

The Negative Framing of China's Public Diplomacy: The Case of *Foreign Policy* in the Early Phase of COVID-19

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Abstract

The research on China's public diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic is a fast-growing field. China's global engagement and communication in the context of the pandemic has been typically characterized as a case of reactive public diplomacy aimed at repairing its damaged nation brand or reputation. There is an established consensus on the view that China's COVID-19 diplomacy constitutes an effort to push a positive framing of the self to influence global public opinion and achieve desired outcomes. What is being missed in the existing research is the fact that not only China's image but also China's very attempt at self-framing through public diplomacy is an object of framing itself. This article articulates the idea of the negative framing of public diplomacy by means of in-depth textual analysis of a selected corpus of articles published in *Foreign Policy* magazine during an early phase of COVID-19. This perspective underscores the role of international media in reflexively framing, and potentially affecting, the public diplomacy attempts of given international actors. It thereby advances the agenda of refining the concept of framing in the field of public diplomacy and foregrounds further research on the effects of public diplomacy messaging in complex information ecosystems.

Keywords: COVID-19, Chinese public diplomacy, narrative, framing, propaganda

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Introduction

The concept of framing is most widely utilized in media and communication studies but is also present in the scholarship on public diplomacy. In communication, frames select and emphasize certain aspects of a message while downplaying or omitting others to shape the audience's perception of a certain fact or event (Druckman, 2011) while affecting the interpretative and moral judgements of it (Nisbet, 2009). Gilboa defined framing as "media selection, exclusion of, and emphasis on certain issues and approaches to promote a particular definition, interpretation, moral evaluation, or a solution" (Gilboa, 2008, p. 64) and proposed it as a variable in the study of public diplomacy. Entman's "cascading activation model" was recommended to examine how "several actors, including presidents and their chief foreign policy advisers, elites, and the media, are engaged in a battle to shape frames that reach the public through the media and greatly influence the formation of public opinion" (Gilboa, 2008, p. 64).

The present article seeks to refine and apply the concept of framing in the study of public diplomacy. It attempts to do so from the vantage point of China's public diplomacy amid the COVID-19 pandemic, on which a burgeoning corpus of scholarly research has been developing over the past four years. Though never explicitly elaborated upon as such, the notion of "framing fighting" implicated by Entman's model is present in the existing studies. Both the popular wisdom and academic consensus hold that the Chinese international engagement and communication in the context of COVID-19 was mainly motivated by the political interest of changing the narrative of China's responsibility in the origin and global spread of the epidemic (Verma, 2020; Chen, 2023), which essentially amounts to an effort to "push frames down the road to the public" (Gilboa, 2008, p. 64) to secure reputation and achieve desired outcomes (Cull, 2022). This perspective taps into a pre-existing academic discourse on Chinese public diplomacy as typically reactive public diplomacy usually activated to amend negative international perceptions and narratives, particularly during and in the aftermath of major scandals and crises (Hayden, 2011; d'Hooghe, 2015; Hartig, 2016).

Scholars and media use the terms "mask diplomacy" (Verma, 2020; Chen, 2023; Kowalski, 2021), "vaccine diplomacy" (Aspinall, 2021; Kobierecka 2023; Lee 2023), and, more generically, "coronavirus diplomacy" (Bocchi, 2020; Kobierecka & Kobierecki, 2021). In the present article, the term "COVID-19 diplomacy" will be employed to capture the manifold international engagement and communication efforts of a country in the unique historical juncture of the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic of 2020-23. While the characterization of China's COVID-19 diplomacy as reactive public diplomacy striving to assert favorable frames is now a familiar and established notion among the relevant scholarship, the concept of framing has not yet been applied on the phenomenon of public diplomacy itself.

Addressing this gap, the goal of this article is to suggest the reflexive application of framing analysis to public diplomacy as an empirical phenomenon. Not only, in the specific case considered, is the image of China (its nation brand, its role in and handling of the pandemic, and so on) the object which is framed. Also framed are the Chinese attempts to frame and position herself in a positive light through what is called public diplomacy. To suggest this critical idea, the framing of China's public diplomacy will be located and examined in a selection of articles (17 in total) published in the influential *Foreign Policy* magazine during the period March-April 2020, identified as the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Focusing on this specific juncture is a crucial and valuable endeavor as initial perceptions of China's responsibilities shape the scholarly understanding of its subsequent behavior in terms of reputation-repair efforts. Only the articles that frame China's international engagement and communication in negative terms were deliberately selected for in-depth textual analysis. This restricted sampling is intentional and aimed at suggesting that *opposing frames* may exist and intervene at an intermediate stage between the sending and receiving ends of the public diplomacy messaging, possibly engendering unexpected or unintended outcomes. In the media case considered, China's communication and engagement – regarded in academia as “public diplomacy” – amid the pandemic are negatively framed as “propaganda” and are thereby disqualified from the realm of public diplomacy.

The research focus on the targeted textual sample illustrates how public diplomacy messages are not always received as intended, thereby adding complexity to the state-of-the-art understanding of the public diplomacy phenomenon. This research does *not* aim to decisively contribute to an overall assessment of China's overall image, China's public diplomacy, or its efficiency (Wei, 2016), either within or beyond the context of the pandemic, but rather to foreground the analytical integration of reflexive public diplomacy frames, defined here as the *framing of public diplomacy framings*. Such reflexive framings can be either positive or negative; this article focuses on the negative frames, believing that *these* are the ones which bear more relevance in terms of foregrounding complexity and potential unintended outcomes in the public diplomacy equation.

Concerns about China's aggressive and opportunistic pursuit of political ends by means of public diplomacy are certainly not alien to the existing academic debate (Vériter et al., 2020; d'Hooghe, 2021). This article contributes to substantiating the existence of negative framings of China's public diplomacy at the level of the media and the public sphere being the empirical realm of public diplomacy. Capturing the complexity brought by the negative frames in the public diplomacy equation, as evidenced in the selected empirical case, also contributes to mid-range research in international relations by virtue of the conventional positioning of virus diplomacy (Cull & Manfredi-Sánchez, 2022) as a field of study in the broader framework of health diplomacy (Fauci, 2007; Fidler, 2013; Hotez, 2021). Furthermore, health diplomacy has also been positioned within the scope of development diplomacy (Kobierecka, 2023), which in turn intersects with the strategic communication practices thereof

(Pamment, 2016; Manor & Pamment, 2022) as a research area in international relations.

Literature Review

Early scholarly works investigating the phenomenon of China's mask diplomacy in the early months of the pandemic mobilize the notion of strategic narrative. This notion articulates the idea that the Chinese international communication and engagement amid COVID-19 was aimed at "changing the narrative" of China's responsibility in the origin and spread of the epidemic. Chinese President Xi Jinping declared in early February

his desire to win international support and understanding through diplomacy and propaganda. Xi also issued a directive to China's state media to publish reports that put China's fight against COVID-19 in a positive light. China's propaganda apparatus has been working tirelessly to change the COVID-19 narrative. (Verma, 2020, p. 251)

Verma (2020) analyzes China's strategic communication and engagement during the pandemic in three phases. First, Chinese media and MOFA spokespersons Zhao Lijian and Hua Chunying (the so-called "wolf warrior diplomats") questioned the virus's Chinese origin, suggesting that it came from the U.S. The second phase involved declaring victory over SARS-CoV-2 at a time when Europe became the pandemic's epicenter. The third phase included providing medical assistance and health equipment to affected countries. Verma views these efforts as part of China's broader strategy to maintain its global leadership, consistent with such infrastructural initiatives as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and flagship financial institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (Verma, 2020, p. 251-254).

China's COVID-19 engagement and communication has been examined through the lens of narratives and located within the framework of China's long-standing foreign aid diplomacy. Based on the analysis of the Chinese MOFA spokespersons' declarations, Kobierecka categorizes China's vaccine diplomacy narratives into three groups: first, "China as an advocate of international cooperation and solidarity"; second, "China as a responsible actor and provider of assistance to developing countries"; and third, China as an advocate of COVID-19 vaccines to be a global public good (Kobierecka, 2023, pp. 286-288).

China's vaccine diplomacy has also been embedded within the academic discourse of nation branding to investigate its motivations and soft power outcomes. The Chinese engagement is narrated in academia as a reaction to an initial reputational damage. Drawing from classical definitions of nation branding (Fan, 2006; Anholt, 2007; Kaneva, 2011; Dinnie, 2016), Lee postulates that

China's COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy was motivated in part by its determination to transform itself from an object of mistrust over its initial mishandling of the COVID-19 outbreak to a savior. [...] This approach entails reframing its image as the country that accelerated the virus' spread through cover-ups to that of the magnanimous global power offering leadership at a time of international leadership disarray. (Lee, 2023, p. 69).

Lee's findings overlap with Kobierecka's when it comes to observing that China tried to harness the "rhetorical framing of COVID-19 vaccines" as international public goods (IPGs) and enhance its nation brand as a "virtuous great power" (Lee, 2023, p. 71). In place of discussing the outcomes of China's vaccine diplomacy, Lee concludes that the "soft power dividends from vaccine diplomacy are compelling enough for a country whose nation brand continues to be dogged by unfavorable 'made-in-China' and 'China Threat' undertones" (Lee, 2023, p. 76), thereby circularly mixing outcomes with motivations in such a conclusion.

The scholarship's systematic application of the construct of strategic narratives taps into the discourse of "whose story wins" already popularized by Ronfeldt and Arquilla (2020). According to Manfredi-Sánchez, "the Chinese position has created a narrative of gift-giving and efficiency in its handling of the pandemic" and occurred in the framework of existing patterns of development and health cooperation in China's foreign policy (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2023). Together with the other relevant cases of global vaccine diplomacy, the public diplomacy narratives amid the pandemic make use of "counter-pandemic measures and vaccines to sustain a charismatic message" and of "medical science as arguments for power and prestige" (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2023, p. 408).

The canonical narrative-based approach centered on Ronfeldt and Arquilla's "whose story wins" approach has also been employed to verify China's "visual storytelling" amid the pandemic. Like Manfredi-Sánchez, Hellman and Oppermann (2022) recognize the power of images and visibility through the media exploited by countries in the narrative struggle "about the international distribution of blame and praise". Two "policy narratives" were identified. The first one "fights back against international accusations that China is responsible for the initial spread of the virus by pushing the broader narrative of China as a trustworthy, reliable and indispensable global leader" and is conveyed through what has been called mask diplomacy and vaccine diplomacy. The second policy narrative "centres on the success of China's leadership in bringing Covid-19 under control at home" and is "pushed by Chinese officials and diplomats through various communication channels" (Hellmann & Oppermann, 2022, p. 187).

Overall, two features stand out from this review of major contributions on China's COVID-19 diplomacy. Firstly, there is unanimous consensus on the reactive nature of China's engagement. Lee (2023) specifically mobilizes the notion of repairing the nation brand, while

the other studies all agree that China initially faced reputational damage due to blame for the virus's origin and initial spread. In response, China sought to achieve what Cull and Manfredi-Sánchez (2022) call “reputational reckoning” through virus diplomacy.

Secondly, there are multiple overlaps in identifying the motivations or agendas of China's COVID-19 diplomacy. All studies (except Verma, 2020) employ the construct of narratives to interpret China's attempt to improve its global reputation amid the crisis. Among the manifold narratives promoted by Chinese public diplomacy, the narrative of China as a responsible actor assuming a leadership role in global governance emerges.

Interestingly, the narratives identified separately in the abovementioned studies correspond to the “four strategies of virus diplomacy” outlined by Cull and Manfredi-Sánchez (2022). The strategies of “praising the self” combined with “criticizing the other” are fulfilled by China's narrative of itself as a success story in the fight against the virus (Verma, 2020; Hellmann & Oppermann, 2022; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2023). The strategy of “humanitarian assistance as a gift” resonates in China's public diplomatic self-positioning as an advocate and active performer of international solidarity through gift-giving. Finally, the strategy of “partnership and cooperation” is reflected in China's narrative of pragmatic yet charismatic and proactive upholding of health cooperation under the banner of China's long-standing international development policy, especially toward developing countries.

The Framing of Public Diplomacy

The consensus on the notion that China's engagement amid the pandemic is a reactive response to perceived reputational damage is apparent in the scholarship on China's COVID-19 diplomacy. This idea aligns with the construct of reputational security coined by Cull (2022). Multiple studies since 2020 have investigated China's approaches and strategic narrative postures during the pandemic, largely focusing on the question of how China conducts its COVID-19 diplomacy. While the reactive nature of China's public diplomacy and the narratives it promotes have been widely recognized (d'Hooghe, 2015; Hartig, 2016), the question of whether China has successfully persuaded foreign audiences with its narratives has received less attention.

Scholarly consideration and analyses on the outcomes of China's public diplomacy in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic remain limited. Preliminary observations on this matter can be traced in some of the existing studies. Among the studies reviewed above, for instance, Manfredi-Sánchez (2023, p. 402) sees China's narratives of gift-giving and efficiency as producing benefits for the Chinese government, whereas Lee (2023, p. 76), in contrast, finds “mixed international sentiments”, suggesting a negative assessment. Such disagreements on the efficiency of China's public diplomacy in the context of the pandemic suggest the existence of a knowledge gap that warrants further investigation. While there is no doubt

about the fact that China strives to improve its international image and reputation by pushing certain well-known narratives by means of public diplomacy, the extent to which such narratives can be expected to be successful, and the factors contributing to any shortcoming, remain open research questions (Wei, 2016).

In light of this research gap, the present contribution pursues the limited goal of tentatively exploring a factor that may be responsible for the overall lack of success of China's COVID-19 diplomacy in displacing foreign attributions of responsibility and blame for the origin and spread of the epidemic. This research objective is centered on the following question: What is one factor that may negatively impact the narratives promoted by China's public diplomacy during the pandemic? As a preliminary step, this study examines the concept of framing for analyzing China's public diplomacy (not China's image per se) in the context of the pandemic.

The concept of framing was originally defined, most popularly, by sociologist Erving Goffman as the "frameworks or schemata of interpretation" which enable individuals "to locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences" (Goffman, 1974, p. 21). In media and communication studies, Entman characterizes framing as a "fractured paradigm" in need of clarification, mainly owing to the inconsistency in its conceptualization (Entman, 1993, p. 51). Other scholars managed to "lay the groundwork for an overall conceptual understanding" of framing based on some key definitional components: namely, the fact that, on the one hand, frames organize, select, and highlight information while, on the other hand, they convey meaning to said information (Yan, 2020, pp. 49-50).

Not only are media frames defined as "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse" (Gitlin, 1980, p. 7), but they also contribute to "interpretation and evaluative definition" of social reality (van Gorp, 2007, p. 62), which derives from the definition of a frame as a "central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events" constituting "the essence of the issue" at hand (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p. 143). Entman postulates that the functions of framing include "[to] promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). In news, frames affect people's perceptions, beliefs and corresponding actions (Chong & Druckman, 2007) by providing an "interpretive storyline that set(s) a specific train of thought in motion, communicating why an issue might be a problem, who or what might be responsible for it, and what should be done about it" (Nisbet, 2009, p. 15). In sum, a "frame not only provides the public with information about an issue itself but also has potential to suggest explanations, evaluations, and eventually result in logical conclusions, like who are responsible for the problem and what actions should be taken" (Yan, 2020, p. 50).

The impact of frames was examined in an experimental study (Bolsen et al., 2020) assessing the impact of two predominant framings of COVID-19 on social behaviors during an early phase of COVID-19. The experiment, conducted between April 29 and May 3, 2020, showed that “exposure to framed messages regarding the origins of COVID-19 can have a powerful effect on people’s beliefs about the cause of this global pandemic” (Bolsen et al., 2020, p. 575). Belief in the conspiracy theory that the virus was artificially manufactured by the Chinese government in a Wuhan laboratory correlates with a willingness to blame and hold China accountable, while belief in the zoonotic origin of the pathogen is associated with more supportive attitudes toward international cooperation in biomedical research.

The conceptual framework of framing, as defined here, has been implicitly present in existing studies on Chinese COVID-19 diplomacy. The framing of China’s role as the origin of the pandemic, liable to the world, lies at the heart of the reputational damage suffered by the country. As per the existing consensus, it is assumed that the country activated its public diplomacy to counter this negative framing by promoting favorable narratives. In an attempt to engage with this consensus, this article proposes a critical innovation: framing not only precedes and motivates the activation of public diplomacy but also influences the process of public diplomacy itself, potentially shaping the moral judgments and subsequent actions of the target audiences. Focusing on the case of China’s COVID-19 diplomacy, this contribution suggests that framing remains active even after public diplomacy is initiated, plausibly influencing both audience perception and subsequent public diplomacy strategies. Thus, the central focus is on the framing of China’s public diplomacy during the public diplomatic process itself, rather than on the framing that preceded or was promoted by China’s public diplomacy efforts.

To this end, this study examines the negative framing of China’s COVID-19 diplomacy in the early phase of the pandemic through in-depth textual analysis of 17 articles published in the well-known magazine *Foreign Policy* during March-April 2020. *Foreign Policy* is influential in shaping understandings and narratives of current international affairs, typically providing a platform for diverse contributions to potentially inform and influence public discourse. This analysis aims to extrapolate the logical interpretive storylines and moral judgments (i.e., framing) concerning China’s public diplomacy presented in these texts. Several criteria guided the article’s selection for analysis. First, the analysis focuses exclusively on articles that mention and make judgments on China’s mask and coronavirus diplomacy, excluding those which address other topics during the same period. Second, the present research only considers articles that construct a negative understanding of China’s public diplomacy.

This study deliberately selects articles with a negative framing of China’s COVID-19 diplomacy, employing a methodology analogous to Chen’s (2023) study focusing exclusively on positive media reports during the same period March-April 2020. This approach highlights how specific frames can hinder or backfire on a country’s public diplomacy efforts. Detailed

textual analysis is prioritized over a broader sample, also justifying the limited timeframe, for the March-April 2020 period proved a decisive moment in setting the understanding of the subsequent developments. This research shows that, at the level of the media, a negative framing portrays China's COVID-19 diplomacy as "propaganda" rather than "public diplomacy".

The Negative Framing of China's Public Diplomacy in *Foreign Policy*

This section presents a qualitative textual analysis of 17 articles published in *Foreign Policy* magazine that negatively frame China's international communication and engagement efforts (referred to as public diplomacy by scholars) during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic (March-April 2020). This analysis singles out discursive patterns as they materialized within the selected corpus. The majority of these articles are categorized by *Foreign Policy* under the "Argument" category (featuring expert viewpoints on current events), with two articles (Braw, 2020; Traub, 2020) under the "Voice" category (representing personal viewpoints), one article (Palmer, 2020) under "China Brief" (weekly reports on China), and one article (Miller, 2020) under "Elephants in the Room" (Republican/conservative perspectives on U.S. foreign policy). All articles, except those by Legrain (2020) and Schell (2020), which were integrated into the April 2020 issue of the magazine, are only accessible on the magazine's website and were not published in any print issue.

As China's global engagement unfolded on a massive scale starting from March 2020, Paul Miller publishing in *Foreign Policy* on March 12 elaborates on the political dimension of the coronavirus pandemic, arguing that Xi Jinping's "government's missteps are directly responsible for its global transmission and uncontrolled spread" (Miller, 2020, para. 2). On the basis of the "evidently true" reported fact "that the Chinese government, beginning in late 2019, lied and directly contributed to the creation of a global pandemic, the deaths of thousands of people, and a global economic collapse" (para. 8), Miller advocates that China must be held accountable to the world.

From the reader's perspective, this framing of China and its role in the pandemic sets the premise for Peter Rough's observation on March 25 that China was "quick to exploit Western weaknesses" and engaged in a "propaganda war against the United States" (Rough, 2020, para. 3-4). Rough insists on "China's clear and obvious responsibility for allowing a localized epidemic in the city of Wuhan to grow into a global pandemic" (para. 17) and on the fact that, "instead of alerting the world of the outbreak, China engaged in an extensive cover-up of its spread" (para. 4). Interestingly, what in the scholarly debate was called China's mask, coronavirus, or COVID-19 public diplomacy is here called a "propaganda war" that has been reinforced "by sending medical supplies to Europe" (para. 6). Rough warns of "Machiavellian motivations" behind China's humanitarian actions toward European countries (para. 7).

A heated debate on China's responsibilities was raging in Western public spheres in the period when China's "wolf warrior diplomats" were aggressively pushing allegations on official occasions and social media that SARS-CoV-2 may have originated anywhere but China. In this context, Fergus Ryan on March 28 tries to support a nuanced view recognizing China's comprehensive response which contributed to containing the potential global impact of the epidemic. However, while making this nuanced point, he still frames what scholars call "China's public diplomacy" as a "massive propaganda campaign to rewrite the history of COVID-19" waged by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (Ryan, 2020, para. 5).

Two days later, Elisabeth Braw frames Chinese donations to European countries as those of "bad Samaritans" exploiting "ostensible assistance for geopolitical gains." (Braw, 2020, para. 1). To support this frame, she laments that "the Chinese supplies weren't exactly a charitable gift" (para. 9) and are in any case "paltry for a government with massive manufacturing at its disposal and whose bungling of the initial outbreak led to the virus going global" (para. 10). Braw subsequently relates this fact to the otherwise unrelated fact that "around the same time that the first flight [carrying coronavirus aid] arrived, Chinese state media outlets began circulating a rumor that the COVID-19 outbreak had actually originated in Italy" (para. 9). What scholars call mask diplomacy is labeled by Braw as a "public relations opportunity" (para. 11) and "very public show of Chinese soft power" (para. 12), with an evident negative connotation. Interestingly, what is hailed by public diplomacy scholar Lee (2023) as a typically Chinese model of "mixing politics with business" is resented by Braw as China's intention to "sell goods and pry countries" (Braw, 2020, para. 19), concluding that China is a "bad Samaritan" because she "expect[s] something in return" (para. 21).

On the same day, three authors discuss the role of Chinese ambassador to the U.S. Cui Tiankai, who at that time appeared to be distancing himself from the MOFA spokespersons' aggressive rhetoric and allegations. According to the authors, Cui's positioning in reality failed to contradict the "wolf warrior diplomats" and therefore still serves Beijing's hope "to escape blame for its initial cover-up of the outbreak in December and January" (Gitter et al. 2020, para. 4). They consequently engaged in a "comprehensive dissection of China's evolving narrative on the coronavirus's origins since February, which reveal a two-pronged approach aimed at redirecting blame away from China and sowing confusion and discord" (para. 5).

A memorable article written by Italian journalist Mattia Ferraresi (2020) was published on March 31. The article condenses all the negative points that can be said to construct a negative framing of China's global engagement amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Ferraresi's storyline starts from the assumption that "Italy is an ideal outpost for China's wide-reaching propaganda effort to cover up its own responsibility for the global spread of the new coronavirus." (Ferraresi, 2020, para. 1). Ferraresi dubs China's COVID-19 diplomacy based on engagement and communication as a "two-pronged strategy" carefully combining "sending medical supplies to assert its relevance in a leaderless world – call it mask diplomacy – while

at the same time spreading conspiracy theories to conceal the true origin of the virus” (para. 2). Ferraresi’s reasoning culminates with the sensational line: “The Chinese government is blending international aid with information warfare” (para. 23). In this passage, the Italian journalist mobilizes the term “information warfare” to label the fact that Beijing is “widely circulating foggy and contradictory theories over the origins of the coronavirus, conveying the idea that it’s impossible to figure out its actual roots.” (para. 24).

On April 2, Hinnerk Feldwisch-Drentrup (2020) begins his article on the World Health Organization’s (WHO) relationship with China by timely reminding the audience that, “[a]fter initial denials and cover-ups, China successfully contained the COVID-19 outbreak – but not before it had exported many cases to the rest of the world” (para. 1). In his account, falsehoods passed on by China “played a critical role in delaying global response” (para. 2) while the “WHO was uncritically repeating information from the Chinese authorities, ignoring warning from Taiwanese doctors” (para. 3). The author further doubts “whether the WHO experts who traveled to China sufficiently understood the situation on the ground” (para. 13) and concludes that, in any case, “[t]he world is now living with the consequences of the Chinese government’s censorship” (para. 25).

On the next day, Orville Schell (2020) discusses the current issue of the apparently irreversible US-China decoupling and the ensuing vulnerabilities of global supply chains. While the article adopts a broader perspective, dealing with the longer historical trajectory of US-China relations and recommending decoupling and diversification solutions for the present time, the author does not miss, in the process, to recall that “Xi’s initial inability to manage the [coronavirus] crisis has undermined [...] his air of invincibility” (Schell, 2020, para. 13). What public diplomacy scholars call a strategic narrative of self-as-success is designated as “Chinese efforts to reclaim the crisis as a global propaganda victory” by Schell (2020, para. 14), who foretells permanent “major reputational damage, especially facing criticism for suppressing the alarms raised by medical professionals in China”, no matter “if the virus is temporarily contained in China, as recent statistics on new cases seem to suggest” (para. 18).

Nick Aspinwall (2020) reconstructs the story of Taiwan’s admirable handling of the epidemic in an article published on April 9. In contrast to mainland China, Taiwan’s extreme policies to counter the health crisis are welcome and laudable by virtue of the island’s status as a vibrant democracy in contrast to the supposed deplorable dictatorship ruling in the mainland. In Aspinwall’s account, Taiwan does indeed engage in coronavirus diplomacy, just like its authoritarian counterpart. However, the latter’s donations are “potentially a gift and curse, given the questionable status of China’s own domestic containment, reports in several countries of faulty rapid testing kits from some Chinese suppliers, and the terms China applies to medical exports”, so that, in the final analysis, recipient countries must beware of a “health version of debt trap diplomacy” when receiving material from mainland China – but, implicitly, not from Taiwan (para. 22).

On April 13, Nicole Jao (2020) recounts China's attempt "to rewrite the narrative" in the face of international criticism "for its delayed response to the initial outbreak and lack of transparency to the international community ever since" (para. 11). As Jao continues, "Beijing has been shipping medical equipment, protective gear, and medicine across Europe" (para. 11) as part of what she calls "humanitarian propaganda across Europe" (para. 13). However, reportedly, "cracks are starting to show in China's mask diplomacy", with "[s]ome countries question[ing] the quality of China-made medical equipment and supplies" (para. 16).

James Palmer's (2020) April 15 China brief appears right after "[o]fficial documents recently obtained by the Associated Press show that Beijing delayed informing the Chinese public about its own knowledge of the coronavirus outbreak by six days in January". Palmer judges that, "[w]hile it wasn't China's only error, the report is another blow to Beijing's attempts to dodge responsibility for the pandemic", and contrasts China's story with Taiwan's coronavirus success, reporting "how Taiwan detected the threat of the coronavirus as early as Dec. 31, 2019, by watching China closely [and] remains one of the pandemic's outstanding success stories" (Palmer, 2020).

Charles Dunst's (2020) article, published on April 20, compiles key elements constructing a negative narrative of China's international communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. Building on Taiwan's story, Dunst acknowledges that the island "is shrewdly boosting its global clout by donating medical supplies worldwide" (Dunst, 2020, para. 2), which is to be welcomed by the international community in contrast to "[t]he regime whose incompetence allowed the virus to spread from Wuhan to the world [and which] is now cynically making its own case for global leadership" (para. 13). He questions the effectiveness of Beijing's "propaganda", noting that many donations are actually sales, often with defective materials. Dunst anticipates that the CCP's "public relations" efforts would spoil China's chances at global leadership. He also links Beijing's reputational issues to reports of discriminatory treatment of African residents in Guangzhou, arguing that such incidents undermine China's "mask diplomacy" (Dunst, 2020).

On the same day, Doug Bandow (2020) wrote an article dealing with the issue of the U.S. decoupling from China, arguing in favor of prioritizing cooperation over confrontation for the global good. However, and remarkably, even to advance such an argument it was necessary for the author to concede and stress in detail the seemingly unrelated assertion of the Chinese responsibility for the pandemic:

The entire Chinese government mishandled various stages of the coronavirus outbreak, including hiding the extent of infection and transmissibility to humans, punishing doctors and citizen journalists who sought to report on the looming pandemic, and moving too slowly on a travel ban from Wuhan, allowing the coronavirus to become a truly global crisis. (Bandow, 2020, para. 1)

James Green's (2020) article, published two days later, reproduces the same argument and with the same rhetorical mechanism: to reasonably argue in favor of health and humanitarian cooperation rather than an unfruitful US-China blame game amid the pandemic, the prerequisite is to recall and emphasize the fact that China was responsible for the origin of the pandemic in the first place:

Even before the outbreak of the coronavirus, US-China relations were under serious strain. [...] Then came the coronavirus outbreak, originating in the Chinese city of Wuhan [...]. Let's be clear: The Chinese government mishandled the outbreak, delaying its initial response for weeks and withholding information for six inexcusable days. (Green, 2020, para. 2)

Green then brings back the topic of China's global coronavirus engagement, framed as an effort to "distract" the global public opinion from its association with the outbreak (that is what is called reputational damage in scholarly parlance): "Beijing's high-profile donations of protective equipment and forgiveness of African debt are, in part, an effort to distract from the initial botched handling of the outbreak" (para. 13).

While conceding that China outperformed the United States in responding to the outbreak, which would suggest a superior appeal of the authoritarian model of governance in handling emergencies, James Traub (2020), writing on April 27, stresses that it was the same authoritarian model of China that was originally responsible for the whole crisis: "It was not technocratic failure but an authoritarian culture that led to the lapse between the identification of the first case in Wuhan on Dec. 8 and the lockdown on Jan. 23" (para. 11). Traub's argument is that, in the final analysis, the only models truly worth emulating are those of Asian democracies like Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong, plus Singapore.

Finally, writing on April 28, William Brent (2020) elaborates his general policy recommendation for China to strategically invest in electrifying rural healthcare facilities in developing countries throughout Africa and Asia to boost Beijing's reputation. Notably, even to elaborate such a generic recommendation which reasonably bears timeless validity regardless of the pandemic situation, the argument must always stem from a reminder of China's pernicious role in causing the novel coronavirus pandemic: "As ground zero of the coronavirus pandemic, China owes the rest of the world more than a few planeloads of masks and ventilators to help address the ongoing global health crisis, especially given Beijing's apparent lack of initial transparency" (Brent, 2020, para. 1).

Discussion

In identifying the discursive logics and rhetorical mechanisms underpinning the negative framing of China's public diplomacy in the *Foreign Policy* articles from the targeted period, it

is *by no means* implied that the magazine or its contributors pursue some kind of like-minded agenda against China. Not all articles which appeared in the magazine over the period considered are dedicated to conveying a negative framing of China's public diplomacy. As further research may demonstrate, other magazines— such as, for instance, *The Diplomat* – in the same period have proven even more vocal and sensational in insistently condemning China's responsibilities in the initial mishandling of the epidemic, entirely deploring all of China's subsequent international image-repairing attempts on that basis (see, for example, Albert, 2020; Kuo, 2020; Cook, 2020 in *The Diplomat*). This, therefore, implies that the sample considered should not be taken as representative of the international reception of China's public diplomacy. This sample simply constitutes an empirical indication of the existence of negative public diplomacy framings located at the level of the media.

Framing involves the selection and emphasis of certain pieces of information over others and, at the same time, the attribution of meaning and moral valuation to the said information. Four elements of the framing of China's public diplomacy can be observed in the *Foreign Policy* articles analyzed in this paper. First is the ubiquitous repetition of China's responsibility for the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic. The existing scholarly analyses all agree on the idea that China's COVID-19 diplomacy originates as an attempt to repair the nation brand, yet China's public diplomacy is analyzed in isolation as if it were separate and independent from China's purported responsibility for initiating the pandemic. In other words, first is China's fault and the reputational drawback associated with it, and only thereafter, that is at a separate stage, comes China's public diplomacy. In contrast, China's original sin plays a *constitutive role* in the *Foreign Policy* framing of China's public diplomacy, which qualifies the negative designation of it in terms of “propaganda” or “public relations” with opportunistic political ends. This in turn determines, at the level of moral judgement, the moral disenfranchisement of any of China's attempts to repair the nation brand.

Second, the reports on China's actions in the areas of pandemic response, international engagement, and the communication thereof are frequently juxtaposed to other reports that contribute to undermining China's narrative of success and international solidarity. Namely, the infamous aggressive statements and conspiracy suggestions on the part of some Chinese diplomats and state media (boldly called “information warfare” by Ferraresi) cannot be separated from, and play a constitutive role in defining and morally judging, all of China's subsequent actions amid the pandemic (Braw, 2020; Gitter et al. 2020; Ferraresi, 2020). Likewise, even the mistreatment of African citizens in Guangzhou (Dunst, 2020) came to play a role in the otherwise unrelated COVID-19 diplomacy of China.

Third, the coronavirus success of democratic Taiwan is a recurrent theme which is set against mainland China's authoritarian methods and original sin. Taiwan's and mainland China's resolute epidemic responses are not judged on an equal moral footing, due to the former's democratic status and the latter's characterization as an autocratic regime under the rule of an all-powerful Xi Jinping. This theme is brought to the fore in the pieces by

Feldwisch-Drentrup (2020) and Aspinwall (2020), though it is mentioned and lurks within other texts as well. This framing induces a negative judgment of China's engagement against the putative virtuous yardstick of Taiwan.

Finally, the assumption of China's culpability in the pandemic has sedimented in the discourse on COVID-19 and, in the *Foreign Policy* texts, has emerged as a rhetorical prerequisite for public figures to be accepted in the public debate. As it appears, one is not allowed to articulate an argument in favor of international cooperation amid the pandemic without firstly expressing allegiance to the chorus blaming China's unforgivable and unforgettable sin (Green, 2020; Bandow, 2020). The case of Brent's article is particularly telling, showcasing how one is compelled to begin by acknowledging China's primordial sin before being allowed to adequately elaborate and deliver any argument of their own to the audience. What is peculiar is that, in Brent's specific case, the argument has strictly little to do with the pandemic (it concerns development cooperation in the areas of energy and health facilities), yet it has been forcibly juxtaposed with the question of the coronavirus's origin. This suggests that the assumption of China's perpetual culpability has become irreversibly entrenched at the level of common sense and cannot be omitted, let alone questioned, lest one face ostracization from the public debate.

The case of the *Foreign Policy* framing of the early COVID-19 diplomacy of China was selected for analysis by virtue of the striking contrast between the positive attempt at reputation-improvement or -repair and the negative media framing of such an attempt. We can discuss at length the intellectual and cultural origins and political imbrications of the discourses on China traced in the texts analyzed, as well as their relative weight in terms of actual impact at the level of public opinion. Arguably, the narrative (or counter-narrative) pushed by this corpus likely drew from pre-existing attitudes and concerns. Academic, specialist, and media voices, for instance, have suggested that anti-China rhetoric (Layne, 2020; Nair, 2023) and the attitudes of fear and blame of China are but an expression of a long-standing "neo-orientalist" culture existing among Western societies (Eichelberg, 2007; Miyake, 2021).

framings that question the virtuosity and legitimacy of China's public diplomacy amid the pandemic are frequent and easily found elsewhere in outlets beside *Foreign Policy* magazine (see, for example, Doherty et al., 2021). From this perspective, further research shall also assess the effective impact of *Foreign Policy*'s frames on public opinion compared to other outlets of a similar kind (say, *The Diplomat*). The fact that not all *Foreign Policy* publications do frame China's public diplomacy in a distinctively negative fashion leads to the question of the specific impact of the limited cluster of *Foreign Policy* pieces considered in this research in determining public opinions and attitudes among the audiences.

This question should be the object of further study on the broader phenomenon of framing in public diplomacy and requires the adoption of an audience's perspective as well as

the incorporation of the most recent advancements in communication studies aimed at capturing the complexity of contemporary information ecosystems and the individuals' situatedness therein (Thorson & Wells, 2016; Nisbet & Kamenchuk, 2019), thereby confirming the suggestion of public diplomacy as "probably one of the most multidisciplinary areas in modern scholarship" (Gilboa, 2008, p. 56).

Conclusion

The present study fulfils the limited goal of suggesting the fundamental idea that frames are not only the object public diplomacy pursues and, at least in the case of China, reacts to, but are also a factor which apply to the public diplomacy process itself. In other words, not only is a nation's image framed by its public diplomacy efforts, but the public diplomacy act of framing itself also becomes subject to framing by others. As empirically substantiated in the specific two-month period of China's public diplomacy amid COVID-19 scrutinized in this paper, the framing of China's public diplomacy occurs at the level of the media in the recipient countries. Involving in-depth textual analysis of a deliberately restricted sample of articles from *Foreign Policy* magazine negatively framing China's public diplomacy, this study highlighted the existence of opposing frames that may intervene between the sending and receiving ends of public diplomacy messages. This consideration better captures the empirical complexity of public diplomacy phenomena.

The idea that initiatives to enhance soft power by certain countries are often interpreted and met with negative, or confrontational, reactions by governments and media is embedded in recent scholarly works (Birge & Chatterje-Doody, 2021; Chernobov & Briant, 2022). Similarly, in non-academic contributions, Zappone (2023) noted how "China's messages are understood through pre-existing frames" (p. 8), while Zeli (2024) went on to suggest that a "securitization of Chinese soft power" is ongoing and apparent in certain Western discourses. This phenomenon certainly deserves further attention, elaboration, and formalization at an academic level. The present article designated it as the "(negative) framing of public diplomacy" and encourages further research in this direction.

It is believed that this research path can prospectively provide substantial advancements in the broader research on China's public diplomacy strategies – beyond the pandemic. For instance, negative media frames can be integrated as an intervening variable in Mattingly and Sundquist's (2023) framework correlating positive/negative public diplomacy messages with reputational changes amongst targeted publics. As such, negative media frames, external to public diplomacy frames, could be factored into the determination of whether and to what extent innovative public diplomacy practices of China, such as the textual-visual integration combined with the discursive adjustments in China's BRI promotion examined by Kuteleva (2023), effectively produce positive reputational effects. The plausible hypothesis that negative media framings of public diplomacy may engender unintended (dampening or

backfiring) effects on public diplomacy could be thereupon verified.

Further, external and negative public diplomacy frames in the media should be explored in more empirical cases – beyond the case of China, beyond *Foreign Policy* magazine, and beyond COVID-19 – with a view to generalization and theoretical integration within existing and future models of public diplomacy, thereby contributing to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the public diplomacy phenomenon in international relations and communication (Gilboa, 2008). In the final analysis, it is believed that the construct of “(negative) framings of public diplomacy” introduced in this study is set to break new ground for a critical research agenda on public diplomacy that shifts its focus away from the repetitive and overlapping analyses of the contents, motivations, and methods of public diplomacy in favor of systematic attention to the dialectical (i.e., non-linear) relationships between public diplomacy actors and the complex information ecosystem existing at the receiving end of the public diplomacy equation.

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