

The Chinese quest for good reputation: Strategic narratives, public diplomacy and China's mass-media strategy

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Abstract

Soft power and public diplomacy compose the new reality shaping the dynamics of contemporary international relations. Strategic narratives represent an essential means for political actors to extend their influence, gain the public opinion's support for their actions and fulfill their foreign policy goals. The thesis focused on the Chinese Party-state's construction of strategic narratives targeted towards foreign audiences, with the purpose of actively encouraging the increasement of positive views on China and strengthening its status as a 'peaceful rising power'. Through qualitative content analysis, the major themes and sub-themes employed in the period between 2018 and 2020 in the English-language media outlets controlled by the Party-state used as empirical data sources were identified and their meaning was interpreted in the theoretical framework of strategic narratives. The analysis demonstrated that China employs complex narratives, which are continuously adapted to fit the preferences of the distinct audiences and seek to create consensus over China's appropriate capacity to assume the status of responsible major global player and promote equity, multilateralism, free trade and mutually beneficial cooperation as the principles guiding the new world order emerging in the aftermath of the lasting consequences determined by the 'Trade War' and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: China, Strategic narratives, Public diplomacy, Soft power, Media analysis

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1. Introduction

At the turn of the 21st century, the field of international relations was marked by a drastic change in perception regarding the indicators for the assessment of a state's level of influence on the stage of global politics, as well as by a general reorientation towards creating a 'nation brand' attractive for the foreign public. The factors that determined this metamorphosis were the unexpectedly peaceful ending of the Cold War-related ideological conflict, the general consensus over the extraordinary costs involved by the states' focus on the increasement of their hard power capacities, and scholars' fascination with regards to the circumstances that enabled the United States' impressive power accumulation, which framed the subsequent order of world politics as a unipolar system (Nye, 2004). In turn, these developments generated an ardent debate over the importance of 'soft power' and the consequences of constituting and enforcing it through public diplomacy as a primary tool. Moreover, the recent intertwining of the features of international affairs and security with those of strategic communication put the spotlight on the benefits of employing 'strategic narratives' in the foreign policy-drafting process as a "means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics and a tool to extend their influence, manage expectations and shape the behavior of other domestic and international actors" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2014, p.3).

It is in this context that the Chinese Party-state started to significantly invest in the enhancement of the country's array of soft power assets and the development of productive public diplomacy strategies. Furthermore, the mass-media's role has been reconsidered, becoming central in the efforts to disseminate the carefully-crafted strategic narratives on 'the nation brand' and 'the story of the state' (Gao, Ingram and Kee, 2016), with President Xi Jinping urging the Chinese media sources to "tell China's story well, spread China's voice well, let the world know a three-dimensional, colorful China, and showcase China's role as a builder of world peace" (King, 2017).

However, China's soft power strategy has also been subjected to doubt from critical voices that regard it as a disguised propaganda strategy (Edney, 2014; Wang, 2020d) and its public diplomacy efforts encountering numerous obstacles in an ever increasing hostile environment. Most recently, China has been struggling to manage the consequences of unfavorable events such as the alleged reveal of conservative news website *The Daily Caller* that the Chinese

Communist Party's Propaganda Department had paid more than \$19 million to American news outlets for advertising and printing of pro-Beijing supplements (Ross, 2020) and the United States' decision to designate four major Chinese media outlets, namely *China Central Television*, the *China News Service*, the *People's Daily* and the *Global Times*, as "mouthpieces and 'propaganda outlets' under the control of the Chinese Communist Party" (Pamuk, 2020). Subsequently, some researchers suggest that given the potential impact of the 'Trade War' and the COVID-19 pandemic's effects on China's reputation, the Chinese authorities are more than ever attempting to employ the global media as a means of exercising soft power with the purpose of attenuating the increasing wave of criticism, projecting a favorable image of the country and preparing the ground for a possible overtaking of the United States' position as the world's greatest superpower (Jacob, 2020). This claim has also been supported by some democracy-protective NGOs, with a special Freedom House report, titled "Beijing's Global Megaphone: The Expansion of Chinese Communist Party Media Influence Since 2017", highlighting that China has been "insinuating state-media content into mainstream media or other existing dissemination channels" (Cook, 2020, p.4).

The thesis therefore aims to assess the manner in which reputable American and Chinese newspapers publishing in English are employed by official structures subordinate to the Party-state as a symbolic stage to depict Chinese soft power assets and exercise public diplomacy efforts, analyze the preeminent strategic narratives promoted by the Chinese authorities in these media outlets and discuss the manner in which distinct messages are targeted towards different types of foreign audiences. The research focuses on the strategic narratives integrated in articles published between 2018 and 2020, in the context of the exacerbation of the diplomatic, 'Trade War' and COVID-19 pandemic-related tensions between China and the United States as contenders for the role of major global superpower, to answer the subsequent research question:

- "What are the main themes and sub-themes composing the strategic narratives deployed by the Chinese government in newspapers targeted towards English-speaking foreign audiences in the period between 2018 and 2020?"

This thesis is structured as follows. The first chapter introduces the topic of the research and offers the reader an overview of the relevant background information, the thesis's purpose and the research question that guides it. The second chapter, the *Literature Review*, is divided into three sections, with the first one discussing China's experience with public diplomacy, the

second one describing the role attributed to the mass-media through China's soft power strategy and the final one depicting the knowledge gap and the contribution to research. The third chapter, the *Theoretical framework*, outlines the theoretical framework upon which the thesis relies for the design of the research question, with an emphasis on the concepts of 'soft power', 'public diplomacy' and 'strategic narratives'. The fourth chapter, the *Methodological approach*, describes the research's ontological and epistemological assumptions, explains the data collection and analysis method and ends with a reflection on the issues of the researcher's reflexivity, positionality and ethical considerations. The fifth chapter, *Data analysis*, presents and interprets the empirical findings within the theoretical framework, followed by the final chapter, *Conclusion*, which summarizes the research's results.

2. Literature Review

The following chapter aims to summarize the primary characteristics of previous literature on the thesis's topic, as well as provide significant background information to support the current research. Therefore, this section will first present the features of the Chinese public diplomacy efforts and their impact on the drafting of foreign policy. Then, it will proceed to discuss the role of the domestic mass media in the Chinese public diplomacy strategy, as well as the manner in which China attempts to influence international mass media outlets. Lastly, the identified literature gap and the thesis's contribution to research will be explained.

2.1. China's experience with public diplomacy

In recent years, China has been increasingly regarded as “the powerhouse of the Asian region with massive soft power resources”(Lee, 2011, p.18). The Chinese officials' acknowledgement of the importance and benefits associated with public diplomacy crystallized during the Hu-Wen administration, but the efforts to create a complex range of soft power assets have greatly intensified since 2013 under the Xi-Li administration. In accordance with President Xi Jinping's 2014 announcement that “We should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's message to the world” (Biswas and Tortajada, 2018), the Party-state began to focus on the endorsement of a political and international relations agenda encompassing both China's previous diplomatic efforts and commitments to active involvement in global development, as well as its newly discovered interest in the enhancement of its capacity to influence the general public perception of the country and its actions (Shambaugh, 2015). Furthermore, China's current foreign policy strategy has been evaluated as centered around strengthening the country's status of ‘global investor, donor and cultural model through a peaceful rise’ (Wang, 2008; Zhao, 2015), an action which could be appropriately motivated by the country's desire to avoid the mistake of previously rising powers such as Wartime Japan or the Soviet Union to “engage in adversarial and ultimately self-destructive relations with the existing world order” (Edney, 2014, p.75). Although Chinese officials tend to present the goals pursued by the foreign policy strategies in terms of serving the national interests, some scholars argue that these strategies are actually designed to concentrate China's public diplomacy efforts in the pursuit of the Chinese Communist Party's objective of maintaining its domestic dominance (Edney, 2014).

China's public diplomacy efforts focus on six major directions, namely involving the generally wealthy and politically influential Chinese diaspora in the endorsement of a positive representation of China, expanding the overseas influence of Chinese mass-media outlets (the most relevant examples being the Xinhua Media Agency and the English-language TV channel CGTN) to challenge "the Western media monopoly" (Shambaugh, 2015, p.104), counteracting foreign audiences' negative perception regarding China's status as a rising power through the creation of a Public Diplomacy Office, sponsoring the establishment of Confucius Institutes (as educational centers focused on increasing the public interest regarding the Chinese language and culture) in an impressive number of countries, subsidizing academic and cultural exchanges, and organizing large-scale forums, conventions or cultural and sporting events (Shambaugh, 2015). The public diplomacy endeavors of the Party-state, which are generically referred to as 'charm offensive' (Kurlantzick, 2007), have always been liable to being affected by China's problem with credibility and self-criticism, as "its repressive political system and mercantilist business practices tarnish its reputation" (Shambaugh, 2015, p.99). Although China strives to become an epitome of soft power resources' effective exploitation, its reluctance to embrace at least some of the values defining modern liberalism (such as intellectual freedom and the involvement of the civil society in the drafting of policies), its strict refusal to allow a relaxation of the media environment with regards to the version of the discourse on the 'national brand' that reaches the readers, and the problematic behavior of the Party-state when faced with major crisis moments raise significant questions for the foreign public concerning the demarcation line between classic propaganda and public diplomacy (Rawnsley, 2012, 2015). This hypothesis could subsequently be supported through the Pew Research Center's Summer 2020 Global Attitudes survey which has revealed that a median of 73% of developed nations' population have an unfavorable opinion of China (Silver, Devlin and Huang, 2020b) in spite of the Chinese government's spending on foreign affairs increasing two-thirds from the end of the Hu-Wen administration to the end of Xi Jinping's first presidential term (Herrmann and Mokry, 2018).

The increasing preoccupation of the Party-state to strengthen the Chinese public diplomacy efforts in the recent years can be explained as determined by a significant concern that soon the prevailing sentiment among foreign audiences with regards to China could be fear, as the country's economic and military capabilities continue to increase. In turn, the disproportionate interest shown by the international public towards China's economic growth and military power as opposed to its cultural values and assets could lead to the emergence of security

dilemmas which are sure to constrain the process of foreign policy drafting in a manner that will eventually damage China's core interests. Therefore, the Party-state feels compelled to disseminate its own carefully created image of the Self around the world in the attempt to prevent other foreign actors from advertising their version of China's position in the international system, which might be detrimental to the Party's well-being (Edney, 2014). Moreover, previous research on the relation between global media and the Chinese public diplomacy draws on the hypothesis according to which although China has eagerly attempted to progressively reshape its depiction in Western media from predominantly negative towards neutral and eventually positive (Gao, Ingram and Kee, 2016), in the present context of a world affected by a major public health crisis and susceptible to an ensuing economic crisis, it currently finds itself trapped in a 'narrative battle' with the United States and struggling to avoid being subjected to a particular type of 'politics of blaming' (Jaworsky and Qiaoan, 2020).

In order to counteract the damaging effects of the current 'blame game' (Zhao, 2020a), the Party-state concentrates on strategical communication as the most vital component of public diplomacy efforts (Nye, 2004). The process of strategical communication of a state's official message entails engaging with foreign audiences and observing their opinions and preferences to later integrate them into foreign policy strategies, possessing the capability to address essential issues through a wider range of approaches and maintaining credibility through the employment of multiple channels rather than a single state-sanctioned mechanism in the dissemination of the message (Cull, 2010). In order for strategical communication to materialize in an effective way, the political actors' most preferred means is represented by the mass media, due to its capacity to "shape public opinion by connecting events occurring in the world with the images of these events in people's minds" (Wang, 2020d, p.15).

2.2. The connection between the mass-media and China's public diplomacy strategy

When describing the connection between public diplomacy efforts and the mass media, Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle (2014, p.14) argue that "the projection of strategic narratives in the context of the new media ecology presents significant opportunities and challenges for actors", a situation which the Chinese Party-state proved impressively capable to benefit from.

The relationship between the Chinese party-state and the media has generally been defined by an increased degree of intricacy, since the regime “regards them with schizophrenic vision, both as potential threats to and as necessary tools for their continuing survival in the interconnected world” (Repnikova, 2017, p.7). In the case of domestic media, the authorities and the Chinese journalists are described as interacting under the parameters of “a fluid, state-dominated partnership characterized by guarded improvisation resulting in an analytical dichotomy of control versus resistance” (Repnikova, 2017, p.9), as the Party-state still presides over the contents of the media and uses this subordination to exercise more freedom in the drafting of pragmatic foreign policy even with regards to delicate issues (Shirk, 2011; Weber and Fan, 2016). However, the advance of a new media ecology has led to the emergence of “an interactive and more symbiotic relationship between the media and the foreign policy-making process” (Wang and Wang, 2014, p.216), with media sources now playing a direct and active role in informing the drafting of policies through agenda-setting. Consequently, foreign media channels’ representatives in China are often under the close supervision of the Party-state, that seeks to influence the manner in which they depict China on the international stage. Moreover, they are pressured to follow a specific government-dictated line especially when reporting on sensitive issues and are constantly subjected “to official and unofficial restrictions which are designed to discourage them from filling in too many critical news articles” (Edney, 2014, p.81).

A crucial asset in the Party-state’s public diplomacy “arsenal” is represented by the English-language media outlets under the direct auspices of its various bodies, which form “the mechanism through which the Party-state articulates a discourse internationally” (Edney, 2014, p.79), as they are published in print both within the country and overseas, as well as online, and therefore reach larger audiences. These outlets were created due to the need for China’s media industry to become more innovative and competitive on the world stage and to appeal to larger foreign audiences (Shirk, 2011). Moreover, to help them swiftly gain credibility and popularity “the government agreed to separate state ownership of the media from its daily operations, giving media organizations greater freedom” (Wang, 2011a, p.45). However, editors still have to pay close attention not to challenge the government’s discourse and from the interaction between the market’s demands and the control of the Party emerged “a type of mass media which stirs up nationalist sentiments that feed back into the foreign policy process in a kind of echo chamber” (Shirk, 2011, p.226). The two major outlets which constitute the points of interest for the current thesis are the *China Daily* (as the most popular online Chinese

newspaper published in English and one of the state's principal instruments of public diplomacy, managed by the Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party) and the *Global Times* (as the subsidiary of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party's official newspaper *People's Daily* dedicated to covering international relations and foreign policy-related issues).

In the case of international media outlets, they are considered “a key target of the Party-state efforts to articulate an official discourse and suppress threatening discourses” (Edney, 2014, p.81) and serve as a field in which the authorities are willing to invest large sums in order to be able to directly reach the foreign public through marketing and advertisement campaigns. The most explicit example of this type of behavior relates to the ‘China Watch’ advertorial supplement, whose publication in the print and online versions of reputable Western newspapers (especially in the most circulated American newspapers) was paid by *China Daily* and featured news articles written to specifically fit the preferences of the American audiences. The rationale behind the Party-state's efforts to influence the content of the international media channels is represented by the perception also shared by certain segments of the Chinese public that “Western media is misleading foreign audiences about China through reporting and commentary that is either unintentionally biased or deliberately distorted” (Edney, 2014, p.84) and, therefore, there is a need for the authorities to disseminate an officially sanctioned discourse.

Regarding China's relationship with media channels in the United States in particular, there is a growing number of voices claiming that although the Party-state does not hold unmediated influence over the manner in which China is depicted in articles from American newspapers, the fact that newspapers are generally controlled by entertainment-media corporations which have close ties with Chinese entities or rely on the Chinese market for obtaining substantial profit has a major impact on China's portrayal in the media, and thus “China can leverage U.S. media reports as part of its effort to downplay its failures and promote its ‘expertise’ to help other afflicted nations – a soft power win” (Durso, 2020).

The depiction of China in the contemporary American media can be described as closely matching the general consensus among the American audiences that the Sino-US relationship represents the most significant international relationship of the 21st century and the manner in which the two countries relate to each other influences the behavior of all the other actors on

the stage of international affairs and affects the world order. The American newspapers' most preferred topics of coverage lean more towards the economic growth of China, its bustling business environment and impressive technological development, and less towards stories focused on the cultural dimension (Wang, 2020d). Moreover, the media often reports on situations regarding human rights abuses and crackdowns on the civil society, as well as on China increasing its military capacities in light of various territorial disputes, which in turn intensifies people's fear of China overtaking the United States as the next global superpower and feeds into the so-called 'China threat theory' (Broomfield, 2003; Callahan, 2005; Wang, 2020d). Therefore, although the American public's perception of China has been constantly shifting since the days of the Cold War, most recently the negative views have reached historic highs, with the share of Americans having an unfavorable perception of China reaching a total of 66% of the total adult population (Silver, Devlin and Huang, 2020a).

2.3. Finding the literature gap and contribution to research

Within international relations studies, the topics of 'soft power' and 'public diplomacy' have been extensively researched from a multitude of distinct perspectives, with China's soft power strategy receiving an understandably significant amount of attention from specialists given the contemporary shifts on the stage of global politics. The existing academic literature regarding China's public diplomacy efforts is mainly focusing on defining and explaining the features of the 'nation brand', as well as on assessing the degree of effectiveness of these efforts in positively influencing the global public opinion (Wang, 2008; d'Hooghe, 2011; Wang, 2011b; Rawnsley, 2012; Hall and Smith, 2013; Blanchard and Lu, 2019). Furthermore, some scholars attempt to demonstrate that the messages disseminated by China to the international audiences resemble more the lines of a propaganda strategy rather than those of a public diplomacy one (Edney, 2014; Shambaugh, 2015). Nonetheless, research on the topic of 'strategic narratives' as one of the most relevant and innovative manifestations of soft power seems to be still in its early stages.

With regards to inquiry on the relationship between the Party-state and the mass media, there are a number of valuable studies concerning the Party-state's approach of involving the media into the fulfillment of foreign policy goals. However, they often display a tendency to regard all media outlets as forming a monolithic entity that generally publishes the official vision on significant topics (Wang and Wang, 2014; Gao, Ingram and Kee, 2016; Repnikova, 2017;

Wang, 2020d). There is however a lack of studies dedicated to comparing and analyzing the differences between China's depictions in the domestic media outlets targeted towards foreign residents and English-speaking Chinese citizens and those present in the sections of English-language media sources sponsored by the Party-state.

Therefore, as previous academic inquiry on China's soft power strategy either focuses on other strands of public diplomacy efforts, or focuses only on the strategic narratives present in officially published discourses and policy papers, this research project analyzes the media as the main area of strategic narratives' projection and aims to treat the aforementioned depictions of China from the perspective of conscious public diplomacy efforts, as well as discuss and assess them according to the defining features of the theoretical framework of strategical narratives. The current thesis will thus attempt to contribute to the filling in of the identified gap in literature through providing viable answers to the main research question, namely 'What are the main themes and sub-themes composing the strategic narratives deployed by the Chinese government in newspapers targeted towards English-speaking foreign audiences in the period between 2018 and 2020?', as well as to its ensuing sub-questions, with the ultimate purpose of bringing light to the manner in which China seeks to attract foreign audiences to support its strategical objectives.

3. Theoretical framework: Soft power, public diplomacy and strategic narratives

This chapter offers an overview of the theoretical framework upon which the design of the research question relies, and which guides the ensuing analysis. Thus, firstly the concepts of ‘soft power’ and ‘public diplomacy’ that form the new reality in international relations will be introduced. Consequently, the fundamental features of ‘strategic narratives’ as the central theoretical concept of the thesis and their application in the examination of the data will be discussed.

3.1. ‘Soft power’ and ‘Public diplomacy’ as the new reality in international relations

Coined theoretically in the dying days of the Cold War by political scientist Joseph Nye but gaining momentum in the early 2000s, the notion of ‘soft power’ can be explained as “the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment” (Nye, 2008, p.94). In the process of assessing the significance of soft power in the sphere of global politics and the need for political actors to invest in the creation of a complex array of soft power assets, the emphasis is placed on the states’ strategy to create and promote a ‘national brand’, that constitutes a model which other states are willing to emulate in order to enjoy the same level of success (Nye, 1995, 2004).

In the field of international relations, soft power is regarded as complementary to hard power capacities. Together they form a state’s smart power strategy, relying on the balance between military capabilities and the attractiveness of one’s own national culture and values for foreign audiences. Furthermore, the East Asian states view soft power as “a form of national power that is based on ideational and cultural attractiveness, which is intentionally or unintentionally realized by actors in international relations to achieve strategic imperatives” (Lee, 2011, p.11). As soft power represents a multifaceted concept, simultaneously understood as an aptitude to co-opt the foreign public and shape its preferences through attraction, a significant source of influence over the behavior of other political entities and a type of persuasion derived from the use of valid arguments (Nye, 2008), there are a variety of material means through which soft power is constructed in reality. Although scholars most often emphasize the cultural component of soft power, as cultural practices create meaning for a specific society, the dimensions of adequate political values and ideas, effective educational and socioeconomic

systems and legitimate national and foreign policies are also vital in the process of building a country's international reputation, as the state does not represent a monolithic producer and supervisor of soft power assets, but rather shares its responsibilities with other non-governmental actors (Nye, 2008; Lee, 2011).

After identifying potential soft power resources, nations strive to capitalize on them through the employment of 'public diplomacy' as a sophisticated tool of strategic communication, whose primary purpose "to communicate with and attract the publics of other countries, rather than merely their governments" (Nye, 2008, p.95) differentiates it from conventional diplomacy. As an instrument of statesmanship, public diplomacy highlights the particular culture, values and policies of a state, incorporates elements of both strategic communication (through information campaigns, public relations and the management of media) and cultural diplomacy (through scholarships, conferences and academic exchanges,), and intends to negotiate with the foreign public in order to gain its support in the promotion of certain advantageous policy decisions on the stage of world politics (Nye, 2008; Hall and Smith, 2013). Furthermore, as the final goals of foreign policy strategies are shaped in accordance with each state's core interests, public diplomacy efforts can serve as "an advocacy instrument for the provision of global public goods, aimed at furthering regional cohesion, helping maximize narrowly defined national interests, or even fanning nationalist sentiments at home as a way of putting tense bilateral relations under added pressure" (Melissen, 2015, p.4).

At the dawn of a new millennium, the Asian states shifted away from their historical preference for traditional diplomacy, which mainly relies on bilateral partnerships and is characterized by a considerable degree of skepticism with regards to the 'good intentions' of foreign actors (Sohn, 2015), and started investing considerably larger sums to identify soft power assets capable of co-opting foreign audiences' support for their causes. This departure from the previous status of mere targets of the Western superpowers' efforts to gain more influence in the international system has inevitably generated substantial changes in the Asian nations' approach to foreign policy. Their conventional 'modus operandi' has been replaced by a tendency to emphasize the urgent need for foreign policy strategies to find an equilibrium between increasing hard power capacities and attracting foreign audiences' sympathy through the creation of a base of national soft power assets, which should "range from historical figures and artistic treasures to unusual flora and fauna" (Hall and Smith, 2013, p.3). While the Asian countries have mainly received greater attention on the stage of global politics due to their

remarkable economic development, nowadays they are recognized for their public diplomacy efforts, aiming to gain legitimacy for their own strategies of development and to promote themselves as models worthy of emulation. Subsequently, their actions can be described as following the structure of public diplomacy's core areas, namely listening to the foreign public's opinions and incorporating them into the policy-making process, advocating for the benefits resulting from their specific foreign policies' implementation, resorting to cultural and exchange diplomacy and paying greater attention to disseminate their message to the international broadcasters (Cull, 2010; Shambaugh, 2015).

3.2. 'Strategic narratives' as a defining feature of the current dynamics of international affairs

One of the most recent major developments in the field of international relations is represented by the idea of 'narrative integration' into "broader theoretical arguments about structure, agency and the construction of order in the international system" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2014, p.1). In a general sense, narratives represent "frameworks that allow humans to connect apparently unconnected phenomena around some causal transformation" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2014, p.7), the final purpose of this linking process being to assign a single meaning to actors, plot, time and space as elements comprising the structure of a specific whole.

By extending the fundamental interpretation of narratives to fit into and suit the requirements of the framework of global affairs, international relations specialists designed the theoretical concept of 'strategic narratives', which can be defined as narratives created by powerful political stakeholders, with clear diplomatic preoccupations and objectives and capable of explaining the formation, projection, diffusion and reception of ideas by foreign audiences (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2014). These narratives aim to "explain the world and set constraints on the imaginable and actionable" (Roselle, Miskimmon and O'Loughlin, 2014, p.76), integrate the categories of actors, spatial and temporal settings, conflict and suggested resolution as their structural components with the final goal of clearly depicting their initiators' interests, as well as the manner in which they intend to pursue them (Roselle, Miskimmon and O'Loughlin, 2014). Furthermore, 'strategic narratives' are being deemed as the most concrete manifestation of soft power in the 21st century, and their study primarily focuses on the analysis

of public diplomacy efforts' influence over the state of international affairs as deriving from the ability to create consensus over shared meanings.

As it was earlier mentioned, strategic narratives consist of four component parts:

1. *Actors*: In the construction of strategic narratives, actors represent “those who have agency and are depicted as important to the shaping of the narrative’s meaning” (Roselle, Miskimmon and O’Loughlin, 2014, p.75). They can be divided into state actors and non-state actors (such as international institutions, multinational corporations or NGOs), are endowed with specific objectives, features and behaviors and are particularly concerned with the process of identity construction (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle, 2014). The narratives employed in the English-language media sources controlled by the Party-State are centered around state actors, with the main actors being represented by China (whose identity is often associated with the narrative of ‘rising power’ in the articles) and the United States (whose identity is primarily defined in juxtaposition to China to highlight the striking contrast between the behavior and actions of the two states) while other states are portrayed either as willing to cooperate with or hostile towards China, although non-state actors such as the World Health Organization or the World Trade Organization are also briefly mentioned.

2. *Setting/ environment/ space*: In the field of international relations, a narrative’s setting refers to “how the international system is depicted and how it works”(Roselle, Miskimmon and O’Loughlin, 2014, p.76). The choice of placing actors in a particular setting is critical as there is a tight relationship of interdependence between these two components of a narrative, with one directly affecting and influencing the other, due to the fact that the stage on which the actors’ actions take place “does not represent a neutral space” (Roselle, Miskimmon and O’Loughlin, 2014, p.76). The news pieces portray the current international system as a unipolar system dominated by the United States but challenged by China’s peaceful rise to the status of great global power, whose impact is predicted to eventually lead to a new global order based on a multipolar distribution of power.

3. *Conflict or action*: This category is closely related to the temporal dimension of strategic narratives (which are designed as to address the past, the present and the future) as it depicts the actions undertaken by the actors, as well as the subsequent reactions and interactions. Moreover, it highlights how the actors perceive potential dangers and threats and further intend

to cope with them (Roselle, Miskimmon and O’Loughlin, 2014). The strategic narratives identified in the data sources focus on the historically complicated relationship between China and the United States, the attempts to reach a common ground and to cooperate in the circumstances of mutual benefits, China’s relations with the rest of the world and the creation of new partnerships excluding the US, as well as a comparison between the United States and China’s strategies of managing the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. *Resolution or suggested resolution*: The final component of narratives is concerned with “presenting the needed action to resolve a disruption to the status quo” (Roselle, Miskimmon and O’Loughlin, 2014, p.76) and defines the limits of the possible in terms of a conflict’s resolution. In the context of the current research project’s interest, the characteristics of the already-established ‘rising China’ narrative are mostly present, with the media outlets warning of a “potential unhappy ending, if the US and China view each other as zero-sum antagonists and eventually enemies” (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle, 2014, p.144). However, the avoidance of a direct confrontation and the de-escalation of the tensions through bilateral talks, people-to-people collaborations and mutually rewarding cooperation are also highly suggested by the authors. If the ‘Trade War’ would end with the decoupling of the two countries, the articles advocate for a turn towards other rising powers as potential major partners for China and for the adoption of a new strategy of world development.

The strategic narratives influencing contemporary global politics operate on different but interdependent levels, and are thus divided in three categories, namely ‘System Narratives’, ‘Identity Narratives’ and ‘Issue Narratives’ (Roselle, Miskimmon and O’Loughlin, 2014). Firstly, International System Narratives “describe how the world is structured, who the players are, and how it works” (Roselle, Miskimmon and O’Loughlin, 2014, p.76) and attribute precise roles to the specific actors integrated into the world system. The most prominent system narrative promoted by the Party-state regards China’s peaceful rise. Secondly, National or Identity Narratives “set out what the story of the state or nation is” (Roselle, Miskimmon and O’Loughlin, 2014, p.76) and define what are the key interests, values and principles which guide states’ behavior and actions. Some examples of identity narratives are China as a global leader in various fields and promoter of multilateral cooperation or the US as its selfish and unreasonable opponent. Thirdly, Issue Narratives “set governmental actions in a context, with an explanation of who the important actors are, what the conflict or issue is, and how a particular course of action will resolve the underlying issue” (Roselle, Miskimmon and

O'Loughlin, 2014, p.76) and explain the need for certain policies and their positive impact. The issue narratives which the thesis focuses on are the escalation of the tensions between China and the United States and China's readiness and willingness to commit to the responsibilities specific to the role of "responsible major global player" (People's Daily, 2020). Furthermore, the projection of particular strategic narratives at one level affects the other levels as well and places limitation on the level of agency involved in the drafting of future policies. The data analysis section of the thesis will follow this structure of narrative levels to assess the manner in which China "uses communication strategies, persuasion and influence to affect international affairs" (Roselle, Miskimmon and O'Loughlin, 2014, p.77).

Scholars apply the theory of 'strategic narratives' in the analysis of national states' foreign policy strategies to explain the evolution towards a distinct stage in the process of designing and maintaining the world order, in which the reliance on hard power capacities is no longer the main focal point in the states' attempt to establish themselves as influent actors in the realm of global politics. Therefore, numerous political actors resort to strategic narratives as an optimal instrument "to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors and to extend their influence, manage expectations and change the discursive environment in which they operate" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2014, p.3). This desire to reshape the international order to fit the involved actor's own perception of its conception, purpose and utility is manifested through the propagation in the media of some fundamental binaries (such as good-evil, altruistic-selfish, or democratic-authoritarian) in accordance with which the respective actor is placed in the favorable position. Thus, the potential order emerging from these narratives has a decisive impact on the drafting of further foreign policies (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2014).

Finally, the communication process of strategic narratives is understood as composed of the *formation*, *projection* and *reception* stages (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2014). The current thesis focuses on the formation and projection dimensions of strategic narratives to analyze the manner in which the Chinese Party-state shapes China's image of the Self and then targets it towards foreign audiences with the long-term goals of "cultivating a lasting positive perception of itself" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2014, p.12), and gaining legitimacy at the international level for the promotion of its own foreign policies. The analysis operates with the three architectural levels of strategic narratives, namely the 'Issue', 'Identity' and 'System' Narratives, to depict how consensus is created over China's mature and tactful

approach of international relations, which matches its established identity of ‘peaceful rising power’ that advocates for the preeminence of a world order based on the principles of equity, multilateralism, and international cooperation. Therefore, as it is explained in the context of the thesis’s focus, the purpose of strategic narratives’ employment in China’s public diplomacy strategy can be described both as “designed to counter political backlash and to reveal misconceptions about China” (Rahman, 2020, p.2), as well as aiming to construct a type of world order centered around China as a considerably more committed, responsible and fair alternative to the United States’ model of global superpower.

4. Methodological approach

The following chapter outlines the characteristics of the methodological approach chosen for the thesis, by explaining the composition of the data set, the underlying assumptions supporting the data selection stage, the manner in which the process of data collection unfolded, as well as the method through which the resulting data was analyzed. Therefore, this section will first summarize the main research question and its deriving sub-questions, then explain the underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions of the thesis. Afterwards, the data collection and analysis method will be introduced and critically discussed. Finally, a reflection on the issues of the researcher's reflexivity, positionality and ethical considerations will be presented.

4.1. Research question

The research question of the thesis can be summarized as “What are the main themes and sub-themes composing the strategic narratives deployed by the Chinese government in newspapers targeted towards English-speaking foreign audiences in the period between 2018 and 2020?”, its formulation being primarily based on knowledge drawn from Alan Bryman's work on social research methods. The aforementioned question is complemented by a set of ensuing sub-questions, designed to expand on its implications through correlation with the principal data sources. These secondary questions are:

- “How do the selected depictions of China fit into the framework of the three component categories of strategic narratives?”
- “What are the differences between the strategic narratives targeted towards American media outlets and those aimed towards the audience of the English-language newspapers subordinated to the Chinese Communist Party?”

4.2. Ontological and epistemological positioning

The essential ontological and epistemological assumptions upon which the thesis is constructed can be derived from the choice for the thesis to employ a deductive approach and mainly use the original theoretical concepts of “soft power”, “public diplomacy” and “strategic narratives”, that can be primarily linked to the grand theory of constructivism applied to the field of international relations and which emphasizes “the importance of normative as well as material structures on the role of identity in shaping political action and on the mutually

constitutive relationship between agents and structures” (Burchill and Linklater, 2013, p.140). The ontological positioning refers to “the nature of reality and its characteristics” (Creswell, 2013, p.35) and attempts to reveal “whether social entities can and should be considered objective entities that have a reality external to social actors, or whether they can and should be considered social constructions built up from the perceptions and actions of social actors” (Bryman, 2016, p.32). Through this definition, Allan Bryman outlines the two possible ontological directions of research, namely objectivism and social constructivism. I do not consider objectivism as a viable ontological position for this thesis, as it proposes a perspective of the social world as composed of standard predetermined phenomena, independent of the actions of social actors (Bryman, 2016). By contrast, social constructivism argues that the social world is constantly shaped and reshaped by outside forces through the power of ideas and its categories are created through the interaction of the various social actors with the purpose of generating “subjective meanings which are negotiated socially and historically” (Creswell, 2013, p.39). Subsequently, the collected empirical data is expected to depict different versions of China as a single factual construct, each subjected to the agency of distinct actors and serving particular purposes.

With regards to the epistemological positioning, that can be explained as “what is (or should be) regarded as acceptable knowledge in a discipline” (Bryman, 2016, p.27), the thesis relies on an interpretivist framework of analysis, which requires for a research strategy that “respects the differences between people and the objects of the natural sciences and therefore requires the social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social action” (Bryman, 2016, p.30). Furthermore, this framework can be considered highly compatible with the thesis’s predominant theoretical conceptualization of ‘strategic narratives’. By employing an interpretivist stance, the thesis aims to demonstrate that the favorable narratives projected in the English-language media outlets cannot be considered a completely faithful representation of an objective reality but are rather components of a carefully constructed strategic discourse.

4.3. Data collection method

Given that the thesis’s aim is to analyze the preeminent strategic narratives promoted by the Chinese authorities in English-language newspapers and the manner in which distinct messages are targeted at different types of media outlets, this research project will rely on the usage of a deductive qualitative research design whose primary method is qualitative content analysis of

published documents, as it places “an emphasis on allowing categories to emerge out of data and on recognizing the significance for understanding meaning in the context in which an item being analyzed (and the categories derived from it) appeared” (Bryman, 2016, p.291). These documents are understood in social sciences research as “materials that can be read, have not been produced specifically for the purpose of research, are preserved so that they become available for analysis and are relevant to the concerns of the social researcher” (Bryman, 2016, p.543). In the context of the present research project, relevant articles in the English-language from prestigious American and Chinese media outlets will be contextualized in order to identify the main themes and sub-themes employed in constructing strategic narratives to depict China in a peculiar manner, as the development of a set of key themes represents a vital step in the process of strategic communication that enables actors to endorse particular policies (Nye, 2004). Therefore, the main sources from which representative data will be extracted are represented by published documents in the form of mass media outputs.

As the thesis considers the aforementioned type of articles a public diplomacy endeavor specifically targeted towards the international public, I have decided to analyze a textual body comprised of evocative pieces written only in English and published online, given their greater accessibility degree and them enjoying the attention of the targeted audience which constitutes the subject of this study. In order to properly build a corpus of newspaper articles suitable for the ensuing analysis process of the narratives aimed towards the foreign readers of the state-supported Chinese media outlets, the criterion of representativity as official mouthpieces of the Chinese Communist Party (as explained earlier in the *Literature Review* chapter) prevailed. Thus, the online versions of the *China Daily* and the *Global Times* were ultimately chosen.

With regards to the data sources belonging to the Western media, the initial criterion of selection of relevant American newspapers was related to their editorial board’s political stance. Therefore, since the main data sources extracted from the Western media were intended to be highly representative for the strategic narratives targeted towards audiences subscribing to the principal two opposite polar positions of the political spectrum, the ‘China Watch’ sections of the online editions of the liberal newspaper *The New York Times* and the conservative newspaper *The Wall Street Journal* were considered. However, after several major newspapers were accused in late 2020 of disseminating pro-Beijing propaganda through the ‘China Watch’ supplement, the majority decided to delete their online archive of inserts paid by China Daily, with only *The Wall Street Journal* archive remaining available and

becoming the main source of data to be taken in consideration in the analysis of the types of narratives specifically designed for the American newspapers.

Initially, a significant challenge was related to establishing an appropriate timeframe for the selection of representative newspaper articles. After preliminary reflections on several potential timespans, I have decided to focus on the period between the onset of the ‘Trade War’ between China and the United States in the summer of 2018 and the final period of the Trump administration in late 2020, as it constitutes the context of the exacerbation of the economic, diplomatic and COVID-19 pandemic-related tensions between China and the United States (as contenders for the role of major global superpower) and represents one of the most productive stages in terms of the publishing of China-related articles.

To collect the necessary data, the advanced search function of the selected newspapers’ online versions was used. In order to find suitable articles related to the topics of interest belonging to the timespan between 2018 and 2020, text queries were realized, containing phrases such as ‘COVID-19’, ‘China’s relationship with the United States’, ‘diplomatic tensions’, ‘economic growth’, ‘economic recovery’, ‘efforts to fight the pandemic’, ‘intellectual property’, ‘tariffs’, ‘trade agreement’ or ‘trade dispute’. The key words were selected after firstly conducting an overview of the articles published in the chosen news outlets in the designated timespan and then identifying the fight against the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the frictions caused by the ‘Trade War’ and the diplomatic interventions for the de-escalation of the situation as the preferred topics of interest. In the end, the inquiry resulted in the selection of a total of 178 articles deemed as relevant, out of which 58 articles were selected from the *China Daily*, 52 from the *Global Times* and 68 were selected from the *Wall Street Journal’s* ‘China Watch’ section¹.

In the ensuing stage of the research, the articles underwent a process of coding to reveal the most significant themes and sub-themes which can be considered as constituting strategic narratives. The initial primary categories employed were ‘the COVID-19 pandemic’, ‘China’s relations with the world’, ‘Diplomatic tensions’ and, respectively, ‘the Trade War’, with other hierarchically secondary codes later emerging in the actual coding process. Furthermore, in the

¹ Due to space constraints, a comprehensive list of the articles selected from the three media sources was not included in the final version of the thesis but can be provided upon request.

data analysis stage, qualitative content analysis assisted by the NVivo software has been selected as the most suitable method of interpretation of the data as it is capable of “bringing out aspects of the set of findings, and, through the employment of a more fine-grained analysis, allowing a greater sensitivity to the nature and content of specific themes” (Bryman, 2016, p.553).

4.4. Ethical considerations, limitations and reflexivity

While undergoing inquiry in the field of social sciences, researchers should actively observe the issues of positionality and reflexivity, process which can be defined as “reflecting on how one is inserted in grids of power relations and how that influences methods, interpretations, and knowledge production” (Sultana, 2007, p.376). In what concerns the fulfillment of this required researcher’s reflection, the thesis strove to demonstrate awareness regarding the inherent subjectivity of the employed interpretivist epistemology and emphasize the subjective character of the newspaper articles analyzed, which depict specifically constructed narratives regarding China and its efforts to assert itself as a global superpower. Doing social research from the position of an outsider in concern with both the Chinese state’s strategies of public diplomacy and the public perception of the American and other foreign audiences with regards to these endeavors, as well as taking into consideration the influences exercised by my European social and cultural background over the research process, another major challenge can also be considered to be capturing the subtle nuances integrated in the discourses projected through the selected newspaper articles.

With regards to the ethical considerations distinguished by Bryman (2016), as the current research project does not involve human participants, compliance to the primary principles of “no harm to participants, lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy and deception” (Bryman, 2016, p.135) can be guaranteed. Moreover, since the articles employed represent primary sources in English, the hazard of misinterpretation due to translation errors can be successfully avoided.

5. Data analysis

The following section summarizes the empirical findings derived from the inquiry, as guided by the research question and sub-questions, and follows the major principles of the chosen theoretical framework to create an appropriate interpretation of the data collected from the selected media sources. Through the employment of a NVivo-assisted process of coding (which underpins qualitative content analysis), the chosen body of data was subjected to a textual sectioning whose purpose resided in the identification and retrieval of multiple themes and sub-themes of interest for the research. Therefore, this chapter will first provide an overview of the data sources' defining characteristics illustrated through some of the most emblematic quotes highlighting the specific themes and sub-themes that emerged during coding. It was particularly visible that the newspaper pieces depicting China encompassed both similar and distinct features with concern to the prevailing tone of the article, the focus on particular topics of interest for a specific audience and the manner of portrayal of significant actors' actions in the context of identic events, based on the criterion of their publication in either the *China Daily*, the *Global Times* or the 'China Watch' section of the *Wall Street Journal*, respectively. Consequently, the aforementioned themes and sub-themes will be discussed and analyzed through correlation with the three structural levels of 'strategic narratives' as the theoretical framework underpinning the current thesis.

5.1. The careful crafting of good reputation: The peculiarities of English-language mass media's coverage of China-related topics

5.1.1. *The China Daily*

As the major national daily newspaper in English, published under the direct supervision of the Chinese Communist Party' Publicity Department and possessing multiple printed editions (targeted towards either the worldwide public or directly intended for the foreign individuals residing in China), the *China Daily* is generally regarded by political scientists as "the mouthpiece of the Chinese Party-state" (Edney, 2014, p.79), strictly following the line dictated by the Party in presenting officially sanctioned views on significant events. This aspect is clearly reflected in the online version of the newspaper, which contains an impressive number of articles reporting on the same topic and often lacking a clearly specified authorship. Moreover, the majority of the articles discuss the key themes of 'the condemnation of the

ideological zero-sum competition’, ‘the desire for peace, but doubled by a preparedness to retaliate’ and ‘the country’s opening up to the outside world’, with the news pieces usually displaying similar headlines and presenting barely minor differences in their textual body, as their fundamental purpose can be assessed as reinforcing the formal discourse articulated by the Chinese media outlets to counter foreign challenges:

“China can protect its interests even if a trade war breaks out” (China Daily Editorial Board, 2018a)

“China has plenty of ammunition to fight its corner in trade war” (China Daily Editorial Board, 2018b)

An important common thread that can be seen as linking the majority of the articles extracted from the *China Daily* is their tendency to either exhaustively depict or at least refer to the sinuous relationship between modern China and the United States by resorting to an illustrative antithesis. The relationship is evaluated in the framework of the dichotomy between China’s conciliatory attitude and desire to cooperate with the US in the benefit of a greater good and the United States’ defensive attitude and misunderstanding of the two countries’ concrete degree of interdependence and China’s well-intentioned proposal to surpass the inherent ideological differences between countries with very distinct political, economic and social circumstances in order to solve the disputes only through bilateral talks. Moreover, the Trump administration’s choice of treating the increasingly worrisome commercial frictions in the simplistic manner of a ‘zero-sum game’, beneficial only for the United States, but with potentially disastrous consequences for the global economy, is often sanctioned:

“However, rather than accepting that trade is beneficial to all parties concerned, the Trump administration seems to believe that trade is a zero-sum competition in which the US should be the only winner. The international community’s concerns over the US’ reckless and dangerous policies and actions highlight how important the world’s two largest economies are to global trade” (China Daily Editorial Board, 2018a).

“The approach of the Trump administration therefore is simplistic, purely transactional, and reveals a serious lack of understanding of both modern-day China, and of the significant benefits that global trade and China’s accession to the World Trade Organization has brought to the US” (Scheltinga, 2018).

Another significant feature which can be distinguished in the most news pieces selected for analysis regards the preference for an overtly assertive tone in depicting China's behavior and actions with concern to potential damages to its own national interests, generated by foreign hostile actors and particularly in the case of its interaction with the United States in the context of the ongoing 'Trade War'. The commercial conflict is described as having been provoked by the United States to promote its selfish interests, but not representing "a tipping point in the Sino-US relationship" (Zhao, 2018) as long as diplomacy efforts remain strong, since "China has always been committed to resolving disputes through dialogue and consultation" (China Daily Editorial Board, 2019). However, while emphasizing China's pacifist attitude, predilection for a diplomatic approach to the disputes and willingness to negotiate under equitable conditions when dealing with the vast number of obstacles posed by the US to the country's economic growth and development, the newspaper pieces resolutely affirm that, when faced with severe aggressions coming from Washington, the authorities in Beijing do not hesitate to retaliate:

"China has said it will not "fire the first shot" in a trade battle with the US. However, if the US goes ahead with the tariff hike, China will be forced to fight back to defend the core interests of the nation and the interests of the people" (Zhong, Xiaojin and Jing, 2018).

At last, in contrast with the selfishness and protectionism defining the United States, which does not respect the rules and regulations of major international institutions such as the World Trade Organization or manifest interest for the collateral damage produced by this attitude, China is portrayed as a defender of multilateralism and global cooperation under mutually beneficial conditions. The articles highlight the efforts made by the Chinese government to contribute to global development, open up the Chinese markets to foreign investments, boost the economic competitiveness, enhance the number of policies implemented in the field of intellectual rights protection and improve the country's technological attractiveness. In this manner, the narratives present in the *China Daily* articles can be understood as mainly targeted towards the outside world and its component social actors (others than the United States) and attempting to tilt the balance of foreign audiences' positive opinion regarding the two current global economic superpowers in favor of China:

"The United States has become the world's biggest destabilizing factor. This makes it absolutely necessary for all the countries that want to maintain the multilateral

international trading system to cooperate, in order to safeguard their interests that are being threatened by the US' protectionist moves” (China Daily Editorial Board, 2018d).

“China is committed to further opening up its economy to the outside world... and its emphasis on neutral competition demonstrates it believes in fair conduct of business” (Shen, 2018).

5.1.2. *The Global Times*

Directly controlled by the *People's Daily* as the Chinese Communist Party's flagship newspaper, the English version of the *Global Times* daily newspaper represents China's official foreign affairs newspaper, which mainly deals with topics related to the Sino-US relationship and is targeted towards both young, educated and wealthy Chinese citizens interested in global affairs, as well as to foreign audiences. The newspaper generally employs an overly nationalistic and melodramatic manner of reporting, as it can be deduced from the presence of key themes such as ‘the importance of patriotism and the need for a change in the Chinese evaluation standards’, ‘hostility as the new normal in the Sino-US relationship’ or ‘the vaccine diplomacy fight’, fact for which is often reprimanded by Chinese officials and scholars due to growing concerns that “its sensational stories give foreign readers a bad impression of Chinese foreign policy ... as the editors seek to attract audiences by dramatizing international news events, exaggerating threats, and emphasizing conflict over cooperation” (Shirk, 2011, p.229). However, media scholars regard the *Global Times* as the most adequate example of the tactics used by the contemporary Chinese media, described as politically-controlled but also increasingly orientated towards commercial success, to “mobilize public opinion on foreign policy and then feed it back into the foreign policymaking process” (Shirk, 2011, p.227). This inclination towards zealous nationalism and cultural biases can easily be observed from the choice of headlines for the published news pieces:

“China's hard-won stability unshakable by national and global complexities” (Hu, 2020b)

“Western elites sly and silly to create distorted China narrative” (Ai, 2020)

“World should heed China's cures to global woes” (Wang, 2020c)

In constructing the image of the self, the *Global Times* distinguished itself from the other selected media channels through the manner in which it advocates for a substantial shift of the

standards according to which the Chinese people perceive themselves and the outside world, as well as for the endorsement of a more permissive, patriotic and supportive attitude in the Chinese citizens' approach in what concerns the evaluation process of their own country's contemporary circumstances and actions. The news pieces argue that although China is still in the process of peacefully developing itself and its people "need to be patient as China's rise is not a day's work" (Yang, 2020), the country is no longer in the position to be evaluated according to the criteria established by the Western countries and there are no plausible reasons for which China should be regarded as inferior to them, as it has achieved an impressive level of stability and became a model for other developing countries. Moreover, the articles emphasize that the majority of the population became more trusting of the Chinese government after it has proved capable of taking efficient measures when dealing with crisis situations, and that the individuals who still criticize China are greatly influenced by Western-fabricated distortions:

"Our previous evaluation standards were severely constrained by the West. But now it is obvious that China has the ability to do everything well. Gone is the era when the West could lecture China easily" (Global Times Editorial Board, 2020a).

"Half of respondents said they became more trusting of the Chinese government, so I don't understand why some Chinese people resist and badmouth our country as a whole... Some of their arguments are illusions made when they look up the West from a low point; some stem from Western anti-China forces' lame clichés about China" (Hu, 2020b).

Simultaneously, most of the articles extracted from the *Global Times* employ a significantly harsher tone with regard to the actions of the United States against China, claiming that its status as global hegemon determines the US to be "the thirstiest for the sense of security, so its guard against other countries has always been aggressive" (Wang, 2020b) and considering that the current tensions in the Sino-US relationship will prevail, as "no matter who sits in the Oval Office, policies will be adopted to suppress the emerging power" (Cui, 2020). The United States are firmly criticized for being keen "only on finding fault with China" (Global Times Editorial Board, 2020h) and constantly devising strategies to contain its development due to a "serious universal American hostility to China" (Sun, 2020), instead of taking active measures to improve the country's own living standards, eradicate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and successfully restart the domestic economy. Furthermore, some pieces claim that in the

endeavor to undermine China's progress, the United States constantly intervene in the internal affairs of other countries and try to manipulate them to denigrate China. As a result, the Chinese policymakers are encouraged to take a firmer stance against the American slander:

“The Trump administration works daily to comprehensively contain China ... If Joe Biden is elected, he will still regard China as a strategic rival and contain China's development” (Yang, 2020).

“Some countries, roped in by the US, have intensified their disputes with China” (Yang, 2020).

“The fundamental way for China to cope with the US strategic challenges is to empower itself. China must become a country the US cannot suppress or destabilize” (Global Times Editorial Board, 2020e).

A final interesting feature of the *Global Times* articles relates to the vital need for the widespread distribution and utilization of Chinese-manufactured vaccines in order to properly fight the COVID-19 pandemic across the world. China's commitment to a fair global distribution of vaccines to all countries in need, regardless of their economic situation, is greatly emphasized in contrast to the selfish practices of the United States in particular, which focus only on “deliberately distributing vaccines to reshape the attitude of Western countries and the world, trying to restore the so-called leadership it lost in the disease fight” (Global Times Editorial Board, 2020g):

“China's vaccines only consider the common interests of all humanity and must become one of the main forces in the near future so there is hope for the victory of humankind. The most important thing for humanity is to get through this immediate crisis. The positive role that Chinese vaccines can play and the contributions they can make are obvious to all” (Global Times Editorial Board, 2020f).

5.1.3. The ‘China Watch’ section of the *Wall Street Journal*

The *Wall Street Journal* represents one of the oldest daily newspapers in the US, focusing on business and with an editorial board leaning more towards the conservative side of the political specter (Reid and Reese, 2021). Its ‘China Watch’ section represents an advertorial supplement

“paid by *China Daily* and inserted into the print and online editions of American newspapers, which features news and opinions from the Chinese paper tailored to the American audience” (Edney, 2014, p.84), whose purpose is “to play an important role in explaining China to the world and ensuring that the country’s voice is heard” (Wang, 2020d, p.65). However, this type of cooperation between *China Daily* and the *Wall Street Journal* “has provoked criticism from journalism ethicists inside the United States” (Wang, 2020d, p.66) due to multiple accusations of American established newspapers publishing foreign propaganda. A significant feature differentiating the ‘China Watch’ section from the previously analyzed Chinese media sources is the preference for more neutral topics such as ‘the focus on mutual understanding’, ‘the importance of local officials and people-to-people collaboration’ or ‘the fragile equilibrium in the Trade War-related talks’, fact that can be noticed right from the titles of the articles, which tend to focus more on the crucial need for cooperation between China and the US:

“China, US Should Stand Together: Kentucky Governor” (Bevin, 2018)

“Substantial Progress Seen on Trade Talks” (Zhao, 2019)

“China and US Must Counter ‘Political Virus’” (Liu and Zhu, 2020)

“Top Two Economies Urged to Collaborate Amid Pandemic” (Zhao, 2020b)

The articles included in the ‘China Watch’ section shift the focus from the frictions defining the higher-level realm of the relationship between China and the United States, generally understood and assessed strictly in the framework of the ‘nation-state’ in the English-language newspapers published in China, towards the expansion and success of the ‘people-to-people’ type of collaboration, with a particular highlight on the importance of local American officials in explaining the mutual benefits resulting from the peaceful cooperation between the two countries. The governors and local authorities in multiple American states are portrayed as “unscathed by the Washington-Beijing impasse” (Zhao and Kong, 2019), highly supportive of warm relations and business partnerships and proactive in “ramping up critical exchange and cooperation at the sub-national level” (Zhao and Kong, 2019). Furthermore, the direct contact and friendship between people in the fields of education, culture and technological development are considered to be “the very foundation” (Dong, 2019) of the two states’ future relations:

“As we strengthen our sub-national relationships at the person-to-person and business-to-business level, we will develop deeper cultural respect and understanding for one another. Together, we must stand united for global peace and prosperity and together,

our futures will shine more brightly than ever! Matt Bevin, Governor of Kentucky” (Bevin, 2018).

“As far as Cincinnati Mayor John Cranley is concerned, he would like to have more Chinese companies represented in his city and is not deterred by the current trade skirmishes going on between China and the US.” (Zhou and Yuan, 2018).

Furthermore, another particular feature of the *Wall Street Journal's* ‘China Watch’ section is represented by the attempt of the editors to strike a fragile equilibrium between the number of articles which promote the improvement of the economic relations between China and the United States on the basis of calm and fruitful bilateral talks, and that of those which blame the US administration for the numerous stagnations of the trade negotiations due to its imprudent and ostentatious behavior. In the first category of news pieces, the substantial progress made by officials from both countries on “such specific issues as technology transfer, protection of intellectual property rights, non-tariff barriers, services industry, agriculture and exchange rates” (Zhao, 2019) is praised as a major step in reaching an agreement that would lead to the normalization of the interstate relations and prove beneficial for both China and the US. However, in the latter type of articles, the authors blame the United States and especially President Donald Trump for bringing great damages to the free trade system solely for immoral political purposes, bring to the readers’ attention the US reliance on the Chinese market for the export of American agricultural and high-technology manufacturing products, and issue veiled warnings of a complete economic decoupling as “Trump’s trade war may force China to look for alternative partners” (Chen, 2018b):

“A trade war would be immensely damaging to China, the U.S., and the world. Supply chains would be disrupted, factories would close, people would lose their jobs, and global financial markets would fall” (Chen, 2018c).

5.2. The employment of ‘strategic narratives’ in the English-language media outlets funded by the Chinese Party-state

As previously mentioned, the architecture of strategic narratives is comprised of three interlinked levels, namely ‘International System Narratives’ which depict the structure and composition of the world order, ‘Identity Narratives’ that outline the particularities defining a

specific state, and ‘Issue Narratives’ which justify governmental actions and explain the need for and the positive impact of the implementation of certain policies (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle, 2014), levels which will further be analyzed below.

5.2.1. System Narratives

The first organizational level of strategic narratives is comprised of ‘System Narratives’ which portray “the nature of the structure of international affairs, a structure that emerges and is sustained, changed, and transformed over time in a process in which the agency of the actors is inherent” (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle, 2014, p.10). ‘System Narratives’ depict the defining characteristics of the complex broader context in which the other two levels of strategic narratives operate, as the Issue Narratives are carefully constructed to perfectly fit into the Identity Narratives that tell the ‘story of the state’, which in turn are integrated into and respect the rigors of the established world order (Roselle, Miskimmon and O’Loughlin, 2014). Thus, it can be understood that through the employment of System Narratives in the Chinese media sources, the Party-state attempts to give a particular meaning to the system of international affairs and to persuade other actors to accept it as relevant and valuable.

Simultaneously, system narratives are used to portray the manner in which relevant actors relate to the international system according to the categorization of “great powers, normal powers, rising powers, weak states and rogue states” (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle, 2014, p.51). There is a general consensus among the articles published in the three different data sources that the organization of the contemporary international relations system is centered around a unipolar structure, in which the United States represents the hegemon power which other countries are unwilling to balance against through military means, as they rely on its active involvement and sustained efforts to maintain the present security order, and whose dominance is rarely contested and only through traditional diplomatic means such as regional coalitions or multilateral organizations (Baylis, Smith and Owens, 2014; Han and Paul, 2020). Furthermore, all sources depict China as a peaceful rising power, with noble aspirations to build a prosperous future and eager for global cooperation.

China’s admiration and respect for the United States as the architect and enabler of a climate of enduring peace are especially highlighted in the pieces published in the ‘China Watch’ section, which praise the US for “establishing and maintaining the international security order

in Asia ... which enabled all the Asian miracles and none more than modern China itself” (Allison, 2018). Moreover, all three media outlets acknowledge the fundamental part played by the US in the shaping of the modern world economy and trade system by fostering economic growth, encouraging investment practices, promoting global entrepreneurship and ensuring prosperity as it benefitted from a level of wealth which allowed it to become “an important contributor to the world” (Wang, 2020b), although it is also implied that this success can be primarily attributed to an exceptional amount of luck and not to hard work and perseverance. However, the current sense of security offered by the belief that the American dominance is indisputable determines the United States to often act in a selfish and unreasonable manner, by emphasizing “the mindset of ‘America First’ in order to secure its own interests” (Yuan, 2019), being inconsiderate towards the interests of other states, endangering developing countries’ perspectives for real progress and engaging in tariff battles and other unfair trading practices. Subsequently, the majority of United States’ actions are regarded as relying on the premise of the preeminence of unilateralism and protectionism, a type of attitude that the Chinese media outlets predict will unfortunately end up “undermining the international order” (Wan, 2020).

Consequently, in the context of the collateral damages produced by the ‘Trade War’-related economic frictions, as well as of the serious and long-lasting effects generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States is considered in the articles to have demonstrated its defeat and its inability to continue to live up to its canonical status of global epitome of modern liberal democracy and development which the other states should actively strive to emulate. Moreover, the authors rhetorically muse whether “the ‘beacon of democracy’ will still be able to light up the world” (Xu, 2020a) or “America's history of luck is finally running out” (Wang, 2020b). The evident struggle of the US to efficiently deal with a major crisis situation is regarded as the indisputable proof that the contemporary world order is on the verge of a crucial reconfiguration, view which can be excellently summarized by the following quote:

“Should the countries stay enclosed or open up, maintaining a monopolistic or competitive market? Should the countries stick to unilateralism or multilateralism? All these differences are underpinned by the ultimate question of whether the world is governed by the old way of hegemonism, or a new approach by building a community with a shared future for mankind” (Yuan, 2019).

Given the fact that the United States' behavior "no longer matches its status as a global superpower which is supposed to act in a responsible and graceful manner" (Wang, 2020b), the articles emphasize that although China's agenda was never to dramatically overturn the current system, the country is however willing to take advantage of this opportunity and is ready to promote a new global model of economic, social and cultural development. China's ultimate aim is therefore pictured especially in the *China Daily* and the *Global Times* articles as transforming its vision of 'a fraternal human society' (China Daily Editorial Board, 2020a) into reality through the creation of a community with a shared future for all humankind, relying on mutual trust and cooperation and capable of a coherent collective response when faced with crisis situations, with the 'Belt and Road Initiative' at the core of this strategy:

"China will work with its partners to develop the Belt and Road into a model of cooperation, a model of health, a model of recovery and a model of growth" (People's Daily, 2020).

The so-called 'post-pandemic world order' (Shindo, 2020) proposed by China relies on multilateralism, regional and international cooperation, policy coordination regarding essential issues at all levels of administration and the enhancement of socio-economic security as its guiding principles. Moreover, it suggests that "hegemonic preponderance of powers should be replaced by cooperation among major powers" (Shindo, 2020) and its immediate goals relate to international coordination in the disease-fight, the establishment of a contact-free economy, restoring the global supply chains, offering comprehensive support for developing countries, ensuring biodiversity coordination and strengthening global governance with international institutions such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization at the core (Wang, 2020c). Finally, this narrative of the emergence of an improved global order is shaped to perfectly fit with the following level of 'Identity Narratives' depicting China as a peaceful rising power, as well as the aspects deriving from this status.

5.2.2. *Identity narratives*

The subsequent level in the organization of strategic narratives is comprised of 'Identity Narratives' which depict "the identities of actors in international affairs that are in a process of constant negotiation and contestation" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2014, p.10). These narratives outline the manner in which actors understand themselves and other actors, clarify what their values, principles and goals are, and construct "an experienced space

intertwined with an envisioned space and delineated through horizons of experience and of possibility” (Roselle, Miskimmon and O’Loughlin, 2014, p.76). As it was earlier explained in the literature review chapter, in the field of international relations actors are divided into state and non-state actors, and as the topic of interest of the current research is constituted by the first category, this section will discuss the manner in which China perceives itself, as well as the other countries with which it is interacting.

The overarching theme of all the analyzed articles is represented by China’s portrayal as a rising power which seeks to continue to develop itself in a peaceful manner, theme which succeeds in encompassing all the aspects of ‘the story of the state’. In its process of ascending to the status of world power on the stage of global politics, China understands the need for globalization, as “the interests of all countries are interwoven and all have a common stake in the future” (China Daily Editorial Board, 2020b), and respects the Westphalian state system’s guiding principles of national sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs “to legally safeguard its sovereign rights and interests” (Sun, 2020). Moreover, although the articles do not hesitate to allude to the country’s impressive capacity of comprehensive retaliation in case the United States would aggress China first, the country’s unwillingness to engage in a new version of the Cold War is greatly emphasized, (Shen, 2018; Buecklers, 2020). This approach towards direct confrontation is considered as the correct behavior of a “responsible major global player” (People’s Daily, 2020), which resorts to ‘cloud diplomacy’ in its interactions with the world as illustrated in the following quote:

“China has proposed the world for keeping to the right strategic direction with a broader international vision, for making strategic cooperation with a greater sense of historical urgency, for strengthening connectivity to provide a solid underpinning for the economic recovery, and for learning from each other to make the most of comparative strength and advantages to forge greater synergy and enhance joint strength to make a final victory against COVID-19” (People’s Daily, 2020).

With regards to the domestic traits of this ascension, all three media sources focus on China ‘rising’ through the opening up of its economy, encouragement of foreign investments in its capital and financial markets, enhancement of the protection of intellectual property rights and higher spending on technological development (China Daily Editorial Board, 2019; Wang, 2019; Wan, 2020). This narrative is further complemented by the depiction of China’s identity

as a global leader in major development fields. Firstly, China has acquired the status of global health leader due to its extraordinary success in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, generated by the Party-state's prioritization of the lives of the citizens over any other factor, imposing "the most comprehensive, strictest and thorough" (Han, 2020) lockdown and disease containment measures since the beginning of the crisis, and using advanced information and telecommunication technologies to minimize the direct contact between people. Moreover, after the domestic epidemic was contained, China showed its support for the world by "offering medical provisions including face masks, and increasing exports of supplies and equipment to meet other countries' needs" (Wang, 2020a), donated \$50 million to the World Health Organization, sent numerous medical expert teams to foreign countries, and made its vaccines global public goods, supplying them to developing countries through the United Nations' COVAX program. Secondly, as a top technologically advanced country, China employs robotics, artificial intelligence, advanced manufacturing, quantum information science, 5G networks, big data and other high-end technologies to bring innovation to a great range of fields, from epidemics containment and telemedicine to e-learning, transportation, green energy production, sustainable economic growth and scientific research (Li, 2020). Thirdly, the country represents a model of successful poverty alleviation and its efforts are greatly praised as "China has contributed more than 30 percent to world economic growth since its reform and opening-up began, brought 850 million people out of poverty, and contributed more than 70 percent to global poverty-reduction work" (Han, 2020). In addition, these depictions of China are deemed as exclusively facilitated by the climate of stability and prosperity ensured by the Party-state, with "China's characteristics, including the socialist path it takes and the one-party rule it adopts, fitting China's actual conditions no matter how the West feels about them" (Wang, 2020b), and corroborated with a great respect for sovereignty and dignity. Therefore, the discourse disseminated by the media regarding China's national identity is centered around the key observation that a country governed by a political ideology completely distinct from Western liberal democracy can be an honorable promoter and guardian of multilateralism, globalization, international cooperation and active involvement in the world's equitable development.

By contrast, with regards to the manner of depicting the United States, the media sources directly controlled by the Party-state opt for assigning to the US the status of the potentially dangerous 'Other' and thus portray the American 'story of the state' in stark contrast to the defining characteristics of its own 'nation brand'. In this context, the articles condemn

America's "worship of unilateralism, whose promotion seems identical to anti-globalization and isolationism" (Yuan, 2019), its "ignorance of the developing countries' right to develop" (Yuan, 2019) and its highly unjust behavior in times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic as "in vaccine distribution, the US only prioritizes itself, and then its main allies" (Global Times Editorial Board, 2020c). Moreover, they regard the United States as the main instigator of protectionism, unfair trade practices and geopolitical frictions that end in the harming of other states' national interests and the destabilization of the global economy (China Daily Editorial Board, 2018c; e; Steinbock, 2019).

Subsequently, the data sources highlight that the basic purpose of the Trump administration's China policy "is a carrot-and-stick ploy based on trade tariffs ... to reverse China's progress and to kick China out of the US-led international political and economic system" (Lin, 2020), and imply that the underlying motivation of the Trump administration's blaming of China is to regain credibility and distract the public attention from its own failures as "Trump's moves represent a reflection of the dysfunction of democracy that the US is so proud of" (Xu, 2020a). Thus, the emergence in the White House of an 'iron triangle' (China Daily Editorial Board, 2018f), comprised of President Donald Trump and trade officials Robert Lighthizer and Peter Navarro and defined as "a staunch supporter of populism and protectionism, suffering from zero-sum mentality when dealing with China and determined to maintain US hegemony" (China Daily Editorial Board, 2018f), has made China find itself in a constant struggle to identify a revised manner of interaction with the US. Consequently, a recurring underlying theme in the analyzed articles becomes the United States' shift in attitude from a responsible world power to a thoughtless intimidator, keen on stigmatizing and oppressing China. This metamorphosis is attributed to the United States suffering from a type of 'hegemonic angst' (Sun, 2020) that compelled it to perceive China as a major strategic rival with whom the US is in a perpetual comprehensive competition and to operate a fundamental change in foreign policy from an engagement-oriented approach towards a containment-centered one. Furthermore, on a global scale, it has also determined the US to act according to an absolute supremacy mentality characterized by the employment of "stubborn practices of compromising trade liberalism, economic globalization, the multilateral trade system and the global industrial chain, which are not inferior to nude trade terrorism" (Sheng, 2018).

Finally, the identity of other state actors present in the news pieces is mainly shaped by reference to their relationship with China, and they are regarded as either potential allies, united

by the desire to contest the United States' trade coercion and counteract its unilateral actions, or hostile figures, which "hide behind the US and follow Washington's steps to gang up against China" (Lin, 2020). In the context of the Sino-US decoupling becoming a reality, China considers the European Union, Russia, the UK and the Arab countries as possible new strategical partners. The Party-state's official discourse pictures China and the EU as "the two major forces for world peace and stability, two major markets for world development and prosperity, and two major civilizations for upholding multilateralism and improving global governance" (People's Daily, 2020), while it depicts Russia as China's closest peaceful military ally together with which it ensures the stability and security of the Asian region (Global Times Editorial Board, 2020b). China also constitutes "the African continent and the ASEAN countries' largest trading partner and investor and is taking an active and steady role in solving their governance and development issues" (Wu, 2020). By contrast, Australia is being reprimanded in harsh terms for "being a US lackey and acting as if it wants to lead the West to confront China" (Xu, 2020b), while Japan and India are accused of actively endorsing anti-China measures by "taking the initiative in launching the India-Japan-Australia resilient supply chain concept in the Indo-Pacific region" (Lin, 2020). To conclude, understanding the 'Identity Narratives' outlined above is crucial for grasping the meaning of the roles the aforementioned actors play in the formation of 'Issue Narratives' as the third type of strategic narratives.

5.2.3. Issue Narratives

The final category of strategic narratives is represented by 'Issue Narratives' which give particular meanings to events and "are strategic in the sense of seeking to shape the terrain on which policy discussions take place in accordance with the interests of the actor which creates them" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2014). Through their employment, actors seek to decisively shape the actions, behaviors and outcomes generated by a particular situation or conflict in order to integrate them into and influence the decision-making process, as well as stimulate the public support for certain courses of action (Roselle, Miskimmon and O'Loughlin, 2014). Moreover, they are deeply embedded into the other two categories of narratives, with some of the features defining the 'Issue Narratives' targeted by the Chinese Party-state towards foreign audiences having already been introduced in the previous sections.

From the analysis of the selected articles, two major issues can be distinguished, namely the escalation of the tensions in the complex relationship between China and the United States

during the Trump administration and, respectively, China's readiness and willingness to commit to the responsibilities specific to its role as a 'peaceful rising power' in the system of international relations, issues whose defining features are further depicted in the context of the implications and consequences directly related to the 'Trade War' and of the shaping of the 'post-pandemic world order' (Shindo, 2020). China regards the increasing degree of volatility provoked by the United States inside the framework of the contemporary world order as harmful towards all the other actors, perception appropriately illustrated through quotes such as "the unilateralist and protectionist actions of the US have harmed the interests of China and other WTO members" (China Daily Editorial Board, 2019) or "The Trade War will harm all global players" (Dong, 2018), and thus the news pieces argue that a feasible resolution is urgently needed. Furthermore, the most viable solution for the de-escalation of the conflict is seen as cooperation "in the spirit of mutual respect, equality and mutual benefit ... and the joint advancement of China-US relations based on coordination, collaboration and stability for the well-being of both nations and the world" (China Daily Editorial Board, 2019), but in case the US will disregard China's benevolence, the articles suggest that the inevitable solution would be for "the international community to join hands as soon as possible to resist the US in an unflinching manner so that they can win the US-instigated 'war on terror' in the field of trade" (Sheng, 2018).

A recurring theme in all three analyzed media sources regards the Trump administration's persistent misunderstanding of the conditions defining contemporary China, due to a stagnation of the American perception of China in the circumstances of the two countries' economic systems interlinking in the late 1970s, as the root of the current complicated relationship between China and United States. In the context generated by this serious misconception regarding China's current capabilities, as well as fueled by the desire of the Trump administration to blame another actor for its own failure in revitalizing the American economy and job market, the 'Trade War' represented an imminent stage in the unfolding of bilateral frictions. The Chinese media sources particularly depict the 'Trade War' as "not actually about trade ... but about the stellar geopolitical and economic rise of China, and rather a strategy to contain China that will eventually backfire" (Scheltinga, 2018) and its ubiquitously invoked pretext of the China-generated American trade deficit as misleading since "the US is judging China from the worst and most evil point of view" (Yang, 2020), while "most economists believe that US trade deficit has much to do with US domestic macroeconomic policy, the low

saving rate and the role of US dollar as a global reserve currency, rather than the trade barriers of other countries” (Chen, 2018a).

Although the commercial conflict is framed by the Trump administration as a “zero-sum competition in which the US should be the only winner” (China Daily Editorial Board, 2018a), the articles contradict this hypothesis and argue that it actually represents a competition leading only to lose-lose results for all actors (Dong, 2018; Zhou, 2018). Thus, they predominantly assume that the ‘Trade War’ is simultaneously harming the long-term interests of the two directly involved countries, and the principles of global prosperity, sustainable development and mutually beneficial trade. Moreover, it is also inferred that its ensuing consequences would irreparably damage the Sino-US bilateral relationship and severely slow down the economic growth and progress deriving from it, as well as produce collateral damages for other nations relying on free and fair trade and put in jeopardy traditional US allies’ future interactions with China, as they would unwillingly yield to the American ‘maximum pressure strategy’ and therefore stigmatize China, either under the warning of politic and economic sanctions and constraints, or due to an overall vulnerability generated by an enduring dependence on the US (Yuan, 2019).

At the same time however, the Chinese media outlets also subtly hint that although historically trade wars do not have a real winner, in case that the tensions escalate, China is sufficiently prepared to retaliate (as explained in the previous sections) and eventually overcome the following effects, which will mainly be restricted to the areas of foreign trade, investment and macro-economy (Su, 2018; Sheng, 2019) and otherwise manageable, due to “its confidence, commitment towards safeguarding the core interests of the country and its people, national strength and moral righteousness, as well as its objective assessment that the US' tariff war will have a limited impact on the Chinese economy” (Su, 2018). Furthermore, another aspect greatly emphasized especially in the ‘China Watch’ articles directly targeted towards the American public relates to the Trump administration’s refusal to acknowledge the extensive degree to which the United States’ economy will be damaged by an eventual economic decoupling, as China could easily reorient towards other markets, but the US is heavily relying on the Chinese market for the purchase of cost-effective raw materials, affordable consumer goods and manufacturing products and the sale of its own agricultural and high-tech products.

With regards to a potential conflict resolution, the three media sources agree that the easing of the bilateral tensions would only be achievable through the encouragement of cooperation between China and the US. Yet, their approach to cooperation is depicted from two distinct standpoints, with the news pieces published in the ‘China Watch’ section pleading for small steps in the rapprochement between the two states based on localized people-to-people collaboration through subnational agreements, business investment, job creation and educational exchanges, while the *China Daily* and the *Global Times*’ articles arguing for the need to intensify diplomatic efforts and productive talks at the highest levels of the state. Nonetheless, the latter publications do not refrain from emphasizing the ‘friend or foe’ dichotomy as applied also to conflict resolution. China represents a ‘responsible major global player’, ready to assume the status of protector of other countries’ rights and feeling compelled to “propose practical solutions, safeguard the common interests of the two countries and the world trade order and respond to America’s concerns with great sincerity” (Yuan, 2019). The United States however disregards China’s benevolence, continues to increase tariffs on Chinese exports and “refuses to comprehend that China has been making untiring efforts to resolve the dispute through talks based on equality and mutual respect” (China Daily Editorial Board, 2019b), as exemplified by the following quote:

“Beijing still favors a multilateral approach to international trade and cooperation based on rules and equality while Washington seems keen on pushing ahead its version of unilateral and protectionist fairness and reciprocity” (Shen, 2018).

In addition, the features of the two issues explained above can be observed as applied also to the depiction of the COVID-19 pandemic and the manner in which China and the United States have been trying to control the disease spread, as well as counteract its ensuing economic and social effects. The media sources highlight that the United States’ strategy was to divert the attention from the flawed domestic management of the crisis situation, as protecting the economy at any cost was considered above the value of human life, and consisted in the employment of a ‘blame game’ (Zhao, 2020a). Through this ‘blame game’, China’s successful efforts to stop the viral contamination, properly protect the health and safety of its population and safeguard the economic and trade systems against a potential collapse, as well as the Chinese cities’ disinterested help through the donation of medical provisions including face masks, supplies and protective equipment to their American twin cities severely hit by the pandemic (Liu, 2020; Zhou, 2020) were gravely minimized, while its alleged status as the

‘place of origin of the global outbreak’ (since it represents the country where the initial epidemic outbreak was first observed) is greatly highlighted. Moreover, China was constantly accused of withholding essential information about the virus genome and refusing to collaborate with the World Health Organization, accusations that the media sources strive to combat by publishing numerous news pieces portraying both the domestic and the international efforts of China to fight against the disease (Global Times Editorial Board, 2020d; e; Zhu, 2020a; b). Simultaneously, the articles suggest that this strategy constitutes yet another example of “the absurd ‘always blame China’ scenario” (Zhao, 2020a) and that, actually, the US represents the actor which “has been undercutting international efforts to curb the virus spread” (Zhao, 2020a) and whose selfish desire to emerge as the absolute winner even from a crisis situation of immense proportions will permanently damage the bilateral relationship.

Finally, the *China Daily* and the *Global Times* articles also predict that the ‘America First’ strategy will prevail even in the vaccination process (Shen, 2020), with the equal rights and needs of the developing countries being completely neglected by the United States, behavior which China seeks to disapprove with by providing free and fair access to its COVID-19 vaccines as a global public good and donating substantial sums to help with the pandemic response across the globe (Han, 2020; Global Times Editorial Board, 2020c). Through the endorsement of China’s disease fight strategy as opposed to the American one, the selected media outlets once again emphasize that China meets the requirements of the ‘responsible major global player’ role and is capable of guiding the world toward post-pandemic recovery, as explained below:

“It will be impossible to lead the US toward a new path of seeking truth from facts ... All humanity needs to join hands and make arduous efforts to completely defeat COVID-19. There is no higher morality than saving lives around the world and there is no time to play political games in the fight against the pandemic” (Global Times Editorial Board, 2020e).

6. Conclusion

As political scientist Joseph Nye has predicted, in the present information age, the current characteristics shaping the field of international affairs stand as a clear evidence of contemporary global politics being a stage on which an actor's success depends "not only on whose army wins but ultimately on whose story wins" (Nye, 2004, p.106). Given the current magnitude of strategic communication as an enabler for the endorsement of particular policies (Nye, 2004), strategic narratives represent for political actors an essential tool of persuasion for the achievement of strategic benefits. Moreover, actors generally employ narratives which are able to interact with those projected by other actors and subsequently contest them, in order to maneuver each other to obtain support for the completion of their own long-term goals (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2014).

The thesis focused on the Chinese Party-state's construction of strategic narratives targeted towards foreign audiences and answered the research question and sub-questions through the identification of the major themes and sub-themes characterizing the strategic narratives integrated in the selected articles. The most notable findings which emerged through the comparison of the three media sources regard the employment of distinct critical lenses when reporting on the same topics of the 'Trade War', the Sino-US bilateral relationship's straining or the COVID-19 pandemic depending on the audience to which the article is directly addressed to, and the presence of significantly different tones in the description of the current status as well as the future of the China-the United States relationship. Thus, the news pieces published in the *Wall Street Journal's* 'China Watch' section try to maintain a higher degree of objectivity and prefer to use a neutral and even pacifying and friendly tone when depicting the Sino-US relationship. Moreover, they emphasize aspects such as 'the focus on mutual understanding', 'the importance of local officials and people-to-people collaboration' or 'the disinterested help offered by China to the US in times of crisis', avoid criticizing the actions of the United States too harshly and advocate for the urgent resumption of a mutually beneficial bilateral cooperation. The *China Daily* articles employ an openly more assertive tone when accentuating China's adequate capacities to defend its interests against the harassment and stigma caused by the United States and to retaliate in a proportional manner, seek to disseminate a favorable image of the country to worldwide audiences by placing China in antithesis to the egotistical and protectionist actions of the US and attempt to prepare the ground for a possible overtaking of the United States' position as the world's greatest superpower.

Finally, the *Global Times* articles stand out for their tone marked by strong nationalist accents, focus on portraying hostility as the new normal in the Sino-US relationship and display a tendency to publish articles criticized by external voices as heavily misleading.

Furthermore, in the process of data analysis, the identified themes and subthemes were discussed and interpreted within the framework of the strategic narratives' three distinct levels of organization, as these narratives are simultaneously "central to the identity and behavior of actors in the international system, the structure of the system itself, and how ideas, issues, and policies are contested" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2014, p.249). Therefore, the 'System Narratives' promoted by the Party-state acknowledge the vital role played by the United States in the shaping of the contemporary order of global politics as a unipolar structure, but also argue that the recent transformation of the US into a protectionist and inconsiderate hegemon power calls for a major system change, and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic the world order could be reorganized following the principles of equity, multilateralism, mutual trust and international cooperation. Moreover, the 'Identity Narratives' are concerned mainly with China and the US as major actors on the global stage. They depict China as a 'peaceful rising power' and a 'responsible major global player', the US as a reckless instigator of protectionism, unfair trade practices and geopolitical frictions, while other state actors' identity is merely defined by reference to the relationship they have with China. Subsequently, the 'Issue Narratives' strive to outline that China has managed to evolve to the point where it can represent a global leader in a wide range of fields, from trade and economic growth to public health and sustainable development, with its mature and thoughtful behavior in the management of the bilateral frictions with the United States and its successful model of epidemic containment simultaneously offering "the Chinese system a rare opportunity to prove its strength and legitimacy" (Hu, 2020a) and the world an impetus "to heed China's cures to global woes" (Wang, 2020c).

To conclude, while the thesis answers the research question outlined above, it also determines the emergence of other numerous questions and directions for future research. As the current research's focus is merely limited to the formation and projection dimensions of the identified strategic narratives to analyze the manner in which the Chinese Party-state shapes China's image of the Self and then targets it towards foreign audiences, future research might be interested in examining these narratives' reception by different segments of foreign audiences to better understand their efficiency and impact on "the change of attitudes, opinions, and

behavior before and afterwards the narrative was employed” (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle, 2014, p.17).

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