

PERFORMANCE PUBLIC POLICY: CHINA IN COVID-19

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Abstract: COVID-19 created a worldwide public policy vacuum due to the lack of scientific knowledge concerning effective disease control and vaccine. In this policy vacuum governments often sought to display themselves effective protectors of the public's health and safety despite a less than effective or complete policy performance. From this perspective is useful to compare actual policy outcomes as well as analyse the symbolic performance in public policy. This article presents an analytical framework of performance public policy with three elements, including constructing policy achievement, providing political goods, and establishing 'normative' commitment in both domestic politics and foreign policy. The research argues that Chinese government and CCP have been able to maintain a relatively high degree of social coherence and domestic support during the pandemic by employing performance public policy, a combination of materials strength, political propaganda, nationalist discourse, and assertive foreign policy.

Keywords: COVID-19; Performance Public Policy; Chinese Politics; Chinese Foreign Policy; Global Governance

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic devastated global public health and deeply impacted the world economy. Unsurprisingly given the serious economic, social and political consequences of the pandemic, differing government responses have been highly politicised. Various quarantine and infection case tracking methods caused concern over the appropriateness of state power intruding into previously private spheres and on individual liberties. The usage of face masks, social distancing rules, and intra-state travel restrictions have aroused passionate debate over public health restrictions and human rights. In many states immigration policies, often stoked by racist rhetoric, became more controversial and less humane.

Wuhan, the capital of Hubei Province, China experienced the first major outbreak of the novel coronavirus. China's official news reported that the earliest infections were identified on 8 December 2019. On 31 December the World Health Organization (WHO) was informed about the emergence of a 'pneumonia' of an unknown aetiology, which was later named COVID-19. The subsequent transmission of COVID-19 outside across the globe has resulted in over 700 million confirmed cases and approximately 7,000,000 deaths.¹ In addition to human suffering and economic misery, the outbreak has also triggered political tensions and the deterioration of bilateral relationships between China and many other countries, who criticized it for failing to live up its international responsibilities by failing to regulate activities that likely led to the initial infections, such as the wildlife trade, or its failure to limit its initial spread by mishandling health responses and inadequately informing international health authorities. Because of these shortcomings, American President Trump demanded compensation from China, a sentiment echoed by politicians and news outlets in Britain, France, Germany, and Australia. In particular, Chinese-Australian relations significantly deteriorated after Australia pushed for an international investigation into the COVID-19 outbreak. These international disputes have been accompanied by increasing racist or discriminatory animus directed towards people of Chinese or Asian descent in many states.

Nevertheless, in spite of the mismanagement and lack of transparency, the Chinese government's 'performance' was considered rather successful in the eyes for many domestic and international audiences from the end of January 2020 to late 2022, when the Government abruptly abandoned its "zero-covid" policy in the face of domestic fatigue and the increasing damage to the economy. After the initial missteps, Chinese authorities implemented strict measures to limit transmission and treat infected individuals. Medical personnel from across the country were sent to support Wuhan's hospitals. The government built two special COVID-19 hospitals in two weeks. Strict quarantine protocols were enforced: travel was restricted across regions, local residents could shop groceries only once a fortnight with a pass limited to one person for each household, and face masks were required at all times in public. By the middle of March 2020, new infections were near zero.

Prior to the wide availability of vaccines, this highly contagious disease presented difficult public policy challenges. The initial lack of an effective vaccine or treatment, high transmission rates and lack of knowledge concerning infection transmission, the difficulty of prevention, the structural stresses on health care systems,

¹ Worldometer, *Covid-19 Coronavirus Pandemic*, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>.

and economic dislocation caused by the pandemic initially created a public policy vacuum across the world. This policy vacuum, with attendant issues relating to governmental performance, competence and legitimacy, is especially problematic for the Chinese Government. As the national economic growth lessens and the communist ideology becomes less relevant among the younger population, the effective management of issues of great public concern, such as COVID-19 by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) can have important implications for regime legitimacy and security. As President Xi Jinping put it, the coronavirus is a ‘crisis’ and a ‘major exam’ for the Party leadership.

This article examines Chinese government’s responses to COVID-19. It argues that by adopting a stylized ‘performantive public policy’, the Chinese government and CCP enhanced its domestic legitimacy through its manipulation of symbols and rhetoric coupled with the use of political “performance” or show in addressing the pandemic. First, the Government has generated a convincing policy performance for the Chinese domestic public by using a “result-oriented” pandemic policy. This featured strict quarantines, effective case tracking and aggressive research into treatment and vaccines joined with the wide dissemination of populist imagery featuring top political leadership actively engaged in combating the disease. Second, the Government fostered and re-emphasised nationalist and anti-West political discourses after the disease outbreak. This has the effect of diverting domestic attention by reemphasising the differentiation between ‘us’ and the ‘others’ among the Chinese public. Third, the Government pursued a more assertive foreign policy. This policy has been framed as a necessary response to the ‘enemy outside’ and is reinforced the assumed ‘patriotic duty’ of all Chinese people both at home and abroad to support the state.

I. PERFORMANCE, LEGITIMACY, AND PUBLIC POLICY

Weber argues that governments tend to legitimize their rule on three main grounds: charismatic leadership, traditional leadership where rule is accepted because of religion, culture, and lineage; and rational-legal authority which is built upon a set of political institutions and bureaucratic procedures. Weber does not include regime performance as a source of legitimacy. Nevertheless, good socioeconomic performance generally enhances regime legitimacy. Political support is often associated with ‘output effectiveness’, including economic success and a high level of domestic satisfaction that people’s needs are met on a day-to-day basis.² Examining the communist regimes in the 1980s, White points out that successful socioeconomic performance was essential for the legitimacy of the Soviet Union and other Eastern European communist states which otherwise lacked institutional and procedural based legitimacy.³ The implication of this is notion is that when continuous economic growth cannot be achieved, the political management of the economic slowdown becomes crucial for stability and legitimacy.⁴ Indeed, the rise of the Asian ‘tigers’ not only confirms the relationship between socioeconomic performance and regime durability, but also draws

² Ronald Rogowski, *Rational Legitimacy: A Theory of Political Support* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 7-19.

³ Stephen White, ‘Economic performance and communist legitimacy’, *World Politics* 38(3), (1986), pp. 462-482.

⁴ Ibid.

attention to state capacity and autonomy, which can be used to effectively pursue developmental goals.⁵

Research on this broader notion of performance-based policymaking (and the impacts the success or non-success of particular policy programmes can have on regime legitimacy) has largely focused on the policy effectiveness, regime legitimacy, capacity building and state transformation. Authoritarian regimes and the post-conflict states in post-Cold War era have provided much empirical evidence for this scholarship. For example, Vietnam adopted *Doi Moi* policy in 1986, an economic reform aiming to establish a market-oriented economy. The consequent higher socioeconomic performance reinvigorated the legitimacy for the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), replacing traditional sources of legitimacy, such as socialist ideals and Ho Chi Minh's charismatic authority.⁶ When positive socioeconomic performance could not be sustained, the CPV resorted to nationalism, evident in Vietnamese disputes with China in the South China Sea, to supplement its performance-based legitimacy.⁷ Suharto's Indonesia is another example of performance-based legitimacy in an authoritarian state. The Suharto regime sought to build strong state capacity featuring improved civil service in the context of stable economic growth. This approach, coupled with a reliance on patronage generated significant domestic support until Asian Financial Crisis interrupted economic growth leaving the regime vulnerable.⁸ Soest and Grauvogel have argued that performance legitimacy can be derived from the delivery of public goods such as security, education or health care.⁹ Examining the post-conflict states, such as Afghanistan and South Sudan, Dagher argues that performance legitimacy is earned by state and non-state actors when they deliver public goods, services and welfare that are urgently associated with the daily lives of citizens.¹⁰ This output based legitimacy, bolstered by institutional capacity building, is particularly important where the public has limited experience with liberal democratic culture.¹¹

While state performance has been mostly defined in material terms, recent scholarship looks beyond the socioeconomic outputs and has increasingly focused on the ideational and normative criteria against which citizens evaluate state performance. From this perspective, a state's ability to deliver services and economic benefits does *not* necessarily lead to regime legitimacy and stability. First, many intervening variables interrupt this seemingly straightforward causal relationship between performance outputs and legitimacy, such as citizens' changing expectations towards government, the equality of public goods distribution, management of service delivery,

⁵ Adam Przeworski and Fernando Limongi, 'Political regimes and economic growth', *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 7(23), (1993), pp. 51-69.

⁶ Hong Hiep Le, 'Performance-based legitimacy: The case of the Communist Party of Vietnam and "Doi Moi"', *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 34(2), (2012), pp. 145-172.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Marcus Mietzner, 'Authoritarian elections, state capacity, and performance legitimacy: Phases of regime consolidation and decline in Suharto's Indonesia', *International Political Science Review* 39(1), (2018), pp. 83-96.

⁹ Christian von Soest and Julia Grauvogel, 'Identity, procedures and performance: how authoritarian regimes legitimize their rule', *Contemporary Politics* 23(3), (2017), pp. 287-305.

¹⁰ Ruby Dagher, 'Legitimacy and post-conflict state-building: The undervalued role of performance legitimacy', *Conflict, Security & Development* 18(2), (2018), pp. 85-111.

¹¹ Ibid.

and the attribution process.¹² Second, other than the widely accepted socioeconomic indicators, state performance can also be measured in non-material forms. More specifically, the ability to provide common political goods, such as civil and political rights, law and order, the absence of corruption, government and political leaders' responsiveness, national identity, and shared values, is another set of criteria to gauge governmental effectiveness. Providing 'order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation' is often times sufficient to secure legitimacy.¹³ State performance is also assessed on the basis of moral principles and normative commitments, creating demanding requirements for state performance and legitimacy. This 'moral performance' while arising from internal domestic morality/ethics also encompasses international normative obligations and rhetoric. The internal ethics generates political support from citizens over whom state power is exercised;¹⁴ while a commitment to international norms secures legitimisation from the global normative community.

II. PERFORMANCE AND CHINESE PUBLIC POLICY

Scholarship on Chinese politics has tended to attribute regime stability and legitimacy to the socioeconomic performance that the Chinese government and CCP have been able to generate since 1978. Indeed, many observers have argued that the discussion of legitimacy can be simplified to an assessment on 'governance'.¹⁵ More specifically, this performance-based legitimacy is measured by Chinese government's ability to promote and sustain economic growth and social stability through solid governance policies and political institutions.¹⁶ The reform and ownership diversification of state-owned enterprises and other smaller private enterprises, the transition from centrally-planned to a more market-oriented economy, and the development of trade and foreign investment, have created a dynamic Chinese economy over the past 40 years. According to World Bank, China's annual GDP growth has averaged close to 10 percent, and over 850 million people have been raised from poverty since 1978.¹⁷ To secure social stability in the face of this economic and social transformation, the Chinese government has adopted two types of policies. On the one hand, it implemented programmes to assist vulnerable groups, such as the workers who lost their employment due to state-owned enterprise reform and rural students who cannot afford education. On the other hand, it has also adopted repressive policies towards political dissidents, democracy advocates and human rights activists while actively censoring or disrupting potential sources of dissenting public speech or action.¹⁸ The resulting sustained economic achievement and social stability have reaped the Party political goodwill and capital, while providing support for CCP's

¹² Clair McLoughlin, 'When does service delivery improve the legitimacy of a fragile or conflict-affected state?', *Governance: An International Journal of Policy, Administration, and Institutions* 28(3), (2015), pp. 341–356.

¹³ Bernard Williams, *Realism and Moralism in Political Theory* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 3.

¹⁴ Edward Hall, 'Bernard Williams and the basic legitimation demand: A defence', *Political Studies* 63, (2015), pp. 466–480.

¹⁵ Yucaho Zhu, "'Performance legitimacy' and China's political adaptation strategy', *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 16, (2011), pp. 123–140.

¹⁶ Hongxing Yang and Dingxin Zhao, 'Performance legitimacy, state autonomy and China's economic miracle', *Journal of Contemporary China* 24(91), (2015), pp. 64–82.

¹⁷ World Bank, 'The World Bank in China: Overview', <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/china/overview#1> (accessed 26 August 2020).

¹⁸ Zhu, "'Performance legitimacy' and China's political adaptation strategy'.

leadership and authority.¹⁹ Additionally, the government has skilfully rallied nationalist and patriotic sentiment to supplement its performance-based legitimacy.²⁰ Patriotic education campaigns have been launched to enhance national unity. These campaigns have emphasised China's historic victimhood, the West's 'ill intention' and containment policy towards China, and the 'patriotic duty' of all ethnic Chinese to support the PRC despite their citizenship.

Having recognised the salience of socioeconomic performance and nationalism in Chinese politics, recent research has broadened the notion of policy performance, while paying more attention to the symbolic meaning and normative interpretations of those factors which comprise policy performance in the eyes of policymakers and the public. Scholarship on the Communist Party rule in China has led to even more expansive notion of governmental "performance" to address the unique aspects of Chinese state, economy and society that have surfaced over the past two decades. For instance, Dickson writes: '...to the extent that the Chinese public regards the current regime as legitimate, it is primarily on the basis of performance legitimacy — specifically with regard to modernization, nationalism, and political stability.'²¹ Zeng has expanded the definition to include the performance as an amalgam of "all government function" interwoven with ideology and nationalism.²² This ideological-institutional approach suggests a close examination to CCP's ability to construct, shape, and institutionalise certain "pro-government" or "pro-Chinese 'subjective values and meanings' which are applied to evaluate China's policy performance.²³ From this perspective, a non-material, symbolic, or yet non-existing 'accomplishment' is as equally important as the concrete performance and material outcomes.²⁴ For example, the current Chinese leadership under Xi Jinping interprets and frames Chinese economic and political achievement since 1978 into a syllogism of national pride and collective satisfaction: the 'China Dream'- the rejuvenation of nation.²⁵ The Chinese government regularly showcases its policy performance (and legitimacy) through various public and cultural events, such as National Day parades, movies and songs featuring patriotic themes, and 'red' tourism.²⁶ In times of crisis, this symbolic policy performance, as described and explained through state-controlled media can shape citizens' perception of the crisis generating public support.²⁷ This performance public

¹⁹ André Laliberté and Marc Lanteigne, eds. *The Chinese Party-State in the 21st Century: Adaptation and the Reinvention of Legitimacy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), p.15; Kerry Brown, *Contemporary China* (London: Red Global Press, 2019), p. 228.

²⁰ Michael Roskin, *Countries and Concepts: Politics, Geography, Culture* (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2009) p. 426; Philip P Pan, *Out of Mao's Shadow: The Struggle for the Soul of a New China* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), p. 323.

²¹ Bruce J Dickson, 'No "Jasmine" for China', *Current History* 110(737), (2011), pp. 211-216.

²² Jinhan Zeng, *The Chinese Communist Party's Capacity to Rule: Ideology, Legitimacy, and Party Cohesion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 68.

²³ Heike Holbig and Bruce Gilley, 'Reclaiming legitimacy in China', *Politics & Policy* 38(3), (2010), pp. 395-422.

²⁴ Seraphone F Maerz, 'The many faces of authoritarian persistence: A set-theory perspective on the survival strategies of authoritarian regimes', *Government and Opposition: An International Journal of Comparative Politics* 55, (2020), pp. 64-87.

²⁵ Tony Saich, *Governance and Politics of China* (London: Red Global Press, 2015), p. 76.

²⁶ Yih-Jye Hwang and Florian Schneider, 'Performance, Meaning, and Ideology in the Making of Legitimacy: The celebration of the People's Republic of China's sixty-year anniversary', *The Chian Review* 11(1), (2011), pp. 27-56.

²⁷ Jessica C Weiss and Allan Dafoe, 'Authoritarian audiences, rhetoric, and propaganda in international crises: Evidence from China', *International Studies Quarterly* 63(4), (2019), pp. 963-973.

policy can be effective and lower cost when compared to substantive policy responses, while still meeting public expectations and ensuring that state preferences remain essentially unchallenged.

III. PERFORMANCE PUBLIC POLICY

It is evident from the discussion above that the Chinese government constructs and epitomises its policy performance to shape public perception and enhance CCP's authority and legitimacy. In the face of Covid-19, ideational factors in Chinese public policy, more specifically the interpretation and symbolic meaning of policy performance that Chinese government and CCP used in order to promote a 'satisfactory' or paranematic policy outcome to the domestic public was particularly significant. An investigation of this phenomenon includes three overlapping and mutually reinforcing elements. First, there is a "Spin" (controlling or influencing communication in order to deliver a preferred message) element associated with the particular policy. Using "Spin" the Chinese government epitomizes policy outputs by presenting or constructing a material achievement (or non-achievement) in a favourable light. This is often accompanied by linking the output (or non-output) to be a direct result of competent populist or technocratic leadership. Second, there is the rhetorical and material provision of political and public goods. Along with tangible public goods which may be directed at a portion of the population, political goods which as not materially divisible, are also provided to optimize a positive public perception of government performance. These political goods, such things as national unity and pride, shared values, and strong leadership capacity are often boosted by anti-Western and nationalistic political discourse. Third, the Chinese government uses moralistic/ethical foreign policy tropes to demonstrate a 'moral commitment[s]' in its foreign policy to satisfy the domestic audience. Adopting an assertive foreign policy [both rhetorically and on the ground] and emphasising Western countries' 'wrongful conduct' against China, the Chinese government has fostered a domestically appealing moral 'high ground', that includes defending Chinese sovereignty and national interests, which in turn justifies and legitimates its foreign policy.

A. Constructing Policy Outcomes: 'For A Full Victory Against the Pandemic'²⁸

The Covid-19 pandemic first broke out in Wuhan in December 2019. Initially ill-prepared, the Chinese government regrouped from early mistakes and essentially controlled transmission in about three months. Along with this substantial public health achievement, the government has also skilfully constructed the public policy outcomes during the pandemic; and presented them in a convincing manner to the domestic public which both lessened the real and perceived danger of the disease while enhancing its popularity and the positive perception of senior leadership. A positive, even heroic performance, coupled with cultivation of top political leaders' populist images as portrayed in the media enhanced national pride and secured additional domestic support, and by implication enhanced the legitimacy of the Chinese Government.

1. Spinning the Narrative of Achievement

²⁸ People's Daily, 'Jianjue daying hubei baoweizhan, wuhan baoweizhan' ['Determined to gain the victory of defending Hubei and Wuhan'] 15 March 2020, <http://tyzx.people.cn/n1/2020/0316/c385048-31633362.html> (accessed 28 August 2020).

a. Creating a Narrative

Chinese state media and propaganda apparatus attributed China's 'good performance' against the pandemic to the 'advantages of China's political system', CCP's leadership, Party member's dedication, and the sacrifice and efforts of all Chinese people. In the narrative, the public health policies deployed to battle the virus, highlighted by China's 'speed, scale, and efficiency', were lauded for their 'exemplary performance' by Chinese media.²⁹ This policy performance tended to be quantified and presented in a manner to exhibit superior performance. The declining number of new cases, increased hospital capacity, growing numbers of medical personnel and equipment, as well as increasing community compliance, were used to showcase the achievement, although further analysis suggests a more equivocal and nuanced evaluation. For example, from late April 2020 many major Chinese new outlets, such as People, Xinhua, and China National Radio, effusively celebrated the 'high recovery rate' (94.3%) and 'low fatality rate' (5.6%) of the Chinese COVID-19 patients.³⁰ Yet when compared to the global statistics, the results barely met the average global recovery rate of 95%, and remained below some other countries such as Australia and Germany.³¹ Nevertheless, the media applauded the Party's leadership, (particularly the Party's central leadership), effective mass mobilisation, advanced scientific methods, and national unity for achieving this 'outstanding performance'.³² The 2020 White Paper entitled '*Fighting COVID-19: China in action*' summarises China's 'strategic achievement' in the simple language of numbers: in a month, the rate of infection was contained; in two months, the daily reported cases, which had increased at the onset of the pandemic, fell to single digits; and in three months, a 'decisive victory' was secured in Wuhan City and Hubei Province.³³ This clear articulation of the positive government performance rallied political support. Indeed, a 2020 survey showed that 89 percent of citizens are satisfied with the government's information dissemination during the pandemic.³⁴

In addition to domestic disease control, the Chinese government has also demonstrated and spun its superior policy performance by measures it took to protect Chinese citizens' health overseas. By late March 2020, the spread of virus within China was effectively under control; while new cases outside China had increased. The State Council Information Office in April 2020 revealed that President Xi Jinping had telephone communication with top political leaders of other countries, such as Britain,

²⁹ Minister of Foreign Affairs of PRC, 'Xi Jinping meets with visiting World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus', 29 January 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1737014.shtml (accessed 31 August 2020).

³⁰ For example, see Dong Changxi, 'Zhongguo xinguan feiyan zhiyulv weishenme zheme gao' ['Why is the recovery rate of coronavirus patients so high in China?'], People.cn, 30 April 2020, <http://health.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0430/c14739-31694518.html> (accessed 2 September 2020).

³¹ Worldometer, 'COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic', <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/#countries> (accessed 1 September 2020).

³² Pei Guangjiang, Huan Xiang, Xie Jianing and Rong Yi, '“Zhongguo dajuan” jingdeqi lishi jianyan' ['Chinese response' can pass the test by history'], *People's Daily Online*, 8 June 2020, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0608/c1001-31738044.html> (accessed on 1 September 2020).

³³ China's State Council Information Office, 'Fighting COVID-19: China in action', *Xinhuanet*, 7 June 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-06/07/c_139120424.htm?bsh_bid=5517099546 (accessed 2 September 2020).

³⁴ Cary Wu, 'How Chinese citizens view their government's coronavirus response', *The Conversation*, 5 June 2020, <https://theconversation.com/how-chinese-citizens-view-their-governments-coronavirus-response-139176> (accessed 2 September 2020).

the United States, France, and Germany. Xi requested his counterparts to ‘protect the health, safety and lawful rights’ of Chinese citizens. It was reported that he had ‘received positive responses.’³⁵ After many governments evacuated their citizens from China at the early stage of the pandemic, (an international embarrassment as it exhibited a lack of confidence in Chinese Covid-19 prophylactic and treatment measures) the Chinese government sought to change this narrative and ‘image loss’ by chartering flights to bring underaged Chinese overseas students back home. For example, on 2 April, the first chartered flight organised by Chinese embassy in UK took approximately 188 under-18 Chinese students from London to Jinan, Shandong Province.³⁶ Later, more chartered flights were arranged. These student repatriations were domestically acclaimed as evidence the government’s care and compassion for vulnerable overseas students. Additionally, Chinese embassies provided more than 1 million ‘health kits’, containing face masks, anti-bacterial wipes, capsuled Chinese herbal medicine, and a COVID-19 educational pamphlet to those overseas Chinese students who could not return.³⁷ The gratitude of the student beneficiaries was widely publicised through various social media platforms such as WeChat. And major Chinese news outlets profusely praised the ‘unity and deep love to the motherland’ of younger generation, while noting that ‘the motherland always supports her citizens overseas, and serving the people is the ultimate goal of Chinese government’.³⁸ This underpinned other discussions that accompanied reports on overseas students which questioned their patriotism and Chinese identity by suggesting that ‘western’ values and foreign influenced sensibilities had no room in the Chinese polity. Many commentators opined that the repatriated students could not ‘positively contribute to the motherland’s development’ in the future because they had received a ‘western education’ from a young age.³⁹ This us/them positioning of China v. “the west” further underscored the significance and superiority of Chinese policy and its care for its citizens in China.

The government received criticism from the domestic public and international community for its lack of transparency and mishandling of cases, especially at the early stage of the pandemic. Facing the increasing number of fatal cases in Hubei Province in January 2020, the government, even while pursuing significant material health initiatives, nevertheless sought to present or reconstruct its past poor policy performance in more a favourable light. First, the central government distanced itself from any ‘wrongful conduct’ by assigning blame to the local governments for the mismanagement of quarantine and disease control measures. Numerous local government officials in multiple provinces, (e.g. Hubei, Hunan, Sichuan, Henan, Gansu,

³⁵ Gov.cn, ‘Guowuyuan xinwuban jiu yiqing qijian zhongguo haiwai liuxue ren yuan anquan wenti juxing fabuhui’ [‘State Council Information Office held news release regarding the safety of Chinese students overseas during the pandemic’], 2 April 2020, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-04/02/content_5498179.htm (accessed 4 September 2020).

³⁶ Sina Finance, ‘Baoji jie xiao liuxuesheng huiguo!’ [‘Chartered flight taking young Chinese students overseas back home’], 1 April 2020, <http://finance.sina.com.cn/wm/2020-04-01/doc-iimxxsth3034683.shtml> (accessed 4 September 2020).

³⁷ Gov.cn, ‘Guowuyuan xinwuban jiu zhongguo guanyu kangji yiqing de guoji hezuo qingkuang juxing fabuhui’ [‘State Council Information Office held news release regarding international cooperation to combat the pandemic’], 26 March 2020, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-03/26/content_5495712.htm#1 (accessed 4 September 2020).

³⁸ Gov.cn, ‘Guowuyuan xinwuban jiu yiqing qijian zhongguo haiwai liuxue ren yuan anquan wenti juxing fabuhui’.

³⁹ For example, see Sohu, ‘Gaibugai jie waiguo de xiao liuxuesheng huiguo?’ [‘Should young overseas students be brought back home’], 26 March 2020, https://www.sohu.com/a/383272310_100214804 (accessed 4 September 2020).

Tianjin and Zhejiang) were disciplined for not strictly implementing quarantine rules.⁴⁰ The central government additionally encouraged the public to monitor local authorities' performance in disease control and report any misconduct through a State Council App launched in 2019.⁴¹ Second, in response to the criticism related to the withholding of information on the disease, the Wuhan government corrected the COVID-19 case numbers and fatalities in April 2020. It explained that the 'oversight' of 1,290 undocumented deaths was largely due to the 'lack of hospital capacity', noting the correction was made to 'respect the history, the people, and those who lost their lives'.⁴²

In addition to transparency issues, China's human rights violations during the pandemic also garnered international attention. Human rights advocacy groups were concerned with arbitrary detentions and restrictions on free speech, which have deepened with the COVID-19 lockdown. Domestic outrage also grew after news that Li Wenliang died from the virus in February, 2020. The Wuhan doctor who had voiced the public health concern over COVID-19 in November 2019 and subsequently received police reprimand and a formal written warning and censure for "publishing untrue statements about seven confirmed SARS cases at the Huanan Seafood Market."⁴³ His treatment with the authorities raised public and international concerns about the lack of free speech for those individuals concerned about the disease. In response to the opprobrium, the government proffered an alternative explanation which finessed the criticism and promoted its preferred interpretation of human rights. First, in the face of increasing netizens' praise for Li as a 'hero' and 'whistle-blower', the government redefined the nature of the matter. It stated that the police reprimand was a 'wrongful application of the rule of law' and should be revoked. Instead of a simple revocation and admonishment to the police, the government went further. It noted that Li was a 'true patriot' and titled him the honorific 'martyr' for his actions. Additionally, in a further effort to deflect criticism, the government emphasized that Li was an ophthalmologist and a CCP member. Because of his CCP membership any attempt to label him a 'whistle-blower', 'hero', and 'awakener' *against* the 'system' was an 'insult to Dr Li and his family' [i.e. he was in the system and so his protestations were simply a demonstration of the way the system is supposed to work].⁴⁴ Second, the government engaged in a broader discussion related to human rights, again promoting social-economic rights over civil-political rights. It argued that the right to life and health are the basic human rights, and as such should be prioritised in the global pandemic. More

⁴⁰ People.cn, 'Zhuyile! Zhaxie ganbu yin yiqing fangkong buli deng bei yansu wenze' ['Attention! These cadres were held responsibility seriously for not effectively controlling the disease spread'], 29 January 2020, <http://fanfu.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0129/c64371-31564153.html> (accessed 7 September 2020).

⁴¹ Gov.cn, 'Guowuyuan bangongting xiang quanshehui zhengji!' ['General Office of the State Council gathering information from the public'], 24 January 2020, http://www.gov.cn/hudong/2020-01/24/content_5472009.htm (accessed 7 September 2020).

⁴² Xinhuanet, 'Wuhan dingzheng xinguan feiyan quezheng bingli he siwang shuju, ['Wuhan corrects the statistics of coronavirus cases and fatalities'], 18 April 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/mrdx/2020-04/18/c_138986696.htm (accessed 7 September 2020).

⁴³ Stephanie Hegarty, "The Chinese doctor who tried to warn others about coronavirus," 6 February 2020, BBC News, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-51364382> (Accessed 12 March 2020).

⁴⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China, 'Guanyu shehua renquan wenti de gezhong miulun yi shishi zhenxiang' ['The fallacies and truth regarding human rights in China'], 2 July 2020, [switzerlandemb.fmprc.gov.cn/web/zyxw/t1794112.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/zyxw/t1794112.shtml) (accessed 4 September 2020).

specifically, ‘equality among patients, protecting people’s livelihood, open access to information, and rule of law’ are the ‘foundations’ of human rights in China.⁴⁵

b. Underpinning Populist Leadership

Populist politics is anti-establishment and anti-elitist. From this perspective, populists have a problematic relationship toward holding and maintaining power, as wielding power could make them a part of the ‘corrupt elite’, in opposition to ‘the people’.⁴⁶ However, Chinese populism does not exhibit a genuinely anti-elitist nature, especially as it has been moderated by the government. Rather Chinese populism, consistent with other nationalist populism proffers an unmediated relationship between the ‘paramount leader’ and ‘Chinese people’ but does not exhibit a direct anti-elite animus. This is evident in the fact that positive policy outcomes are often delivered from the top political leadership directly to the public without intermediaries or institutional accoutrements. During the pandemic, President Xi Jinping’s media appearances exhibited him as a caring, compassionate yet determined leader combating the pandemic together with the people. Xi’s speech made in early February 2020 at the Beijing Disease Control Centre was widely publicised and repeatedly quoted, especially his statement that ‘People’s life, safety, and health are always the priority.’ This image of a caring leader was similarly emphasised in news reports on his 10 March visit to Wuhan. According to reports, many officials and medical professionals were ‘much encouraged’ and ‘moved by Xi’s deep feeling for the people’ both during and after the trip.⁴⁷

Furthermore, all the success and ‘policy achievement’ against Covid-19 was generally attributed to Xi’s personal dedication and leadership; while any undesirable performance outcome was ‘due to the poor local responses’. Xi’s personal association with the ‘successful disease control’ could be observed on all levels of political media. For example, in the White Paper, Xi’s name and leadership are mentioned 49 times. The Paper emphasizes that CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping ‘personally leads and coordinates the [anti-virus] action’, which had given the people much ‘confidence, strength, and guidance’.⁴⁸ In addition to disease control, Xi’s personal commitment and interest in economic recovery, especially poverty alleviation, which was necessary in the face of the pandemic’s economic dislocation, was also showcased. After March 2020 Xi carried out a series of highly publicized inspections of several economically less developed provinces, such as Shaanxi and Shanxi, and reiterated the importance of fostering local industries to benefit the public.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Zhang Yonghe, ‘Zhongguo yiqing fangkong zhangxian renquan baozhang’ [‘Disease control in China shows the practice of protecting human rights’], *People.cn*, 20 March 2020, theory.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0320/c40531-31640521.html (accessed 4 September 2020).

⁴⁶ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, ‘Populism’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 503.

⁴⁷ People’s Daily, ‘Jianjue daying yiqing fangkong de renmin zhanzheng; [‘Determined to win the People’s War against the pandemic’], 11 February 2020, http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2020-02/11/nw.D110000renmrb_20200211_1-01.htm (accessed 8 September 2020).

⁴⁸ China’s State Council Information Office, ‘Fighting COVID-19: China in action’, *Chinese government White Paper*, Xinhuanet, 7 June 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-06/07/c_139120424.htm?bsh_bid=5517099546 (accessed 2 September 2020).

⁴⁹ Cheng Yao, ‘Liuci difang kaocha, Xi jinpings guanzhu naxie zhongdian’ [‘What did Xi focus on in his six local inspection’], *Xihuanet*, 14 May 2020, www.xinhuanet.com/politics/xxjxs/2020-05/14/c_1125984071.htm (accessed 8 September 2020).

Of course, an unmediated relationship with the people can create problems if policy performance is perceived as less than adequate. Since assuming the ‘paramount leadership,’ due to his jettisoning of the collective leadership model used over the past 3 decades, Xi has had to shoulder more personal responsibility for policy outcomes. This can be both beneficial, underlining his personal concern and relationship with the population but it can also create problems. On one hand, Xi can enjoy the credit, esteem and popularity that comes with good policy performance; on the other hand, he can be held ‘individually responsible’ for any policy failure. For example, at the early period of virus spread (January 2020) many citizens were trying to buy face masks, but many online and retail outlets were sold out. Anxious netizens and local residents started to ‘demand’ President Xi, instead of local officials, to deliver them face masks.⁵⁰

2. Providing Political Goods: ‘The Great Spirit of China’⁵¹

Besides actually generating material achievement or creating a narrative that such achievement has occurred, an important aspect of state policy performance is the provision non-material benefits to the public. These non-material benefits (re)generate support for the policy choices undertaken and deepen the legitimacy of the government. This is particularly the case when there is high uncertainty and volatility such that it is difficult to assess any substantial government performance, a situation which occurred early in the COVID crisis. During the pandemic, the government exhibited this aspect of policy performance through the highlighting its provision of ‘political goods’, including law and order, national unity and pride, and shared values. For example, in February 2020, the Supreme Court, the Supreme Procuratorate, Ministry of Public Security, and Ministry of Justice jointly published an advisory opinion regarding legal punishment for offenses relating to the interference with disease control measures. Severe punishments were introduced for violence against medical professionals and police, producing and selling counterfeit medications, raising commodity prices, spreading ‘rumours’, and being uncooperative with quarantine measures.⁵² Additionally, as an extension of Xi’s highly popular anti-corruption campaign, many local political leaders, for example in Hubei, Guizhou, Guangxi, Jiangxi, Hunan, and Tianjin, were given Party discipline or criminal charges for inappropriate behaviour, abuse of power, and corruption during the pandemic.⁵³

Second, government emphasised its effective treatment of COVID-19 patients, especially through the use of Chinese traditional medicine (TCM). Despite the lack of rigorous trial data on effectiveness of TCM, various TCM remedies such as herbal drink, were promoted and widely used as a treatment.⁵⁴ In an effort to publicize and share the ‘Chinese experience’ and ‘Chinese solution’, TCM remedies were also sent to other

⁵⁰ This is based on the author’s observation in Jiangsu Province, China, in 23-30 January 2020.

⁵¹ People.cn, ‘Zai yiqing fangkong douzheng zhong zhangxian weida zhongguo jingshen’ [‘Demonstrating the great spirit of China in fighting the pandemic’], 7 April 2020, <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0407/c1003-31663076.html> (accessed 9 September 2020).

⁵² Xu Juan, ‘Wei yiqing fangkong zhulao fazhi diba’ [‘Build a strong legal ‘dam’ for disease control’], *People.cn*, 24 February 2020, opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0224/c1003-31600409.html (accessed 10 September 2020).

⁵³ People.cn, ‘Hubeisheng Huanggangshi chufen dangyuan ganbu 337 ren’ [‘337 Party cadres were discipline in Huanggang, Hubei Province’], 2 February 2020, fanfu.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0130/c64371-31565382.html (accessed 10 September 2020).

⁵⁴ David Cyranoski, ‘China is promoting coronavirus treatments based on unproven traditional medicines’, *Nature*, 6 May 2020, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01284-x> (accessed 2 September 2020).

countries, such as Thailand, Iran and Italy, as a form of international aid during the pandemic.⁵⁵ According to the 2020 White Paper, TCM was involved in treating 92% patients, and was proven useful in over 90% cases.⁵⁶ President Xi championed the use of TCM as ‘a treasure of Chinese civilisation’.⁵⁷ The promotion of traditional medicine by the government clearly fostered a heightened level of national pride and confidence that in turn enhanced CCP’s authority and legitimacy in uncertain times.

Third, Chinese state media described fighting COVID-19 a global-wide ‘competition’. In this competition, a nation’s ‘material power’ as well as ‘mental strength’(which calls for the highest level of nation unity and patriotism), is put to test. The official governmental discourse in media and through governmental information releases placed this ‘competition’ in light of the national mythology as it related to the formation of Chinese nation, the historical ‘hardship’, and the ‘heroic Chinese people’ to rally political support.⁵⁸ Further as the early suppression policies proved more and more effective China ‘won this competition’ (for there are no infection within the country), the Chinese people have demonstrated the ‘great spirit of China’ to the world.

In addition to emphasizing Xi’s ‘paramount leadership’ in this competitive fight against Covid-19, the political discourse during the pandemic skilfully superimposed and equalised the terms of ‘Chinese people’, ‘Chinese nation’, CCP, and People’s Liberation Army. The policy achievement of overcoming the virus, is built upon the ‘heroism of the whole Party, Army, and Chinese people from all ethnic groups,’ and therefore the ‘true patriotism’ requires an individual to equally and unequivocally support to all these entities.

After transmission was brought under control in April 2020, there was an outpouring national pride and confidence. Chinese media has presented the government’s response to COVID-19 as a living evidence of ‘China dream’: ‘the sincere wish of a shared national destiny’ and ‘the great expectation of a strong and prosperous state’ which tie ‘all Chinese people’ together.⁵⁹ Such nationalist pride and patriotism was exemplified by a six-hour documentary series ‘Fighting Together’ (tongxin zhanyi 同心战“疫”), documenting and celebrating this success was jointly made by the Publicity Department of CCP and China Central Television (CCTV). It aired in September 2020 to a mainly domestic audience. The documentary, grounded in historical fact but with considerable artistic license, pays tribute to Wuhan city where the pandemic first appeared, and praises the ‘heroic deeds’ of medical professionals, CCP party members, PLA, and ordinary Chinese people. President Xi Jinping’s leadership, policy instructions and personal commitment echo through the documentary, even though Xi was criticised for his absence during the earlier days of the pandemic.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ China's State Council Information Office, ‘Fighting COVID-19: China in action’.

⁵⁷ Nectar Gan and Yong Xiong, ‘Beijing is promoting traditional medicine as a “Chinese solution” to coronavirus. Not everyone is on board’, *CNN*, 16 March 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/14/asia/coronavirus-traditional-chinese-medicine-intl-hnk/index.html> (accessed 2 September 2020).

⁵⁸ People.cn, ‘Zai yiqing fangkong douzheng zhong zhangxian weida zhongguo jingshen’.

⁵⁹ People.cn, ‘Zai yiqing fangkong douzheng zhong zhangxian weida zhongguo jingshen’.

⁶⁰ Chris Buckley and Steven Lee Myers, ‘Where’s Xi? China’s leader commands coronavirus fight from the safe heights’, *New York Times*, 8 February 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/08/world/asia/xi-coronavirus-china.html> (accessed on 4 December 2020).

State media, Xinhua, described the documentary series as an important demonstration of President Xi's and CCP's leadership as well as the 'advantages of China's socialist political system'.⁶¹ Around the same time, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism sponsored the opera entitled 'Angel's Diary', telling a story based on a diary written by a head nurse's working in a hospital during the pandemic. In her diary, the head nurse documented fellow Wuhan medical professionals faithfully performing their duty while making personal sacrifice. These artistic works further boosted Chinese national pride because the success of China was contrasted with by public comparisons with other developed countries that had not effectively dealt with COVID-19 at the time.

3. Establishing 'Moral' Commitments: 'A Responsible Great Power'⁶²

Along with presenting symbolic policy performance in both material and non-material forms, the Chinese government also utilised foreign policy to demonstrate its policy 'achievement' in assertively defending national sovereignty and acting 'responsibly' towards foreign affairs during the pandemic. This more assertive foreign policy exhibited during the pandemic has been justified as a 'moral commitment', combining the discourse of China's sovereign rights, 'victimhood', and global responsibility. While clearly aimed at China's neighbours and competitors, the policy also was directed toward diverting domestic attention away from public health issues by emphasizing the 'enemies' beyond the borders and by the promotion China's preferred values across the international community.

a. Assertive Foreign Policy: China is Being 'Wronged'

Recently China has justified an assertive foreign policy based on the continuing notion of 'victimhood' and as justified response to the threatening reactions of foreign powers who oppose its 'peaceful' foreign policy. Chinese political discourse presented China as a 'victim' of foreign containment efforts while it is in fact merely exercising its sovereign rights in a peaceful manner. This justification has the roots in the 'Century of Humiliation' national narrative and atrocities suffered in WWII. It is fuelled by the Japan's 'inadequate' apology for the war crimes as well as the continued American presence in the Asia Pacific region, especially American involvement in Taiwan.

This paradoxical policy setting, simultaneously assertive and emphasising victimhood was particularly reflected in China's foreign policy during the pandemic. For example, China was criticised of taking advantage of COVID-19 to consolidate its power and control in the South China Sea. In April 2020 a Chinese coast guard vessel sank a Vietnamese fishing boat in disputed waters; and in May the US Navy sent patrol ships in response to a Chinese survey and Coast Guard ships manoeuvring in the Malaysian Exclusive Economic Zone. Additionally, the Chinese aircraft carrier Liaoning conducted sea trials in disputed seas near the east coast of Taiwan; while China's newest aircraft carrier *Shandong* conducted her 'maiden sea trial' in May. In addition to these military actions, in April 2020 China's State Council decided to

⁶¹ Xinhua, 'Jilupian tongxinzhanyi jiangbo' ['Documentary "Fighting Together" will be aired'], *Xinhuanet*, 31 August 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-08/31/c_1126435642.htm?baike (accessed on 4 December 2020).

⁶² People.cn, 'Zhongguo kangyi zhangxian fuzeren daguo dandang', ['China demonstrates itself a responsible great power while combating the pandemic'], 19 March 2020, theory.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0319/c40531-31638571.html (accessed 28 August 2020).

establish two new districts in Sansha City, a prefecture level city which ‘governs’ the disputed territory in the South China Sea. While clearly a symbolic gesture, these geopolitical actions exhibited an intention to tighten control over the area to advance territorial claims, while adding additional impediments to Western efforts in support their preferred policy of freedom of navigation in the region.⁶³ During the pandemic, China’s assertive postures in the South China Sea, (widely publicised in domestic media) worsened relations with Southeast Asian states, as well as the United States. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, echoed by Philippines’ Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin, rejected China’s ‘historical rights’ in the region and called for China to respect of 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration’s ruling which dismissed China’s claims in the area.⁶⁴

Reacting to this international criticism, the government reiterated its sovereign rights and emphasized its ‘victimhood’ in the face of ‘anti-China’ foreign forces. First, Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi, denounced the accusations that China was expanding in the South China Sea during the pandemic. He called such accusations ‘preposterous’ as ‘China was fully focusing on cooperating with ASEAN states to combat the virus.’ He noted that because of their joint efforts the ASEAN states and China were able to ‘gain more political trust’. Wang further pointed out that it was ‘shameful’ and ‘regrettable’ that ‘some countries’ intended to ‘sabotage’ China’s relations with ASEAN states, and ‘endanger the peace and stability’ in the region.⁶⁵ Second, in response to US and the Philippines’ reference to the 2016 International Arbitration ruling, Chinese government reiterated that the 2016 decision was ‘illegal, invalid and unacceptable;’ as such US naval activities in the South China Sea were a ‘violation of China’s sovereignty and security’ and a misuse of the *Convention on Law of the Sea*.⁶⁶ Given these stated ‘sovereign rights’, the establishment of new districts in Sansha City (which had led to international criticism), was ‘reasonable, legitimate, and appropriate. Wang noted that those neighbouring states (Vietnam and the Philippines) which had criticised the extension of jurisdiction, had also previously built administrative structures and were ‘in fact’ engaged in acts of ‘illegally seizing Chinese territory’.⁶⁷

The application of ‘victimhood’ discourse has gathered much nationalist support: many netizens expressed appreciation of government’s ‘strong stand’ internationally to defend China’s national interests and handle ‘US pressure’. This has

⁶³ Zachary Williams, ‘China’s tightening grasp in the South China Sea: A first-hand look’, *The Diplomat*, 10 June 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/chinas-tightening-grasp-in-the-south-china-sea-a-first-hand-look/> (accessed 15 September 2020).

⁶⁴ Rahul Mishra, ‘China’s Self-Inflicted Wounds in the South China Sea’, *The Diplomat*, 21 July 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/07/chinas-self-inflicted-wounds-in-the-south-china-sea/> (accessed 15 September 2020).

⁶⁵ People.cn, ‘Wang Yi: “Zhongguo liyong yiqing zai nanhai kuoda cunzai” shi wuji zhitai’, [‘Wang Yi: it is preposterous to say that China is taking advantages of the pandemic to expand the existence in South China Sea’], 24 May 2020, world.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0524/c1002-31721425.html (accessed 15 September 2020).

⁶⁶ Yu Xiaoping and Yu Xiaoxuan, ‘Yiqing zhixia meifang paichu junjian feiji pinfan zai nanhai zishi, wajiaobu duncu tingzhi’ [‘Ministry of Foreign Affairs requests US to stop sending warships and fight jets to stir South China Sea during the pandemic’], *Thepaper.cn*, 7 April 2020, https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_6860327 (accessed 15 September 2020).

⁶⁷ Liu Yanhua, ‘Sansha shequ, heli hefa zheng dangshi’ [‘Establishing districts in Sansha is reasonable, legitimate, and good timing’], National Institute for South China Sea Studies, 21 May 2020, www.nanhai.org.cn/review_c/434.html (accessed 15 September 2020).

been a longstanding aspect of Chinese foreign policy discourse. Interestingly however, this ‘victimhood’ rhetoric has been extended not only in its resistance to its asserted territorial claims and economic disputes with other states but also in its response to international criticism as the alleged COVID-19 source country.

Chinese state media not only highlighted China as ‘victim’ of the coronavirus but also as a target of Western ‘political manoeuvre’. During the high point of the pandemic there were calls for a global inquiry into the origin of the coronavirus and China's handling of the initial outbreak in Wuhan. Australia was one of early proponents of an independent investigation. In May 2020 Australia offered a draft motion to World Health Assembly requesting an evaluation of responses to the pandemic, which was supported by 122 countries.⁶⁸ The paradoxical victim-aggression policy was evident in China's reaction to Australia. On one hand, Chinese government criticised Australia for holding the ‘ideological bias’ and playing ‘political manoeuvre’ against China, which inevitably ‘interfered [with] international cooperation’ during the pandemic.⁶⁹ As the United States was one of the main virus infection sources in Australia, Chinese news outlets suggested that Australia should target the investigation towards the United States -- instead of ‘using China as a scapegoat to appease its domestic public’.⁷⁰ On the other hand, China enacted a set of aggressive punitive measures against Australian economic interests. In May 2020, Chinese government imposed punishing tariffs on Australian exports such as barley and beef. In addition, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs advised Chinese citizens not to visit Australia due to the increasing ‘racial discrimination and violence against Chinese’ from ‘local community, news media and law enforcement’.⁷¹ For the same reasons, the Ministry of Education advised Chinese students not to choose Australia for tertiary education, an action that had significant adverse impacts on Australian universities. Employees in many state-owned institutes received administrative orders to not to visit Australia for business or pleasure.⁷²

Third, ‘colonial and imperial victimhood’ as it relates to Hong Kong has also dominated China's political discourse during the pandemic, rallying much domestic support against the ‘foreign interference into Chinese domestic affairs’. On 30 June 2020, a new national security law entered into force in Hong Kong. The law has been widely criticised in international community for its vague definition of ‘national security’ and the lack of accountability and transparency. Many Western states and international organisations expressed deep concern over the law. Chinese government

⁶⁸ Daniel Hurst, ‘Australia hails global support for independent coronavirus investigation’, *The Guardian*, 18 May 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/18/australia-wins-international-support-for-independent-coronavirus-inquiry> (accessed 15 September 2020).

⁶⁹ Yu Xiaoqing and Wang Lunyu, ‘Aodaliya youshui dui zhongguo yiqing zaoqi zhankai diaocha’ [‘Australia is lobbying to investigate China's handling of the initial virus outbreak’], *Thepaper.cn*, 23 April 2020, https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_7102830 (accessed 14 September 2020).

⁷⁰ CCTV.com, ‘Aodaliya yao ‘diaocha xinguan bingdu yuantou?’ [‘Australia wants to ‘investigate the origin of the coronavirus?’] 14 May 2020, m.news.cctv.com/2020/05/14/ARTIwt3p86y0VoY3QAnNwlyX200514.shtml (accessed 15 September 2020).

⁷¹ People.cn, ‘Zhu aodaliya shiguan tixing: zhongguo gongmin jinqi jinshen qianwang aodaliya’ [‘Reminder from the Chinese embassy in Australia: Chinese citizens should be cautious of planning to visit Australia’], 13 July 2020, <http://travel.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0713/c41570-31781655.html> (accessed 16 September 2020).

⁷² Based on the author's personal communication with people working in a state-owned institute in Jiangsu Province, China, on 24 May 2020.

assertively responded to these criticisms citing its rights of sovereignty, security, and national development under international law. It stated that the security law aimed to ‘protect Hong Kong residents’ from ‘separatist, terrorists, and foreign forces’, and that the United States [and other states] should not interfere with China’s domestic legislative action.⁷³ It has also asserted that China had performed all its obligations under the ‘Sino-British Joint Declaration’ that established the basis for Hong Kong return to China, noting that the Joint Declaration did not govern Hong Kong in 2020.⁷⁴

The assertive foreign policy and policy discourse during the pandemic skilfully diverted Chinese public attention from domestic disease control and the increasingly onerous lockdowns to ‘various threats overseas’, including previous colonial powers, ‘foreign forces’ seeking to contain China, and ‘aggressive’ neighbour states. This foreign policy proffered to the domestic public that the ‘true enemies’ were the ‘foreign forces out there’ and by implication the coronavirus, despite its devastation was not a significant issue. For the international audience, however, the Chinese emphasis on the world’s ‘common enemy and shared victimhood’ under COVID-19, was an attempt to mislead the international community from a more assertive foreign behaviour that sought to deepen Chinese foreign policy objective at a time when the world’s attention was distracted by the pandemic.

b. ‘Normative’ Foreign Policy: China is Being A ‘Responsible Power’

Chinese foreign was criticised during the pandemic for its failure to meet its responsibility.’ This responsibility related to its lack of transparency, accountability, and protection of individual rights during the crisis. China countered these criticisms by emphasizing its state responsibility through its implantation of a ‘responsible public policy’ of reporting and controlling the disease. And more importantly with its widely publicised provision of global common goods during the pandemic. To address the criticism on lack of transparency, the government claimed that China’s public health institutes have always been ‘open, transparent, and responsible’ in terms of information sharing, having reported then yet ‘unknown virus’ to WHO on 3 January 2020. In support of its position of as a responsible power, Chinese state media noted China has made a ‘great contribution’ to world public health in combatting COVID-19 as it has ‘efficiently contained the virus spread’ and made ‘tremendous economic sacrifice’ with a nation-wide lockdown.⁷⁵ It argue that in contrast other countries such the United States, have acted neither appropriately nor responsibly. From the Chinese perspective, these countries not only did not slow transmission rates but also violated their

⁷³ People.cn, ‘Waijiaobu: jiang dui waibuy shili ganshe xianggang xingjing yuyi fanzhi’ [‘Ministry of Foreign Affairs: China will fight against any foreign interference in Hong Kong affairs’], 27 May 2020, world.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0527/c1002-31726340.html (accessed 14 September 2020).

⁷⁴ People.cn, ‘Waijiaobu bo meifang ganshe zhongguo shegang lifang’ [‘Ministry of Foreign Affairs criticised US interference in Hong Kong’s law-making’], 25 May 2020, world.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0525/c1002-31723142.html 1/ (accessed 14 September 2020).

⁷⁵ People.cn, ‘Quanmin zhan “yi”, zhongguo dui shijie de dandang’ [‘People’s war against coronavirus: China’s responsibility for the world’], 9 February 2020, <http://opinion.people.com.cn/gb/n1/2020/0209/c223228-31578105.html> (accessed 17 September 2020).

international responsibilities, spreading what China has called a ‘political virus’ by ‘sabotaging other countries’ genuine efforts’ to combat the disease.⁷⁶

Furthermore, Chinese government attempted to burnish its much advertised ‘responsibility power’ image by providing global commons goods during the pandemic. First, according to the 2020 White Paper, China had offered a large amounts of humanitarian aid including USD\$50 million cash to WHO, sending medical teams to 27 countries, and delivering medical aid to 150 countries and 4 international organisations.⁷⁷ For example, on 23 March 2020 a Chinese chartered plane arrived in Italy and delivered 155 ECMOs, 1.1 million FFP2 and N95 face masks, 305,000 surgical masks, 205,000 gloves, 1,000 COVID-19 test kits, and Personal Protection Equipment, a lot of which were donation from Chinese government and Chinese businesses.⁷⁸ Other less developed and neighbouring countries also received donations or medical aid from China.⁷⁹ Chinese media contrasted its ‘altruism’ with Taiwan’s ‘selfishness’ as Taiwan refused to allow face mask exports to the PRC, when it donated 100,000 N95 face masks to Australia in January 2020 for use in the widespread bushfires.⁸⁰

Second, Chinese government announced its willingness to cooperate and share the vaccine it had developed with the less developed countries. Two Chinese vaccine makers conducted trials with Pakistan National Institute of Health where people were reported to be eager to receive the vaccines.⁸¹ As President Xi stated at World Health Assembly in May 2021, the domestically-made Chinese vaccine was envisioned to become a ‘global public good’. And China would ensure its ‘accessibility and affordability in developing countries’.⁸² This global outreach was not without effect. China’s vaccination research and its stated intention to share the results have eased diplomatic ties with its Southeast Asian neighbours. Standing in contrast to the ‘America First’ policy under the Trump Administration, the policy signalled China’s continued aspirations for global leadership in the post-pandemic world order.

Third, Chinese government stated its intention to participate in world economic recovery and shape the post-pandemic world system with its power, influence, and preferred values. The ‘One Belt One Road’ Initiative, China’s global infrastructure development strategy remained the centrepiece of Chinese foreign policy related to

⁷⁶ People.cn, ‘Zhongguo daibiao zai lianda quanhui yanli bochi meifang wuduan zhize’ [‘Chinese UN representatives denounced US criticism at General Assembly’], 12 September 2020, <http://world.people.com.cn/gb/n1/2020/0912/c1002-31858953.html> (accessed 17 September 2020).

⁷⁷ China's State Council Information Office, ‘Fighting COVID-19: China in action’.

⁷⁸ People.cn, ‘Dapi wuzhi zi zhongguo dida milan, yuanzhu yidali kangji yiqing’ [‘Chinese resources arrived in Milan to assist Italy in the pandemic’], 24 March 2020, <http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0325/c1002-31647279.html> (accessed 18 September 2020).

⁷⁹ People.cn, ‘Zhongguo yuanzhu duoguo kangyi’ [‘China gives aids to multiple countries to combat the pandemic’], 6 April 2020, http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrhwb/html/2020-04/06/content_1980222.htm (accessed 18 September 2020).

⁸⁰ Wang Ping, ‘Jie yiqing la chouhen tai dangju shihe juxin’ [‘Using the pandemic to flaming hatred: what is Taiwan’s intention?’], *People.cn*, 13 February 2020, <http://tw.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0213/c14657-31584337.html> (accessed 18 September 2020).

⁸¹ Sui-Lee Wee, ‘From Asia to African, China promotes its vaccines to win friends’, *New York Times*, 11 September 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/11/business/china-vaccine-diplomacy.html> (accessed 18 September 2020).

⁸² Xinhuanet.com, ‘China’s COVID-19 vaccine to become global public good when available: Xi’, 18 May 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-05/18/c_139066851.html (accessed 18 September 2020).

overseas investment and economic interactions. As President Xi's main policy 'innovation' and achievement, the Initiative has often been used as a basis for economic cooperation after the pandemic, despite evidence that it may not have sufficient funding.⁸³ Nevertheless, President Xi described the Initiative 'the answer' to the many challenges in post-pandemic world where China 'works with its partners' to build 'a road to multilateral cooperation, public health, economic revival, and full development potential.'⁸⁴

Besides the One Belt One Road Initiative, China has also pushed its own preferred values in a 'global community of shared future'. This concept echoes the idea of 'Beijing Consensus', a Chinese developmental model featuring 'stable yet repressive politics and high-speed economic growth'. Unlike 'Beijing Consensus' that was endogenously defined and never fully embraced in Chinese official discourse, 'a global community of shared future' often appeared in foreign policy rhetoric during the pandemic. Though not particularly clear, the concept involves two layers of meaning. First, China's political system has 'advantages', which were 'evident' in the pandemic and assisted in China fulfilling its 'international obligations.' Therefore, foreign powers should refrain from intervening in its affairs.⁸⁵ This non-intervention principle includes the idea that normative values and human rights can be interpreted and implemented differently by different political systems. For example, Chinese delegates insisted that 'people's happy life was their primary human right' at the UN Human Rights Council in September 2020.⁸⁶ Second, whether or not 'participating [in] multilateralism and global cooperation',⁸⁷ China intends to play a more important role in global issues in the post-pandemic world.

CONCLUSION

This paper explores China's public policy during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing upon the scholarship of performance-based policy that focuses on policy effectiveness, regime legitimacy, and state capacity building, this article argues that the Chinese government and Chinese Communist Party maintained social stability and domestic support during the outbreak by exercising a performative public policy. This policy approach emphasized the construction and positive presentation of policy achievement, in both material and non-material forms. From this perspective, symbolic performance can be as important as a concrete policy -- and in certain circumstances more effective, such as during the early stages of COVID-19 where a paucity of scientific knowledge created difficulties in evaluating the effectiveness of a particular

⁸³ Plamen Tonchev, 'The Belt and Road after COVID-19', *The Diplomat*, 7 April 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/the-belt-and-road-after-covid-19/> (accessed 21 September 2020).

⁸⁴ China.com, 'Jujiao hou yiqing shidai, xi jinping wei zhe tiao "lu" fuyu xin neihan' ['In post-pandemic era, Xi Jinping gave the 'Road' new meaning'], 20 June 2020, http://news.china.com.cn/2020-06/20/content_76183791.htm (accessed 21 September 2020).

⁸⁵ People.cn, 'Zhongguo zhu fayu dashi: yidai yilu shi guoji huhui hezuo de changyuan jihua' ['Chinese Ambassador in France: One Belt One Road is a long-term international cooperation initiative'], 27 August 2020, world.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0827/c1002-31838589.html (accessed 21 September 2020).

⁸⁶ People.cn, 'Zhongguo daibiao: renmin de xingfu shenghuo jiushi zuida de renquan' ['Chinese delegates: People's happy life is the primary human rights'], 19 September 2020, world.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0919/c1002-31867495.html (accessed 21 September 2020).

⁸⁷ Li Jiabao, 'Zhongguo kangyi chengguo xiang shijie chuandi xinxi' ['China's achievement of combatting the pandemic conveys confidence to the world'], *People.cn*, 14 September 2020, world.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0914/c1002-31859878.html (accessed 21 September 2020).

health initiative. While this piece has focused on China, performance public policy is found in other countries' policymaking as well. For example, US President Trump's in 2020 who took performance and political theatre to new heights in his tenure, commented on American economy rebounding and COVID-19 receding; while at the same time the US death toll climbed and there were a record number of unemployed. Similarly, in Australia, the national border was closed to Chinese travellers early in the pandemic (February 2020) alleged to reassure the domestic public; nevertheless, the main infection sources in Australia were from Europe and America.

China's performance public policy during the pandemic had three elements. First, the government constructed and presented policy outcomes, regardless of their actual success or failure, in a positive light. This positive policy achievement was largely credited to individual efforts President Xi. Second, the government provided political goods, such as national pride, law and order, and shared Chinese values, to optimize the positive public perception of government performance. The political goods were often accompanied by the anti-Western and nationalist discourse. Third, Chinese government attempted to promote its 'moral commitments' in foreign policy. Adopting a 'victimhood' rhetoric, the government deployed an assertive foreign policy to 'protect' security and sovereignty against the 'anti-China foreign forces' during the pandemic. The assertive policy diverted domestic attention from a spreading disease to 'threats overseas', and rallied nationalist support in the issues such as South China Sea and Hong Kong. Furthermore, Chinese government has also announced its intention to assume a more important role in a post-pandemic world through the provision of global public goods, such as sharing vaccinations and stimulating recovery. China has also aimed to shape the international normative community with its own preferred values embedded in an authoritarian political culture.