Chinese Diplomacy and the Battle for Truth During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Struggle for Hegemony?

La diplomacia china y la batalla por la verdad durante la pandemia de COVID-19: ¿una lucha por la hegemonía?

Daniel Lemus Delgado[*]

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes Chinese diplomacy during the Covid-19 crisis and the struggle for control of narratives aimed at constructing an image of a responsible nation. In this paper I assume that the emergence of COVID-19 represented a critical problem for the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party, forcing the authorities to fight not only to contain the spread of the virus but also to create and maintain a favorable public opinion regarding management of the crisis both nationally and internationally. It is in this context that the Chinese government launched an active diplomacy offensive, presenting itself as a responsible state through both "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy" and "Mask Diplomacy". Based on Foucault´s approach to the Regime of Truth, I analyze the narratives and activities of the Chinese government and how diplomacy was employed in order to create a truth about the coronavirus outbreak. In addition, I review how social mechanisms and conventions were utilized to emphasize and validate knowledge linked to power systems. I conclude that if the Chi-

nese government has the "truth" as a part of a regime, it both enhances the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party and increases its power. At the same time a strong Chinese government is able to devote significant resources to spreading a discourse both nationally and internationally which is purportedly true. The point of the discourse however is to further strengthen the power of the ccp, rather than to achieve global hegemony.

Keywords: China – Covid-19 – Diplomacy – Narratives–Regime of Truth

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza la diplomacia china en el año 2020 durante la pandemia de COVID-19 y la lucha por el control de narrativas cuya finalidad era construir una imagen favorable de China en el escenario internacional. Así, se asume que el surgimiento del COVID-19 representó un problema crítico para la legitimidad del Partido Comunista Chino (pcch), obligando a las autoridades a luchar no solamente para contener la propagación del virus, sino también para crear y mantener una opinión pública favorable respecto de la gestión de la crisis. En este contexto, por medio de la llamada "Diplomacia del Guerrero Lobo" y la "Diplomacia de las Mascarillas", el gobierno chino lanzó una ofensiva diplomática con la intención de presentar a China como un Estado responsable ante la comunidad internacional. Basado en el enfoque teórico de Foucault sobre los Regímenes de Verdad, este artículo analiza las narrativas y acciones diplomáticas que emprendieron las autoridades chinas para crear una verdad sobre el brote de coronavirus, discutiendo cómo se utilizaron los mecanismos y convenciones sociales para enfatizar y validar el conocimiento, vinculados en última instancia a los sistemas de poder. Finalmente, se concluye que, si el gobierno chino tiene la "verdad" sobre el nuevo coronavirus, aumenta la legitimidad y con ello su poder. Al mismo tiempo, un gobierno chino fuerte puede dedicar importantes recursos a difundir un discurso sobre la verdad del origen del virus y el manejo de la crisis sanitaria, tanto a nivel nacional como internacional. Sin embargo, se sugiere que el objetivo de la diplomacia china durante la pandemia fue fortalecer aún más el poder y legitimidad del pcch, en lugar de buscar la hegemonía global.

Palabras clave: China – Covid-19 – Diplomacia – Narrativas – Regímenes de Verdad

I. The origin of Sars-Cov-2 and the challenge to the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party

On December 31st, 2019, the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission informed the World Health Organization of an outbreak of twenty seven cases of a pneumonia-like illness (World Health Organization, 2020a). The Chinese scientific community initially stated that the illness originated in the Hua Nan fish and seafood market, in the city of Wuhan (Rosenbaum, 2020). The World Health Organization named the new virus Sars-Cov-2 (World Health Organization, 2020b), with the Chinese government subsequently reporting that the first known case of a patient with Covid-19 appeared on November 17 (Ma, 2020). Although the initial response of the authorities in Hubei province was slow and erratic, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party soon took control of the situation through a powerful anti-corruption commission (Tian and Lee, 2020). The severity of the new infection was recognized by President Xi on January 20, when he claimed that the new virus was the most serious health problem to befall China since the founding of the People's Republic (Zheng, 2020). He declared that the COVID-19 outbreak has been the "hardest major public health emergency to contain since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949"; Xi proclaimed a "people's war" to fight this invisible enemy by mobilizing the force of the whole country (Xinhua, 2020). Months later, at a ceremony recognizing four distinguished officials for their efforts to contain the outbreak, Xi claimed victory over COVID-19, a challenge that he referred to as "an extraordinary and historic test." (Zhao and Liu, 2020)

Paradoxically, at around the same time as the Sars-Cov-2 virus emerged at the beginning of the year, President Xi, in his discourse at the Central Party School, warned that the security and stability of China could be subjected to multiple national and international threats. He reasoned that China had to be prepared to face unpredictable events in a complicated international context, and that the most important task therefore for the party leadership should be maintaining political stability while simultaneously guiding the country along the path of development. Xi pointed out that the CCP needed to generate strategic initiatives in order to convert danger into security and transform threats into opportunities (People's Daily, 2019). He warned senior CCP officials that they should be on high alert for two specific types of incidents: "black swans" and "gray rhinos". For Xi, the latter correspond to known risks that are ignored, while the former are highly unforeseen events. He requested that party officials "be on guard against black swans, and be watchful for gray rhinos." Both gray rhinos and black swans could include social, political, ideological, economic, scientific and

technological challenges, and even involve the CCP itself (Lam, 2019).

The emergence of a new coronavirus presented a significant challenge to the leadership of the CCP (Rezková and Šimalčík, 2020). The health emergency presented by the virus would test both the ability and leadership skills of the Chinese bureaucratic elite. The pandemic paralyzed the economy, restricted travel country-wide, delayed the start of classes, canceled international events, and postponed the work of the Consultative Assembly, which is arguably the most important annual political event in the country. In addition, the new virus gave rise to the largest mass-quarantine in human history (Wright, 2020). Just a few weeks after Xi's speech, it was clear that the CCP was facing an unexpected event: a black swan.

On 30th January 2020, one month after the new virus was officially reported by the Chinese authorities, the World Health Organization declared it to be a global emergency (World Health Organization, 2020c). On the same day, the number of Chinese dead rose to 170, with 7,711 cases being reported nationwide (Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). An illness which was originally a localized problem in China began to emerge as a significant global challenge, and the international community began to judge China for the way the CCP had acted in the face of what was rapidly becoming a global health emergency. The US Vice President Mike Pence said that "China let the world down," and threatened the nation over how the virus had been handled, affirming the country "will be held accountable" for reported attempts to initially hide information about the outbreak (Stockler, 2020). In addition, the international context in which COVID-19 appeared was highly complex. The initial stages of the economic reform period in China were characterized by economic openness and restructuring, as the country gradually entered the international economy and become a global economic powerhouse. However, there has been no attempt to democratize the Chinese regime (Lee, Lee and Chang, 2015), and the international environment in the last few years has been characterized by growing mistrust. The economic rise of China has been accompanied by increasing perceptions, particularly in the United States, that the nation poses a serious threat (Canrong, 2011). While geopolitical conflicts on the edge of Chinese territory have increased, Chinese investment in Africa and Latin America is increasingly being viewed with suspicion. The election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in 2016 has only served to exacerbate the differences between the two countries, and has ultimately given rise to several conflicts between them, in addition to a trade war (Bown, 2019).

More significant even than the impact of the Covid-19 epidemic on the health of the Chinese population and the very real threat of resulting economic paralysis, was the issue of the legitimacy of the CCP.

A poorly-managed crisis had the capacity to expose the limits, weaknesses, and contradictions of the Chinese political system and could ultimately pave the way for the eventual collapse of the regime. Significant questions arose over the whether or not the CCP leadership, constrained by the structures of a one-party system, would be able to overcome the crisis. It appeared unlikely that the leadership of the CCP would emerge stronger after the pandemic had passed.

As Xi had warned, the apparent stability of the Chinese regime could be rocked at any time. A highly unexpected event such as the emergence of COVID-19 could prove to be the Achilles' heel of the ruling party. Within a very short period of time President Xi and the fifth generation of CCP leaders found themselves battling on two distinct fronts simultaneously, in a changing and complex international environment. On one hand, the goal was to contain the virus and begin the process of economic recovery. On the other hand there was the desire to win the global narrative and represent China as a nation which had acted responsibly and in solidarity with others. This article proposes that the fight waged by the Chinese government for control of the global narrative surrounding the pandemic is aimed essentially at strengthening the leadership and legitimacy of the CCP inside China, rather than being a race for world hegemony. This being the case, the diplomatic strategy followed by the Chinese authorities focused on both maintaining and increasing the political legitimacy of the CCP at home.

The organization of this article comprehends four sections. Firstly, I discuss the relationship between the Chinese Communist Party and Foreign Policy. Later, I analyze Michael Foucault's concept of truth to understand how this theoretical approach can help analyze Chinese diplomacy. In the next section, I discuss the implementation of "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy" and "Mask Diplomacy" to spread a global narrative portraying China as a responsible nation. Finally, I conclude that the primary aim of the Chinese political elite is to strengthen the legitimacy of the Chinese government by imposing a narrative on the origin of the virus as part of the construction of a concept of truth.

II. The Chinese Communist Party and Foreign Policy

My starting point to understand Chinese diplomacy during the outbreak is the assumption that one of the main motivations of the Chinese government is the search for political legitimacy. Consequently, the quest for this recognition determined China's diplomacy during the outbreak. To a large extent, what the Chinese government did or did not do in the international arena through its diplomatic channels has the main purpose of increasing China's international prestige. This prestige is another way to strengthen the legitimacy of the CCP within China. In other words, traditionally, the CCP has wanted to maintain relatively stable external relationships in order to provide conditions for resolve China's internal problems, and any challenge to this situation implies a risk for the power of CCP (Lampton, 2008). Thus, the design and implementation of foreign policy depend on the perspective of the CCP, whose ultimate goal is to generate the conditions of legitimacy and stability of the political regime.

China has a one-party state system characterized as "fragmented authoritarianism" (Brødsgaard, 2018). However, China remains a highly hierarchical political system (Brown, 2014). The CCP has nearly ninety million members; around 70 percent of them are men; in addition, 30 percent of its membership are farmers, herdsmen, and fishermen (Albert, Xu and Maizland, 2020). Although the party's policies

have changed over time, the structure remains intact (Larus, 2012). Founded in 1921, the CCP has a long history and has been in power since the triumph of communism in 1949 (Uhalley, 1988). During its rule the CCP has faced formidable challenges, some of which have called into question the legitimacy of its rule. A critical factor favoring the continued rule of the party however is its policy of pragmatism, the implementation of wide-ranging and continuous reforms, and the combination of force with subtle persuasion through the creation of convincing narratives (Shambaugh, 2008).

As Starr has pointed (2010), the CCP defines its function as defining all the vital decisions for the present and future of China, which the government must then carry out. The CCP has created an organizational structure operating parallel of government bureaucracy. The party members oversee the work of bureaucrats at every level, ultimately blurring the line separating policy-making from policy implementation. The legislature, the executive branch, and the judiciary operate under the supervision of the party. Therefore, the success or failure of the government is ultimately a result of the CCP. Therefore, the success or failure of the government is ultimately a result of the CCP. Since its foundation, the leaders of CCP established party organs responsible for the party members' enrollment, training, and discipline. They positioned party elites in crucial administrative positions in government,

industry, agriculture, education, and the military to monopolize the power over the state and military (Larus, 2012). Thus, it is virtually impossible to join China's ruling elite without being a member of the CCP (Larus, 2012).

In such a political regime, legitimacy is not derived from a direct consultation process based on universal suffrage. Despite the enormous variety of autocracies, the CCP, in common with other autocratic regimes, sustains its claim to legitimacy through its effectiveness in maintaining order, providing the services that every state must offer to its citizens, and generating the appropriate conditions for economic progress in a balanced way (Burnell, 2006). In China, this legitimacy has historically been rooted the expectation that the ruling elite must be intellectually strong, capable, and efficient (Sik, 2000). This vision is inspired by the Confucian model of the ideal civil servant who governs by moral and intellectual ability and not through relationships or social origin (Fung, 2017). In other words, the Chinese government's claim to legitimacy rests fundamentally on the favorable perception by the citizens of their leaders: Chinese citizens expect their leaders to handle state affairs effectively and use the human capital of the nation as a force for good. Persuasion is a result of taking concrete actions that benefit the population and simultaneously building a narrative purporting to be true in order to generate a favorable opinion of the government (Brady, 2012).

It is worth stating however that the style of government imposed by the ruling elite does not currently, nor has it ever, correlated precisely with the idealized vision of the Chinese official inherited from Confucius, although Confucian thought has been widely promoted by the government in an effort to consolidate its cultural leadership (Wu, 2014). Firstly, in addition to coercion, the CCP also seeks to establish legitimacy through a delicate balance of persuasion, control, and prestige. Persuasion is based on spreading the idea that given the particular characteristics of China, the one-party system, with government decisions being controlled by the CCP, is the most appropriate method of governance. Secondly, the government consolidates power by controlling the population: this is achieved by both direct and indirect observation, enabling any sign of social discontent to be quickly neutralized, by the employment of state violence if necessary. Control is fundamental to the elimination of any criticism that may destabilize the regime. Thirdly, prestige is used to foster a feeling of national pride: for the CCP nationalism is a key ideology, one widely used to justify party actions (Gorman, 2017).

National pride is fostered through a particular interpretation of the past and a vision of the present and future of China that projects the country as a

unique nation. The ccp seeks to "maximize the value of national pride as a collective adhesive without succumbing to mob spontaneity" (Shen and Guo, 2013: 135). The ccp still has a reservoir of legitimacy accumulated during and after the rise to power, "but even the deepest reservoir will eventually evaporate unless regularly replenished." (Perry, 2018: 16). Nevertheless, the national past is also an interpretation of history. So, the ccp promotes one interpretation of the past as a principal way to maintain its legitimacy. Also, the ccp defended a particular vision of the present. This vision includes how the new coronavirus originated and how the Chinese government responded. The reactions in the international arena wanted to gain the respect and admiration of its citizen. This way of proceeding is part of a larger and more complex process, which, from the perspective of the philosopher Michel Foucault, can be considered a regime of truth.

III. The Chinese Communist Party, Covid-19 and the Regime of Truth

Regarding the ccp, to be an effective tool for legitimacy, persuasion, control, and prestige are part of a larger phenomenon, called truth regime (Foucault, 1995, 2000). Under this perspective, Chinese foreign policy during the pandemic has reflected the hidden desire to support building a regime of truth. So, the Chinese government using diplomatic channels to spread its version of the truth concerning the government's responsibility for the origin, expansion, and containment of the new virus. The construction of a regime of truth is not an exclusive task of the State, nor does it happen only at a particular moment in history. On the contrary, this is the product of a broad historical and social context in the institutions that support certain "truths" over others. In this way, diplomacy is just one more instrument that, based on certain circumstances, results in a truth that favors a positive assessment of the national and international performance of the Chinese government in the face of the pandemic. The truth has its origin in the knowledge and the possibility to propose this knowledge as a superior. This situation is possible because those who present the truth have specific power to disseminate and impose their truth. Specifically, ccp spreads, through diplomatic means, its truth about the origin of the Sars-Cov-2 and the correct and responsible governmental actions in response to pandemic challenges (Lemus, 2020).

Foucault affirms that power and knowledge are closely related, and that they both support and depend on each other (Foucault, 1981). Foucault suggests that all knowledge is purporting to be "universal," "pure," "neutral," "disinterested," or "free." However,

economic and ideological demands influence knowledge. In addition, power and knowledge are mutually constituted (Foucault, 1980). As Devatk (2009) has pointed out, knowledge is never unconditional, and therefore it is impossible for truth to be seen as something separate from power; on the contrary, power systems are needed to produce the truth, and, in turn, the truth gives rise to power (Foucault, 2000).

For Foucault, each society has its regime of truth, its general politics of truth; that is, the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as true (Foucault, 1998). Regimes of truth are the consequence of discourse and institutions, and they are strengthened or redefined continually through the education system, the media, and the diffusion of ideologies. The fight for truth therefore is not for some absolute truth that can be discovered and accepted, but rather a battle about the rules by which truth and untruth are distinguished and how specific effects of power are attached to the truth (Foucault, 1984). In this sense, the "battle for the truth" is not one for some absolute truth that can be discovered and accepted but rather a battle over the rules governing how truth and untruth are separated. It is a battle over the state of truth, and with it, the economic and political role that said truth plays in a given social context (Rabinow, 1984).

In the face of the grave health crisis experienced due to Covid-19, the Chinese case shows that the speeches promoted as true by the state leaders do not simply seek more efficient methods to combat the new disease. Also, the discourses promote truths that impact the legitimacy of the government's actions in the face of the pandemic (Lemus, 2020). This reality was present both nationally and internationally.

For Foucault, regimes of truth often have several distinct criteria. These include techniques for distinguishing true and false declarations; how true and false are authorized, and the status accorded to those who speak what is recognized as truth (Weir, 2008). The battle "for the truth", or at least "around the truth" therefore does not mean the set of true things that must be discovered or accepted, but rather the set of rules according to which the truth is distinguished from fiction and linked to the true political effects of power (Foucault, 1980). Foucault also argues that regimes of truth are not primarily occupied as champions "in favor" of the truth, but instead are involved in establishing the status of truth and the economic and political role it plays (Foucault, 1980).

In contrast to the arguments of Foucault, Weir (2008) theorizes that regimes of truth in contemporary societies are composed of multiple truth formulae, not simply scientific and quasi-scientific truth. Consequently, all types of discourses, including diplomatic narratives, contribute to creating a regime of truth. In this way each society has its regime of truth, that is, the types of discourses that it welcomes and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances that make it possible to distinguish

true or false statements, the way of sanctioning one or the other; the techniques and procedures that are valued in obtaining the truth, and the status of those charged with saying what works as true.

The State is not the only actor that builds the regimes of truth, nor is diplomacy the only way to create these regimes of truth. From Foucault's perspective, the concept is much broader. This concept illustrates how each society constructs truths and mechanisms from which these truths establish a symbiotic relationship between power and knowledge. Thus, the elites have a more significant opportunity to generate their regimes of truth. To the extent that this happens, the elites reinforce their power. The historical experience suggests that in contemporary China, the elite clusters around the Communist Party are fundamental to creating truths and mechanisms to disseminate these truths to strengthen its prestige and power. Therefore, being a member of the party makes it possible to generate discourses that have a greater chance of being considered trues because the party has the strength and the means to do it. To the extent that the population accepts these discourses as truth, it reinforces the party's power and its legitimacy to govern. China's bureaucratic elite responsible for designing and implementing foreign policy is embedded in a particular context that has gradually built a regime of truth since

the triumph of the Communist Party. This regime ultimately supports the idea that only communism can save China, and only communism can restore the leading role that China once played on the international stage. In a conscious and iconic way, Chinese diplomats generate discourses that underpin this truth. From this perspective, it is not essential whether Chinese diplomacy tell the "truth." The truth about the realities of China regarding the management and control of Covid-19. The most important is how diplomacy is one more piece in the complex machinery of the PCC that for years has implemented a regime of truth about the political system, the role of the PCC, and the future of China and the world.

Finally, in common with other nations, China uses specific social and historical contexts to establish the veracity of certain narratives and employ knowledge in specific ways. For example, this same fact is present in China's main rival, the United States. US diplomacy, based on notions–beliefs–about so-called universal values such as democracy, freedom, and human rights, are equally refined constructions of "truths," with ambitions both hegemonic at the international level and for legitimacy at the domestic level. In the next section, I analyze how Chinese foreign policy uses a combination of traditional and more contemporary diplomatic approaches as a tool to build a truth regime.

IV. Covid-19, truth regime, and Chinese diplomacy

A broader context that includes the principles of foreign policy and the particular characteristics of the vision of international relations during President Xi Jinping have framed the Chinese diplomacy during the crisis of Covid-19 in the year 2020. In this sense, the speeches of Chinese diplomats reflect a paradigmatic approach to China's role in the international scenario. Traditionally, the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence China's foreign policy have guided Chinese foreign policy. These principles include mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China, 2014).

However, each generation of communist leaders has imprinted its characteristics on the foreign policy according to their particular context. Today, President Xi, under the premise of rejuvenating the Chinese nation, has taken a significant turn in foreign policy. Thus, the cautious and low-profile approach to foreign affairs, which shaped the initial transformation of China during the '80s and '90s, has been replaced with a more confident and active approach to befitting China's re-emergence as a significant player on the global stage (Nien-chung , 2016). Consequently, Chinese diplomacy "has a more activist inclination, forming a broader strategy

in asserting China's priorities" (Nien-chung, 2016: 82)

This shift in foreign policy is primarily a discursive shift during the Xi administration. The elements that define this discursive turn comprehend a highlight a strong sense of China's civilization achievements and historical experiences, the intent of showing the foreign policy differentiated from the Western model of diplomacy based on values of liberal democracy, and the emphasis on building "a new type of international relations" distinguished by confrontations between blocks as during the Cold War, a more pragmatic approach to disregard political and ideological differences among countries in order to pursue common economic benefits in defense of economic globalization (Poh and Li, 2017).

The transformation of Chinese foreign policy during the regime of Xi corresponding to a new era in the history of China. In the report to the 19th ccp Congress, highlighted three development stages of China since 1949. First, "China has stood up". Second, "China has grown rich". Finally, China has entered a new era of "it is becoming strong". Thus, Xi asked for "major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics in order to build China into a great modern socialist power in the world by the middle of the 21st century" (Hu, 2019: 1).

After Xi came to power in 2012, China's bureaucratic elite also joined in the "battle for discourse." (Semenov

and Tsvyk, 2021). In this way, at the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in November 2013, the CCP adopted "The Decision on Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening Reforms," accentuating the need to strengthen opportunities for the propagation of information overseas, establishing a system of entitlement/power to foreign policy discourse and endorsing the access of Chinese culture into a broader world. (Semenov and Tsvyk, 2021). This vision shaped Chinese diplomacy during the Covid-19 crisis in 2020.

To understand speeches and the specific diplomatic actions during the pandemic outbreak. In that case, it is necessary to officially consider the general framework of Chinese diplomacy during this period. This framework helps us explain how Chinese diplomacy during the Covid-19 crisis was focused on winning the battle of narratives, establishing its truth, and promoting an image of China as a responsible nation. Chinese diplomacy, dictated by the Politburo at the core of the CCP, should therefore be seen as part of a larger strategy that has the ultimate goal of strengthening and legitimizing the rule of CCP (McGregor, 2010).

A good example to examine the relationship between official statements and diplomatic discourses and actions to promote a Chinese truth about Covid 19 is the participation of Wang Yi, State Councilor and Minister of Foreign Affairs, at the Symposium on the International Situation and China's Foreign Relations on 11 December 2020 in Beijing. He established that "Facing the devastating impact of COVID-19 and an increasingly complex international environment, China was among the first to contain the virus, to carry out international cooperation against COVID-19, to reopen the economy safely, and to restore economic growth" (Wang, 2020). From this perspective, the Chinese government has taken proactive steps to stay ahead of the changing circumstances, "in an effort to serve the country and contribute to the world." According to Wang, the Chinese government fought at the same time against novel coronavirus and the "political virus" as well as made new contributions to safeguarding national interests and global stability (Wang, 2020).

To Wang, in different ways, the Chinese diplomats made different efforts and achieved important achievements during these troubled times. First, the diplomats have carried out robust international cooperation against COVID-19. Second, they have further expanded opening-up and mutually beneficial cooperation. Third, they have provided strong support for global stability. Fourth, they have made solid progress in building a community with a shared future with neighbors. Fifth, they have protected and expanded the shared interests of the developing world. Sixth, they have actively participated in the reform of the global governance system. Finally, they have served the Chinese people through diplomatic work (Wang, 2020).

An important aspect, according to Wang, was the fact that the diplomats have firmly safeguarded the national interests and dignity of China. He said: "Over the past year, by staying committed to an independent foreign policy of peace, we have firmly safeguarded the path and system chosen by the Chinese people and upheld our country's sovereignty, security and development interests. We have taken a clear-cut position against any politicization or stigmatization of COVID-19 and held back the global spread of the "political virus". We have pushed back against slanders and smears against China's system and path and resolutely defended the security of political authority and system of the Party and the country. We have forcefully defeated the attempts to interfere in China's internal affairs by external forces through issues related to Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Tibet, and upheld sovereign independence and territorial integrity of our country. With justice on our side, we have denounced various types of disinformation and laid bare the attempts of scapegoating and blame-shifting in a bid to present and put on record an objective and truthful historical narrative. We have taken firm countermeasures against unilateral sanctions and the so-called long-arm jurisdiction in the name of national security and safeguarded our national dignity and the legitimate rights and interests of our companies and citizens." (Wang, 2020).

Under this vision, the diplomatic approach was directed towards denying accusations of ineptitude or bad faith on the part of the Chinese government and how they had managed the crisis, and showing a positive and friendly image of China. In addition, diplomacy was employed as a privileged vehicle in the refutation of several conspiracy theories which maintained that SARS-Cov-2 was a lab-engineered virus intentionally created and spread as a part of the Chinese Grand Strategy to rule the world (Van Beusekom, 2020).

From a long-term perspective, the diplomatic response was manufactured not only to "save the face" of Chinese officials but to contribute to the consolidation of a regime of truth. In the first instance, the principal objective was to proclaim the effectiveness of the Chinese government in controlling the outbreak of the epidemic, and, when circumstances allowed, to render assistance to other countries during the health emergency. In addition, recognizing more recently that a positive image on the international stage is essential for the stability and legitimacy of the Chinese political regime, the CCP has used diplomacy to manufacture a favorable international environment (Shullman, 2019). It can be seen therefore how even during the pandemic Chinese diplomatic strategy has been devoted to strengthening the relationship between truth, knowledge, and power in line with the regime of truth proposed by Foucault.

Diplomatic strategy during the outbreak was expressed in two distinct ways: one was aggressive, while the other employed public diplomacy, was more subtle, and oriented more towards persuasion. These responses showed the profound change which had taken place from the days of Deng Xiaoping's China, which focused on keeping a low profile and "peace and development" (Keith, 2018). Contemporary Chinese diplomatic strategies have moved away from Deng´s vision of a nation which "hides our light and bides our time", and concentrated on keeping a low profile while developing strength (Wong and Deng, 2020).

The transformation of Chinese foreign policy has been a process modified by the visions of each generation of leaders. These visions of a Chinese future have recently become characterized by a more proactive attitude as a result of the arrival of Xi and the fifth generation leaders (Stenslie and Gang, 2016). Xi has promoted China's new role on the international stage based on a great national revival (Economy, 2018). As Loh (2020) has noted, Xi has made foreign policy one of his political aims and a fundamental performance target, tying his performance and legitimacy together. The success of both rests on the ability of Chinese diplomats to deliver on his expansive foreign policy goals. The outbreak of COVID-19 therefore posed a significant challenge to Xi's relatively young presidency and his stated aim of transforming Chinese diplomacy, and

it soon became apparent that this was a challenge which required significant pragmatism.

China's more proactive diplomatic stance became known as "China's Wolf Warrior Diplomacy." The concept is derived from a Chinese action movie in which Chinese soldiers, led by an American mercenary, fight against enemies of their nation, and somewhat predictably emerge victorious (Hughes, 2020). In essence, this film is combines the Hollywood-style movie superhero genre with Chinese-style patriotism (Buckley, 2107). The concept describes often-confrontational offensives by Chinese diplomats designed to defend national interests (Zhu, 2020). The type of diplomacy involved mainly consists of Chinese officials issuing "hawkish, painfully direct, and sometimes untrue statements in an attempt to rally people around the Communist Party and undermine critics abroad." (Ma, 2020: 1).

The origin of this diplomatic style is rooted in growing Chinese nationalism, in turn fostered by the continuous promotion of the four confidences by the CCP: "in our chosen path, in our political system, in our guiding theories, and in our culture." (Zhu, 2020). An additional reason stems from explicit instructions from President Xi calling on diplomats to show more fighting spirit (Zhai and Tian, 2020). The constantly growing confrontation with the US under the Trump administration provides fertile ground for the new-style diplomacy. Wang Yi, Minister of Foreign Affairs, is quoted as referring to a Mao Zedong slogan which states: "We will not attack unless we are attacked…

but if we are attacked, we will certainly counterattack." (Wang in Zhai and Tian, 2020). Minister Wang further declared to the press at the annual meeting of the national legislature that Chinese diplomats "never pick a fight or bully others, but we have principles and guts…We will push back against any deliberate insult to resolutely defend our national honor and dignity." (The Economist, 2020).

One of the aims of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy is the preservation of Chinese honor in the face of media attacks in the US and elsewhere. It is a mindset expressed openly by diverse members of the ministry of foreign affairs, particularly by younger diplomats, who have grown up in a more self-confident China. (Kuwahara, 2020). Among these younger diplomats three Foreign Ministry spokespeople in particular stand out for their manifestation of this diplomatic style: Hua Chunying, Zhao Lijian and Geng Shuang. They have impressed the public with their distinctive style and have many supporters, particularly amongst Chinese Generation Z citizens, who have a strong sense of national identity and pride (Huang, 2020). While in the Western Hemisphere, diplomats from countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States are facing questions at home over their handling of international affairs, in China diplomats who have shown less conciliatory positions when expressing their point of view seem to enjoy great popular support.

The main communication strategy of the so-called Wolf Warrior Diplomacy is the sharing of text messages on the Twitter social network, along with interviews published in the international media. Press conferences specifically organized to refute some accusations about China's behavior prior to and during the COVID-19 outbreak are another commonly-employed diplomatic tactic. The irony behind the employment of Twitter to put forward the Chinese argument is that this network is actually prohibited within China itself.

Gui Congyou, the current Ambassador of the People's Republic of China to Sweden, is just one example among many of the energetic and threatening tone Chinese diplomats are taking to defend the image of China abroad, even beyond the handling of the COVID-19 crisis. Ambassador Gui pushed back abruptly on Swedish criticism of alleged Chinese human rights abuses, warning in an interview with a Swedish newspaper of severe consequences if the fault-finding didn't stop. He said: "The Chinese government absolutely cannot allow any country, organization or person to harm China's national interests. Of course, we must take countermeasures," he said, mentioning likely disruption to Swedish cultural exchanges with China. "Economic and trade relations will also be affected." (Detmer, 2020: 1).

The other side of the coin is so-called mask diplomacy. One of the first and most pressing problems that countries faced with the sudden emergence of the new coronavirus was finding medical supplies. This was particularly

true in the case of face masks, which experienced a significant rise in price due to competition between nations to acquire them, mostly as a result of evidence that mask-wearing impeded the spread of the virus. China therefore decided to donate both masks and other medical equipment, in addition to sharing key scientific knowledge about combating the Sars-Cov-2 virus as soon as it became available. Both aid and medical assistance subsequently became known as mask diplomacy. At the beginning of the outbreak, China received this type of aid, particularly from Japan (Li and McElveen, 2020) and South Korea (Alton, 2020). Once countries began to experience some success in containing the virus, this type of help became increasingly important in the theater of international relations, with mask diplomacy being practiced not only by China but also Vietnam and Taiwan.

According to Wong (2020), Chinese mask diplomacy is defined by four characteristics. Firstly, this diplomacy emphasizes the distribution of vital resources as a means of securing mass coverage of the population. Secondly, the donation of supplies to ailing hospitals and local charities are pivotal in creating a positive image of China. Thirdly, this diplomacy contributes to the creation of long-term dependence relations and patronage networks. The fourth characteristic highlights the willingness of Chinese civil society to cooperate with others and shows the friendly face of China. Some Chinese multinationals have used the pandemic as an opportunity to forge international connections and project and disseminate aid with the intention of winning allies and creating a favorable impression among the international community. Finally, Wong (2020) suggests that a critical dimension of China's mask diplomacy is its three-faceted moralizing discursive traits. The first of these is criticism by China of US "disengagement" and "abdication" of global leadership, mainly in terms of failing to heed who advice or offer aid to European nations. The second trait is the manifestation by China of its intention to become a global leader in health cooperation by sharing knowledge, information, experiences and resources. The third and final trait can be seen in how China is reframing both internal pressures and the domestic measures adopted to control the outbreak, and grounding these in the interests of the global political community.

One of a number of strategies employed by the Chinese government in order to create a narrative favorable to the ccp administration is the donation of medical supplies to countries affected by the pandemic. The ccp is employing such strategies in order to generate a positive image of China both inside and outside the country and engender a feeling of national pride and trust towards the political authorities, with the ultimate aim of strengthening the legitimacy of their regime. In addition, this type of diplomacy–both through the narrative it promotes and the acts that accompany the narrative – further legitimizes the Chinese political regime

and highlights the benefits it can bring. Once China had apparently come through the most severe phase of the pandemic, the CCP authorities played a role in showing China to be a reliable ally by sharing not only material resources to help contain outbreaks in other countries, but by sending medical personnel to disseminate information and share experience about the virus. As part of this effort, China has provided medical aid and sold ICU facilities, ventilators, masks, gloves, testing kits and medicines (Verma, 2020) to other countries. This type of diplomacy seeks to distance China from being recognized as the source of the outbreak and instead cultivate a reputation as a responsible and benevolent global leader in times of crisis (Chen and Molter, 2020).

According to Alton (2020), China has offered aid in four distinct ways during the Covid-19 crisis. Firstly, by government-to-government donation of medical equipment to 82 countries in the WHO and African Union. Secondly, through sending seasoned expert medical teams to affected areas and cooperating on health technology, including sharing diagnostics and therapeutics and holding videoconferences with medical experts. Thirdly, through sub-national support from local Chinese authorities, and finally through non-governmental assistance from Chinese corporations and NGOs.

China has therefore provided aid to a significant number of countries and helped them to confront the health crisis pre-equipped with tens of millions of masks and millions of testing kits. In addition, China's role as a world leader in the manufacture of medical equipment allowed the nation to gift 1,000 ventilators to the city of New York (Hornung, 2020). One year before the beginning of pandemic, 44% of the world's exports of face masks originated from China, with the next largest exporters, Germany (7%) and the US (6%), playing a comparatively minor role (Fuchs, et. al., 2020).

In Europe, China provided 30 tons of medical supplies to Italy, while Huawei offered to help fight the virus by setting up cloud computing facilities for Italian hospitals in order to facilitate the rapid sharing of information. Serbian President Vucic went to Belgrade airport to receive 16 tons of medical aid from China, kissing the Chinese flag and pledging to implement the Chinese virus-containment model. Prime Minister Viktor Orban of Hungary praised China for its assistance and for the provision of medical supplies (Verma, 2020a). Poland received 20,000 masks, 5,000 protective suits, 5,000 sets of medical goggles, 10,000 single-use medical gloves and 10,000 shoe covers, with Greece receiving 550,000 masks as well as other protective gear (Alton, 2020). In addition, the tycoon Jack Ma promised to donate 2 million masks for distribution in European countries including Spain, Italy, Belgium, and France, with Huawei offering a substantial amount of personal protection equipment to Ireland (Wong, 2020). Oppo, Xiaomi, and

other Chinese smartphone companies also sent thousands of masks to Europe (Verma, 2020b).

V. Conclusions

The response of the Chinese government during the first few weeks after the appearance of the virus was interpreted critically by the international community. However, once the CCP began to experience some success in containing the crisis it began a diplomatic campaign to improve the image of China on the international stage. These diplomatic activities however were frequently viewed with suspicion, and presumed to be part of the Chinese desire for world hegemony. One positive result of this initiative however has been to improve the image of Chinese state principally within the country itself, which in fact may have been the principal motivation. In other words, the main concern of the CCP has been strengthening the legitimacy of its claim to rule a vast and complex country, with foreign policy viewed as one way of achieving this.

The COVID-19 outbreak accelerated the transition of Chinese foreign policy from one which was humble, quiet and discreet, to one which was considerably more active. The new foreign policy stance took place in an environment where the Chinese economy was gradually opening up, and, as a result of this, foreign policy took on a broader dimension and was more focused towards consolidating the vision of a rejuvenated Chinese nation. Whether by showing a kind and supportive face through "mask diplomacy" or a more severe countenance as exemplified by "wolf warrior diplomacy", the intention is the same: to strengthen the image of China and thus increase the prestige of the CCP.

This is how Chinese diplomacy during the COVID-19 world crisis has become an integral part of the strategy to win truth narratives. China of course is not the only country that promotes its narratives and pushes for their international acceptance. The imposition of a truth manufactured by the Chinese state is also viewed as a way of strengthening a regime of truth relating to the legitimacy of the CCP. The bureaucratic elite generates and communicates a narrative about China's past, about what the Chinese nation is, and about how China has made critical contributions to the world. They have highlighted how, at this moment in history, fraught with difficulties and in the middle of a sea of uncertainty, the Chinese government and its people have made valuable contributions to helping overcome the crisis. At the same time however it should not be forgotten that the benevolent face of Chinese diplomacy is accompanied by both coercion and threats, and while strong government has given China significant material capabilities, the

same strong government is responsible for spreading a discourse both nationally and internationally, that it would like to be considered as true. This truth however is only designed to strengthen the legitimacy of the ccp and consolidate its grip on power: world hegemony is not the ultimate

goal. Finally, the ccp's chosen methods of communicating with the world about the COVID-19 health crisis, in addition to its national and international response, have been governed by its overwhelming desire to both legitimize its rule and consolidate its power within China itself.

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