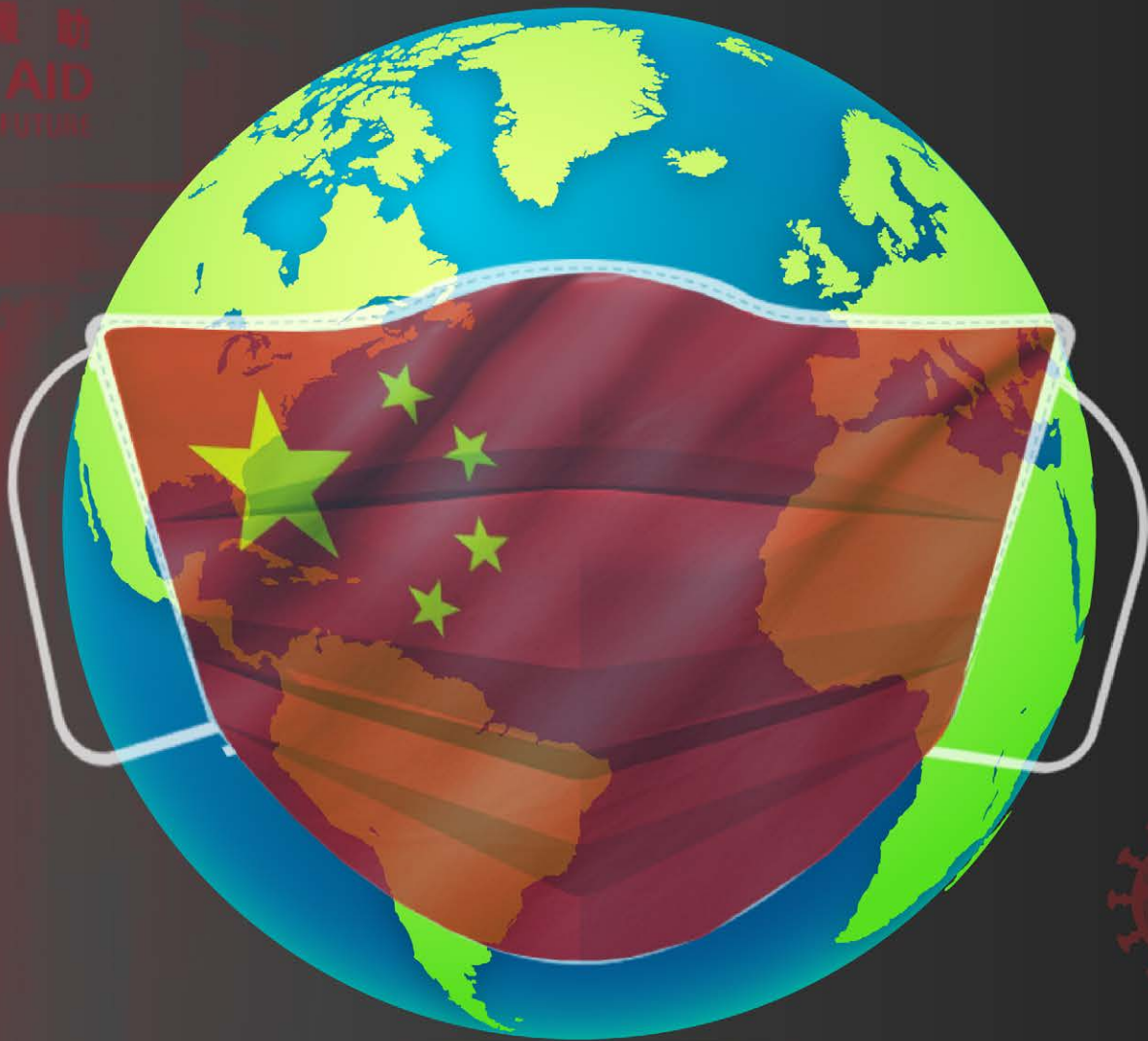


JUAN PABLO CARDENAL

Chinese propaganda for a post-Covid-19 scenario

LARA KOVANDOVA | Translated



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CHINESE PROPAGANDA FOR A POST COVID-19 SCENARIO

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BY **Juan Pablo Cardenal** • Translated by Lara Kovandova

With more than 280,000 official deaths and a large recession looming, the world is tragically suffering the health and economic consequences of Covid-19. In this context, voices from abroad pointing to China's alleged responsibility for trying to cover up the disease and therefore, for having contributed significantly to the global spread of the pandemic, are multiplying. To neutralise criticism and deflect its responsibility, Beijing has launched a propaganda offensive to position China not as the authoritarian country where the pandemic was incubated, but as an effective, responsible and generous international leader. Amid Beijing's politicisation of aid provided to affected countries, the crisis has also shone light on China's over-reliance on certain strategic sectors. Questioning China's role in globalisation should be one of the lessons of Covid-19.



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First act: Divert attention and evade responsibility

When the Chinese authorities lifted the confinement in Wuhan after almost three months, a message of might adorned illuminated skyscrapers in the city of Yangtze: «Victory for Wuhan, victory for China». The Beijing regime sought to spread amongst its people and the rest of the world the view that it had achieved what very few had: defeat of Covid-19. Its staging, however, has not prevented criticism of China's alleged responsibility for the global pandemic. The United States, France and the United Kingdom, which together with Spain and Italy reach 194,810 deaths¹, have been the first countries to publicly censor Beijing's management of the crisis as well as the lack of transparency in the origin of the virus and the official count of victims. The United States has announced lawsuits against China and several other countries including Australia, Sweden and Germany are demanding international investigation and ponder their political responses².

Perhaps it was because of the magnitude of the figures of the infected and deceased when the epidemic erupted and before the virus spread beyond its borders, that Beijing's initial version was not called into question – beyond the usual suspicions aroused by an authoritarian regime that is not subject to any scrutiny and for which information is a State matter. However, amid the chaos in Europe and the United States, the *official truth* fabricated in Beijing is becoming increasingly inconsistent and disturbing. Those who question it, and try to present evidence confirming such suspicions, face the handicap of the secretive essence of the country, as well as the regime's obsession with social stability –which makes finding such evidence a difficult task. But some unknowns remain.

Two of these are especially dubious amidst the ravages the virus has caused in the rest of the world. On one hand, are the official figures of 4,632 –the official death toll

1 Source: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/> Date: May 9, 2020. The official death toll in the whole world to this date has risen to 280.697

2 «Pressure grows on China for independent investigation into pandemic's origins», *Science*, May 4, 2020.



that the Chinese government has announced—credible? On the other hand, given that most of them died in the Hubei province, how was it possible to circumscribe the impact of Covid-19 to that province and prevent the spread *en masse* to the rest of China? The chronology of the crisis fuels the suspicion that something does not add up. Beijing did not officially recognise the outbreak until December 31 last year despite the fact that, according to a report by Chinese doctors at a hospital in Wuhan and published by *The Lancet* magazine, a first case was reported at least from the 1st of that month³. Despite this, confinement was not imposed until January 23—or 54 days later.

During this precious time in which—if acted—the disease could have been controlled, the government denied everything. Moreover, it tried to cover up the facts: it arrested the doctors who were raising awareness, hid the truth and manipulated the information which would be released onto the media. With the complicity of the World Health Organisation⁴, an *official truth* has started to consolidate since then in China and abroad⁵. Had it reacted earlier, geographical transmission of the virus could have been significantly lessened. According to a scientific study from the University of Southampton in the United Kingdom, if China had taken action three weeks earlier, contagions would have been reduced by 95%⁶. Therefore, the magnitude of the health impact, the number of casualties and the economic consequences of Covid-19 globally, would have been much lower. It is in this context, and in the face of criticisms which sprouted during those first weeks on Chinese social media about the government's response, that Beijing decided to set in motion its propaganda scheme.

The propaganda campaign has two recipients: the Chinese population and the international community. Domestically, in order to neutralize criticism from its own citizens, Beijing presents the alleged strengths of the Chinese political system as the

3 The *South China Morning Post* of Hong Kong published that the first known case was known previously: on November 17 of 2020.

Source: Ma, Josephine: «Coronavirus: China's first confirmed Covid-19 case traced back to November 17,» *South China Morning Post*, March 13, 2020

4 The WHO has been heavily criticised for allegedly underestimating the severity of the pandemic and for being complicit in Beijing's cover-up tactics. The international organisation is also accused of ignoring Taiwan's early warning about the virus on the Beijing veto, as well as for refusing to declare an international emergency on January 22, when the pandemic was already unstoppable. As if that were not enough, its director general, Ethiopian Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, did not hesitate to publicly praise the «transparency» and «commitment» of the Chinese authorities in the management of the crisis. The WHO also did not question the Beijing version, as it did with SARS in 2003, and aligned itself with China by declaring, in mid-January, that the virus was not transmitted between humans. All of this would have slowed down the international response, which decisively affected the global spread of the virus. In addition, another WHO executive, Bruce Aylward, declared after a mission to China that, with its response, China had «brought time for the rest of the world» and that, consequently, the international community «should be grateful.»

5 Two of the eight Wuhan doctors who, in December of 2019, alerted about the gravity of the coronavirus and were harassed and arrested for it, died in February and March. One of them, Li Wenliang, declared on his deathbed that «a healthy society should not speak with one voice.» The whereabouts of the remaining six doctors are unknown.

6 Sample, Ian. «Research finds huge impact of interventions on spread of Covid-19», *The Guardian*, March 11, 2020.



most effective antidote to combating the global pandemic, in contrast to the complacency and late response of many democratic governments. The Chinese model is the «only proven successful model so far that could be replicated to halt the virus once and for all, so as to save millions of lives,» published *The Global Times*⁷. «Were it not for the unique institutional advantage of the Chinese system, the world might be battling a devastating pandemic» the *China Daily* insisted in an editorial⁸. As such, the official figures for the deceased and infected in China, far below those of the United States and other European countries, underpin this official narrative and support –by comparison– its management of the crisis.

On the other hand, outside its borders the message focuses on convincing the international community that the virus *is not Chinese*, nor did it originate in Wuhan. This was a holistic effort by the Chinese diplomacy, media and academia. The narrative includes veiled accusations against the US for no other purpose than to try to obscure the landscape: «it is possible that US military forces brought the virus to Wuhan,» said a Chinese Foreign Office spokesman⁹. According to Jianli Yang, president of Washington-based Citizen Power Initiatives for China, this is «an international disinformation campaign aimed at muddying the waters, then importing that campaign back to China to neutralize criticism at the domestic level,» he says.

As this Chinese dissident points to CADAL, it concerns the Xi Jinping regime that the international community may hold China accountable for what happened when the pandemic abates: «Beijing is trying to do everything it can to deflect its responsibility,» he insists. And, in that line of argument, when the effects of Covid-19 seem to subside in China but chaos reigns in the Western world and Latin America is preparing for a possible surge, China is trying to present itself to the world as a reliable and responsible international player, as well as a benefactor partner with its generous help and donations. In short, as a great global leader in crisis management.



THE PROPAGANDA CAMPAIGN HAS TWO RECIPIENTS: THE CHINESE POPULATION AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY. DOMESTICALLY, IN ORDER TO NEUTRALIZE CRITICISM FROM ITS OWN CITIZENS, BEIJING PRESENTS THE ALLEGED STRENGTHS OF THE CHINESE POLITICAL SYSTEM AS THE MOST EFFECTIVE ANTIDOTE TO COMBATING THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC (...)

⁷ Yang, Sheng; y Chen, Qingqing. «China's anti-virus model urged as global solution by Chinese experts as confirmed COVID-19 cases expected to hit 1 million», *Global Times*, March 22, 2020.

⁸ «China's unprecedented measures prevent novel coronavirus infecting the world: China Daily editorial», *China Daily*, February 20, 2020.

⁹ Huang, Joyce. «Chinese Diplomat Accuses US of Spreading Coronavirus», *VOA News*, March 13, 2020.



Second act: Chinese overseas communities mobilise

In this propaganda campaign, overseas Chinese communities are key. Illustrating this, for example, is their role in Spain, one of the countries most affected by the virus and which has a large Chinese diaspora. On February 4, five prominent members of the Chinese community in that country, and Yao Fei, a senior official of the Chinese embassy in Madrid, met at his own request with Spanish President Pedro Sánchez at the Moncloa presidential complex. Following the relevant protocol photograph, Sánchez lamented «any sign of xenophobia» that the Chinese communities may suffer because of the virus, offering the government's «support and solidarity» to them¹⁰. In those days, the Chinese community in Spain had joined the campaign *I am not a virus*, which emerged in France on January 27. The first step in internationalising the propaganda.

Alluding to racism to divert attention is a recurring propaganda strategy of the communist state. As such, in addition to fierce criticism of president Trump for referring to Covid-19 as a «Chinese virus,» the Chinese state press reacted to the Western media that shared the same views: «they should know that their racism and xenophobia hurts the feelings of the Chinese people,» published the *Xinhua* agency using a rhetoric which serves as the regime's watermark¹¹. However, paradoxically, in mid-April Beijing could not avoid the boomerang effect: several African countries and the United States reported mistreatment and racism against black residents in Guangzhou, in the face of the growing number of imported coronavirus cases. Some were evicted from their homes by owners or refused entry to hotels and restaurants¹².

Coinciding with the aforementioned campaign *I am not a virus* and whilst the epidemic had been unleashed in China but not yet in Europe, the Chinese overseas communities mobilised. In a seemingly coordinated way, they stockpiled sanitary equipment: gloves, masks, gowns, gels and hydro alcoholic liquids. The Spanish press then warned that the stocks of masks were running out and that pharmacies were «on the brink of a shortage» especially in areas with high concentration of Chinese population: «collective madness for masks,» published one of them¹³. The same happened in the US, the Czech Republic, Australia, Slovakia, Belgium, France and Argentina, among other countries. Chinese Customs statistics confirm this: between January 24 and February

« ALLUDING TO RACISM TO DIVERT ATTENTION IS A RECURRING PROPAGANDA STRATEGY OF THE COMMUNIST STATE.

10 «El presidente del Gobierno recibe a representantes de la comunidad china en España», communiqué of the Presidency of the Government of Spain, February 4, 2020

11 Lei, Wang. «Western media should quit racist reporting as China fights epidemic», *Xinhua*, February 12, 2020.

12 «African Nations, US Decry Racism Against Blacks in China», *The Associated Press*, April 11, 2020.

13 Alsedo, Quico. «Locura colectiva por las mascarillas: ¿Pero tú crees que un trapito puede parar un coronavirus de esos?», *El Mundo*, February 27, 2020



29, China imported 2.02 billion masks and 25 million protective suits. Its trade value reached USD1.15 billion¹⁴. According to *The New York Times*, official figures yield another surprising fact: China «imported 56 million respirators and masks» in the last week of January¹⁵.

Why did they stock up on health equipment to the point of causing supply shortages in other countries? The instinctive response is that Chinese overseas communities supplied and exported all this material to China to help their compatriots, as at that time, in February, they were going through a peak of the virus outbreak. This shows the ability of the Chinese people to organise themselves and the solidarity amongst them. This being said, the large-scale export of sanitary equipment was not spontaneous: it was a response to the instructions from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), as evidenced by the note issued on January 26 on the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese website, an entity controlled by the Party¹⁶. The communiqué, retrieved by a Slovak news portal¹⁷, warned: «the party makes a call and the Chinese abroad take action» to «join forces» in the fight against the epidemic¹⁸.

This revelation uncovers one of China's hidden strengths that often goes unnoticed: Beijing's astounding ability to mobilise overseas Chinese populations to support its political goals. The gathering of sanitary materials shows «the ease with which the Party-State can mobilise the Chinese diaspora,» confirms Filip Jirouš, a sinologist of Sinopsis.cz, a website that analyses China's influence in the Czech Republic and Central Europe¹⁹. «While the cause is positive in this case, it reveals how politicised Chinese communities abroad are, and how close they are to the organs of the CCP. It also

14 Source accessible at: http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-03/07/content_5488383.html

These figures are expected to capture both the purchase and donations of the diaspora and Chinese companies abroad, as well as donations granted by other countries and their companies.

15 Bradsher, Keith; y Alderman, Liz. «The World Needs Masks. China Makes Them, but Has Been Hoarding Them», *The New York Times*, March 13, 2020.

16 The All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese is part of the CCP and is tasked with «guiding» the Chinese diaspora in accordance with the Party's interests.

17 Sliz, Martin; and Cunderlikova, Jana. «Číňania zháňali rúška a respirátory aj na Slovensku. Prebehli najmenej dve zbierky», *Aktuality*, April 2, 2020. Accessible at: <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/778955/cinania-zhanali-ruska-a-respiratory-aj-na-slovensku-prebehli-najmenej-dve-zbierky/?fbclid=IwAR15mrkzqFCQ6qguo-Q5GMlYpIDGe6dxL66GBNz7Q9n90baM84Eth0Xh4TzU>

18 Source: 中国侨联关于号召海内外侨胞为打赢«新型冠状病毒肺炎»防控阻击战捐赠款物的倡议书, All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese, January 26, 2020. In English: «Proposal by the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese to ask overseas Chinese to donate money and materials for the prevention and control of the «new coronavirus-infected pneumonia.» The statement reads: «In order to respond to the decision of the Central Party Committee and to support the Wuhan region to fight the epidemic and win the battle for the prevention and control of the epidemic, the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese proposed to overseas Chinese to donate money especially medical consumables and protective supplies, including masks (N95 masks, surgical masks, disposable medical masks), protective caps, protective clothing, protective goggles, disposable latex gloves, etc.»

19 For more information: <https://sinopsis.cz>



uncovers the government's ability to mask an action as spontaneous, when in fact it is a top-down command» he says.

It is estimated that the diaspora of Chinese immigrants overseas is around 50 million across a hundred countries. To this figure is added another 30 million migrants who have already «returned» to China, two modalities of expatriates that Beijing considers «very important in the modernisation of China».²⁰ They form a collective of entrepreneurs, students, employees and other compatriots that the CCP seeks to manage, orient and guide to serve its interests. Among others, the diaspora serves to support Chinese integration into the world, to defend «peaceful reunification» with Taiwan, to act as a lobby, to enthusiastically welcome Xi Jinping on his official trips abroad, and to act as a promoter of Chinese soft power and culture. Or, as is the case now, to lend itself to a coronavirus campaign of politicisation.



WHILE IT SEEMS TO BE AN ATTEMPT TO ENCOURAGE CULTURAL INTEREST, INCREASE ETHNIC AWARENESS AND PROMOTE BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES, NURTURING THE DIASPORA HAS THE ULTIMATE GOAL OF LEGITIMISING THE CCP AND DEFENDING ITS INTERESTS.

The CCP manages ethnic-Chinese communities through a strategy called *qiaowu*, which combines coercion and incentives with the aim of aligning them with the Party and its objectives. The diaspora thus serves to «maintain China's international image and influence important channels to access social, economic and political resources» in host societies, says academic James Jiann Hui To²¹. While it seems to be an attempt to encourage cultural interest, increase ethnic awareness and promote business opportunities, nurturing the diaspora has the ultimate goal of legitimising the CCP and defending its interests. The same diaspora, a part of which –but not all– is perfectly aligned with the CCP, is responsible for interacting with different partners in the host societies²².

20 Source: Liu, Guofu; y Du, Zejun. «The People's Republic of China: Policy and Institutional Frameworks, National Report», *European University Institute*, Research Report 2014/19, 2014.

21 James Jiann Hua To, «Qiaowu: Extra-Territorial Policies for the Overseas Chinese», Chinese overseas series, xiv, *Brill*, May of 2014.

22 The CCP's United Front Work Department (UFWD) designs, directs, and executes this strategy. Historically, the work of the «United Front» has been instrumental in the CCP's consolidation of its power. At the domestic level, the strategy is to capture or subvert potential opponents with the aim of subordinating them and thereby neutralising any political opposition. For its part, abroad it intends to influence both individuals and the national policies of other countries in order to serve Beijing's interests. A reform in March 2018 gave the CCP even more thorough control over the planning, coordination and implementation of this strategy, thereby subordinating the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the other State bodies that until then had a significant role in the plan. The UFWD, which is directly dependent on the CCP Central Committee, is structured in 12 bureaus, three of them in charge of the relationship with Chinese diasporas abroad.

Source: Joske, Alex. «Reorganizing the United Front Work Department: New Structures for a New Era of Diaspora and Religious Affairs Work», The Jamestown Foundation, *China Brief*, Volume: 19 Issue: 9, May 9, 2019.

Source: Bowe, Alexander. «China's Overseas United Front Work», U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, August 24, 2018.



Third act: International gathering: from Australia and Europe to Latin America

In a *decentralised centralisation* effort, the Party-State sends a slogan and many follow it: part of the diaspora, the embassies, and the State or private-owned enterprises. And therefore, the instruction also arrived in Latin America, as reflects the regional press in Mandarin and on the websites of the organs linked to the CCP of Fujian, the province from which most of Argentina's 180,000 Chinese residents come from. According to this information, the Argentine Hongmen Association, many of whose expatriate members are linked to the Zhi Gong Party²³, sent 150,000 masks to China in the early days of February. Lin Haining, its president, recounted that he asked his compatriots to «search Argentina's major shopping malls» and that, as a result, they were «able to gather 50,000 masks.» Another 100,000 arrived from the same association in Brazil. According to the publication, the initiative arose after a meeting with the leader of the Fujian Provincial Committee of the Zhi Gong Party²⁴.

Also in February, other Chinese associations in Argentina joined the supply-hoarding. Among them, the one that brings together the diaspora originating from the city of Fuqing, in Fujian, whose donations contributed to the purchase of 436,000 masks bound for China²⁵. The financial contributions of two 9- and 6-year-olds from Fuqing and residents of the South American country, thanks to which they acquired 25,000 masks that were sent to China, was conveniently advertised in the media in Mandarin²⁶. The Chinese community in Argentina additionally placed an order for 7 million masks from the Argentine company Pademed²⁷. «Supporting the people of our homeland to fight the epidemic is our unwavering responsibility and obligation,» declared Lin Shuiqin, president of the Guizhou Chamber of Commerce in Argentina.

If in the South American country mainly the Fujianese mobilised, in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Italy and Spain who collected health equipment were those from the cities of Qingtian and Lishui, in Zhejiang province. In Australia, the campaign was led by the Chinese Students and Scholars Associations (CSSA), which is firmly rooted in the

²³ The Zhi Gong is one of eight minority political parties, called «democratic,» authorised in China, which is part of the Political Consultative Conference of the Chinese People, a political advisory body of the People's Republic. This body is under the control of the Communist Party, but it is given entry to other political parties and organisations to give a false impression of plurality and representativeness.

²⁴ Source: 15 万只口罩！这位素未谋面的阿根廷华侨再接力, Red China de Ultramar de China, February 2, 2020. Accessible at: <http://archive.vn/QCINu>

²⁵ 阿根廷福清侨团捐赠逾 43万只医用口罩, Gobierno de la ciudad de Fuqing (Fujian), March 5, 2020. Accessible at: <http://archive.vn/FRe86>

²⁶ Nian, Bin. 共同抗击疫情 海外侨胞在行动——福清籍阿根廷华裔儿童为中国捐赠25000只医用口罩, *Dongnan Wang (Red del Sudeste)*, January 26, 2020. Accessible at: <http://archive.is/w3kgk>

²⁷ Vázquez, Pilar. «Coronavirus. Fábricas argentinas reciben pedidos por más de 7 millones de barbijos para China», *La Nación*, February 3, 2020.



country's universities. The CSSA's activity is overseen through the various embassies, by the United Front Work Department of the CCP –responsible for the regime's so-called influence operations abroad²⁸. The request included a detailed description of the required sanitary material, as well as contact persons at the various Wuhan hospitals and shipping instructions from Australia²⁹: evidence for it being a Party initiative and for having been coordinated by the authorities.

The Chinese real estate giant Greenland Group, one of the largest companies in the sector in Australia, also joined the effort. For days, it sent many of its employees –most of whom were of Chinese origin, from financial officers, directors, human resources staff to receptionists– on a mission to stock up on health equipment. Thanks to them, the company was able to export 3 million masks to China, 700,000 protection suits and 500,000 pairs of gloves from Australia and other countries such as Canada and Turkey, according to the company's *newsletter*³⁰. A second Chinese real estate, Risland Australia, announced in February that it had sent a plane carrying 90 tones of sanitary equipment to Wuhan, China. According to the local press, Risland bought some equipment from a former Chinese military officer living in Australia, who inflated the prices by 300%³¹. The hoarding of health equipment by the Chinese diaspora caused, weeks later, a shortage of these same products in Australia and other countries³².



THE CHINESE REAL ESTATE GIANT GREENLAND GROUP, ALSO JOINED THE EFFORT. FOR DAYS, IT SENT MANY OF ITS EMPLOYEES -MOST OF WHOM WERE OF CHINESE ORIGIN, FROM FINANCIAL OFFICERS, DIRECTORS, HUMAN RESOURCES STAFF TO RECEPTIONISTS- ON A MISSION TO STOCK UP ON HEALTH EQUIPMENT.

The collection and purchase by the diaspora and Chinese companies were not the only sources of supply, as several international countries and companies made donations to China as soon as the epidemic broke out. Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission, said the EU donated 50 tons of health equipment to China in January³³. At the same time, the US announced the shipment of 17.8 tons of medical

²⁸ Christodoulou, Mario; Rubinsztein-Dunlop, Sean; Koloff, Sashka; Day, Lauren; and Bali, Meghna. «Chinese Students and Scholars Association's deep links to the embassy revealed», *ABC*, November 4, 2019.

²⁹ 澳洲中国留学生为「武汉肺炎」发布官方捐赠通道！战胜病毒，共渡难关, statement of the International China-Australia Students Club, January 26, 2020. Accessible at: <https://t.co/fl5xC2HpSk?amp=1> More information at this Twitter thread: https://twitter.com/geoff_p_wade/status/1244785709430407168

³⁰ McClymont, Kate. «Chinese-backed company's mission to source Australian medical supplies», *The Sydney Morning Herald*, March 26, 2020

³¹ McKenzie, Nick; y Galloway, Anthony. «Profiting from a pandemic: former Chinese officer accused of huge COVID-19 mark-ups», *The Sydney Morning Herald*, April 1, 2020.

³² McNeil Jr., Donald G. «Mask Hoarders May Raise Risk of a Coronavirus Outbreak in the U.S.», *The New York Times*, January 29, 2020.

³³ The announcement was made on March 18 through Twitter. However, in a statement dated February 24 2020, the European Commission stated that France, Germany, Italy, Latvia and Estonia had supplied «more than 30.5 tons of protective equipment» to the Asian country, without specifying whether that aid was part of the 50 tons mentioned by the President of the Commission.

Statement accessible at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/qanda_20_307



aid, whilst the US Chamber of Commerce in the Asian country helped coordinate donations worth USD 74 million from 120 US companies. Among them, Honeywell and 3M offered 500,000 and one million N95 masks, respectively. Japan donated another three million masks. No one did a «public campaign to broadcast the fact that we were sending material to China,» said a senior Brussels official³⁴. «When we sent them help, they asked us to be discreet, [because] they did not want to lose face» said another community source³⁵.

Fourth act: Chinese altruism: donations or business?

The mitigation of the disease in China coincided with its rampant spread in Europe and the Americas. And, in the CCP's effort to position China not as the authoritarian country where the pandemic was incubated but as a responsible international leader in the midst of a global crisis, it launched a diplomatic offensive to help the countries hardest hit by Covid-19. In mid-March, for example, China was quick to help Italy when this most affected European country publicly criticized France and Germany's restrictions on the export of masks and respirators. Amid Italian reproaches, the arrival of nine doctors and 30 tons of Chinese Red Cross medical supplies at the airport in Rome was a powerful image.



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In Latin America, one of the first countries to receive Chinese aid was Venezuela with 4,000 tests, followed by others such as Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina and Chile³⁶. In the Latin American region as well as in other countries, donations were the result of a shared effort between local authorities linked to the CPP's United Front Work Department, state-owned enterprises and part of Chinese diaspora through the aforementioned *decentralised centralisation*. In this way, Argentina received health supplies donated by the Chinese embassy, by the authorities of cities such as Chongqing or Shanghai, by the Alibaba Foundation and three other state-owned enterprises based in Argentina and by part of the Chinese community, which donated 8.3 million Argentine pesos in addition to health equipment and food. Printed on the boxes was a quote from the Martin Fierro poem: «Brothers and sisters are united because that is the first law. Have a true union at any given time.»³⁷

³⁴ Fàbregas, Laura. «Duch: «Hay una guerra de propaganda. Alemania o Francia han dado 10 veces más material que China»», *El Español*, April 4, 2020.

³⁵ Source: Tuit de la periodista Isabelle Ory, accessible at: <https://twitter.com/isabelleory/status/1242547172366827524>

³⁶ Source: Gil, Tamara. «Coronavirus: cómo China gana presencia en Latinoamérica en medio de la pandemia (y qué implica para la región y el mundo)», *BBC*, April 14, 2020.

³⁷ According to the Argentine press, China had donated in mid-April 53.500 medical kits, 405.000 N95 masks, 2.500 gloves and 14.000 protective suits, among other medical equipment.
Source: «Coronavirus: China detalla las donaciones de test y barbijos quirúrgicos que hizo a la Argentina», *Todo Noticias*, April 17, 2020.



In Spain, another country severely hit by the virus, the operation followed the same scheme. «Donations of medical equipment from the Chinese government and Chinese companies, as well as the Chinese community in Spain are coming to help the Spanish government fight the disease,» *Xinhua* said. Among the donors the piece mentioned Huawei, the Jack Ma Foundation and the Alibaba Foundation, while the Chinese community made at least 55 donations of material to town halls, police and hospitals in different cities³⁸. Among the most celebrated communist propaganda was the arrival in the Spanish capital of the Yiwu-Madrid train with 110,000 masks and 766 protective suits. The world's longest railway line, symbolising the economic corridor of the so-called New Silk Road, is China's largest diplomatic initiative to expand its influence around the world.

Consequently, the arrival of the material was politically labelled: «The Belt and Road Initiative: Spreading Love.» The Chinese embassy in Madrid also joined the global propaganda campaign in the figure of Yao Fei, the diplomat that accompanied members of the Chinese community during the February 4th meeting with Pedro Sanchez. He was very active on Twitter and on the country's major television channels, announcing the help provided by the Chinese government, businesses and community³⁹. In early March, Beijing confirmed that it had launched an «extensive and intensive public diplomacy campaign, with over 400 interviews in all the main television and radio channels, 300 articles published in the newspapers, more than 500 conferences held and over 20,000 messages on social media.»⁴⁰

Beijing promised to help 82 countries, but it is important to understand the fact that not all the equipment sent from China had the altruistic purpose that the Communist regime pretends to disseminate. To start with, there is significant uncertainty about how many of the announced donations materialised in practise. There is doubt too around the real receivers of the aid because on the internet in Mandarin there are several articles and advertisements from organs linked to the United Front Work Department that mention the diaspora as the recipients of donations from China⁴¹. But the suspicions stem mainly from the fact that many of the shipments arriving from the Asian country, as Europe became the epicentre of Covid-19 and the disease spreads though the world, are not donations but rather commercial transactions.



BEIJING PROMISED TO HELP 82 COUNTRIES, BUT IT IS IMPORTANT

TO UNDERSTAND THE FACT THAT NOT ALL THE EQUIPMENT SENT FROM CHINA HAD THE ALTRUISTIC PURPOSE THAT THE COMMUNIST REGIME PRETENDS TO DISSEMINATE.

38 Data compiled by the author.

39 Yao Fei was interviewed in peak audience hours by Spanish Television, Antena 3, La Sexta, and Onda Cero.

40 «Ganar Resueltamente la Batalla contra la Epidemia y Promover la Construcción de la Comunidad de Futuro Compartido de la Humanidad», communiqué by Chinese government on March 4, 2020
Accessible at: <http://es.china-embassy.org/esp/zxgx/t1752052.htm>


41 海外侨胞抱团防疫 中国支持及时有力 危难时刻 中华儿女心连心, *People's Daily*, March 27, 2020. Accessible at: <http://archive.is/NWsky>



«What China wants is to make money. This is not help for the world,» said Bonnie Glaser, director of the China Power Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)⁴². However, the message that seems to have prevailed in certain areas, especially in a context where many governments do not want to antagonise the world's leading health equipment producer at the moment, is that China has acted with generosity and in good faith. Asked about Beijing's intentions behind what the critics call «China's mask diplomacy,» Spanish Foreign Minister Arancha González Laya told CGTN that «it doesn't matter the colour of the cat, provided that it catches the mouse,» alluding to a famous quote attributed to Deng Xiaoping. He went on to add that «by exercising generosity, [China] projects its soft power.»⁴³

Other episodes also raise doubts about the help China has provided to the rest of the world. In the Czech Republic, in March, the police confiscated a shipment of health equipment from a Czech middleman who wanted to sell it to the government at exorbitant prices. The content included 28,000 respirators and 580,000 masks, as well as another 100,000 labelled as Chinese Red Cross humanitarian aid for Italy. According to research by Sinopsis and the newspaper *Aktuálně.cz*, the middleman bought the material from Zhou Lingjian, a Chinese businessman who owns the warehouse where the seizure took place and is also the owner of the *Prague Chinese Times* newspaper⁴⁴. Zhou chairs the country's largest Chinese overseas association, the Czech Association of the Natal City of Qingtian, which coordinated a campaign that a month earlier collected and sent 780,000 masks and 30,000 respirators to China. «This creates the suspicion that the material seized is actually from the local Chinese collection,» says Filip Jirouš, of Sinopsis.

Bad practises in the Chinese industry undermine Beijing's propaganda campaign. Of course, it's an unquestionable factor that it is clear inexperience –when not incompetence– of many international buyers. However, the inventory of failed transactions caused by the low quality or reliability of the sanitary material, as well as the absence of certifications or the number of business frauds, is extensive. Thus, Spain, Turkey and the Czech Republic received hundreds of thousands of rapid diagnostic kits that were discarded as useless, while the Netherlands had to remove 600,000 masks because the filters did not work despite having an N95 quality certificate⁴⁵. Germany received 11

 **PEKÍN PROMETIÓ AYUDA A 82 PAÍSES, PERO ES IMPORTANTE ENTENDER QUE NO TODO EL MATERIAL PROVENIENTE DE CHINA TUVO EL PROPÓSITO ALTRUISTA QUE EL RÉGIMEN COMUNISTA PRETENDE HACER CREER.**

⁴² «Coronavirus: cómo China...» op.cit.

⁴³ Accessible at: <https://twitter.com/thepointwithlx/status/1245018547992084487?s=12>

⁴⁴ Valášek, Lukáš. «Confiscated face masks imported by an influential Chinese representative in Czechia», *Aktuálně.cz*, March 26, 2020.

⁴⁵ «El escándalo de los defectuosos productos chinos para el coronavirus detectados en Europa», *BBC*, April 1, 2020.



million defective masks, Finland withdrew 2.2 million units and Australia confiscated another 800,000, all due to being impaired. Belgium, Georgia, Malaysia, Slovakia, Ukraine, Canada and the United Kingdom are just a handful of affected countries, along with Colombia and Paraguay in Latin America.

Part of the explanation for so many bouts of fraud⁴⁶ could lie in the negative impact Covid-19 has had on the Chinese economy. As a result of the brakes on economic activity and the closure of borders and exports, 460,000 companies went bankrupt⁴⁷. In this context, and in the face of high global demand for sanitary equipment, thousands of companies got involved in the manufacture of sanitary products –or in the intermediation of their exports– in order to avoid the definitive closing down of their businesses. According to estimates from the Asian country, 28,000 Chinese companies were involved in the production of masks and other products to combat Covid-19 between February and April.



PART OF THE EXPLANATION FOR SO MANY BOUTS OF FRAUD COULD LIE IN THE NEGATIVE IMPACT COVID-19 HAS HAD ON THE CHINESE ECONOMY. AS A RESULT OF THE BRAKES ON ECONOMIC ACTIVITY AND THE CLOSURE OF BORDERS AND EXPORTS, 460,000 COMPANIES WENT BANKRUPT.

Many of the new players have no experience in quality control of their products. And, since many of them were not involved in the healthcare business before coronavirus, they lack the necessary certifications or licenses to produce, export and certify the quality of these products. In the midst of these desperate times, the trade in sanitary equipment in the Chinese market became, especially in the first few weeks, «a speculative auction» where transactions were closed «to the highest bidder and with payment in advance,» even for customers who had a prior relationship, according to sources in the pharmaceutical sector. But, as has been demonstrated in a noticeable amount of cases, accepting the price and payment terms has not guaranteed the quality or even the reception of the purchased goods.

⁴⁶ Authorities announced the seizure in February of more than 80 million fake or defective masks, as well as 370,000 defective disinfectants. Chinese Customs noted that between the 1st and 13th of April they confiscated – for reasons of poor quality – 31.6 million masks, 500,000 protective gowns, 1.2 million diagnostic kits and 677 ventilators, all intended for export.

Source: Su, Alice. «Faulty masks. Flawed tests. China's quality control problem in leading global COVID-19 fight», *Los Angeles Times*, April 10, 2020.

Source: Tabeta, Shunsuke. «Bad masks: China clamps down on suppliers after European outcry», *Nikkei Asian Review*, April 18, 2020.

⁴⁷ Leng, Sidney. «Coronavirus: nearly half a million Chinese companies close in first quarter as pandemic batters economy», *South China Morning Post*, April 6, 2020.



Fifth act: towards a more complex post-Covid-19 cohabitation

Despite its propaganda campaign, Beijing has been unable to avoid international criticism for its cover-up of the pandemic, for making political and propaganda use of the aid provided, and for failing to curb fraud in Chinese industry amid the desperate situation in much of the world. Reproaches come from several countries, but with more than 80,000 dead, the United States has not only already announced lawsuits against Beijing, but president Trump is pressuring intelligence agencies to find out the origin of the virus and the Communist regime's responsibility in managing the pandemic. Australia supports the need for an investigation too, as does Sweden and Germany, whilst the British government warns that the relationship with China «will not be business as usual,» when the pandemic passes.

Never receptive to criticism from abroad and concerned about the delegitimising effect that it may have at the domestic level in relation to its monopoly on power, Beijing has hardened its act. And so, whilst publicly endorsing a rhetoric of generosity, it responds aggressively and with economic threats to anyone who calls into question China's management or responsibility in the crisis. It entered into a scuffle with the German newspaper *Bild*, which published an article entitled «What China Owes Us» in which was put a figure for compensation that China would have to pay to Germany for its liability and damage caused: 150 billion euros. In its vitriolic reaction, the Chinese embassy in Berlin accused the German newspaper of «nationalism, prejudice and hostility towards China.»⁴⁸

By positioning itself in favour of opening an international investigation to scrutinise Beijing's actions, Australia has also been subject of the wrath of Chinese diplomacy and press. While its ambassador in Canberra threatened a boycott of Australian products, the Chinese press accused Australia of being «a gum stuck in the sole of China's shoe.» The *Global Times* also reacted vigorously: «Morrison's adventurism could damage China-Australia relations beyond repair.»⁴⁹ With the accusation that France has deliberately let its elders die in the residences, Chinese diplomacy also had a disagreement. Beijing has not been able to avoid similar disputes with India, the Philippines, the Netherlands, Poland and other countries.

Likewise, at the beginning of the crisis, the Chinese embassy in Peru reacted furiously to an article by writer Mario Vargas Llosa, in which he referred to the «virus from China» and touched on sensitive matter by adding that «no one seems to notice that none of this would have happened if the People's Republic were a free and democratic

⁴⁸ Van der Made, Jan. «China furious over German newspaper claims that China caused Covid-19 outbreak», *RFI*, April 24, 2020.

⁴⁹ Hong, Chen. «Morrison's adventurism could damage China-Australia relations beyond repair», *Global Times*, April 28, 2020.



country and not the dictatorship that it is.»⁵⁰ According to some Chinese dissidents and netizens, the writer's works were immediately removed from the online catalogues, in what is interpreted as retaliation. Beijing's diplomatic pressure also reached Brussels, after Josep Borrell, the head of European diplomacy, was accused by the US press of giving in to China's pressure after allegedly softening criticism in an official EU report on the Communist regime's global disinformation campaign⁵¹. The *China Daily* also censored an article signed by the 27 EU ambassadors to China in which it was suggested that the coronavirus originated in China⁵².

On May 4, the *Reuters* agency echoed an internal report by the Chinese government that would confirm that China's cohabitation with the rest of the world, and especially with at least a part of the Western world, will be more difficult in the post-Covid-19 era. The report says, according to *Reuters*, that Beijing «faces a rising wave of hostility in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak,» while noting that «global anti-China sentiment is at its highest since the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown.»⁵³ Regardless of this report, the coronavirus crisis has generated what appears to be a nascent but growing global distrust of China, resulting in doubts from Germany, the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic and other countries about the convenience of allowing Huawei to build the 5G telecommunication networks, being a «high-risk supplier» for national security. Beyond that, Covid-19 has encouraged voices warning of over-reliance on China on strategic sectors.



ON MAY 4, THE REUTERS AGENCY ECHOED AN INTERNAL REPORT BY THE CHINESE GOVERNMENT THAT WOULD CONFIRM THAT CHINA'S COHABITATION WITH THE REST OF THE WORLD, AND ESPECIALLY WITH AT LEAST A PART OF THE WESTERN WORLD, WILL BE MORE DIFFICULT IN THE POST-COVID-19 ERA

In the midst of the current crisis, the sector that best makes this dependency visible is pharmaceuticals, even beyond the production of sanitary equipment. It is perfectly illustrated by the trade of hydroxychloroquine, an active pharmaceutical ingredient (API) that France and the US are better in line with research to combat Covid-19. Since it serves primarily to treat malaria, its use is widespread in the unregulated markets of developing countries. In the regulated Western markets –more demanding in its standards– it is a niche product and therefore the production with such standards is very small. This was the case up until the announcement that hydroxychloroquine may

⁵⁰ Vargas Llosa, Mario. «¿Regreso al Medioevo?», *El País*, March 15, 2020.

⁵¹ Alandete, David. «Indignación en EE.UU. por la claudicación de Borrell ante China», *ABC*, May 2, 2020. Weeks earlier, Josep Borrell himself had pointed out, in relation to China, that «we must be aware there is a geopolitical component including a struggle for influence through ... the politics of generosity.» He added: «China is aggressively pushing the message that, unlike the US, it is a responsible and reliable partner.»

⁵² Lau, Stuart. «State-run China Daily newspaper censors opinion article by European Union ambassadors», *South China Morning Post*, May 7, 2020.

⁵³ «Internal Chinese report warns Beijing faces Tiananmen-like global backlash over virus», *Reuters*, 4 de mayo de 2020.

The news agency warns in its information that it did not have access to such a report and therefore bases its information on sources that did have access to it.



be effective in treating the virus, when its demand skyrocketed. In this context, of the three producing countries, Finland barely increased its price, whilst India did raise it, as the intermediates needed to manufacture it –which come from China– also raised the price. But China, the world’s leading producer, increased the price of hydroxychloroquine by 1.000% over a three-week period. And with it, it set off the alarms in the sector⁵⁴.

Some estimates suggest that China would also have a global monopoly on more than 80% of vitamin C production and 90% of antibiotics, while India, the first global generic drugs supplier, depends on China for 80% of its APIs⁵⁵. This bears implicit risks. Among them, market undersupply, as was the case in 2017, when 1,500 Chinese pharmaceutical plants responsible for a quarter of the world’s pharmaceutical production, were forced to close temporarily for environmental reasons. To this is added the risk that Beijing may be tempted to use its dominant position politically. According to a Dutch television investigative documentary, the *Xinhua* agency reacted to Trump’s insistence to refer to the «Chinese virus» with the warning that if China had to retaliate «implementing strategic control over medical products and banning its export to the US,» the country would «sink into an ocean of coronavirus.»⁵⁶



BEFORE THE COVID-19 CRISIS ERUPTED, THE WAY IN WHICH THE CHINESE GIANT MANAGED ITS MONOPOLY IN THE PRODUCTION OF SO-CALLED RARE EARTHS WAS, A DECADE AGO, ALREADY AN ELOQUENT PRECEDENT.

Before the Covid-19 crisis erupted, the way in which the Chinese giant managed its monopoly in the production of so-called rare earths was, a decade ago, already an eloquent precedent. In addition to the prices of some of these rare earths, which are critical to emerging technologies but whose extraction requires highly polluting processes, soared by 3.000%. Moreover, in 2010, China decided to suspend the export of lanthanides to Japan coinciding with a diplomatic conflict between the two countries over a group of islands in East China Sea. China disassociated its trade decision from the political row with Japan, but the World Trade Organisation (WTO) ended up convicting Beijing in 2014 following a US lawsuit that was joined by the European Union, Japan itself and 16 other countries⁵⁷.

⁵⁴ More information: Findlay, Stephanie; y Yu, Sun. «Maker of drug touted as coronavirus cure accuses China of gouging», *Financial Times*, April 24, 2020.

⁵⁵ Bingham, Emma. «China’s Antibiotics Dominance», *The Wire China*, April 12, 2020.

⁵⁶ «China’s medicinal Power in the Corona Crisis», Zembla, BNNVARA, April 4, 2020. Accessible at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XLKlVlMG-X0&feature=youtu.be>

⁵⁷ Araújo, Heriberto; and Cardenal, Juan Pablo. «La Imparable Conquista China», Ed. *Crítica*, Barcelona, 2015.



The world's dependency on China on global supply chains and the Covid-19 crisis can therefore lead some countries to re-examine their industrial and trade strategies. This would lead to a disconnection from China that could reduce that dependency on some sectors. Although it is still an embryonic proposal, EU Trade Commissioner Phil Hogan noted the need to have a discussion to know «what it means to be strategically autonomous» and to build «resilient supply chains, based on diversification.»⁵⁸ Despite Beijing's propaganda campaign to improve its image, the world entering the unknown realm of partial *de-globalisation* is something that cannot be ruled out in the post-Covid-19 scenario that is to come.

58 Crawford, Alan; and Martin, Peter. «China's Coronavirus Diplomacy Has Finally Pushed Europe Too Far», *Bloomberg*, April 21, 2020.





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