chinese virus' to react to China's disinformation efforts. Notwithstanding the efforts of some Chinese officials and news outlets, the narrative of a USA origin of the virus did not live long. Following Zhao's first tweets, China Ambassador in Washington, Cui Tiankai, was summoned up by the White House. In the following weeks, the Chinese Ambassador released an interview to Jonathan Swan from *Axios on HBO*. When asked about the source of conspiracy theories on the USA origin of the virus, Cui Tiankai replied that "such an attempt were first initiated here. You

saw my interview on Face the Nation. We were talking about some people here saying crazy things" (*Axios* on HBO, 22 March 2020). The Chinese Ambassador deflected accusations by pointing the attention to USA communication. In the eyes of Beijing, USA suggestions of a laboratory origin of the virus represented a mere provocation, since the Joint WHO-China study on the origin of SARS-CoV-2 has retained this scenario to be extremely unlikely (WHO 2021). While the majority of Chinese diplomats resort to the agreeable tones and practices of traditional diplomacy, only a smaller number share Zhao's so-called 'Wolf Warrior diplomacy'. The label echoes back to the popular 'Wolf Warrior' action movies, which centred on Chinese special forces taking on American mercenaries with the slogan: "Anyone who offends China, no matter how remote, must be exterminated" (Landale 2020). Far from inciting violent acts, the new 'Wolf Warrior Diplomacy' possesses, nonetheless, a nationalistic and aggressive tone and it appears to have gained a new relevance within the Chinese public diplomacy toolbox. In order to understand 'Wolf Warrior Diplomacy', we have to take a step back to observe rising trends in the broader Chinese political and cultural landscape. Reflecting on China's approaches to its national image, Qunshan (2018) reveals that national image is the result of a game between 'self-shaping' and 'other-shaping' dynamics. While China tries to 'self-shape' an image of peaceful development, embodiment of the socialist nature and reflection of the traditional characteristics of Chinese culture, it has been repeatedly 'shaped' by Western countries as a "threatening, collapsing and evil" country (Qunshan 2018). Beijing is, thus, invited to get rid of this dilemma by deconstructing the negative images that Western countries have portrayed (Qunshan 2018). This capacity to 'self-shape' the national image is mostly visible in Xi's attention to 'tell the China story'. Since his elevation to Party Secretary in November 2012, Xi has commanded the country's leaders, the media and public and diplomatic services to proactively engage in "telling the China story" (Brown 2020). The phrase 'tell China stories well' (*jianghao zhongguo gushi* 讲好中国故事) represents an encouragement to use China's own communication channels to promote official Chinese views and opinions and to strengthen the international influence of China (Huang, Wang 2019). According to Huang and Wang (2019, 2987), the phrase is an important guide to China's public diplomacy, which is often understood by Chinese scholars as an extension of external propaganda. From an image repair strategies' perspective, efforts to tell successful stories about disease containment and management epitomize a bolstering strategy. The pandemic has not only showed how 'telling China stories well' is common practice in Chinese public diplomacy, but it has also revealed a more dramatic shift from traditional Chinese agreeable and harmonious diplomatic tones to a more ag-

gressive and harsh communication when Chinese good stories are not well received.

Indeed, Chinese authorities have not condemned 'Wolf Warriors' messages. On the contrary, state-run media have engaged in a strenuous defence of 'Wolf Warrior diplomacy'. On 16 April, the *Global Times* referred that "Chinese diplomats' pushback seems utmost restrained" and "still defense-inclined", considering the West's "unwarranted criticisms", "groundless accusations" and "belligerence and antagonism" in "smearing China's virus fight and its cooperation with other countries and world organizations". Hence, Chinese diplomats' behaviour is presented as a legitimate and consequential response to a declining West that is uncomfortable with China's rise and "can only resort to a hysterical hooligan style diplomacy in an attempt to maintain its waning dignity. As Western diplomats fall into disgrace, they are getting a taste of China's 'Wolf Warrior' diplomacy (*Global Times* 2020c). Hence, China justifies resort to 'Wolf Warrior Diplomacy' by presenting this type of communication as a response to 'USA and Western democracies' accusations, whose offensiveness is far much greater than Chinese diplomats' tweets. In so doing, China's Wolf Warrior Diplomacy conforms to an IRT strategy of evasion of responsibility through provocation and a reduction of the offensiveness of the event by differentiation. However, the core tactic in China's Wolf Warrior Diplomacy and diffusion of fake news remains accuser's attack. While reducing the credibility of the accuser is a consolidated communication strategy, it is particularly uncommon in the Chinese culture, where communication should preserve harmony and privilege the 'golden mean' by avoiding extreme tactics, such as attacking accusers and publicly apologising (Huang et al. 2016). From a political perspective, the CCP seems to mimic typical American strategies to signal China's ascending power by behaving as its relevant counterpart. However, cultural dynamics might be also at play. According to cross-cultural psychologists, Westerners and Easterners tend to assess responsibility in a significantly different manner, as the former concentrate more on culpability, whereas the latter highlight consequences (Gries, Peng 2002, 175). From a cultural perspective, Western countries' demand for transparency in responsibilities clashed with Chinese tendency to avoid public apologies. Albeit a cultural gap contributes to explain China's reactive diplomacy, political drivers are mostly at work. Since the adoption of the concept of 'Major Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics' under Xi Jinping, Chinese elites resort to a new assertiveness to legitimise China's role in global politics, its effort to reform international order, its engagement in ideological competition with the West and its greater responsibility in accordance with its elevated power and status (Smith 2021). China's changing strategic diplomacy from restrained and low-profile to proactive and assertive is reflected in the

use of narrative power to improve its international image and advocate for a reorganisation of world order (Chang 2021). This growing assertiveness in foreign policy is influencing the *sui generis* nature of China's public diplomacy. As pointed out by Yang (2020), Chinese public diplomacy not only tells China's story to the world, but also shoulders the responsibility of accruing legitimacy for the country, both internationally and domestically. This leads to a paradox of globalism and nationalism in Chinese official discourse, where globalist and nationalist arguments intertwine and complement each other to reinforce the legitimacy of the ruling party at home and the international reputation of China under the leadership of the ruling party (Yang, Chen 2021). However, Chinese public diplomacy's simultaneous pursuit of double aims can lead to contradictions. When this occurs, we argue that national image in the eyes of the domestic audience is prioritised. The case of 'Wolf Warrior diplomacy' is exemplary of this trend, as the strategy revamped national spirits and boosted the CCP legitimacy. The Chinese public opinion is not indifferent to Western perceptions. In the past years, the Chinese government craved Western praise as favourable international attitudes towards China provided respectability, boosted legitimacy of the government and helped to reduce domestic opposition (Wang 2011, 43-4). Given these premises, Beijing wishes Western audiences to either support its stories or, at least, abstain from criticism. In case of Western accusations, 'Wolf Warrior diplomacy' coupled with political and economic retaliatory measures are supposed to provide the CCP with that "firewall to prevent western countries from smearing China" (Qunshan 2018). A communication blending a strategy of provocation, differentiation and accuser attack can help safeguard the domestic image of China and discourage external accusations. According to Z.A. Huang (2022), 'Wolf Warrior diplomacy' targets a Chinese audience pursuing two aims. Firstly, the strategy

allows Beijing to manage and employ nationalist public opinion at the domestic level through the creation of a heroic image in order to disseminate a vision of Chinacentrism.

Secondly,

[it] contains a serious nationalist sentiment that provides mechanisms and conditions for the Communist Party of China to maintain its dominant power in Chinese society and conquer discursive power on the international stage.

While China's bullying communication can partially discourage Western countries from advancing accusations, it certainly goes against the image of the 'peaceful rise' and the trustful, cooperative and re-

sponsible power that China wishes to convey to international audiences. If China's initial cover-up of the crisis had done no good to its image, resorting to fake news and aggressive tones did not do any better. According to Gribas et al. (2015), an organisation faces an antagonistic audience when the crisis is severe and the organisation is exclusively or primarily responsible for it (Gribas et al. 2015, 48). As this scenario applies to Western audiences, China did not opt for the most effective strategies. Hence, attacking the accuser, differentiation and denial might represent the least effective tactics when dealing with antagonistic audiences (52-4). Surveys confirm that Beijing's strategies have done poorly in projecting a positive image of China to Western countries. According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak, almost two-thirds of American hold an unfavourable view of China and this represents the most negative rating since the institute started to ask the question in 2005 (Devlin et al. 2020). China does not do better with public opinion on the other side of the Atlantic, where opinions of China in most Western European countries were already generally negative by December 2019 (Silver et al. 2019). A poll of opinions of a sample of the German population conducted by London-based Redfield & Wilton Strategies reveals that 77% of the respondents retained China to be blamed for the virus, 74% said China has dishonestly reported its infection figures and only 10% was in favour of closer relations with Beijing (Posaner 2020). In a poll conducted by YouGov on behalf of the Tony Blair Institute, a majority of people in the USA, France, Germany and the United Kingdom identified the Chinese government as a force of bad in the world (Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, June 2020). The picture is not rosier in the Nordic Countries, where citizens are increasingly wary of Chinese foreign investments and are likely to demand new screening mechanisms (Andersen et al. 2020). In addition, Nordic countries were the most vocal against Chinese aggressive communication strategies during the pandemic. Swedish public opinion reacted with vigour to the Chinese Ambassador's offensive and journalists-blaming communication, while Denmark rejected Chinese request of public apologies for a cartoon blaming China for the virus on a national newspaper (Andersen et al. 2020). China's image repair efforts yielded better results in Southern Europe as economic vulnerabilities and national political agendas pushed those countries to be more well-disposed towards bolstering strategies and less likely to advance accusations. However, it is quite unlikely that those countries will gravitate closer to China's foreign policy aims. Referring one more time to the Italian case, data revealed a staggering dynamic in Italian public opinion by reporting an almost complete decline of trust in liberal democracies and the EU's capacity to respond to the pandemic (Bechis 2020). Reflecting on this trend, it seems that public opinion's favour to China

is almost inversely correlated to that to the EU. Put simply, China's communication strategies thrive in a weakened EU and Transatlantic partnership. In spite of China's economic attractiveness and propaganda efforts, even the most favourable audiences remain wary of China's non-transparent handling of the epidemic, gazes at national companies in key strategic sectors, ambiguous geopolitical aims, poor record in human rights' protection and severe limitations to civil liberties. If some Western audiences move closer to China's foreign policy aims, they will be more driven by economic vulnerability rather than soft power attraction.

8 Conclusion

The spread of COVID-19 has turned into a pandemic that has posed a serious threat to the image of a responsible and credible global power that China wants to project. Relying on Benoit's IRT, the research points out how China reacted to domestic and international public image threats at every phase of the crisis. While IRT is mostly descriptive in nature, the introduction of a contextual framework encompassing political, cultural and societal variables has allowed for a certain explicative nuance to strategies selection and effectiveness. At the outbreak of the disease, corrective actions targeted to wet markets partially alleviated international accusation. However, this article identified a number of cultural and political variables that made strategies of denial in the form of cover-up, censorship and evasion of responsibility prevail in early warning and response. Facing damage to the country's image, the CCP's tactic of resorting to denial by shifting blame and the adoption of compensation initiatives partially addressed domestic discontent by tuning into Chinese traditional attitudes to hierarchical authority and a growing rise of heroic culture. Benefitting from Chinese traditional collectivistic values, observance of hierarchical authority and self-discipline, China attained successful containment and management of the disease. The CCP bolstered the image of China as a responsible and effective crisis manager in the eyes of global audiences. Resorting to transcendence to deflect responsibilities and highlight the leadership role that China might play in international cooperation, Xi Jinping gave new impetus to the diplomatic initiatives of the CCD, BRI and Health Silk Road. While transcendence represents a traditional communication practice rooted in Chinese culture, it acquired a more political nuanced role in the promotion of China as a leader in global governance. However, the image of China as a responsible power with the ideas and capacities to contribute to global governance was mainly conveyed through bolstering strategies. The bolstering of Chinese successful crisis management garnered praise from do-

mestic and international audiences. However, Chinese health diplomacy was too entrenched to the attainment of Chinese geopolitical aims not to raise external audiences' suspicions. Resort to bolstering is uncommon in Chinese communication, which is prone to avoiding 'extreme tactics'. Chinese communication during the pandemic has witnessed a growing shift towards unusual strategies in Asian societies. Reliance on 'Wolf Warrior Diplomacy' to counteract Western powers' accusations is exemplary of this trend. This communication strategy that blended provocation, differentiation and accuser attack tactics is reflective of Xi's leadership and assertive foreign policy, and mirrors a certain will to mimic American strategies to signal China's ascending status. However, 'Wolf Warrior Diplomacy' is also indicative of a public diplomacy that has prioritised image's restoration at the domestic level.

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