

# The Communist Party of China and Strategic Narratives During the Covid-19 Pandemic

## Identity and Narrative Construction in the Party Journal Qiushi

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes how the Communist Party of China (CPC) has used the Covid-19 pandemic to enhance its identity as a global actor. This builds upon theories of soft power and demonstrates the advantages of using strategic narratives to analyze soft power in the current global system. I analyzed articles on the subject published in the English online version of the CPC's official party journal *Qiushi* by using strategic narratives to determine how the CPC views the world order and how it can be changed. I found that the CPC has constructed a narrative of the current world order being advantageous only for a select few and has presented Chinese multilateralism as a solution. Furthermore, the CPC has presented China as a better provider of aid than other countries, especially the U.S. This is primarily aimed at developing countries. These findings help us understand how the CPC sees itself as a global actor and how this influences their approach to not only the pandemic but also foreign politics, which is analyzed through strategic narratives in this thesis.

## KEYWORDS

Communist Party of China, Covid-19, pandemic, multilateralism, vaccines, *Qiushi*

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

China and the Communist Party of China (CPC) have been the topic of many discussions during the Covid-19 pandemic. Other countries, mainly in the West, have accused the party-state of mask and vaccine diplomacy, exploiting the pandemic for its own geopolitical agenda, and hindering investigations into the origins of the coronavirus in China (Lin et al, 2021). The CPC has denied these accusations and instead stood by its commitment to honor their vision of a shared future for humankind (Xinhua, 2020a). Even the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been promoted for this noble cause, protecting people's jobs and access to goods during the pandemic (Ma, 2020).

The disparity between these two narratives come as no surprise considering the political friction between China and the West, especially the U.S. The pandemic has provided an opportunity for the CPC to voice its discontent with Western dominance in the global power balance and argue for the West's incompetence of governance. According to China<sup>1</sup>, a unipolar system has emerged where rich countries selfishly neglect developing countries and global inequity has become even more obvious through vaccine hoarding by rich countries (Xinhua, 2021e; Song, 2021; Xinhua, 2020b). The Covid-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity for the CPC to produce propaganda to prove its superiority over Western liberal democratic leadership and to brand itself as a global leader (Campbell, 2022; Lee, 2023).

The CPC's identity and narrative creation in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic will be the focus of this thesis. China's role as determined by their identity during the pandemic relates to the CPC's use of soft power to promote its long-term goals of enhancing its legitimacy as a global leader (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle, 2013). This thesis will employ strategic narratives to provide a nuanced approach to the CPC's identity and narrative creation and explain how this relates to Chinese foreign relations.

## 1.1 Background

This thesis analyzes how the CPC is framing its international engagement positively in the Party journal *Qiushi*, which serves to introduce Party policies and theories to its domestic and international audiences. I am using the English version of *Qiushi*, whose primary audience I

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<sup>1</sup> The terms "China" and "the CPC" are used interchangeably due to the centralization of power under the Party.

consider to be international, making the contents of the journal a tool for soft power creation across borders.

Soft power is a concept defined by Joseph Nye in which an actor brings about a favorable change or reaction of another actor without using hard power, such as military resources. While material resources play a part in exerting power, they are not enough to study international relations and affairs. It is necessary to be aware of an actor's values and interests, and how capable the actor perceives itself to be in terms of achieving its political goals (Nye, 2013). We can understand an actor's own identity and how they wish to be perceived through the narrative they construct. In this thesis, I use strategic narratives to analyze how the CPC views itself in the current world order and what this order looks like, how the Covid-19 pandemic is challenging said order, and how China aims to change the world order to its advantage.

In December of 2019, China reported the first known cases of "viral pneumonia" to the World Health Organization (WHO). In January of 2020, China informs the WHO that the viral pneumonia is a previously unknown coronavirus and reports the first official fatality. During this month, the coronavirus is declared a global health threat and China is sharing gene sequences and detection protocols with the WHO. President Xi receives the WHO Director-General in Beijing and declares China's willingness to cooperate with the global community and the WHO in the fight against the coronavirus outbreak. In February of 2020, China receives praise for its containment of the virus based on information provided by the Party (Timeline: China and World Health Organization during COVID-19 crisis, 2021).

But during this month, a Dr Li Wenliang's passing sparked a flow of outrage on Chinese social media. The doctor had been reprimanded by authorities for spreading information about the virus to his colleagues in a chat group which was leaked to the public. He was forced to apologize publicly for spreading misinformation and soon after passed due to complications after being infected with the coronavirus. Public backlash followed, and people started expressing dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the pandemic as a whole (Zhang, 2020). Following the backlash, the CPC launched an investigation and found that the doctor had not disturbed public order after all, but still condemned the spreading of "unverified" information (Davidson, 2020). Bringing the outbreak under control together with power tools such as censorship and propaganda calmed down the outrage (Zhang, 2020). Still in February, a news conference is held in Beijing by a joint China-WHO team that has concluded that China's speed in isolating the virus and learning about it has seen remarkable results

(Timeline: China and World Health Organization during COVID-19 crisis, 2021). But already in the following month, China receives further criticism on an international level for its handling of the virus outbreak. China could have limited the spread of the virus by acting quicker than they did had they not downplayed the danger of the virus (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2020).

By April, the President of the United States accuses the WHO of bias towards China and halts U.S. funding for the WHO (Timeline: China and World Health Organization during COVID-19 crisis, 2021). The U.S. President also criticized the WHO's response to the pandemic, to which it responded that all available resources are necessary to fight the pandemic (Lovell Jr. & Higgins-Dunn, 2020). Beijing is angered by Australia calling for an independent investigation about the origins of Covid-19. In May of 2020, China is accused of hindering the investigation by blocking investigators' access to facilities in China, censoring discussions, and withholding coronavirus samples following renewed calls for a global Covid-19 response (Timeline: China and World Health Organization during COVID-19 crisis, 2021). Up until the time of writing this thesis, China denies these accusations and continues to warn against the politicization of the pandemic (Bloomberg, 2023).

As of 29 March 2023, the Covid-19 pandemic has caused 6 887 000 deaths across the world (World Health Organization, no date). It has affected the global economy, public health, trade routes, and access to food to name a few of many consequences (Impact of COVID-19 on people's livelihoods, their health and our food systems, 2020). As such, it comes as no surprise that the pandemic has become a widely discussed topic across the globe, nor that it has been politicized (Hart, Chinn & Soroka, 2020).

China has been accused of restricting access to foreign bodies investigating the pandemic, which has aroused suspicion from other countries about not only the origins of the virus but also how criticism on how China has handled the situation. China has also been accused of exploiting the Covid-19 pandemic to strengthen its international influence through vaccine and medical diplomacy (Lin et al, 2021). Since the beginning of the pandemic, China has stated that it wants to provide Covid-19 vaccines as a public good, providing vaccines mainly for developing countries. China claims that these vaccines provide safety in a time of need and that everyone has a right to life (Yin, 2021). However, Lin et al (2021) present evidence that China has sold most of its exported vaccines instead of donating them, as they would like the public to think they did.



China's sometimes secretive, sometimes public approach to the pandemic has become a topic of research outside its borders. Research has been conducted on the Chinese government's legitimacy and strengthening of the state infrastructure during the pandemic (Jiang & Ong, 2022; Christensen & Ma, 2021). Articles have been written on the Chinese government's use of media to improve its image and attract foreign audiences during and after the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak (Qi, Joye & Van Leuven, 2022; Meadows, Tang & Zou, 2022; Zhang, 2022). There has been ample discussion about mask and vaccine diplomacy, behind which China is accused of hiding geopolitical objectives (Qi, Joye & Van Leuven, 2022; Lin et al, 2021). Lee (2023) and Yan (2019) go further and assess the efficacy of soft power on improving China's image abroad. But this research has not touched on the Party Journal and direct discourse creation with a primarily foreign audience.

This thesis focuses on narrative creation instead of reception and uses the Party journal *Qiushi* for this purpose. The Party has complete control over the content posted in the journal. As such, it is a suitable avenue to study the CPC's identity construction without it being directly constrained by outside actors. Instead, the content addresses topics relevant to its narrative creation, such as responding to criticism on its own terms and promoting its ideal image.

I started out looking at the framing of Covid-19 restrictions in China and measures and their relaxation in December 2022, but the thesis evolved into a look at the rhetoric used in articles discussing the pandemic in the Party journal *Qiushi*. This shift came about after I realized that the relaxation of Covid-19 restrictions in China is discussed on a wider scale in Western media than in Chinese media. While this focus could provide a topic for study, I noticed that certain themes appeared more often than others in the articles I viewed on *Qiushi*, and most articles were coded as positive articles aimed to strengthen the Party state's legitimacy on an international level. Ultimately, I decided to expand on these findings. Following the selection process for the data, all articles in the journal containing "Covid-19" in the title that were deemed relevant<sup>2</sup> were coded using thematic analysis in NVivo. Then, the theory of strategic narratives was used to determine the function of the themes found using the context provided in the literature review.

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<sup>2</sup> The selection process is detailed in chapter 4.5.

The following research questions emerged from the data used in this thesis:

- How has the CPC used the Covid-19 pandemic to enhance its identity as a global leader?
  - How has the CPC used the Covid-19 pandemic to undermine the legitimacy of other states and institutions?

## 1.2 Research Motivation

Soft power tools are everchanging, and so the question is if and how the CPC as an actor is using the pandemic to promote its own interests. By gaining an understanding of how China constructs narratives, we can learn about CPC's perception of the world order, how this order impacts them negatively, and what soft power tools China uses to change it. The *Qiushi* journal provides material that reflects Party ideology and political goals, which makes it a suitable source of data for this thesis.

As *Qiushi*'s own website states, the English online version “uses materials from the Chinese and English versions of the journal to introduce the CPC's theories, policies, and practical experience in national governance to domestic and foreign audience” as the “official publication of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China” (Qiushi Journal, 2020).

## 1.3 Demarcation

This thesis analyzes the narratives portrayed in *Qiushi* regarding the Covid-19 pandemic that began in 2020 and is currently ongoing in 2023, though most restrictions have been relaxed. The thesis treats the collected written sources as being of equal importance and as part of a constructed narrative. Further research can be done on how these sources are connected to specific policy decisions.

I will be using the English edition of *Qiushi* to be able to better grasp nuance in the written language. This way, I am able to analyze what image the CPC wants to construct to an international audience, but this may also include Chinese citizens as an audience.

This thesis will not be evaluating in depth the truth of claims and statements in the data, but instead focuses on their narrative function.

## 1.4 Disposition

Following this chapter in which the topic and key concepts have been introduced, the literature review will provide an overview of how China is perceived by its surroundings, China's national and international identity construction and an overview of literature on China and the Covid-19 pandemic. Then I will present the theoretical framework used for this paper, followed by my chosen methodology. Finally, I provide an analysis of the data and a conclusion where I answer my research questions.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, I will provide the context for my analysis of the data in chapter 5 by reviewing existing literature. I begin by examining the literature on China's national identity and its portrayal of Confucian and revolutionary terminology in the post-Mao era. This provides different ways to understand the CPC's identity and legitimacy on both a domestic and international level, which will be discussed further in the analysis. Then, I will present an outline of the discourse on China's growing influence in the world and how China's surroundings have responded to it. Examining the criticism China has faced before and during the pandemic will provide the context in which China as a state exists and which challenges it faces. This allows for a nuanced interpretation of the data, bearing in mind the points in which China's legitimacy as a global leader might be perceived as insufficient. Finally, I summarize literature and research already written on the link between the pandemic and legitimacy in China.

### 2.1 Understanding China

In this section, I provide an overview of literature written on the link between ideologies, culture, and politics. Scholars debate the link between domestic and international politics and aim to contextualize the latter by analyzing China's approach to domestic values. Heilmann (2017), founding president of MERICS, and Professor for the Political Economy of China at Trier University, argues that taking a culturalist approach might be limiting in research, overemphasizing cultural factors over institutional ones.

The CPC has since the 1980s shown a renewed interest in Confucianism. The Party has come to incorporate Confucian values back into its narrative and identity creation following China's economic success in the previous decades, coupled with the country's increasing political power under Neo-Confucianism. China's increasing influence called for a stronger national

identity to unite the people and to construct a positive image abroad. The Party now incorporates values such as “*hexie* (harmony), *minben* (putting the people first), *xiaokang* (well-off society), *dezhi* (rule by virtue), and family values such as filial piety” in its emphasis on Chinese heritage, philosophy, cultural identity, and world view (Li, 2015, p. 80). Over the last three decades, there has been discourse in China around combining Confucianism, Western influence, and Marxism. The goal has been to create historical legitimacy and claims of rule over Taiwan, Macau, and Hong Kong while working within the Western-dominated global system. To do this, a common ideology is necessary to unite the people under the CPC. This could be considered a Sinicized or even Confucian version of Marxism (ibid.). Li (2015), who is a professor in political science at Merrimack College, U.S., does not detail how these values and ideals influence China’s approach to foreign affairs and international relations.

Buzan and Acharya (2021), professors in International Relations, argue it is possible to understand Chinese IR realist theories through the lens of hierarchical relationships and duties, which are focal points in Confucianism. Concepts such as *Tianxia* and the Mandate of Heaven describe a mutually beneficial hierarchy that requires dominant powers to provide for their subjects, and the right to replace a ruler if they fail to fulfill their duties to the people. But the authors state that it is difficult to divide these concepts into ideas about domestic and foreign politics and how they influence each other (ibid.). Yan (2019) discusses the importance of morality in interstate relationships and the need for respect and consent to govern others. Chinese traditional values which are present in humane authority leadership present an alternative to liberalism, but as humane authority is rooted in pursuing humane values both domestically and internationally, the author believes that China could face issues due to their different policy approaches in the two areas (ibid.).

Lahtinen (2022) claims that Confucianism is a key element of China’s goal of “Building a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind Humanity” (ibid., p. 69). Bringing experience from the University of Helsinki, Finland, as associate professor and her former position as Director of a Confucius Institute, she argues that Confucianism and traditional values influence Chinese ideas of global governance, global ethics, and economy by analyzing conferences held by the CPC. She further claims that “China’s vision for global governance draws inspiration from traditional Chinese thought and history to change the existing international order” (ibid., p. 69). The BRI is one example of how Confucianist values are imbued in Chinese foreign relations, essentially making Confucianism a soft power tool (ibid.).

Heilmann (2017) argues that this culturalist approach labels China's political developments as unique to China, ignoring "the importance of patronage or the failings of the legal system" which "can be observed to a similar extent in a number of other developing countries and political systems" (ibid., p. 39). Instead, he argues that studying the adaptability and resilience of China's governance system through "new forms of political consultation, meritocratic elements in the Communist Party's cadre system, and ideological adjustments to emerging policy challenges" is a more flexible and nuanced way of understanding Chinese politics (ibid., p. 39).

Nonetheless, it is important to mention that many Chinese scholars and experts value culture and consider it the key factor of soft power. What sets it apart from the Western scholars discussed above is that they treat it as a "fluid concept that encompasses Chinese traditional culture, moral principles, and political ideology" (Repnikova, 2022, p. 4).

It is also possible to analyze Chinese IR through a legalist perspective. Legalism also provides historical legitimacy for the centralization of power following a legal reform presented in 2014 at the Fourth Plenum. The reform aimed to foster trust for discredited communism by strengthening "the law as a method of political rule and governance" to prevent issues such as corruption (Schneider, 2016, p. 20). Xi Jinping has in his speeches promoted Chinese unity as protection against foreign threats:

"(...) the dream of the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation— internally strong, unified and prosperous, and therefore invulnerable to attack and dismemberment from abroad. The intellectual wellspring of Legalism plays directly to the Chinese historical experience of weakness and dismemberment in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Legalism provides both a compelling political explanation for that history and a Chinese way to turn Chinas 'century of humiliation' into a Chinese century" (ibid., p. 22).

This way, Schneider (2016) connects China's legal reform with historical motivation and legitimacy. He also connects domestic ideas with their effect on foreign relations.

This section has summarized how Western and Chinese scholars understand China using traditional values, morality, Confucianism, and legalism. There are different ideas on how much Chinese domestic values and culture influence foreign relations. While it is widely acknowledged that Confucian terms have seen an increased use in domestic politics in recent years, there is no consensus on its impact on foreign relations or whether this is the same Confucianism seen in ancient Chinese history. Culturalist research, while prevalent in Chinese

studies, should be considered carefully for contemporary topics. Some of the authors are not specialized in Chinese IR and may be prone to oversimplification or misinterpretation of Confucian theories. Instead, a non-culturalist approach provides insight through the study of China's political adaptability and how China is using the Covid-19 pandemic to enhance its identity as a global leader without oversimplifying the soft power creation process. Confucian and legalist terms can be used for historical legitimacy, but their use does not make China inherently Confucian or legalist.

Having discussed how China's national identity is constructed by the CPC and by foreign scholars, the following section discusses how other states react to China's growing global influence. Facing skepticism, the CPC is having to legitimize its position and construct a peaceful identity as to not threaten other states and ignite further tension.

## 2.2 China as an Emerging Great Power

This section presents literature written on "the rise of China", the discourse surrounding the topic, and implications for the global system. I provide an overview on how scholars have approached the topic through IR, culturalism, and soft power, what narratives on China this has led to, and how China has responded. The literature review covers literature on China's discontent with the current, U.S.-dominated world order and how the CPC wishes to improve it through direct cooperation with other states. The CPC is presenting China as an alternative to the U.S. who wish to develop but whose independence is threatened by the U.S.

IR scholarship as a tool to understand relationships between states has been criticized for assuming that the international order is anarchical and in turn assuming that state sovereignty is a permanent fact. Such assumptions undermine the importance of hierarchical systems within the global order. The usage of theories such as the Thucydides Trap come without acknowledging how anarchy and sovereignty were understood at the time the theory was created (Mattern & Zarakol, 2016). As discussed above, concepts such as hierarchies are also defined differently in the West and in China, which should be considered when discussing a state's view of the world order (Buzan & Acharya, 2021).

As China's influence has grown, discourses on the world order have also changed. In the 1990s, China was often referred to as a threat mainly by the West as "China is considered the destined competitor for U.S. hegemony" (Hao, 2015, p. 350). In 2010, the Chinese State Councilor at the time proposed that the two states "initiate an era of globalization with the new type of great power relations of mutual respect, harmonious existence, and win-win by

states of different social systems, cultural traditions, and levels of development” (ibid., p. 350). Since then, Xi Jinping has reiterated these points and emphasized cooperation and mutual respect but has faced skepticism internationally due to the lack of trust between the U.S. and China (ibid.). At the same time, the BRI has been promoted to counterbalance global U.S. policies. China has criticized the U.S. for following an outdated Cold-War approach to international relations and the global power structure which has limited China’s growth and is looking to present an alternative – “Building a Community with Shared Future for Mankind” which “offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence” (Lahtinen, 2022, p. 67).

This diplomatic approach is thought to promote peaceful cooperation with other countries to prevent barriers in trade and politics. Simultaneously, the CPC does not want to signalize their relationship with the U.S. to be a priority over other states not deter new cooperation partners. Yan Xuetong, a prominent Chinese IR realist who also serves as the director of the Institute for International Studies at Tsinghua University, China, believes that the U.S. and China will be able to coexist due to their different interests. However, Hao, who works at the Institute of American Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, states there is no one understanding of China’s new international relations among Chinese scholars as the reason behind building relationships with other states remain unclear. They are expected to differ between states (Hao, 2015).

Regardless, any state ought to realize the importance of domestic governance for international legitimacy. “National capability is the instrument through which an actor exercises international leadership, and strategic credibility legitimizes an actor, so enabling him to attract international followers” (Yan, 2019, p. 40). Authority is earned through strategic credibility which in turn can lead to bigger political capability. Therefore, China must focus on leading by a good example and producing something that other states would want. However, there are also other issues that require a response. China’s nonalignment policy, not providing protection for other states, undermines the state’s credibility (ibid.).

As the interest in Confucian values (or at least what is currently portrayed as Confucian values) has grown in China under CPC governance, foreign scholars are also looking into its influence on foreign politics. Xi Jinping has equated the capabilities of cultural soft power with those of hard power domestically, emphasizing the importance of values and ideologies. Xi has also highlighted the importance of telling the country’s story well and “constructing international discourse power, especially vis-à-vis the West” (Repnikova, 2022, p. 2). The

associate professor in communication considers soft power is a way to promote “China’s political and diplomatic agenda and gaining legitimacy in the international community” through for example hosting the Olympic games (ibid., p. 42). Yet another way is to host economic summits, which are less likely to face international controversy while forming elite networks and promoting China’s interests. “The soft power effect in this case might be less perceptible, and yet more significant for China’s BRI policy and for building legitimacy in the Global South” (ibid., p. 48).

This section has provided an overview of literature on China’s rise, focusing on IR. There are some differences between major Chinese and Western IR theories, such as different definitions of hierarchy and contrasting views of the world order. There are also different narratives on China’s rise – peaceful, threatening, legitimate, etc., depending on the source. At the same time, IR as a school is facing criticism that its theories are not suitable for studying contemporary topics such as China’s rise.

There is however a consensus among both non-Chinese and Chinese scholars that China is employing soft power to influence international relations to their advantage. China has tried to construct its identity as a peaceful nation cooperating with major powers in the global system to facilitate the establishment of international relations. Concomitantly, China is spreading its influence through the BRI and criticizes the U.S. for following a Cold-War mentality which inhibits China’s growth. Wanting to be able to grow in a system that is built to inhibit China, the CPC must not only construct a suitable global narrative that allows for its growth, but also prove that it is a legitimate global leader that has a place in the narrative. Can this be done through soft power?

Questions of how the CPC uses soft power to improve its image abroad have led scholars to look at Confucian influence in China, referring to Xi’s emphasis on cultural soft power and the importance of “telling the country’s story well” (Repnikova, 2022, p. 2). In the case of the pandemic, China’s success story of containing the virus has lent the state legitimacy and authority on the matter and allowed the CPC to criticize other states for how they handled the pandemic. The following section elaborates on how domestic governance affects international legitimacy in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

### 2.3 China And the Covid-19 Pandemic

As discussed above, domestic governance affects a state’s legitimacy both domestically and internationally (Yan, 2019). The Covid-19 pandemic as a threat towards public health has



tested the capabilities of governments all over the world and inadequate action could affect the government and its future goals negatively. Failing to protect citizens during a public health crisis could lead to a lack of trust for the government, in turn affecting its legitimacy. “A government’s legitimacy is based on its ability to justify its actions and decisions and make the acceptable to its citizens” (Meadows, Tang & Zou, 2021, p. 158). Governments perceived as legitimate will see better cooperation from the country’s citizens. As such, it is essential to protect and manage legitimacy during crises to ensure the most efficient public response through voluntary cooperation (ibid.).

Has China succeeded at this? Qi, Joye & Van Leuven (2022) claim that China used its early successful attempt at controlling the spread of Covid-19 at home “to promote its global image and soft power through comprehensive humanitarian aid” (ibid., p. 206). Medical assistance provided by China to Europe was quickly labeled as soft power under “mask diplomacy” as Western media argued the government-sponsored aid meant to influence public opinion on China. The authors argue that China wants to improve its negative image which is based on discourse on for instance the state’s system of governance and authoritarian ideology (ibid.).

“Beijing has provided millions of free doses [of Covid-19 vaccines] to 69 countries and commercially exported many more to 28 countries” following domestic success in containing the virus (Lee, 2023, p. 64). She calls China’s medical aid to other countries a public diplomacy<sup>3</sup> campaign to brand the state “as a global health leader” (ibid., p. 65). Vaccine diplomacy, a type of medical diplomacy, uses common problems and goals such as humanitarian issues regarding health to establish connections and dialogues with other states as this issue transcends emotional and traditional concerns. Global health diplomacy has grown as an area of study in recent years as the world becomes more interdependent than ever and it is no longer possible for a nation to survive on its own (ibid.).

“China sees the soft power vacuum around vaccines as a geopolitical opportunity” (ibid., p. 70). “China’s soft power campaign through vaccines is aimed at filling the vacuum left by the Trump-led U.S. retreat from the world diplomatic stage” (ibid., p. 70). Wealthy countries were able to quickly secure access to vaccines and start production, whereas low- and middle-income countries struggled to do the same. China, just like India and Russia, hurried to address the inequity through donations and deals with countries in need. They were also able

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<sup>3</sup> Chinese public diplomacy is discussed further in chapter 5.2.

to consider the needs of developing countries that preferred Chinese inactivated vaccines which are easier to transport and store especially in warmer climates as they do not require freezers like the mRNA vaccines popular in Western countries (ibid.).

Committing to making vaccines a public good and in turn improving accessibility in developing countries is part of Xi's and China's idea of a common future for mankind. At the same time, China refuted any claims of vaccine diplomacy and hidden political agendas and instead shifted the focus towards Western countries hoarding vaccines. "Within the context of emerging anti-globalization around the world, China's focus on IPGs aims to drive the nation further along the track of global leadership alongside the U.S." (ibid., p. 71). But like Lin et al (2021), Lee (2023) emphasizes that only 1.31% of vaccine doses distributed by China were donated, the rest sold at similar prices to other vaccines. As such, the pandemic also provided business opportunities for China in developing countries without competition from Western states that focused on vaccine accessibility at home (ibid.).

For China, vaccine diplomacy is a way to change its image from a mistrusted nation due to the initial investigations into the virus to a savior both of its own country and abroad (ibid.). But according to Zhang (2022), international recognition for China's successful experience in handling the pandemic has been sparse except for positive recognition from the WHO. Especially Western media reported negatively on China and public perception plunged at the beginning of the pandemic. "According to a survey from the PEW Research Center, a median of 61% of the 14 advanced economies believes that China has done a poor job dealing with the coronavirus outbreak" (ibid., p. 183). Another survey from PEW a year later reported minor positive change while "the median negative attitude toward how China is dealing with the outbreak dropped 10%. However, the overall confidence in Chinese leadership's handling of world affairs, which closely connects to COVID-19 management, remained very low at 20%" (ibid., p. 183). Zhang (2022) suggests that the dissonance between overly positive news reports in China and negative news coverage in Western media might explain the failure in changing public perception.

To summarize, China's rise has been contested since before the pandemic, and China's image seems to have only suffered during the pandemic. The assumption that China would want to turn this around comes quite naturally as China jumped on the opportunity to fill "the soft power vacuum around vaccines" and provide low- and middle-income countries with medical assistance (Lee, 2023, p. 70). But are vaccines the only way that China could be using the pandemic to enhance its identity as a global leader?

With so much negative discourse on China's vaccine policies, I believe that it is necessary for the CPC to address the negative narratives surrounding China for their medical diplomacy to be effective. This literature review has discussed China's highly debated rise and how the CPC has constructed China's identity as peaceful while criticizing the West for preventing its growth. But research on China's soft power creation during the pandemic has been restricted to vaccine development, which fails to encompass how vaccine distribution among other policies must be legitimized through a broader narrative.

Not only must China demonstrate that the currently Western-dominated system is faulty and unjust to undermine their criticism against China, but it is also necessary to justify changing the system. The CPC has been presented an opportunity to do so using the Covid-19 pandemic and responds to accusations of vaccine diplomacy on the same level with accusations of vaccine hoarding. But to accomplish a bigger change, China is criticizing the system as a whole. This is difficult to analyze in its entirety only through the lens of vaccine diplomacy, which is why I have opted to analyze articles on Covid-19 in *Qiushi*. By studying narrative creation on the Covid-19 pandemic against the backdrop of China's inhibited rise, the use of soft power to achieve long-term change becomes increasingly clear.

### 3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the previous chapter, I discussed approaches taken to understand China both before and during the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as China's international identity. The CPC is constructing an identity that will benefit their long-term geopolitical goals while constructing a narrative of the U.S. hegemony and Western unipolarity as damaging to delegitimize their authority. Strategic narratives have been chosen to study this process as it considers identity and narrative construction as soft power produced through communication.

Joseph Nye (2013), founder of the school on soft power, argues that material resources play a part in exerting power – reaching a desired outcome and influencing another actor's behavior – but that they are not sufficient for studying power on a global scale. Indeed, the definition of power depends on someone's values and interests. Power should be defined in relation to what it's holder can achieve wielding it, who is involved in “the scope of power” and what issues are included in “the domain of power” (ibid., p. 560). Possessing resources but failing to convert these into influence could result in failure in reaching a desired outcome. Instead, Nye (2013) proposes we look at strategy and context.

However, soft power research has been criticized for focusing on soft power resources and capabilities instead of their impact, citing statistics and numbers. Strategic narratives can be considered a return to the issue Nye was aiming to address in the 1990s, namely how actors influence international affairs. What sets it apart from Nye's approach is the study of narratives, whose importance he does acknowledge but not study in detail. "The analysis of the formation, projection and – critically – the reception of strategic narratives and the interactions that follow does the work soft power analysis promised but has not delivered" (Roselle et al, 2014, p. 71).

Policies, values, ideas, and culture can all be understood as soft power resources. Values and culture, for instance, while always on display can be used strategically to create a specific narrative. Broadly speaking, there are two ways to influence others – through coercion or attraction. Soft power is often associated with attraction, bringing about long-term change based on shared values or economic opportunities. This can also include diplomacy intended to strengthen public attraction. But it can also be used as coercion, for instance by holding the constraints and duties of a state's identity against it (ibid.).

Strategic narratives help us understand the constraints and duties of states within the world order by looking at actors' own perceptions of themselves. Roselle et al (2014) argue that the soft power school focuses too much on "sophisticated counting of tools and resources" and how governments can develop these (ibid, p. 71). Instead, strategic narratives present the possibility to analyze international relations in their complexity as a social phenomenon through communication (ibid.). "Explaining the formation of strategic narratives involves understanding actors' strategic goals and types of communication. Agenda setting, legitimation [...] are examples of communicative goals" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle, 2013, p. 8). "Understanding an actor's strategic aims is a central issue in the study of strategic narratives, and politics more broadly" (ibid., p.8). Instead of looking at communicative soft power tools in a vacuum, strategic narratives allow for them to be studied in the context in which they operate (ibid.).

### 3.1 Strategic Narratives

As defined by Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle (2013),

"a narrative entails an initial situation or order, a problem that disrupts that order, and a resolution that reestablishes order, though that order may be slightly altered from the initial situation." [...] "Strategic narratives are representations of a sequence of events

and identities, a communicative tool through which political actors – usually elites – attempt to give determined meaning to the past, present, and future in order to achieve political objectives” (ibid., p. 5).

Like earlier sections, Miskimmon, O’Loughlin & Roselle (2013) distance themselves from culturalist approaches and soft power theory that overemphasizes nominal tools and resources when researching identity construction. It is vital to acknowledge that identity construction is continuous social process with other actors and thus cannot be examined as isolated, just as the actor and environment also affect each other. Furthermore, narratives are actively created by political actors to affect others’ behavior. For political actors, this also applies to narratives aimed to enhance a state’s attraction for foreign audiences and enhance one’s own legitimacy (ibid.).

Narratives are also suitable for studying the definition of identities on a global scale. China has been attributed mainly two different identities, that of a rising power and a normal great power. The former implies that the state will disrupt the global order and threaten the current hegemon U.S., while the latter implies that China is conforming to international values, laws, and ideologies as it takes its place in the system. The question is how China itself identifies. Its national ideas on foreign policy and how to achieve those goals are narratives about China’s history, present, and future. At the same time, China can be both constrained and empowered by the identity attributed to the state as a great power by other actors (ibid.).

Strategic narratives compete in defining and understanding order, how order is constructed and how it is maintained. They compete by addressing discontent and fragmentation, providing coherent and plausible narratives that appeal to the audience. But there has yet to be a narrative that is unanimously accepted by the world. Instead, a political actor can try to create narratives of order (ibid.)

“Order is conceived through the metaphor of balance” (ibid., p. 64). The current world order has been normalized with the U.S. as a unipolar hegemon, and with that, discourses on whether the state makes up for the lack of balance or exploits its position of power – to the detriment of U.S.’ legitimacy as a global leader. “Achieving balance is seen as a necessary goal of international affairs” (ibid., p. 64).

Roselle et al (2014) have defined three levels of strategic narratives. The first level, International System Narratives, describe the world structure, its actors, and how it functions. The authors categorize the rise of China narrative on this level. The second level, National

Narratives, describe the identities of nations, such as the U.S. as a proponent of democracy. Issue Narratives, on the third level, propose an attractive policy as a solution to an issue at hand, contextualizing governmental actions. Narratives can affect narratives on other levels and constrain future behavior (Roselle et al, 2014). In the data used for this thesis, I identified narratives from all three levels.

With the U.S.' declining power and legitimacy in the world, China could see an opportunity to challenge the hegemon and present China as a great power to balance the US or even rise above. Regardless, it seems the U.S. is perceiving the rise of China as a threat. This will affect China's mobility within the system, but the question is whether other states will join the U.S. in trying to contain China's growth. This depends, at least in part, on how China can portray itself in its strategic narrative (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle, 2013).

The post-Cold War global system allows for new forms of narrative communication due to technological development, for example governments' ability to reach out to citizens of another state directly through online platforms. It is possible to study narrative production at three different stages: formation, projection, and reception. The formation stage allows us to learn about political actors' context in policy narratives and "how national or international narratives constrain how political actors conceive the realm of the possible" (Roselle et al, 2014, p. 78). Projection focuses on how narratives are spread through media and how they are contested. Reception focuses on the results of narratives on public opinion (ibid.).

To study how the CPC is using narrative communication during Covid-19, both the formation and projection stages could be considered, but this thesis will focus on the formation of China's different narratives which take place in the *Qiushi* journal. Studying the projection and reception stages entails more background information on media in other countries and international relations with China. These stages are better suited to study the efficacy of narrative communication. The formation stage is suitable for the research questions as the *Qiushi* journal is published directly by the Party and is not directly constrained by outside actors. Though the contents of the journal are aimed at responding to criticism and improve the Party's image, this is not a contestation by media but rather a way for the Party to construct a narrative and identity independently.

### 3.1.1 Operationalization

China's rise in the recent decades has prompted discussion about China's agenda and the impact it could have on the global world order. Scholars have taken culturalist and legalist

approaches to understand China's approach to IR and politics, but Heilmann (2017) suggests that the best option is to study China's adaptability and resilience. Strategic narratives as a theory have been chosen to study this through China's attempt at soft power creation during the Covid-19 pandemic against the backdrop of China's negative image in the West and mounting accusations of medical diplomacy. The identity and narrative creation in *Qiushi* serve to improve China's image by responding to concerns while delegitimizing critics by criticizing the West for failing to fulfill its obligations during the pandemic. As such, China's adaptability will be studied in the formation stage.

In this thesis, the strategic narrative presents the U.S. hegemony as the initial situation, the Covid-19 pandemic as the challenge, and China as the solution by not only bringing back order through its victory over the pandemic but also by changing the world for the better through the promotion of multilateralism. Strategic narratives will be used as a lens to analyze how China constructs its identity using the Covid-19 pandemic to portray itself as a global leader, taking the initiative to improve the world through medical assistance and cooperation, as well as providing a counterweight to the U.S. hegemony.

## 4 METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Research design

This thesis uses qualitative research methods that allow for a combined inductive and deductive approach, consisting of the identification of themes from the data but using the theoretical framework of strategic narratives. I have formulated themes in an exploratory way without any predetermined hypotheses by treating bodies of texts as objects of my analysis (Guest et al, 2012). Thematic analysis was chosen as method due to its interpretive nature. While this approach might require more contextual knowledge prior to starting the research, this approach allows for repetitions of themes to be visualized while understanding their importance and meaning. Recorded themes must be relevant to the research question (Bryman, 2012).

Discourse analysis has also been considered for this thesis but ultimately dismissed in favor of thematic analysis due to the former's focus on linguistics. To understand how the CPC is using the Covid-19 pandemic to portray itself as a global leader, I believe it is more productive to focus on themes instead of linguistics, especially since the collected sources also have different authors. Similarly, content analysis was also dismissed as a method due to

its focus on word frequencies in texts. Different authors may have different ways of expressing a certain topic, and as such certain themes could go unnoticed. These methods do however often overlap in some respects, and some may be used in the context of thematic analysis (ibid.).

## 4.2 Ontological and Epistemological Positioning

As discussed in the previous chapter, strategic narratives take a constructivist approach as the theory “asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors” (ibid., p. 33). Not only are realities continuously being constructed by social actors, but there is no one way to understand these realities either as a researcher (ibid.). Thus, my findings in this thesis one possible interpretation of reality.

It is also important to acknowledge that prior knowledge may affect data collection, coding, and analysis negatively due to bias. Furthermore, many sources discussing thematic analysis treat it as a tool for interviews and not as much for written sources (Guest et al, 2012 & Mihas, 2023). This means that I am lacking vocal cues and intonations as indicators of implicit meanings when working with strictly written sources. I will explain my constructivist positioning and strategic narrative as lens through which I analyze the data to keep the reader informed on how I reach my conclusions.

## 4.3 Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that allows the researcher to identify recurring themes and assess their explicit and implicit meanings and their importance for a narrative (Guest et al, 2012). By focusing on finding themes across one data set, thematic analysis can study shared or collective meanings and thus identify how a topic is commonly written about. The analysis must produce answers to the research questions asked by identifying relevant themes among all the possible ones in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Thematic analysis is challenging in the sense that the approach requires the researcher to be informed on the topic to be able to interpret the selected data and form themes, as it also works with more implicit ideas than content analysis. While reading the data carefully, themes are identified which are then categorized under codes. Reliability can be a concern when working with implicit themes (Guest et al, 2012). To improve reliability for this thesis, I will be discussing my main themes in the data collection chapter and detail the criteria for



categorization as well as the implications thereof. The coding structure is available in appendix A.

The length of individual texts must also be considered (ibid.). As the collected data in this thesis varies in length, I have determined that it is not useful to count the occurrence of themes within a document itself, but instead what themes a document discusses. Otherwise, it would be difficult to scale the theme occurrences relative to document length.

#### 4.3.1 Operationalization

The process of thematic analysis in this thesis starts with the familiarization with the collected data. While reading, the research questions “How has the CPC used the Covid-19 pandemic to enhance its identity as a global leader?” and “How has the CPC used the Covid-19 pandemic to undermine the legitimacy of other states and institutions?” helped me to focus on relevant parts in the texts and code them accordingly. NVivo was used as a tool to make coding as efficient as possible. As Braun and Clarke (2012) predicted, the codes are made up of a combination of interpretative and descriptive ones. At the earlier stages of coding, more or less everything is coded in one way or another as it is difficult to say yet what will be relevant in the analysis later on. Then, themes are created by reviewing similarities between codes and identifying which topics often recur, followed by a revision of all codes and themes which then are defined and named and finally analyzed (ibid.).

#### 4.4 Limitations, Reflexivity, and Ethical Considerations

This section serves to address factors that can affect the research process or outcome in this thesis. The factors relate both the data used and to the researcher’s ability to conduct this research. Initial concerns about ethical considerations and limitations during the thesis research process regarded the publication details of the articles on *Qiushi*’s website. The articles often lack author and publication date. Instead, many articles cite *Xinhua* and *People’s Daily* as the source without a link or detailed reference, and the date sometimes only refers to when it was last updated without an indication of its original publication date. Additionally, some articles have been annotated saying that the views presented in the article do not necessarily reflect those of the *Qiushi* journal.

Ultimately, I decided to use *Qiushi* articles despite these concerns. I consider the articles to fill a purpose collected in the Party journal. For this thesis, I do not consider the original publication dates as vital information in the analysis. As the Covid-19 pandemic is yet a fairly

recent occurrence, I have been able to look at all articles on *Qiushi* per the selection criteria mentioned earlier in the thesis, without restricting myself to a certain time interval. This relates to another concern often brought up when working with official media. *Qiushi* is the CPC's official publication, and together with the lack of information about the published articles, there are concerns about the articles' reliability, factualness, and bias. There are no guarantees that these articles have not been covertly altered either.

*Qiushi*, *Xinhua*, and *People's Daily* are all considered propaganda organs of the CPC (Li & Zhou, 2020). This means that these sources, while perhaps not providing factual information, are suitable for content and discourse analysis. As such, I do not believe that the lack of publishing information will affect the outcome of this research.

#### 4.5 Data collection

As discussed in chapter 1.2, this thesis uses articles from *Qiushi*. The Party journal collects articles that enhances the Party's own image and narratives, making it a suitable data source to analyze how the CPC is using the Covid-19 pandemic to portray themselves as global leaders in their strategic narrative.

The articles posted on *Qiushi*'s webpage are considered complete on their own and are as such treated as documents in this thesis. Documents are treated as tools with a dedicated purpose and not as a reflection of reality (Bryman, 2012), namely portraying the CPC and China in a positive light to a global audience. Documents are designed to elicit a response and fill a purpose, and this can only be studied with the broader context in mind in terms of the CPC's constraints, ideas, goals, and audience.

The articles used in this thesis were identified through *Qiushi*'s own search function by including all articles containing "Covid-19" in the title. Different search terms were also considered but neither "coronavirus", "restrictions" nor "pandemic" yielded as many results and included "Covid-19" in the title as well. Ultimately, as the research questions in this thesis address the CPC's use of the Covid-19 pandemic for its strategic narrative, this chosen term was the most relevant and yielded the most results. Then, documents that only were numerical reports on Covid-19 cases or similar that did not produce any rhetoric were discarded. This included two documents on restrictions to be put in place during the Winter Olympics held in Beijing in 2022. The articles were downloaded through NVivo's Chrome extension and then imported into NVivo, which was used to code the documents.

The final selection of documents resulted in 100 individual articles whose titles are listed in appendix B. Most of these articles discuss China's interactions with the rest of the world, with only a small number of articles discussing only China's Covid-19 situation. Considering these articles have all been written or translated into English, I assume the intended audience to be citizens of foreign nations.

## 5 EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

In this section, I will discuss and analyze the codes I have defined for this thesis in a broader context of strategic narratives to answer this thesis' research questions:

- How has the CPC used the Covid-19 pandemic to enhance its identity as a global leader?
  - How has the CPC used the Covid-19 pandemic to undermine the legitimacy of other states and institutions?

First, I present the coding framework used for processing the data. Keeping in mind the issue that the CPC is presenting through strategic narratives, namely the unipolar world order as initial situation, the Covid-19 pandemic as a disruption of this system, and the Chinese action as a solution to the pandemic which will also alter the world order, each of the codes will be discussed to assess their role in the CPC's strategic narrative. Finally, I conclude by summarizing my findings and relating them to my research questions.

### 5.1 Coding Framework

The themes were constructed keeping key goals of strategic narratives in mind, such as legitimacy and popularity, as well as the global world order, multilateralism, and feelings of unity. Some data has been coded under multiple codes. This section outlines the criteria for the main themes and what data has been coded to them. The coding structure is available in appendix A, including codes that were ultimately not used in the analysis. The titles of the articles used are available in appendix B. They are sorted and numbered by codes and referred to as such, except for citations.

The following codes highlight the narratives that are being used to legitimize China as a leader within the international system and how the CPC's position has become one of authority when it comes to the pandemic and issues relating to it.

### 5.1.1 Multilateralism

This code includes different aspects of multilateralism that were highlighted in 45 out of the 100 articles. This includes aspects of multilateralism such as emphasis on inclusiveness, respect, and equality as general approaches to battle the pandemic, but also support for the United Nations to oppose “unilateral bullying” and statements on improving the international order. China is depicted as a helper of developing countries and praised for not hoarding vaccines like wealthy countries do (articles 1, 2, 5, 7, 37, 39).

The articles claim that China is demonstrating their leader’s goal of common health and prosperity for the entire world by working together with other countries against the pandemic. Xi Jinping encourages dialogue to bridge differences and to work together towards common development and coexistence (article 4). International cooperation is a non-negotiable condition to successfully battle the pandemic, and China has reached out to countries in need to help them (article 5). China is even said to be the first country to help develop domestic vaccine production in Africa (article 11). Instead, vaccine hoarding countries ought to be held accountable, even going as far as to call it a potential violation against human rights obligations (article 10). Richer countries are unilateral and protectionist in their vaccine distribution, despite the narrative the Western media is trying to spread to justify their actions. This exacerbates vaccine inequity and affects the people who should be prioritized (article 14).

China’s vaccine cooperation with countries such as Germany is portrayed a way to improve global governance and uphold multilateralism. Efforts aimed at combating the pandemic are seldomly mentioned alone, instead combined with economic recovery, and standing up for justice in the world (articles 7, 12). Improving the EU-China dialogue and expanding it to other topics such as the environment is mentioned as one goal (article 12). Providing vaccines as a global good is a way to build a more inclusive world, and China argues that labeling their work as vaccine diplomacy stigmatizes and politicizes the state’s vaccine development. It is unfair and prevents the work towards a trusting global community and hinders the fight against the pandemic. Instead, mounting unilateralism and protectionism should be addressed as they prevent the fight against the pandemic (articles 6, 16).

Furthermore, nationalism and unilateralism are condemned as the virus does not distinguish between countries and races. Claiming that that Covid-19 pandemic is intertwined with security threats, the articles emphasize that all countries share a “common future” and only

through cooperation is a global community possible. China pushes for a reform of the global health governance system, proposing to prioritize health concerns and denounce the politicization of these issues (articles 16, 18, 20, 24).

“It has not just been an invisible coronavirus which has put the international community to the test but also an invisible ‘political virus’ and ‘information virus.’ Some have sought to politicize the epidemic, ascribe labels to the virus, denigrate the hard work of other countries, and incite and manufacture prejudice and racism” (Hao et al, 2020).

Cooperation and solidarity are presented as a way to both fight the pandemic and change the current unfair world order. It is brought up multiple times in the selected data that human rights have been politicized and used in the context of Covid-19 pandemic by some Western states to stigmatize others (article 20). Accusations of vaccine diplomacy are dismissed as disrespectful, and that China is fulfilling its moral duties by considering the health of the international community (article 9). Even the BRI has been demonized and Xi Jinping has accused those supporting protectionism of sticking to the Cold War mentality from the last century (article 22).

Overall, the articles have highlighted China’s speed, willingness, and effectiveness in helping others fight the pandemic by emphasizing unity and multilateralism in contrast to mounting unilateralism. At the same time, they have been ready to cooperate with the U.S. and other countries that I have understood to be among vaccine-hoarding countries in the name of Xi’s vision of a global community (articles 15-18). China has a leading role in upholding multilateralism and helping other countries battle the pandemic (article 19).

“In the UN context, “multilateralism” is commonly defined as coordinated diplomatic interaction by three or more states (or other actors) carried out within the framework of international organisations and in accordance with their rules”, (Rudyak, 2021).

But the Chinese definition of multilateralism takes more of an ideological stance. China accuses the current international system of prioritizing the narrow interests of specific groups over others and argues that this is unjust and that the rules must be re-written. Instead, multilateralism with Chinese characters should be promoted, which supports consultation and agreements between countries in international affairs that honor legitimate concerns and interests of all parties involved. Xi Jinping holds the belief that this will lead to “a community of a shared future of mankind”. The Chinese Policy Planning Department of the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs has also referred to the country's approach to multilateralism in ancient China, highlighting the importance of respecting differences while working toward common goals, and honoring promises and treaties. Rudyak (2021) argues that this is multi-bilateralism instead of multilateralism (ibid.).

How does this relate to the Covid-19 pandemic? According to foreign Minister Wang Yi at the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) back in 2020, the pandemic has brought about profound changes in the world. Members of the CICA need to work together in order to battle the pandemic, and they should support the WHO in its coordinating role. At the same time, they should “oppose politicizing the pandemic and stigmatizing specific countries” (Xinhua, 2020a). However, I argue that China politicizes the pandemic to its advantage. The state brings up the topic of multilateralism as a solution not only to the pandemic but also to the current unjust system:

“Wang said CICA members should take the 75th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations (UN) as an opportunity to stick to multilateralism, oppose unilateral bullying, safeguard the authority and role of the UN, and promote the international order towards a more just and rational direction” (ibid.).

China identifies itself as a country willing to work with Asian countries to develop “a new type of international relations featuring mutual respect, fairness, justice, and mutually-beneficial cooperation” while building “a community with a shared future of mankind” through contributing to development and peace both in Asia and globally (ibid.).

The CPC has not shied away from criticizing the current power balance in the world in articles regarding the pandemic. Rich countries are accused of vaccine nationalism, hoarding vaccines, and neglecting to help developing countries battle the pandemic (Xinhua, 2021c; Xinhua, 2021f). As a contrast, China is said to have been one of the earliest nations committing to making vaccines a public good and working with developing countries to produce vaccines to ensure equitable vaccine distribution in the world. This is because the country adheres to its vision of “a community of common health for mankind” (Yu, You & Wang, 2022). “China has a strong sense of responsibility for the lives and health of the people of China and the world” and has “promptly, transparently and unreservedly shared with the world information on [...] Covid-19” (Ma, 2020). The country has “engaged in multilateral and bilateral cooperation, strengthened global unity, and supported the leading role of the WHO in combating Covid-19” (ibid.).

China claims it is against politicizing the pandemic but uses this opportunity to condemn powerful states for failing their moral obligations as developed countries. Perhaps this is not politicizing in the eyes of the CPC, but simply a way to condemn a unipolar system that is not mutually beneficial. By looking at this through the lens of hierarchical relationships and duties, we could consider this criticism as a claim that the vaccine hoarding countries are unfit for rule as they have failed to provide for their “subjects” (Acharya & Buzan, 2021). They have failed to act in a morally correct way, thus invoked the right of the governed to criticize them (Yan, 2019).

Acharya and Buzan (2021) use concepts such as *Tianxia* to illustrate how discontent from poor governance arises and talk about how some Chinese scholars have tried to recover traditional Chinese culture and relate this to contemporary discourse. But they themselves claim that this concept is incompatible with the current Western dominated IR. Using the authors’ own logic when discussing the Mandate of Heaven, rebellion but not revolution can be justified (ibid.). How then could a new international system be instated if revolution cannot be justified? And even if it could be justified, China is not encouraging a new political system for the world order but a new balance thereof. Indeed, China has voiced support for the WHO and WTO, lending support and legitimacy to the international system. This warrants some skepticism when discussing Confucian values in a contemporary context. Acharya and Buzan’s (2021) article fails to provide proof that this topic is relevant to Chinese IR today. Values that have been described as Confucian in contemporary discourse such as rule by virtue, well-off society, harmony, and putting the people first do not inherently imply that the CPC follows a Confucian ideology (Li, 2015). The CPC might instead be using Confucianism to legitimize the values they want to promote instead of taking a Confucian approach to IR.

That is not to say that there is no link between Confucianism and Chinese politics. Lahtinen (2022) argues that Confucianism is firmly embedded in the concept of a community with a shared future of mankind and global ethics, and Repnikova (2022) argues that traditional Chinese values are currently being studied by Chinese politicians and make up a vital part in ideology production. She claims that Socialism with Chinese Characteristics is a way to use morality to unite the public around the CPC’s leadership (ibid.).

But is this focus on Confucianism in Chinese foreign politics justified? China’s approach to multilateralism is based on how they perceive the current world order and the issues thereof. By systematically categorizing the CPC’s ideologies, policies, and initiatives as Confucianist, we are excluding any reasoning or motivation that does not align with it. As Miskimmon,

O’Loughlin & Roselle (2013) argue, too much focus has been put on cultural values and ideas when discussing national identity construction. Identity construction is a continuous social process and is also very much affected by how others view the actor (ibid.).

According to the articles introduced earlier in the thesis, vaccine-hoarding, and the stigmatization of countries during the pandemic have led to greater inequalities in people’s health globally. Through strategic narratives, this can be perceived as a failure to rule by virtue from the CPC’s perspective. The rich countries have failed to fulfill their duty and neglected especially developing countries, justifying criticism and change. China is condemning the politicization, stigmatization, and unipolarity occurring during the pandemic and argues that criticism against China is deflecting from the West’s own incompetence.

With a sense of responsibility for the global health, Xi and the CPC have worked towards a community of a shared future by stepping up to the task and delivering medical aid and technology to developing countries. This narrative paints China’s inclusive and effective approach as favorable over Western countries, who are selfish and inefficient. China has offered to work together with these countries in a selfless manner, all in the name of global health. This way, the CPC has constructed China’s identity as a nation that can improve the issues of an unjust, unipolar global system by being truly multilateral and inclusive.

### 5.1.2 Legitimacy

The next code relates to how the CPC uses narratives to improve their legitimacy in different ways. As this is a very big topic, ten child codes were derived from the data to better grasp how this narrative is constructed. I will discuss the most prevalent ones in this section. Codes that I will not expand on in this thesis include uses of praise of Chinese measures, language that highlights selflessness such as vaccine exports despite the need for vaccines at home, and perhaps somewhat contradictory, articles that highlight China’s capable handling of the pandemic at home<sup>4</sup>. All these codes highlight how China is constructing a position of authority.

This code further discusses how the CPC legitimizes itself as a global leader who change the world in the name of a shared future for humankind. The CPC can gain trust and popularity among states who are also dissatisfied with the current world order by providing an alternative to U.S. hegemony and Western aid. As discussed in chapter 3.1, China has been

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix A for the coding structure and codes that are not discussed further in the thesis.



attributed two contrasting identities by its environment: a rising power versus a normal great power (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin & Roselle, 2013). As seen in the previous section, the identity as a rising power might cause other countries, especially Western, to be wary of China and label their aid as vaccine diplomacy. On the other hand, we see that the CPC is supporting existing institutions such as the WHO as a normal great power would. These identities exist parallel to each other.

On the level of National Narratives as defined by Roselle et al (2014), China now faces the task of defining its identity within the system. How can it define itself so that other countries will not join the U.S. in containing China’s growth and instead gain support (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin & Roselle, 2013)? And how can it communicate this narrative?

Since the re-centralization of power under Xi Jinping and the CCP in 2013, “a renewed emphasis on ideological conformity have reinvigorated the focus on ‘external propaganda’ around the conviction that state media and even quasi-private actors must work internationally to ‘tell China’s story well’” (Bandurski, 2021, p. 46). Under the new name of “public diplomacy”, Chinese media is to cultivate positive public opinion on China in foreign countries (ibid.). The following child codes discuss how this has been operationalized in *Qiushi*.

#### *5.1.2.1 China’s Importance for the World*

Under the code “China’s importance for the world” which was coded in 67 of the 100 articles, I compiled data that highlights how other states’ reliance on China is depicted. This includes Chinese vaccine and medical assistance provided to different states, China’s importance for the global supply chain and construction of infrastructure through BRI during the pandemic.

After joining the Covid-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) program, Sinovac and Sinopharm were not only been approved for emergency use by the WHO but for global distribution. Chinese vaccines are praised for their timely arrival by the Cambodian Prime Minister and Indonesian President, among others. With growing distribution, the efficacy and safety of Chinese vaccines have been validated and China has launched vaccine development, production, and research in cooperation with developing countries (articles 10, 19). Chinese vaccines have been exported to over 50 countries and the state has provided medical assistance in over 80 countries (article 1). The early sharing of the virus gene sequence allowed for research and development of vaccines to be launched early, and China is one of the leaders within Covid-19 vaccine research (article 2). China’s vaccines are depicted as

raising hope of victory over the pandemic on an international level, further highlighting the state's inclusive approach to vaccine development. The vaccines have been developed through scientific procedures of international standards to become a public good, and China's actions will help the world win quickly over the coronavirus (articles 8, 20).

China's calls for other countries and members of Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) to not only work together with each other and China to support the UN in battling the pandemic, but also to continue develop the BRI (article 6). The BRI has helped Europe receive goods from China without delay during the pandemic as shipping lanes were clogged, especially around Christmas time in 2021. One article includes praise for the BRI's reliability from the joint chief executive officer of Port of Hamburg Marketing as well as the deputy director general of the Department of Rail Transport under Thai Ministry of Transport. The Greater Mekong Subregion has benefited from the China-Laos railway through tourism, agricultural products, and trade to name a few factors. Construction of railways under the BRI has continued during the pandemic in different parts of the world, including Africa, providing trade opportunities, and creating jobs (article 3).

In 2021, the Peljesac Bridge in Croatia was joined through a BRI project, reconnecting Croatia's territories. The Croatian Prime Minister said that this has solved a 300-year-old issue, describing it as "a modern picture of modern sovereignty that defines how to achieve strategic national interests" (Xinhua, 2021a). The article also mentions the inauguration of Hungary's "largest solar power plant, which was built by China National Machinery Import and Export Corporation (CMC)" which will "help Hungary reduce its carbon-dioxide emissions by about 120,000 tonnes each year" (ibid.). Finally, the Chinese taking over the Piraeus Port in Greece and its since then increased capacity is brought up. Greece's permanent representative to NATO praises the BRI as mutually beneficent and that the takeover was through legitimate and fair means (ibid.).

The world's reliance on China during the pandemic for different reasons emphasizes how wide China's influence reaches. Not only has China provided medical aid over continents, but the BRI has ensured delivery of goods, provided jobs and infrastructure.

"COVID-19 has given the international community a glimpse of China's powerful collective will and ability to forge ahead through unity, as well as its willingness to take responsibility and help the world. This has provided a vivid embodiment of the concept of a global community of shared future under the lens of the pandemic. China has set an

example for international efforts and global cooperation on containing COVID-19. As long as the correct choices are made and there is unity and concerted action, we will beat COVID-19”, (Ma, 2020).

As discussed above, China is portrayed as vital in not only the battle against Covid-19 in terms of medical supplies and vaccine development, but also economically and politically through the BRI. The BRI has managed to provide other parts of the world with goods, jobs, and infrastructure at a time when many economies suffered. It has even been able to solve problems from before the pandemic in Croatia and Greece.

What’s the catch? According to Rudyak (no date), China considers aid to be transactional. “China is not a ‘donor country’ and does not provide ‘developmental aid’” (ibid.). Instead, China expects to be repaid in relational power, such as political support for China and their position in the world for example in international organizations (ibid.). The new type of international relations China is working to replace the old, Western-dominated one, focuses on win-win cooperation as a contrast to a system that favors a small group. Cooperation, in turn, is understood “as a way to uncover shared interests and build ‘friendly relations’ based on the principle of ‘seeking common ground while maintaining differences’”, (Rudyak, 2021, p. 11).

While support and praise for China has been included in the articles, there is a lack of explicit information on how China profits from the aid it provides. As such, China is constructing an identity as a state that provides assistance and cooperation without imposing ideological terms and conditions, and a narrative that China can to achieve change.

#### *5.1.2.2 Legitimacy Through Vaccines*

The next child code indicates how vaccines in particular have been used to promote China’s legitimacy on both a domestic and on an international level. While only 13 articles discussed vaccines on a domestic level, 46 articles discussed them on an international level. Since the content of most of the articles under this code has already been introduced under different codes, this section will focus on summarizing new information.

On a domestic level, the data includes information on the number of vaccines administered, the technology behind vaccine development, their safety and efficacy (articles 1-3, 5, 8). The articles explain how safety procedures, especially vaccines, work to protect the people (articles 2, 5, 7) and include interviews with citizens receiving their shots (articles 7, 9). The *Qiushi* articles detail vaccination plans, and technological approaches used for vaccine

developments. The vaccine is said to cover all mutations of the virus and has become effective without serious side effects through coordination and tests (articles 2, 4-6). Testimonies from citizens are included who detail how safe they feel thanks to the vaccine and that they have voluntarily been vaccinated and follow government guidelines for everyone's good (articles 7, 9). At the same time, herd immunity as a concept is being criticized for being unscientific and dangerous (article 10). Instead, the Chinese containment methods of mass vaccination and lockdowns have proven successful and are superior. Following Yan's (2019) logic, the success in handling the pandemic at home has given China legitimacy to provide aid and call for others to follow China's lead in the fight against the pandemic. The CPC is depicted as leadership that is as capable as it is popular.

On an international level, China is said to have helped developing countries accessing vaccines to an affordable price despite supply shortages in China (article 1). Authors repeatedly focus on China's efforts to make Covid-19 vaccines a public good and helping states that have not received help from anyone else (articles 3, 4, 6). This is all part of China's efforts to build "a global community of health for all" as the state repeatedly shows that it keeps promises made to others (article 6). China welcomes and supports European and American countries in helping Africa battle the pandemic through vaccine distribution, while acknowledging that the West feels threatened by China's presence in Africa (article 9). The use of statistics highlights not only production capabilities but also the safety and efficacy of Chinese vaccines (articles 1, 2, 4, 7, 14, 24, 28, 30, 32, 36, 40, 45). The BRI has played a part in distributing medical goods (article 2).

These articles discuss content that has already been discussed in this thesis in terms of Chinese medical assistance and vaccines as a public good. This code focuses on the CPC taking on the role as provider for other countries through medical assistance as a legitimizing tool. As discussed above, there are concerns over China's provision of medical aid to other countries as the Chinese definition of aid is reciprocal (Lin et al, 2021; Rudyak, 2021). Cooperation as well has implications of political support as a requirement (Rudyak, 2021).

This lends some weight to accusations of vaccine diplomacy. As stated earlier, Chinese vaccines have been exported to over 50 countries and the state has provided medical assistance in over 80 countries (article 1). This could imply that 80 countries were left indebted to China in some way having received aid. If it is as Lin et al (2021) say, then over 96 percent of exported protective equipment and vaccines was sold and not donated. Still, the authors claim that "Hungary, for example, blocked EU statements criticizing China in April

2021, just a few weeks after the country purchased millions of doses of Chinese vaccines” (ibid.). This indicates that China has had at least some success in influencing pro-China sentiments in foreign states not only through donations but also sales (ibid.).

Far from all countries have seen an increase in positive attitude towards China. In fact, China’s bilateral approach to vaccine exports through sales left developing and low-income countries unable to access the vaccines as the majority have been sold to middle-income countries (ibid.). A text query for “sale”, “sold”, and “sales” in the code yielded zero results, but 8 results for “trade”, 15 for “assistance”, 19 for “aid”. This strengthens Lin’s et al (2021) argument that China wants to construct its identity as a helping, selfless state with legitimacy to rule. But by selling the majority of vaccines instead of donating them, China has made it difficult for low-income countries to acquire them and by their own logic as depicted in *Qiushi* contributed to vaccine inequity.

### 5.1.3 Sense of Unity & Focus on People

This section discusses the two codes “Sense of Unity” and “Focus on People” together as these are closely linked in their narrative function, namely the Chinese depoliticization of the pandemic<sup>5</sup>. The focus on unity not only domestically but also internationally also goes hand in hand with multilateralism. Inclusiveness, openness, and cooperation are promoted in the fight against Covid-19 as the virus acknowledges no borders, forcing countries to work together. “Sense of Unity” addresses the sense of unity the documents call for to battle the Covid-19 pandemic. Out of the 100 articles, 44 articles contain this theme on an international level, and 16 on a domestic level.

What sets this code apart from the other ones is the explicit mention of cooperation, unity, and inclusiveness in relation to the pandemic. On a domestic level, the data depicts the Chinese people to have acted as one in their response to the pandemic. United they have followed government advice and regulations which they praise for its swift and effective actions (articles 1, 4-6). The data also shows how the CPC is portrayed positively in written media by taking care of the most vulnerable and remote parts of the Chinese population (articles 2, 3) and in turn celebrated (articles 6, 7, 10, 12, 14).

“In the run-up to its centenary this year, the Communist Party of China (CPC) demonstrated its exemplary governance capability by leading the Chinese people in

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<sup>5</sup> The articles are still numbered separately in Appendix B.

efficiently containing the COVID-19 outbreak and eliminating absolute poverty in the world's most populous country. [...] The accomplishment is a further testament to the CPC's commitment to the people. By positioning the fight against poverty as a top policy goal, the CPC has again shown that it is striving to ensure no disadvantaged groups are left behind in China's economic take-off" (Xinhua, 2021g).

On an international level, the code includes mentions of common goals and China as a proponent of international cooperation, calling on other countries to follow China's lead (articles 2, 4, 6, 7, 9, 11, 18, 20-24).

"Xi stressed that unity and cooperation are the most potent weapon to conquer the epidemic, and encouraged countries to overcome division with unity, replace bias with reason, and pool the maximum global synergy to beat the virus" (Yin, 2020).

Instead of politicizing the pandemic or stigmatizing countries, energy should be focused on battling the true enemy, the coronavirus. This can only be done through unity and cooperation, as humanity has done in the past (articles 22, 25, 27). Indeed, an article even mentions that China received help from other countries in the BRI at the beginning of the pandemic – a debt that has now been repaid (article 26). Now China helps other countries through humanitarian assistance determined by science, not prejudice (articles 30, 31).

Under "Focus on People", I have collected data that mentions citizens of different states, including China. In 26 documents, China demands that people's lives are prioritized above all and that everyone should work towards a common future for mankind. The documents show the Chinese government's concerns for the Chinese people at home and abroad, and how Xi Jinping is "setting an example for the rest of the world" by "putting people's lives front and center" (Xinhua, 2020c). The Chinese national spirit has been given credit for the success in fighting the pandemic at home. The Chinese people's participation in the fight, their willingness to participate and their positive attitudes towards the government demonstrate their trust in the government. This trust stems from the government providing information to the people per their rights to information, as big data and other technologies are being used for the people's good during the pandemic (articles 4, 5, 10, 12, 15).

"Last but not least, China's grassroots society has robust social management and public service systems. People know that they can live normal lives despite the implementation of preventative regulations because community workers are always there to help" (Xinhua, 2021h).

The government also receives praise from politicians in other countries such as Egypt for China's quick and efficient containment of the pandemic to protect people and the country's philosophy of prioritizing human lives (article 8). Countries ought to reassess their priorities and their definitions of national security, prioritizing human health and wellbeing (articles 18, 21, 24). The pandemic has shown the weaknesses of current systems, and only through cooperation can the pandemic be fought, and human lives saved.

I was surprised to find very little direct criticisms of other countries that have failed to pull their weight in the fight against the pandemic according to China. Instead, many statements are vague and criticizing greater concepts such as unilateralism without naming countries (articles 3, 5). One of the few direct criticisms addresses the U.S.:

“Yet, Washington, in the absence of scientific evidence, has reopened its economy during the peak period of the outbreak, ignored the elderly in nursing homes, turned away the poor who cannot afford treatment, and launched election campaigns regardless of the risk of virus transmission, all in a bid for more cheap political points” (Xinhua, 2020d).

This provides the CPC with an opportunity to directly criticize the U.S. and highlight their incapability to rule. If they fail to provide for their own citizens, on what authority do they tell other countries how to handle the pandemic (Yan, 2019)? As a contrast, China has demonstrated its successes at home and how the CPC has been celebrated for their efforts (articles 1-7).

The pandemic is an issue that affects everyone, regardless of their nationality or political alignment. The only way to save everyone is to prioritize people's health, as President Xi Jinping has told the world to do. “China has a strong sense of responsibility for the lives and health of the people of China and the world” the articles state (Ma, 2020). The CPC is constructing a narrative of depoliticizing the pandemic by providing assistance to developing countries as discussed in earlier sections and by discussing the pandemic on a global level while focusing on the people and their right to health and life.

The articles calling for unity and the depoliticization of the pandemic serve to present China as an unbiased country with the citizens health as a priority in contrast to other powerful states (articles 22, 25). I argue that this too is a form of politicization. While criticizing the U.S. for failing to care for their citizens might not inherently be political, the fact that a state such as

China, who has had sanctions imposed upon it by the U.S. is criticizing the latter (Tellez, 2023), might be political as China would profit from diminished U.S. influence.

## 6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to analyze how the CPC has used the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as how the CPC has delegitimized other states and institutions, to enhance its image as a global leader. The topic was presented in the introduction, followed by a literature review that was conducted to illustrate how China is perceived by itself and its surroundings. There were vast differences between China's identity as described by the CPC and especially Western countries. China refutes accusations of opportunism and pushing political agendas through medical diplomacy during the pandemic, and instead blames the West for failing its duties to protect other countries and points out how unjust the global power distribution is. It is in China's interest to defend its image based on political and economic interests, as seen both in the literature review and the data analysis.

China's image is heavily intertwined with Confucianism, and scholars writing on China show a fondness for traditional Chinese values and seek them out when studying China and Chinese foreign relations (Buzan & Acharya, 2021; Li, 2015). However, I have argued that this culturalist approach is too simplistic. China's politics have proved to be both adaptable and resilient. Instead, Confucian and other traditionalist terms have been used to lend legitimacy to current policies, making Confucianism a soft tool itself (Heilmann, 2017; Lahtinen, 2022).

Soft power is the focal point of this thesis. While China has constructed an identity as a peaceful rising nation, the state has still struggled to rise. The U.S. has been criticized for following an outdated Cold-War mentality to international relations following its hostility towards China (Lahtinen, 2022). The assumption was then made that China wants to grow as other states have been able to, and in turn, that China must want to improve its image to gain legitimacy to be able to challenge its critics (Hao, 2015; Lahtinen, 2022; Zhang, 2022).

The Covid-19 pandemic provided an opportunity for China to do so. Based on the theory that a government's ability to govern its own people affects its legitimacy internationally, China leaned heavily on its early containment of the virus outbreak to gain authority to criticize the West for hoarding vaccines (Meadows, Tang & Zou, 2021; Qi, Joye & Van Leuven, 2022). Providing vaccines to countries in need, China was able to brand itself "as a global health leader" (Lee, 2023, p. 65). The state provided help when the rich ones would not (*ibid.*). But the West accused China of vaccine diplomacy, insufficient action at home, and exploiting the



pandemic to follow their geopolitical agenda. China was not donating the majority vaccines and equipment produced like advertised, but selling it (Lin et al, 2021; Lee, 2023).

This would then imply that the narrative constructed of China as a selfless nation helping those in need in the name of a shared future of mankind is more important than providing aid. Subsequently, 100 articles from the CPC's party journal *Qiushi* were analyzed through strategic narratives, which allowed for the study of the CPC's identity and narrative construction within the context of criticisms against China during the Covid-19 pandemic. Using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and assess their explicit and implicit meanings and their importance for a narrative (Guest et al, 2012), this thesis found that the CPC has used the Covid-19 pandemic to enhance its identity as a global leader on three different levels: Through International System Narratives, the CPC has described the current world structure as dominated by rich countries, especially the U.S. It is a unipolar system that benefits few powerful nations at the expense of others. Buzan and Acharya (2021) suggest that the criticism stems from Chinese morals and values of hierarchical traditions, but I have argued that only analyzing China through the Western understanding of Confucianism might be limiting. Instead, I have focused on the narratives surrounding politicization of the pandemic and the role of propaganda. By accusing the West of politicizing the pandemic to justify racism towards China and upholding U.S. hegemony, the CPC has undermined the legitimacy of the current system and criticism towards China.

On the level of National Narratives, China has constructed its identity as a reliable state that is capable of handling a crisis such as a pandemic both domestically and globally and provides assistance for other nations when other states fail to do so. While direct criticism towards other countries has been sparse in the data, the U.S. has been criticized for its failure to care for its people, which ought to affect their image as a global leader. China provides an alternative to countries in need of aid: China itself. Through emphasis on China's vaccine aid and making vaccines a public good, the CPC has proved its conviction to work towards common health and a common future for mankind. The BRI has provided economic resilience and jobs for states working together with China during the pandemic, speaking for China's capable governance.

The CPC wishes to rectify the unjust system, and the pandemic has provided an opportunity to criticize it and propose a solution, which is presented as multilateralism with Chinese characteristics. While multilateralism might not qualify as a *policy* solution as an Issue Narrative, it is nonetheless presented as a solution and as such included in this thesis. It is a

solution to not only fight the pandemic in an equitable way, but to accomplish long-term change that would end U.S. hegemony. It is implied that this would benefit many countries, especially developing ones.

By examining the data through strategic narratives, I have been able to analyze China's communicate soft power tools used during the Covid-19 pandemic to improve China's image (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle, 2013). Strategic narratives have provided a way to analyze China's approach to foreign relations and long-term goals in terms of international cooperation and geopolitical objectives – changing the world to be multipolar instead of unipolar so that China can rise uninhibitedly. It has also become apparent that China's narrative and identity construction in *Qiushi* responds to criticism to provide China with legitimacy as a global leader. Not only has this been done through statistics, positive accounts from citizens and global leaders, and effective governance at home, but the CPC has constructed China's identity as morally superior to the West. To provide a contrast to unfair leaders, the CPC has created narratives of unilateralism vs. multilateralism, vaccine hoarding vs. vaccine distribution, and politicization vs. focusing on people and unity throughout the pandemic.

In conclusion, the CPC has used the pandemic as an opportunity to construct China's identity as a state capable of leadership through its alleged swift containment of the virus. Through this authority, the CPC has criticized other states and even the global community of having skewed priorities, neglecting developing countries in the fight against Covid-19 by selfishly prioritizing themselves. Criticism towards China during the pandemic has either gone unaddressed as in the case of narratives of vaccine sales versus vaccine donations or been dismissed on the basis of Western hypocrisy and racism. This has contributed to the narrative of an unjust system that warrants change, which the CPC wishes to accomplish through multilateralism with Chinese characteristics.

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## 8 APPENDIX A – CODING STRUCTURE

Name	Files	References
Anti-Ch.se sentiments	5	8
BRI	15	33
Success during Covid	7	17
Ch. receive help	4	7
Ch.'s economic success	9	35
Ch.'s legitimacy	0	0
Ch.'s importance for world	67	179
Govt action	25	49
Praise	39	69
Pro-Ch. sentiment	6	10
Pstn of authority	66	193
Repaying debts	2	3
Rule of law	1	7
Selflessness	12	15
Sit. in Ch. under control	33	70
Through vaccines	0	0
Domestic	13	14
International	46	100
Cooperation with other countries	19	34
Economic	9	19
Critique towards other countries	6	7
Current challenges	0	0
Dom. Cvd outbreaks	3	4
Domestic	2	2
Gender equality	1	1
Global health governance	6	6
Poverty	8	10
Focus on people	26	59
HR politicized	5	12
Multilateralism	45	122
Sense of unity	0	0
China	16	36
International	44	121
Setbacks bc of other countries	5	5
Sovereignty	4	5

## 9 APPENDIX B – LIST OF ARTICLES USED

This appendix lists the names of the articles included in the data for this thesis. All articles were retrieved from <http://en.qsttheory.cn/> March 3, 2023. The articles are grouped by code and may appear in more than one code.

### 9.1 Multilateralism

1. Beijing Initiative calls for joint combat against COVID-19
2. China calls on CICA members to jointly fight against COVID-19
3. China develops COVID-19 vaccines as global public good
4. China fulfills its promise to make COVID-19 vaccine a global public good
5. China helps chart way forward for restoring world after COVID-19 pandemic
6. China injects confidence, impetus to global COVID-19 response
7. China ready to boost COVID-19 vaccine cooperation with Germany~ Xi
8. China to provide 2 billion COVID-19 vaccines globally this year~ Xi
9. China walks the talk in supporting global COVID-19 vaccination
10. China walks the talk on COVID-19 vaccine sharing
11. China-Africa solidarity, cooperation raise hope of overcoming COVID-19 globally
12. China-Germany-EU leaders' meeting charts course for development of ties amid COVID-19 pandemic
13. China's economic growth to bolster global recovery from COVID-19
14. China's vaccines help strengthen ~weakest link~ in world's fight against COVID-19
15. Chinese vaccines boost global fight against COVID-19 pandemic
16. Chinese vaccines help humankind build 'Great Wall of Immunity' against COVID-19
17. Deepen International Cooperation to Combat COVID-19 and Build a Global Community of Health for All
18. Forging Powerful Synergy for the Global Fight Against Covid-19
19. Full text~ Keynote speech by President Xi Jinping at Extraordinary China-Africa Summit on Solidarity Against COVID-19
20. Global cooperation in fighting COVID-19 & human rights protection~ need for a collective approach
21. How Belt and Road helps global recovery amid COVID-19 pandemic
22. In fighting COVID-19 pandemic together, preserving lives must be priority
23. Providing 500 mln vaccine doses to world, China aims to enhance int'l cooperation against COVID-19
24. Providing Strong Support for the Global Fight Against COVID-19 Through Pragmatic and Efficient International Scientific and Technological Cooperation

25. Put people first and forge global synergy in fighting against COVID-19
26. Solutions, solidarity needed to defeat COVID-19 pandemic
27. Somber COVID-19 situation a constant reminder of need for closer cooperation
28. Strengthening Vaccine Cooperation to Build a Great Wall Against COVID-19
29. Sunshine of cooperation will finally dispel dark cloud of COVID-19
30. Timely vaccine arrivals in Africa show China honoring its commitment to global COVID-19 vaccination
31. To build joint strength, solidarity for global fight against COVID-19
32. UN chief calls for ~far greater solidarity~ in message on 2 millionth COVID-19 death
33. Unite for safe, effective, affordable COVID-19 vaccines
34. WHA delegates highlight China's support in fighting COVID-19 pandemic
35. Winning a Decisive Victory Against COVID-19 and Promoting the Development of a Global Community with a Shared Future
36. Xi announces supplying Africa with additional 1 bln COVID-19 vaccine doses, pledges to jointly implement nine programs
37. Xi charts course for world to meet challenges amid COVID-19
38. Xi hails APEC ~family spirit,~ calling for joint fight against COVID-19, economic slowdown
39. Xi hails China's COVID-19 combat spirit as model virus fighters honored
40. Xi on fair distribution, global cooperation of COVID-19 vaccines
41. Xi pledges continuous support for Colombia's COVID-19 fight
42. Xi proposes BRICS solutions for combating COVID-19, reviving world economy
43. Xi says China to continue providing support for Nepal's fight against COVID-19
44. Xi says China to continue supporting Fiji's COVID-19 fight
45. Xi urges APEC openness, cooperation amid COVID-19 pandemic
46. Xi urges APEC solidarity to fight COVID-19, promote economic recovery

## 9.2 Legitimacy

### 9.2.1 China's Importance for the World

1. ~China speed~ of vaccination highlights determination to beat COVID-19
2. Beijing Initiative calls for joint combat against COVID-19
3. Belt and Road rail services, construction booming despite COVID-19
4. BRI investment helps nations persevere amid COVID-19
5. BRI projects bridge China-Europe cooperation amid COVID-19 pandemic
6. China calls on CICA members to jointly fight against COVID-19
7. China CDC helps Sierra Leone establish molecular test method for COVID-19
8. China develops COVID-19 vaccines as global public good
9. China enhances cooperation with B&R countries despite COVID-19

10. China fulfills its promise to make COVID-19 vaccine a global public good
11. China has five COVID-19 vaccines in phase III clinical trials
12. China helps chart way forward for restoring world after COVID-19 pandemic
13. China injects confidence, impetus to global COVID-19 response
14. China keeps its promise of making COVID-19 vaccines global public good
15. China ready to boost COVID-19 vaccine cooperation with Germany~ Xi
16. China to provide 1st batch of COVID-19 vaccine aid for Nepal~ Chinese FM
17. China to push ahead equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines
18. China unleashes great economic momentum after COVID-19 victory
19. China vows more COVID-19 vaccines to developing countries
20. China walks the talk in supporting global COVID-19 vaccination
21. China walks the talk on COVID-19 vaccine sharing
22. China willing to help more countries access to COVID-19 vaccine~ FM
23. China-Africa solidarity, cooperation raise hope of overcoming COVID-19 globally
24. China's economic growth to bolster global recovery from COVID-19
25. China's Golden Week holiday a driver for domestic growth, global recovery amid COVID-19
26. China's recombinant COVID-19 vaccine capable of covering virus mutations
27. China's vaccines help strengthen ~weakest link~ in world's fight against COVID-19
28. Chinese COVID-19 vaccines are becoming global public good
29. Chinese embassy donates medical equipment to Philippines to help combat COVID-19
30. Chinese medical experts arrive in Angola to aid fight against COVID-19
31. Chinese medical experts help South Sudan strengthen fight against COVID-19
32. Chinese official pledges to ensure safety of COVID-19 vaccines
33. Chinese people embrace normal life amid regular COVID-19 control, prevention
34. Chinese vaccines boost global fight against COVID-19 pandemic
35. Chinese vaccines help humankind build 'Great Wall of Immunity' against COVID-19
36. Chinese-donated CT scan, mobile X-ray save lives in specialized COVID-19 hospital in Iraq
37. COVID-19 pandemic speaks volumes of BRI cooperation for greater connectivity~ experts
38. Deepen International Cooperation to Combat COVID-19 and Build a Global Community of Health for All
39. Despite COVID-19 pandemic, China remains important engine for global growth
40. Economic ties between China and BRI countries still strong despite COVID-19 pandemic~ report

41. Experts say Xi's speech commending COVID-19 role models shows philosophy of putting lives first
42. Forging Powerful Synergy for the Global Fight Against Covid-19
43. Full text~ Keynote speech by President Xi Jinping at Extraordinary China-Africa Summit on Solidarity Against COVID-19
44. Global cooperation in fighting COVID-19 & human rights protection~ need for a collective approach
45. Golden Week holiday bounce back highlights China's recovery from COVID-19
46. How Belt and Road helps global recovery amid COVID-19 pandemic
47. In fighting COVID-19 pandemic together, preserving lives must be priority
48. Joint construction of Belt and Road sees new progress despite COVID-19
49. National spirit behind China's success in fighting COVID-19, poverty
50. Precise COVID-19 control measures a stabilizer for economic growth
51. Providing 500 mln vaccine doses to world, China aims to enhance int'l cooperation against COVID-19
52. Providing Strong Support for the Global Fight Against COVID-19 Through Pragmatic and Efficient International Scientific and Technological Cooperation
53. Put people first and forge global synergy in fighting against COVID-19
54. Somber COVID-19 situation a constant reminder of need for closer cooperation
55. Strengthening Vaccine Cooperation to Build a Great Wall Against COVID-19
56. Sunshine of cooperation will finally dispel dark cloud of COVID-19
57. Timely vaccine arrivals in Africa show China honoring its commitment to global COVID-19 vaccination
58. To build joint strength, solidarity for global fight against COVID-19
59. WHA delegates highlight China's support in fighting COVID-19 pandemic
60. Winning a Decisive Victory Against COVID-19 and Promoting the Development of a Global Community with a Shared Future
61. Xi announces supplying Africa with additional 1 bln COVID-19 vaccine doses, pledges to jointly implement nine programs
62. Xi hails China's COVID-19 combat spirit as model virus fighters honored
63. Xi on fair distribution, global cooperation of COVID-19 vaccines
64. Xi proposes BRICS solutions for combating COVID-19, reviving world economy
65. Xi says China to continue providing support for Nepal's fight against COVID-19
66. Xi says China to continue supporting Fiji's COVID-19 fight
67. Xi urges APEC solidarity to fight COVID-19, promote economic recovery

## 9.2.2 Legitimacy Through Vaccines

### 9.2.2.1 *Domestic*

1. ~China speed~ of vaccination highlights determination to beat COVID-19
2. China administers over 9 mln doses of self-developed COVID-19 vaccines
3. China fulfills its promise to make COVID-19 vaccine a global public good
4. China has five COVID-19 vaccines in phase III clinical trials
5. China to inoculate key groups with COVID-19 vaccines
6. China's recombinant COVID-19 vaccine capable of covering virus mutations
7. Emergency use of COVID-19 vaccines expands to larger scale
8. Four Chinese COVID-19 vaccines undergoing phase-3 clinical
9. Happy rebirth-day~ Wuhan marks one year of recovery since COVID-19 lockdown ends
10. Unite for safe, effective, affordable COVID-19 vaccines
11. WHO validates China's Sinopharm COVID-19 vaccine for emergency use
12. Xi hails China's COVID-19 combat spirit as model virus fighters honored
13. Xi requires swift containment of latest COVID-19 outbreaks

### 9.2.2.2 *International*

1. ~China speed~ of vaccination highlights determination to beat COVID-19
2. Belt and Road rail services, construction booming despite COVID-19
3. China develops COVID-19 vaccines as global public good
4. China fulfills its promise to make COVID-19 vaccine a global public good
5. China has five COVID-19 vaccines in phase III clinical trials
6. China injects confidence, impetus to global COVID-19 response
7. China keeps its promise of making COVID-19 vaccines global public good
8. China ready to boost COVID-19 vaccine cooperation with Germany~ Xi
9. China to aid 19 more African nations with COVID-19 vaccines~ foreign ministry
10. China to provide 1st batch of COVID-19 vaccine aid for Nepal~ Chinese FM
11. China to provide 2 billion COVID-19 vaccines globally this year~ Xi
12. China to push ahead equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines
13. China vows more COVID-19 vaccines to developing countries
14. China walks the talk in supporting global COVID-19 vaccination
15. China walks the talk on COVID-19 vaccine sharing
16. China willing to help more countries access to COVID-19 vaccine~ FM
17. China-Africa solidarity, cooperation raise hope of overcoming COVID-19 globally
18. China's recombinant COVID-19 vaccine capable of covering virus mutations
19. China's vaccines help strengthen ~weakest link~ in world's fight against COVID-19
20. Chinese COVID-19 vaccines are becoming global public good

21. Chinese official pledges to ensure safety of COVID-19 vaccines
22. Chinese vaccines boost global fight against COVID-19 pandemic
23. Chinese vaccines help humankind build 'Great Wall of Immunity' against COVID-19
24. Despite COVID-19 pandemic, China remains important engine for global growth
25. Experts say Xi's speech commending COVID-19 role models shows philosophy of putting lives first
26. Forging Powerful Synergy for the Global Fight Against Covid-19
27. In fighting COVID-19 pandemic together, preserving lives must be priority
28. Providing 500 mln vaccine doses to world, China aims to enhance int'l cooperation against COVID-19
29. Providing Strong Support for the Global Fight Against COVID-19 Through Pragmatic and Efficient International Scientific and Technological Cooperation
30. Put people first and forge global synergy in fighting against COVID-19
31. Sinovac COVID-19 vaccine granted conditional market approval in China
32. Sinovac vaccine prevents 67% of symptomatic COVID-19 infections~ Chilean study
33. Somber COVID-19 situation a constant reminder of need for closer cooperation
34. Strengthening Vaccine Cooperation to Build a Great Wall Against COVID-19
35. Sunshine of cooperation will finally dispel dark cloud of COVID-19
36. Timely vaccine arrivals in Africa show China honoring its commitment to global COVID-19 vaccination
37. To build joint strength, solidarity for global fight against COVID-19
38. Unite for safe, effective, affordable COVID-19 vaccines
39. WHA delegates highlight China's support in fighting COVID-19 pandemic
40. Xi announces supplying Africa with additional 1 bln COVID-19 vaccine doses, pledges to jointly implement nine programs
41. Xi hails APEC ~family spirit,~ calling for joint fight against COVID-19, economic slowdown
42. Xi hails China's COVID-19 combat spirit as model virus fighters honored
43. Xi on fair distribution, global cooperation of COVID-19 vaccines
44. Xi pledges to provide COVID-19 vaccines to Poland
45. Xi urges APEC openness, cooperation amid COVID-19 pandemic
46. Xi urges APEC solidarity to fight COVID-19, promote economic recovery

### 9.3 Sense of Unity

#### 9.3.1 Domestic

1. ~China speed~ of vaccination highlights determination to beat COVID-19
2. China capable of maintaining safe, orderly Spring Festival travel rush amid COVID-19 pandemic

3. China shares experiences in fighting against COVID-19 at UN Women Virtual Ministerial Roundtable Meeting
4. China's economic growth to bolster global recovery from COVID-19
5. Containing sporadic COVID-19 outbreaks the Chinese way
6. Experts say Xi's speech commending COVID-19 role models shows philosophy of putting lives first
7. Golden Week holiday bounce back highlights China's recovery from COVID-19
8. Happy rebirth-day~ Wuhan marks one year of recovery since COVID-19 lockdown ends
9. How China pulls its economy from COVID-19 slump
10. National spirit behind China's success in fighting COVID-19, poverty
11. People's active participation helps contain COVID-19 epidemic in China
12. Providing Legal Guarantees and Services for Winning the Battle Against COVID-19
13. Put people first and forge global synergy in fighting against COVID-19
14. Winning a Decisive Victory Against COVID-19 and Promoting the Development of a Global Community with a Shared Future
15. Xi hails China's COVID-19 combat spirit as model virus fighters honored
16. Xi inspects Wuhan, stresses sci-tech innovation, COVID-19 control, community management

### 9.3.2 International

1. ~China speed~ of vaccination highlights determination to beat COVID-19
2. Beijing Initiative calls for joint combat against COVID-19
3. BRI investment helps nations persevere amid COVID-19
4. China calls on CICA members to jointly fight against COVID-19
5. China develops COVID-19 vaccines as global public good
6. China helps chart way forward for restoring world after COVID-19 pandemic
7. China injects confidence, impetus to global COVID-19 response
8. China ready to boost COVID-19 vaccine cooperation with Germany~ Xi
9. China to provide 2 billion COVID-19 vaccines globally this year~ Xi
10. China to push ahead equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines
11. China walks the talk in supporting global COVID-19 vaccination
12. China walks the talk on COVID-19 vaccine sharing
13. China willing to help more countries access to COVID-19 vaccine~ FM
14. China-Africa solidarity, cooperation raise hope of overcoming COVID-19 globally
15. China-Germany-EU leaders' meeting charts course for development of ties amid COVID-19 pandemic
16. China's economic growth to bolster global recovery from COVID-19
17. Chinese vaccines help humankind build 'Great Wall of Immunity' against COVID-19



18. Deepen International Cooperation to Combat COVID-19 and Build a Global Community of Health for All
19. Experts say Xi's speech commending COVID-19 role models shows philosophy of putting lives first
20. Forging Powerful Synergy for the Global Fight Against Covid-19
21. Full text~ Keynote speech by President Xi Jinping at Extraordinary China-Africa Summit on Solidarity Against COVID-19
22. Global cooperation in fighting COVID-19 & human rights protection~ need for a collective approach
23. How Belt and Road helps global recovery amid COVID-19 pandemic
24. How China pulls its economy from COVID-19 slump
25. In fighting COVID-19 pandemic together, preserving lives must be priority
26. Joint construction of Belt and Road sees new progress despite COVID-19
27. Providing Strong Support for the Global Fight Against COVID-19 Through Pragmatic and Efficient International Scientific and Technological Cooperation
28. Put people first and forge global synergy in fighting against COVID-19
29. Solutions, solidarity needed to defeat COVID-19 pandemic
30. Somber COVID-19 situation a constant reminder of need for closer cooperation
31. Strengthening Vaccine Cooperation to Build a Great Wall Against COVID-19
32. Sunshine of cooperation will finally dispel dark cloud of COVID-19
33. Timely vaccine arrivals in Africa show China honoring its commitment to global COVID-19 vaccination
34. To build joint strength, solidarity for global fight against COVID-19
35. UN chief calls for ~far greater solidarity~ in message on 2 millionth COVID-19 death
36. Unite for safe, effective, affordable COVID-19 vaccines
37. Winning a Decisive Victory Against COVID-19 and Promoting the Development of a Global Community with a Shared Future
38. Xi announces supplying Africa with additional 1 bln COVID-19 vaccine doses, pledges to jointly implement nine programs
39. Xi charts course for world to meet challenges amid COVID-19
40. Xi hails APEC ~family spirit,~ calling for joint fight against COVID-19, economic slowdown
41. Xi hails China's COVID-19 combat spirit as model virus fighters honored
42. Xi proposes BRICS solutions for combating COVID-19, reviving world economy
43. Xi urges APEC openness, cooperation amid COVID-19 pandemic
44. Xi urges APEC solidarity to fight COVID-19, promote economic recovery

#### 9.4 Focus on People

1. China-Africa solidarity, cooperation raise hope of overcoming COVID-19 globally

2. China's economic growth to bolster global recovery from COVID-19
3. Chinese vaccines help humankind build 'Great Wall of Immunity' against COVID-19
4. Containing sporadic COVID-19 outbreaks the Chinese way
5. Deepen International Cooperation to Combat COVID-19 and Build a Global Community of Health for All
6. Despite COVID-19 pandemic, China remains important engine for global growth
7. Economic ties between China and BRI countries still strong despite COVID-19 pandemic~ report
8. Experts say Xi's speech commending COVID-19 role models shows philosophy of putting lives first
9. Forging Powerful Synergy for the Global Fight Against Covid-19
10. Full text~ Keynote speech by President Xi Jinping at Extraordinary China-Africa Summit on Solidarity Against COVID-19
11. Global cooperation in fighting COVID-19 & human rights protection~ need for a collective approach
12. How China pulls its economy from COVID-19 slump
13. In fighting COVID-19 pandemic together, preserving lives must be priority
14. National spirit behind China's success in fighting COVID-19, poverty
15. People's active participation helps contain COVID-19 epidemic in China
16. Providing Legal Guarantees and Services for Winning the Battle Against COVID-19
17. Providing Strong Support for the Global Fight Against COVID-19 Through Pragmatic and Efficient International Scientific and Technological Cooperation
18. Put people first and forge global synergy in fighting against COVID-19
19. Solutions, solidarity needed to defeat COVID-19 pandemic
20. Standing Committee of Political Bureau of CPC Central Committee discusses optimizing COVID-19 response
21. Strengthening Vaccine Cooperation to Build a Great Wall Against COVID-19
22. Winning a Decisive Victory Against COVID-19 and Promoting the Development of a Global Community with a Shared Future
23. Xi hails China's COVID-19 combat spirit as model virus fighters honored
24. Xi inspects Wuhan, stresses sci-tech innovation, COVID-19 control, community management
25. Xi requires swift containment of latest COVID-19 outbreaks
26. Zhong Nanshan~ Education 'key' in COVID-19 fight