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Issue Brief

Pandemics and Power Narratives: The Rashomon Effect

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Summary

Even as the world struggles to fortify responses to the unprecedented crises that the COVID-19 pandemic has unleashed, China has brazenly attempted to control the narrative through propaganda as to the causes and effects of this global pandemic, which originated in Wuhan. China was initially the recipient of the trust and empathy of many nations but now finds itself facing international condemnation and domestic unrest over its manipulation of information relating to the global pandemic.

There are no winners in tragedies but stories of survival, hope and empathy that are retold and remembered in the aftermath. Even as we struggle to fortify responses to the unprecedented crises that the COVID-19 pandemic has unleashed globally, attempts are being made to reframe and deflect attention as to the causes and effects of this global pandemic. At a time when physical borders have shut down and virtual connectedness has deepened, it is imperative that information flow remains open and credible. Mitigation through concealment or denial, are no longer options in the face of a rapidly mutating crisis. The Japanese cult classic from the 1950's, *Rashomon*, dealt with the subjectivity of truth and the uncertainty of factual accuracy. China's brazen attempts to control the narrative through propaganda, exemplifies the *Rashomon* effect in play. China was initially the recipient of the trust and empathy of many nations for its handling of the COVID-19 but now finds itself facing international condemnation and domestic unrest over its manipulation of information relating to the global pandemic.

Internal backlash against 'guided public opinion'

It is often argued that the narrative China tells itself about itself is the story it also tells the outside world. The legitimacy of the party depends on what the people believe within China. As President Xi Jinping participated in an extraordinary meeting with G20 leaders, media watchers highlighted the *People's Daily* interview of China's Deputy Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu, who praised Xi's speech at the forum, for introducing "China's experience," setting forth "China's proposition," putting forward a "Chinese initiative," and highlighting "China's contribution" in battling the pandemic.¹ Ma's message echoed the party line of Chinese triumph over COVID-19. However, very few at home are reportedly buying the victory lap and popular resentment is at tipping point.

The admonishment and reclaiming of Wuhan's Dr Li Wenliang

The domestic outrage is highlighted best in the anger many felt after the death from COVID-19 of Dr Li Wenliang, the young doctor who first raised an alarm about the possibility of an outbreak in December 2019.² The 34-year old doctor was accused of "rumour-mongering" when it was revealed that he had discussed the virus with fellow professionals on a chat group on December 30. It has been reported widely that the doctor was questioned by his hospital and by the police, several weeks earlier, for his warnings through social media regarding the outbreak in Wuhan. In an interview via text messages reported by *The New York Times*, Dr Li stated that if officials had shown "more openness and transparency," the situation could have

¹ [Full text of Xi's remarks at Extraordinary G20 Leaders' Summit](#), *Xinhua*, March 26, 2020; Qian Gang, [The trouble with "total war"](#), China Media Project, March 27, 2020.

² For more see [The Li Wenliang storm](#), China Media Project, March 8, 2020; David Bandurski, [Reclaiming Doctor Li](#), China Media Project, March 19, 2020.

been better.³ His death shocked many Chinese and flamed the fury of locals against the state response to COVID-19, especially so against the three weeks of denial till mid-January, lack of transparency and the neglectful treatment of medical personnel.⁴

In a bid to rein in public opinion, China's anti-corruption agency, pushed into investigating the summoning and formal reprimand by the Wuhan Public Security Bureau of Dr. Li, announced in mid-March that the actions of the local police were "irregular" and "improper," and reclaimed Dr Li as a faithful member of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).⁵ The China Media Project at Hong Kong University observes that despite some notable exceptions, "much [local] coverage of Li Wenliang, molded his story into the normative CCP narrative of heroism and personal sacrifice, sidestepping the uncomfortable issue of his mistreatment by local authorities ..."⁶

Outrage against 'gratitude education'

Reports of anger simmering on social media in China picked up as CCP's attempts at controlling the narrative tightened. Media watchers point to the backlash against Wang Zhonglin, Wuhan's Party Secretary, who reportedly said that it was necessary to "carry out gratitude education among the citizens of the whole city, so that they thank the General Secretary [Xi Jinping], thank the Chinese Communist Party, heed the Party, walk with the Party, and create strong positive energy."⁷ This controversy erupted on the heels of a video circulating on Chinese social media from Wuhan in which residents in a cluster of high-rise apartment buildings can be heard shouting, "Fake! Fake! Everything is fake!" as China's vice-premier Sun Chunlan undertook an inspection of the area.⁸ The episode, which has been widely discussed online, was surprisingly also covered by the state-owned *Global Times*, which ran a commentary slamming the estate manager for trying to deceive the visiting official.⁹ The messaging was clear: the party was with the people and it was hostile forces which were messing up

Concern over Clampdown of Information

Despite assurances of the Wuhan case being an isolated incident, some local journalists were not letting up the pressure. A post to WeChat called "Have a Bit of Conscience: It's Not Time to Ask the People of Wuhan for their Thanks," spoke at the

³ Chris Buckley and Steven Lee Myers, 'As new coronavirus spread, China's old habits delayed fight', *The New York Times*, February 1, 2020.

⁴ 'The Li Wenliang storm', n. 2.

⁵ See [China releases investigation report on issues concerning Dr. Li Wenliang](#), *Xinhua*, March 20, 2020; Bandurski, 'Reclaiming Doctor Li', n. 2.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See David Bandurski, 'When propaganda bites back,' China Media Project, March 8, 2020.

⁸ Jun Mai, 'It's all fake! Angry residents shout at Chinese vice-premier in coronavirus-hit Wuhan', *South China Morning Post*, March 6, 2020

⁹ See [Video exposed cheating still exists in Wuhan](#), *Global Times*, March 6, 2020.

length of the insensitivity of this public communiqué and linked it to the video that went viral from Wuhan, stating - “This is public opinion, this is reality.”¹⁰ Meanwhile, Western media highlighted a case where a business property tycoon from Beijing, Ren Zhiqiang, was reported as missing after he wrote a scathing critique alleging that the CCP’s strict limits on free speech had exacerbated the epidemic.¹¹ The Chinese Diaspora in the US, who attended memorial meetings for Dr Li, echoed concerns about “access to the truth” given that individuals like Dr. Li were “criminalized for sharing real news ...”¹²

For several days now, China has reported few or zero new domestic cases of Covid-19 infection, claiming success in controlling the outbreak. While China attempts to guide the world to beat the pandemic, there is rising scepticism within the country on getting back to business as usual.¹³

Denial, mobilisation and propaganda wars: Phases of the COVID-19 narrative

Chinese media observers say the CCP’s playbook for information control is quite straight forward and the locals know it’s in play. They infer that the Chinese authorities’ *first* instinct was the suppression of information as was witnessed in the case of the reprimand of Dr Li. The *next phase* came into play as Wuhan became the epicentre of the outbreak, with the narrative focusing on how the Chinese government acted decisively and mobilised to build hospitals in record times and lockdown entire cities. For two weeks, they note, the Chinese state allowed some non-state-sanctioned information to flow and again clamped down to ensure that the emphasis was being placed on telling positive stories.¹⁴ The heroic efforts of frontline workers were highlighted, including Wuhan’s Dr Li. As China reports a decline in new cases and prepares to bring many of its provinces out of lockdown while hoping to pursue economic recovery, it is *shifting propaganda efforts outwards*.¹⁵

The US-China blame game

The Chinese attempts at deflection of the blame over the handling of the crisis focused on sowing doubts about the origins of the virus, suggesting that it may have come from the US. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lijian Zhao started a Twitter storm by promoting a conspiracy theory that the virus came from a US

¹⁰ See Mai, ‘It’s all fake!’, n. 8; ‘The Li Wenliang storm’, n. 2.

¹¹ Javier C. Hernández, ‘Chinese tycoon who criticized Xi’s response to coronavirus has vanished’, *The New York Times*, March 14, 2020.

¹² Han Zhang, ‘Grief and wariness at a vigil for Li Wenliang, the doctor who tried to warn China about the coronavirus’, *The New Yorker*, February 11, 2020.

¹³ Yuan Ruiyang and Isabelle Li, ‘lights are on but no one’s working: how local governments are faking coronavirus recovery’, *Caixinglobal.com*, March 4, 2020.

¹⁴ For more, see ‘Neican Brief 15 March 2020: Propaganda, Xi in Wuhan, censorship and “translations”’, *Xinjiang bill*, China Neican, March 15, 2020.

¹⁵ Ibid.

military bio-lab.¹⁶ On *WeChat*, articles claiming the US origin of the virus were allowed to spread in huge numbers.¹⁷ This claim has been repeated by China's official media and by Chinese ambassadors around the world, with the exception of Cui Tiankai, China's ambassador to the US, who distanced himself from the controversy.¹⁸

US President Donald Trump upped the ante, defending his use of the term “Chinese Virus”, in interactions with the media. Beijing meanwhile expelled 13 US journalists in retaliation for what it termed was “unreasonable oppression” of Chinese journalists in the US, sending the message that it will not take lightly critical overseas coverage.¹⁹ US media outlets have noted that the White House was also launching a communications plan across multiple federal agencies with a focus on accusing Beijing of orchestrating a “cover-up” and creating a global pandemic, while highlighting America's response to the global pandemic as “extraordinary humanitarianism”.²⁰ The jostling over the *politics of gratitude* is clearly not one sided.

‘China to the rescue’: The geopolitics of gratitude

Media observers argue that as China moves into a new phase in the fight against the coronavirus epidemic, CCP leaders keen to claim victory have tried to focus propaganda efforts over the question of gratitude — both inside and outside China. Balking at a suggestion that China owes the world an apology, a commentary on *Xinhua News* suggested instead that the world in fact owed China a debt of gratitude.²¹ The message focused on China's massive sacrifices in fighting the coronavirus epidemic, and the steep economic cost it incurred to cut off the path of transmission.

As part of its efforts to show the world the invincibility of the Chinese system, championed by the defeat of the COVID-19, Beijing is now offering assistance, either through supplying medical equipment, advice and in some cases, medical staff, to several countries in Europe, Africa and the Middle East.²² Beijing has increased aid to overwhelmed governments like Italy, Spain, Greece, as well as in Eastern Europe, to help them deal with the outbreak. These overtures have been heavily advertised domestically to show that China is stepping up its efforts globally. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić's statement for instance that his country had received the largest shipment of medical aid from China and that it would have not been able to defend itself without the help of “Chinese brothers”, has been heavily played up in domestic

¹⁶ [‘US sparks word war against China on COVID-19’](#), *The Global Times*, March 13, 2020.

¹⁷ See ‘Neican Brief’, n. 13.

¹⁸ James Walker, [‘China’s US Ambassador splits with Foreign Ministry spokesperson over ‘crazy’ Covid-19 theory’](#), *Newsweek*, March 23, 2020.

¹⁹ [‘China: Expulsion of US journalists was response to “unreasonable oppression”](#)’, *The Guardian* March 18, 2020.

²⁰ Erin Banco, [‘White House pushes US officials to criticize China for coronavirus “cover-up”](#)’, *The Daily Beast*, March 21, 2020.

²¹ [‘Righteous, the world should thank China’](#), *xinhua.net*, March 04, 2020 quoted in Qian Gang, [‘The politics of gratitude’](#), China Media Project, March 23, 2020.

²² James Kynge and Hudson Lockett, [‘From cover-up to global donor: China’s soft power play’](#), *Financial Times*, March 24, 2020.

media.²³ Similarly, Xi's outreach to Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, to provide aid and promise to step up cooperation, has also been widely reported.²⁴

When Italy overtook China in the number of COVID-19 fatalities, China provided masks, ventilators and doctors.²⁵ The propaganda machinery however went a little overboard. On March 16, the *People's Daily* ran a story reporting how Italians played the Chinese national anthem and shouted "Grazie Cina!" ("Thank you, China!").²⁶ The authenticity of the story was called to question when Italian media traced the original video, which related to Italians applauding Italians, contrary to the Chinese propaganda machinery's spin.

In the interim, the EU, faced with the biggest jump in COVID-19 cases, hit back against what it saw as attempts to discredit it in the battle of narratives. The EU's High Representative/Vice President Joseph Borrell warned of a "struggle for influence through spinning and the 'politics of generosity'".²⁷ Reports have since emerged of many EU countries returning or rejecting Chinese medical aid, raising concerns about the quality of supplies.²⁸ While some EU experts see this aid blitz as an intention to position China as the great power that came to the assistance of Europe and thereby reverse EU's growing concern about Beijing's authoritarianism, German Chancellor Angela Merkel framed the issue as a matter of reciprocity, pointing to the massive amount of aid and equipment donated by European countries to China in the early stages of the crisis.²⁹

BRI 'echo chamber' and the 'Health Silk Road'

Chinese state propaganda has also sought to use the Belt and Road Initiative relationships to shore up legitimacy in the initial stages of the crisis.³⁰ China has been able to get statements of praise from Pakistan, Serbia, Ethiopia and Italy — all countries with which it has cultivated political and economic ties through the BRI. The BRI corridors, ports and logistics hubs are now being used to provide medical support to partner countries, to endorse Beijing's attempts to position itself as a global leader in healthcare — the "Health Silk Road."³¹ Meanwhile, *Xinhua*, the official Chinese news agency, reported that each of the 54 African nations will receive 20,000 testing kits, 100,000 masks and 1,000 protective suits for medical use from the Jack Ma Foundation, a charitable organisation led by the former Alibaba chief

²³ "[Spotlight: As China recovers from COVID-19 blow, Chinese rush to Europe's rescue](#)", *Xinhua*, March 23, 2020.

²⁴ Kynge and Lockett, 'From cover-up to global donor', n. 22.

²⁵ See n.23.

²⁶ '[Italian people sing their gratitude for Chinese help](#)', *People's Daily Online*, March 17, 2020 and Gang, 'The politics of gratitude', n. 20.

²⁷ '[EU HRVP Josep Borrell: The Coronavirus pandemic and the new world it is creating](#)', March 24, 2020.

²⁸ '[Coronavirus: Countries reject Chinese-made equipment](#)', BBC, March 29, 2020.

²⁹ '[Is China winning the Coronavirus response narrative in the EU?](#)' Atlantic Council, March 25, 2020.

³⁰ Johan van de Ven, '[Limited payoffs: What have BRI investments delivered for China amid the coronavirus outbreak?](#)' China Brief, Volume 20, Issue 5, March 16, 2020.

³¹ Wade Shepard, '[China's "Health Silk Road" gets a boost from COVID-19](#)', *Forbes*, March 27, 2020.

and a cherished member of the CCP.³² As it projects itself as a saviour, China is also sending the world a message — Beijing is capable of carrying the burden and leading the way, alone.

Highlighting WHO endorsement for China's exceptional response to COVID-19

For many observers globally, it was confounding in hindsight to recall that the initial declaration of an “emergency” by the World Health Organization (WHO) was effusive in its praise for the Chinese government’s “transparent” efforts, while the fact was that China’s story about the origins of the pandemic kept changing.³³ WHO Director General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, in February 2020 sat next to President Xi in Beijing and heaped praise on Chinese efforts even as China criticized numerous other governments for cutting off travel to and from the country.³⁴ It is now being alleged that as the second-largest donor to the United Nations, which oversees the WHO, China is using the institution to lend itself a veneer of legitimacy in the face of a worsening global crisis. There has also been a suggestion that the WHO chief, who has previously served as Health Minister in Ethiopia, is walking a tight rope. China is Ethiopia’s largest foreign investor and Beijing plans to build a new headquarters for the African Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Addis Ababa. This has allegedly stopped the WHO chief from upsetting Xi and the CCP.³⁵ This conjecture amplifies the questions being raised regrettably on the WHO’s credibility in critical times.

India and COVID-19: Lessons and opportunities

India with a population of 1.3 billion people is currently at the heart of the fight against the global pandemic. India has enforced a nationwide 21 day lockdown and undertaken evacuation of more than 1400 of its citizens and those of its neighbours from high-risk countries, including China, Japan, Iran and Italy.³⁶ Prime Minister Narendra Modi has led public awareness campaigns to make people more vigilant in the pushback against the outbreak. In keeping with India’s ‘Neighbourhood First’ policy, India has shown leadership in mobilising the heads of government of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) ³⁷ and that of the G20³⁸ to share reliable information, best practices and support each other in fighting this pandemic.

³² Kyngé and Lockett, ‘From cover-up to global donor’, n. 22.

³³ [‘Report of the WHO-China Joint Mission on Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\)’](#), WHO, February 16-24, 2020.

³⁴ Daniel Wagner, [‘China’s influence dampens international response to coronavirus outbreak’](#), *Fair Observer*, February 24, 2020.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ [‘Evacuation by India of its citizens and other nationals from COVID-19 affected countries’](#), PIB, March 9, 2020.

³⁷ Elizabeth Roche [‘SAARC members warm up to PM Modi’s Covid-19 fund call’](#), Livemint, March 24, 2020.

³⁸ Sachin Parashar , [‘G20 on Covid-19: PM Modi calls for stronger WHO to fight pandemics’](#), *The Times of India*, March 27, 2020.

In consonance with India's vision for Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla participated in a telephonic conference call initiated by US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun for discussions among some countries in the Indo-Pacific region on issues related to countering COVID-19.³⁹ Interestingly, China sought India's support to counter the US bid to lay COVID-19 blame on its door a few days before the G20 meeting.⁴⁰ The Chinese have been deeply appreciative of India's gesture of sending 15 tons of medical supplies to Beijing when it was still reeling under the crisis.⁴¹ In addition, India has dispatched doctors to the Maldives and Nepal and has offered supplies to Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Italy.⁴²

While concerns remain domestically about the scale of testing and an escalation of COVID-19 cases in the next few weeks, India's efforts have positioned itself as a leader shaping regional responses to the coronavirus, but through actions not mere words. The key to India's continued success will lie in ensuring transparency in coping with the unfolding crisis and mitigating any attempts at misinformation that could prove deadly to India's pushback efforts. As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolds, India needs to remain vigilant.

Conclusion

In a world where disruptions had become the new normal, the COVID-19 pandemic has created an irreversible systemic shock, creating new geo-political fault-lines and opportunities. New Delhi must calibrate its responses as Beijing tries to repair its tarnished image — especially along the BRI corridor, and continues its efforts to infuse the dominant global power structure with Chinese characteristics. As Joseph Nye reminds us, 'power sometimes depends on whose army or economy wins, but it can also depend on whose story wins'.⁴³ We must not lose sight of the fact that China grasps this reality very well.

³⁹ Dipanjan R Chaudhury, 'India shares measures with Indo-Pacific region states to combat Covid-19', *The Economic Times*, March 20, 2020.

⁴⁰ 'China seeks India's support to Counter US bid to lay COVID-19 blame on its door', *The Deccan Herald*, March 24, 2020.

⁴¹ 'India provided 15 tonnes of medical supplies worth Rs 2.11 crore to coronavirus-hit China: Government', *The Economic Times*, March 18, 2020.

⁴² 'India sends aid to coronavirus COVID-19-hit Italy', March 22, 2020.

⁴³ Joseph S. Nye, Jr., 'China's soft and sharp power', *Project Syndicate*, January 4, 2018.

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