

RESEARCH ARTICLE

COVID-19 and the International Politics of Blame: Assessing China's Crisis (Mis)Management Practices

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed a global health and political crisis like no other in recent history. As ground zero of the virus outbreak, significant criticism and blame have been directed at China for covering up the outbreak. Yet a systematic assessment of China's responses to international opprobrium of its pandemic measures has been largely lacking in the literature. Drawing on the concept of "blame" from public administration, this article seeks to fill this gap by investigating China's COVID-19 crisis and blame (mis)management practices. We make two key contributions in this article. First, we highlight how Beijing engaged in the politics of blame and outline three modes (defensive, aggressive and proactive benevolence) of its blame management practices. Second, we suggest that China sought to articulate and refine its identity during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing insights into a China that is increasingly assertive yet vulnerable to reputational damage. We contend that China's efforts to counter international opprobrium and shift strategic narratives speak directly to issues of autocratic legitimation and its conceived "responsible great power" identity, with greater success among domestic rather than global audiences.

摘要

新冠肺炎的大爆发凸显了全球范围内近年来未曾有过的公共卫生与政治两方面的危机。作为疫情的始发地，中国由于早期对病毒传播被指责有所隐瞒，备受外界的批评和问责。然而，现有学术文献缺乏有关中国如何回应针对其防疫措施的国际负评的系统性考察。基于对公共施政中使用“问责”观念的理解，本文填补关于中国的新冠危机与对管理“问责”得当(与否)的实践，这两个议题间的学术空白。本文主要学术贡献有两方面。一，我们着重指出北京如何投身于“问责”背后的政治角力，并列出其管理“问责”的实践当中的三个模式：即(表达)防御型、进攻型及先发主动型的善意。二，我们表明在疫情期间，中国有去塑造与深化其国家认同，并对中国既追求强势又容易毁誉(的状态)，提出新见解。中国在抗击国际负评，以及转化其战略论述到直接讨论集权的合理性和自诩“负责任大国”身份等议题的努力，在国内比在国际更有效。

Keywords: blame management; COVID-19; China's identity; pandemic diplomacy; autocratic legitimation

关键词: 指责管理; 新冠病毒; 冠病外交; 中国国家身份; 专制合法化

First detected in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, and classified a “pandemic” by the WHO in March 2020, COVID-19 is one of the deadliest global health crises. Various actors have come under intense review for their pandemic (mis)management, with both praise and blame assigned in public discourses. China has been on the receiving end of such scrutiny, with Beijing locked in international blame games over information suppression, reporting failures and investigations into the origins of the virus. Although Chinese political leaders acknowledged the shortcomings in China's public health governance and accepted the need for reform to its domestic public, the

government also embarked on an extensive strategy to counter global attributions of blame and highlight its subsequent achievements.¹ For instance, Beijing points to the timely manner in which it notified the international community of available epidemic data, as well as its contribution to global prevention and control efforts. The government, which released a White Paper detailing its efforts in securing victory against the pandemic, maintains that its COVID-19 response has been transparent and responsible.²

These developments reveal two interesting phenomena: first, that blame politics is prevalent in international politics; and second, that a non-democratic country such as China employs multiple blame management practices.³ As existing scholarship on blame tends to focus on democracies and/or domestic-level studies,⁴ such phenomena invite a deeper interrogation of China's engagement with the international politics of blame. This article is thus driven by the following research question: How and why does China engage in international COVID-19 blame politics? We focus on the initial to middle phase of the pandemic (late 2019 to mid-2021), when international blame politics was most acute, and posit that Beijing has employed three modes of international blame management practices (defensive, aggressive and proactive benevolence) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We argue that the domestic–global nexus is key to understanding China's blame management practices, highlighting Beijing's desire to cultivate a “responsible great power” image and cement autocratic legitimization of the CCP. We demonstrate how China sought to (re)articulate its identity during the pandemic, providing insights into a China that is increasingly assertive yet sensitive to reputational damage. This article contends that these objectives have resulted in varied effects, with greater success among domestic rather than global audiences. Facilitated by the role of technology and China's “information bubble,” the pandemic has resulted in strong local endorsement of China's responsible great power identity and CCP legitimacy in the initial to middle phase of its pandemic management. The results are however far more mixed at the global level, with actors welcoming a more constructive role for China while remaining wary of its global intentions.

By examining the modes, objectives and effects of China's international blame management practices, this article contributes to the literature in three interrelated ways. First, by extending the scholarship on domestic blame politics to the foreign policy domain, we contribute to the literature analysing the domestic–global interplay driving China's international behaviour.⁵ Second, although all countries are sensitive to international criticism, they respond to and manage it differently. Our typology – the defensive, aggressive and proactive benevolence modes – therefore conceptualizes and clarifies the various blame management practices that Beijing adopts, adding to the growing literature on China's COVID-19 measures and responses to international criticism.⁶ While we do not claim generalizability, this framework offers a first-cut analysis into how authoritarian regimes navigate international blame in relation to domestic legitimacy concerns. In the context of a China that has centralized domestic political power and is far more confident on the global stage, one would assume that Beijing would primarily rely on aggressive practices to counter international criticism. Our findings nevertheless demonstrate that Beijing employed a variety of means – including defensive and benevolent practices – to manage blame, thereby adding nuance to the

1 The acknowledgement of shortcomings was not an admission of blame as COVID-19 lapses were viewed as technobureaucratic gaps rather than being of a systemic character. (“Xi Jinping calls for improving epidemic monitoring, early warning capabilities.” CGTN, 24 May 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-05-24/Xi-Jinping-joins-panel-discussion-with-NPC-deputies-from-Hubei-QKQwiYvCO4/index.html>. Accessed 2 June 2022.)

2 State Council Information Office 2020a.

3 We use the term “blame management” to encompass both blame generation and blame avoidance practices. Our analysis focuses on the discursive and performative aspects of blame management practices, such as narratives and diplomatic activities.

4 Hood 2011; Weaver 2018; Abdullah and Kim 2020.

5 Weiss and Wallace 2021; Yang, Yifan 2020.

6 Jing 2021; Liu 2020; Ran and Yan 2021; Yang, Xiangfeng 2021.

“assertive China” narrative. Third, given that international crises may have significant impact on a country’s identity and global image,⁷ analysing the motivations and outcomes of China’s blame management practices provides key insights into the projections and receptivity of Beijing’s identity claims as a responsible great power. This yields important implications for assessing China’s growing power and influence.⁸

This article proceeds in three sections. The first unpacks the politics of blame, highlighting the “who” (actors and audience), “how” (strategies) and “why” (objectives and effects) in blame generation and avoidance. It demonstrates the need to extend the analysis to the international realm and examine the domestic–global nexus in blame politics. This conceptual grounding informs our subsequent analysis on China’s COVID-19 responses. The second section focuses on Chinese political leaders and diplomats as the actors most actively involved in ascribing and deflecting blame. By examining their discourses (in speeches, texts and tweets) and actions, we construct a typology of China’s blame management practices. The final section focuses on objectives and effects. It analyses why China has employed such practices, with particular insights on identity construction and autocratic legitimation to domestic and global audiences.

The Politics of Blame

Defined as the act of holding someone accountable, blame is an inherently social and political concept. It is linked to moral judgements and role expectations as to whether an actor’s behaviour adheres to social norms and rules. Blame thus requires warrant – it necessitates a certain level of justification on intentionality, capability, obligation or causality – and it may be anticipatory or reactive.⁹ It is also deeply political as it can be instrumentally used to deflect and divert attention or to frame issues in ways that draw on emotional and cognitive biases.¹⁰

This politics of blame features prominently in public administration (PA) scholarship. These works focus largely on democracies and domestic-level politics, examining how and why policy-makers engage in blame management practices. As Weaver states, “blame generating can be seen as part of an *iterative game*. Politics and policymaking are not one-round, one-time affairs; they involve repeated interactions among mutually dependent actors.”¹¹ Actors involved in a blame game include the blame makers (those attributing blame) and the blame takers (those to whom blame is attributed).¹² The politics of blame becomes most visible when there is an audience to respond to blame attribution. Importantly, this “audience” is conceived in the plural, in the sense that different audiences may react to blame generation differently. Although blame generation may be targeted at a core audience, it may also impact other audiences and shape their responses.¹³

Policymakers seek to mitigate and avoid blame for electoral purposes. These include enhancing legitimacy and public trust, solidifying their constituencies and minimizing responsibility for unpopular policies.¹⁴ This is often due to negativity bias, with actors far more sensitive to negative messaging and losses than they are to positive messaging and gains. It is important to recognize, however, that “negative messages are social constructs. Rarely are they a simple recital of facts; they are also a selection and interpretation of facts.”¹⁵ Verbal and non-verbal framings, along with the role of media, are therefore key elements in shaping negativity bias. Linguistic cues, loaded terminology and visual images may be employed to generate stigma, drive “othering” processes and

7 Gill 2020.

8 Loke 2021; Shambaugh 2020.

9 Malle, Guglielmo and Monroe 2014.

10 Leong and Howlett 2017, 601.

11 Weaver 2018, 267. Emphasis in the original.

12 Hood 2011, 7.

13 Weaver 2018, 267.

14 Flinders 2021; Weaver 1987.

15 Weaver 2018, 264.

destabilize perceptions.¹⁶ Indeed, the “ability to create images that are intelligible to, resonate with, and resist alternative interpretations by the audience is an important element of effective blame generating.”¹⁷

Policymakers therefore employ a variety of blame avoidance strategies, as outlined in Hood’s three ideal-types: presentational, agency and policy strategies.¹⁸ Presentational strategies avoid blame through persuasion, “smoke and mirrors,” rhetoric and spin. These would include diversionary tactics, providing justifications and spinning a blameworthy problem into something else. Presentational strategies “are concerned with the framing of arguments, the rhetorical dimension of politics and management, the dynamics of public attitudes and opinion, and the links between media and politics.”¹⁹ Agency strategies focus on where responsibility lies and include shifting the blame, finding a scapegoat, or delegating shared responsibility in organizational complexity. Finally, policy strategies avoid blame by following best practice guidelines and collective decision making.²⁰

Blame management in authoritarian regimes

Although the concept of blame has typically been applied to the study of democratic governments’ electoral objectives, it is not an unfamiliar concept to authoritarian regimes. Authoritarian regimes similarly face legitimacy and public image concerns, which may be negatively affected if the domestic public blames the government for policy failures.²¹ They are also confronted with information dilemmas during crises: while greater transparency and open information would facilitate more effective public policy responses, it would also open up space for greater critiques and dissent to undermine domestic regime legitimacy.²² This is especially so because the concentration of power at the top implies that this is where blame will most likely be directed in the event of policy failures or civic resistance.²³

Given the significant impact that blame politics may have on regime stability and sustainability, authoritarian regimes also employ various blame avoidance strategies. One such strategy is what He and Warren call “authoritarian deliberation” at local levels.²⁴ These deliberative participatory mechanisms, such as citizen petitions and deliberation in public forums, serve various functions. They help to minimize public dissent and provide important feedback mechanisms for elites to understand citizens’ preferences.²⁵ Importantly, however, they also help to distribute responsibility and shift blame:

in situations in which decisions are difficult and inflict losses, deliberative processes enable leaders to shift responsibility onto the process and thus avoid blame. In China, the elites are recognizing that “I decide” implies “I take responsibility.” But “we decide” implies that the citizens are also responsible, thus providing (legitimate) political cover for officials who have to make tough decisions.²⁶

Authoritarian regimes can also establish multiple authority levels by delegating power and responsibility to lower-level authorities, thereby avoiding blame and protecting the credibility of the central

16 Hansson 2018.

17 Weaver 2018, 265.

18 Hood 2011.

19 Ibid., 17.

20 Ibid.

21 Baekkeskov and Rubin 2017.

22 Ibid., 426.

23 Cai 2008, 415.

24 He and Warren 2017.

25 Ibid., 162–63.

26 Ibid., 163.

command.²⁷ Actors in a blame game are thus embedded in a largely hierarchical structure, where the “chain of blame shifts from more powerful to less powerful actors.”²⁸ Such blame management practices are aided by the state-run media to construct favourable optics of the central leadership. China’s domestic environmental governance, to take one example, demonstrates this propaganda-decentralization nexus and is thus reflective of Hood’s presentational and agency strategies. As Ran writes, “Discursive domination through manipulation of the government’s propaganda machine constructs a positive image of [the] central government’s environmental policymaking, which contrasts with the negative light in which local implementation is portrayed. Meanwhile, decentralization provides a necessary prerequisite that enables blame to be funnelled towards local government.”²⁹

Such blame management practices nevertheless have limitations. When confronted with large-scale casualties, media exposure and collective popular resistance, decentralization and propaganda efforts may fuel discontent and delegitimize the central party leadership. In these instances, the central government of authoritarian regimes may intervene and recentralize decision-making authority.³⁰ This was evident in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, where media coverage on faulty building design and governance failures was tolerated as long as blame was directed at the local government. Once media reporting became more critical with potentially damaging ramifications for the regime, however, the central government enacted censorship to restrict information access and ban media coverage.³¹ These blame management measures, including the removal of dissent in media forums, in turn make it more challenging to obtain accurate accounts of domestic public beliefs within authoritarian countries.³²

The domestic-global nexus in blame politics

As the preceding discussion demonstrates, the literature on blame has typically focused on democratic governments and politicians’ electoral motivations. Even when authoritarian regimes are examined, the analysis remains largely focused on how blame is generated and avoided locally. In other words, the existing literature investigates how and why democratic or authoritarian governments engage in domestic blame management practices. However, as the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, blame politics is ubiquitous in the international realm. Within international relations (IR), important works examine whether collectivities can be assigned blame and how blame functions in international society.³³ However, less attention is paid to the interplay of domestic and global factors in blame analysis, a task we take up in this paper. Specifically, we aim to bridge the PA and IR literatures on blame, extend blame politics into the international domain and examine the domestic-global nexus driving international blame management practices. This analysis is especially pertinent in the context of China’s COVID-19 responses as the country has been on the receiving end of much international blame. To be sure, China is not unfamiliar with global health stigma. This occurred during the 2002 SARS epidemic, when the Chinese political system was criticized in Western media for suppressing information and curtailing international cooperation.³⁴

The scale of the global COVID-19 pandemic has nevertheless meant far greater criticism of China. This blame attribution is especially significant for a country that has invested substantial resources to present itself as a responsible great power. As the world’s second largest economy, the pandemic has cast the international spotlight on China’s global standing and great power

27 Cai 2008.

28 Ran 2017, 656.

29 Ibid., 656.

30 Cai 2008, 419.

31 Repnikova 2017, 121–29.

32 Dukalskis and Gerschwitz 2017, 261.

33 Erskine 2004; Balzacq and Rousseau 2020.

34 Buus and Olsson 2006.

role. At the same time, China has greater resources at its disposal to engage in international blame management practices and recreate the global pandemic narrative to align with its identity and preferences. Beijing has used Twitter, for instance, a platform almost exclusively for foreign consumption as the service is banned in China, to promote its global COVID-19 narrative. Indeed, one study has found that more than 270,000 COVID-19 tweets were made from Chinese state-linked accounts between January 2020 and September 2021.³⁵ This desire to push back against international blame and “tell China’s story well” is more pertinent given that the pandemic is arguably the first truly global incident under President Xi Jinping’s 习近平 tenure. Given the intrinsic links between Xi’s domestic goals of enhancing Party legitimacy and fulfilling the Chinese Dream and his international goals of achieving greater global respect and influence, there is much more at stake. As Weiss and Wallace write, state preferences “cannot be deduced from the structure of the system or the distribution of power and capabilities but are determined first and foremost by domestic politics.”³⁶ By examining Chinese news media and primary diplomatic sources such as tweets, statements and press conferences from the pandemic outbreak in late 2019 to mid-2021, we now turn to analyse the domestic–global interplay driving China’s COVID-19 blame management practices.

China’s COVID-19 Crisis and Blame (Mis)management Practices

The outbreak in Wuhan, along with its subsequent global spread, represented a major public health and political crisis for China. Similar dynamics occurred during the SARS epidemic, when China faced heavy criticism for its lack of transparency.³⁷ Part of this was attributed to China’s fragmented authoritarian system, with local cadres evaluated based on performance and therefore incentivized to cover up local incidents.³⁸ In the context of COVID-19, the provincial and central governments similarly suppressed the severity of the outbreak and clamped down on grassroots reporting to allow Beijing to control the disease narrative.³⁹ For instance, prominent lawyer Chen Qiushi 陈秋实 gained publicity for his reporting in Wuhan from late 2019 to early 2020, depicting realities that deviated from official media coverage. Chen subsequently “disappeared” in February 2020, reappearing after 600 days only to state that he “cannot speak about what happened.”⁴⁰ Dr Li Wenliang 李文亮, an ophthalmologist in Wuhan and one of the first to issue warnings about the disease on Weibo 微博, was reprimanded by the police for “spreading rumours.” He passed away weeks later from the coronavirus and became a cause célèbre for whistleblowing and transparency in China.⁴¹ The impulse to silence dissenting voices and suppress non-state narratives domestically (akin to Hood’s presentational strategies of rhetoric and spin) is apparent in these instances.

Setting aside the initial cover-up and inconsistency, several scholars have nevertheless argued that China’s unique political system created an effective chain of command and crisis governance. Once it became clear that the outbreak was spreading with detrimental consequences, the central government recentralized authority and decision-making powers.⁴² In response to the initial public anger on information suppression, Beijing mobilized its disciplining apparatus by dismissing lower-level bureaucrats, which left the core leadership largely inoculated against criticism.⁴³ China’s authoritarian system also allowed for mass resource and bureaucratic mobilization, with the

35 “Is China succeeding at shaping global narratives about Covid-19?” ChinaPower, 22 October 2021, <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-covid-disinformation-global-narratives/>. Accessed 2 June 2022.

36 Weiss and Wallace 2021, 642–43.

37 Baekkeskov and Rubin 2017.

38 He, Shi and Liu 2020.

39 Walsh 2020.

40 Zhai 2021.

41 Li 2020.

42 Mei 2020.

43 Ran and Yan 2021.

focus on collectivist values helping to foster community compliance to coercive state-led actions.⁴⁴ A key example of the former was the construction of the brand-new Huoshenshan 火神山 hospital in Wuhan in under ten days, echoing the construction of Beijing's Xiaotangshan 小汤山 hospital during the SARS epidemic.

Parallels can thus be drawn between China's SARS and COVID-19 responses: they demonstrate, on the one hand, persistent problems with early reporting and information transparency; on the other, a continued "whole-of-government" approach to mobilizing resources and establishing a concerted pandemic response.⁴⁵ The current pandemic has nevertheless enhanced Beijing's "paternalistic campaign-style mode of crisis governance."⁴⁶ Unlike the SARS crisis, the CCP now has widespread access to new digital technologies for domestic censorship, surveillance and information dissemination. As Liu and Zhao demonstrate, high-levels of Chinese public acceptance to contact tracing apps grounded in communitarian logics gave the state almost unfettered surveillance access.⁴⁷ Beijing's domestic COVID-19 measures therefore demonstrate the pervasive – and indeed increasingly – strong hand of the state.

A typology of China's COVID-19 international blame management practices

China's actions at the international level have been more varied. Global calls for China to be held culpable generated significant political pressure for Beijing. In response, China engaged in a variety of blame management practices. We outline three particular modes – defensive, aggressive and proactive benevolence – employed by Chinese leaders and diplomats (see [Table 1](#)). Like all typologies, this mapping represents ideal types for analytical clarity. The modes outlined here are not mutually exclusive and often overlap.

Defensive. China's defensive practices are largely reactionary to international criticism, with the CCP seeking to minimize accountability and win sympathy. In a statement issued by the Embassy of the PRC in the Republic of India, China labelled itself a "victim" and asserted that "COVID-19 [was] a natural, not man-made, disaster."⁴⁸ In retaliation to allegations of a cover-up when the outbreak first emerged, Beijing denounced foreign governments for fabricating rumours and spreading misinformation. Specifically, the Chinese authorities called out the Trump administration for labelling COVID-19 as the "Chinese virus." The Chinese ambassador to Cuba, Ma Hui 马辉, tweeted that US officials had "stooped so low to lie, misinform, blame, [and] stigma[t]ize" Beijing.⁴⁹ China also repeatedly framed calls for investigations as a "political act." Indeed, Fu Cong 傅聪, director general of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' (MFA) arms control department, accused the US of "scapegoating China" and "politicizing" the pandemic – a common refrain of Chinese officials since the start of the pandemic.⁵⁰

At the same time, Beijing sought to utilize regional and bilateral fora to positively highlight its pandemic measures and thus inoculate itself against escalating criticism. One example was the "Special Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)–China Foreign Ministers' Meeting on the Coronavirus Disease 2019" held in February 2020. This meeting took place amidst growing international opprobrium against Beijing for mishandling the outbreak in Wuhan. The post-meeting statement acknowledged "China's decisive measures to address COVID-19 through prompt sharing of information and other significant efforts to contain the epidemic and to protect regional

44 He, Shi and Liu 2020.

45 Ibid., 254.

46 Ibid., 253.

47 Liu and Zhao 2021.

48 Embassy of the PRC in the Republic of India 2020.

49 Ma 2020.

50 Crossley and Martina 2021.

Table 1. China's COVID-19 International Blame Management Practices

Modes	Features	Objectives and Effects
Defensive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Victim narratives • Shield criticism through institutional mechanisms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Autocratic legitimation • Projection of responsible great power identity
Aggressive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confrontational rhetoric • Assertive “wolf warrior” diplomacy • Scapegoating and imposing costs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater receptivity from domestic audience; mixed reactions from global audiences
Proactive benevolence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solidarity narratives • Aid diplomacy • Provision of global public goods 	

Source: the authors

and global public health security.” It further expressed “full confidence in China’s abilities to succeed in overcoming the epidemic.”⁵¹

China also convened COVID-19 meetings with its ASEAN counterparts such as Laos, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. These bilaterals were significant because they occurred outside the usual pandemic summitry. Their outcomes mirrored that of the ASEAN meeting – defending China’s actions and praising its success in dealing with the pandemic. The China–Laos meeting, for instance, presented Vientiane the opportunity to applaud “the efforts China has made in fighting COVID-19” and stress that it “will stand firmly with the Chinese people.”⁵² Singaporean officials also noted the confidence and resolution of the Chinese “in overcoming the difficulties” wrought by the pandemic in their bilateral meetings.⁵³ The use of such narratives and institutional mechanisms were representative of Beijing’s defensive blame management practices.

Aggressive. China nevertheless also engaged in aggressive blame management practices. Like its defensive mode, aggressive practices are largely reactionary, but with key distinctions. These aggressive practices contain more antagonistic methods and content: they are confrontational; openly critical; and with greater intent to threaten or impose costs. They also seek to change the strategic narrative and redirect blame through disinformation campaigns and scapegoating, and are thus representative of Hood’s presentational and agency strategies.⁵⁴

China’s diplomatic assertiveness represents one such blame management mechanism. Indeed, the label “wolf warrior” diplomats first surfaced in 2020 in tandem with the increasingly combative tone and assertive practice of COVID-19 diplomacy.⁵⁵ In India, Chinese spokesperson Wang Xiaojian 王小剑 tweeted that calls for Beijing to compensate for losses engendered by the pandemic were “ridiculous [and] eyeball-catching nonsense.”⁵⁶ Even geopolitical allies such as Venezuela were not spared from Beijing’s aggressive blame management practices. A Twitter thread from the Chinese Embassy in Venezuela protested Venezuelan officials’ reference to the “Chinese coronavirus” and told detractors to “put on a mask and shut up.”⁵⁷

Chinese officials have utilized traditional and social media to spin and shift the blame onto others.⁵⁸ As part of a broader strategy to counter negative coverage and find an alternative scapegoat, China questioned the origins of the disease, casting doubt on the scientific consensus of

51 ASEAN 2020, 2.

52 MFA of the PRC 2020b.

53 MFA Singapore 2020.

54 Hood 2011.

55 Loh 2021.

56 Wang 2020.

57 Embajada de China en Venezuela 2020.

58 Rosenberger 2020; Schecter 2020.

Wuhan as “site zero.”⁵⁹ Chinese officials promoted conspiracy theories that the virus originated in Spain or the USA.⁶⁰ Beijing also leveraged the media to deflect blame by focusing the narrative around the purportedly ineffectual COVID-19 management of other countries. Chinese state media, for example, released a Lego animated video openly mocking US pandemic measures, while highlighting its own successful containment methods.⁶¹

Furthermore, diplomatic officials have not shied away from leveraging its economic might by threatening to impose costs against countries perceived to be criticizing its pandemic measures. Cheng Jingye 成竞业, China’s ambassador to Australia, repeatedly rejected Canberra’s call for an independent inquiry into the Wuhan outbreak and, in the same breath, intimated that Australian wine and beef imports could be jeopardized.⁶² China’s ambassador to France and Monaco, Lu Shaye 卢沙野, also tweeted that French lawmakers were “mad hyenas” for criticizing Beijing’s pandemic management.⁶³ Diplomats are thus placed at the forefront of state efforts to deflect blame by going on the offensive.

Proactive benevolence. The Chinese government has also emphasized aid diplomacy and global solidarity in the battle against the pandemic. Boxes of medical supplies were delivered to Chinese nationals in Singapore, accompanied by the words “Take care comrades, the motherland cares for you” on the local embassy’s Facebook post.⁶⁴ China’s ability to provide pandemic aid to its citizens overseas stood in stark contrast to many Western countries’ sluggish responses to COVID-19.

Beijing has also sought to highlight China’s provision of public health goods as a way to underscore its essential role in global governance. In that connection, the Chinese MFA has consistently called the coronavirus a “common enemy of mankind,”⁶⁵ while stressing that “China is on the side of humanity’s shared interest.”⁶⁶ Likewise, then Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi 王毅 expressed his desire for global cooperation to uphold the multilateral international order.⁶⁷ The relative success of the Chinese authorities’ containment and control efforts, coupled with pandemic mishandling by Western nations, provided Beijing manoeuvrability to seize the narrative by showcasing Chinese expertise and diplomatic aid. As Hua Chunying 华春莹 tweeted:

The 1st batch of Chinese #COVID19 #vaccines through #COVAX have arrived in #Dhaka and #Islamabad. More batches are on the way. China has provided 770+m vaccine doses&concentrate vials to the world. We will continue to fulfill our pledge to make vaccines a global public good.⁶⁸

At his keynote speech at a China–Africa COVID-19 summit, President Xi also emphasized China’s efforts to help African countries: “when Africa was struck by the virus, China was the first to rush in with assistance and has since stood firm with the African people. ... China will ... continue to help African countries by providing supplies, sending expert teams, and facilitating Africa’s procurement of medical supplies in China.”⁶⁹

59 Jacob 2020.

60 Winterburn 2020; Zhao, Lijian 2021.

61 Shelton and Zhao 2020.

62 Landale 2020.

63 Ambassade de Chine en France 2021.

64 Embassy of the PRC in Singapore 2020.

65 Embassy of the PRC in the Republic of India 2020.

66 Hua 2020a.

67 “FM Wang Yi calls for global cooperation to defeat coronavirus.” CGTN, 24 May 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-05-24/FM-Wang-Yi-calls-for-global-cooperation-to-defeat-coronavirus-QKKEF7RoJi/index.html>. Accessed 2 June 2022.

68 Hua 2021.

69 MFA of the PRC 2020a.

In line with its public diplomacy efforts, China claimed that it was the first country to pledge to make its home-grown vaccines “a global public good,”⁷⁰ and promised that it would “contribute to the accessibility and affordability of vaccines in all developing countries.”⁷¹ According to Wang Yi, Chinese vaccines have engendered “good efficacy and economic and social benefits in more than 100 countries,” demonstrating that China “always honors its promises and walks the talk.”⁷² Emphasizing that international cooperation is “the only right way” to cope with the pandemic, Xi pledged to donate a further 150 million vaccine doses to ASEAN countries and 600 million doses to African states.⁷³ From China’s perspective, its show of goodwill to ameliorate vaccine inequity is designed to increase its civic virtue, repair its global image and remedy some of the blame foisted on the country.

Assessing the Objectives and Effects of China’s Blame Management Practices

Having identified the three modes (defensive, aggressive and proactive benevolence) of China’s blame management practices, we now turn to analysing the objectives and effects of such practices. We contend that China’s blame management practices are tied closely to two interrelated objectives of the Chinese leadership: autocratic legitimation and cultivation of a responsible great power image. A positive international reputation enhances CCP legitimacy, while domestic solidarity gives its leaders the mandate to conduct a more assertive brand of foreign policy. Against this backdrop, China’s blame management practices have significant spillover effects on its self-identity as a responsible great power. The three modes represent China’s toolkit of COVID-19 blame management practices and are not mutually exclusive. Rather, the CCP utilizes different, or a combination of, modes at different times, allowing the central leadership to foster autocratic legitimation as well as enhance its identity claims as a responsible great power. These modes are aimed at two sets of audiences – domestic and global – with more favourable effects in the former and mixed effects in the latter.

In pursuit of autocratic legitimacy and a “responsible great power” image

China’s international COVID-19 blame management practices must be understood in the context of Beijing’s objectives to enhance autocratic legitimacy and its responsible great power image. As foreshadowed earlier, authoritarian regimes are not immune from legitimacy deficits and therefore seek domestic support to ensure regime durability. Autocratic legitimation can occur through various mechanisms, such as the use of nationalist ideology or performance-based indicators. The central leadership may also leverage the country’s international role and engagement to enhance domestic legitimacy.⁷⁴

Beijing’s blame management practices clearly reflect these autocratic legitimation mechanisms. As international blame intensified, the Chinese state engaged in an aggressive mode of blame management through a propaganda offensive and “wolf warrior” diplomacy to divert domestic attention away from the origins and initial mismanagement of the pandemic. This narrative battle caters to both the Chinese domestic and international audiences – it represents a strong China standing up for itself and is linked to collective historical memory, identity construction and popular nationalism.⁷⁵ For instance, a Zhihu 知乎 post on the US’s purported failure in pandemic management highlighted its “anti-intellectual stupidity,” “greedy plundering of capital,” and noted that the

70 MFA of the PRC 2021.

71 Hua 2020b.

72 MFA of the PRC 2021.

73 “China to provide another 1b COVID-19 vaccines to Africa: Xi Jinping.” CGTN, 17 January 2022, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2022-01-17/China-to-provide-another-1b-COVID-19-vaccines-to-Africa-Xi-Jinping-16TLIoxCq0U/index.html>. Accessed 14 October 2022.

74 Dukalskis and Gerschewski 2017, 253–260.

75 Jaworski and Qiaoan 2021.

“stupid citizens of the US do not deserve sympathy” – this post generated over 26,000 likes and widespread support in the comments section.⁷⁶

Furthermore, while China’s “wolf warrior” diplomats mostly use Twitter (a platform not normally accessible to Chinese netizens), images of their tweets are regularly circulated on social media within the confines of China’s digital ecosystem to generate images of strength and resilience at home.⁷⁷ Aggressive blame management practices thus allow the CCP to counter perceived foreign bullying, mobilizing nationalist sentiment to push back against international criticism. As a CCP strategy to legitimize and consolidate its rule at home, it shows its domestic constituents Beijing’s confidence in rebutting perceived unreasonable international criticism. At the same time, it reveals how Beijing is sensitive to reputational concerns, as it subsequently sought to temper its more aggressive rhetoric upon receiving international backlash. At a study session for the CCP’s top leadership in June 2021, for instance, President Xi exhorted state media outlets and diplomats to tone down their language and instead work towards presenting the image of a “trustworthy, lovable and respectable China” to the world.⁷⁸

Beijing is thus striking a balance between defending its interests and cultivating an image as a responsible great power. To be sure, China has long self-identified as a responsible great power, although the content and nature of its perceived responsibilities have undoubtedly evolved over time.⁷⁹ Over the years, China has called for a more inclusive order based on fairness, mutual respect and win-win cooperation. Beijing has sought to redefine China’s global role to enhance its strategic, institutional and normative power and hence shape a more favourable external environment for China’s national rejuvenation, while nevertheless remaining cautious about the burdens of overcommitment.⁸⁰ This vision has become especially pronounced under President Xi, manifested in slogans such as “new model of major country relationship” and “building a community with a shared future for mankind.” Such slogans weave together China’s responsible great power identity and global role obligations and have become guiding principles for its approach to global governance.⁸¹

Indeed, Beijing sought to enhance its global COVID-19 role and international image through a mode of proactive benevolence, underpinned by discourses of friendship and reciprocity.⁸² It was also driven by Chinese perceptions of US decline, accelerated by Trump’s WHO withdrawal at the height of the pandemic and thereby weakening global cooperation.⁸³ Trump’s unilateralism was contrasted with China’s multilateral approach to build solidarity and promote its “responsible” identity during the pandemic. Hence, while Beijing engaged in aggressive blame avoidance practices such as scapegoating and “wolf warrior” diplomacy, it also signalled to both domestic and global audiences China’s responsible global role. The publicization of aid to Chinese citizens overseas, discussed above, showcased state efforts to display concern for its citizens, thus highlighting Beijing’s ability and responsibility to deliver key goods to overseas Chinese in crisis periods. Other messaging focused on China’s swift actions in curbing the pandemic outbreak at home, its support for greater multilateral leadership by the G20 and UN agencies, as well as the provision of pandemic aid to the international community. As Xi declared at the 2020 G20 Leaders’ Summit, “We need to enhance

76 “Meiguo yiqing zheme yanzhong, meiguo ren buzaihu ma?” (The pandemic situation is already so dire in the United States, don’t Americans care?) *Zhihu*, 29 August 2020, <https://www.zhihu.com/question/385287692/answer/1370885426>. Accessed 14 October 2022. Zhihu is a popular “question and answer” website in China.

77 Lai 2021.

78 “Xi seeks ‘lovable’ image for China in sign of diplomatic rethink.” *Bloomberg News*, 1 June 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-06-01/xi-seeks-lovable-image-for-china-in-sign-of-diplomatic-rethink>. Accessed 14 October 2022.

79 Loke 2016.

80 Wei 2020.

81 Yang, Jiechi 2019.

82 Smith and Fallon 2020.

83 Chen and Zhang 2020; Loke 2020.

the role of the WHO, improve pandemic preparedness and response, forge a strong shield for human health and safety, and build a global community of health for all.”⁸⁴

This mode of proactive benevolence has clear implications for legitimacy generation. The projection of a responsible great power image on the international stage playing a decisive role in controlling the virus and rendering assistance to other countries sought to strengthen China’s prestige and, in turn, legitimate CCP rule to its domestic audience.⁸⁵ China’s dual objectives to enhance its legitimacy and responsible image are also located in defensive blame management practices. By convening special COVID-19 bilateral and regional meetings, Beijing banked on its political and diplomatic capital in South-East Asia to generate legitimacy for its pandemic management. China remains one of the most substantial providers of COVID-19 aid to ASEAN countries and leveraged diplomatic summits to emphasize its assistance and garner international legitimacy. Additionally, China’s diplomats were important actors in defending China’s reputation and generating international support, underlining the MFA’s role in China’s identity-building endeavours.⁸⁶ China’s reactions have thus been an amalgamation of defensive, aggressive and proactive blame management practices.

Domestic endorsement and global ambivalence

Beijing’s blame management practices have achieved broad success at the domestic level. There are undoubtedly a variety of factors to consider, such as the role of propaganda and censorship in highlighting worsening pandemic conditions elsewhere as well as restricting domestic access to foreign media and critical views of China’s pandemic management.⁸⁷ Furthermore, although both English- and Chinese-language official media coverage of the pandemic highlighted globalist discourses in support of international pandemic efforts, blame politics and nationalist sentiments were more visible in Chinese-language media outlets oriented towards galvanizing domestic support to rally around international criticism.⁸⁸ Such blame management tactics helped to channel the initial domestic discontent away from the regime, in turn strengthening Party legitimacy and resilience. Surveys conducted during the early days of lockdown and in the immediate aftermath of Wuhan’s reopening demonstrated high levels of domestic approval and public trust of local and central governments.⁸⁹

Beijing’s image projection as a responsible leader in global COVID-19 efforts, and the selective international endorsements it received from its defensive and proactive benevolence blame management efforts, were also reproduced for domestic consumption. To a large extent, this highlights the role that China’s state media plays in inflating self-perceptions. A 2021 US–China perception survey of 3,391 Chinese internet users, for instance, found that 78 per cent of those polled believe that China has a favourable or very favourable international image.⁹⁰ These blame management practices have also boosted overall domestic confidence in the CCP’s leadership. A 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer found Chinese citizens’ trust in their government stood at a record 91 per cent, in stark contrast to America’s 39 per cent.⁹¹ Beijing’s persistent “zero-COVID” policy is nevertheless revitalizing domestic discontent, particularly in cities that experienced prolonged lockdowns in 2022. At the same time, a significant portion of the public continues to support the policy, shaped by state propaganda and fears of overwhelming infections.⁹² While the current implications of

84 State Council Information Office 2020b.

85 Gill 2020; Wen 2021; Yang, Yifan 2020.

86 Loh 2020.

87 Huang, Haifeng 2020.

88 Yang and Chen 2021.

89 Su, Su and Zhou 2021; Wu et al. 2021.

90 “The pulse: Chinese public opinion.” US–China Perception Monitor, n.d., <https://uscnpm.org/the-pulse/>. Accessed 14 October 2022.

91 Lehr 2022.

92 Huang, Yanzhong 2022a.

China's zero-COVID policy lie outside this paper's timeframe (late 2019 to mid-2021), we acknowledge that more recent developments temper the domestic "success" that we discuss here.

At the international level, however, China's blame management practices to counter international criticism and win hearts and minds received mixed reactions. Although a larger number of countries subsequently held a more favourable view of China's pandemic management, this did not translate to an increased CCP ability to influence broader perceptions.⁹³ To be sure, China's global health charm offensive and efforts to rebrand its image has had some success, allowing Beijing to partially recover from its initial reputational damage.⁹⁴ In Latin America and the Caribbean, the scale and timing of Chinese medical supplies and vaccines, especially in comparison to sluggish US aid to the region, helped China to build goodwill.⁹⁵ In South-East Asia, however, polls conducted by Kompas, ISEAS–Yusof Ishak and YouGov "paint a mixed picture of public perceptions towards Chinese vaccines," owing to scepticism over the reliability of Chinese-made vaccines.⁹⁶ China's mode of proactive benevolence has also had limited influence in shaping African media coverage on China's COVID-19 management.⁹⁷ In Europe, countries that received Chinese pandemic assistance tended to view China more favourably, while China's aggressive blame management practices worsened negative perceptions in other states.⁹⁸ The overarching effect of Beijing's endeavours to reframe its strategic pandemic narrative is therefore one of varied success within and across regions.⁹⁹

This demonstrates that although there is some global receptivity to China's image projection as a responsible great power, there also remains widespread apprehension about the CCP's broader intentions and claims to global health leadership.¹⁰⁰ For many, China's pandemic aid is also viewed as a wider strategy to secure geopolitical leverage in the South China Sea or support for its one-China principle.¹⁰¹ The CCP's often-blurred distinctions between Chinese vaccine donations and sales, as well as greater awareness of Chinese disinformation campaigns, have resulted in more critical global assessments of Beijing's attempts to capitalize on its projected optics.¹⁰² Although the US is perceived to have fared worse in its pandemic management, many believe that Beijing's authoritarian regime does not offer a credible alternative to US leadership.¹⁰³ China's multipronged blame management practices to cultivate autocratic legitimacy and a responsible great power image have thus not had the desired effect globally. In other words, domestic endorsement has not been fully replicated at the international level.

Conclusion

Although the politics of blame is not an uncommon phenomenon, extant literature tends to focus on democracies and/or domestic-level studies. This is puzzling since the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the extension of blame politics into the international realm and that an authoritarian country such as China engages in multiple blame management practices. This paper therefore seeks to fill this gap on both these levels. Although China has been the target of significant international opprobrium, a systematic analysis of China's COVID-19 international blame (mis)management

93 Silver, Devlin and Huang 2021.

94 Müller, Brazys and Dukalskis 2021.

95 Brizuela de Ávila et al. 2022.

96 Zaini and Hoang 2021.

97 Madrid-Morales 2021.

98 Jerdén et al. 2021.

99 Hagström and Gustafsson 2021.

100 Huang, Yanzhong 2022b.

101 Rolland 2020; Telias and Urdinez 2021.

102 "Is China's Covid-19 diplomacy succeeding?" ChinaPower, 23 September 2021, <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-covid-medical-vaccine-diplomacy/>. Accessed 2 June 2022.

103 Norrlöf 2020; Zhao, Suisheng 2020.

practices from late 2019 to mid-2021 has been largely lacking in the literature. We suggest that a turn to studying these practices is important for what it reveals about China's evolving global role and indeed whether Beijing is prepared to assume the responsible great power identity that it frequently espouses. This article therefore makes two key contributions. It constructs a typology to illustrate three modes (defensive, aggressive and proactive benevolence) of Beijing's international blame management practices and highlights how China sought to refine and recast its identity during the pandemic. In doing so, the article provides insights into a China that is increasingly assertive yet manifestly insecure, sensitive to legitimacy concerns and vulnerable to reputational damage.

China's navigation of the defensive, aggressive and proactively benevolent blame management toolkit is representative of the broader and multifaceted nature of China's foreign policy conduct. The context through which Beijing reacts to criticism therefore cannot be disentangled from the practices. In this regard, China's identity as a responsible power fuels, and is simultaneously fueled by, its blame management practices. This identity is complicated by the reputational damage it received, particularly in the early stages of the pandemic outbreak. This sensitivity to reputational deficits stems from two main concerns: the domestic delegitimization of CCP performance; and the contestation of its self-image as a responsible and benign international power. Nevertheless, with the help of Chinese media and diplomats, Beijing sought to rectify these concerns by contrasting the speed, decisiveness and success of its pandemic response with Western efforts. This allowed the Chinese leadership to project its identity claims as a responsible great power and foster autocratic legitimation, albeit with greater success at home than abroad.

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