

VISUAL PROPAGANDA IN THE TIME OF COVID-19: CHINA'S IMAGE REPAIR IN STATE MEDIA POLITICAL CARTOONS

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Abstract

Political cartoons are an important political communication tool gaining increasing scholarly attention. Their primary function is influencing, reflecting, or reinforcing public opinion by commenting on specific events and personalities. Historically, governments also used political cartoons as a visual propaganda tool to rally support for their war efforts. However, the age of instantaneous and digital media provides new incentives for governments to exploit the rhetorical functions of political cartoons in advancing their communicative goals over contentious peacetime issues, as in the case of China amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The regular publication and strong presence of pandemic-themed cartoons in the Chinese state media's online platforms indicate their utility in the CCP's massive propaganda campaign to shape global narratives about the global health crisis. This study extended the image repair theory (IRT) [1] on visual texts by examining the political cartoons published by four Chinese state media outlets with global reach – Xinhua, China Daily, Global Times, and CGTN – to repair China's pandemic image problem. Guided by an interpretative approach to political cartoon analysis [2], it was found that Chinese state media cartoons enacted three dominant image repair strategies: (1) attacking the accuser, (2) differentiation, and (3) blame-shifting. Furthermore, it was discovered that these cartoons were also deployed as a visual counterattack against China's strategic rival, the United States. By concentrating on a relatively unique communication medium, this study offers new insights into the image repair literature in crisis communication, which has focused mainly on oral and written texts.

Keywords: China, COVID-19, image repair, political cartoons

1.0 Introduction

President Xi Jinping's ascension to power has intensified the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) efforts to improve China's reputation abroad [3]. However, there is arguably no other crisis that posed a more significant threat to China's current self-promotion drive than the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak in 2019. The reason for this is twofold. First, China recorded the first confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the City of Wuhan. Second, as the disease spread across countries in early 2020, international attention has focused on China for its alleged mismanagement and cover-up of the novel coronavirus outbreak.

International criticisms against China have been amplified by the mainstream media, world leaders, and health experts capable of shaping global perceptions about the pandemic. For instance, on 3 February 2020, the influential *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) published an opinion piece that drew a strong rebuke from the Chinese government. Titled "China is the Real Sick Man of Asia," the article criticized China's handling of the Wuhan outbreak. Apart from its content, the Chinese government's attention was seemingly caught by the headline's use of a derogatory label, "Sick Man of Asia," which is ingrained in the Chinese people's collective memory.

China's pandemic image problem worsened after it became embroiled in a "word war" with the US over the former's retaliatory expulsion of three WSJ journalists based in Beijing. Former US President Donald Trump began referring to SARS-CoV-2 as the "China virus" on his Twitter account and during

official briefings. His administration also launched an investigation into whether COVID-19 spread due to an accident at the Wuhan Institute of Virology [4]. This investigation occurred almost concurrently with Australia's call for international investigation into the pandemic, increasing the pressure on China. [5]. Trump also urged the United Nations members to "hold China accountable" in his General Assembly speech, citing the Chinese government's mismanagement and cover-up [6].

Despite China's massive propaganda portraying itself as a global "good Samaritan" for its exports of medical supplies and vaccines, threats to its image persisted in 2021. In January, an independent panel of experts commissioned by the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that China's "public health measures could have been applied more forcefully by local and national health authorities" to prevent the pandemic [7]. Furthermore, the change of leadership in the US has posed another trouble for China, as President Joe Biden directed the country's intelligence agencies to conduct a 90-day investigation into the origins of COVID-19. He also chastised China for allegedly withholding vital information about the virus to aid the global fight against the pandemic [8]. Although the US virus origins probe yielded inconclusive results, the Biden administration has continued to press China for cooperation in the planned WHO Phase II study. The European Union and at least a dozen other countries, including Canada, Australia, Israel, the United Kingdom, South Korea, and Japan, also supported this move [9, 10].

2.0 Problem Statement

As an actor perceived to be responsible for the pandemic, it is therefore imperative for China to mitigate the crisis's reputational costs. Thus, this study aims to examine China's communicative efforts to deal with its pandemic problem image using Benoit's [1, 11] image repair theory (IRT) in crisis communication. While virtually all research on image repair has concentrated on verbal and written texts, this study aims to offer a novel contribution to the existing literature by focusing on a relatively unique communication medium – political cartoons. Their regular circulation and strong online presence in the Chinese state media platforms indicate their utility in China's massive propaganda campaign to shape global narratives about COVID-19. A close examination of pandemic-themed cartoons in its four (4) international state-run media agencies, namely *Xinhua News Agency (New China News Agency)*, *China Daily*, *China Global Television Network (CGTN)*, and *Global Times*, revealed that the Chinese government exploited the said communication medium to repair its country's image tarnished by the pandemic. Thus, this study specifically aims to answer the following questions: (1) What are the image repair strategies employed by Chinese state media cartoons to repair China's pandemic image problem? (2) what are these cartoons' key themes and messages in enacting a particular image repair strategy? (3) what plausible explanations could account for the overall image repair strategies employed by Chinese state media cartoons?

The remainder of this study is organized as follows. The following section discusses the study's theoretical framework. It delineates the IRT's fundamental assumptions and surveys the existing literature on image repair. It also discusses how political cartoons can be used as a visual propaganda tool for image repair, specifically by looking into their rhetorical functions and communicative utility for the Chinese government during the pandemic. After describing the research methods employed, the findings are presented and discussed in the succeeding sections. The concluding section discusses this study's implication for theory and research.

3.0 Theoretical Framework

3.1 Image Repair in Crisis Communication

According to Benoit [12, p. 14], the idea that communication is a "goal-oriented activity" and "maintaining a positive reputation is one of the central goals of communication" offers the basis for understanding image repair theory in crisis communication. Because one's image is an asset that builds credibility and trustworthiness, an individual, organization, or government has the basic needs to maintain a good image, especially as a prerequisite for attaining other vital goals. Therefore, any allegations or

suspicions of wrongdoing incite a causal reaction from the accused to take preventive or restorative communication practices [1]. The persuasive goal of image repair is to reshape the audience's belief about the accused's responsibility for an act and their values about its offensiveness [12].

Image repair forms a key component of crisis communication because an image-threatening attack, criticism, or complaint is common during a crisis, as it is an “event for which people seek causes and make attributions” [13]. It means that the people's search for a crisis's cause(s) always involves evaluating a particular actor's responsibility. IRT asserts that no threats to one's image can occur unless an attack, criticism, or complaint satisfies two requisites: (1) the accused must be held responsible for an action, and (2) its action must be considered offensive [1]. Accordingly, it emphasizes the connection between the *salient* audience and the *perception* of responsibility, arguing that in crisis communication, “perceptions are more important than reality” [1]. As Tedeschi and Reiss [14] observe similarly, “central to the realization that one faces a predicament is a *belief* that *others* attribute to oneself the causality and responsibility for the event in question.” No crisis is detrimental to one's image unless a salient audience *thinks* it is at fault; the critical point is not whether the actor is – *in fact* – responsible for the offensive act but whether it is *perceived* to be [1]

IRT offers five rhetorical strategies that an actor uses when facing an image-threatening crisis [1]. These strategies are (1) denial, (2) evasion of responsibility, (3) reducing the offensiveness of the accusation, (4) offering corrective actions, and (5) mortification or apologizing (see Table 1). Depending on its priorities and goals, target audience, and the nature of the accusations, an actor may employ one or more of these strategies [1].

TABLE 1
A Typology of Image Repair Strategies

Strategy	Key Characteristics
<i>Denial</i> Simple Denial Shifting the Blame	Did not Perform the Act Act Performed by Another
<i>Evasion of Responsibility</i> Provocation Defeasibility Accident Good Intentions	Responded to Act of Another Lack of Information or Ability Act Was a Mishap Meant Well in Act
<i>Reducing Offensiveness of Event</i> Bolstering Minimization Differentiation Transcendence Attack Accuser Compensation	Stress Good Traits Act Not Serious Act Less Offensive More Important Considerations Reduce Credibility of Accuser Reimburse Victim
<i>Corrective Action</i>	Plan to Solve or Prevent the Problem
<i>Mortification</i>	Apologize for the Act

The majority of research on image repair examines and evaluates the strategies employed by the corporate [15–19] and individual actors [20–26]. There are strikingly limited studies that explore government-led efforts to repair a country's image amid an international crisis. Among them examined Saudi Arabia's attempt to deal with its damaged reputation after 9/11 [27], China's image repair efforts in the aftermath of the “Made in China” controversy [28], and the US' image repair efforts amid the Taiwan-US beef controversy [29]. Since maintaining a positive image drives the state's diplomatic efforts to attain its foreign policy goals, government-led international image repair merits further scholarly attention. Thus, one of the goals of this study is to contribute to the scant literature on this specific area of image repair research.

3.2 Political Cartoons as a Rhetorical Tool: A Vehicle for Image Repair

It is necessary to acknowledge the political cartoons' various communicative functions in different contexts to demonstrate how they offer an alternative avenue for image repair. In democratic societies, they are openly circulated within the mass media to provide social and political commentaries [30, 31]. In non-democratic societies, they usually act as a "safe" medium [32, p. 110] for expressing dissenting views due to their indirect and symbolic meanings. However, censorship in authoritarian regimes also allows state-run news agencies to fill the vacuum left by the independent media as the traditional source of political cartoons. Given this scenario, their communicative function shifts from appraising government performance and satirizing politicians to serving as an instrument of visual propaganda to further the state's communicative goals.

As the state's propaganda vehicle, there are two mutually reinforcing reasons why political cartoons can fulfill the persuasive goals of image repair. First, in their seminal work on political cartoons research, Medhurst and DeSousa [33] contend that political cartoons are visual forms of persuasive communication that employ various rhetorical techniques, similar to oral rhetoric. Their function goes beyond entertainment because they are opinion messages that pass specific values and judgments to the audience [34, 35]. Although they are mainly circulated through media channels, political cartoons are not constrained by the same factual standards as news reports since the cartoonists' objective is to invite the audience to see events or personalities from a particular viewpoint [32, 35].

Additionally, political cartoons can serve as a communication tool for image repair since they typically exhibit thematic coherence. Rather than seeing them as independent humorous sketches, it is essential to recognize that they also display common themes, ideas, or messages in their visual "recontextualization of events" [36, p. 19]. Their sources' editorial positions (e.g., news agencies) typically define these commonalities [36]. During times of crisis, the said thematic coherence is strikingly evident, as political cartoons offer visual frames to inform the audience about the unfolding events by critiquing situations, assigning blame, and attacking those presumed to be responsible [30, p. 757]. Thus, governments can also exploit their communicative functions when facing an image-threatening crisis, especially in contexts where the state controls the national media outlets.

In China, such a utility is maximized due to its top-down political communication system that aligns media reporting with the stance of the CCP, particularly on high-stakes political issues [37–39]. Since the pandemic began, COVID-19 has become a dominant theme of Chinese state media cartoons, indicating that they are critical components of the CCP's propaganda apparatus. As will be shown later, the said communication medium served as a tool for the Chinese government to channel its pandemic messages to repair its country's image.

4.0 Methods

This study surveyed 329 pandemic-themed cartoons published between January 2020 and August 2021 on the websites of four Chinese state-run news outlets. These agencies are *Xinhua News Agency* or *New China News Agency* (48 cartoons), *China Daily* (180), *China Global Television Network (CGTN)* (44), and *Global Times* (63). They were selected because of their global reach and regular publication of political cartoons about COVID-19. They also maintain social media accounts with a substantial following, such as Facebook and Twitter, publishing the same cartoons found on their respective websites.

Xinhua is China's official state-run news agency and is one of the largest news agencies in the world. Situated on top of China's media system hierarchy, it is mainly "responsible for setting the general tone for other media outlets in the coverage of politically sensitive events" [40]. On the other hand, *China Daily* is the largest English-language newspaper in China [41]. Together with *Xinhua*, their global presence allows China to compete with other well-established international news agencies. *CGTN* is a multi-platform news agency launched by *Central China Television (CCTV)* in 2016 with a similar objective of reaching

an international audience [42]. Lastly, *Global Times* is the tabloid arm of the *People's Daily* devoted to providing news and commentaries on international affairs and China's foreign relations from a nationalist perspective [43]. These state-run news agencies are vital to CCP's foreign propaganda [44].

While the crisis was still ongoing when the study's data were performed, the above-mentioned time frame still covered the key events of the COVID-19 pandemic. It included the virus' discovery in Wuhan, the imposition of countrywide lockdowns, the development of vaccines, the global vaccination drive, and the gradual transition to the post-pandemic world. The study used Benoit's [1] typology to investigate how the Chinese state media cartoons enact image repair. An interpretative approach to political cartoon analysis also guided this study [2]. The said approach investigates the rhetorical – visual, and verbal – devices employed by the cartoon and recognizes the need to look beyond its textual features to generate meanings. Equally crucial in political cartoon analysis is recognizing, first, the reader's role as “co-authors” that employ contextual knowledge (e.g., historical, cultural, and political) to decipher the cartoon's message and, second, the cartoonist' perceived intent (e.g., political leanings, publisher's editorial stance and control in highly censored press). The study excluded those political cartoons that did not enact any image repair strategy. Hence, a total of 228 cartoons comprised the data for this study.

5.0 Findings: Image Repair in Chinese State Media Cartoons

The Chinese state media's propaganda in the form of political cartoons deployed three dominant strategies to deal with China's pandemic image problem: (1) attack the accuser, (2) differentiation, and (3) denial. This study discovered that virtually all their visual counterattacks aim to discredit or blame the US, China's most vocal state critic during the pandemic (See Table 2).

TABLE 2
Image Repair Strategies in Chinese State Media Cartoons

Strategy	Themes	#Cartoons	% Total Dataset
Attack the Accuser	US Failed in its COVID-19 Response	84	36.84
	US Peddles Disinformation and Conspiracies about COVID-19	68	29.82
Differentiation	US Hampers Global Fight against COVID-19	32	14.04
Shifting the Blame	COVID-19 Originated in the US	33	14.47
Others		11	4.82
Total		228	100

Under the attack the accuser strategy, the meanings these cartoons convey towards China's strategic rival were classified thematically as follows: the US failed in its COVID-19 response (36.84%), and peddling disinformation and conspiracies (29.82%). Those cartoons that enacted the differentiation strategy claimed that the US is hampering the global fight against COVID-19 (14.04%), while those that employed denial tactics implied that COVID-19 originated in the US (14.47%). Cartoons belonging to these themes conveyed common defense messages, as illustrated by several examples in the following sections (see Table 3). On the other hand, those classified under the Other (4.82%) category are the cartoons found in the “middle ground,” which means that their meanings are congruent with the above-presented themes but do not contain any visual or verbal references to the US. Thus, caution is observed in classifying these cartoons. The subsequent sections explored how China's visual propaganda employed the above-mentioned image repair strategies during the pandemic. Due to the anticipated challenges of obtaining reprint permissions from the Chinese state media outlets as they operate in a tightly controlled media environment, this study instead provided detailed descriptions of each illustration cited in this study.

TABLE 3

Themes and Key Messages per Image Repair Strategy

Strategy	Themes	Key Messages
Attack the Accuser	US Failed in its COVID-19 Response	<i>Partisanship instigates social discord and rejection of science and expertise in the US amid the pandemic</i> <i>Moral hypocrisy and politicized devotion to Western liberal values amid the pandemic jeopardize human life</i> <i>Pandemic's hardest-hit country</i>
	US Peddles Disinformation and Conspiracies about COVID-19	<i>Purveyor of xenophobia and racist claims about COVID-19</i> <i>"Wuhan lab-leak theory" is fabricated, unscientific, and politically motivated</i>
Differentiation	US Failed in its COVID-19 Response	<i>Impeding global health cooperation by hoarding COVID-19 vaccine supplies</i> <i>Political goals drive US vaccine distribution strategy</i> <i>Irresponsible global actions amid the pandemic put the world at a greater risk</i>
Shifting the Blame	COVID-19 Originated in the US	<i>COVID-19 already spread on American soil in 2019</i> <i>COVID-19 is linked to the US biowarfare program</i>

5.1 Attack the Accuser

5.1.1. US Failed in its COVID-19 Response

The dominant theme running through the cartoons enacting an attack the accuser strategy is the domestic struggles of the US in dealing with COVID-19, leaving it without credibility to chastise China for the pandemic. For example, Xinhua's "COVID-19 Tug of War" (11 August 2021) metaphorized the US pandemic response as a tug of war to depict how the country's dysfunctional politics jeopardizes its fight against COVID-19. The game is competed between American politicians and scientists to imply their adversarial relationship. The cartoon gains meaning from three visual cues. First, the four banner-carrying balloons, "Origins tracing," "mask mandate," "no mask," and "Vaccination," orbiting around the two hot-air balloons bearing the "Fighting COVID-19" banner highlight the politically divisive issues in the US pandemic response. Second, the labels on the opposing sides of the stage, "PARTISAN POLITICS" and "science," imply that partisan politics disrupt a science-based pandemic response. US top epidemiologist Anthony Fauci exclaims, "We're going in a wrong direction!!" as he and other scientists struggle to draw the politicians across their line. Lastly, the placement and depiction of the audience in the background, with those supporting the scientists wearing facemasks and those supporting the politicians being maskless, illustrate how partisanship permeates and polarizes the American public, resulting in the unabated spread of COVID-19.

On the other hand, China Daily's "Cheers versus Jeers" (19 August 2020) is a two-panel cartoon juxtaposing the treatment of medical experts in China and the US during the pandemic. The cartoonist employed contrast, a key visual rhetorical technique intended to invite the audience to compare and evaluate opposing elements [33]. China's top epidemiologist Zhong Nanshan represents the Chinese medical experts, while Fauci portrays their American equivalents. The left panel shows Zhong wearing China's prestigious Medal of the Republic as the audience showers him with roses and gives approving hand gestures (applause and thumbs up). A hostile audience assails Fauci on the right panel, as revealed by the hand gestures (finger-pointing and thumbs down) and the objects (knife and black paint) hurled toward him. The cartoon was published amid the widening rift between the White House and its top epidemiologist in mid-2020. Again, it denotes that partisanship instigates the rejection of science and expertise in the US.

In the pandemic's initial year, anti-lockdown protests swept the US and, eventually, the Western world. The protesters, supported by several conservative politicians, are broadly united by their opposition to government-imposed restrictions, which they allege infringe on their civil liberties. As a result, some cartoons criticized the moral hypocrisy of China's accuser by showing that its politicized devotion to Western liberal values came at the expense of human life during the pandemic. For example, China Daily's "No Human Left" (4 December 2020) used the visual rhetorical technique of contradiction to invite the audience's condemnation and resentment [33]. A medical frontliner installs a padlock over the barricaded buildings on the left panel. Based on the "CHINA" label on its protective suit, the image represents the Chinese government's lockdown restrictions, implying that it acted decisively to manage the COVID-19 outbreak. Meanwhile, another character, bearing the semblance of a politician, chastised the frontliner by saying, "NO HUMAN RIGHTS."

On the right panel, titled "NO HUMAN LEFT," he joins the protesters rallying for "freedom" and decrying the government's stay-at-home orders and mask requirements. The presence of a white man wearing a red baseball cap, a prototypical portrayal of a Trump supporter favored by cartoonists, indicates that the cartoon alludes to American society. While these protesters are preoccupied with their demands, they failed to anticipate the virus' looming surge portrayed as a massive tsunami, stressing the Americans' vulnerability to the virus. The cartoon also implies the inferiority of the US democratic system compared with China in dealing with the pandemic.

Various cartoons also mock the US' crisis performance by highlighting its status as the world's hardest-hit country by COVID-19. In June 2021, for example, Bloomberg's COVID Resilience Ranking scores sparked outrage in China, placing the US first and China in eighth place. Chinese cartoonists considerably featured this occasion. For instance, Xinhua's "Highest COVID Cases. Highest COVID Deaths" (14 July 2021) features Michael Bloomberg crowning Biden, who dons his trademark sunglasses and a donkey hat representing his party affiliation. Biden receives the crown while carrying two rusted trophies sarcastically awarded to the US for being No. 1 in "COVID CASELOAD" and "COVID DEATH." His downcast face with cold sweat and trembling legs signifies apprehension and diffidence in accepting the resiliency award as his country reached a grim pandemic milestone.

5.1.2 The US Peddles Disinformation and Conspiracies

Numerous Chinese state media cartoons have also accused the US of exploiting the pandemic to discredit China and its people through the propagation of disinformation and conspiracies. For example, Global Times' "Aiming at Asians" (20 March 2021) and Xinhua's "Degradation of US Politics" (29 July 2021) portray the US as a purveyor of xenophobia and unfounded claims about COVID-19. They both feature another American cultural symbol, the Statue of Liberty, which Chinese cartoonists frequently satirize. In the "Aiming at Asians" cartoon, she points a rifle at an "Asian"-labeled human target board after obliterating similar objects. The phrases that enter her ears, "China virus" and "Kung-flu," provide context for her action. Trump occasionally used these phrases in his tweets, press briefings, and political rallies regarding COVID-19. Thus, the cartoon portrays how the US' anti-China rhetoric has incited unfounded resentment and violence against Asians. Personified through Lady Liberty's character, the US is likened to a terrorist targeting and scapegoating another race for the pandemic. The cartoon's warm and sandy backdrop is crucial to the meaning's interpretation, as notable terrorist groups camp in isolated desert outposts.

The "Degradation of US Politics" cartoon also personified the US through Lady Liberty's character. While the cartoon features the statue in her original pose, some visual and verbal modifications are apparent. It mocks the US pandemic response by replacing Lady Liberty's crown with the one matching the structure of a coronavirus. There are also notable changes in her torch and the tablet. The torch symbolizes enlightenment derived from the statue's formal name, "Liberty Enlightening the World," while the actual inscription on the tablet is "JULY IV MDCCLXXVI" (July 4, 1776) which refers to America's date of independence. By placing the label "Lab leak Theory" on the torch's flame, the cartoon accuses the

US of propagating the idea that SARS-CoV-2 escaped from the Wuhan lab. Accordingly, the cartoon offers textual and visual cues that the accuser's hypothesis about the virus's origins is unfounded, unscientific, and politically motivated. Apart from its cultural reference to America's renowned symbol, it employs a literary allusion by substituting Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince* for the statue's tablet. This political treatise is popularly viewed as a practical guide for rulers to acquire and maintain power through amoral and, if necessary, ruthless means. In modern-day use, Machiavelli's realist method often signifies that "*the ends justify the means*" – a phrase prominently displayed in the illustration. Furthermore, the colorful index tabs inserted between the treaties' pages imply that the US is drawing notes from the realist politics playbook to discredit China by spreading conspiracies about the virus' origins. Lady Liberty's malicious grin denoting the accuser's self-serving political agenda affirms this message.

Similarly, CGTN's "*Déjà Vu All Over Again*" (7 June 2021) aims to cast doubt on the truthfulness of the Wuhan lab leak hypothesis, alleging that China's accuser has a record of fabricating evidence to advance its political goals. It is a two-panel cartoon that blends cultural and historical allusions to generate meaning. Both panels reenact the iconic 1917 "I Want You" poster by James Montgomery Flagg. This wartime propaganda material features Uncle Sam looking directly and pointing his finger at the audience to persuade them to enlist in the US Army. The left panel's title is "I WANT YOU to believe Iraq has weapons of mass destruction, while the right panel's title is "I WANT YOU to believe that COVID-19 leaked from a lab in Wuhan." Although only Uncle Sam's right hand is visible in Flagg's illustration, in this example, he holds a long test tube in both panels using his left hand. The test tube on the left panel stores a white powder, while the one on the right contains coronaviruses. The cartoon drew reference to the controversial evidence, a vial of anthrax powder, presented to the UN Security Council by former US Secretary of State Colin Powell to justify the US invasion of Iraq. However, after toppling Saddam's regime, no active weapons of mass destruction were ever discovered. By invoking this historical blunder, the cartoon implies that the US possesses insufficient proof to persuade the global audience that COVID-19 emanated from the Wuhan lab.

5.2 Differentiation

Differentiation is another image repair strategy employed by Chinese state media cartoons. It highlights how the US hampers the global fight against COVID-19 by hoarding vaccines, politicizing their distribution, and impeding multilateral cooperation. The persuasive goal is to demonstrate that China's alleged offenses for its initial mismanagement of the COVID-19 were less offensive than what the US did to hinder the global pandemic response. Illustrative examples are the *Global Times*' "*All for Itself Vaccines*" (25 March 2021) and "*False Friendship*" (25 April 2021), which satirize the US refusal to export vaccines to other severely affected countries. They gain meaning from their intertextual relationship with the discourses on the so-called "America First" policy and the UN's criticisms of wealthy nations over vaccine nationalism. For example, the "*All for Itself Vaccines*" cartoon accuses the US and the European Union of gluttony for stockpiling global vaccine supplies. Using a personification metaphor, it portrays the US and its Western allies as a man who receives excessive vaccine doses, visually cued by the US and EU flags printed on his tank top and the multiple vaccines injected into his arm. Through the man's well-nourished and muscular build, the cartoonist employed the graphic strategy of size to imply these countries' wealth and protection from the virus. On the contrary, the peripheral placement in the frame of other characters desperately knocking against the door denotes the vulnerability of low-income countries to the pandemic fueled by others' greed. The inoculated man's response, "We don't have a vaccine!" emphasizes the West's moral hypocrisy for allegedly refusing to share vaccines equitably.

Several cartoons also portray the US as immoral and selfish for allegedly turning a deaf ear to India's dire situation as it suffered from a deadly COVID-19 surge in April 2021. These illustrations depict India as an elephant, one of its highly revered religious and cultural symbols. For example, the "*False Friendship*" cartoon portrays Uncle Sam struggling to keep the vaccine vials and syringes from spilling out the door. The action denotes that the US has an excess vaccine inventory but is unwilling to share its supplies with its needy ally. His "our hearts are with the Indian people" remark to the elephant alludes to a

tweet by US State Secretary Antony Blinken after his country received backlash for its tepid response. The cartoon implies that the US is merely paying lip service but taking little measures to abate the spread of COVID-19 outside its borders.

Given the editorial positions of the Chinese state media, the above-discussed cartoons also reflect an implied comparison between the US' "America first" policy and China's current standing as one of the world's biggest exporters of COVID-19 vaccines. Hence, the cartoonists' motivations for conveying this image repair message can be contextualized within Xi's declaration regarding vaccines as a global public good. Consistent with this declaration, different cartoons accuse the US of jeopardizing global vaccine cooperation by treating the exportation of vaccines as a geopolitical contest with its strategic rival. The CCP's consistent allegations of the US' "Cold War mentality" and anti-China prejudice motivate this visual counterattack. For example, Global Time's "*Vaccine Politicization*" (21 May 2021) situates Biden in a war room-like setting with a world map. He uses a vaccine syringe instead of typical push pins to mark current military operations and occupied territories. Taking a cue from the question uttered by Biden, "Where is China's influence?", the cartoon denotes the US' selective distribution of vaccines to inoculate certain states from China's sway. It also implies that political rather than humanitarian goals drive the US vaccine distribution strategy.

Lastly, the previous US withdrawal from the WHO, prompted by Trump's allegation that the UN health body is "China-centric," also became a subject of satire among Chinese state media cartoons. Their messages undermine the US' credibility in blaming China for the pandemic, stressing its allegedly irresponsible actions putting the world at greater risk. For example, China Daily's "*Cutting the Lifeline*" (1 June 2020) depicts an elderly bed-ridden patient experiencing serious breathing difficulty after another man severed his oxygen hose. The perpetrator is Trump, as signified by the character's hairstyle.

Meanwhile, based on the labels found on the illustration, the cartoonist metaphorically compared the oxygen cylinder to WHO, which spearheads global pandemic response efforts. The US is currently the single largest contributor to WHO. Thus, the cartoon criticizes the US withdrawal from the UN health body for jeopardizing multilateral efforts to combat the pandemic. Additionally, the statement "...I... CAN'T... ..BREATHE..." uttered by the helpless patient is a cultural allusion to the slogan associated with the Black Lives Matter movement. The US' WHO exit occurred as racial justice protests swept the country after George Floyd's brutal death in May 2020. Thus, this cultural reference appears to imply a moral irony like the cartoons previously presented. Specifically, amid the Americans' outrage over the fatalities caused by systemic racism and police brutality, the cartoon indicates that their country's WHO exit will have the same, if not greater, global consequences as the unjust practices they condemn domestically.

5.3 Denial: Shifting the Blame

Denial is the third image repair strategy employed by Chinese state media cartoons. They are linked thematically by their meanings, refuting the claim that COVID-19 originated in China. Instead, they portray the US as responsible for the pandemic, either because the virus began spreading on American soil prior to its discovery in Wuhan or because it emerged from an American military base. The CCP and its propaganda outlets were already promoting these allegations since the pandemic began. However, blame-shifting became a prominent theme in cartoons in the Chinese state media after Biden ordered a 90-day investigation into the origins of COVID-19. Thus, China's recourse to this image repair strategy reflects its heightened efforts to influence global perceptions ahead of the impending US report that could further jeopardize its reputation.

Due to the lack of conclusive evidence regarding COVID-19 origins, China capitalized on scientific studies that supported its pandemic narrative. Global Times' "*Revealing Clues*" (12 June 2021) depicts this propaganda effort. It portrays Uncle Sam as a detective searching for the coronavirus monster's whereabouts. The cartoon depicts him being either unaware or purposefully oblivious that the monster follows him to satirize the Biden administration's virus origins probe. The message the monster intends to

show Uncle Sam on the placard is key to deciphering the cartoon's meaning. It states, "NIH STUDY SUGGESTS CORONAVIRUS MAY HAVE BEEN IN THE US AS EARLY AS DECEMBER 2019," referring to the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) study published in June 2021 in the reputable *Clinical Infectious Disease Journal*. The study detected SARS-CoV-2 antibodies from the blood samples of several participants taken between January and March 2020 for another research unrelated to COVID-19. Accordingly, it found that positive samples were collected from several US states as early as 7 January 2020, suggesting that the virus was already spreading on American soil in December 2019. Thus, the cartoon implies that the US virus origins probe must first look for clues within its borders rather than elsewhere.

The US virus origins probe had also reignited interest in the lab leak theory. In early 2021, China welcomed the report of the WHO mission in Wuhan, which concluded that SARS-CoV-2 escaping from a lab is "extremely unlikely." The US and other states, on the other hand, expressed reservations about the report's findings, alleging delays and lack of transparency. Amid international pressure, China has rejected calls for a more rigorous investigation into the origins of COVID-19. Instead, its propaganda outlets have promoted a conspiracy theory that SARS-CoV-2 originated from Maryland's Fort Detrick. It is a military base that houses the United States Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID). From 1943 to 1969, it served as a hub for research and development of bioweapons. By singling out Fort Detrick, China aims to associate COVID-19 with the US biowarfare program. As a result, several Chinese state media cartoons also featured this military base to amplify the CCP's call for an international investigation focused on the US.

China's persistent blaming of Fort Detrick for the pandemic has at least two underlying motivations. The first one is its contested safety record. In mid-2019, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued a cease-and-desist order to USAMRIID for violations of biosafety protocols [45]. The CCP's propaganda apparatus took advantage of this incident to shift the lab leak accusation on the US, suggesting that the 2019 safety breaches at USAMRIID may have caused SARS-CoV-2 to escape from its premises.

For example, Xinhua's "*America First*" (30 July 2021) employed the rhetorical device of irony between the "America first" policy, and the US virus origins probe to bolster this appeal. It shows Uncle Sam delivering a public address, with Fort Detrick in the background. As he declared "AMERICA FIRST," Fort Detrick responded sarcastically by emitting a smoke speech bubble saying, "IF THE EXTREMELY UNLIKELY LAB-LEAK THEORY IS WORTH PURSUING THEN..." The phrase "extremely unlikely" is derived from the findings of the WHO mission in Wuhan. The cartoon's message is that if the US is determined to pursue the lab leak theory, it must first probe its bio-lab at Fort Detrick based on the "America first" policy. As previously discussed, the said foreign policy doctrine was also implicitly satirized by Chinese state media cartoons, particularly on the issue of global vaccine distribution.

The other motivation concerns Fort Detrick's controversial ties with Imperial Japan's biowarfare program. For example, Xinhua's "*A Bloody Trivia about Fort Detrick and Unit 731*" (15 August 2021) is a historical allusion to Unit 731, Fort Detrick's wartime counterpart for the Japanese imperial army based in Manchuria. It was notoriously known for conducting human experiments and testing bioweapons on the Chinese population during the second Sino-Japanese War and World War II. The cartoon portrays Unit 731 as a human skeleton dressed in a Japanese imperial army uniform and a laboratory gown, while it personifies Fort Detrick as a US service member. As they exchange a handshake, the human skeleton hands over a document titled "Human Experiments & Biological Weapons" to its counterpart. In response, the US service member pledges, "We've got your back," while placing his right hand over his heart in a sign of commitment to the agreement.

The cartoon alludes to the controversial post-WWII deal in which Fort Detrick acquired critical information regarding Unit 731's biowarfare program in exchange for a war crime immunity deal for the latter's military personnel [46], [47]. By alluding to this event, the cartoon seeks to buttress the conspiracy

theory linking COVID-19 to the US biowarfare program by invoking Fort Detrick's history of covertly acquiring bioweapons data. Indeed, one of the claims made by China's Foreign Ministry is that US service members may have brought COVID-19 to the 2019 World Military Games in Wuhan, either intentionally or not.

6.0 Discussion

As the world grapples with COVID-19, no other country has faced more criticism than China due to its controversial response to the Wuhan outbreak and the unresolved questions about the virus's origins. To counterbalance the pandemic's reputational costs, the CCP has mobilized its media arsenal to express its COVID-19 narrative not only through verbal means, emanating from news reports and editorials, but also through visual means, which included political cartoons.

A common theme of anti-Americanism unifies the political cartoons examined in this study. Thus, despite the weaknesses of the rhetorical strategies employed by these cartoons, it is equally important to discuss why China's visual image repair took a more antagonistic stance towards its strategic rival. Three plausible explanations could account for this study's findings. First is the value of "face-saving" in Chinese culture, a subject on which much research has been published. The primacy of "we" over "I" identity in traditional Chinese societies extends this cultural trait from an interpersonal to an intergroup affair [48, 49]. Yu and Wen [49, p. 53] indicate that in these societies, "group members are expected to do everything they can to prevent their group from losing face." They argue that such a collectivistic face-saving mindset corresponds with the Chinese notion that "the ugly things in the family shall not go public." As a result, this cultural trait also shapes the crisis communication practices of the Chinese government [28]. Specifically, since avoiding the loss of face is of paramount importance in Chinese culture, it creates a larger incentive to deny the existence of a crisis through a cover-up [50] or, as revealed by this study, attribute the crisis to the fault of others to avoid reputational damage.

Another key to understanding why these cartoons mirrored an anti-American theme is the CCP's national narrative. The need to rebuild the party's damaged legitimacy after the 1989 Tiananmen incident compelled its leaders to enact a state-led nationalist movement built on a shared sense of identity, culture, and history [51, 52]. This objective resulted in adopting a revitalized and nationalistic ideology that foregrounds the party's messianic role for the Chinese people. Central to the said ideology is crafting a national narrative that divides China's modern history into two epochs. The first focuses on the story of victimization, which recounts the "Century of Humiliation" between 1840 and 1945 when China lost its territories and prestige at the hands of Japan and the Western imperial powers. The other focuses on the story of revival and redemption, which tells how the CCP helped China recuperate from the "Century of Humiliation" and how it facilitated the country's progress and return to its glorious past [53].

The activation of historical memory greatly influences the CCP's views about China's external environment and global role. Historical analogies from the "Century of Humiliation" serve as "important information processors" for Chinese leaders to interpret current situations [51, p. 24]. They perceive foreign criticisms as a form of bullying intended to humiliate China and thwart its efforts to return to its past glory [54]. As Xi proclaimed during the party's centennial anniversary, "The Chinese people *will never* allow foreign forces to *bully, oppress or enslave us*" [55]. Thus, amid the foreign criticisms China received for the pandemic, the party's nationalistic mouthpiece, *Global Times*, declared that "China's only choice is to fight back with more intensity" [56]. The meanings of political cartoons examined in this study reflect the said objective.

The last plausible explanation is the deteriorating US-China relations, which worsened further during the pandemic. The CCP's increasing foreign assertiveness under Xi's leadership paved the way for a bipartisan consensus in the US to adopt a tougher and more competitive stance towards China [57]. Before the outbreak of COVID-19, their bilateral ties were already strained by disagreements over the issues of trade, human rights in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, and naval activities in the Asia Pacific. As the world

entered the pandemic, their diverging perspectives caused them to detour from the cooperative route they must follow to address the ongoing health crisis. Instead, they trade accusations and disinformation about COVID-19. Thus, the image repair strategies employed by political cartoons in the Chinese state media represent China's determination to outpace its strategic rival in the pandemic narrative competition.

7.0 Conclusion

This study has important implications for theory and research. To begin with, it demonstrated that image repair theory in crisis communication could be applied to visual texts with persuasive features. Hence, this study offered new insights into the extant image repair literature, whose focus is still primarily on verbal communication, notwithstanding the increasing influence of visual texts on contemporary societies to communicate messages. Additionally, while many believe that the heyday of political cartoons has passed with the decline of print media, their rhetorical functions and communicative utility in modern times remain a fruitful area for scholarly investigation. The age of instantaneous and digital media has provided a new outlet for political cartoons to reach a wider audience, specifically through the Internet. For this reason, political cartoons have also become a useful visual propaganda tool in transmitting state-sanctioned messages, as can be concluded in this study. Thus, it is important not to underestimate their significance in contemporary political discourse, being an immediate and influential source of commentary about current affairs.

8.0 References

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