

China's Health Silk Road Narrative

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China's positioning in global health policy

Conceptual development of the narrative

To promote the strategic infrastructure project of the new Silk Road (Belt and Road Initiative, BRI), the Chinese Health and Family Planning Commission formulated a concept for the first time for the years 2015 to 2017 to support cross-border cooperation in the health sector.¹ The Health Silk Road (HSR) was first publicly mentioned in a speech by Xi Jinping in Uzbekistan in 2016, with a focus on medical treatment and disease prevention.² In October 2016, the high-level strategic framework plan "Healthy China 2030" confirmed China's intention to expand its discourse power³ in the global health sector.⁴ In its chapter 26, China explains in detail that it aims to implement its health strategy on the basis of existing bilateral as well as newly developed cooperation mechanisms worldwide, especially within the framework of South-South cooperation. The primary goals of the Health Silk Road include expediency, quality and long-term partnerships. The regional weighting differs: in Asia the focus is on medical care, in Africa

¹ NHC (National Health and Family Planning Commission), "Major health exchange and cooperation on the Belt and Road Initiative," December 18, 2015, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/m/chinahealth/2015-12/18/content_22774412.htm.

² *Xinhuanet*, "习近平在乌兹别克斯坦最高会议立法院发表演讲时强调. 携手打造绿色、健康、智力、和平的丝绸之路" (Essential points of Xi Jinping's speech in Usbekistan. Hand in hand to build a green, healthy, smart and peaceful Silk Road), June 22, 2016, http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2016-06/22/c_1119094645.htm.

³ 话语权.

⁴ State Council, 中共中央 国务院印发 《"健康中国2030"规划纲要》 (*Framework for a "Healthy China 2030"*), October 25, 2016, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2016-10/25/content_5124174.htm.

and in the West on the health industry.⁵ The Health Silk Road has been a strategic core area of the new Silk Road since 2017 and functions as a multilateral, multi-sectoral and inter-institutional mechanism for emergencies in the regional public health system.⁶ In January 2017, China signed a declaration of intent with the World Health Organization (WHO) to cooperate in this area and to take into account the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 2030.⁷ In August 2017, China organized a high-profile international conference in Beijing.⁸

The international impact of the Chinese narrative generally increased. It was accelerated again, especially in the course of the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing adjustments that resulted from it. The strategic goals of the Health Silk Road include strengthening China's position in multilateral health policy and promoting the Chinese economy. As effective factors, China relies on improving its international reputation and on support for its international positioning.⁹ In international relations, a narrative must always take into account the structure of the world system and thus the characterization of China as a rising and potentially threatening great power. The corresponding narrative therefore presents China as a great power with the readiness to take comprehensive (health policy) responsibility in different areas¹⁰ and as a provider of alternatives within the framework of the existing world order.

⁵ Yao Wang et al., "The intentions, needs, advantages and barriers: a survey of twenty-nine countries participating in the 'Belt and Road Initiative' health cooperation," *Global Health Research and Policy*, June 28, 2019, <https://ghrp.biomedcentral.com/track/pdf/10.1186/s41256-019-0109-z>.

⁶ Jin Chen et al., "Combating infectious disease epidemics through China's Belt and Road Initiative," *NCBI* 13, no. 4 (April 18, 2019), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6472722/#pntd.0007107.ref001>.

⁷ An Baijie, "WHO, China sign pact establishing 'health Silk Road'," *China Daily*, January 19, 2017, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2017wef/2017-01/19/content_27993857.htm.

⁸ NHC (National Health and Family Planning Commission of the PRC), "The Belt and Road High-Level Meeting for Health Cooperation: Towards a Health Silk Road, 18. - 20.8.2017," <http://en.nhc.gov.cn/Beltandroadforumforhealthcooperation.html>.

⁹ Barbara Farkas, *Die Seidenstraße* (Wien: Heeresdruck, 2020); Kun Tang et al., "China's Silk Road and global health," *The Lancet* 390, no. 10112 (December 9, 2017), <https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S0140-6736%2817%2932898-2>.

¹⁰ Xi Jinping, "Jointly Shoulder Responsibility of Our Times, Promote Global Growth," Keynote Speech at the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting on January 17, 2017, *Xinhua*: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-01/18/c_135991184.htm.

An important aspect is the whole of government approach to crisis management. This can be seen, for example, in the partly free and partly commercial mask deliveries made by the Chinese government during the Covid-19 pandemic, but also by local governments, the military, companies and private individuals.¹¹

The emphasis is on China's leadership, credibility and lawful approach at the national and international level, for example with respect to scientific competence or China's economic and social resilience. The main fields of action for the international narrative are the multi-layered cooperation in the health sector, internationalization, institutionalization and implementation. Issue-specific narratives concentrate on making concrete decisions and finding solutions. With regard to the Covid-19 pandemic, China used the issue-specific narrative to justify its crisis management and the post-pandemic strategy, as well as to be recognized as a role model.¹² At the national level, the narrative focuses on the identity and values of the actor in the context of international relations, for example on the peaceful development of China¹³, the Chinese dream of the renewal of the Chinese nation or the Silk Road. The broad conceptualization gives China unique flexibility in defining and shaping the Health Silk Road, according to the conditions, countries and recipients.

¹¹ Xinhua, "As China recovers from COVID-19 blow, Chinese rush to Europe's rescue," March 26, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/26/c_138916938_2.htm; MFA (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), "State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi Gives Interview To Xinhua News Agency and China Media Group On International Situation and China's Diplomacy in 2020," January 2, 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1844079.shtml.

¹² CGTN, "Countries take China's lead in building temporary hospitals to fight COVID-19," March 14, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-03-14/Countries-take-China-s-lead-in-building-temporary-COVID-19-hospitals-OQu5a4AOWc/index.html>.

¹³ MOD (Ministry of National Defense), "Xi eyes more enabling int'l environment for China's peaceful development," November 30, 2014, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/TopNews/2014-11/30/content_4554680.htm.

With reference to the doctrine of the community of shared destiny of mankind¹⁴ and the moral realignment of international politics, China drafted the narrative of a global health community.¹⁵ The essence of the community of shared destiny corresponds to China's striving for globalization under the umbrella of Chinese standards and thus the expansion of China's normative power:

China believes that all countries should make the choice that is right for the interests of all humanity and the wellbeing of our future generations. Upholding the vision of a global community of shared future, we should support each other and join hands to contain the spread of the virus and protect the health and wellbeing of people across the globe.¹⁶

The Health Silk Road serves to build an efficient global public health system¹⁷ with special support directed to developing countries, especially on

¹⁴ 人类命运共同体。See, for example, Xi Jinping's New Year's speech, MOD (Ministry of National Defense), "国家主席习近平发表二〇二一年新年贺词", http://www.mod.gov.cn/leaders/2020-12/31/content_4876316.htm.

¹⁵ 人类卫生健康共同体。Xinhua, "Xi calls for building community of common health for mankind," March 21, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/21/c_138902701.htm; State Council Information Office, *Fighting COVID-19: China in Action*, White Paper, June 7, 2020, http://english.scio.gov.cn/whitepapers/2020-06/07/content_76135269.htm; Chinanews, "打造健康丝绸之路正当其时" (The appropriate time for building the Health Silk Road), April 27, 2020, <https://m.chinanews.com/wap/detail/zw/cj/2020/04-27/9168900.shtml>; People's Daily Online, "健康丝绸之路 为生命护航 - 抗击疫情离不开命运共同体意识" (The Health Silk Road to protect life - Fighting a pandemic is inextricably linked with the awareness of the destiny community), March 24, 2020, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0324/c40531-31645276.html>.

¹⁶ State Council Information Office, *Fighting COVID-19*.

¹⁷ Ibid.; Wang, "Intentions;" Yin He, "Health Silk Road protect lives of all mankind," *People's Daily*, March 25, 2020, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2020/0325/c90000-9672120.html>; Chen, "Combating infectious disease;" Yasiru Ranaraja and Maya Majueran, "Is the 'Health Silk Road' a 'debt-trap' of China's BRI for Sri Lanka?," *CGTN*, April 25, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-04-25/Is-the-Health-Silk-Road-a-debt-trap-of-China-s-BRI-for-Sri-Lanka--PXqPCPd7Ta/index.html>.

the African continent.¹⁸ In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, mask diplomacy and even more vaccine diplomacy¹⁹ acquired a geopolitical and geo-economical dimension. China promised to provide vaccines as a global public good.²⁰

China joined the international vaccine initiative Covax (Covid-19 Vaccines Global Access) on October 8, 2020. Covax now comprises around 150 countries and international organizations, had an initial research budget of two billion US dollars and strives for a fair distribution of a globally available and affordable Covid vaccine, primarily through centralized vaccine distribution based on population size. The estimated need is eleven billion US-Dollars or two billion vaccine doses in 2021, especially for the 92 poorest countries in the world. The World Health Organization, the global vaccine alliance GAVI (Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunizations) and the coalition for innovations in epidemic prevention (Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations, CEPI) act in the lead.²¹ China's Foreign Ministry

¹⁸ MFA, "State Councilor," Liying Zhang, "China, Africa support each other in fight against COVID-19," *China.org*, September 2, 2020, http://www.china.org.cn/world/2020-09/02/content_76663093.htm.

¹⁹ CGTN, "China vows to prioritize Philippines' request for vaccine access," July 30, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-07-30/China-vows-to-prioritize-Philippines-request-for-vaccine-access-Sxy6OLYSek/index.html>.

²⁰ Pan Zhaoyi, "Chinese vaccines will be made global public good, says Xi," *CGTN*, May 19, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-05-19/Chinese-vaccines-will-be-made-global-public-good-says-Xi-QCpFSGIL2g/index.html>; State Council Information Office, *Fighting COVID-19*; Xinhua, "China to provide COVID-19 vaccines to the world at reasonable price," September 30, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-09/30/c_139410105.htm; MFA, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on November 17, 2020," https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1833054.shtml; *China.org*, "China, Africa fighting COVID-19 pandemic shoulder to shoulder," December 15, 2020, http://www.china.org.cn/world/2020-12/15/content_77013493.htm.

²¹ MFA, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Remarks on China Joining COVAX," October 9, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2535_665405/t1822631.shtml; Forschung & Lehre, „China schließt sich globaler Covax-Impfstoff-Initiative an,“ October 9, 2020, <https://www.forschung-und-lehre.de/politik/china-schliesst-sich-globaler-covax-impfstoff-initiative-an-3172/>.

spokeswoman Hua Chunying commented on China's accession to Covax as follows:

This is an important step China has taken to uphold the concept of a shared community of health for all and to honour its commitment to turn Covid-19 vaccines into a global public good.²²

China used the strategic opportunities and underlined its fairness, especially in contrast to the USA. After the USA had suspended funding for the World Health Organization in April 2020 - portrayed by China as a lack of solidarity - China made an additional contribution of 50 million US-Dollars to the WHO to fight pandemics and to expand the public health system in developing countries. A further two billion US-Dollars will be donated in cooperation with the WHO and the African Union to 82 countries to combat the health crisis. China is also suspending debt services.²³ Even if western pharmaceutical companies win the competition for market approval for vaccines, which is associated with economic and symbolic weight, the availability and affordability of Chinese vaccines will shape the relationship between China and the developing countries in the long term in favour of China. China repeatedly listed its medical support to other countries in the course of the Covid-19 crisis in detail. This concerns, for example, the effective use of industrial production and export capacities, the dispatch of medical teams, the establishment of joint expert groups, the exchange of information, the number of recipients (countries and organizations) or the specific products such as masks, test sets or ventilators.²⁴

²² MFA, "Remarks on China Joining COVAX."

²³ He, "Health Silk Road;" Xinhua, "China's donation to WHO for coronavirus prevention, control," March 9, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/09/c_138859577.htm; State Council Information Office, *White Paper on China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era*, January 10, 2021, <http://www.lawinfochina.com/display.aspx?id=233&lib=dbref&SearchKeyword=&SearchKeyword=>; State Council Information Office, *Fighting COVID-19*.

²⁴ Xinhua, "Reality Check of US Allegations Against China on COVID-19," May 10, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-05/10/c_139044103.htm; MFA, "State Councillor," David Stanway, "China doubles down on COVID narrative as WHO investigation looms," *Reuters*, January 5, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-china-who-int-idUSKBN29A0LX>.

International legitimacy & leadership

China laid claim to leadership and justified its international legitimacy with a sense of responsibility, scientific approach as well as cooperation and implementation within the framework of international organizations.

In international cooperation on joint prevention and control, it is essential that major countries take the initiative, fulfil their responsibilities and do their share of the work.²⁵

China's complex self-image as a great power²⁶ has developed since the 1990s. It results from numerous factors, such as the formative influence of the USA, strategic considerations, events, ideational influences at home, social demands in international society or the instrumentalization to improve its image. The internal Chinese debate is more and more shifting to the international perspective that China should increasingly take on global responsibility.²⁷ The development policy perspective and the sceptical perspective that global responsibility serves to contain China receded into the background.²⁸ In his keynote address at the World Economic Forum in January 2017, Xi Jinping underlined:

We should strike a balance between efficiency and equity to ensure that different countries, different social strata and different groups of people all share in the benefits of economic globalization. The people of all countries expect nothing less from us, and this is our unshirkable responsibility as leaders of our times.²⁹

²⁵ State Council Information Office, *Fighting COVID-19*.

²⁶ Jinping, "Jointly Shoulder Responsibility."

²⁷ State Council Information Office, *Fighting COVID-19*.

²⁸ Hoo Tiang Boon, *China's Global Identity. Considering the Responsibilities of Great Power* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2018).

²⁹ Jinping, "Jointly Shoulder Responsibility."

Scientific approach

The (natural) scientific approach is an important element in the Chinese narrative and actively serves to increase persuasiveness. The roots of this Chinese thought lie in the scientific worldview of Marxism-Leninism. China, for example, placed its previous health policy successes and scientific successes at home and abroad in the foreground as a role model.³⁰ This includes building up its national health system, the knowledge gained and lessons learned since Sars 2003, China's help with the Ebola epidemic in Africa from 2014 to 2016 and its effective fight against Covid-19. China announced active support for a scientific (and not a political) investigation into the emergence of the pandemic³¹, which finally took place from January 14th to February 10th, 2021, and was organised by the WHO in China.³² The Chinese side presented scientific data or explained the scientific challenges³³ and laboratory safety in China. China preferably referred to specialist journals, for example with regard to the natural development of the Corona virus. An example is the reference by the nationwide English-language Global Times³⁴ to the international scientific journal Current Biology.³⁵ The

³⁰ The Lancet, "Facing forwards along the Health Silk Road," vol. 5, no. 10 (October 2017), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7128673/>.

³¹ Phoebe Zhang, "China backs WHO investigating origin of Covid-19, hits out at US 'politicising issue'," *SCMP*, May 7, 2020.

³² "WHO-convened Global Study of Origins of SARS-CoV-2: China Part," *Joint WHO-China Study*, January 14 – February 10, 2021, <https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus/origins-of-the-virus>.

³³ Xinhua, "News analysis: Why is coronavirus origin tracing a challenging task for scientists?," May 20, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-05/20/c_139072317.htm.

³⁴ Global Times, "Discovery of close relative of novel coronavirus offers evidence of its natural origin," May 14, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1188335.shtml>.

³⁵ Hong Zhou et al., "A Novel Bat Coronavirus Closely Related to SARS-CoV-2 Contains Natural Insertions at the S1/S2 Cleavage Site of the Spike Protein," *Current Biology* 30, no. 11 (June 8, 2020), 2196-2203, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/pmid/32416074/>.

state news agency Xinhua³⁶ cites 'The Lancet'³⁷, Nature Medicine³⁸ and a statement signed by 27 international scientists.³⁹

In its White Paper "Fighting Covid-19", China recorded the various areas and mechanisms of cooperation. It presented its multi-level approach as well as its category-specific, region-specific, dynamic and targeted access to disease control. Furthermore, it explained the classification into risk levels on the basis of a comprehensive evaluation of numerous factors, such as the number of infections in relation to the population in a certain period of time.⁴⁰

China has carried out international exchanges and cooperation on scientific research. China has strengthened communication and exchanges with the WHO, conducted exchanges and cooperation with other countries on research in virus traceability, medicines, vaccines, and testing, shared scientific research data and information, and jointly studied prevention, control and treatment strategies. The Ministry of Science and Technology, the NHC [National Health Commission], the China Association for Science and Technology, and the Chinese Medical Association have jointly put in place a Covid-19 Academic Research Communication Platform for worldwide researchers to release results and participate in discussion. By May 31 [2020], a total of 104 journals and 970 papers and reports had been posted.⁴¹

³⁶ Xinhua, "Truth in China's pandemic battle smashes absurd U.S. allegations," May 11, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-05/11/c_139045957.htm; Xinhua, "Reality Check."

³⁷ Roujian Lu et al., "Genomic characterisation and epidemiology of 2019 novel coronavirus: implications for virus origins and receptor binding," *The Lancet* 395: 565–74 (January 29, 2020), <https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S0140-6736%2820%2930251-8>.

³⁸ Christian G. Andersen, "The proximal origin of SARS-CoV-2," *Nature Medicine* 26, 450–52 (2020), <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41591-020-0820-9>; Nature, "Stop the coronavirus stigma now," Editorial April 7, 2020, *Nature* 580, no. 165 (2020), <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01009-0>.

³⁹ Charles Calisher et al., "Statement in support of the scientists, public health professionals, and medical professionals of China combatting COVID-19," *The Lancet* 395, no. 10226, e42–e43, March 7, 2020, <https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S0140-6736%2820%2930418-9>.

⁴⁰ State Council Information Office, *Fighting COVID-19*.

⁴¹ Ibid.

The strategic domestic political environment is inseparable from international legitimacy. The Covid-19 pandemic represents a health, economic and socio-political crisis for China. The government's legitimacy is based on economic development and its own credibility which is based on its technocratic competence. China's narrative underlines that progress and competence, such as the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic and its (economic) consequences, are definitely compatible with an authoritarian system as a sub-order within the liberal world order. The Chinese narrative emphasizes the resilience potential⁴² of China and the support potential for global recovery through the Silk Road and in particular the Health Silk Road.⁴³ The narrative of the decline of the West⁴⁴ that has existed since the 2008 financial crisis has been reinforced.⁴⁵ China presents itself as effective, far-sighted, united and stable. The economic forecast is positive despite Covid-19 and a global boost.⁴⁶ The respective ideology does not determine the cooperation per se, but only the degree of intensity of the cooperation with certain countries.⁴⁷ China also sees its efficiency and transparency as confirmed by the United Nations⁴⁸ and the WHO⁴⁹. China rejects the accusation of political or propaganda intentions.⁵⁰ Uniform external

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ State Council Information Office, "BRI projects can help global recovery," September 21, 2020, http://english.scio.gov.cn/beltandroad/2020-09/21/content_76724982.htm.

⁴⁴ 东升西降.

⁴⁵ Sohu, "新发展阶段新在哪里？陈一新从八个方面进行阐释" (Where is the next stage of development? Chen Yixin's [Secretary General of the Central Commission for Politics and Rights] explanations from eight perspectives), January 15, 2021, https://www.sohu.com/a/444668793_118060.

⁴⁶ MFA, "Zhao Lijian's Press Conference."

⁴⁷ The Asan Institute of Policy Studies, "Challenge in the Era of Chaos," February 1, 2021, <http://en.asaninst.org/contents/challenge-in-the-era-of-chaos/>.

⁴⁸ Xinhua, "UN General Assembly president urges avoiding rumours about coronavirus, emphasizes solidarity," February 9, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-02/09/c_138767676.htm.

⁴⁹ MFA, "Xi Jinping meets with visiting World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus," January 29, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1737014.shtml; MFA, "Zhao Lijian's Press Conference".

⁵⁰ Xinhua, "Reality Check."

communication is one of China's strengths, as is logistical performance, reliability as a partner and the activation of a large number of Chinese players.

China's resilience for global benefit

China had already emphasized its social and economic resilience before the Covid pandemic. During the crisis, China's comprehensive resilience and the resulting positive effects for the whole world were all the more central:

The unity and perseverance of the Chinese people have impressed the world. The resilience and dynamism of China's development have won global recognition.⁵¹

In the Chinese narrative, resilience in general and its specific cornerstones were emphasized, such as the acceptance of the situation, the solution orientation, abandoning the victim role, taking responsibility for oneself and finally also for others, future planning, optimism and network thinking.⁵² China underlined both its capabilities and capacities to withstand and recover from the Covid crisis as a disruptive event. The central government specified the policy measures and implementation. At the same time, the local governments enjoyed a great deal of autonomy for the conception and implementation of additional support measures at home and abroad. China's resilience is based on the complex combination of the characteristics of the Covid crisis, institutional and organizational experience with previous pandemics such as Sars 2003, government measures and the regional industrial structure.

In the health sector, resilience affects the population and the health system, which is to be expanded internationally through the Health Silk Road. Social resilience includes the social structure, which comprises the population

⁵¹ MFA, "Wang Yi Gives Interview."

⁵² See e.g. State Council Information Office, *Fighting COVID-19*; Huiwen Gong et al., "Regional Resilience in Times of a Pandemic Crisis: The Case of Covid-19 in China," in *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* vol. 111, no. 3 (2020), 497–512; Hui Zhang and Xinzhi Wang, "Community Resilience and Public Safety Research in China," in *Strengthening Social Resilience, Building Social Capital: Perspectives from Israel and China*, ed. Reuven Gal and Shlomo Maital (Haifa: Samuel Neaman Institute, 2017), 83-88, <https://www.neaman.org.il/EN/Files/Strengthening%20Social%20Resilience.pdf>.

structure and the state organizations at the municipal level and has a long-term effect. Social resilience also includes psychological aspects and the digital information systems, both of which have a short-term effect. China's vulnerability is defined by a combination of different factors. These include the awareness of the dangers, the nature of the infrastructure, the implementation of public order, the available resources and the organizational capacity for crisis management.

Fields of action

Health cooperation

Almost 60 bilateral health agreements exist within the framework of the Silk Road until now. General health care is to be improved, including through research collaborations and collaboration in health systems within the framework of the world health order, especially in the Silk Road countries. This affects the formulation of guidelines for health promotion, as well as for research and medical companies. In addition, there is the promotion of specialist training, investments and financing opportunities as well as the strengthening of global support. The health infrastructure is being expanded. The exchange of medical goods and services as well as medical concepts and practices between the countries is to be strengthened.

Mask and vaccine diplomacy

After the pandemic broke out, China appealed to the international community and received relief supplies and payments from around 60 countries. Roles quickly changed, and China became a pragmatic supplier of aid to almost every country in the world, regardless of the existence of diplomatic relations.⁵³ Before the Covid-19 pandemic, China had produced half of the global market share of protective equipment products. Chinese engagement increased significantly in general in Latin America and in the Arab world. As of December 9, 2020, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain were the first countries to approve a Chinese vaccine, followed by Egypt,

⁵³ Lina Gong, "COVID-19: Is the Humanitarian Sector Prepared?", *RSIS Commentary* no. 036 (March 11, 2020): <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/CO20036.pdf>.

Brazil, Indonesia and Turkey. By January 2021, 26 countries had concluded vaccine supply agreements with China, and ten already had an (emergency) vaccine approval. Phase 3 studies on the vaccines from five Chinese manufacturers were carried out in 18 countries, particularly in Southeast Asia, Latin America and the Arab countries.⁵⁴

The Chinese company Sinovac will be able to produce two billion doses of its vaccine Coronavac annually from 2021. As of March 2021, 70 million doses had been administered worldwide. CanSino Biologics' annual production capacity for Convidecia (AD5-nCOV) is 500 million doses, with a single vaccination being sufficient contrary to Coronavac and Sinopharm. Sinopharm administered 80 million doses and delivered 100 million doses through March 2021. Its production capacity reaches three billion doses yearly. Local productions, partly with an export license, exist e. g. in the United Arab Emirates, Indonesia and Malaysia. China's willingness to transfer technology and knowledge was decisive for building up cooperation in clinical tests and enhancing local capacities, for example with regard to the safety protocols. Sinopharm has unrestricted approval, which goes beyond the emergency approval, in Bahrain and the Seychelles, and Sinovac in Malaysia. In China, ten million people had been vaccinated by mid-January 2021.

The thematic world map and the tables pictured below show the geographic distribution respectively the global acceptance of the Chinese Corona vaccines in over 75 countries as of the end of March 2021. The percentage of the population fully vaccinated with Chinese vaccines is shown on a colour scale per country. The vaccines from Sinovac, Sinopharm and CanSino Biologics are taken into account and adjusted according to the number of vaccination doses required: two each from Sinovac and Sinopharm or one vaccine dose from CanSino. Agreements, as far as publicly known, as well as commercial and free deliveries, some of which were also

⁵⁴ CGTN, "Leaders from several countries praise China for COVID-19 vaccines," February 14, 2021, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-02-13/Foreign-leaders-express-heartfelt-gratitude-to-China-for-vaccine-aid-XQIuXmYvwA/index.html>; CGTN, "More countries turn to Chinese COVID-19 vaccines," February 16, 2021, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-02-16/More-countries-turn-to-Chinese-COVID-19-vaccines-XVa5bOk0zC/index.html>.

made via third countries, are considered.⁵⁵ The proportion of free deliveries was comparatively low and mostly took place after the commercial vaccine was ordered. China's planned Covax contingent of ten million vaccine doses is not included.⁵⁶

Measured by the percentage of the respective population who were able to be completely immunized against Corona with Chinese vaccines on the basis of previous agreements or deliveries, Indonesia (36 %) and Malaysia (30 %) rank first in the Indo-Pacific region. It is followed by Cambodia (20 %), the Maldives (19 %), the Philippines (12 %), Pakistan (10 %) and Thailand (5 %). Other regions of the world benefited from the Chinese vaccines to a greater extent, such as Chile (62 %), Turkey (60 %), Peru (58 %) and Morocco (56 %). In the United Arab Emirates, the specific volume is unknown due to the local production license for Sinopharm.

The map of the global distribution of Chinese Corona vaccines does not show a clear course along the Silk Road corridors, but rather the situation-related reaction of China, based, for example, on the infection rate, the logistical requirements or existing bilateral relationships. The map corresponds to the Chinese perspective that *"China has friends all over the world"*, especially in the coastal countries:

China is above-board and open and remains committed to developing friendly and cooperative relations with all countries in line with the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. Take a look at a world map, you will find China have friends all over the world.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Numerous sources, e.g. CGTN, "More countries"; Hui Zhang and Yuwei Hu, "At least 17 countries have purchased China-produced COVID-19 vaccines", *Global Times*, January 14, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202101/1212864.shtml>; Weltbank, "Population 2019," <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL>.

⁵⁶ Reuters, "China to provide 10 million vaccine doses to COVAX initiative," February 3, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-vaccine-china-idUSKBN2A30VZ>.

⁵⁷ MFA, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on March 24, 2021," https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1863896.shtml.

Global distribution resp. acceptance of Chinese Covid Vaccines (by March 31, 2021)

(Percentage of the population fully vaccinated with Chinese vaccines)

	Sinopharm	Sinovac	CanSino	Note	Population	Fully vaccinated
	(2 doses)	(2 doses)	(1 dose)		in Mio.	population in %
Europe & Caucasus						
Albania		1.000.000		via Turkey	2,85	17,52%
Belarus	100.000				9,47	0,53%
Bosnia		30.000		via Turkey	3,30	0,45%
Czech Republic	interested				10,67	
Georgia	100.000				3,72	1,34%
Hungary	5.000.000		approved		9,77	25,59%
Moldavia	2.000			via UAE	2,66	0,04%
Montenegro	30.000				0,62	2,41%
North Macedonia	200.000				2,08	4,80%
Poland	interested				37,97	
Serbia	3.500.000				6,94	25,20%
Turkey		100.000.000			83,43	59,93%
Ukraine		1.800.000			44,39	1,35%

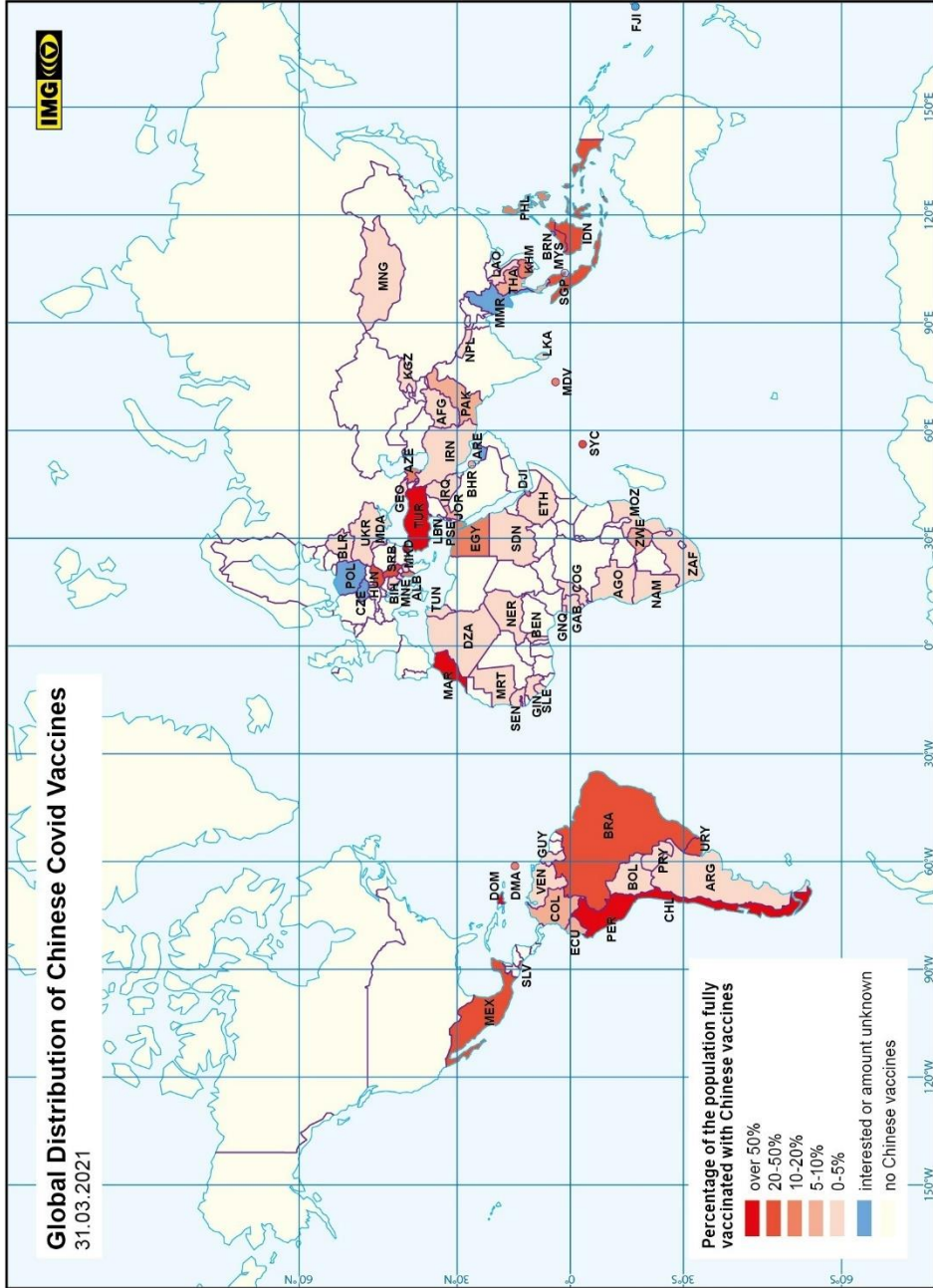
	Sinopharm	Sinovac	CanSino	Note	Population	Fully vaccinated
	(2 doses)	(2 doses)	(1 dose)		in Mio.	population in %
Central & South Asia						
Afghanistan	400.000				38,04	0,53%
Azerbaijan		4.000.000			10,02	19,95%
Kyrgyz Republic	150.000				6,46	1,16%
Maldives	200.000				0,53	18,83%
Mongolia	300.000				3,23	4,65%
Nepal	800.000				28,61	1,40%
Pakistan	1.700.000		20.000.000		216,57	9,63%
Sri Lanka	600.000				21,80	1,38%

	Sinopharm	Sinovac	CanSino	Note	Population	Fully vaccinated
	(2 doses)	(2 doses)	(1 dose)		in Mio.	population in %
Southeast Asia						
Brunei	amount unclear				0,43	amount unclear
Cambodia	1.000.000	5.500.000			16,49	19,71%
Indonesia	15.000.000	140.000.000	20.000.000		270,63	36,03%
Laos	300.000				7,17	2,09%
Malaysia		12.000.000	3.500.000		31,95	29,73%
Myanmar	approved	approved			54,05	amount unclear
Philippines		25.600.000			108,12	11,84%
Singapore		200.000			5,70	1,75%
Thailand		7.000.000			69,63	5,03%

	Sinopharm	Sinovac	CanSino	Note	Population	Fully vaccinated
	(2 doses)	(2 doses)	(1 dose)		in Mio.	population in %
Africa						
Algeria	200.000				43,05	0,23%
Angola	200.000				31,83	0,31%
Benin		203.000			11,80	0,86%
Congo, Republic of	100.000				5,38	0,93%
Djibouti		300.000			0,97	15,41%
Egypt	40.000.000				100,39	19,92%
Equatorial Guinea	100.000				1,36	3,69%
Ethiopia	300.000				112,08	0,13%
Gabon	100.000				2,17	2,30%
Guinea	200.000				12,77	0,78%
Marocco	41.000.000				36,47	56,21%
Mauritania	50.000				4,53	0,55%
Mozambique	200.000				30,37	0,33%
Namibia	100.000				2,49	2,00%
Niger	400.000				23,31	0,86%
Senegal	200.000				16,30	0,61%
Seychelles	50.000				0,10	25,61%
Sierra Leone	200.000				7,81	1,28%
South Africa		5.000.000			58,56	4,27%
Sudan	250.000				42,81	0,29%
Tunisia		200.000			11,69	0,86%
Zimbabwe	2.000.000	1.000.000			14,65	10,24%

	Sinopharm	Sinovac	CanSino	Note	Population	Fully vaccinated
	(2 doses)	(2 doses)	(1 dose)		in Mio.	population in %
Arab Countries						
Bahrain	300.000				1,64	9,14%
Iran	250.000				82,91	0,15%
Iraq	2.000.000				39,31	2,54%
Jordan	2.000.000				10,10	9,90%
Libanon	50.000				6,86	0,36%
Palestine	100.000				4,69	1,07%
United Arab Emirates	local production				9,77	amount unclear

	Sinopharm	Sinovac	CanSino	Note	Population	Fully vaccinated
	(2 doses)	(2 doses)	(1 dose)		in Mio.	population in %
Latin America						
Argentina	904.000				44,94	1,01%
Bolivia	500.000	approved			11,51	2,17%
Brazil		130.000.000			211,05	30,80%
Chile		20.000.000	1.800.000		18,95	62,26%
Columbia		10.000.000			50,34	9,93%
Dominica	20.000				0,07	13,93%
Dominican Republic	768.000	10.000.000			10,74	50,14%
Ecuador		2.000.000			17,37	5,76%
El Salvador		2.000.000			6,45	15,50%
Guyana	20.000				0,78	1,28%
Mexiko	12.000.000	20.000.000	35.000.000		127,58	39,98%
Paraguay		20.000		via Chile	7,04	0,14%
Peru	38.000.000				32,51	58,44%
Uruguay		1.750.000			3,46	25,28%
Venezuela	500.000				28,52	0,88%



Institutionalization & implementation

The structural reform and institutionalization that was started years ago includes the Chinese healthcare industry, international cooperation mechanisms and communication. To steer public opinion, China basically has a network of experienced actors with multiple and differentiated identities. The party directives, the foreign policy goals and the current circumstances are taken into account. This was set out in a pragmatic strategic plan at the beginning of 2017.⁵⁸ Based on the experience of fighting Ebola in Africa, China improved its inter-ministerial and international communication and cooperation.⁵⁹

With the establishment of a new agency for international development cooperation in April 2018, China upgraded the role of the Ministry of Health and the Disease Control Center.⁶⁰ With a view to working with the World Health Organization and the United Nations, China is establishing the four networks of public health, political research, the hospital alliance and the health industry as part of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 2030 in order to continuously look for opportunities for cooperation.⁶¹ China draws up specific development plans for the pharmaceutical, biotechnological and medical device industries, inter alia. The health sector and the general restructuring of the science and technology sector represent a key component for China as part of its global strategy.

⁵⁸ Xinhua, “关于实施中华优秀传统文化传承发展工程的意见” (Proposals for the process implementation to spread and develop the exceptional traditional Chinese culture), January 25, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-01/25/c_1120383155.htm.

⁵⁹ Tang, “China’s Silk Road.”

⁶⁰ Lincoln Chen and Minhui Yang, “New opportunities for China in global health,” *The Lancet Global Health* 6, no. 7 (July 28, 2018), [https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/langlo/PIIS2214-109X\(18\)30263-8.pdf](https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/langlo/PIIS2214-109X(18)30263-8.pdf).

⁶¹ NHC, “Major health exchange.”

⁶¹ Wang, “Intentions;” Tang, “China’s Silk Road.”

To expand its extensive national strength, China relies on its discourse power⁶², especially under President Xi Jinping, who has an excellent command of traditional Chinese rhetoric. As early as 2013, Xi Jinping underlined the need for storytelling⁶³, positive references⁶⁴, new propaganda formats⁶⁵, the spread of the Chinese voice⁶⁶ and the ability to present China's perspective in an advantageous manner⁶⁷. The strategic basis is a multi-dimensional concept and a comprehensive structural reform in the past few years. Its main elements are a stronger external orientation, a centralized and hierarchical top-down governance, the integration of party and state as well as ideological control. The aim is to strengthen the efficiency and coherence of internal and external communication. The official definition of discourse power remains vague and, depending on the perspective, is equated with the right to speak or national, diplomatic or media assertiveness. In any case, in the traditional Chinese perspective, the discourse corresponds to the monopoly of knowledge, morality and status.⁶⁸

⁶² Xinhua, “习近平：意识形态工作是党的一项极端重要的工作” (Xi Jinping: Ideological work is an extremely important issue for the party), August 20, 2013, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-08/20/c_117021464_3.htm; Caixin, “习近平讲述” “中国故事”. 诠释官方外交语言新“温度” (Xi Jinping tells about the “China story.” Explanatory notes concerning the new “temperature” of the diplomatic language), April 23, 2015, <http://www.caixin.com/2015-04-23/100802893.html>.

⁶³ 我们要加强宣传报道.

⁶⁴ 积极借鉴.

⁶⁵ 创新对外宣传方式.

⁶⁶ 传播好中国声音.

⁶⁷ 讲好中国故事.

⁶⁸ Kejin Zhao, “China’s rise and its discursive power strategy,” *Chinese Political Science Review* no. 1 (2016), 544.

International organizations

Global recognition, especially through international organizations, is of great importance for China and its international legitimacy. The WHO praised China's national health policy development as a model as well as the potential of the Health Silk Road and its consistency with the goals of the WHO:⁶⁹

The Belt and Road Initiative contains the fundamentals to achieve universal health coverage: infrastructure, access to medicines, human resources, and a platform to share experience and promote best practices.⁷⁰

The strategic partnership with China proposed by the WHO focuses on the vulnerable countries along the Silk Road. These include numerous crises, conflict and post-conflict countries. The regional focus is on Africa and the health policy on disease control as the basis for global health security. The WHO underlines the importance of health as a human right: *"Health is a human right. People should never have to choose between getting the care they need and financial hardship or impoverishment."*⁷¹ China welcomes the active participation of the WHO concerning the Health Silk Road.⁷² At the international level, for example at the BRICS summit, the G20 summit or the World Economic Forum, Xi Jinping underscored China's successes in fighting pandemics. At the same time, China supports the international organizations, such as the

⁶⁹ MFA, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Daily Briefing Online on February 3, 2020,"

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1739548.shtml; WHO, "Universal Health Coverage: The Key to a 21st-Century Health System," 2017, <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/universal-health-coverage-the-key-to-a-21st-century-health-system>; WHO, "Towards a Health Silk Road," August 18, 2017,

<https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/towards-a-health-silk-road>.

⁷⁰ WHO, "Towards a Health Silk Road."

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² 中国欢迎世界卫生组织积极参与“一带一路”建设·共建“健康丝绸之路”, in *People's Daily Online*, “健康丝绸之路” (Health Silk Road).

coordinating role of the WHO.⁷³ In the United Nations in particular, China is striving to expand its influence.⁷⁴ Secretary-General Guterres praised China's pandemic containment efforts, which "*gave the world valuable time for strategic decision-making.*"⁷⁵

China's cooperation with the global vaccine alliance GAVI, which began in 2002, is a good example of the functioning of a global health community. GAVI initially supported China with the introduction of the hepatitis B vaccine. In 2015, China changed from being a recipient of aid to a country with sustainable self-financing and an active supporter of GAVI. For the period from 2016 to 2020, China provided GAVI with five million US-Dollars and increased this amount to 20 million US-Dollars for the period from 2021 to 2025.⁷⁶

Strategic aspects of the Health Silk Road

In shaping the future global health governance in a sustainable manner, China aims to play a major role with its growing professional and organizational capacities.⁷⁷ Global health governance serves to protect health worldwide through collective action using common mechanisms. Standardization, financing and governance play a key role - and form the basis for the normative effect. Infrastructure development is a key component of health security and disease preparedness. There is a direct correlation between the availability of efficient and resilient infrastructure, such as

⁷³ CGTN, "Liu Xiaoming: China is a COVID-19 victim, not producer of the pandemic," May 1, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-05-01/Liu-Xiaoming-China-is-a-COVID-19-victim-not-producer-of-the-pandemic-Q84xUWVxja/index.html>; Foreign Minister Wang Yi, "China to build community of health with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia," *Xinhua*, September 18, 2020, <http://en.pkulaw.cn/Search/DisplayInfo.aspx?lib=news&id=28050>.

⁷⁴ State Council, "中共中央关于制定国民经济和社会发展第十四个五年规划和二〇三五年远景目标的建议" (Proposals on Formulating the Fourteenth Five Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development (2021 - 2025) and the Long-term Goals for 2035), November 3, 2020, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2020-11/03/content_5556991.htm.

⁷⁵ Reuters, "World should learn lessons from China in coronavirus fight," March 17, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-china-editorial/world-should-learn-lessons-from-china-in-coronavirus-fight-china-daily-idUSKBN21403U>.

⁷⁶ Gavi, "China," <https://www.gavi.org/investing-gavi/funding/donor-profiles/china>.

⁷⁷ Wang, "Intentions;" Tang, "China's Silk Road;" NHC, "Major health exchange."

transportation, electricity, or telecommunications, and public health capacity.⁷⁸ The Health Silk Road also helps China maintain the relevance of the Silk Road, especially during the Covid-19 crisis. It uses the same logistics hubs and market accesses.⁷⁹ As a sectoral extension of the Silk Road, it serves complementary interests. It is increasingly linked to the Digital Silk Road, for example in diagnostics, telemedicine or quarantine monitoring.

Projection & reception of China's narrative

The interactivity determines the effectiveness and sustainability of the narrative and the messages; their coherence is therefore important. To strengthen its discourse power, China uses its pandemic-specific identity as a cooperative fighter⁸⁰, which has a strong mobilization potential, within the framework of a regional narrative. For international communication, China relies on public diplomacy at various levels and on the media that are indispensable⁸¹ for an effect.⁸² The latter includes positive valuations from a foreign perspective⁸³ or the manipulation of information, such as (unjustified) criticism of the supposed inaction of the European Union.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, *Impact of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) and Its Implications for Infrastructure Priorities*, March 25, 2020, https://www.aiib.org/en/news-events/news/2020/_download/Background-Impact-of-Covid-19-and-Implications-on-Infrastructure-Priorities.pdf.

⁷⁹ Chen, "Combating infectious disease."

⁸⁰ Xinhua, "Foreign political party leaders express confidence in China's defeating coronavirus," February 14, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-02/14/c_138781438.htm; Xinhua, "China-S. Korea cooperation against COVID-19 effective, exemplary," March 9, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-05/14/c_139054494.htm.

⁸¹ Wolfgang Müller-Funk, *Die Kultur und ihre Narrative. Eine Einführung* (Vienna and New York: Springer, 2008), 174.

⁸² Zhao, "China's rise," 557f.

⁸³ Xinhua, "Swift, decisive, transparent, cooperative - China buying world time in fight against coronavirus epidemic," February 4, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-02/04/c_138755660.htm.

⁸⁴ European Council, "Report on the comprehensive economic policy response to the COVID-19 pandemic," April 9, 2020, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/04/09/report-on-the-comprehensive-economic-policy-response-to-the-covid-19-pandemic/>.

Narratives are based on intentions and goals and are a learning process. They contain an initial situation, a disruptive problem and a solution. The dynamic and ongoing adaptation of the Chinese narrative begins with questioning the origin of the virus and shifts to effective virus control and finally to global aid from China. The narrative thread and the desired perception of China's crisis management changed in the course of the pandemic from reactive and defensive to active and offensive. Similarly, China's identity changed from being a victim⁸⁵ to being a fighter⁸⁶ and eventually becoming a contributor⁸⁷ on the international level.

China increasingly emphasized its transparent, timely and correct approach with a chronological listing of events and the measures taken, for example in its own White Paper⁸⁸ and in international science journals such as *The Lancet*:⁸⁹

China has always acted with openness, transparency and responsibility, and informed the international community of developments of the epidemic in a timely manner.⁹⁰

On counter-narratives and accusations, which mainly come from the West, China goes into detail and based on facts, in particular on the emergence of the pandemic, on China's crisis management and its active international cooperation. The counter-narratives include allegations of bribery of the WHO or the economic gain from the pandemic. The presumed consideration of China by the WHO results from the toothless mandate without sanction mechanisms, the principle of unanimity and the chronic underfunding of the WHO. Therefore, a policy of appeasement is the only

⁸⁵ MFA, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang's Regular Press Conference on April 30, 2020," https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1775332.shtml; CGTN, "Liu Xiaoming."

⁸⁶ Xinhua, "Swift, decisive;" MFA, "Geng Shuang's Regular Press Conference."

⁸⁷ Reuters, "World should learn;" Xinhua, "China's donation;" State Council Information Office, *White Paper Development Cooperation*.

⁸⁸ State Council Information Office, *Fighting COVID-19*.

⁸⁹ Chaolin Huang et al., "Clinical features of patients infected with 2019 novel coronavirus in Wuhan, China," *The Lancet* 395: 497-506 (January 24, 2020), <https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S0140-6736%2820%2930183-5>.

⁹⁰ State Council Information Office, *Fighting COVID-19*.

way to ensure the cooperation of the affected countries. Lack of transparency is a general structural problem in international disease protection.⁹¹ The stricter Chinese customs regulations for medical exports were used for quality assurance and by no means as export restrictions.

The multi-layered argumentation regarding the origin of the virus is exemplary, with China rejecting the term “China Virus” and the reference to Wuhan as a politicization of the pandemic.⁹² China cites the WHO and the lack of specific evidence that the virus originated in Wuhan⁹³ or the possibility that the virus had previously appeared outside of Wuhan or even China.⁹⁴ In general, China refers to the WHO rules of 2015 for naming new infectious diseases⁹⁵, to related admonitions from the British science magazine *Nature*⁹⁶ and to the naming by the WHO as Covid-19 on February 11, 2020.⁹⁷ China cites several studies from the beginning of 2020 on the natural formation of viruses via bats, for example in *The Lancet*⁹⁸ and in *Nature*⁹⁹.

The blame assignment, put forth by e.g. the USA and Australia, clearly shows the geopolitical dimension and the complexity of the Global Health Governance narrative. Narratives shape identity, chronology and the reconstruction of knowledge. They work in context, influence each other

⁹¹ Jan Thiel, „Das Dilemma der WHO im globalen Seuchenschutz“, *CSS Analysen zur Sicherheitspolitik* Nr. 268 (August 2020), <https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CSSAnalyse268-DE.pdf>.

⁹² State Council Information Office, *Fighting COVID-19*; Xinhua, “Reality Check.”

⁹³ WHO, “COVID-19 Virtual Press conference,” May 4, 2020, https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/transcripts/who-audio-emergencies-coronavirus-press-conference-04may2020.pdf?sfvrsn=3ef4c516_4.

⁹⁴ MFA, “Zhao Lijian’s Press Conference;” A. Deslandes et al., “SARS-CoV-2 was already spreading in France in late December 2019,” *International Journal of Antimicrobial Agents* 55, no. 6 (June 2020).

⁹⁵ WHO, “World Health Organization best practices for the naming of new human infectious diseases,” May 15, 2015, <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-HSE-FOS-15.1>.

⁹⁶ *Nature*, “Stop the coronavirus stigma now.”

⁹⁷ WHO, “Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) Situation Report–22,” February 11, 2020, https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200211-sitrep-22-ncov.pdf?sfvrsn=fb6d49b1_2.

⁹⁸ Lu, “Genomic characterization”; Calisher, “Statement in support.”

⁹⁹ Andersen, “The proximal origin;” *Nature*, “Stop the coronavirus stigma now.”

and have a stabilizing effect.¹⁰⁰ As an actor, China is characterized both by its self-image and by how it is perceived by others. The situational narrative relates to the Covid-19 pandemic, but the context also includes the liberal world order, geopolitical tensions or specific threat perceptions. The narratives work on the national and international level as well as issue specific.

The European Union showed “*gratitude for the support*” during the Corona crisis, for example the centre for the coordination of emergency measures within the framework of the EU’s civil protection¹⁰¹, but also scepticism. The EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borell, warned of the geopolitical component in the “*global battle of narratives*”. Because China’s “*policy of charity*” in the context of its mask diplomacy “*serves to expand its influence*”¹⁰², for example by means of disinformation.¹⁰³ At the 22nd EU-China summit on June 22nd, 2020, the EU underlined the shared responsibility to participate in global efforts to stop the spread of the virus and to boost research on treatments and vaccines in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The EU also called on China to fully participate in the independent review of lessons learned from the international health response to Covid-19.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Müller-Funk, *Die Kultur und ihre Narrative*.

¹⁰¹ European Union, “Coronakrise: Chinesische Hilfslieferung an die EU erreicht Italien,” April 6, 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/de/ip_20_600.

¹⁰² EEAS (European External Action Service), “EU HRVP Josep Borrell: The Coronavirus pandemic and the new world it is creating,” March 24, 2020, https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/76401/eu-hrvp-josep-borrell-coronavirus-pandemic-and-new-world-it-creating_en.

¹⁰³ EUvsDiSiNFO, “Disinformation on the coronavirus – short assessment of the information environment,” March 19, 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-disinformation-on-the-coronavirus-short-assessment-of-the-information-environment/>.

¹⁰⁴ Council of the EU, “EU-China Summit: Defending EU interests and values in a complex and vital partnership - Press release by President Michel and President von der Leyen,” June 22, 2020, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/de/press/press-releases/2020/06/22/eu-china-summit-defending-eu-interests-and-values-in-a-complex-and-vital-partnership/>.

The African Union was grateful to China for the material and financial support in the fight against Corona as well as the basic solidarity:¹⁰⁵

China and Africa are firm supporters of multilateralism and important forces for world peace and development. [...] China will continue to support the African Union's Africa Joint Continental Strategy for Covid-19 Outbreak and Africa's efforts to build stronger public health prevention and control systems.¹⁰⁶

For its part, China emphasizes reciprocity, long-term good relations and its solidarity with developing countries.¹⁰⁷

Outlook & conclusions

Both the discourse and the concepts of the Health Silk Road are based on fundamental and successively built structures in the strategic and institutional area, which China can access in a flexible manner if required. The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the dynamism and international impact of the narrative and normative power of China. In line with its change of identity and the desired external perception, China continuously adapted its narrative. China presented itself as a pandemic victim, then as a fighter against Covid-19 and finally again - in accordance with the original intention of the Health Silk Road - as a global stakeholder who contributes to health security at the international level.

A look at the European Union's 2020 strategic cooperation agenda with China shows that the EU is generally strengthening dialogue and exchange with China in the health sector, for example through joint research and innovation initiatives.¹⁰⁸ In addition, the EU-China investment agreement of

¹⁰⁵ African Union, "China Donates Medical Supplies to African Union Commission," February 23, 2020, <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20201023/china-donates-medical-supplies-african-union-commission>; China.org, "China, Africa fighting COVID-19."

¹⁰⁶ China.org, "China, Africa fighting COVID-19,"

¹⁰⁷ Xinhua, "China-Africa Cooperation Prospers against Covid-19," January 3, 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-01/03/c_139638729.htm; Zhang, "China, Africa."

¹⁰⁸ *EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation*, https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/china/docs/eu-china_2020_strategic_agenda_en.pdf, 9, 14.

December 30, 2020, stipulated market access and investment liberalization in China, for example for private health care.¹⁰⁹ Africa is a focal point for both the European Union and China. On January 1, 2021, the EU signed a partnership with the African Union on health security, for example to strengthen African capacities for disease control.¹¹⁰ On April 15, 2021, the EU initiated the Cotonou Follow-up Agreement as an overarching cooperation framework with African countries.¹¹¹

These initiatives give the European Union and European companies the potential for cooperation with China in the health sector, particularly within the framework of international mechanisms. Health security offers a neutral, and at the same time, promising framework for closer cooperation. It aligns the interests of different states and offers augmented potential for all actors. Health care is politically, economically and technologically relevant and foundational. China's will for a global commitment to health policy is undisputed. Europe could use an inclusive approach towards China for its own strategic and economic advantage as well as for the benefit of third parties, such as in Africa or in other geostrategic areas of action of the European Union.

¹⁰⁹ EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment, December 30, 2020, https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2020/december/tradoc_159242.pdf.

¹¹⁰ European Commission, "European Union and African Union sign partnership to scale up preparedness for health emergencies," December 7, 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/news/european-union-and-african-union-sign-partnership-scale-preparedness-health-emergencies_en.

¹¹¹ European Commission, "Post-Cotonou: Negotiators reach a political deal on a new EU/Africa-Caribbean-Pacific Partnership Agreement," December 3, 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_2291.