

Heroes in Harm's Way: COVID-19 Narratives of China as a Form of Soft Power

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Abstract

This paper examines COVID-19 narratives of China as a form of soft power. The coronavirus pandemic and its handling have presented an image problem for China on the global stage. The country has struggled to control the narratives surrounding the pandemic. This article is interdisciplinary in nature with a focus on contemporary Chinese history, culture, and politics, as well as communication issues and narratives. It analyses non-fictional and fictional narratives as part of China's COVID-19 diplomacy. Beyond documentaries, this paper examines the two docudramas *Heroes in Harm's Way* 最美逆行者 (2020) and *With You* 在一起 (2020) and how these popular TV shows present the coronavirus crisis in China at the beginning of the pandemic. We argue that they provide positive narratives of the COVID-19 response that highlight people's courage and sacrifice to inspire the Chinese population to stand together as a nation. The docudramas showcase everyday life during the lockdown in Wuhan over 76 days from the end of January 2020 to early April 2020. Nurses, doctors, and patients are represented as heroic characters who fight the pandemic together. *Heroes in Harm's Way* and *With You* are testament of a united China broadcast both to domestic audiences and viewers abroad. The docudramas function as damage control to enhance China's image in the world. This helps increase China's soft power as the country presents itself as a capable force for good within its boundaries and beyond.

Keywords: China, COVID-19 narratives, soft power, wolf warrior diplomacy, docudramas, heroism

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Heroji v Plemenitih upornikih: kitajske pripovedi o COVID-19 kot oblika mehke moči

Izvleček

Članek obravnava pripovedi o koronavirusni bolezni na Kitajskem kot obliki mehke moči. Pandemija in soočanje z njo sta na svetovni ravni na Kitajsko vrgla slabo luč, zato se je država trudila nadzirati pripovedi o pandemiji. S poudarkom na sodobni kitajski zgodovini, kulturi, politiki ter vprašanjih komunikacije in naracije pričujoči interdisciplinarni članek analizira resnične in izmišljene pripovedi kot del kitajske koronavirusne diplomacije. Obravnava priljubljene dokumentarne drame *Plemeniti uporniki* (kit. Original 最美逆行者; ang. prevod *Heroes in Harm's Way*) in *S skupnimi močmi* (kit. original 在一起; ang. prevod *With You*) iz leta 2020 ter pokaže, kako ti seriji prikazujeta koronavirusno krizo na Kitajskem ob začetku pandemije. Trdimo, da ponujata pozitivne pripovedi o odzivu na COVID-19, ki poudarjajo pogum in požrtvovalnost ljudi, da bi navdihnili kitajsko prebivalstvo, naj stopi skupaj kot narod. Izbrani dokudrmi prikazujeta vsakdanje življenje v 76 dneh zaprtja Wuhana od konca januarja do začetka aprila 2020. Medicinske sestre, zdravniki in bolniki so predstavljeni kot junaški liki, ki se skupaj borijo proti pandemiji. Heroji v omenjenih serijah pričajo o duhu enotne Kitajske, epizode pa so na voljo tako domačemu občinstvu kot tudi gledalcem v tujini. Dokudrame delujejo kot nadzor škode za izboljšanje podobe Kitajske v svetu. To pripomore k povečevanju mehke moči Kitajske, saj se država predstavlja kot sposobna sila znotraj in zunaj svojih meja.

Ključne besede: Kitajska, pripovedi o COVID-19, mehka moč, diplomacija volčjih bojevnikov, dokumentarne drame, junaštvo

Medical and Political Background: China during the Coronavirus Pandemic

On May 26, 2021, the White House released a statement by US President Joseph Biden regarding the analysis of the US Intelligence Community into the origin of COVID-19 (White House 2021). The report concluded that there was no definitive answer as to whether the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 emerged naturally by transmission from animals to humans, or whether it was accidentally leaked from a lab when it first emerged in Wuhan, the People's Republic of China, in late 2019 (ibid.). This statement was a departure from the previous official position, which had assumed that the virus emerged at a seafood market in Wuhan. It thus marked "a big shift from the derision heaped on the lab theory by many in the media and politics last year, when Donald Trump, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Senator Tom Cotton and others floated the idea" (BBC 2021a). China vehemently rejected the lab leak theory, labelling its resurfacing as "smear campaigns and

blame shifting” (ibid.). Previously, the lab leak theory had predominantly been advocated by people wanting to blame China for the pandemic or by conspiracy theorists. Now it looks like this idea is regaining traction, with President Biden having stated that there was not “sufficient information to assess one [theory] to be more likely than the other” (White House 2021).

The World Health Organization (WHO) sponsored an investigation into the origins of COVID-19 in early 2021 (Maxmen and Mallapaty 2021). China’s reluctance to admit researchers and the fact that “Chinese government officials suppressed crucial public-health data at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and during the 2002–04 severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic” have become further cause for concern in this context (ibid.). While there is currently no evidence that the virus was bioengineered or leaked from a lab, there is also no substantial evidence that it was transmitted from an infected animal to a human being, although “many infectious-disease researchers agree that the most probable scenario is that the virus evolved naturally and spread from a bat either directly to a person or through an intermediate animal” (ibid.). It can take years to determine the origin of pandemics, as seen during previous investigations into, for example, SARS and Ebola. The pandemic itself, its handling, and the continued investigation present an image problem for China. The country has struggled to control the narratives surrounding the pandemic after it was highly successful in containing COVID-19 within China in 2020.

Our paper is interdisciplinary in nature, with a focus on contemporary Chinese history, culture, and politics as well as communication issues and narratives. It investigates several fictional and non-fictional narratives concerning the coronavirus pandemic and China’s public image as a result of the events in 2020. We analyse these narratives as part of China’s COVID-19 diplomacy. Simultaneously, we pay attention to critics of the Chinese efforts such as writer Fang Fang 方方 and artist Ai Weiwei 艾未未, who have painted a darker image of China’s COVID-19 response. Beyond documentaries, we are particularly interested in fictional representations of the country’s efforts in containing the pandemic, and specifically the two docudramas *Heroes in Harm’s Way* 最美逆行者 (2020) and *With You* 在一起 (2020). We examine how these popular TV shows present the coronavirus crisis in China at the beginning of the pandemic. In this paper, we argue that they provide positive narratives of the COVID-19 response that highlight people’s courage, sacrifice, and heroism to inspire the Chinese population to stand together as a community and a nation.

The docudramas showcase everyday life in COVID-19 affected neighbourhoods and hospitals in Wuhan, showing heroic actions by nurses, doctors, and common

people. *Heroes in Harm's Way* and *With You* are representations of a united China broadcast both to domestic audiences and viewers abroad. On YouTube, each episode of *Heroes in Harm's Way* has somewhere between 80k and 500k+ views at the time of writing. The first episode has the largest number of views, 500K+, while the average is around 200k. The number of views of *With You* is even higher, as some episodes have more than one million. However, compared to other Chinese dramas, such as historic costume dramas and videos posted by popular Chinese bloggers, the number of views is quite small. The docudramas present China's efforts at controlling COVID-19-related narratives, and function as damage control to enhance the country's image in the world. This helps increase China's soft power as the country presents itself as a capable force for good within its boundaries and beyond. The target audiences of China's soft power goals and strategies are both external and internal. The external ones are foreign and elite Western audiences, particularly key foreign policy decision-makers. If China can reach and persuade global audiences, it can be an expert at gatekeeping to control the flow of global media coverage towards Chinese domestic audiences. The gatekeepers put the content of global media coverage into a context that is helpful for the Chinese government. They recycle, repurpose, and use what fits into the official narrative to frame it for internal audiences. Additionally, they make sure that the potential positive impact of China's soft power will not be lost, because some sources other than the Chinese government are telling China's story.

At the time of writing in June 2021, over 180.5 million coronavirus cases have been reported worldwide (Johns Hopkins 2021). According to Worldometer (2021), the number of COVID-19 cases in China is officially at 91,780 as of June 30, 2021. Of those cases, 86,689 patients have recovered, while 4,636 have died (ibid.). There are currently 455 active cases, of which 2% are considered serious, while the vast majority (98%) are classified as mild (ibid.). After the detection of the coronavirus in Wuhan, the daily number of cases showed a huge spike in January and February 2020, with the highest daily number recorded at 14,108 on February 12, 2020 (ibid.). After February 2020, the numbers dropped significantly and decreased steadily, so much so that China was able to declare the pandemic as contained within the country. With the emergence of the coronavirus in Wuhan and the subsequent rapid spread of the pandemic all over the world, however, China is still seen as the origin of the virus and the pandemic, which has consequently contributed to a rise of anti-Chinese and anti-Asian sentiment around the world.

People perceived to be Chinese or of Asian heritage in general have been discriminated against in various countries and in sometimes dramatic incidents. They have been blamed for the worldwide spread of the pandemic and become scapegoats for what some see as China's guilt. In a resurgence of the trope of the "yellow

peril” (Kawai 2005), people of Asian heritage have had to endure racial slurs and stereotyping during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the US, for example, this has led to “the swift shift from model minority to contagious pariah” (Li 2021). These perceptions of a “contagious pariah” were fuelled by former US President Donald Trump and others when racializing the coronavirus and labelling COVID-19 “Kung Flu” (BBC 2020). Su et al. (2020) argue that it is time to stop using names such as the “Wuhan virus”, “China virus”, or “Chinese virus” to avoid any stereotyping due to locations or the perceived origin of the virus. Along the same lines, Vasquez (2020) points to the xenophobia inherent in such terms. Reny and Barreto (2020) also analyse changing attitudes towards Asian Americans in the US, and find that they were othered in the early stages of the pandemic. The process of othering positions Asian Americans as outsiders who do not belong to the community or nation. It marks them as different from the norm or any accepted behaviour, and various studies have noted increased racism and bias towards Asian Americans since the start of the pandemic (Devakumar et al. 2020; Ho et al. 2020; Sastry and Ban 2020). Discrimination against individuals has increased as people of Chinese heritage and Asian backgrounds are perceived as an immunological threat. This threat also operates on a societal level, with China as a nation being perceived as a threat to the global community since trust in its transparency and handling of the pandemic in the early stages has largely been eroded. Not providing access to its research facilities to further investigate the origin of the virus has also been construed as China’s attempt at hiding facts, and this perceived lack of transparency has further damaged the country’s reputation.

China’s image problem extends beyond the pandemic. In the past few years, the country has been criticized for various issues deemed unacceptable by other powers such as the US and the European Union. These include, among others, the country’s growing arsenal of weapons, its recent handling of the situation in Hong Kong and the passing of the controversial new National Security Law, and its treatment of Uyghur Muslims in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) 新疆维吾尔自治区. Following the most recent NATO Summit in Brussels, Belgium, in June 2021, leaders of the member countries issued a press release warning that “China’s stated ambitions and assertive behaviour present systemic challenges to the rules-based international order and to areas relevant to Alliance security” (NATO Summit 2021, point no. 55). They further stated:

We remain concerned with China’s frequent lack of transparency and use of disinformation. We call on China to uphold its international commitments and to act responsibly in the international system ... in keeping with its role as a major power. (NATO Summit 2021, point no. 55).

This accusatory rhetoric was met with an equally critical response by the Mission of the People's Republic of China to the EU 中华人民共和国驻欧盟使团:

NATO is slandering China's peaceful development and misjudging the international situation and its own role. It represents a continuation of the Cold War mentality and bloc politics. (Mission of China to the EU 2021a)¹

The spokesperson further stated:

China urges NATO to view China's development in a rational manner, stop hyping up in any form the so-called "China threat", and stop taking China's legitimate interests and rights as an excuse to manipulate bloc politics, create confrontation and fuel geopolitical competition. (Mission of China to the EU 2021a)²

Just a few days later, at its most recent meeting in the UK in June 2021, the Group of Seven (G7), consisting of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK and US, harshly criticized China again. China strongly then defended its actions:

Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Tibet-related issues are China's internal affairs. The East and South China Seas concern China's sovereignty and maritime rights and interests. All these issues represent China's fundamental interests and allow no interference. (Mission of China to the EU 2021b)³

China thus categorically rejected any accusations of wrongdoing, highlighting its confidence and strong role in the world:

China is no longer like what it was in the past. The Chinese people have stood up. Intimidation will never work on us. We will stay on the course of peaceful development and at the same time, firmly safeguard national sovereignty, security and development interests. (Mission of China to the EU 2021b)⁴

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- 1 北约称中国构成了所谓“系统性挑战”，是对中国和平发展的诋毁、对国际形势和自身角色的误判，更是冷战思维延续和集团政治心理作祟。
 - 2 中方奉劝北约理性看待中国发展，停止渲染各种形式的“中国威胁论”，不要将中国的正当利益和合法权利作为操弄集团政治、人为制造对立、刺激地缘竞争的借口。
 - 3 台湾、香港、涉疆、涉藏问题是中国的内政，东海、南海涉及中国领土主权和海洋权益，这些问题关乎中国的根本利益，不容干涉。
 - 4 中国早已不是过去的中国，站起来的中国人民是不会被吓倒的。中方将坚定走和平发展道路，也将坚决捍卫国家主权、安全、发展利益。

These exchanges show the conflicting interests between various world powers. However, despite this hostile rhetoric between China, the US, and the EU, the People's Republic has recently attempted to alter image by moving from the confrontational “wolf warrior” style to present China as “trustworthy, loveable and respectable” to the world (BBC 2021b).

From “Wolf Warrior” to “Loveable China”: COVID-19 Diplomacy as Soft Power

In recent years, China's foreign policy has been called “wolf warrior diplomacy” 战狼外交. This term is an allusion to the 2015 film, *Wolf Warrior* 战狼, and particularly its sequel, *Wolf Warrior 2* 战狼 2 (2017). This action film, starring Wu Jing 吴京 as a Chinese soldier overseas, in this case in an African country, highlights China's role on the international scene. It showcases how a “lone Chinese wolf” defends China and Chinese values abroad by fighting those that might stand in its way. This is exemplified by the film's tagline: “Anyone who offends China will be killed, no matter how far the target is 犯我中华者虽远必诛”. One of the highest-grossing films of the year, *Wolf Warrior 2* celebrates Chinese nationalism in its embrace of violent means to defend China if necessary. This wolf warrior attitude has been translated into diplomatic styles as well, although outside of China the term is used with negative connotations, implying that the aggressive nature of defending China at all cost may be more suitable in films than real life.

Several scholars have examined wolf warrior diplomacy in the context of contemporary politics. Analysing the transcripts of press conferences by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) 中华人民共和国外交部 over the past twenty years, Dai and Luqiu (2021) found that “MFA spokespersons have become increasingly hostile since the beginning of Xi's presidency, with 2019 and 2020 mark[ing] unprecedented high levels of hostility in the past two decades” (Dai and Luqiu 2021, 23). Other observers have pointed out that wolf warrior diplomacy is hurting China's foreign policy, as some confrontational comments and reactions have created pushback (Zhu 2020). One example was a comparison of China and India during the ongoing coronavirus crisis. In contrasting images, China was celebrating a rocket launch, while cremations of people who had died with COVID-19 represented India (Palmer 2021). This implied that China had successfully handled the coronavirus pandemic, whereas other countries, such as India, were still burying thousands of people because they had not been as decisive in combating the virus. These images were met with disgust as users on Chinese social media called them “tasteless”, which ultimately prompted the images to be deleted (ibid.). While

“from China’s perspective, wolf-warrior diplomacy is a direct response to ‘unfair’ approaches by other countries” (Zhu 2021), people perceive the limits of the effectiveness of such aggressive and uncalled-for approaches which are seen as offensive, as in the example of India.

More recently, President Xi Jinping 习近平 has attempted to rethink foreign policy. In a speech to officials of the Communist Party of China (CCP) 中国共产党 in early June 2021, President Xi spoke of the country’s need to present a “credible, loveable and respectable China 可信、可爱、可敬”. There has been some confusion with regard to the most appropriate translation of President Xi’s words, with options ranging from “reliable, admirable, and respectable” (Xinhua News Agency 新华通讯社), “trustworthy, loveable, and respectable” (Bloomberg) to “believable, lovely and respectable” (Google Translate) (Brouwer 2021). Despite the slightly different meanings in translation, this statement promises a friendlier tone in diplomacy, which might mark a return to earlier strategies such as former President Deng Xiaoping’s 邓小平 policy 韬光养晦 “to calmly observe, hold one’s ground, react firmly, act but keep a low profile 冷静观察、稳住阵脚、沉着应付、韬光养晦、有所作为” (Pang 2020, 1). In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, this move might present an attempt to salvage China’s reputation in the world.

In addition to the friendlier rhetoric, China has also provided help to other nations during the pandemic. In the early stages, China was able to support other countries in their handling of COVID-19. After the country had successfully contained the virus in 2020, it shipped masks and PPE (personal protective equipment) to other countries. Kowalski discusses China’s shipment of masks to several Eastern and Central European countries, such as the Czech Republic, Serbia, Poland, and Romania, and notes that China “has been promoting the narrative of its transparent and timely response to the outbreak of the pandemic, while at the same time nurturing its image as a (benevolent) global leader in the struggle against the coronavirus” (Kowalski 2021, 1). Kowalski argues that this has helped China both on the domestic front and international stage, “aiming to cover up China’s leadership’s failure to contain the pandemic in its initial stage, while also turning acts of foreign gratitude to its advantage” (ibid.). Additionally, Kowalski shows how mask diplomacy has paid off for China in this context as people in countries such as the Czech Republic, for example, have an “unexpectedly positive” view of China, with the majority believing that more aid came from China than from the EU (ibid., 7). Even though the deliveries were commercial enterprises, many people actually perceived the arrival of the medical supplies from China as free aid (ibid.). This shows how China has been able to aid other countries and, at the same time, influence its COVID-19 narratives to its own

benefit. China has thus succeeded in helping foreign countries and in promoting an image of stability to its own citizens.

China has also been active with regard to “vaccine diplomacy” (Sreenganga and Ramaprasad 2020; Ninomiya 2021). The term itself is problematic, because it implies that the delivery of vaccines can be used as a political tool to influence other countries in one’s favour. Ninomiya (2021) examines China’s role in delivering its vaccines to developing countries, such as those in Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Latin America. The author also reports on concerns that other countries might have with regard to the undue influence of China on the world stage and the advantages it has gained in terms of foreign relations. Sreenganga and Ramaprasad (2020) also explore whether China’s engagement in vaccine diplomacy is predominantly meant to aid other countries or whether it might be part of a larger strategy to gain global power. Similarly, Lian (2020) argues that China’s plans are “much more sinister”, warning of Beijing’s soft power ambitions. Referring to President Xi’s Chinese Dream 中国梦 as the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation 中华民族的伟大复兴”, Lian is concerned about the possibilities of a dream of “global dominance” (ibid.). The author argues that governments and observers have focused too much on China’s hard power in its geopolitical presence and neglected its soft power ambitions and strategies: “they are only just beginning to appreciate its far more invasive soft-power strategy—and it might already be too late” (ibid.). Health diplomacy in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic is one such instance of soft power, and China has been successful in expanding its soft power in various parts of the world.

Nye defines soft power as “the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment” (Nye 2019, 7). He originally described the concept in the context of the Cold War (Nye 1990, 153–57). More recently, Nye has also characterized soft power as “a struggle to win hearts and minds” in the fight against international terrorism (Nye 2008, 94). In addition to hard power resources, the author argues that “a country’s soft power rests on its resources of culture, values and policies” (Nye 2019, 7).

China is a powerful actor in international affairs, but it aspires to become a normative power. The discussion of China’s soft power goals and strategies, including vaccine, mask, and health diplomacies, can be conceptualized as wanting to become a normative power in the international community, which is capable of shaping normality and thus become a normative actor with moral responsibility. As Sjørusen (2006) asked in the European context: How can the EU be a “normative” power? The same question can be formulated in the Chinese context: How can China be a normative power in multipolar power relationships?

In Mandarin Chinese, the term 标准 (*biaozhun*) can be translated in English as “normative” in the sense of standardization rather than a moral imperative (Womack 2008). Manners defines normative power as “the ability to shape conceptions of normal”. He refocuses the notion of normative power in the discussion of “power over opinion” or “ideological power” (Manners 2002, 239). Manners perceives normative power as the power of (virtuous) example (*ibid.*, 252). Other scholars identify four instruments of influence of normative power, including persuasion, activation of international norms, shaping what is “normal”, and leadership by example (Forsberg 2011, 1184).

Traditionally, Chinese culture, strongly influenced by Confucianism, advocated a highly elaborated “ethic of social interaction that emphasized leadership by example, teaching morality, and the duties associated with relational roles” (Womack 2008, 2). Vaccine, mask, and health diplomacies can be understood as soft and non-coercive instruments. In fact, the so-called vaccine diplomacy finds its root in the gift-giving and gift-exchanging culture in traditional Chinese society, in which *Guanxi* 关系 or social relationships are maintained through “the skillful mobilization of moral and cultural imperatives such as obligation and reciprocity in pursuit of both diffuse social ends and calculated instrumental ends” (Yang 1989, 35). These ancient practices have shaped modern diplomacy. Gratitude inspired by generosity enables China to consolidate its international authority (Kustermans 2019). But to what extent can some of these instruments of influence of normative power help China become a normative power? Tocci (2008) distinguishes between normative and imperial powers based on the assumption of “others-empowering” or “self-empowering”. One can ask whether China is using vaccine, mask, and health diplomacies to empower others or itself. In *Foreign Affairs*, Huang (2021) argues that China “has not won the soft power stakes, but it has an early lead”.

The example and discussion of the EU as a normative power is helpful, because it can make us aware that efforts to justify foreign policy regarding social diffusion and activation of international norms lead to suspicions of hidden agendas. China has carefully managed to keep the imperial and self-empowering dimension of power absent from its narrative to the rest of the world, and its various soft policy instruments can be understood in the context of the decline of Western powers and the “rise of the East”. Fitting China’s goals of soft power strategies into a normative framework does not hinder its potential contributions to general normative international action. China has adopted a “good neighbourhood policy” to maintain better relations and pursue mutual benefit with the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Ye 2019, 95). The challenge is to find out to what extent China can capitalize on these normative aspirations and extend far

beyond its region to be recognized not necessarily by the West but by the “rest” as a cosmopolitan “force for good” in international relations. Viewed from an idealistic perspective, while the notion of normative power is not new, its importance is only likely to gain traction in the future.

As one of the largest and most populous nations in the world, China has traditionally played an important role in the soft power sector. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, China was ranked 5th worldwide in terms of its soft power index (Global Soft Power Index 2021). In 2020, presumably due to the COVID-19 pandemic, China’s ranking suffered and fell to 8th after Germany, Japan, the UK, Canada, Switzerland, the US, and France, respectively (ibid.). The report reveals a mixed reaction to China’s role in the pandemic: “among Western countries, the perception of China has turned markedly negative. Despite providing much of the world’s personal protection equipment, it is accused of politicising exports and boasting” (ibid., 98). The Global Soft Power Index (ibid.) points out that China’s vaccines have often been “denigrated as being less advanced and effective”. On the other hand, the report shows that “among many developing countries, the esteem of China has gone up. China is seen to have performed much better than the US and Europe” (ibid.). This stark contrast is an indication of the various perceptions of China’s handling of the coronavirus pandemic as well as an outcome of its mask diplomacy and vaccine diplomacy.

Verma (2020, 255) argues that China’s health diplomacy has helped the country portray itself as a “Good Samaritan”. In addition to mask diplomacy, China has also introduced a campaign to question the origins of the COVID-19 and has blamed the US in an effort to divert attention from itself and to dissociate itself from the pandemic (Verma 2020). Similarly, Kobierecka and Kobierecki show how China has engaged in “assistance rhetoric” (Kobierecka and Kobierecki 2021, 9), by projecting a positive image in its media, positioning itself “as a global leader in fighting against the pandemic. Even before China managed to overcome the outbreak, the narrative promoted by Chinese media referred to the supremacy of the Chinese way of fighting the disease” (ibid., 8). China was able to position itself rhetorically as a winner of the fight against the pandemic. It contrasted its successful handling of COVID-19 with that of the United States, for example (Gauttam, Singh, and Kaur 2020). China has expanded its influence beyond trade and politics via what Gauttam, Singh, and Kaur (2020, 326) call China’s “Health Silk Road”, in an allusion to the famous trade route. The authors interpret China’s aid as “an organized effort to become hegemon in the coming times through expanding its geopolitical, geostrategic and geo-economic influences across the globe” (ibid., 330). They even anticipate that the “*status quo* would change in favour of China in the post-pandemic world order”

(*ibid.*, 333). While this may be a welcome change for some, it has also been met with concern by others, most notably the US.

The “Health Silk Road” can also be regarded as an extension of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), sometimes also referred to as “One Belt One Road 一带一路” or “The Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road 丝绸之路经济带和二十一世纪海上丝绸之路”. As its original title indicates, the project consists of a number of roads, ports, pipelines, waterways, and railways along six economic corridors that span across Southeast Asia, Central Asia, West Asia, and Europe. Initiated in 2013, the BRI is intended to improve trade, investment, and infrastructure between China and the various countries on the route. In addition to facilitating trade, the BRI also has the potential to increase China’s political influence. To many observers, the initiative speaks to the country’s global ambitions (Brakman et al. 2019; Buckley 2020; Chen, Song and Yang 2021). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, several countries along the route of the BRI have become partners in China’s roll-out of its vaccines. A notable region is the Arab world with, for example, the UAE among others, which collaborated closely with China’s vaccine efforts. As Ninomiya (2021) states: “Sinopharm chose UAE not only for its high number of cases but also for its foreign labour force with workers from 125 countries”. The UAE has also set up a vaccine production facility in Abu Dhabi in cooperation with China (Woertz and Yellinek 2021). According to Woertz and Yellinek, such licensing deals also imply long-term pharmaceutical cooperation.

The UAE has shown continued support of China’s vaccine trials and the BRI more generally (Wang and Khalifa 2021). In a survey of Arab perceptions of China among nationals of Arab nations in the UAE, “62.19% of the participants thought Arab countries should collaborate with China to combat COVID-19. Almost 80% of the respondents believed that China made a positive contribution to the MENA’s economy” (*ibid.*). Wang and Khalifa suggest that “China needs to use its resources to enhance its soft power in the region in order to mitigate the negative impact of COVID-19 on its image”, but the authors also state that “many Arab residents of the UAE continue to view China as a great power and an important partner of the region” (*ibid.*). Continued collaboration between Arab countries and China can strengthen China’s role in the region and the world at large. While facts matter, it is also important to highlight people’s perceptions and feelings, even if these differ from reality. China has been successful in presenting an image of itself that makes other nations and people appreciate its efforts. While China has had to confront image problems, the narratives it has been telling have had an impact on rectifying some of the earlier perceptions of the pandemic as China’s fault.

Coronation: Documenting China's Handling of the Coronavirus Pandemic

Despite China's best efforts to present itself in a positive light, some narratives from within China and certainly also from outside the country have been critical of China's response to the pandemic. One of the earliest examples is writer Fang Fang's 方方 *Wuhan Diary—Dispatches from a Quarantined City* (2020a; 2020b) 武汉日记. Chronicling the events in Wuhan during the city-wide lockdown from January through March 2020, Fang Fang originally posted her thoughts and observations online, after which they also received attention abroad and were ultimately published in book form in various languages. According to Davidson (2020), "On Weibo, 'Fang Fang Diary' has had 380m views, 94,000 discussions, and 8,210 original posts ... On Twitter, the hashtag #wuhandiary shows hundreds of critical posts". Fang Fang has been accused of giving critics a "giant sword" (ibid.) to attack China. Similarly, *Wuhan Diary* tells "uncomfortable truths about China ... her entries began to seem like samizdat" (Garner 2020). Fedtke, Ibahrine, and Wang (2021) argue that Fang Fang's *Wuhan Diary* is an act of sousveillance in which the author advances her observations as a critique from the bottom up. The text serves as an early observation of China's response to the pandemic in Wuhan, and while Fang Fang is generally supportive she does chronicle some shortcomings of its early handling of the crisis.

Artist and activist Ai Weiwei 艾未未 presented an even grimmer view of the pandemic in Wuhan in early 2020. Living abroad, Ai directed a documentary from afar with "an assortment of amateur cinematographers", capturing the footage within China itself (Bramesco 2020). The documentary mentions at the very beginning that "getting reliable information from within the country is difficult" (*Coronation* 2020, 0:00:15). Juxtaposing the coronavirus crisis with the events in Hong Kong, *Coronation* raises questions about the role of the individual in society, which is particularly important in the context of a health emergency when the population depends on others members cooperating and collaborating. Similar to Fang Fang, Ai Weiwei takes a critical look at the silencing of doctors in Wuhan in the early stages of the pandemic: "They delayed... they stopped those doctors talking about it ... it gave the disease a big advantage to spread ... I am sure it was not their intention. They miscalculated the situation" (ibid., 0:04:05–0:04:30). Ai Weiwei also compares the situation in China to that in the US: "But almost no government in the world has complete transparency. If you see what happened to Assange, Snowden, Chelsea Manning ... you can see the US do the same ... but at a different level" (ibid., 0:10:42–0:11:02). The documentary also includes disturbing images of body bags in Wuhan to document the tragic extent of the pandemic

(ibid., 0:12:13). Johnson (2020) points to an “awesome efficiency” in China’s handling of the pandemic, especially when building a new hospital from scratch in a matter of a few days. Such moments express the deep contradiction between the failure and success of fighting the pandemic in Wuhan.

Wu Hao’s 吴皓 *76 Days* is another example of a Wuhan-related documentary, which also chronicles the time during the lockdown in Wuhan over 76 days from the end of January 2020 to the end of the lockdown in early April 2020. The documentary takes an inside look into the functioning of hospitals in Wuhan during the most critical time for the city, with many patients in the ICU, needing intubation and other intensive care. *76 Days* shows the immense pressure under which hospital staff operated in the early stages of the pandemic, but at the same time it illustrates the interactions among doctors, nurses, and patients. Despite the tragic setting and the seemingly impersonal and hidden identities of nurses in PPE labelled only with their names and sometimes a drawing on them, the documentary manages to showcase the sympathy and strong will that hospital staff show when caring for their patients. This is evident in scenes such as feeding the patients, relaying messages from their loved ones to them, or nursing the wounds that the intubation might have left.

In the Same Breath, directed by Wang Nanfu 王男楸, also documents the events in Wuhan at the beginning of 2020. Zeitchik (2021) interprets the documentary as arguing that “the alleged suppression led to an untold number of deaths and the virus spreading rapidly, as unaware people kept taking risks”. In its reporting of the crisis in Wuhan, *In the Same Breath* is much more critical of the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. The documentary premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and was financed by HBO (ibid.). This raises questions of where and how the documentary will be available and what China’s reaction as a major market might be (ibid.). Filming for the various documentaries has been difficult, with virtually all filmmakers relying on volunteers and citizen journalists on the ground in Wuhan to supply them with footage from inside hospitals, for example.

Released right around the first anniversary of the lockdown in Wuhan, *Days and Nights in Wuhan* 武汉日夜 has been called state-backed propaganda (Wang Fujiyama and Wu 2021). At the same time, the documentary is a sensitive portrayal of the problems and struggles that patients and staff were facing. The director Cao Linjing 曹金玲 has been quoted as saying,

We wanted to record the journey of battling against the COVID-19 epidemic via motion picture. Some of the details, including the intense care, anxious waiting, heart-breaking farewells and hopeful rebirths, might strike a chord with viewers. (Wang Fujiyama and Wu 2021)

Days and Nights in Wuhan focuses on the lives of ordinary people thrown into the midst of the pandemic by surprise and trying to cope with the unprecedented situation. The documentary includes many scenes of family members talking to or about the patients, for example, mentioning their favourite food or describing how they were holding their hand in the hospital bed. These stories are heart-warming and inspiring. As in *76 Days* and *In the Same Breath*, audiences see the experiences of the doctors and nurses first-hand. After watching the documentary, one can appreciate the difficulties both the staff and patients were facing. The documentaries all showcase heroism in ordinary people, which is similar to how fictional narratives of China have shown the events in Wuhan in 2020, as discussed below.

Fictional COVID-19 Narratives: Docudramas as Showcases of Heroism

As seen in the discussion of the non-fictional texts, narratives of COVID-19 in China are highly contested. Who gets to say what, where, and when with regard to China's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic is of utmost importance for the country's public image—both domestically and internationally. While China has been criticized for its response to COVID-19, it has attempted to control its image worldwide, conveying a message of strength and decisiveness in dealing with COVID-19. Molter and DiResta (2020) examine how Chinese state media propagate narratives that favour the country's response to COVID-19. The authors show how China and Chinese actors use social media platforms to control the narratives surrounding the pandemic in China. Along the same lines, Jaworsky and Qiaoan (2020) analyse the “narrative battle” between China and the US with regard to the coronavirus pandemic. Jaworsky and Qiaoan (2020, 295) argue that it is necessary to understand the “performative function” of the battle to deescalate it and to move beyond the current surge of nationalism in the dialog between the two countries. In addition to this performative function, Jacob has identified six strategies that China uses to control the narratives of COVID-19 on the international stage: magnify the scope of China's mitigation efforts, highlight the struggle of other countries, promote China's contribution to helping other countries, strengthen the political system within China, deflect the blame from China, and question the origin of the pandemic in China (Jacob 2020, 378–80). Fictional representations of COVID-19 narratives in and of China help magnify the country's efforts in combating the pandemic and help China strengthen its own image.

The two docudramas *Heroes in Harm's Way* 最美逆行者 (2020) and *With You* 在一起 (2020) are the most prominent examples of fictional TV shows that portray

the COVID-19 pandemic in Wuhan in early 2020. The 14 episodes of *Heroes in Harm's Way* aired on CCTV (China Central TV) from September 17–25, 2020. Dragon TV broadcast the 20 episodes of *With You* from September 29–October 8, 2020. All episodes are freely available on, for example, YouTube, unlike some of the other commercial documentaries. *With You* can be watched with subtitles in English, whereas only episodes 3 and 4 of *Heroes in Harm's Way* were available with English subtitles at the time of writing. According to Prensario Internacional, *Heroes in Harm's Way* was also to be aired on Sky UK and other global platforms. The TV show became a popular topic: “As of September 27, the viewing number of relevant Weibo topics of the TV series exceeds 8 billion, hitting Weibo's trending list 17 times, while the hashtag #HeroesInHarmsWay was viewed by 2.9 billion Weibo users” (Prensario Internacional 2020). It was also trending on social media:

On Douyin (TikTok), the TV drama stays on the trending list for three consecutive days topping the list. A single relevant video clip on Douyin generates viewings as high as 15 million ... making *Heroes in Harm's Way* the most discussed CCTV TV series on social media in recent years (ibid.)

Apparently the shows have benefitted from casting one of China's top idols Xiao Zhan 肖战 in one of the episodes, who rose to stardom in 2019 for his role in the enormously popular fantasy drama *The Untamed*.

On the other hand, *Heroes in Harm's Way* has also faced criticism, particularly for its gender discrimination. Even before it was to be aired abroad, controversy engulfed *Heroes in Harm's Way* due to the show's portrayal of gender. Allen (2020) points out that “the name of the show was seemingly chosen because ... female medical staff are often hailed as ‘Heroes in Harm's Way’. However, in Chinese, the name of the show translates more literally as ‘Beauties who go against the tide’”. In fact, the literal translation should be “the beautiful people who went the opposite way”, reading the word 美 as gender neutral. Allen (2020) discusses some controversial scenes that seem to imply that women's roles in the pandemic, particularly at the frontline, were not valued as much as those of men. Jing (2020) makes a similar criticism of certain scenes, for example

a female doctor was asked to step aside in a surgery because of her gender; a female nurse was not allowed to work at the front line because her doctor husband had already done so and there would have been no one to look after the elderly and kids at home. (Jing 2020)

In Episode 3 of *Heroes in Harm's Way*, the male Dr. Yue is chosen to serve at the frontline instead of the female nurse Zhou, who had volunteered first and should have gotten this job. Dr. Yue says to her: “This is a war, not a honeymoon—you’re not ready for this 我是去打仗，你以为度蜜月呢，你这样咋咋呼呼地去了” (*Heroes in Harm's Way* 0:17:04). Nurse Zhou responds: “Don’t question my professionalism” 不许你质疑我的专业” (*Heroes in Harm's Way* 0:17:11). According to Jing, such representations of women “reinforced society’s gender stereotypes and downplayed their contributions to the fight against COVID-19”. This is even more disconcerting as “in actual fact, of the over 42,000 medical workers dispatched to help fight the coronavirus in Hubei, two-thirds were females” (Jing 2020). In addition to this criticism, the *Global Times* 环球时报 (2020) reported that “some Chinese netizens also criticized the TV series for handing out ammunition to Western media to smear and obliterate China’s efforts in fighting the virus”.

In both *Heroes in Harm's Way* and *With You* medical staff are celebrated for their efforts in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. One example at the end of Episode 3 of *Heroes in Harm's Way* shows a patient bowing to Dr. Yue for saving his life (0:42:58). Conversely, when a patient dies, the medical staff bow in front of the hospital bed to express their respect (*Heroes in Harm's Way*, Episode 4, 0:12:54). Even though doctors and nurses are presented as ordinary people, they are elevated to a special status due to their commitment to their job, work ethic, and care of their patients. Viewers are shown everyday heroism that saves lives in the face of a common enemy, the pandemic. The doctors and nurses are represented as smart, sacrificing, willing to endure hardship, and caring. Despite the obvious impetus to praise them as heroes, Cox has cautioned against the overuse of the term hero in the media and elsewhere. Cox argues that

the heroism narrative can be damaging, as it stifles meaningful discussion about what the limits of this duty to treat are. It fails to acknowledge the importance of reciprocity, and through its implication that all healthcare workers have to be heroic, it can have negative psychological effects on workers themselves. (Cox 2020, 510)

Instead, Cox advocates for a re-evaluation of the duties of healthcare workers during a pandemic (ibid.). Similarly, Hopkins examines the role of healthcare workers in light of the term heroism, asking what it means for the profession of doctors and nurses to be grouped in the same “essential” category as sewage workers and grocery store cashiers (Hopkins 2021, 109). Despite this criticism of this concept of heroism, this term helps create an image of glory, which in turn helps China’s soft power ambitions in presenting itself as a conqueror of the pandemic.

Sacrifice and Courage in *Heroes in Harm's Way* and *With You* as Soft Power

Heroes in Harm's Way and *With You* function as narratives of soft power to strengthen China's image in its handling of the coronavirus pandemic. Ma (2021) points out that “*Weiji*, or crisis in the Chinese language, comprises two words: danger and opportunity”. What seems like a contradiction at first in the English language shows that a pandemic can both present a danger, and yet also an opportunity for renewal and strength. Ma highlights the role of the fight against the pandemic by explaining language and metaphors on the

play on the homonym of *yi* for epidemic (疫) and battle (役). The radical *chuang* (疒) for disease in epidemic is replaced by the radical *chi* (彳) to form battle. 彳 suggests little steps like those taken by soldiers at the guard post holding a weapon or lance inherent in the radical *shu* (攴). 彳 also denotes two persons or a group in combat readiness. Broadly speaking, *yi* (役) means military service, forced labour, and duty ... The fight against the epidemic, by word association and emotional affiliation, comes to acquire a sense of military urgency and even honour. (Ma 2021)

Both *Heroes in Harm's Way* and *With You* also praise the role of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) 中国人民解放军 in containing COVID-19. In Episode 2 of *Heroes in Harm's Way*, viewers see how a hospital is built from scratch in a short period of time, supplies are delivered, and trained personnel arrive to take care of the patients (*Heroes in Harm's Way* 0:30:02). Episode 3 of *Heroes in Harm's Way* (0:40:45) also mentions the concerted effort of bringing trained personnel to Wuhan: 344 teams as well as 42,322 medical professionals. In Episode 11 of *With You* (0:01:03), reinforcement from the PLA also arrives in Wuhan to begin the construction of a hospital for up to 1,000 patients, which they are able to complete in just ten days (0:13:25). Both shows address the initial lack of supplies in the hospitals (Episode 3 of *Heroes in Harm's Way*; Episode 1 of *With You*).

War rhetoric also dominates the use of language when talking about the pandemic in both shows. As the Spring Festival is approaching fast, people's hopes are to defeat the virus as soon as possible. As the title *With You* or *Together* indicates, “We should work together and fight a war of annihilation 我们同心协力，我们一起打一个歼灭战” (*With You* Episode 1, 0:17:21). Episode 7 of *With You* (0:26:25) also shows creative ways to ensure supplies for the hospitals. One of the doctors is shown giving an interview to the press to help spread the word and secure more equipment. The rhetoric of war and fighting the pandemic is also evident in Episode 13 (0:03:40): “We're comrades in this battle. We live in the same

trenches. We'll face the bullets together 咱们是战友，咱们同处一个战壕，共同面对枪林弹雨”。 These quotes highlight the nature of the pandemic as a battlefield, but they also show that the way to win is through cooperation and standing together as a community.

Sometimes, this community engagement also assumes a political undertone. In *With You*, the role of the CCP is highlighted positively. In Episode 14, some of the patients complain about the conditions in the hospital, such as the sanitary facilities or the cold. This prompts the staff members to take the matters into their own hands and improve the conditions. They claim that “the Party is with you” as they raise the Chinese flag in the main hall of the hospital. The staff members organize activities for the patients to keep them physically healthy and mentally engaged. The hospital functions as a newfound community: “no matter what language or colour, we sail in the same boat, be each other's family, let's stay together 无关语言肤色，同舟共帆，不就是彼此的家人，我们在一起” (*With You* Episode 14, 0:05:48-0:06:30). Another example of how the Chinese flag symbolizes community is at the end of Episode 4 of *Heroes in Harm's Way* (0:41:42), when a worker holds a miniature Chinese flag and kisses it. The flag also represents pride in the nation as exemplified in Episode 5 of *With You* (0:35:00): “I'm proud of my homeland, let the five-star red flag fly free, the dream lights up the way ahead 我为我的祖国而感到骄傲，就让五星红旗自由地飘，有一种理想照亮了迷茫”. This song can be interpreted as a reference to President Xi's Chinese Dream 中国梦. The shows encourage patriotism through the use of the flag in the context of the healthcare emergency. This implies that China is with the patients and supports them even in such dark times. Such support is also evident from a financial viewpoint when the patients are told that they do not have to cover any of the medical fees incurred because the Chinese government will take care of it (*With You* Episode 2, 0:07:20).

The community and helping one another play an important role in furthering this idea of patriotism. In Episode 1 of *With You* this is shown in the song that reflects on one's contribution to society:

There's no difference between life and death. As a human being, we're armed with love to lighten the life of others. If sacrificing my life will save another life, I'd like to leave. There's someone who will always remember – life is the extension of love.

从来没有生死之分。只是生而为人，总要有颗心来防身才能够照亮他人。如果失去了一个我能换另一个我，离开总会有人记得，生命不正是爱的延伸。 (*With You* Episode 1, 0:30:15-0:31:06)

Sacrificing one's life to save someone else is seen as a high virtue. Similarly, *With You* constantly reinforces the idea of a strong city and, by extension, country: "Wuhan will be strong, Hubei will be strong 武汉就能撑住, 湖北就能撑住" (*With You* Episode 2, 0:35:02). In Episode 4 (0:31:00), the neighbours encourage one another with similar powerful slogans: "Wuhan, stay strong, China, stay strong 武汉加油, 中国加油". In another unique feat of unity, buildings across the country in cities such as Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Chongqing display encouraging messages: "I love Wuhan. Wuhan will win 我爱湖北, 武汉必胜" (*With You* Episode 4, 0:38:50). In Episode 8 (0:31:00), viewers see a moment of silence across the country to honour the dead and staff members of hospitals.

Despite the messages of support and encouragement, *Heroes in Harm's Way* and *With You* do not shy away from showcasing the occasional deviance of those who do not want to follow the rules of strict quarantine in lockdown. In Episode 7 of *Heroes in Harm's Way* (0:18:47), a pregnant woman does not want to leave home. In *With You*, Episodes 9 and 10 focus on an elderly woman who resists isolation in the hospital and is actually successful in escaping this environment, so that staff members have to relocate her. *With You* also touches on smaller moments of resistance. For example, when a couple is trying to escape isolation by jumping over a wall (Episode 19, 0:07:20), or an older gentleman who wants to go for a walk without wearing a protective mask (Episode 19, 0:22:05). While these incidents represent irresponsible behaviour in the face of the pandemic, they are turned into occasions for showcasing the effectiveness of the community workers who are successful in helping the people or convincing them to do their part for society by not endangering others during the pandemic.

With You includes several moments of ordinary people who have become heroes during the emergency. Episodes 3 and 4 focus on a delivery driver, Gu Yong, who becomes a hero as he is brave enough to continue delivering supplies even at the height of the pandemic. He is seen delivering masks to people as well as food to hospital staff. At first he rides a scooter, but later on he also drives a car to transport healthcare workers to and from the hospital. Gu Yong also helps a little girl, Ji Nian, who has recently lost her grandfather to COVID-19 and whose father is missing (*With You* Episode 4). Other examples of help and sacrifice include the doctors and nurses on whose faces viewers can clearly see the marks left by the face masks and shields (*With You* Episode 3). Viewers also learn that the medical staff had to wear diapers, since they had long shifts with no time to go to the bathroom (*With You* Episode 8, 0:16:10). Episode 2 of *With You* (0:29:00) alludes to another moment of sacrifice when the family of a deceased patient donates his body to the hospital for research purposes. This was critical especially in the early stages of the pandemic, to find out more about the disease and how it affected patients. Other examples show

how businesses such as clothing factories repurposed their machinery to produce face masks when they are in short supply (*With You* Episode 17). Episodes 15 and 16 of *With You* details the case of Song Xiaoqiang from Dalian, who is stranded on a train in Wuhan when the lockdown starts and decides to help by working in one of the local hospitals. *Heroes in Harm's Way* develops the same storyline in Episodes 11 and 12. These stories show how ordinary people's lives are thrown into chaos and how they are able to overcome the obstacles they face.

While most scenes are necessarily bleak, with people suffering and with the hospital environment, Wuhan itself is represented as a beautiful and lovely place. Both *Heroes and Harm's Way* and *With You* provide a local flavour of Wuhan by highlighting its landmarks such as the Yellow Crane Tower 黄鹤楼 or the Second Yangtze River Bridge 武汉长江二桥 (*Heroes in Harm's Way* Episode 1, 0:06:35; *With You* Episode 1, 0:02:39-0:03:11). These images recur throughout the shows and are meant to convey a positive image of the city that does not only focus on the horrific events of the pandemic in Wuhan, but that also allows viewers to think of a brighter future. Ma (2021) points out that *With You* “serves the state agenda as well as boosts performing arts in showcasing COVID-19 Triumphalism”. Indeed, both TV shows aim at highlighting the aspect of opportunity in “crisis” 危机. While the danger is real, *Heroes in Harm's Way* and *With You* are predominantly interested in presenting how characters are able to confront problems and then emerge as better people. This in turn helps the Chinese media promote images of hope, collaboration, sacrifice, and heroism. Our chosen examples show how TV shows contribute to presenting resilience and encouraging people during the recent pandemic. They are one example of how fictional narratives have the power to affect people's evaluation of China's COVID-19 response.

Conclusion

Our paper explored non-fictional and fictional narratives of COVID-19 of China. The country has adopted soft power strategies to win the “hearts and minds” of global audiences in the context of COVID-19. China has systematically created its own story about the COVID-19 pandemic and its global spread. The country obliged other stakeholders to accept this narrative as the most appropriate one without questioning it. In this way, they have tried to rewrite and own the narratives surrounding the pandemic. COVID-19 has presented China with the chance to revise its soft power and its communication strategies, including the control of the narratives of COVID-19 on the international stage and the promotion of China's contribution to helping other countries. Fully aware that soft

power is linked to hard power, China has been building its soft power strategies with health, vaccine, and mask diplomacy. By using this soft power, China has successfully engaged in reinterpreting COVID-19 narratives to suit its own purposes. This image of China as a world power has increasingly been enhanced, in particular with regard to its promise to provide the Chinese vaccines as a public good. In the long run, this management approach to the health crisis has promoted its reputation as a global leader. China has been able to present itself as the most successful nation in containing the virus domestically, and reverse the narrative of being cast as a global health pariah. The fictional representations, in particular, show how China views its own COVID-19 response as successful. Promoting unity in the fight against the pandemic, highlighting the positive role of the CCP, and showcasing ordinary people as heroes invites viewers to see China and its handling of the COVID-19 crisis as a positive example to the world.

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