

Analyzing the Impact of COVID-19 on China's International Image

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Abstract

At the end of 2019 the first outbreak of novel coronavirus (COVID-19) infections occurred in Wuhan, prompting the China government to take up lockdown measures to stop the outbreak from spreading. This showed that the country's pursuit of administrative efficiency against the epidemic came at the expense of the universal values of freedom, democracy, and human rights. Moreover, the central government's slow response to the initial outbreak of COVID-19 and its concealment led to it quickly spreading around the world. For this reason, U.S. President Trump's administration frequently used the term "Chinese virus" in place of its proper terminology.

Although China has been actively building up its image as a "great nation that has succeeded in fighting epidemics" through its "Global Foreign Propaganda" campaign and diplomatic actions, it has still been criticized by European countries, the United States, and other countries at international conferences. The United States and other countries formally blamed China for COVID-19 and asked for compensation, and even anti-Chinese sentiments in the international community have arisen. Although China has employed its "Global Foreign Propaganda" campaign and various diplomatic actions to refurbish and build up a heroic image of fighting against the epidemic, the international community still questions the integrity of its government and its political propaganda purposes.

Keywords: COVID-19, China's national image, authoritarianism, global foreign propaganda

1. Introduction

Country image is a complex and vague concept that refers to the perceptions, credibility, and stereotypes of a particular country and its people (Martin & Eroglu, 1993). As Kenneth (1059) mentioned in "National Images and the International System", "We must recognize that some people's decisions can determine policies and national behaviors, but they do not respond to the objective reality of the situation, but to their 'image' of the situation." Thus, Kenneth believed that country image is not innate, but essentially a belief structure, which is an overall evaluation formed during the process of interaction between actors (countries). Obviously, country image is also the international community's perception of a country - that is, once a country image is formed, it projects an overall evaluation of the relative stability of the country, further influencing the policy-making of other countries towards it.

China for a long time has presented the international community with a mysterious image of Red China. However, ever since China's reform and opening up in 1979, it has gradually exerted its influence on the international stage, yet has also created a negative image among the international community, expressed in such terms as the China threat theory, arms expansion, and human rights issues. This has given China a bad reputation among most of its neighbors in the Asia-Pacific region.

To eliminate these negative images, China has tried to shape its image of peaceful expansion through its foreign policy approaches, including Deng Xiaoping's "hide and bide", Jiang Zemin's "being a good neighbor and partner," Hu Jintao's "an amicable, secure and prosperous neighbourhood," and Xi Jinping's "amity, sincerity, mutual benefit and inclusiveness." Public diplomacy tools include the media, the Internet, Confucius Institutes set up in many countries, etc. In addition, China has actively participated in multilateral international organizations, such as the China-ASEAN Investment Agreement, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and

the World Trade Organization (WTO). However, members of the international community still express doubts about its progress. The 2013 View of China survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in the U.S. showed that African countries had the highest perceptions of China, while Middle East and European countries had negative perceptions of China (see Figure 1).

China Favorability Highest in Africa

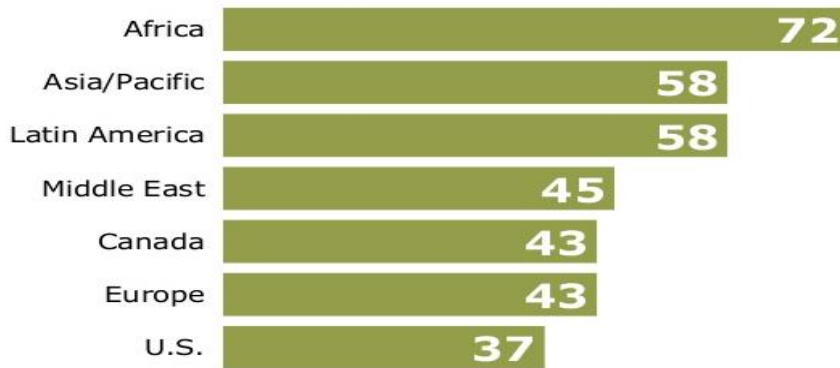


Figure 1. Global Perceptions of China in 2013

Source: Pew Research Center (2013)

Although China has been actively building up a good country image, its foreign strategies (such as the Belt and Road Initiative, sovereignty disputes and land reclamation over islands in the South China Sea, disputes in the East China Sea, and various Taiwan Strait issues) have all shown an intention to challenge U.S. power in the Asia-Pacific region. This has made the United States consider that China is gradually beginning to threaten its dominant position in the Asia-Pacific region ever since the end of World War II. It also makes most of the world suspicious of China’s claim of its “peaceful rise”. Since 2012, these actions have contributed to a decline in the United States’ perception of China, especially after Donald Trump became president in January 2017. As the Pew Research Center survey showed, the United States’ unfavorable view of China increased from 47% to 66% from 2018 to 2020 (see Figure 2).

Negative views of China continue to grow in U.S.

% who say they have a ___ opinion of China

100 %

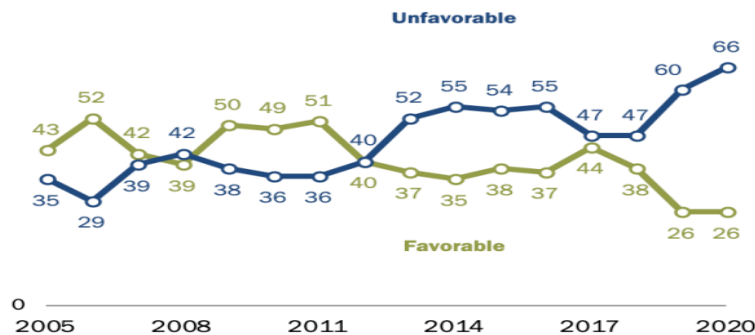


Figure 2. The United States’ Perception of China (2005–2020)

Source: Silver, Devlin & Huang (2019)

On March 22, 2018, Trump signed a presidential memorandum targeting China for unfair trade practices and intellectual property rights infringement (Landler & Tankersley, 2018), which essentially kicked off the U.S.-China trade war by imposing tariffs and other trade actions on China. However, the trade war was not a major factor in the negative perception of China held by the U.S. The main reason behind the trade war was China’s long-term theft of U.S. high-tech technology (such as the Thousand Talents program, the Meng Wanzhou case, Operation Fox Hunt, the establishment of the Confucius Institutes, etc.), which led to a decline by 13% and 22% in favorability towards China in the U.S. and Canada, respectively (see Figure 3).

Negative views of China up sharply in Canada, U.S.

% who have an *unfavorable* view of China

100%



Figure 3. U.S. and Canada’s Perceptions of China (2005–2019)

Source: Pew Research Center (2019)

According to the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) report (2020), COVID-19 was first detected in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, but China tried to conceal the epidemic (Center for Naval Analyses, 2020, pp.3-4). At the same time, Taiwan Centers for Disease Control immediately wrote to WHO officials on December 31, 2019, noting that COVID-19 appears to have atypical pneumonia (SARS) characteristics. Although Taiwan did not explicitly state that “the outbreak would be human-to-human”, the possibility of human-to-human transmission was made clear by stating in an email that all patients in China needed isolation treatment (Taiwan Centers for Disease Control, 2020). Unfortunately, the WHO only replied, “Yes, received, will forward to expert colleagues to deal with (Watt, 2020).” After that, nothing happened. The WHO ignored Taiwan’s warning that the virus could be transmitted human-to-human and spread false news on behalf of China, causing the epidemic to spread worldwide and resulting in an unfortunate price paid by all countries.

By originating in Wuhan, China, the virus epidemic completely changed the world situation that had been seemingly already set in stone through the U.S.-China trade war. The Trump administration emphasized that the epidemic originally evolved from just a catastrophe in China to a major event that is still changing the history of humanity.

2. COVID-19 Outbreak Damages China’s International Image

There are many different opinions about the origin of COVID-19, and there are even rumors that the virus was artificially produced. Although there is no direct and concrete evidence of this having occurred, a Pew Research Center poll on April 8, 2020 found that 29% of Americans believe that the virus was created in the P4 lab (Schaeffer, 2020). Moreover, President Trump was convinced that the coronavirus originated in the P4 laboratory in Wuhan, China and claimed on April 30, 2020 that he had seen evidence that “the COVID-19 came from the Wuhan Virus Institute (Cohen et al., 2020).” On May 3, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said there was “substantial evidence” linking the virus to the Wuhan lab (Mike Pompeo, 2020). On July 10, Chinese virologist Yan Limeng said in an interview with Fox News that the source of COVID-19 was revealed by a Chinese

Communist Party military laboratory (Everington, 2020), confirming President Trump's suspicions about where it originated.

Ever since the outbreak of COVID-19, reporting on the source of the virus has centered on the virus leak theory concerning China's P4 laboratory (Wang, 2020). This theory has repeatedly been the focus of media and public attention and has been confirmed by Chinese virologists to have originated from Chinese military laboratories, casting a dark shadow over China's image once again.

Soon after the COVID-19 outbreak, China in fact tried to cover it up in multiple ways. Indeed, its government event initially misled its own citizens about the epidemic, which led to the pandemic becoming even worse. From official data reported by China to the WHO, the world believed that China should be responsible for three incidents: delaying official notification of its virus outbreak; concealing the epidemic; and reporting figures that were not consistent with the facts. Therefore, after the outbreak of COVID-19 in Europe, the United States, Japan, and South Korea, countries around the world quickly harbored great distrust of China over anything related to the virus. This led U.S. Republican Congressman Michael McCaul to declare in an interview with Fox News on March 24, 2020 that China's concealment of the epidemic was "one of the worst cover-ups in human history (Nelson, 2020)."

The outbreak of COVID-19 worldwide also brought about waves of anti-China sentiment. For example, after the outbreak, headlines such as "yellow peril," "Chinese virus panda-monium," and "China kids stay home" appeared in French and Australian newspapers (Wong, 2020). China's Consulate General in Melbourne pointed out that incidents of insult, hatred, and xenophobia involving the epidemic had occurred to varying degrees across Australia and reminded Chinese citizens to avoid verbal and physical confrontations to ensure their personal safety (China News Group, 2020). In a Los Angeles, California high school, an Asian student was beaten over 20 times in the head by a fellow student who accused him of carrying the virus and told him to "go back" to China (Zhong, 2020). Discontent with China in Indian society also increased, with the border conflict between India and China pushing further anti-Chinese sentiment (Liu, 2020). This showed that as the epidemic spread outward with population movements, fears fueled global Chinese exclusion and anti-Chinese sentiments.

The United States and other countries soon decided to blame and ask for compensation from China for the global pandemic caused by its government's widespread concealment of the epidemic. President Trump (2020) said the coronavirus outbreak had hit the U.S. harder than Japan's bombing of Pearl Harbor in World War II or the 9/11 attacks two decades ago,. Moreover, they stated that China's concealment of the epidemic was a violation of international law. Australian Federal Senator Amanda Stoker said Australia should rethink its relationship with China and pointed out that there is a possibility of a "Nuremberg-style trial" in which countries around the world could bring a cover-up lawsuit to an international court to hold Chinese authorities accountable for the COVID-19 pandemic (Stevens, 2020).

The coronavirus severely impacted the global economy, forcing countries to lock down their cities and businesses and to impose strict controls, causing massive economic shutdowns. Many countries, such as the United States, Australia, UK, Italy, Germany, Nigeria, Egypt, and India, have decided to ask China to compensate for the economic losses caused by the epidemic. U.S. Republican Congressmen Ron Wright and Chris Smith introduced the Sovereign Immunity Act on April 17, 2020, the purpose of which was to allow the American public to sue China if sovereign immunity is taken away. The bill would seek compensation from China for damages caused by the COVID-19 outbreak (Sagnip, 2020). Missouri Attorney General Eric Schmitt and Mississippi Attorney General Lynn Fitch sued China for concealing the epidemic and to seek compensation for the loss of life and economy (Pittman, 2020). Republican Senators Marsha Blackburn and Martha McSally will introduce the Stop China-Originated Viral Infectious Diseases (COVID) Act (McSally & Blackburn, 2020), and Republican Senator Josh Hawley introduced the Justice for Victims of COVID-19 Act (Congress, 2020). Both bills would hold China accountable for its handling of the outbreak and to seek compensation from its government.

Elsewhere around the world, the German newspaper Bild raised the question on April 20, 2020 of whether "China should be asked to pay for the losses caused by the coronavirus epidemic (Krishnan, 2020)." An Egyptian lawyer pressed charges against China President Xi Jinping, calling on his country to pay \$10 trillion in damages caused by the novel coronavirus in Egypt. Turkish lawyer Emir Akpınar also said that Turkey would be able to apply to international legal institutions in accordance with the principles of international law (Daily Sabah, 2020). Adish C. Aggarwala, Chairman of the All India Bar Association and the International Council of Jurists, wrote in a complaint that China, by allowing the spread of COVID-19 around the world with the aim of paralyzing major countries, is the sole beneficiary of it, in violation of International Health Regulations, and in serious violation of

international human rights and international humanitarian laws, should offer compensation, because of it (NDTV, 2020). As of April 29, at least six countries had filed lawsuits or claims against China via official or private organizations, with the total number of claims likely to exceed \$50 trillion (see Table 1).

Table 1. Eight Countries Demand Compensation from China for COVID-19

(Unit: US\$)

Country	Agent	Total amount of compensation
U.S.	Missouri Attorney General Eric Schmitt	Billions
	A Florida attorney	6 trillion
	Lawyer Larry Klayman and Freedom Watch	20 trillion
UK	Henry Jackson Society	6.5 trillion
Italy	COVID-19 Class Action	108 billion
Germany	Bild	160.2 billion
Egypt	Egyptian lawyer Mohamed Talaat	10 trillion
India	All India Bar Association	20 trillion
Nigeria	A group of Nigerian lawyers	200 billion
Australia	The Berman Law Group	6.5 trillion

Source: Soong (2020)

The China government tried to cover up the epidemic outbreak in the early days, which triggered a global pandemic and led to a resurgence of anti-Chinese sentiment. It also led to a wave of anti-China protests and a worldwide campaign to hold China accountable and to seek compensation, putting President Xi Jinping under tremendous domestic and international public pressure and dealing a severe blow to his country's international image. As Canadian Ambassador Dominic Barton said at the Canadian International Council on May 7, 2020, China's current diplomatic approach has led to a growing alienation from other countries and has damaged its international image (Canadian International Council, 2020). In addition, a poll conducted by Angus Reid Institute on May 13, 2020 shows that only 14% of residents have a positive view of China (see Figure 4), while a staggering 86% of residents are still dissatisfied with the China government's lack of honesty and transparency in dealing with the coronavirus pneumonia outbreak (Angus Reid Institute, 2020).

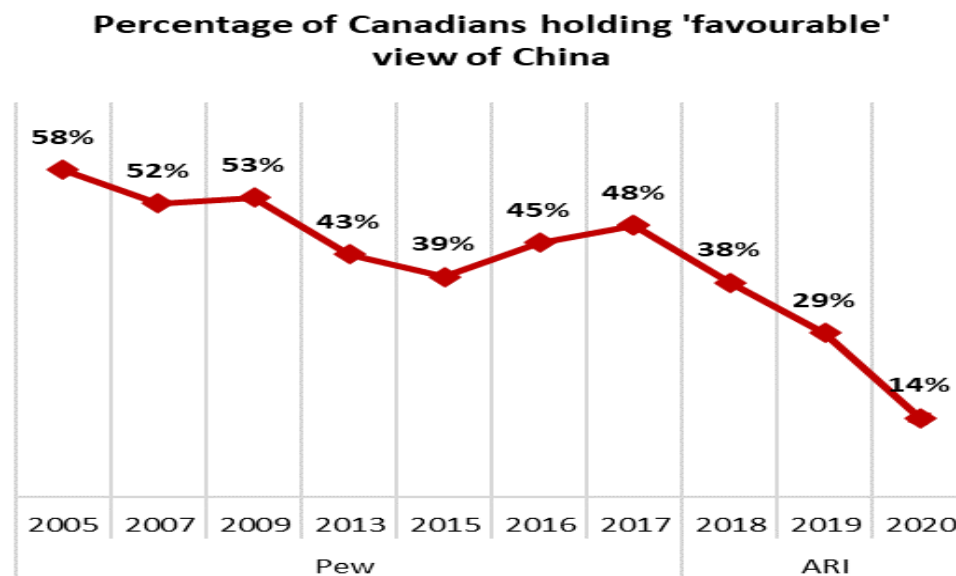


Figure 4. Percentage of Canadians holding a favorable view of China

Source: Angus Reid Institute (2020)

9 has damaged China's international image and made it face criticism from the global community. At the same time, China has attempted to project an international image of fighting the epidemic, by taking advantage of the global crisis caused by COVID-19 to libel and expel foreign media from its borders, including *Voice of America*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *Time*, etc., which have reported various negative aspects of China. In addition, China has used Internet technology and domestic media to launch the "Global Foreign Propaganda" to build an international image that it is helping the world fight the epidemic (Stevenson, 2020).

3. China Has Launched the "Global Foreign Propaganda" Campaign to Build a Heroic Image of Fighting the Coronavirus Epidemic

COVID-19 severely damaged China's international image, and so it launched the "Global Foreign Propaganda" campaign to cover up the negative image of its response to the pandemic's early outbreak. China has targeted to build an image as a model student fighting the epidemic in order to gain international recognition for its role in fighting COVID-19 (Center for Naval Analyses, 2020). For example, the *People's Daily* reported on March 10, 2020 that "since the outbreak of COVID-19, officials and experts from more than 50 international organizations, foreign academic and think tank institutions have sent letters and messages to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and its affiliated research institutions, highly praising China's epidemic prevention and control measures and the positive results achieved (Yang, 2020)." However, the Western media has not wholly accepted the heroic image created by China's official media in this epidemic situation, pushing China to launch the "Global Foreign Propaganda" campaign and to successfully "shirk its responsibility" for COVID-19. As Fox TV host Jesse Watters stated on the March 2, 2020 show, China needed to "formally apologize" for the coronavirus outbreak (Garcia, 2020). The United Kingdom newspaper *The Sun* published an article titled "Don't forget how China let coronavirus spread while trying to cover its tracks" on March 19, 2020, claiming that "If Chinese authorities had acted three weeks earlier than they did, the number of coronavirus cases could have been reduced by 95 percent and its geographic spread limited (Dan, 2020)." *The Daily Telegraph* in Australia published a study by Five Eyes on May 2, 2020, pointing out that China deliberately covered up evidence of the virus early on in a pure case of negligence and deliberately destroyed evidence of the origin of the virus (Kaplan, 2020).

Although China faced international pressure for its mismanagement of the outbreak in the early days, it used multiple channels, such as Internet technology, news media, donations of medical supplies, and dispatching medical personnel to infected areas, to reverse its negative image in regards to the epidemic outbreak. China also employed these channels to expand its international influence. For example, after the U.S. theorized that the coronavirus originated in China at the beginning of the outbreak of the epidemic, Chinese epidemiologist Zhong Nanshan told a press conference at the Guangzhou Municipal Government on February 27, 2020 that "although COVID-19 first appeared in China, that does not necessarily mean it originated in China (Wang and Xu, 2020)"

The Guardian reported that a research team from the Institute of Genetics at University College London conducted a genetic analysis of COVID-19 extracted from more than 7,600 patients from many countries and found that it began to spread in the second half of 2019 and that the United States and Europe hid some cases of COVID-19 in the winter of 2019; obviously, by saying that the virus originated in China, countries such as the U.S. tried to politicize the outbreak by tracing the source of the virus to China (Kuo, 2020). Zhao Lijian, spokesman of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, declared on Twitter on March 21, 2020: "Coronavirus did not originate from China, and the virus may have been brought to Wuhan by the US military (Zhao, 2020)." On June 18, 2020, Beijing CDC researcher Yang Peng said it was found that the virus came from the European direction through genome-wide sequencing (Wen, 2020). In short, at the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, China not only concealed the epidemic, but also tried its best to shirk its responsibility and shift blame for the origin of the virus to European countries and the U.S., with the intention of reversing the narrative of the origin of the virus.

Even so, the COVID-19 outbreak was seen by the China government as a good opportunity to promote its superiority and enhance its international image. For example, in Beijing on February 23, 2020, Xi Jinping delivered an important speech at a meeting to advance the work on coordinating the prevention and control of COVID-19 and to promote economic and social development, saying, "It has been proven that the CPC Central Committee's judgement on the situation of the epidemic is accurate, all work arrangements are timely, and the measures taken are effective. The results of the prevention and control work have once again demonstrated the notable advantages of the leadership of the CPC and the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics (Peng, 2020)." On March 5, 2020, the Chinese Communist Party's *Xinhua News* published an article entitled "The World Should Be Thankful to China" to counter the negative image of China created by the pandemic, especially that the United States should apologize to China for its previous wrongdoings (Yang, 2020). *Xinhua's* intention in publishing this article was to send three messages to the world: COVID-19 did not originate in China; China had bought time for the world to inhibit the spread of the epidemic; and the China government will help foreign countries that do not have adequate resources to fight against COVID-19.

While China has been keen to create the narrative that "the virus did not originate in China", it was also actively creating a heroic image of "fighting the epidemic". For example, on March 13, 2020, *Xinhuanet* reported: "After the outbreak of COVID-19, tens of thousands of local medical workers in Wuhan fought against the epidemic day and night. To avoid infecting their families with the virus, many medical workers have not been able to go home for more than a month. Moreover, China was informed that Japan had insufficient coronavirus nucleic acid detection kits, so China urgently donated a batch of test kits. When the epidemic situation in Daegu, Korea, became critical, China made emergency preparations for a large number of medical masks. China donated a batch of nucleic acid test kits and medical equipment for the coronavirus outbreak in Iran and sent a Chinese expert team to assist the outbreak (Huaxia, 2020a)." On April 10, 2020, China's Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian announced, "Thus far, the Chinese government has provided or is providing supplies to 127 countries and four international organizations, including surgical masks, protective gear and testing reagents. China donated \$20 million to the WHO, sent 13 medical teams to 11 countries and held over 70 video conferences with experts from more than 150 countries and international organisations. Localities, enterprises and civil groups in China also donated medical supplies to more than 100 countries, regions and international organisations (Foreign Ministry, 2020)." On April 14, 2020, Premier Li Keqiang attended a special meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (also known as 10+3) on COVID-19, saying "As the virus is spreading in over 200 countries and regions, the life and health of the people around the world and the global economy is under serious threat. China is willing to offer support and help ASEAN countries within its reach through free assistance and commercial channels. Additionally, China suggests building a 10+3 reserve center of emergency medical supplies (Premier, 2020)." Based on the above, this study concludes that, in addition to claiming its epidemic prevention and control achievements, China has been actively sharing its experience in epidemic prevention and control, sending medical teams, and providing medical supplies and medical assistance in an attempt to demonstrate its image as a responsible power and to gain international friendship for its government through large-scale foreign assistance (Center for Naval Analyses, 2020, pp.10-12).

China has worked hard to build its image of a global hero in the fight against COVID-19. For example, *Xinhua* reported on March 20, 2020, "Issam Makhoul, member of the Political Bureau of the Israeli Communist Party, appreciated China taking the lead to help and support other countries, especially those hard hit by the epidemic (Huaxia, 2020b). Former Italian prime minister Massimo D'Alema said the Italian people are struggling to fight the epidemic. He thanked the CPC, the China government, and the Chinese people for their full support and selfless help. Maite Mola, vice president of the Party of the European Left, expressed sincere gratitude and

appreciation for China's support and assistance to European countries in their fight against the epidemic (Huaxia, 2020b)."

Although China has attempted to portray itself as a global hero in the fight against the epidemic, others in the international community have remained skeptical of China's achievements. For example, Sebastian Strangio, an expert on Southeast Asian geopolitics, noted in *Le Figaro* on April 16, 2020 that "the epidemic has triggered a long-standing underlying anti-Chinese sentiment in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations" (Falletti, 2020). In an interview with the *Financial Times* on April 17, 2020, French President Emmanuel Macron said, "There was a lack of transparency in China's handling of the Wuhan pneumonia outbreak, and I would not believe that China handled the epidemic well (Mallet, 2020)." Vanessa Molter, a research associate at the Stanford Internet Observatory (SIO) at Stanford University, and Renee DiResta, Director of Research, reported in the Harvard Kennedy School of Misinformation Review on June 8, 2020, that "During the epidemic, Chinese officials used official media and internet technology to create and disseminate the Chinese Communist Party's version of the coronavirus story (Molter & DiResta, 2020)." It can thus be seen that China's anti-epidemic measures and its foreign aid have attracted wide attention from media around the world, but they are skeptical of its information on the epidemic, especially that on confirmed epidemic cases. During the global epidemic outbreak, China announced the results of its fight against the coronavirus and sent a large number of medical supplies abroad in an attempt to reverse its negative image. However, the quality of medical supplies has led the international community to question the integrity of the China government and the purpose behind this effort.

China generally has used the "Global Foreign Propaganda" campaign to state that it provided whatever assistance it could offer to other countries and regions in the midst of the stalemate in its own epidemic prevention and control. However, after the China government took the drastic measures of "city lockdown" to prevent and control the epidemic, Beijing took advantage of the serious epidemic in Europe and the United States to promote the effectiveness of its own fight against the epidemic and to actively reach out to the international community. From the government and official media to hospitals, research institutes, and enterprises, China initiated this campaign to export the "Chinese model of fighting the epidemic." Its assistance has reached countries on all five continents. China has continuously promoted its image as a "great power that successfully fought the epidemic" and a "great power that took responsibility during the crisis (Koo, 2020)." However, from the concealment of the epidemic in the early stage to the quality problems of the medical equipment and masks in the later stage, China was criticized by the United States and other countries, which also made the international community question the integrity of the China government and the political propaganda purpose behind its actions. In an effort to spread its version about how its system is helping to prevent and fight the epidemic, China also expelled foreign media from reporting on China's negative impact, which elevated the U.S.-China confrontation to the brink of "unrestricted warfare" and also allowed the two sides to expose that the "administrative efficiency" of the Chinese Communist Party in epidemic prevention violated universal values and principles of freedom, democracy, and human rights during the competition for epidemic prevention and control.

4. The Chinese Communist Party's "Administrative Efficiency" in Epidemic Prevention Revealed That It Violated the Principle of Universal Values

At the end of 2019, the first case of coronavirus occurred in Wuhan, China, and by the beginning of 2020, the government took severe large-scale measures to lock down Wuhan in an attempt to contain its spread. China did not disclose all information about the epidemic to the public, because of the "Dr. Li Wenliang incident". Instead, China intensified censorship and deletion of information related to the epidemic on the Internet and social media and simultaneously activated a propaganda system for "positive" reporting on the epidemic, requiring the media to only report positive stories. For example, the *People's Daily* reported on May 9, 2020 that "One of the reasons why China was able to contain the coronavirus epidemic within a short period of time was that it was always open, transparent and responsible, open to the world, let the community know, and released information about the epidemic in a timely manner. The fight against the epidemic cannot be delayed, and cooperation is the key to victory. China has done many right things from the very beginning. Many countries and international organizations have spoken highly of China's anti-epidemic measures and transparency. China will always join hands with other countries to protect the homeland of mankind. This is a vivid reflection of China's practical actions to implement the concept of human destiny as a community (People's Daily, 2020)." While publicizing Xi Jinping's effectiveness in fighting the epidemic, China's official media were also trying to prove to the world the superiority of and confidence in the country's authoritarian system of "concentrating on big things and centralizing power on one person."

China's massive city lockdown in the early days of the coronavirus outbreak, strict restrictions on population

movement, and the “Skynet” combined biometric system in fact brought the epidemic under control in March. The “efficiency of epidemic prevention” created by China made the China-style epidemic prevention model an instant one for many countries to follow. In contrast, in the early stage of the epidemic, countries in Europe and the United States adopted a slow and loosely controlled approach, resulting in the outbreak of the epidemic soon getting out of control. This led to a discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of democratic and authoritarian systems for epidemic prevention. It was even thought that the authoritarian system was more effective in responding to the pneumonia crisis in Wuhan. At the same time, the China government used official media to publicize the effectiveness of its fight against the epidemic and the superiority of its authoritarian governance to constantly emphasize “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era”. China believes it has the best system in the world - better than the Western capitalist system and better than democracy. However, it is also under this system where rank has its privileges, where there is no objective medical and judicial supervision, and where everything is based on the interests and values of the minority communist leaders as the basis for all policies. It is no wonder that a pandemic erupted throughout the world.

Even so, the Chinese Communist Party continued to preach about the superiority of its system after the coronavirus pandemic. Upon discovering the seriousness of the epidemic, the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee immediately established the “Central Leading Group on Responding to the Novel Coronavirus Disease Outbreak” (Li, 2020). Xi Jinping emphasized that he “has been personally directing and deploying” all efforts toward the epidemic. Xi also mentioned that China’s superior political system allowed it to act quickly so that its leadership system would not be blamed.

From the perspective of practical politics, it can be observed that the China-style epidemic prevention model can quickly and effectively control the spread of the epidemic domestically, but it also highlights the administrative efficiency of the authoritarian regime at the cost of democracy and human rights. Moreover, China’s epidemic prevention model is based on the logic of political stability maintenance. At the first instance of the coronavirus outbreak, the epidemic was immediately hidden under the pretext of stability overrides everything. China’s internal critics and whistle-blowers of its policies were clamped down hard, and to prevent the media from revealing the truth about the outbreak, China immediately imposed a news blockade and expelled Western journalists at any cost.

It is certainly not easy for Western countries to follow China’s model of epidemic prevention, such as large-scale city lockdowns and Skynet surveillance. In addition to having the power to confront China’s regime, Western countries are also involved in economic, social, and human rights issues. The American media outlet *Vox* reported on March 26, 2020: “Democracies have procedures that require transparency on these issues, authoritarian states often work very hard to cover it up; to describe China’s success in preventing the epidemic as it is now ignores the failure of China to cover up the number of cases, to threaten and punish journalists, health care workers who are at odds with the bureaucratic and official line, allowing the virus to spread quickly at the beginning, and to ignore the effectiveness of democratic countries such as Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea in preventing the epidemic (Zack, 2020).”

The real source of the COVID-19 epidemic is overall not the virus itself, but the system as it is in China. Nonetheless, the Chinese Communist Party does present the epidemic as a crisis management challenge that is unrelated to any political system or leadership structure. This contradicts the logic of the Chinese Communist Party’s claim that “The whole country fights the coronavirus epidemic together to highlight the advantages of China’s political system (Fang, 2020).” In addition, compared with the rapid and strict control mode in China and the loose and delayed control mode in Europe and the United States, China’s political system has the ability to take authoritarian measures that are fully reflected in the prevention and control of this coronavirus epidemic; these measures are unthinkable and impossible to undertake in any Western political system. It also reveals that China’s political system is determined by the words of the party secretary, and that it is willing to violate the universal values of freedom, democracy, and human rights.

5. Conclusion

China has for a long time given the international community the mysterious image of Red China. Although it has been actively building a good country image through diplomacy, media, and finance, China’s foreign strategies, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, the South China Sea and the East China Sea, and its handling of Taiwan on the world’s political stage, have led the international community to believe that China is actively seeking dominance in the Asia-Pacific region. It also makes the world suspicious of China’s claim of a peaceful rise. In another vein, the U.S.-China trade war has impacted China’s image in terms of patents, technology, and intellectual property rights and has caused the U.S. and Canada to lower their favorable opinion of China. The

international community has also learned that China's rise is based on the theft of other countries' high-tech technologies, U.S. 5G technology, and large subsidies given to its own industries.

The serious COVID-19 epidemic outbreak that started in Wuhan, China made things even worse. Beijing leaders tried to conceal the fact that the outbreak of the virus from its border had led to a global pandemic and caused enormous losses of life, health, and economies around the world. It caused governments and people to become angry with China and to insist on accountability and compensation for its actions. With the rise of the epidemic in many developed countries and the increasing number of accusations that the virus most likely originated from the P4 laboratory in Wuhan, China, President Trump labeled it as a "Chinese virus" and claimed that the impact of the virus on the United States was more serious than Pearl Harbor and 9/11. In addition, the Chinese Communist Party's concealment of information about the origin of the virus and the epidemic has led to conspiracy theories that it may have deliberately launched a biochemical war, leading to anti-Chinese sentiment and anti-Chinese phenomena in the international community. Obviously, the COVID-19 epidemic has dealt a heavy blow to China's international image.

To eliminate the negative image of COVID-19, China shirked its responsibility by publicizing through official media and experts that the coronavirus virus did not originate in its country. China also claimed that the outbreak was under control in March 2020 in order to mock the lack of control of the outbreak in Europe and the United States. At the same time, the China government used diplomacy to send medical teams, masks, and protective clothing to countries with serious COVID-19 outbreaks, such as Italy, Iran, and Iraq. In this way, China was not only communicating its successful experience in dealing with the virus, but also demonstrating its superiority over Western European countries and the United States in dealing with it. China even helped the international community to buy time to contain the epidemic, by helping foreign countries that were unable to handle it and portraying itself as a responsible major power in the midst of a pandemic crisis. China clearly used the "Global Foreign Propaganda" campaign to influence global public opinion on the epidemic, and combined with diplomatic actions and coordination with other countries and international organizations it created hero stories in line with its need to reverse its own negative image among the international community and shape its role as a responsible partner.

COVID-19 has naturally led to a debate about the efficiency of any political system in managing the epidemic. Some scholars argue that authoritarian regimes can ignore people's needs and preferences in regard to epidemic control. In addition to managing the spread of the epidemic through various authoritarian measures, the China government also controlled information about the epidemic and tried to keep its experience from the outside world. Therefore, the efficiency of such a system controlling the epidemic is better, and the epidemic can be prevented from spreading quickly by locking down cities. However, from the perspective of democracy, some scholars believe that an authoritarian system does not encourage information transparency, and China's initial concealment of the coronavirus not only missed an opportunity to prevent the spread of the epidemic worldwide, but also caused other countries to underestimate the preparations needed to prevent its consequences. The difference between Taiwan's and China's responses to COVID-19 highlights the divergence in governance between democratic and authoritarian systems. Instead of blocking information about the epidemic, Taiwan has made it easier and more convenient for the public to obtain information, thus achieving excellent epidemic prevention results. COVID-19 shows why Taiwan's democratic system is superior to the authoritarian system of the Chinese Communist Party, precisely because democracy not only relies on public opinion to formulate policy, but also facilitates transparency and the proper flow of information for the prevention and control of epidemics around the world. Open-information governance in democracies is far more likely to defuse a crisis than authoritarian regimes that hide the truth for the benefit of entrenched regimes.

The COVID-19 pandemic has once again dealt a heavy blow to China's international image, spurring it to spend much money on its "Global Foreign Propaganda" campaign and diplomatic actions in an attempt to bleach its dark image in the international community and to build an image of its domestic success in fighting the epidemic. However, the real source of COVID-19 was not the virus itself, but problems with China's system. China has always boasted about its administrative efficiency in dealing with the epidemic as an authoritarian state, but it has exposed that the pursuit of such efficiency in the fight against the epidemic comes at the expense of the universal values of freedom, democracy, and human rights, and this pursuit has also damaged the image of China in the international community.

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