

China's Great Propaganda Campaign During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Summary

Infected cases of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) as of July 23 have reached above 14.9 million with over 600,000 deaths globally. While the origin of the novel coronavirus remains under investigation, the epidemic was first reported in Wuhan, a city in central China. However, instead of alerting the global community in the early stages of the outbreak, the People's Republic of China (PRC) government under the lead of Communist Party of China General-Secretary Xi Jinping sought not only to cover-up the severity of the coronavirus, but also seize the opportunity to carry out a great propaganda campaign targeting both its citizens and the international community.

The Taiwan Foundation for Democracy has compiled PRC government statements, news reports, and social media posts since the COVID-19 outbreak, and identified four main stages in China's latest propaganda campaign: downplaying the severity of COVID-19, shifting responsibility, China being the savior, and the "shared fate" narrative. This report will demonstrate and analyze the components of each stage to shed light on the PRC government's orchestration of a propaganda campaign amid the COVID-19 global health crisis.

Background: The start of the COVID-19 pandemic

Awareness of a novel coronavirus started growing when Chinese Dr. Li Wenliang on December 30, 2019 sent a message in a WeChat group warning fellow doctors about a SARS-like virus among patients and urged them to wear protective gear to avoid infection. That very night, two official documents issued by the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission started circulating on the internet. The documents claimed that cases of an unknown pneumonia virus had started appearing from the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market, a wet market in Wuhan, China.



(Photo Caption: Chinese Dr. Li Wenliang on Dec. 30, 2019 sent a message in a WeChat group warning fellow doctors about a SARS-like virus among patients. / Photo Credit: Screenshot from Weibo.)

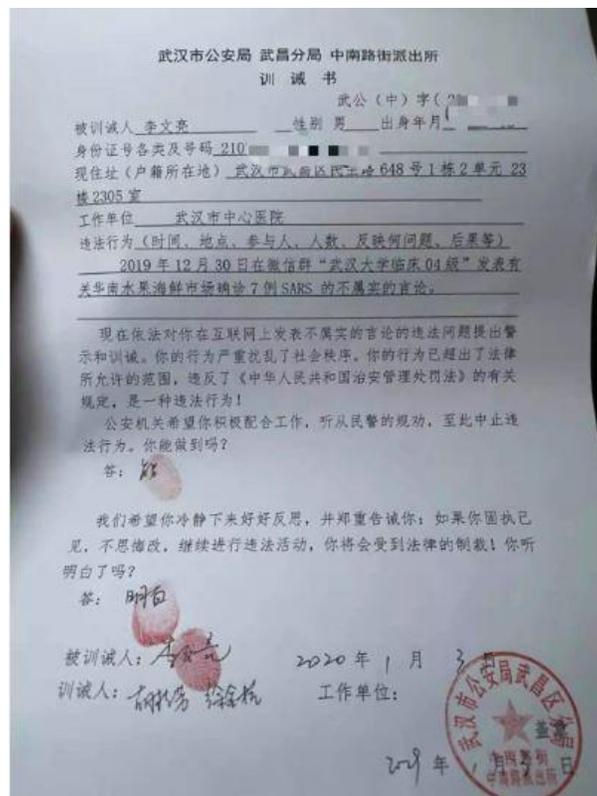
The Wuhan Municipal Health Commission on December 31, 2019 [issued a press release](#) on its website revealing information regarding 27 infected cases of the unknown pneumonia. The press release claimed that all 27 cases were being treated in isolation and there were “so far no obvious signs of person-to-person transmission.”

On January 1, the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market was temporarily closed.

China Central Television (CCTV), the primary Chinese state broadcaster, on January 3 reported that police had contacted eight people in Wuhan who had spread rumors about a new pneumonia, including Li. The doctor on the same day was summoned to the Public Security Bureau — a local police station — where he was told to sign a “letter of admonition” which accused Li of "making false comments" that had "severely disturbed the social order."

The letter warned Li that he would be “punished by the law” if he continued conducting such “illegal activity.” The doctor signed and fingerprinted the letter which he would take to his deathbed on February 7, after contracting the virus he alerted his colleagues of.

The virus was later coined officially as Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), an infectious disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2).



(Photo Caption: Dr. Li’s “letter of admonition.” / Photo Credit: Screenshot from Weibo.)

In months following Li’s warning, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) government would

launch a great propaganda campaign of four phases which this report will analyze.

1. Downplaying the severity of COVID-19

Though the People's Republic of China (PRC) government's awareness of the new coronavirus can be traced back to late December, it refused to acknowledge the severity of the virus, especially the possibility of human-to-human transmission, during the early stages of the epidemic. This downplay would be reinforced through state media, social media, and government statements.

The PRC government consistently gave vague responses regarding person-to-person transmission of the "unknown pneumonia" after it first publicly addressed the "unknown pneumonia" on December 31, 2019.

Wuhan Municipal Health Commission reports from January 6 to January 17 claimed there had not been an increase in the number of infected cases (standing at 59 cases since January 5). The commission also emphasized in multiple reports during this period that "no evidence of obvious human-to-human transmission" had been found. However, infected cases had been confirmed around January 12 in Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzeng, with the patients having no contact history with the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market.

The Global Times, a state-owned English-language newspaper, on January 19 [ran an article](#) with the headline, "Wuhan virus preventable, controllable: commission." The article assured that the coronavirus was under control, according to the National Health Commission. It also quoted Zhou Zijun, a professor at Peking University's school of public health, saying "the SARS virus and the new coronavirus do not share much in terms of medical pathology," "the coronavirus in Wuhan appears to be far less serious than the virus that caused the SARS or the Middle East respiratory syndrome, known as MERS," and "the coronavirus was not spreading as rapidly, and the death rate was not as high."

The following day, on January 20, Dr. Zhong Nanshan, a respiratory expert and head of China's

National Health Commission team investigating the outbreak, confirmed [in an interview](#) with China Central Television that there was “definitely” person-to-person transmission of the new coronavirus. Xi Jinping, general-secretary of the Communist Party of China, on the same day [made his first public address](#) of the coronavirus, emphasizing “the strengthening of leading the conversation” and “maintaining social stability” while “strictly controlling the outbreak.”

Jumping ahead of time, it was on [May 8 reported](#) in [German publication Der Spiegel](#), which cited intelligence from Germany’s federal intelligence service, the Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND), that Xi in a [January 21](#) conversation with World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus pressured the organization to “delay a global warning” about the coronavirus outbreak and “hold back information on human-to-human transmission of the virus.” The WHO on [May 9 released a statement](#) calling the allegations “unfounded and untrue.” The statement also included a note saying, “China confirmed human-to-human transmission of the novel coronavirus on 20 January.”

Following Xi first public address of the coronavirus on [January 20](#), the WHO on [January 22](#) released [a statement](#) saying on a field visit to Wuhan from [January 20 to January 21](#) to investigate COVID-19, the delegation found that a “new test kit nationally suggests that human-to-human transmission is taking place in Wuhan.”

China’s Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian on the same day made his first mention of “Wuhan pneumonia” on his Twitter account. Zhao claimed that “Chinese society made a big step forward compared to SARS outbreak in 2003” and “news of Wuhan pneumonia was reported earlier” which promoted “understanding of the pneumonia.”

Zhao also re-tweeted China Ambassador to India Sun Weidong’s post saying, “#China will continue to deepen international cooperation and work in concert with the international community to deal with the epidemic and safeguard regional and global health security.”

Early next morning, on [January 23](#), Wuhan City announced lockdown.

On January 28, WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus met with Xi Jinping in Beijing and exchanged information regarding the novel coronavirus. Xi [said in his remarks](#), “Chinese government has released information about the epidemic in a timely, open, transparent and responsible manner, responded to concerns of all sides actively, and enhanced cooperation with the international community.”

In his remarks, Tedros [said](#) the WHO “appreciate the seriousness with which China is taking this outbreak, especially the commitment from top leadership, and the transparency they have demonstrated, including sharing data and genetic sequence of the virus.” The WHO director-general also said “China's measures are not only protecting its people, but also protecting the people in the whole world,” according to a [PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs press release](#).

Two days after the meeting in Beijing, the WHO on January 30 [declared](#) the COVID-19 outbreak constitutes a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC). However, members of the WHO Emergency Committee did not recommend “any travel or trade restriction based on the current information available.” The committee “emphasized that the declaration of a PHEIC should be seen in the spirit of support and appreciation for China, its people, and the actions China has taken on the frontlines of this outbreak, with transparency, and, it is to be hoped, with success.”

China’s Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian also posted [multiple tweets](#) in late January sharing China’s success and efficiency in building hospitals within days to control the epidemic.

It is also worth noting Xi Jinping on February 3 gave an internal speech regarding the COVID-19 outbreak to the Politburo Standing Committee, the core leadership of the Communist Part of China, which was later made public on February 8 through Chinese state media.

Xi [said](#), “Propaganda work must be strengthened. We must coordinate online and offline, domestic and international, small and major news, to warm and unite people’s hearts, to better maintain social stability.”

“We should actively respond to international concerns, tell the story of China’s fight against the epidemic well, to show the spirit of the Chinese people’s unity and mutual help,” said the PRC general secretary.

With other countries expressing their concern about the novel coronavirus, the PRC government was quick to “reassure” the global community of the severity of COVID-19. This was done through government officials actively emphasizing the “effective” control of the virus in China, and rushing to quote global experts whenever they praised China’s efforts in harnessing the epidemic. The Chinese officials were also quick to respond to suspicions of China’s management of the health crisis.

When United States President Donald Trump’s on [February 2](#) spoke about shutting down the country for those coming from China, China Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying [responded on February 3](#) that prevention and control measures of COVID-19 in China “are gradually showing their effectiveness,” and there was an increase in the number of recovered cases. She also emphasized that the mortality rate of the coronavirus was “far below” that of Ebola, SARS, and MERS.

China’s Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian on [February 7](#) echoed Hua’s comment [in a tweet](#) saying the 2019 H1N1 flu in the U.S. had a mortality rate “as high as 17.4%,” hinting the COVID-19 outbreak in China was far less serious. Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi on [February 15](#) [also made a speech](#) at the 56th Munich Security Conference, introducing China’s decisive measures to combat the COVID-19 epidemic and the “notable results it has achieved.”

In his [February 23](#) speech during a meeting in Beijing, Xi [emphasized](#) that the results of the prevention and control work of COVID-19 in China “have once again demonstrated the notable advantages of the leadership of the CPC and the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics.” WHO Director-General Tedros [said on February 24](#) during a briefing in Geneva, while coronavirus had pandemic potential, it was not there yet because “we are not witnessing uncontained global spread.” The WHO would later on [March 11](#) [declare COVID-19 a pandemic](#).

Bruce Aylward, a Canadian epidemiologist who led a WHO mission to Wuhan during the coronavirus outbreak, reiterated Xi's [February 23](#) comment and said, "There's no question that China's bold approach to the rapid spread of this new respiratory pathogen has changed the course of what was a rapidly escalating and continues to be a deadly epidemic," as The New York Times [reported on February 25](#).

2. "Throwing the Pot" — Shifting responsibility

As cases of the novel coronavirus started drastically increasing globally, the PRC government moved on to launch the second phase of its campaign — shifting responsibility.

Chinese social media since the COVID-19 outbreak had been discussing a theory that the U.S. military had brought the coronavirus to Wuhan. The basis for this theory was 300 athletes from the U.S. military had attended the 7th Military World Games in Wuhan in October 2019. Months later, the coronavirus broke out in the city.

The PRC government would make use of the brewing discussion of the above conspiracy in the second phase of its great propaganda campaign.

It started with the official Twitter account for China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson office on [February 19](#) shared a statement published on The Lancet, an international medical journal. The statement was signed by 27 public health scientists and professionals who "strongly condemn conspiracy theories suggesting that COVID-19 does not have a natural origin." The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Twitter post added the statement concluded that "the virus is originated in wildlife, not from labs."

On [February 27](#), Chinese epidemiologist Zhong Nanshan [in a press conference](#) said that while the first coronavirus infections were reported in China, the virus may not have originated in the country. Zhong's statement further spurred the "U.S. military brought the coronavirus to Wuhan" theory in China.

Following the China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson office sharing the statement on The Lancet on [February 19](#), the state-run Xinhua News Agency on [March 9](#) published an opinion piece titled, “Washington's poisonous coronavirus politics must end.” The article was in response to U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [on March 6 saying](#) “imperfect data” from China put the United States "behind the curve" in containing the outbreak. It wrote that “some in the United States” were “trying to shift the blame and politicize humanity's common challenge by stoking pernicious anti-Chinese sentiments.”

China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson office on [March 9](#) [posted a tweet](#) saying, “China has been updating the WHO & other countries including the US on #COVID19 in an open, transparent & timely manner.” This was followed by [a tweet from Zhao Lijian on March 12](#) hinting that it might have been the “US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan.”

Hua Chunying in unison [tweeted on the same day](#) that some cases previously diagnosed as the flu in the U.S. were “actually #COVID-19.”



(Photo Caption: The Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Trio)

Though the U.S. was the main target for China's shift of blame, other countries were not let off easily either.

In [a March 19 interview with National Public Radio](#) (NPR), a non-profit U.S. media organization, Dr. Giuseppe Remuzzi, director of the Mario Negri Institute for Pharmacological Research in Milan, said general practitioners in Italy "remember having seen very strange pneumonia, very severe, particularly in old people in December and even November."

Remuzzi continued, "This means that the virus was circulating, at least in [the northern region of] Lombardy and before we were aware of this outbreak occurring in China."

The Italian professor's remarks spread widely on social media, and China did not skip a beat.

Within two days, Chinese local media such as [Global Times](#), [China Central Television](#), and [Beijing Daily](#) had flocked to report that an "Italian expert" said the coronavirus "might have started spreading in Italy before the outbreak erupted in China." These reports were complimented with the social media accounts, namely Weibo and Twitter, of these media outlets reinforcing the story.

Remuzzi proceeded to clarify his former statement in the following days, saying [in a March 26 interview](#) with The Times, a U.K. publication, that "Beijing's attempts to twist his words to suggest the coronavirus originated in Italy is a textbook example of 'propaganda.'" He also emphasized [in an email interview with MailOnline](#) that there was "no evidence to show" the patients he described in the NPR interview had been infected with COVID-19.

This second phase of China's great propaganda campaign would trickle into the third phase of its campaign — China as the savior.

3. From shifting blames to reversing the image

While the Chinese government has continued to devote strong effort to downplaying its responsibility in delaying a full disclosure at the outset of the emergence of the coronavirus, it has found it easier to splash new paint on the picture than to scrape off the smeared surface, riding on the disarray into which the world has been thrown by the pandemic.

Many, including international media, have noticed the Communist Party of China's (CPC) re-adjusted tactics in now hailing China as the sacrificer and the savior in combating the virus. On February 7, China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian was still deflecting the attention on the outbreak by comparing it to H1N1 flu in the U.S. in 2009 on Twitter; two weeks later, on February 20, Hua Chunying, also the spokesperson of China's Foreign Ministry, tweeted for the first time about China's aid to a foreign country. A Taiwanese investigative [report](#), by sieving through and analyzing the spokespersons' tweets, argued that this was the inflection point that saw the country's redirected strategy of boasting the country's outgoing support to the world.

The timing of Beijing's supposed gears-changing corresponds to that of abatement in China's reported infection cases. In mid-February, three weeks after the imposition of the Wuhan lockdown on January 23, the reported confirmed cases started to decrease sharply. On February 23, Xinhua News, China's state media, published an editorial titled, "Some countries slow to respond to virus," expressing worries that many countries had not taken sufficient prevention and control measures and stating that China had "gone through the most difficult period." The piece touted that "China has provided lessons and contributed valuable experience" in fighting the virus and "can be a reference for other countries worldwide." On the same day, CPC General Secretary Xi Jinping was reported as saying that as the coronavirus spread subsided, it "once again demonstrated the notable advantages of the leadership of the CPC and the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics."

China as the savior

At least since February 25, Beijing initiated its diplomatic campaign of delivering aid to other countries, starting from the delivery of 250,000 masks to Iran on February 25 and 5,000 sets of protective clothing and 100,000 masks to Japan on February 27. It was followed by news of

medical supplies and/or medical experts being sent to Italy, France, Liberia, Philippines, Malaysia, Venezuela, and so on and so forth throughout the world. On the official website of the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA), [the first record](#) of COVID-19-related aid delivery was the donation of \$20 million to the WHO on March 8 (English version, as the Chinese-language official page started with the aid to Iraq on March 11). A steady stream of almost daily announcements of the country providing outward support followed.

The culmination was Xi's public address at the opening of the 73rd session of the World Health Assembly (WHA) on May 18, in which it was announced that a \$2 billion donation over two years toward fighting the coronavirus would be provided to the World Health Organization, following the Trump administration's announcement of suspension of payments to the organization in April in response to the United Nations agency's handling of the pandemic. Xi's speech at the WHA was a triumph for China not only in its show of magnanimity, but also in successfully brushing aside many virus-hit nations' attempts to hold it accountable, by preventing the discussion and passage of a motion calling for investigation into the source of the novel coronavirus and China's role in the outbreak. Most significantly, making an opening speech at a global health assembly during a global pandemic partly caused by its lack of transparency is in itself a political achievement for China, all the more so when Taiwan was yet again blocked from attending the meeting. The doors remained closed for Taiwan despite the island-nation's success story of effectively stemming the spread of the virus and therefore a stronger call from many, including the US, EU, and Japan, for its participation this year.

“Weave good virus-fighting stories”

That the Chinese authorities have been highly vigilant and cautious about public opinions from the very beginning of its disease control work is evident. The state media reported that the newly-formed “Central Leading Group On Responding to the Novel Coronavirus Disease Outbreak” (中央应对新型冠状病毒感染肺炎疫情工作领导小组) was convening its first meeting on January 26. The important and interesting aspect of it is the composition of the new leading group. Curiosity has been raised over the fact that it is not led by Xi but Premier Li Keqian, but it is partly explainable as while Xi heads many of the central leading groups and is

believed to have centralized political power after he took over the reins, there are other leading groups/committees that are led by Li and other Politburo Standing Committee members. The group has been however criticized for its lack of techno-bureaucrats and its politically-intended appointments.

Some have pointed out that while Li's group, headed by the premier himself, is endowed with higher political status when compared to the commanding group led by then Vice Premier and Minister of Health Wu Yi during the 2003 SARS outbreak, the former, filled with Politburo and Central Committee members, has no seat for any National Health Commission technocrats (with the exception of Vice Premier Sun Chunlan - a member of Li's group – whose portfolios do include public health, education, and culture).

The rank of the representatives from the CPC Publicity Department, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Public Security, has been elevated to minister-level (in contrast to the 2003 group when the counterpart representatives were vice ministers), which manifests greater emphasis placed on propaganda, foreign relations, and internal stability. Another appointment that stands out is that of first-ranked Secretary of the CPC Secretariat Wang Huning, who is tasked to act as vice-chair of the group. Wang has been recognized as and dubbed the “CPC policy czar for ideology and propaganda,” [credited](#) as the mastermind behind the ideological banners of three successive leaders, from Jiang Zemin's “Three Represents” through Hu Jintao's “Scientific Outlook on Development” to Xi's “China Dream.” He was promoted to the highest echelon of the Chinese political power only during Xi's reign, who has been markedly attentive to propaganda and cultivating narratives.

As mentioned earlier in this article, on [February 3](#), in a Politburo Standing Committee meeting, Xi highlighted was the importance of “propaganda, education, and public opinion guiding.” Domestically, “moving disease-combating stories should be told,” “warm undertones should be added to the public opinion,” and “the lead in the Internet [public opinion] should be in the hand [of the government] and cyberspace should be teemed with positive energy.” On the global scale, “[we are to take] a proactive role in responding to foreign doubts and weave good China's coronavirus-fighting stories.”

Tightening up the grip and guiding the fist

It was observed that when the public concern about the virus and Wuhan exploded during the period from January 19 to early February - the end of which roughly corresponded to the date on which the above-mentioned directives were given by Xi - there was “an uncharacteristic loosening” of the CPC Internet censorship, according to [Reuters](#). “Online buzz about the outbreak flourished, with netizens largely unfettered in criticizing local authorities - but not central government leaders - over their handling of the crisis,” the report said. But after February 3 (Xi’s directions), or probably most notably after February 7, when doctor and whistleblower Li Wenliang died after contracting coronavirus, “that liberalisation has come to end, with censors [in early February] shutting down WeChat groups and scrubbing social media posts, according to Chinese reporters. Authorities have also reprimanded tech firms that gave free rein to online speech.”

Hushing angry discussions about the government’s mishandling of the contagion went hand in hand with continuing selling positive narratives, both inside and outside the borders. On February 26, Xinhua News made public the government’s plan to publish a book chronicling China’s “war against the coronavirus” as a “major power” (Chinese: "大国战疫"), in which Xi’s “strategic vision and extraordinary leadership in his effort in containing the infection” would be praised.



(Photo Caption: An advertisement for “A Battle Against Epidemic” (大国战疫) on a Chinese online bookstore /
Photo Credit: Jingdong online shopping site)

It was on the same day that the Global Times, the CPC’s mouthpiece, ran a English report questioning the effectiveness of the U.S. political system in its virus response and bemoaning that while “China has acted as a responsible big country, timely sharing information with the World Health Organization and other countries and providing precious knowledge for them in epidemic prevention and control,” the American elites “due to ideological and political prejudice against China...don't believe China's moves and experience are reliable and helpful.” On the next day (February 27), Xinhua News used its Twitter account to ask the users (supposedly not expecting them to be Chinese as Twitter is blocked in China) to choose which aspect of China’s fight against the epidemic was for them “impressive”; the choices included “spirit of self-sacrifice” and “solidarity among Chinese.”

A curious episode was that the plan for the book, in Chinese language and intended for domestic assumption at its initial stage (as it was said to be later translated into different languages), backfired. Apparently it was too fawning even for the Chinese people and netizens, who still had vivid memories of the Wuhan lockdown and all the tragedies it caused. They bombarded it with sarcastic and scathing comments. Four days after the plan was announced, the book was taken off the shelves from the online bookstores, without any explanation as usual.

The time might not have been ripe yet to uphold the CPC and Xi as heroes in virus-fighting domestically. But that did not deter the CPC from upping the ante outside the Great Firewall. The domestic setback in a way strengthened the need for further foreign propaganda. Shoring up the Chinese image abroad or fighting the blames from the outside could feed the nationalistic sentiments within.

4. “A Community with a Shared Future for Mankind”

When the book went missing from online bookstores, and when the countries outside China also started to see hikes in infection cases, the Chinese Foreign Ministry launched the “shared fate” narrative. On March 1, Foreign Minister Wang Yi had an article published on Qiushi, a periodical published by the CPC’s Central Party School and the CPC Central Committee, demanding perseverance in “fighting the war against the disease” and “promoting the building of a community with a shared future for mankind.” Other than underlining General-Secretary Xi’s outstanding leadership in “disease-fighting diplomacy” by making timely contacts and communication with foreign leaders that resulted in their “praise and confidence in China’s virus-fighting measures,” the foreign ministry stressed its role in narrating “good virus-fighting stories” by using various platforms including global forums, new media, and regular press conferences. Chinese embassies and organizations abroad were said to have “engaged in intensive public diplomacy activities, having interviews with local TV and radio programs for more than 400 times, publishing more than 300 bylined articles, holding upwards of 500 briefings and speeches.” Most importantly, “as the history of human civilization is one of fighting diseases...building a community of shared future is the only right direction of human social development, and China will take this cooperation in containing the disease as a turning point to strengthen international coordination and protect and build the global village.”

Wang’s article was widely shared by the Chinese embassies on their websites. And on March 2, China’s Ambassador to the U.K. Liu Xiaoming made a public speech at the Chatham House with the same slogan, calling on the world to “Pull in the Same Direction and Build a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind.” On March 4, the Xinhua News shared an article originally

from a patriotic WeChat official account. “Unapologetic, China should be thanked by the world,” was its title. “There have been opinions saying China owes an apology to the world, which is just absurd,” it said. “China has made great sacrifices in fighting COVID-19, including economic costs, and cutting off the transmission of the virus. No other country has made such sacrifice and effort of equivalent scale... We should unapologetically say that the U.S. owes China an apology and the world owes China gratitude, as without our sacrifice, the world would be deprived of a precious window of time in fighting the virus.” On March 9, the China Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Office tweeted that China's endeavor to combating the epidemic “has bought time for int'l preparedness. Our contribution is there for all to see.”

Embattled on both fronts

When the world and particularly the U.S. continued to see spikes in infection numbers and death toll, many questioned the adequacy and transparency of the Chinese government’s initial responses to the discovery and spread of the virus. Calls for compensations and investigations surged.

Domestic doubts have not subsided either. Xi only went to Wuhan for the very first time on March 10 since the outbreak. It was reported, with Wuhan locals as sources, that police were stationed in every household in the small residential district that Xi visited to “feel people’s mood.” The real objective of the stationed police was however was said to prevent people from yelling from the buildings as they did when Vice Premier Sun Chunlan visited the city on March 5. “Fake, fake, everything is fake,” “we protest,” “formalism,” were said to have been shouted by the quarantined residents from the apartment windows when Sun was there.

March 5 was also the date when Li Wenliang, the whistleblower, received first official recognition from the Chinese National Health Commission, with the deceased doctor being on a list of 506 healthcare and response workers who were "advanced individuals in the prevention and control of novel coronavirus pneumonia epidemic in national health system," published in [a statement](#) on the commission’s website. Li was [awarded](#) the title “martyr” by the CPC on April 2, and on April 4, the Tomb Sweeping Day, the Chinese leaders and the country observed silence

for the coronavirus victims, including Li. State media Xinhua News' [page](#) for the report was in black and white, mourning the nation's loss and ordeal. On April 20, it was announced that Li, aged 34 at the time of death, was to be [honored](#) with the May 4th Medal, which is “the highest honor for outstanding Chinese youth jointly awarded by the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League and the China Youth Federation.”

As “positive stories” were churned out in the country, and the foreign ministry spokespersons were busy retorting the accusations and exchanging barbs with foreign leaders, the call for building a community with a shared future for mankind and the relaying of the message that China is a responsible major power continued. The ideas were upheld in Xi's speech at the G20 Extraordinary Virtual Leaders' Summit on COVID-19 on March 26, and again in a Qiushi article authored by Xi published on April 16, stating that solidarity and cooperation is the global community's most powerful weapon against the coronavirus.

However, more details have emerged about China's reluctance to share data even with the WHO. The Associated Press released an [exclusive report](#) on June 3, finding that the WHO officials, despite the public praise they heaped on China for its “speedy response”, were actually frustrated by China's delays in sharing the information they needed to fight the spread of the deadly virus.

In early July, it was further [revealed](#) that the Chinese authorities at the start of the outbreak did not proactively provide the information to the WHO. In an updated chronology published by the WHO on the development of the coronavirus pandemic, it was shown that it was “the WHO office in China that notified its regional point of contact on December 31 of a case of ‘viral pneumonia’ after finding a declaration for the media on a Wuhan health commission website.” The revelation has upended the perception formed by the initial timeline of the organization's communication with the Chinese authorities about the virus, which said only that the Wuhan municipal health commission had on December 31 reported cases of pneumonia but did not specify who had notified it. According to the revised timeline, the Chinese health authorities reportedly did not provide information until January 3, after the WHO asked them twice on January 1 and 2.

Conclusion: A divided world to the benefit of an inward-looking regime

During the Two Sessions (the meetings of the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, or China's legislative consultative bodies) held between May 21-28, fighting the coronavirus and reviving the post-Covid-19 economy were emphasized, but what occupied the international headlines and grabbed the world's attention was the National People's Congress's crafting and passing on May 28 a "decision" to allow its standing committee to draft a national security law for Hong Kong. (The law was then passed and promulgated on June 30.)

When the world is already witnessing a heightened enmity toward the Chinese government, what is the logic behind the move that is surely to aggravate the tension? First, looking in hindsight, what the CPC claimed to be "internal affairs" divided the world into those who agree with the claim and those who don't. As of this writing, the liberal democratic world has not shown unity in its response to this national security law, and there are countries facing internal political division on the issue. This is a replay of the coronavirus politics, in which many are taking the CPC to task while others have remained reserved or silent, either because their hands are tied with the disease or with the expected post-Covid-19 economic burdens and thereby dependence on China. Beijing has been deftly playing with the divide with its economic might since the One Belt One Road initiative, and in this pandemic, it has made emphasis of China's help on "developing countries," manifest in Xi's speech at the WHA. It is not to say that Beijing made the move on Hong Kong just to sow discord among the countries, but that it did not have to risk all of its global friends by doing so.

But the fallout of curtailing Hong Kong's autonomy can be serious and the price huge, as many have pointed out the damage the U.S.'s withdrawal of the territory's special status may incur. This brings us to the second possible explanation for Beijing's risky maneuver. While the CPC may have aspired to be a global leader, it is also a regime having relied on providing stability and economic growth for its legitimacy within the country for the past four decades. In this pandemic it is an embattled regime struggling to allay and dampen the discontent and fury arising from what happened in Wuhan, from where heart-wrenching and outrageous stories were broadcast

and spread via social media outlets despite heavy-handed censorship. Xi's leadership is also likely seriously challenged, with all kinds of oppositions simmering and factions waiting to topple and take over his rule. Xi's strongman rule was already said to have provoked defiance within the party before the coronavirus crisis, and this pandemic and the following economic downturn could very well be a fuse to be lit.

Facing international criticisms and expecting the coming global political and economic environment to develop to the disadvantage to it, Xi's CPC probably believes that now, when the world is still reeling from pandemic and the consequent political turmoil, as the perfect timing to further consolidate the CPC's political strength in the country but also his own hold to the power in the face of intra-party feud, in which the non-Xi old-guard factions are believed to have control over and vested interests in Hong Kong.