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The Role of Competing Narratives in China and the West's Response to Covid-19

For the world's largest and most influential countries, a major global crisis provides a potential opportunity to significantly enhance their power on the international stage. In the last twenty years we have seen such moments in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 and the financial credit crunch in 2008. The 2020 coronavirus pandemic crisis provides a similar inflection point. Even though it has only been six months since the outbreak began, it is clear that the system's most important powers – namely the United States (US) and China, as well as countries in Europe including the United Kingdom (UK) – are attempting to use the Covid-19 crisis to promote particular narratives designed to boost their own images or blacken those of others.

For those of us in International Relations concerned with analysing and tracing how national identities form, the interactions between the world's great powers are especially illuminating. Confirming much about how these countries view each other and themselves, along with their underlying values, norms and worldviews, their interactions also tell us a lot about what they aspire to – and what they fear – and how this will impact upon international politics. Such narrative contestations also unveil deeper structural shifts in wider global balances of power, particularly from the West to East Asia, and demonstrate how intangible factors – such as perceptions, recognition and status – can be as valuable as material measures in world affairs. Within the context of Chinese studies, these scholarly approaches have much to offer in terms of enhancing our understanding of both China's contemporary rise, but also even predicting the longer-term implications that the current pandemic will have upon its foreign policy, and nature of international affairs more broadly.

As part of this milieu, the handling of the coronavirus crisis is indicative of something far beyond the immediate public and global health threat. Instead, it is a case study of global leadership and of where the main consensus in international relations lies concerning who has the most capabilities, and who are the most responsible and competent actors. Within the maelstrom of 24-hour news cycles and social media, the importance of dominating this consensus has never been so important, as information and narratives are constantly written, re-written, reinforced and reiterated to win over domestic and international audiences. This process of repetition, and the frequency at which it occurs, normalises these consensuses. At stake are the very national brands of countries, as the crisis produces reputational winners and losers. Various international media bodies serve as the critical transmitters of these narratives and do so via their own national and regional prejudices.

Central to the current crisis has been the rapid emergence of a highly public “blame game” between China and the US (and to a lesser degree the UK). Officials in the US have used the crisis to question the legitimacy of the ruling Chinese Communist Party and have openly asked if Beijing's handling of the crisis – and an initial apparent coverup – is sufficient reason for

China's people to remove them from power (Borger, 2020). Additional narratives concerning whether or not China has suitable health standards and if it did enough to protect its population has also been used to question if China is – or can ever be – a truly responsible international partner (Shadi, 2020). Moreover, highly recurrent official references to a “China virus” and a “Wuhan virus” have been used to suggest that China created the virus to purposefully undermine the standing of the West (Singh et al., 2020).

The creation and deployment of these narratives has often been utilised to deflect attention from perceived shortcomings concerning the US's own handling of the pandemic. With its overall death toll standing at over 112,000 in early June 2020, and the increasingly haywire handling of the crisis by US President Donald Trump being evermore criticised, a narrative counterpoint of a serious decline in the US's global standing has also become apparent. Proponents of this view note Washington's “act of international vandalism” by withdrawing funding from the World Health Organization (Ellyatt et al., 2020), the privileging of US citizens in the quest for a vaccine (Goodman et al., 2020) and President Trump's advocacy of injecting bleach as a cure against the virus (Fahey, 2020). Such narratives all claim to evidence the US's dysfunctional nature and globally negligent handling of the crisis.

In the UK, a very similar anti-China narrative has also been evident, which has also come about in the context of mounting global criticism concerning the UK's frequently confused, *ad hoc* and bungled handling of the pandemic (Wintour, 2020). As such, influential leaders have urged China to cooperate in international attempts to isolate the exact outbreak point of the virus (Maidment, 2020), with some leaders suggesting that Beijing has covered up the true origin of the pandemic and that China's leaders will do anything to hold onto power, including risking the lives of its citizens (Adedokun, 2020). Again, such accounts help to neutralise and detract from the UK's own response, and together are reflective of how the UK, the US and the West collectively fear China's rise to international eminence, and how the coronavirus crisis can be used to boost their standing and delegitimise Beijing's. In both the US and UK, media agencies have been crucial in the dissemination of these narratives, underscoring the role of such non-state actors and nationalism in determining global affairs.

Contrary to these negative depictions concerning who – if anyone – is culpable concerning the Covid-19 outbreak, the dominant narratives from Beijing and Chinese media have mainly rested upon presenting China as a helpful and non-threatening international partner. With peer recognition being a vital factor informing a country's relative status, China is converting its containment of the pandemic into a positive political message. In contrast to the US, it is thus urging the need for international cooperation and partnership (Jiang, 2020), has pledged \$2 billion (as of late May 2020) to fight the outbreak worldwide (Chen, 2020) and is enhancing its attractive soft power (Larsen and Gramer, 2020). These accounts innately differ with those coming from the US and the UK, highlighting a *dichotomy of narratives* between China's aspirations and ambitions versus Western suspicions and fears. It also shows China's confidence and the West's insecurity concerning their status in the world. Studying norms, values and worldviews offers not only the means with which to evidence such a schism but also provides indications about any future disputes and possible conflicts, and when applied to China's contemporary rise, again stresses Chinese studies' importance.

As the political, economic and social fallout of the pandemic continues into 2020 and beyond, we can expect these varying narratives to become increasingly reiterated and emboldened from all sides. We can also forecast for relevant media bodies across the West and China to continue to promote, reinforce and censor these narratives, via their own national and international biases. This contestation to determine the prevailing “story”, and ultimately history, will deepen as we head towards the US Presidential election in November wherein President Trump looks likely to use China as a point of blame and deflection from his own domestic weaknesses. We can also expect much the same to happen within the UK, mostly if there is a second wave of infections that will call into question the government’s competence. Equally, China will double down on its own narratives if it senses a critical juncture to promote its interests and worldviews, in particular if the West’s continues with its disorganised response. In these ways, Chinese studies will have an ongoing relevance – and specific analytical value – as the coronavirus pandemic develops in the next few years.

Ultimately, the coronavirus crisis and its exploitation by the world’s leading powers further points to the hierarchical and relational nature of international affairs, whereby if the power of one country expands, more often than not the power of others declines. As such, if Beijing’s legitimacy increases, that of Washington and London will decrease, and vice versa. Such an inter-relationship underscores why the creation, promotion and sustenance of narratives is so critical, as their acceptance – or not – may result in a radically re-ordered international system. It is for this reason that many observers currently fear an irrevocable weakening of the liberal world order, leading to a change in the “psychological balance of power” in global affairs (Brands, 2020). Such an importance highlights the value that Chinese studies scholars focused on international relations provide, especially those that emphasise the role of narratives and perceptions, and whose significance and necessity will only increase as China takes an ever-more influential and pivotal role in world affairs.

In sum, if China’s viewpoint is accepted by enough of its international peers, it will prevail, and lead to Beijing positioning itself as a global leader, supplanting western countries in its wake, and building an authority and legitimacy to which others will more instinctively turn at times of future crisis. Such a reordering may have profound implications for the dominant political basis of the international system, including possibly ushering in – especially via ever greater digital surveillance and social control – an authoritarian-oriented future. Conversely, it may lead to a more cooperative and less combative form of politics focused upon mutual harmony. Crucially, our scholarly study of international relations in the context of Chinese studies deepens our ability to recognise and analyse these “narrative wars”, and moreover helps determine which of these futures, or others, will eventually emerge in world affairs. Without the contextualization provided by Chinese studies, such a vital orientation would be lost, to the deep detriment of scholars, analysts, politicians and the general public alike.

1,598 words

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