

China: From coronavirus to conspiracy virus¹.

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In the past few days, the CCP has resorted to soft power and information warfare in order to project the image of a model in international leadership. This is definitely not the first time that a country tries to make use of a humanitarian crisis through its soft power. Consider in particular the 2003 Tsunami, or the 2010 Haiti earthquake. Nevertheless, China has acted with uncommon determination to impose its perspective and interpretation of the current situation, including officially employing conspiracy theories.

Projecting the image of a leader in charge

On March 12, China sent 9 Chinese medical professionals and 30 tons of medical equipment to Italy. Should we read this action as international cooperation or rather a marketing operation? The many cameras and setting of the scene aimed at filming the “humanitarian gesture” make the answer clear. As another example, Jack Ma, head of the Alibaba Group, has [donated kits and masks](#) to the United States, Japan, Korea, Italy, Iran, Belgium and Spain,

etc. By doing so, China hopes to influence the point of view and the preferences of the other states. In other words, it aims at projecting the image of a leader in charge and in control of the situation.

This willingness to co-opt, to guide political choices, has a twofold objective: internally, the Communist Party is trying to restore its image in response to the criticism about its crisis management. At this point, it is important to recall that Beijing denied the existence of any crisis for many weeks, censoring whistle-blowers and the Internet.

At the international level, the Chinese political gestures of the last few days naturally help to project the image of a benevolent, supportive, compassionate China, concerned first and foremost with the common interest... In particular contrary to the United States, which has taken the stance of retreat and isolationism to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

China's plans are, however, far more cynical than they appear: there is a true Realpolitik logic behind these actions, between a power struggle with Washington and a desire to weaken the EU, manipulating the mental prism of people and of certain political parties so that the latter change their attitude and consequently have a more positive and constructive approach towards China.

Reinventing the coronavirus narrative

“It might be U.S. army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan. Be transparent! Make public your data! U.S. owe us an explanation!”. By publishing this tweet on March 12 on his official account, Zhao Lijian, spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Affairs Ministry, accused Washington of being at the origin of the coronavirus and of introducing it on Chinese soil through its army. From the very beginning, Beijing lost control over the narrative of the coronavirus because of poor crisis management by the Chinese authorities. By resorting to conspiracy theories, the Chinese authorities simply hope to re-establish this control. These accusations have no scientific basis but are popular in conspiracy theory circles.

On March 8, the newspaper *La Croix* published an article, which stated: “In the eyes of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the fact that China may have been singled out as the source of the coronavirus is unacceptable. Everything that links China to the virus must be questioned and disappear from all history books. Thus, all Chinese ambassadors abroad have the instruction to spread the following message from their Twitter account (which is banned in China) or in the foreign media: ‘If the coronavirus has been deployed from Wuhan, its real origin remains unknown. We are looking into where it came from exactly’”.

This desire to rewrite the discourse of the coronavirus has a double objective and is complementary to the soft power policy explained above. Firstly, the idea is to reinforce the image in certain parts of the world, already anti-American and anti-Western (Middle East, Africa...), that the United States is the great Evil, thus strengthening the beliefs of these countries. In other parts of the world, such a discourse would cause doubt, weakening the image of the United States and the West. Secondly, the aim is to show to the Chinese population that the coronavirus is an attack on China, reinforcing nationalism and Chinese pride

(*rallying around the flag*), which in turn allows the Communist Party to clear itself of any responsibility in managing the epidemic.

The coronavirus outbreak is spreading in an international context already sowed with doubts and imbalances. At the CCP Congress in October 2017, President Xi stated that “China offers a new option for other countries and nations that wish to accelerate their development while preserving their independence”. By positioning itself as an alternative to the Western model led by the United States, the CCP aims at promoting its own authoritarian model. If Western democracies mismanage the current medical crisis, Beijing could show that its model is more effective and capable of managing crises than the West is, which weakness was clearly exposed by Italy's coronavirus management.



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