



# The Politics of Blaming: the Narrative Battle between China and the US over COVID-19

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## Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we are witnessing a surge of nationalism throughout an ostensibly globalized world. In this article, we focus on the “narrative battle” over COVID-19 that has escalated between two competing major powers – China and the US. Guided by a cultural sociological approach, we reveal the meaning-making processes behind the narrative battle through in-depth, hermeneutical reconstruction of the “reactive performance” of each country, as articulated in political speeches and mass media. We point out that, in the Chinese narrative, the country emerges from a “century of humiliation,” becoming a major world power that will no longer be subject to the “bullying” of the West. In the US narrative, even though Trump initially highlights the country’s “very good” relationship with China, as the storyline unfolds, China is blamed for the global pandemic, assuming again the role of a dangerous actor on the world stage. Our research shows that the current reactive communicative mechanism is not only unsustainable, but also dangerous in times of crisis. We suggest that recognition of the narrative battle and acknowledgement of its performative function in the public sphere is the first step toward mutual understanding and meaningful dialogue between these two world powers.

**Keywords** Sino-US relations · Narrative battle · Nationalism · Cultural sociology · COVID-19

“Distress rejuvenates a nation” (多难兴邦). Wen Jiabao (2008, quoted in [45]).

Arguably, the COVID-19 pandemic is not only the “inevitable result” of globalization but may also threaten globalization as we know it [50]. As is typical in times of crisis, we are witnessing a surge of nationalism throughout an ostensibly globalized world. Nation states are retreating into a self-protective mode; yet, at the same time,

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many are engaging in a politics of blaming. In this article, we focus on the “narrative battle” over COVID-19 that has escalated between two competing major powers – China and the US. Guided by a cultural sociological approach [4], we reveal the meaning-making processes behind the narrative battle through in-depth, hermeneutical reconstruction of the “reactive performance” of each country, as articulated in political speeches and mass media.

The Sino-US relationship is often called the most important bilateral relations in the world and, as such, it has been at the center of attention in international relations (IR) at least since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Although scholars have long proposed from various perspectives that the two powers need not necessarily clash [13, 22, 33, 49], the pessimistic realist perspective continues to be highly influential in painting the Sino-US relationship as destined for conflict [14, 32]. Accordingly, the US and China are said to be entwined in a “security dilemma” of distrust, in which the actions of both sides provoke reactions that threaten to spiral out of control [29]. While there has been some academic work emphasizing the mutual responsiveness of Sino-US relations [43], most publications have focused on how the discourse in either the US or in China develops [10, 23, 25, 52].

This paper contributes to this - largely IR-dominated - discussion by adopting a cultural sociological perspective on Sino-US strategic communication throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. In the process, we emphasize the mutual reactivity of the two powers, which shows signs of a dangerous conflict spiral, vaguely predicted by realist IR scholars, yet left largely unaccounted for in terms of the concrete mechanism. As such, we offer answers to two related questions. How has the narrative battle over COVID-19 depicted Sino-US relations and what patterns can we observe through the two super powers’ interactions over the pandemic? Unpacking the concrete mechanism through a cultural sociological analysis allows us to see the patterns that are being revealed both as a result of the narrative battle over COVID-19 as well as a reflection of existing patterns of interaction between the two countries.

The escalated politics of blaming between China and the US is based on perceived threats to the imagined community [7] from the other side; thus, the narration is largely emblematic of reactive nationalism [11]. Different from previous research on nationalism and international relations, in this study, we propose a cultural approach that unpacks the meaning-making processes of social actors, complementing and enriching conventional patterns of politics/economics-based analyses in the IR field. As the narrative battle unfolds, we are witnessing a “shrinking” of the public sphere in which evidence-based rational discussions are cornered by radical opinions and conspiracy theories. The analytical tools of cultural sociology provide a fitting lens to examine these narrative battles, and to foster a first step toward mutual understanding and meaningful dialogue during the global crisis.

To reconstruct the narrative battle between China and the US over COVID-19, we collected multiple forms of data covering the period from February 1 through May 31, 2020. First, we read and analyzed the Twitter<sup>1</sup> feeds of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign

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<sup>1</sup> We fully acknowledge that Twitter is a banned social media resource in China. Nevertheless, its importance in the Chinese mediasphere is tremendous. Not only do members of the public access the platform using Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), but tweets, often providing summaries of official press conferences, are widely shared on the immensely popular social media platforms, WeChat and Weibo.

Affairs (MFA) and the US Department of State, to capture the “attacks” they launched on each other. We also examined the COVID-19 press briefings by the Chinese MFA and the White House Coronavirus Task Force. Finally, we purposefully sampled mainstream and alternative news media in both countries, locating articles strategically relevant to our research aims [34]. While we acknowledge that sub-national actors on both sides also spoke about Sino-US relations, perhaps in different ways from leading political actors, our focus remains on the top echelons of the state, to capture the mainstream discourse dominant in both countries. The entire range of discourse remains beyond the scope of this article.

The data were analyzed abductively [41] to locate “surprises” within the patterns of meaning. Our goal for the analysis was to provide a deep, qualitative reading of the data, in contrast to a quantitative content analysis focused on ascertaining precise proportions of certain themes or patterns. The in-depth interpretive analysis commenced with what Hall [19] refers to as a “long preliminary soak, a submission by the analyst to the mass of his material” that reveals “the same underlying appeals, the same ‘notes’ being sounded again and again in different passages and contexts” (p. 15). We alternated data collection and analysis procedures until reaching theoretical saturation [18], and the patterns repeated within the collected data. To elaborate the findings, we wrote them up based on the principles of “thick description” [17], providing an empirically rich reconstruction of the meanings within the data.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. First, we map out selected literature that ties together globalization, nationalism, and culture, highlighting its relevance for our analysis. We then present our analytical framework of “reactive performance,” and elaborate its theoretical and methodological components. Our findings and the answers to our research questions are presented through a two-fold analysis. We first take the reader on a chronological journey through the blow-by-blow battle between the US and China over COVID-19, beginning on February 1 and moving through May 31, 2020. A narrative analysis of the storyline from each side follows. In the Chinese narrative, the country emerges from a “century of humiliation,” becoming a major world power that will no longer be subject to the “bullying” of the West. The US narrative is contradictory. Even though the US has historically perceived China as “dangerous,” initially, Trump highlights the country’s “very good” relationship with China. As the storyline unfolds, China is blamed for the global pandemic, assuming again the role of a bad actor on the world stage. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of our analysis, and a speculative outlook on the future of Sino-US relations.

## **Bringing Together Globalization, Nationalism, and Culture: A Literature Review**

Scholars and political commentators alike have heralded the COVID-19 pandemic as ushering in the “end of the world as we know it” ([42]; cf. [44]), a factor in upending the hyper-globalized world we are accustomed to. Others are more optimistic, arguing that the pandemic could eventually result in stronger international cooperation [50] or at least in a more positive, liberal, and inclusive nationalism (Scherzer and Woods 2020). Although it is not the primary purpose of this paper to weigh in on this debate, we

suggest that accelerated de-globalization [24] is not imminent. Looking at the five facets of globalization stressed by contemporary social theorists – deterritorialization, social interconnectedness, speed or velocity of social activity, its character as a long-term process, as well as a multi-pronged process [38] – it is difficult to imagine a substantive reversal in these processes.

Whether or not the “global village” [31] will ultimately transform, one thing that seems clear is that a resurgence of nationalism has overtaken many nation-states. Conflict and crisis tend to bring up nationalist sentiments, especially if the nation appears under threat ([21]: 46). In the case of COVID-19, some have noted the emergence of “vaccine nationalism,” a race among individual states to be the first on the market, reminiscent of the situation in 2009 with the Swine Flu [47]. The US president stokes national sentiments by referring to the “foreign virus” or the “Chinese Virus,”<sup>2</sup> while China engages in what Zhang [53] calls “disaster nationalism,” in which the focus is on the “heroic sacrifices of individuals as well as the cohesion of the national community. State media also celebrates the contribution of ordinary citizens more than usual, indicating a more human-centred and participatory approach.” Zhang notes the *People’s Daily* hashtag, “Thank You, Every Ordinary Chinese Citizen,” which garnered more than 570 million views on Weibo by the end of April.

Nationalistic sentiments are not new, of course; but during the pandemic they have been reinforced and/or transformed. In China, anti-imperialist nationalism was already popular during the Mao Era. Even though the “Reform and Opening up” in the 1980s weakened such anti-Western sentiment, this type of nationalism, which “pitted an exploitative foreign imperialism against a courageous Chinese people” ([15]:67), has regained its popularity thanks to official propaganda and popular writings since the Tiananmen Square Incident [48]. Official nationalism is crystalized in the rhetoric of “patriotism” (*aiguozhuyi*), in which Western antagonism in the past and present plays a significant role in shaping national pride and solidarity. Populist nationalism is more radical, upholding an explicit anti-imperialism ideology of China vs. the West, accusing Western (mainly US) policies for confronting and containing China. For these nationalists, any conflicts between China and the West, such as the trade war or the narrative battle over COVID-19, can be interpreted as new rounds of Western attempts to contain and bully China. The glorious memory of Imperial China and the bitter memory of a “century of humiliation” serve as unifying factors for these nationalists and motivate them to exert pressure on Chinese foreign policy [51]. Such pressure from nationalists has become one of the major reasons China has difficulties adopting more moderate foreign policy, especially in its interaction with the US.

Nationalism’s many faces in the US have touched China at several historical junctures. In the late nineteenth century, fears about Chinese immigrants and their impact on the US labor market led to an exclusion movement, which lasted nearly one hundred years [40]. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 (CEA), a “watershed event in the context of race, nation, and the law,” eventually led to a complete ban on Chinese entering the US, creating a framework of “danger” posed against the “purity” of whiteness and nation ([26]: 663).

<sup>2</sup> [Whitehouse.gov](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-members-coronavirus-task-force-press-briefing-5/). 2020. Remarks by President Trump, Vice President Pence, and members of the Coronavirus Task Force in press briefing. March 18. Retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-members-coronavirus-task-force-press-briefing-5/>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

The themes of danger would continue throughout the Cold War, notwithstanding Nixon's "path-breaking journey" to China in 1972 ([9]: 25), and the fact that the two countries often stood together in opposing the Soviet Union. US historian Gordon Chang argues that the communist takeover in 1949 represented the moment that "China became a sensitive domestic political issue," and views on the country have remained contentious between Democrats and Republicans in the US (quoted in [5]). Nevertheless, in an overarching sense, China stands in the US geopolitical imagination as a "dangerous" state "that cannot be counted on to act in accordance with the norms of civilized international relations" ([28]: 145). This characterization has had lasting effects; some argue that "[a]lthough the specific language and target of racist nativism has changed over time, similar themes still reverberate in the contemporary anti-immigrant discourse in the USA as it did during the CEA" ([40]: 675). Indeed, anti-Asian sentiments seem to have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, with conservative elites labeling it the "Chinese flu" or the "Wuhan virus" [36].

To be sure, these nationalist sentiments from both sides have further strained already competitive Sino-US relations. While the US-China relationship was more "complementary and cooperative in nature from 2001 to 2008," having reached symbiosis in the late 1990s ([46]: 54) and especially after China's accession to the WTO in 2001, the global financial crisis transformed cooperation into competitiveness, which only accelerated in the Trump-Xi era. [46]: 57) attribute the shifts to various factors, including "China's domestic economic reforms and growing ambition in global economic governance," as well as a change in the US stance toward China at the end of 2017 (*ibid.*, p. 66). As a "Rising Power," China is also looked upon as potentially taking a leadership role in global health governance [30]. Even though the future is unpredictable or unknowable, we posit that the COVID-19 crisis and what we call the "narrative battle" between the two countries have led to an escalation of the binary thinking that sees the pandemic as a "power game of winners and losers" [53]. Our analysis departs from typical approaches in international relations and nationalism studies, however, and follows the cultural turn in the social sciences.

First and foremost, nations are symbolic constructions. As Stuart Hall asserts: "[A] nation is not only a political entity but something which produces meanings—a *system of cultural representation*" ([20]: 612). Regardless of how rationalized national politics may seem, modern nationalism is not removed from cultural meanings and the meaning-making process [37]. Following Alexander and Smith's "strong program" [4], we conceive of culture as an independent causal factor:

Meanings in modern societies are relatively autonomous.... The internal structure of meaning must be established before such beliefs can ever be related to noncultural factors. To see culture as *cause rather than product* is to move from the older "sociology of culture" to contemporary "cultural sociology." ([3]: 693, italics ours).

Of course, more material structural factors, such as political and economic conflicts, play a role and direct the development of nationalistic sentiments. But culture nevertheless forms and informs all of these realms; as Alexander puts it, culture is a "thread that runs through, one that can be teased out of, every conceivable social form" ([4]: 7). Cultural sociology is complementary to some

of the most cited views on nations and nationalism. For example, Anderson's [7] idea of the nation as an "imagined community" in which members, who can hardly know all the others personally, have faith in the fact that they are part of a larger collective, functions as a "cultural structure," or repository of meaning. The strong program's hermeneutical reconstruction of cultural structures, or "structural hermeneutics," is thus a fitting methodology to reveal the cultural mechanisms underlying the narrative battle over COVID-19 between two of the world's most powerful imagined communities.

Brittingham's [11] constructivist approach to developing a "reactive model" of nationalism and conflict also dovetails with the strong program in cultural sociology. She argues that "nationalism is a social role that becomes active when a state seeks to defend its national identity from perceived threats from another state – i.e., nationalism is inherently reactive," demonstrating how Chinese nationalism results from the "ideational threat from its most significant Other – the United States" (ibid: 149). In this iterative process, social actors, such as political leaders, call upon available cultural resources/structures. Although not explicitly cultural, Turcsányi's [43] study of China's assertive policies in the South China Sea reveals a similar concept: "reactive assertiveness." In 4 out of the 5 policy cases he examines, the immediate trigger for acting (inappropriately) boldly and assertively comes from the actions of an external actor (ibid: 173–174). We bring the cultural turn into conversation with these reactive models by conceptualizing a theoretical framework in which performance is paramount. As Alexander [3] asserts, "Defining the nation is a performative accomplishment." Using cultural sociology, we aim to provide a granular view on this process, focusing not only on the "how" but also the "why" of the Sino-US narrative battle over COVID-19.

### **The Framework of Reactive Performance: A Cultural Sociological Approach**

Our theoretical framework is adapted from the "cultural pragmatic" theory of social performance within the strong program in cultural sociology [1, 2]. In particular, Alexander defines a cultural performance as "the social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation" ([2]: 32).

In the framework of "reactive performance," we pragmatically extricate and translate four elements from Alexander's cultural pragmatics, which are background representations, scripts, actors, and audiences. Actors are the flesh-and-blood performers who project meanings in a social interaction. Audiences are the observers who take in the projected meanings and potentially influence actors through their (re)actions. Background representations are the general symbolic systems the actors and audiences draw upon, the "universe of basic narratives and codes and the cookbook of rhetorical configurations from which every performance draws" ([1]:550). Scripts provide the text for what actors do and say in front of audiences, informed by the background representations.

Alexander [2] claims that in a successful performance, there is an "electric charge" between the texts and the actors, and if the actors can project this electric charge to the audience, which enables "psychological identification" and "cultural extension" from audiences to actors, then this performance is coherent or "re-fused." However, this

mechanism of re-fusion downplays the role of the audience [8], because re-fusion is more about actors’ social “actions” than the social “interactions” between actors and audiences (Author 2018). To capture the process of “interaction,” we use the word “resonance” to highlight the participation of both sides. Resonance, put simply, is when actors’ performances (actions or, more often, speeches) “ring a bell” with audiences (ibid). Likewise, because resonance depends on interaction, audience responses in their roles as citizen-listeners may influence actors’ discourses.

As illustrated in Fig. 1, in the drama of the Sino-US battle over COVID-19, the actors are the politicians of each side involved in the conflict. These actors perform their scripts via press conferences/briefings, Twitter posts and other public statements. In the process, the actors consciously or unconsciously draw on background representations, or the dominant *narratives* floating in each society, such as the cultural trauma of “a century of humiliation” on the Chinese side and the identity as the “beacon of the free world” on the US side. It is thus a “narrative battle,” in which each side has its version of a story, with a coherent structure (beginning, middle and end), a compelling plot, and characters [16, 39].

Narratives not only guide the actors, but also influence audiences, the general public in each country taking in the performances of both their own leaders and the leaders of the other side. Whether a performance is successful or not is reflected in audience reactions, namely, the level of resonance. A successful performance occurs when audiences identify with the actors, insofar as they have skillfully incorporated the dominant codes of the background representations.

In the process of the Sino-US narrative battle over COVID-19, the performances in the two countries occur reactively. That is to say, the response of one country seems to be triggered by that of the other – an assertive move from one side results in a more assertive move from the other side – and this back-and-forth escalation resembles the “reactive nationalism” ([11]; cf. [43]) discussed above. In Fig. 1, we present a “reactive performance” model that captures the reactive interaction between the two countries on the national level.

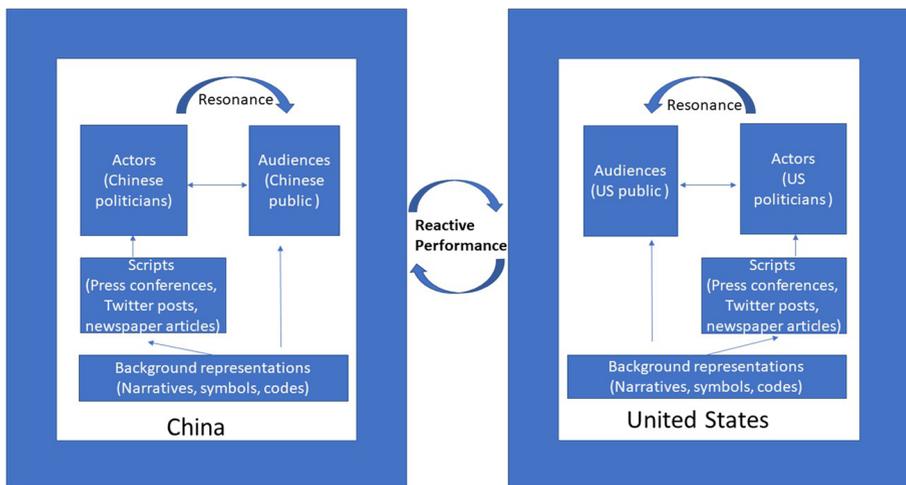


Fig. 1 Reactive Performance in the Narrative Battle between China and the US

## The Sino-US Narrative Battle over Foreign Policy: An Empirical Analysis

Guided by the framework of “reactive performance,” in this section, we analyze the battle between the United States and China over COVID-19 from the beginning of February 2020 until the end of May. Firstly, we present a chronological analysis of the key scripts from actors on both sides of the narrative battle, highlighting the “reactiveness” and the nationalistic tones of the performances. We then elaborate the dominant story-line emerging from these scripts and discuss how they correspond to background representations, namely, the narratives, symbols, and codes floating in these societies. The background representations can be understood as the long-term ethos that the public endorses; thus, to achieve resonance, actors must incorporate the narratives, symbols, and codes from background representations into their scripts, which is precisely what Chinese and US political elites did during their narrative battle. In a globalized context, the general public is not only exposed to the performance of its own leaders, but also that of other nations. Therefore, to maintain resonance, the performance of political elites is inevitably reactive, subject to the performance of its counterparts.

### The Narrative Battle Unfolds: A Chronological Analysis

#### February – Disputes over Journalism

We have situated the beginning of the narrative battle at the publication of a symbolically titled article. On February 3, the *Wall Street Journal* (*WSJ*) published an opinion piece commenting on the Chinese government’s mismanagement of the COVID-19 epidemic and the possible global consequences of a Chinese economic meltdown. The headline – “China is the real sick man of Asia”<sup>3</sup> – immediately aroused public anger in China. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) reacted quickly and condemned the author for his “arrogance, prejudice and ignorance,”<sup>4</sup> accusing the *WSJ* of being “racially discriminatory” and demanding a public apology.<sup>5</sup> Receiving no apology, on February 18, a major Chinese media outlet, *Global Times*, published an opinion piece that ridiculed the *WSJ* for lacking the courage to even say it was sorry.<sup>6</sup> On the same day, the U.S. State Department designated five Chinese media outlets as official government entities under the Foreign Missions Act, which meant their journalists would be subject to the same constraints as the PRC government’s diplomatic outposts.<sup>7</sup> Within hours, Beijing

<sup>3</sup> Mead, Walter Russell. 2020. China is the real sick man of Asia. *Wall Street Journal*, February 3. Retrieved from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-is-the-real-sick-man-of-asia-11580773677>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Peoples Republic of China. 2020. Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Daily Briefing Online on February 6, 2020. February 6. Retrieved from [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/t1741546.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1741546.shtml) Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Peoples Republic of China. 2020. Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang’s Daily Briefing Online on February 10, 2020. February 10. Retrieved from [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/t1743009.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1743009.shtml) Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Ling, Shengli(凌胜利). 2020. The Wall Street Journal does not even have the courage to say sorry? (华尔街日报《连道歉的勇气都没有?》) *Global Times* (环球时报-球网), February 18. Retrieved from <https://world.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnKprw2>. Accessed 13 July 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Fifield, Anna, Carol Morello, and Emily Rauhala. 2020. U.S. designates major Chinese media outlets as government entities. *Washington Post*, February 18. Retrieved from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/us-designates-5-major-chinese-media-outlets-as-government-entities/2020/02/18/d82b3ece-5210-11ea-80ce-37a8d4266c09\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/us-designates-5-major-chinese-media-outlets-as-government-entities/2020/02/18/d82b3ece-5210-11ea-80ce-37a8d4266c09_story.html). Accessed 10 July 2020.

retaliated — three *WSJ* journalists were given five-day notices to leave the country, and the MFA asserted that “the Chinese people do not welcome media that speak racially discriminatory language and maliciously slander and attack China.”<sup>8</sup>

The next day, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo condemned China’s expulsion of the foreign correspondents, saying: “Mature, responsible countries understand that a free press reports facts and expresses opinions. The correct response is to present counter arguments, not restrict speech.” Pompeo ended his statement by wishing the Chinese people could “enjoy the same access to accurate information and freedom of speech that Americans enjoy.”<sup>9</sup> Two weeks later, the Trump administration announced further restrictions on Chinese journalists in the US, claiming such restrictions were aimed at upholding “reciprocity” in US-China relations.<sup>10</sup> Responding to this, Chinese MFA spokesperson, Hua Chunying, posted on her Twitter account: “Reciprocity? 29 US media agencies in China VS 9 Chinese ones in the US. Multiple-entry to China VS Single-entry to the US. 21 Chinese journalists denied visas since last year. Now the US kicked off the game, let’s play.”<sup>11</sup> But this “game” was not limited to the “reciprocity” of journalist visas. In March, the battle shifted to conspiracy theories about the origin of the virus.

### March – Disputes over the Origin of the Virus

On March 4, the Chinese MFA spokesperson, Zhao Lijian, said at a press conference and also tweeted: “Confirmed cases of #COVID19 were first found in China, but its origin is not necessarily in China,”<sup>12</sup> implicitly promoting the widespread conspiracy that the virus might have originated in a military lab in the US, brought in by the US army to Wuhan during the 2019 Military World Games in October. Trump fired back within days, retweeting a message containing the term “China virus,”<sup>13</sup> invoking the popular conspiracy that the virus was leaked from a high-security biochemical lab in Wuhan, suggested already by US Senator Tom Cotton publicly in February.<sup>14</sup> On the same day, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Robert Redfield criticized the term “China virus” as “absolutely wrong and inappropriate.”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Peoples Republic of China. 2020. Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang’s Daily Briefing Online on February 19, 2020. February 19. Retrieved from [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/t1746893.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1746893.shtml) Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Pompeo, Michael R. 2020. Chinese Action Against Journalists. *US Department of State*, February 19. Retrieved from <https://www.state.gov/chinese-action-against-journalists/>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>10</sup> [5]. U.S. places new restrictions on Chinese journalists. *Axios*, March 2. Retrieved from <https://www.axios.com/us-restrictions-chinese-journalist-wsj-china-trump-f4074630-9280-4251-b927-004688380575.html>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Hua Chunying 华春莹. 2020. @SpokespersonCHN, March 3. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/spokespersonchn/status/1234734030907555840?lang=en>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Spokesperson发言人办公室. 2020. @MFA\_China, March 4. Retrieved from [https://twitter.com/mfa\\_china/status/1235160704677642240?lang=en](https://twitter.com/mfa_china/status/1235160704677642240?lang=en). Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Trump, Donald J. 2020. @realDonaldTrump, March 10. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1237334397172490240>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Stevenson, Alexandra. 2020. Senator Tom Cotton repeats fringe theory of coronavirus origins. *New York Times*, February 17. Retrieved from <https://nyti.ms/2wlQnpb>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Itkowitz, Colby. 2020. CDC director rejects label “Chinese virus” after Trump, McCarthy tweets. *Washington Post*, March 10. Retrieved from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/cdc-director-rejects-label-chinese-virus-after-trump-mccarthy-tweets/2020/03/10/58bd086c-62e5-11ea-b3fc-7841686c5c57\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/cdc-director-rejects-label-chinese-virus-after-trump-mccarthy-tweets/2020/03/10/58bd086c-62e5-11ea-b3fc-7841686c5c57_story.html). Accessed 10 July 2020.

This gesture seemed to be appreciated by the Chinese side, when MFA Spokesperson Hua Chunying tweeted a link to Redfield's testimony on March 12.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, however, another MFA Spokesperson, Zhao Lijian, tweeted on the same day, "It might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan."<sup>17</sup>

On March 16, Trump again referred to the "Chinese Virus,"<sup>18</sup> and during a White House press briefing on the 17th, he defended his use of the term: "I didn't appreciate the fact that China was saying that our military gave it to them."<sup>19</sup> He also rejected the idea that such a term creates a stigma: "I don't think so. I think saying that our military gave it to them creates a stigma."<sup>20</sup> On March 18, Trump similarly claimed that he used the term because China had blamed the virus on US soldiers.<sup>21</sup> A day later the Chinese state media outlet, *CGTN*, reinforced the idea that US soldiers had brought the virus to Wuhan, publishing "10 questions for the U.S.: Where did the novel coronavirus come from?"<sup>22</sup>

Toward the end of March, the two sides showed signs of rhetorical de-escalation of the battle. On March 22, China's ambassador to the US, Cui Tiankai, said during an interview that he thinks it is "crazy" to spread rumors about the coronavirus originating from an US lab.<sup>23</sup> MFA spokesperson, Zhao Lijian, tweeted "#COVID19 epidemic once again proves that mankind is a community with a shared future [...] We should unite to deal with the epidemic and carry out international cooperation to save more lives."<sup>24</sup> In response, Trump seemed to back off from using the phrase "Chinese virus," stating that he would not use it again: "I don't have to say it," if the Chinese "feel so strongly about it."<sup>25</sup> On March 26, Trump made a phone call to Chinese President Xi Jinping, and afterward tweeted amicably about their "very good conversation."<sup>26</sup> However, the deterioration of the situation in the US reignited the flames.

<sup>16</sup> Hua Chunying 华春莹. 2020. @SpokespersonCHN, March 12. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/spokespersonchn/status/1238003509510856704?lang=en>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Westcott, Ben and Steven Jiang. 2020. Chinese diplomat promotes conspiracy theory that US military brought coronavirus to Wuhan. *CNN Business*, March 13. Retrieved from <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/13/asia/china-coronavirus-us-lijian-zhao-intl-hnk/index.html>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Trump, Donald J. 2020. @realDonaldTrump, March 16. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1239685852093169664?lang=en>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Whitehouse.gov. 2020. Remarks by President Trump, Vice President Pence, and members of the Coronavirus Task Force in press briefing. March 17. Retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-members-coronavirus-task-force-press-briefing-4/>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Whitehouse.gov. 2020. Remarks by President Trump, Vice President Pence, and members of the Coronavirus Task Force in press briefing. March 18. Retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-members-coronavirus-task-force-press-briefing-5/>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Fuhua, Wang. 2020. 10 questions for the U.S.: Where did the novel coronavirus come from? *CGTN*, March 19. Retrieved from <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-03-19/10-questions-for-the-U-S-Where-did-the-novel-coronavirus-come-from%2D%2DOZrgRTSZfa/index.html>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Swan, Jonathan and Bethany Allen-Ebrahimi. Top Chinese official disowns U.S. military lab coronavirus conspiracy. *Axios*, March 22. Retrieved from <https://www.axios.com/china-coronavirus-ambassador-cui-tiankai-1b0404e8-026d-4b7d-8290-98076f95df14.html>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Lijian Zhao 赵立坚. 2020. @zlj517, March 23. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/zlj517/status/1242117540056358918>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Suliman, Adela and Eric Baculino. 2020. Trump strikes conciliatory tone with China's Xi on coronavirus call. *NBC News*, March 27. Retrieved from <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/trump-strikes-conciliatory-tone-china-s-xi-coronavirus-call-n1170141>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

## April – Disputes over the Numbers and the Origin

On April 1, US intelligence officials submitted a report to the White House relaying their doubts about China's numbers on COVID-19 cases and deaths,<sup>27</sup> reflecting the mistrust and hostility that still haunts Sino-US relations. Pushing back, *The People's Daily* published an article entitled, "US COVID-19 statistics challenged by multiple research: lethal virus is far more widespread in the country than previously thought."<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, in Washington, Trump claimed on April 23 that he has evidence that gives him "high level confidence" that the virus came from the Wuhan Institute of Virology in China.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo claimed in an interview that there is "enormous evidence" that the coronavirus originated from a lab in Wuhan.<sup>30</sup>

In response, Beijing returned to the conspiracy theories that COVID-19 originated in the US. The MFA spokesperson Twitter account posted on April 27, "When did the first infection occur in the U.S.? Is the U.S. government hiding something? Why they opt to blame others?"<sup>31</sup> Three days later, Chinese state media outlet *Xinhua* released a remarkable video animated by LEGO blocks and named, "Once Upon a Virus," which outspokenly mocked the US coronavirus response.<sup>32</sup> In this video, China is represented by a terracotta warrior and the US by the Statue of Liberty. The exchange depicts the events in January 2020, with the warrior announcing:

Warrior: "We discovered a new virus."

Statue: "So what?"

Warrior: "It's dangerous."

Statue: "It's only a flu."

Criticisms by Western media on Chinese efforts to contain the virus follow:

Warrior: "Stay at home."

Statue: "It's violating human rights."

Warrior: "Build temporary hospitals."

Statue: "It's a concentration camp."

<sup>27</sup> Wadhams, Nick and Jennifer Jacobs. 2020. China concealed extent of virus outbreak, U.S. intelligence says. *Bloomberg*, April 1. Retrieved from <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-01/china-concealed-extent-of-virus-outbreak-u-s-intelligence-says>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>28</sup> People's Daily Online. 2020. US COVID-19 statistics challenged by multiple research: lethal virus is far more widespread in the country than previously thought. April 21. Retrieved from <http://en.people.cn/n3/2020/0421/c90000-9682363.html>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Aljazeera. 2020. Trump "confident" coronavirus may have originated in Chinese lab. May 1. Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/05/trump-confident-coronavirus-originated-chinese-lab-200501003915123.html>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>30</sup> US Department of State. 2020. Secretary Michael R. Pompeo with Martha Raddatz of ABC's This Week with George Stephanopoulos. May 3. Retrieved from <https://www.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-with-martha-raddatz-of-abc-this-week-with-george-stephanopoulos/>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>31</sup> Spokesperson发言人办公室. 2020. @MFA\_China, April 27. Retrieved from [https://twitter.com/MFA\\_China/status/1254757672282275845](https://twitter.com/MFA_China/status/1254757672282275845). Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>32</sup> Shelton, Tracy and Iris Zhao. 2020. Chinese state media releases animated propaganda video mocking US coronavirus response. *ABC News*, May 1. Retrieved from <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-01/china-state-media-propaganda-video-mock-us-coronavirus/12204836>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

Warrior: “[Hospital] Built in 10 days.”

Statue: “Show off!”

Warrior: “Time to lockdown.”

Statue: “How barbaric!”

The mockery of China continues in February, but by mid-March, the Statue of Liberty is shown receiving an intravenous drip with a face red from fury, contrasted to an ever-strong mask-wearing warrior followed by an army of fully equipped medical doctors. The dialogue continues:

Statue: “You didn’t warn us.”

Warrior: “We said it was dangerous.”

Statue: “You lied!”

The dialogue then underscores how the US continues to contradict itself in April. The Statue of Liberty insists: “You gave false data. Why didn’t you warn us? [...] The virus is not dangerous, but millions of Chinese are dead, even though the virus is not dangerous. We are correct, even though we contradict ourselves.” The video ends with the warrior questioning the statue: “Are you listening to yourselves?” The statue replies, “We are always correct, even though we contradict ourselves,” the warrior concludes cynically: “That’s what I love best about you Americans. Your consistency.”

## May – Disputes over Mixed Themes

On May 1, *People’s Daily* published 10 questions on COVID-19 that must be answered by US politicians.<sup>33</sup> How many of the over 20,000 deaths from the last seasonal flu in the United States in September 2019 were the “novel coronavirus undetected”? Why was the bioweapons lab in Fort Detrick, the largest bioweapons research base of the U.S. military suddenly shut down last July? The article explicitly links the closure of this lab with mysterious pneumonia cases, the H1N1 seasonal flu, a pandemic exercise called Event 201, and the first case of COVID-19 in Wuhan.

Meanwhile, across the ocean, Trump threatened to bring back tariffs if China would not fulfill all of its promises from the phase one trade deal.<sup>34</sup> Journalist visa issues also re-entered the battleground. On May 8, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security announced new restrictions on visas for PRC passport holders working for non-US outlets, reducing their visas from open-ended, single-entry stays to a limited 90-day work visa.<sup>35</sup> Unlike the previous strike on visas, this policy targeted all Chinese journalists, regardless of the (foreign) news agency they worked for. On May 11,

<sup>33</sup> People’s Daily Online. 2020. 10 questions on COVID-19 that must be answered by U.S. politicians. 2020. May 1. Retrieved from <http://en.people.cn/n3/2020/0501/c90000-9686382.html>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Klein, Jodi Ju. 2020. 10 questions on COVID-19 that must be answered by U.S. politicians. *South China Morning Post*, May 4. Retrieved from <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3082687/trump-threatens-phase-one-trade-deal-if-china-us200>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Wang, Vivian and Edward Wong. 2020. U.S. hits back at China with new visa restrictions on journalists. *New York Times*, May 9. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/09/us/politics/china-journalists-us-visa-crackdown.html>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

Beijing threatened “countermeasures” if Washington does not “immediately correct its mistakes.”<sup>36</sup> Rather than “correcting its mistakes,” the FBI and CISA issued a joint warning about Chinese attempts to steal U.S. COVID-19 research.<sup>37</sup> *People’s Daily* responded to this allegation with an article entitled, “China leads vaccine R&D, no need to steal.”<sup>38</sup> And in a May 13 tweet, Trump called COVID-19 the “Plague from China,”<sup>39</sup> showing no sign of backing down. This three-month interactive performance is summarized in Fig. 2.

## The Narrative Battle as a Reactive Performance

### The Story from the Chinese Side

As presented above, in the drama of the Sino-US battle over COVID-19, the “actors” – politicians and government officials – perform their “scripts” via press conferences and briefings, Twitter posts, and other public statements. In the process, they consciously or unconsciously draw on “background representations.” On the Chinese side, the dominant narrative concerns how an increasingly strong China will not tolerate bullying from the imperialist West any longer. This narrative symbolically opens with the opinion piece entitled “China is the real sick man of Asia,” which reminds the Chinese of the longstanding cultural trauma of “a century of humiliation,” starting when a glorious Middle Kingdom was invaded and divided by colonial powers. This cultural trauma has been a unifying factor in “anti-imperialist nationalism” [48] and “populist nationalism” [51]. It is also central to the concept of the “China/Chinese Dream (*zhongguomeng*)” – to achieve “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (*fixing*) – promoted by Chinese President Xi Jinping [6]. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the MFA took a strong stand against this opinion piece and insisted on an apology from the *WSJ*, signaling that today’s China is not the weakened nation of late 19th and early twentieth century. Moreover, when Washington took assertive steps against Chinese journalists, Beijing also retaliated without much hesitation, emphasizing the “countermeasures” that today’s China *is able to* take, as MFA spokesperson Hua Chunying put it: “Now the US kicked off the game, let’s play.” This playful statement implies 1) the U.S. is the offender, and China is the defender, just like 150 years ago; but 2) China is now in an equal position to “play” the game with the West. The offensive language used by top US officials, such as the term “China/Chinese virus,” and the bullying attitude of the Trump administration, threatening to bring back tariffs, were instantly interpreted as a Western attack to undermine China again. Meanwhile, many Chinese genuinely believe that the virus was (intentionally) brought in by the US soldiers to Wuhan, which further intensified their anti-imperialist nationalism.

<sup>36</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. 2020. Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s regular press conference on May 11, 2020. May 11. Retrieved from [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/t1777953.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1777953.shtml) Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigation. 2020. People’s Republic of China (PRC) targeting of COVID-19 research organizations. 2020. May 13. Retrieved from <https://www.fbi.gov/news/pressrel/press-releases/peoples-republic-of-china-prc-targeting-of-covid-19-research-organizations>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Liang Jun, Bianji. 2020. China leads vaccine R&D, no need to steal. *Global Times*, May 12. Retrieved from <http://en.people.cn/n3/2020/0512/c90000-9689409.html>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>39</sup> Trump, Donald J. 2020. @realDonaldTrump, May 13. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1260578860992737285>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

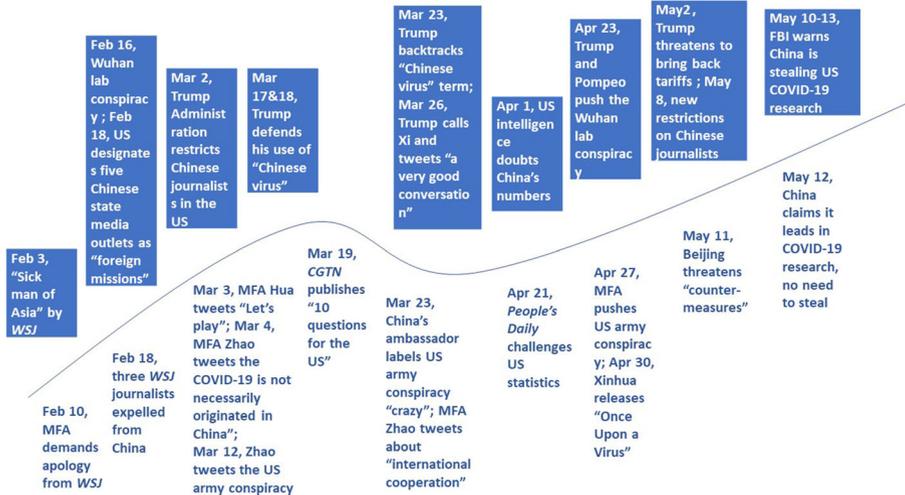


Fig. 2 A Chronology of the Narrative Battle between the US and China

The Chinese public's anti-imperialist nationalism developed with the conflict, best seen through the "Fang Fang Incident" in April, which represents a peak in the anti-imperialist narration. Fang Fang is a 65-year-old writer based in Wuhan. During the lockdown, she had chronicled the situation in her city since late January, posting online daily. Her diaries had gained wide popularity among Chinese readers initially, yet the public's perception changed dramatically after they saw the English and German versions of her book on Amazon in April. Fang Fang was then accused of "handing foreigners a dagger" to attack China by offering "(false) evidence" through her diary,<sup>40</sup> and even her previous supporters felt betrayed.<sup>41</sup> Fang Fang, one of "us," speaking for the sick and the voiceless in Wuhan during the pandemic, suddenly became a member of "them," those who intended to attack and weaken China. While Chinese officials remained silent regarding this matter, the public quickly jumped into the mode of the Cultural Revolution, denouncing the "pro-Western petty bourgeois writer."<sup>42</sup> Such participatory nationalism online clearly reflects the anti-imperialist ethos seeded by and rooted in collective memory and reignited by the Trump administration's strikes against China.

Public opinion has been shown to have an impact on Chinese foreign policy [35, 51]. Therefore, the MFA and official state media drew upon background representations their audiences could identify with, using well-chosen symbolic codes to narrate a story that could achieve "resonance" with the public. To start, they expelled US journalists when the *WSJ* named China "the sick man of Asia" and the US restricted

<sup>40</sup> Jiangxiaozhang (蒋校长). 2020. The female Chinese writer who sends "ammunition" to the US (那个向美国输送"弹药"的中国女作家). *UCAS2004* (国科环宇), April 11. Retrieved from [https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/SsMu-90BMiRLynpbNh4t\\_A](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/SsMu-90BMiRLynpbNh4t_A). Accessed 1 June 2020.

<sup>41</sup> Woshishiyijun (我是拾遗君). 2020. Fang fang disappointed those who supported her (方方有点对不起支持她的人). *Shiyi201633* (拾遗), April 9. Retrieved from <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/U79ICGouj4zgjObwrkZKQ>. Accessed 23 May 2020.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

Chinese journalists.<sup>43</sup> As the conflict proceeded, they promoted a counter conspiracy when the United States suggested its version of a Chinese conspiracy,<sup>44</sup> and when Washington questioned Chinese numbers, China responded in kind.<sup>45</sup> Towards the end of the period we analyzed, the Chinese story featured the LEGO animation created by *Xinhua* ridiculing, “That’s what I love best about you Americans, your consistency,” which corresponds to popular Chinese public discourse about the inconsistent, hypocritical, and double-standard West [12]. Meanwhile, the *People’s Daily* article “China leads vaccine R&D, no need to steal” signals that China is already a scientifically and technologically advanced country, overtaking traditional world powers. Therefore, in this narration – as in previous narrations about the Sino-US trade war, for example – China has achieved its transformation – from a weak “sick man” to a strong leading world power that will not tolerate bullying by the hypocritical and declining West.

### The Story from the US Side

The US background representations on China have historically painted the country, and the Chinese Communist Party in particular, as a dangerous juggernaut [9, 26, 28]. This sentiment is reflected in the *WSJ* opinion piece about China as the “real sick man of Asia” that opens the COVID-19 narrative battle we portray.<sup>46</sup> The author warns: “[A] world that has grown accustomed to contemplating China’s *inexorable* rise was reminded that nothing, not even Beijing’s power, can be taken for granted” (italics ours). The Wuhan government is characterized as “secretive and self-serving,” and the national authorities responded “ineffectively.” Not only is the response to the virus suspect, but the country’s economic power is something to fear: “China’s financial markets are probably more dangerous in the long run than China’s wildlife markets.” As the battle continues, China’s danger to the “free world” is highlighted. A Florida representative tells the immensely popular *Fox News Channel* that China, much like the Soviet Union in the twentieth century, is the “most existential threat to the United States, to liberty around the world, to a free world order that we’ve ever faced.”<sup>47</sup> US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo brings it back to the coronavirus, tweeting that China has “a history of infecting the world,” through their “substandard laboratories.”<sup>48</sup>

Referring to our analytical model, these scripts feed into public attitudes toward China, clearly resonating for US audiences and escalating the reactive performance.

<sup>43</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. 2020. Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang’s Daily Briefing Online on February 19, 2020. February 19. Retrieved from [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/t1746893.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1746893.shtml) Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>44</sup> Westcott, Ben and Steven Jiang. 2020. Chinese diplomat promotes conspiracy theory that US military brought coronavirus to Wuhan. *CNN Business*, March 13. Retrieved from <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/13/asia/china-coronavirus-us-ljijian-zhao-intl-hnk/index.html>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>45</sup> People’s Daily Online. 2020. US COVID-19 statistics challenged by multiple research: lethal virus is far more widespread in the country than previously thought. April 21. Retrieved from <http://en.people.cn/n3/2020/0421/c90000-9682363.html>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>46</sup> Mead, Walter Russell. 2020. China is the real sick man of Asia. *Wall Street Journal*, February 3. Retrieved from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-is-the-real-sick-man-of-asia-11580773677>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>47</sup> Hanchett, Ian. 2020. GOP Rep. Waltz: China’s rise “the most existential threat” to the U.S. *Breitbart*, May 10. Retrieved from <https://www.breitbart.com/clips/2020/05/10/gop-rep-waltz-chinas-rise-the-most-existential-threat-to-the-u-s/>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>48</sup> Secretary Pompeo. 2020. @SecPompeo. May 3. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/SecPompeo/status/1257022823882727425>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

While in 2005, a plurality of US respondents (43%) had expressed favorable views of China, by the early-mid 2010s, the majority had shifted to an unfavorable position. As the COVID-19 crisis escalated in March, fully two-thirds were now unfavorable, and 62% felt China's "power and influence" was a "major threat."<sup>49</sup>

Interestingly, President Trump's narrative on China throughout the COVID-19 battle, opens rather differently. It is reflective of the utmost diplomacy, even at the same time that a travel ban from China has taken effect since January 31. A script performed at the end of February even praises the country's response to COVID-19: "And I want to say that China seems to be making tremendous progress. Their numbers are way down."<sup>50</sup> The president almost seems cosmopolitan:

We're all in this together. It's something that nobody expected. It came out of China, and it's one of those things that happened. It's nobody's fault. We all — we all will solve this problem; we'll solve it well.<sup>51</sup>

The performance shifts dramatically, however, in mid-March, when Trump apparently used a black Sharpie pen to cross out "coronavirus" in a speech, replacing it with the "Chinese virus."<sup>52</sup> Vigorously defending the use of the term, he slips a reactive response into his script: "China tried to say at one point — maybe they stopped now — that it was caused by American soldiers. That can't happen. It's not going to happen — not as long as I'm President. It comes from China."<sup>53</sup> This shift is well illustrated by our model: after the Wall Street Journal article, which escalated the narrative battle and strengthened negative perceptions of China in the US, Trump reacted in kind.

Now, the president's scripts for the middle of the narrative are in lock step with the public and other politicians. While Trump is referring to the "Chinese virus," Pompeo calls it the "Wuhan virus" — notably, six times in one press briefing.<sup>54</sup> By early May, Pompeo cites "enormous evidence" that the virus originated in a Chinese lab, and accuses the communist regime of lack of transparency, among other dangerous characteristics: "This is an enormous crisis created by the fact that the Chinese Communist

<sup>49</sup> Devlin, Kat, Laura Silver, and Christine Huang. 2020. U.S. views of China increasingly negative amid coronavirus outbreak. *PEW Research Center*, April 21. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/04/21/u-s-views-of-china-increasingly-negative-amid-coronavirus-outbreak/>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>50</sup> *Whitehouse.gov*. 2020. Remarks by President Trump, Vice President Pence, and members of the Coronavirus Task Force in press conference. February 29. Retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-members-coronavirus-task-force-press-conference-2/>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>51</sup> *Whitehouse.gov*. 2020. Remarks by President Trump, Vice President Pence, and members of the Coronavirus Task Force in press conference. March 14. Retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-members-coronavirus-task-force-press-briefing/>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>52</sup> Crowley, Michael, Edward Wong, and Lara Jakes. 2020. Coronavirus drives the U.S. and China deeper into global power struggle. *New York Times*, March 22. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/22/us/politics/coronavirus-us-china.html>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>53</sup> *Whitehouse.gov*. 2020. Remarks by President Trump, Vice President Pence, and members of the Coronavirus Task Force in press conference. 2020. *Whitehouse.gov*, March 18. Retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-members-coronavirus-task-force-press-briefing-5/>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>54</sup> US Department of State. 2020. Secretary Michael R. Pompeo's remarks to the press. March 17. Retrieved from <https://www.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-remarks-to-the-press-6/>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

Party reverted to form, reverted to the kinds of disinformation, the kinds of concealment, that authoritarian regimes do.”<sup>55</sup> Again, the idea of China as dangerous to the world resonates with US audiences. A plurality (47%) of the respondents to an *Economist/YouGov* poll taken in mid-May believes it is definitely or probably true that “a laboratory in China was the origin of the virus responsible for COVID-19.” The public is quick to engage in a politics of blame: a solid majority (64%) asserts that “China’s handling of the COVID-19 outbreak led to the worldwide pandemic.”<sup>56</sup>

The end of the US narrative in this reactive performance is clear. The US will be the rescuer, as it has always been. Trump declares: “As history has proven time and time again, Americans always rise to the challenge and overcome adversity.”<sup>57</sup> Pompeo notes in a tweet that “the U.S. government is now providing more than \$1 billion to the global response on behalf of the generous American people - the world’s greatest humanitarians.”<sup>58</sup> The US must respond because China presents a clear danger to the nation. Already in March, an email and a website post by the Trump-Pence 2020 campaign had declared, “America is under attack — not just by an invisible virus, but by the Chinese.”<sup>59</sup> And the public believes the US should step in; a plurality (41%) thinks the U.S. should “take some action for the express purpose of punishing China for the COVID-19 pandemic.”<sup>60</sup> It is notable that throughout the narrative battle between the two countries, the US public itself engages in reactive nationalism: an astounding 91% feel that it is “better for the world if the US is [the] world’s leading power.”<sup>61</sup>

### Looking toward the Future: “Distress Rejuvenates a Nation”?

In this article, we have employed in-depth hermeneutical analysis and thick description to elaborate an emergent culture structure, namely, the narrative battle between China and the US over COVID-19. Utilizing a model of “reactive performance,” we demonstrate the ways in which social “actors” perform reactive nationalism ([11]; cf. [43]) by calling upon “background representations” to fill their “scripts” with meaningful references, narratives, symbols and codes that will “resonate” with their “audiences” ([1, 2]; Author 2018). Politicians and government officials in each of these imagined communities ([7][1983]) narrate a story informed by long-standing cultural

<sup>55</sup> Department of State. 2020. @StateDept, May 5. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/StateDept/status/1257728012138749953>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>56</sup> Yougov.com. 2020. The Economist/YouGov poll. May 17–19. Retrieved from <https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/t0kq71u182/econToplines.pdf>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>57</sup> Whitehouse.gov. 2020. Remarks by President Trump in address to the nation. March 11. Retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-address-nation/>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>58</sup> Secretary Pompeo. 2020 @SecPompeo, May 20. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/SecPompeo/status/1263127010055983106>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>59</sup> TrumpPence. 2020. In midst of coronavirus crisis, Joe Biden defends China and parrots Communist Party propaganda. March 18. Retrieved from <https://www.donaldjtrump.com/media/in-midst-of-coronavirus-crisis-joe-biden-defends-china-and-parrots-communist-party-propaganda/>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>60</sup> Yougov.com. 2020. The Economist/YouGov poll. May 17–19. Retrieved from <https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/t0kq71u182/econToplines.pdf>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>61</sup> Devlin, Kat, Laura Silver, and Christine Huang. 2020. U.S. views of China increasingly negative amid coronavirus outbreak. *PEW Research Center*, April 21. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/04/21/u-s-views-of-china-increasingly-negative-amid-coronavirus-outbreak/>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

representations. In the Chinese narrative, the country rises from being the “sick man of Asia,” weary from a “century of humiliation,” to a strong world power that no longer needs to suffer the bullying of a hypocritical West full of double standards. The US narrative seems to fulfill this characterization of a nation of contradictions. While historically, the US has seen China as a dangerous actor on the world stage, to which its people stand in contrast as the “world’s greatest humanitarians,” at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, Trump proudly touts the country’s “very good” relationship with China. But he boldly moves on to denigrate the country, blaming it for the global pandemic, and noting it is “well-known” for its “pattern of misconduct.”<sup>62</sup>

From an analytical and theoretical perspective, the careful reconstruction of meanings and culture structures help reveal the nuances of contemporary sociological phenomena such as the international conflict over the COVID-19 crisis. While interactions between nation states are often examined through the lens of political science and international relations, this research shows that a cultural-sociological approach, which shifts the focus from sovereign states to the identities, memories and narrations of individuals and collectives in those states can yield fruitful outcomes. A cultural-sociological perspective like the one employed for this analysis complements existing perspectives on foreign policy and international relations by stressing the meaning-making processes underlying social action. It is through unpacking such meaning-making processes that we have reconstructed not only how the battle unfolded but also touched upon why, on the level of a social psychoanalysis, the battle proceeded as it did.

Even as the social scientific results of our analysis help enhance how we conceptualize and understand social life, they point to important political implications on a global scale. As we noted in our introduction to this article, we clearly see a “shrinking” of the public sphere in which evidence-based rational discussions are cornered by radical opinions. The conspiracy theories that have appeared in both China and the US and the promotion of such theories by high-level officials serve as good examples of such radicalization. Does the narrative battle imply the resurgence of what *The Economist* posits as a “new scold war,” threatening the world by “tearing it apart”?<sup>63</sup> The author warns that “relations between America and China have plunged into an abyss from which they will struggle to escape.” An article penned by the magazine on the same day heralds, “There is less trust between Washington and Beijing than at any point since 1979.”<sup>64</sup> The resurgent nationalism certainly paints a bleak picture for foreign policy. Our research shows that behind this “scold war” and the bleak reality are competing narratives embedded in the collective memories and cultural identities of the two nations. Reconstructing such historical and cultural webs of meaning may not automatically move the relationship in a better direction, but it offers a road map to better understand oneself and the other side.

<sup>62</sup> Whitehouse.gov. 2020. Remarks by President Trump on actions against China. May 30. Retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-actions-china/>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>63</sup> The Economist. 2020. The new scold war: The pandemic is driving America and China further apart. May 9. Retrieved from <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2020/05/09/the-pandemic-is-driving-america-and-china-further-apart>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

<sup>64</sup> The Economist. 2020. Superpowered insults: There is less trust between Washington and Beijing than at any point since 1979. May 9. Retrieved from <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2020/05/09/there-is-less-trust-between-washington-and-beijing-than-at-any-point-since-1979>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

Former Chinese premier Wen Jiabao wrote four characters on a school blackboard in Beichuan, the epicenter of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake: “Distress rejuvenates a nation (多难兴邦).” The Chinese believe that “a nation can be successful only after experiencing some hardships and difficulties, as a disaster can also open new opportunities and bring new changes” ([45]: 160). Can we apply this maxim to the global level? Some scholars are optimistic, stressing that the COVID-19 crisis will eventually have a positive impact on globalization through the recognition that we share a “common fate” [50]. Lampton [27] has suggested that leaders in both the US and China should “rethink the US-China bilateral dialogue mechanism” to improve cooperation and avoid major conflicts between the two super powers. Our research shows that the current reactive communicative mechanism is not only unsustainable, but also dangerous in times of crisis. We suggest that recognition of the narrative battle and acknowledgement of its performative function in the public sphere is the first step toward mutual understanding and meaningful dialogue between these two world powers.

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