

The Changing Image of China in the COVID-19 Pandemic from the Perspective of Mainstream Spanish Media

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Abstract

This article aims to explore the depiction of China by mainstream Spanish media during the COVID-19 pandemic. 105 articles were collected from *El Mundo*, *El País*, *La Vanguardia*, *ABC* and *El Periódico*, and analyzed by topic: domestic information diffusion and epidemic prevention measures in China, Chinese aid in Spain, and opinions about them. The main finding is that China's image portrayed by these newspapers changed from draconian and Machiavellian, given the country's massive strict quarantine and censorship, to villainous, due to cover-up of epidemic information and governance failures that Spanish media condemned in retrospect, and then to opportunist, to a helper of use but not genuine, after China started to aid Spain while taking advantage of the inaction of the Occident. However, the Spaniards' acceptance of these media-portrayed images varies: despite intense criticisms of governance failures and censorship characterized by the authoritarian system, Spaniards only consider "the virus from China" as an important threat, instead of the expansion of Chinese ideologies. The opportunist depiction was accepted by a considerable proportion of Spaniards, thinking China had gained economically from the pandemic and even improved its global reputation. Aid from ethnic Chinese in Spain, from private firms in China and from the Chinese Government were positively felt. Besides, the fact that Spanish citizens increasingly blamed their Government for incompetence might also explain why there was limited damage to China's image.

Keywords: *China's image, Spanish media, COVID-19 pandemic*

1. Introduction

Being the first country to detect the novel coronavirus, China's moves were closely followed by the world media, and any change in its international

image was magnified. In addition to the anglophone media, Spanish-language media in Spain have been reporting extensively on the actions taken by the Chinese Government, Chinese citizens, and the Chinese community in Spain since January 3, 2020. Months later, Spain became one of the European countries most affected by the pandemic.

Prior to the pandemic, Spain and China maintained generally positive diplomatic relations since their establishment in 1973. Ex-Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit to Spain in November 2005 marked the establishment of comprehensive strategic partnership between the two countries. In October 2014, Spanish ex-Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy officially visited China and Chinese President Xi Jinping also paid a state visit to Spain in November 2018. In 2019, bilateral trade between the two nations reached 35.469 billion US dollars, a year-on-year increase by 5.2%.

Once a global colonial empire, Spain continues to play an important trans-regional role in the development of the world economy and the dissemination of news, its influence stretching to Africa and Latin America (Xu, 2014). The country's colonial history also made Spanish the third most spoken language in the world. Since the 2000s, given Spain's increasingly digitalized, commercialized and internationalized media in other regions, especially in Latin America (Wei and Chen, 2018), mainstream Spanish media can be an important platform to exhibit China. For instance, *El País*, the Spanish newspaper ranking second in terms of daily readers in 2020, which reached 951,000 (Orús, 2021), also produces a Hispanic American edition and a Mexican edition (both in Spanish), as well as a Brazilian one (in Portuguese). According to ComScore, the year 2015, two years after the emergence of the Portuguese version, saw *El País* newspaper become one of the top ten newspapers in Brazil, with more than two million monthly active users.

1.1 Previous Media Opinions and Ratings of China

A 2013 study about the coverage of China by Spanish newspapers *El País*, *El Mundo* and *ABC* during the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China found that the positive depictions of China consisted in economic, diplomatic and social development achievements, describing China as a "power (*potencia*)", while the negative image was reflected in three areas: corruption, political system and Internet censorship, and the China threat theory (Jia and Zhu, 2013).

According to Wei and Chen's (2018) study of mainstream Spanish newspapers' coverage of China-related issues, they portrayed China as an "important great power", but still tended to gaze at the country using a Western discourse by questioning its economic achievements, and to create

a biased image by using totalitarianism-related terms to describe its political system and deliberately highlighting China's military strategies, which suggest China is not a peaceful country as it claims to be. Nevertheless, the study noted that some Spanish media like *El Mundo* wrote more rigorous reports than anglophone media were, and could make distinct and independent judgments about the nature of the same news, which would help contribute to a more diverse Chinese image.

Regarding Spaniards' perception of China, the percentage holding a very favourable/somewhat favourable view of China was generally in decline since 2005, with ups and downs. Favourable rating topped in 2005 at 57% and slumped to 31% in 2008. Rising again to 55% three years later, in 2016 only 28% of Spanish interviewees regarded China positively, and in 2019 the figure stood at 39%. On the other hand, the survey shows the proportion of interviewees responding with "unfavourable" rose to 53% in 2019 (Pew Research Center, 2020).

However, Elcano Royal Institute (Real Instituto Elcano in Spanish), a Madrid-based think tank, observed less dramatic changes in the Spanish's rating over China. Using a 0-10 scale, China's rating varied from 4.7 to 5.3 from 2012 to 2020. Based on the fieldwork carried out from March 6th to March 19th, its report *Barómetro del Real Instituto Elcano (BRIE) n°41* (2020) indicates a slight improvement in China's rating, scoring 5 out of 10 in March 2020 compared to 4.7 in November 2017 (Esteban, 2020; Elcano Royal Institute, 2020).

1.2 Existent Image about Overseas Chinese in Spain

According to Spain's National Institute of Statistics (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas), the population of ethnic Chinese in Spain grew from 12,036 in 1998 to 202,093 in 2019. In the report *Chinese Immigration in Spain: What image? (La Inmigración China en España: ¿Qué Imagen?)*, which studied 75 articles extracted from mainstream Spanish newspapers, Merino Sancho (2008) indicated that the predominant topic of these articles was the competence of Chinese commerce: 14 similar reports expressed concerns about the expansion of Chinese small businesses in Spain, in parallel with the outflow of Spanish local businesses towards China (Huang, 2014; cf. Merino Sancho, 2008). The author, while arguing against the existence of xenophobia against the Chinese community, concluded that though the perception of Chinese immigration had improved compared to the 1990s, there was a certain fear or a suspicion more related to business competition than to political or social domains, and that criticisms of the Chinese community's lack of integration into local society were well-founded (Merino Sancho, 2008).

2. Methodology

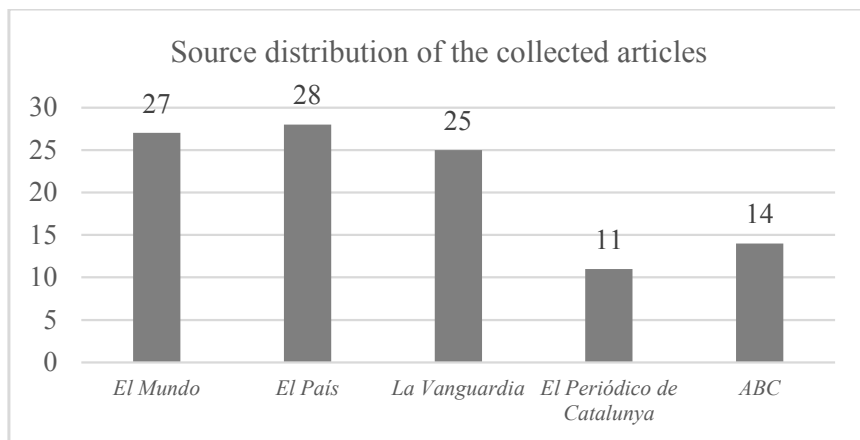
2.1 Topics of Interest

To examine how the depiction of China has changed in Spanish media during the pandemic, five major Spanish newspapers, in terms of circulation, were studied: *El Mundo*, *El País*, *La Vanguardia*, *El Periódico de Catalunya* and *ABC*. Articles related to China and coronavirus were collected from the websites of *elmundo.es*, *elpais.com*, *lavanguardia.com*, *elperiodico.com* and *abc.es*, either with the integrated search engine in their portals or Google advanced search. Keywords (or their combined form) for research corresponding to each topic are listed as follows:

Wuhan, virus, coronavirus, China, pandemia, neumonía, cierre, confinamiento, cuarentena, Asamblea de OMS, donación china, ayuda china, donación a España, China pagará, litigar a China, consecuencias para China, pedir compensación a China

In total, 105 reports and editorials from January 3, 2020 to July 12, 2020 were collected from the five newspapers.

Figure 1 Distribution by Newspaper of the Collected Articles

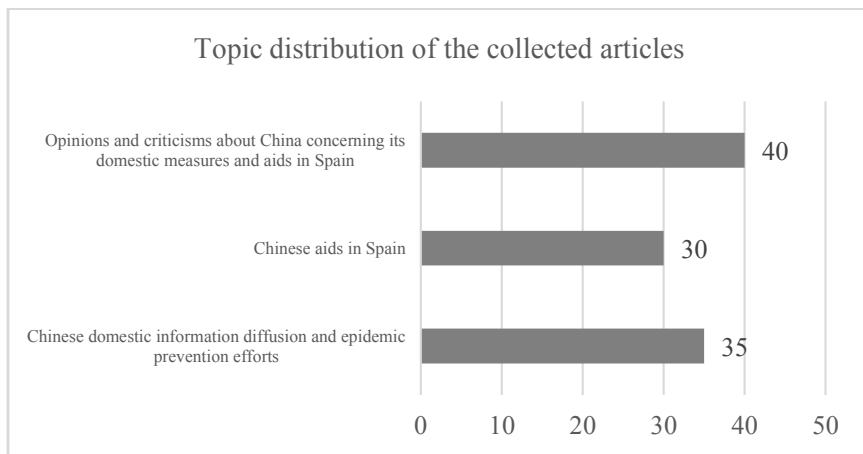


2.2 Collection of Articles

The 105 articles collected were later categorized into the following topics (see Appendix) and interpreted accordingly:

- I. Chinese domestic information diffusion and epidemic prevention efforts
- II. Chinese aid in Spain
- III. Opinions about China concerning its domestic measures and its aid in Spain

Figure 2 Distribution by Topic of the Collected Articles



In sections or subsections where necessary, a summary of the source of information related to the three topics above used by the articles is also made (from Table 1 to Table 11). The number of articles extracted from each newspaper in each section (see Appendix) is displayed in brackets following the newspaper’s name in the first row. The “author” rows show how many articles are contributions of correspondents in Spain or in China, or of a certain news agency. The “source” rows demonstrate the number of articles that include a certain source cited by the author. Multiple sources of the same type, e.g., different experts, are not counted repeatedly.

3. Content Analysis

3.1 Domestic Information Diffusion and Epidemic Prevention Efforts in China

3.1.1 Information about the Virus’s Infectivity: Record of Cover-up

Reports from January 3rd to January 20th about the appearance of the disease described it as “mysterious pneumonia”, “of China” or “of Wuhan”, mainly citing official sources such as the Center of Disease Control and Prevention and National Health Commission of China, as well as Hong Kong’s *South China Morning Post*. Public suspicion on major Chinese social media like Weibo was also cited. On January 20th, *El Mundo* in *Mortal coronavirus from Wuhan has already come out of China* said that the Chinese authorities kept silent at the beginning, but on January 19th decided to “put an end to the silence” to “stop evil rumors” by clarifying that the new virus was not SARS

and the outbreak would be “preventable and controllable”, just before human-to-human transmission was confirmed.

El País's *A virus similar to SARS, responsible for the mysterious Chinese pneumonia* on January 11 reviewed China's infamous secrecy over the epidemic which raged over the country 17 years ago, so its image was already shadowed by the lack of transparency, even before the infectivity of the virus was made clear. On January 21, the same newspaper wrote that “reasonable doubts about data transparency still exist, given that the epidemic was kept secret for weeks, even though the Chinese Government has greatly improved its reactions compared to the handling of SARS”. That history stimulated speculations and condemnations of cover-up against China later.

3.1.2 Lockdown of Wuhan: Draconian and Responsive

Reports about the lockdown of Chinese cities were generally descriptive, quoting Chinese authorities or correspondents located in China who were also put under lockdown. Apart from descriptions of the grim reality, some articles considered the restriction of movements “drastic”, “draconian” and “an unprecedented social experiment”. China was then presented as hardline and bold, instead of cautious or considerate, imposing forceful measures on its citizens, but responsive to a potential political crisis triggered by the virus through resolute *ad hoc* measures, even if the efficiency of such measures remained unclear. The depiction of China as hardline coincided with that by the Chinese state-run media.

On January 22, *El País* reported that the city of Wuhan would be closed, saying that China had begun to take drastic measures to stop the virus, and that its efforts were applauded by the WHO for being a “robust response to the crisis”. On January 23, *El Periódico de Catalunya* also reported the shutdown of Chinese cities, citing Xi Jinping's affirmation that China had taken strict measures of epidemic control and treatment. *El Periódico* commented that Wuhan was “very likely to remain in global history due to the coronavirus”. Its report, entitled *Vacations in quarantine in Wuhan due to the coronavirus*, pointed out the lockdown was “an unprecedented social experiment aimed to stop the epidemic that threatened to become a global crisis”. On January 26, however, the same newspaper expressed doubts about the reliability of movement restriction measures and exhaustive measurement of temperature. The piece of news also mentioned exhaustively other *ad hoc* measures adopted by Chinese authorities.

As consequences of the outbreak began to surface, *Wuhan Coronavirus: fear for a pandemic* by *La Vanguardia* on January 28 said the coronavirus crisis was already affecting the economy and politics, since the local authorities in Wuhan reacted late and inappropriately, as admitted by

the Mayor of Wuhan, which resulted in Chinese leaders being increasingly questioned by their citizens. In an article published later that day, *La Vanguardia* also quoted WHO's praise: China took the outbreak "seriously" and the highest-level authorities had shown transparency.

3.1.3 Quarantine and Confinement: Epidemic Control at all Costs

The lockdown created a draconian image for China early on. Apart from the establishment of special supply chains of living goods in most areas under lockdown, a series of new and strict *ad hoc* epidemic prevention measures were noticed by Spanish media, such as improvised quarantine barricades, removal of hundreds of incompetent officials, and harsh repression of public anger through censorship, which caused numerous detrimental side effects, etc. On the other hand, positive results of these extreme measures were also mentioned and reviewed. After the virus became evidently under control in mid-February, *La Vanguardia* noticed that China could start boasting about its experience through its well-oiled propaganda machines. Therefore, China was depicted as a Machiavellian virus fighter during the period, even at the cost of extensive violation of individual rights and crippling the national economy.

Spanish media's coverage of life in quarantine mainly consisted of descriptions by correspondents in Beijing or Wuhan, and pieces via phone interviews or instant messaging applications like WeChat, intermittently recounted in first person. Using a story-telling narrative, these reports tried to reproduce the grim reality with first-hand observations, a way to better empathize with readers, exposing trapped Chinese citizens' complex and developing emotions, which were predominantly negative – fear, trauma, skepticism, anger, fury, etc., as well as their criticisms toward the authorities. Some reports also explicitly expressed worry and sympathy for the Chinese, but not for the "communist regime". For example, in *Vacations in quarantine in Wuhan due to the coronavirus* on January 24, *El Periódico de Catalunya* told the stories of several citizens affected by "traumatic" quarantine measures and explained that "only the Confucian idea that prioritizes the common good over the individual can prevent an uproar". The article described the Chinese as "a people who had suffered tragedies one after another during the past two centuries".

On February 10, *El País* noted that "the drastic measures in force impede China's attempt to restart the economy" after the total shutdown of three weeks, quoting a white-collar worker in Beijing affected by the quarantine, and the surveys of UK Chamber of Commerce in Beijing and that of the US in Shanghai, respectively.

Other reports pointed out China's ultimate target of defeating the virus and the actual achievement: On January 31, *La Vanguardia* quoted Chinese

officials' affirmation that "China is capable of containing and defeating the coronavirus". *ABC* on February 23 acknowledged the positive results of the massive quarantine that lasted for a month, reflected by the decreasing number of new infections, but *ABC* again labelled the measures as "draconian", such as confining everyone at home as if in a "warzone".

On March 10, *El Mundo* covered Xi Jinping's victorious announcement in Wuhan, considered "a clear signal for the world that China has won the battle against the coronavirus". *El Mundo* added, "although Xi's visit was showered with complimentary propaganda from the state-run media, it had brought hope about reopening the city". On the same day, *La Vanguardia* said that thanks to the "the largest quarantine in history" China managed to control the virus and bought more time for other countries to brace for the epidemic, but also noted the resurgence of Chinese propaganda, taking the example of *Global Times* which emphasized that "China has acted as a great responsible nation", and its criticism toward US elites who dismissed the Chinese epidemic prevention measures "out of ideological or political prejudices".

In retrospect, *ABC* (on March 31) and *El Mundo* (April 1st) both wrote that the lockdown of Wuhan might have avoided more than 700,000 infections, quoting a joint work by researchers.

3.1.4 Use of Technology: Towards a Technological Leviathan

Among the actions taken by China, what had particularly sparked the concern of the Spanish media was the wide range of unprecedented technologies, which allegedly have connections with, or are controlled by the "omniscient and omnipotent" Chinese Government, especially by its police forces, even if not all the operator(s) of these hi-tech systems and apparatuses are the state authorities or state-owned enterprises. In such observations, these efficient methods reportedly involving violations of individual freedom and privacy via collection of personal data, etc., could be considered evidence that further characterizes the Chinese regime as a totalitarian and authoritarian one which takes on all things of society. Besides, there were also episodes of xenophobia in China.

In *Chinese Technology against the coronavirus*, *El Mundo's* correspondent in China wrote, for example, "China is a totalitarian state where the use of the technology has been crucial to monitoring and controlling the population during the coronavirus epidemic", citing SMS notifications, Alipay Health Code, disinfection robots, thermic drones and helmets, carrier drones, facial recognition systems and collection of mobile locations. *El Mundo*, quoting *The New York Times*, warned that the Health Code "seemed to share information with the police (*parece compartir información con la policía*)",

“establishing a model for new forms of automated society control which could persist (*estableciendo una plantilla para nuevas formas de control social automatizado que podrían persistir*)”, and that facial recognition and the collection of smartphone data worked the same. The article also said the authorities guaranteed the collected data would only be used for epidemic prevention, citing Xinhua News Agency.

El País in February also had been aware that COVID-19 was unlocking some countries’ capacity of massive surveillance. It wrote more straightforward criticisms against China’s technological measures, “China has always been steps ahead in terms of massive surveillance [...]. Now it even boasts about its capacity and perfection”. To support its argument, the newspaper discussed several “surprising methods” including facial recognition cameras capable of detecting who violated the quarantine, the unknowing tracking of smartphone locations, quoting *The Wall Street Journal*, and police drones, citing the Chinese official media *Global Times*.

On May 15, *El Mundo* posted an article authored by Belgian painter Koen de Cock entitled *The ‘Chinese’ art of confinement*, who recounted the forced quarantine he experienced, during which he felt he “had lost control of his own life”. It can be regarded as a black tale of the omnipresent Chinese technologies, like mobile apps and QR codes “for healthcare use”, and their penetration into everyone’s life, whether local people or foreigners. The most outstanding example was the efficient tracking of people’s whereabouts, while the tracked subjects remained unaware, including the author himself. Furthermore, the story provided evidence of how the Chinese Government keeps everything in its own hand. Apart from depicting how he was deprived of his personal freedom, de Cock exclaimed that local Chinese people began to demonize foreigners as more imported infections were recorded.

In contrast, *La Vanguardia*’s article *How has China informed of the pandemic?* on April 19 was much less critical of Chinese technologies. Authored by a reader correspondent in China, it showed how the Government used SMS and WeChat Applet to inform the citizens of the development of the epidemic and precaution measures. Shocked at the efficiency of these communication measures, the author exclaimed that such “clear, consensual and logical” information was lacking in Spain. Though the article argued against the stereotype about China, such as the intensified surveillance by omnipresent CCTVs and smartphone apps, the description of the daily bombardment of messages undoubtedly strengthened the image of a “Big Daddy Government”.

In sum, regarding the source of information of the four articles in 3.1.4, *El Mundo* and *La Vanguardia* both used the accounts by European citizens in China. Nevertheless, in *Chinese Technology against the coronavirus*, *El*

Table 1 Sources of Subsection 3.1.1.4

3.1.1.4 Domestic Information Diffusion and Epidemic Prevention Efforts in China:
Use of Technology

	Newspaper	<i>El Mundo</i>	<i>El País</i>	<i>La Vanguardia</i>	<i>El Periódico</i>	<i>ABC</i>
Author	Source Category	(2)	(1)	(1)	(0)	(0)
	Correspondent in China	2*		1**		
	Correspondent in Spain		1			
	The newspaper's editorial office/Columnist					
Author/Source	News agency of continental Europe					
	US/UK news agency					
	Expert/Scholar/WHO		1			
	Other/Unspecified		1			
Source	US/UK media & newspaper	1	1			
	Hong Kongese media & newspaper	1				
	Mainland Chinese official media & newspaper	1	1			
	Other mainland Chinese media & newspaper			1		
	Chinese authorities					
	Interviewee in China					

Note: * One of the articles was authored by Koen de Cock, reader correspondent in China.

** Authored by Brigitte Musafira, reader correspondent in China.

Mundo's correspondent in China, when trying to prove the abuse of collected personal data via technology, only quoted claims from *The New York Times* and the Hong Kong-based *Asia Times*, without presenting proof. Also, the claims cited from *The Times* included ambiguous words like "seem (*parece*)", "could (*podrían*, in conditional)". Similarly, when *El País* tried to prove the massive tracking of people in China, it did so by citing *The Wall Street Journal*.

3.1.5 Mass Screening in Wuhan: An Efficient Example for the World

After the reopening of Wuhan, there had been recurrence of COVID-19 cases. China then used its capability to conduct massive tests to set itself as an example in worldwide epidemic prevention. What we could see from the reports was an efficient and ambitious China which was not overly confident.

On May 12, *El Periódico de Catalunya* first wrote about the massive test for 11 million Wuhan citizens, describing the measures to prevent the second outbreak as "neither lukewarm nor scarce", which "does not go beyond China's capabilities".

Moreover, a report by *El Mundo* on May 15 said the massive testing would cost an equivalent of 234 million euros, commenting that "China would assert its authority by demonstrating its ability to conduct tests for a whole city with more residents than New York". The article quoted the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which manifested intolerance of failure and determination to set a model for the world, but *El Mundo* considered the proclamation an example of the studied official narrative of "China is one step ahead of the world".

3.1.6 Summary of Source of Information in Section 3.1

In sum, articles concerning China's measures to tackle the virus were predominantly authored by China correspondents, with exceptions like the newspapers' editorial office, or European news agencies like EFE and AFP. Apart from Chinese authorities, expert and scholarly sources were also frequently cited, along with the Hong Kong newspaper *South China Morning Post*. *Global Times* and Xinhua News Agency were among the most quoted mainland Chinese official media, while the liberal magazine *Caixin*, for its investigations into the management of the epidemic, was the non-official Chinese media frequently cited by *El Mundo* and *El País*. The two major newspapers as well as *El Periódico* also contacted several affected Chinese citizens via telephone or WeChat, as mentioned in 3.1.3.

Table 2 Sources of Information of the Analyzed Articles of Section 3.1

3.1 Domestic Information Diffusion and Epidemic Prevention Efforts in China

	Newspaper	<i>El Mundo</i> (11)	<i>El País</i> (9)	<i>La Vanguardia</i> (6)	<i>El Periódico</i> (6)	<i>ABC</i> (3)
	Source Category					
Author	Correspondent in China	9*	8	3**	5	1
	Correspondent in Spain		1			
	The newspaper's editorial office/Columnist	1	1	2	1	
Author/Source	News agency of continental Europe	1	1	2		
	US/UK news agency		2			
	Expert/Scholar/WHO	3	5	3	4	1
	Other/Unspecified	2	3	2		2***
Source	US/UK media & newspaper	1	1			
	Hong Kongese media & newspaper	2	3		2	1
	Mainland Chinese official media & newspaper	1	4	2	1	
	Other mainland Chinese media & newspaper	4	2			
	Chinese authorities	7	3	4	2	1
	Interviewee in China	2	2		1	

Note: * One of the articles was authored by Koen de Cock, reader correspondent in China.

** 2 out of 3 authored (or co-authored) by Ismael Arana, *La Vanguardia*'s correspondent in Hong Kong SAR, China. The rest by Brigitte Musafira, correspondent reader in China.

*** One authored by "Agencies" and another by "Servimedia".

3.2 Chinese Aid in Spain

3.2.1 Aid from Overseas Chinese in Spain

Twelve collected articles covered aid and donations offered by ethnic Chinese living in Spain and voluntary groups. Most were neutral statement of facts, with occasional praise for participants' spontaneity, modesty, sense of responsibility and contributive spirit. In contrast to previous stereo-types about Chinese immigrants, most of these reports, through interviews with heads of organizations formed by Chinese, as well as with individual volunteers, emphasized that Chinese were proactively integrating into local society, showing solidarity with Spaniards (as reflected by tweets from Spanish netizens showing support and gratitude), and even cooperating with local governments (as confirmed by Spanish newspaper interviews with officials), therefore resulting in an improved image of overseas Chinese in Spain. Comparatively, their connections with Mainland China were downplayed by the reports.

The first coverage of Chinese aid in Spain, on March 15, was two reports from *La Vanguardia*, one about the donation of medical supplies to local hospitals in Madrid, and the other, praising the donation as "exemplary", about ethnic Chinese offering healthcare materials to police stations. *El País* noted their deeds in Madrid were spontaneous, speaking highly of the modesty and selflessness of the "nameless" volunteers and donors, and using an interviewee's affirmation to exemplify their support for Spain: "Although we are Chinese, Spain is also our country". Comparatively, *La Vanguardia* later quoted the perception of overseas Chinese by the vice-president of the Association of the Chinese in Spain: "They do not form a closed community but a hospitable and open one, and they all want to contribute."

On March 23, *El Mundo* wrote about the Valencian Government's purchase of medical supplies from China via the entrepreneur Chen Wu Keping, "a man deeply rooted in Valencia" who kept connections with the local government and had a strong sense of Spanish identity, for whom a local official called for "respect". On March 31, *La Vanguardia* covered the donations of protective gears by the Chinese community in Navarra. On April 5, *El País* reported on Johni Zang, a wholesaler of Chinese origin and secretary general of Chinese Corporations Federation in Spain, who organized donations thanks to his connections in China. According to the report, Zang, who "had no memories of China" and was saddened by suffering Spain, was collaborating with the Barcelona Government, but showed much modesty about his work.

On April 9, *El Mundo* in *The four Chinese benefactors to the aid of Spain* reported on Jennifer Zhang, President of China Club; Chen Wu Keping, entrepreneur; Estela Li, coordinator of China-Spain Volunteer Alliance against the Coronavirus; and Chen Chen, President of the Association of

Young Chinese Student Entrepreneurs. Jennifer Zhang reportedly coordinated the embassy and “all Chinese enterprises” that wanted to send supplies to Spain; for example, she made possible the donation of 100,000 masks by the Shanghai-based company Ctrip. Chen Chen had been dedicated to contacting Chinese universities for donations. Estela Li helped to connect Spanish doctors with counterparts in Wuhan, whose deeds were further elaborated on and praised by *La Vanguardia* in *Doctors from Wuhan instruct Spanish doctors in the coronavirus*. Apart from stating the organization’s non-profit nature, the report also showed translation accuracy as proof of Li’s sense of responsibility.

The report *COVID-19: the united network of Chinese* by *El Periódico* on April 26 observed that Chinese in Catalonia already began to create a network of information, translation, and donations with China in an operation to help police officers and medical staff, even before the epidemic hit Spain. Most Chinese in the report work as doctors or are medical students in Barcelona.

3.2.2 Aid from Private Companies in China

Aid from Jack Ma, founder of Alibaba, were covered by *El Mundo*, *El País* and *La Vanguardia*, and those from Ren Zhengfei, President of Huawei, by *ABC*. Ma was depicted by *El Mundo* as a puppet promoted by China to improve its “villainous” image, and his donation was considered some sort of propaganda.

On March 19, *El Mundo* showed skepticism about China’s intention to discard its villainous image and to become the antiviral hero, which would “certainly require the action of several of its prominent figures” like Jack Ma: “First, announcing with its propagandistic mouthpieces that its draconian methods to stop the COVID-19 have worked. Then, when the global community copies some of its measures, the time to fill the void with solidarity has come. With names.” Ma was initially described as “an entrepreneur dedicated to education and philanthropy like Bill Gates”, but *El Mundo* continued its query, “an aid in his name, but under the red flag banner, has been sponsored by the biggest fortune of the Giant of Asia”.

On March 21, *ABC* reported on Huawei’s donation of one million masks in the name of Ren Zhengfei, in collaboration with the Spanish group Inditex. Compared to Jack Ma, reports about Ren were less ideologically-packed.

3.2.3 Aid from the Chinese Government and Issues

As for interactions at the governmental level, none of the newspapers called China “a partner” of Spain, but still shed light on China’s promise to aid

Spain on March 16 and 17, exchanged words of support, praises of each other's efforts between the two governments. However, there were very few reports about specific donations to Spain from a particular branch of Chinese Government. Furthermore, there were reports of when and how Chinese supplies arrived in Spain, without specifying the manufacturers or donors. When some COVID-19 test kits bought from China were found defective, related incidents were widely covered by the Spanish newspapers, but the criticisms were mostly directed against the Spanish Government, instead of China. In brief, China was depicted as a helper of some use, but less upright than the overseas Chinese acting spontaneously for Spain: the aid from China were considered more of a promotional campaign. As concluded by *La Vanguardia*, the coronavirus stimulated "Chinese solidarity" with Spain: all the donations added up to an international solidarity effort by China.

On March 16, both *ABC* and *El Mundo* reported on the promise on behalf of China made by Wang Yi, Minister of Foreign Affairs, to send urgent medical aid to Spain. However, *ABC* still considered the promise hollow, and criticized China for forcing factories to restart amid the outbreak. Then, according to *El Mundo*, on March 22 the Madrid Government chartered two planes with medical gears from China. On April 1, *ABC* signaled that an airplane with medical supplies bought by Madrid from China had landed in Spain.

On March 26, it was reported by *El Mundo*, *El País* as well as *La Vanguardia* that 9,000 rapid test kits bought from China were found defective. The Chinese Embassy in Spain responded that the Ministry of Health of Spain had bought from an unlicensed enterprise. The three newspapers did not criticize the Chinese Government for the incident, but criticisms from the opposition parties against the Spanish Government were cited instead. *ABC*'s report on April 20 also revealed that a cockroach was found in a box of masks from China purchased by the Valencian Government.

The only donation by a Chinese provincial government reported in detail was that from Gansu Province to the Spanish region of Navarra, by *La Vanguardia* on March 31. *La Vanguardia* also posted an article by Lin Nan, consul general of China in Barcelona, which was entitled *Unity, cooperation and hope: three Chinese stories in Catalonia during the pandemic*. Calling for unity and cooperation in the case of global challenges, the article reviewed the good deeds of overseas Chinese in Spain, praising their integration into the local society, as well as the mutual help between the Catalonian Government and China, and praised the Spanish medical professionals.

3.2.4 Summary of Source of Information in Section 3.2

The articles in section 3.2 (Tables 3–5) were mainly authored by Spanish correspondents, but 6 out of 9 articles from *La Vanguardia* came from

Table 3 Sources of Subsection 3.2.1

3.2.1 Chinese aid in Spain: Overseas Chinese in Spain

	Newspaper	<i>El Mundo</i>	<i>El País</i>	<i>La Vanguardia</i>	<i>El Periódico</i>	<i>ABC</i>
	Source Category	(2)	(3)	(4)	(2)	(1)
Author	Correspondent in Spain Correspondent in China The newspaper's editorial office/Columnist	2	3	2	1	1
Author/Source	News agency of continental Europe US/UK news agency Other/Unspecified			2	1	
Source	Spanish authorities US/UK media & newspaper European political organization Leader/Spokesman of European countries Spanish social network Chinese authorities Ethnic Chinese interviewee in Spain	1 1 1 2	1	1	1	1

Table 4 Sources of Subsection 3.2.2

3.2.2 Chinese aid in Spain: Private companies in China

	Newspaper	<i>El Mundo</i>	<i>El País</i>	<i>La Vanguardia</i>	<i>El Periódico</i>	<i>ABC</i>
	Source Category	(1)	(1)	(1)	(0)	(1)
Author	Correspondent in Spain Correspondent in China The newspaper's editorial office/Columnist	1	1			1
Author/Source	News agency of continental Europe US/UK news agency Other/Unspecified			1		1
Source	Spanish authorities US/UK media & newspaper European political organization Leader/Spokesman of European countries Spanish social network Chinese authorities Ethnic Chinese interviewee in Spain		1	1		

Table 5 Sources of Subsection 3.2.3

3.2.3 Chinese aid in Spain: Aid from Chinese Government and Issues

	Newspaper	<i>El Mundo</i>	<i>El País</i>	<i>La Vanguardia</i>	<i>El Periódico</i>	<i>ABC</i>
	Source Category	(4)	(2)	(4)	(0)	(3)
Author	Correspondent in Spain	3	2			2
	Correspondent in China					1
	The newspaper's editorial office/Columnist					
Author/Source	US/UK news agency					
	News agency of continental Europe	1		3		
	Other/Unspecified	3	1	1		1
	Chinese authorities	1	1	2		
Source	Spanish authorities	3	2	2		2
	US/UK media & newspaper					
	European political organization					
	Mainland Chinese official media & newspaper	1				1
	Other mainland Chinese media & newspaper					
Ethnic Chinese interviewee in Spain						

European news agencies like Europa Press or EFE. All reports by *El Mundo*, *El País* and *ABC* directly quoted Chinese helpers in Spain, while *El País* and *La Vanguardia* also cited responses from Spanish netizens. Most articles about government aid quoted authorities in both countries, as well as Xinhua News Agency.

3.3 Opinions, Criticisms and Praises

While *El Mundo* and *El País* doubted China's data transparency in January, as mentioned in 3.1.1, criticisms of China's delay in informing the public and WHO were mainly retrospective. In February, disapprovals were focused on censorship, which peaked with Dr. Li Wenliang's death. *El Periódico* argued the uproar was an "experimental relaxation of censorship" allowed by the Chinese Government, but such "trial-and-error experiment" eventually failed. As a result, intensified censorship resumed to maintain social stability. China's technological methods that might violate individual rights and privacy were already discussed in section 3.1.4. After mid-March, *El Mundo*, *El País*, *ABC* and *La Vanguardia* observed China's opportunism through its "mask (medical) diplomacy", pointing out its intention to clean up its image, set itself up as an antiviral hero and ally other countries against the US. *ABC* claimed that China would end up weaker even if it took proactive diplomatic actions. In April, as the pandemic swept Europe hard and as China revised the death toll, Spanish newspapers demanded greater transparency from China and condemned data manipulation. The release of Fang Fang's *Diary of Wuhan* in Spain in early July revived criticisms of China's lack of speech freedom. There was also praise for the efficiency of Chinese preventive measures.

3.3.1 Delay and Cover-up: Exaggerated Praises

While some articles in 3.1.1 doubted if China was hiding information in January, criticisms about China's cover-up were reviews rather than synchronized with the development of the epidemic. For instance, *El Mundo* on June 3 reviewed Chinese authorities' "delayed" and "reluctant" communications with the WHO, citing the Associated Press (AP)'s investigation, and, according to *Caixin*, the National Health Commission's secret order to destroy or archive the virus samples in January. *El Mundo* also quoted a professor who said to AP that more lives could have been saved if China and WHO had acted more swiftly. The newspaper commented that while AP's information did not support the accusation from the US of China's collusion with WHO, it suggested the latter's praise for China's transparency was exaggerated.

Table 6 Sources of Subsection 3.3.1

3.3.1 Opinions about China concerning its domestic measures and its aid in Spain: Delay and cover-up

	Source Category	Newspaper	<i>El Mundo</i>	<i>El País</i>	<i>La Vanguardia</i>	<i>El Periódico</i>	<i>ABC</i>
Author	Correspondent in Spain Correspondent in China The newspaper's editorial office/Columnist		(1)	(0)	(3)	(0)	(0)
Author/Source	Expert/Scholar US/UK news agency News agency of continental Europe News agency of Japan Other/Unspecified Writer WHO		1 1		1 1*		
Source	US/UK media & newspaper Leader/Spokesman of UE/European countries except Spain Leader/Spokesman of UK/US Hong Kongese media & newspaper Mainland Chinese official media & newspaper Other mainland Chinese media & newspaper Spanish leader/authorities Chinese leader/authorities Interviewee in China NGO		1 1 1 1				

Note: * Source marked as "Chinese media".

Contrastingly, on January 29 *La Vanguardia* seemed to consider China's slow move reasonable: "[...] China was reluctant to provide accurate information. But not only the Chinese government do so. To keep people calm, the authorities of several countries tend to be conservative when informing of the danger of infectious diseases."

Another piece of evidence of delay and cover-up was Xi Jinping's order to combat the epidemic on January 7, which did not go public until mid-February. Also citing AP, *La Vanguardia* said on February 17 that the President was aware of the severity of the epidemic two weeks before publicly acknowledging it. The report commented that Xi's speech intended to build up a decisive image for the Chinese leader, but it also exposed him to criticisms of why the citizens were not alerted beforehand.

In sum, evidence used to criticize China's delay and cover-up was predominantly contributed by AP, apart from the liberal Chinese magazine *Caixin*.

3.3.2 Censorship: Monolithic, Impenetrable, Intolerant and Machiavellian

Observations of Chinese censorship could be divided into three parts: before COVID-19 broke out in Europe, Spanish media had been criticizing China's censorship which silenced the alarm raised by several doctors in Wuhan and thus increased the damage of the epidemic, as well as the calculated relaxation and tightening of censorship before and after Dr. Li Wenliang's death. China's remedial actions for the incident, including the suppression of provocative remarks, also strengthened its Machiavellian image. Since these newspapers observed that every Chinese citizen obeyed the Government and lacked motives for resistance, China could be described as "monolithic and impenetrable". Months later, Spanish media continued to report on the censorship of Chinese social media which blocked views and ideas different from the official ones, portraying a China intolerant to dissidence.

Most of the reports did not distinguish the issuers of directives (Ministry of Publicity of China) from operators of censorship (social networks like Weibo and WeChat), considering the censorship mechanism as a whole, except *La Vanguardia's* report (using part of a message from EFE) on February 6 on Amnesty International's denunciation of China's censorship, where the NGO condemned the collusion between Chinese authorities and the social networks and the press in China which helped to intensify censorship.

While Amnesty International asserted that China's censorship increased the damage caused by the coronavirus, the death of Dr. Li Wenliang on February 6 became a landmark event and evidence of its vicious aftermath. His death, according to *El Mundo* and *El Periódico*, closed a brief window of censorship relaxation, reflected by the unprecedented, but ephemeral, public

outcry after the death announcement: *El Mundo* considered it a strategy of the Chinese Government, allowing citizens to let off their accumulated fury over the days of lockdown, while *El Periódico* regarded it as a failed experiment of censorship relaxation, given that more severe and extensive censorship resumed soon after the outcry. Both *El Periódico* and *La Vanguardia* predicted Chinese citizen's lacking resistance.

To be specific, *El País* described Dr. Li as "the ophthalmologist who 'was retaliated against' because of warning about the epidemic". *ABC* on February 6 stated that "Li's death has unleashed a dangerous outcry against the authoritarian regime of the Communist Party." The same day, *La Vanguardia* briefly mentioned the public reaction online and quoted the Supreme Court's criticism of the police which had detained the doctor, and its regrettable social impact.

Regarding the unprecedented uproar, *El Mundo* in a retrospective report *The forgiveness from Li Wenliang, the doctor silenced by China who warned about the coronavirus* on March 20 said that "the Great Firewall", synonym of Chinese censorship, "was deliberately allowed to break", so that the people could somehow vent their frustrations. In comparison, *El Periódico* considered the flooding criticisms as evidence of a trial-and-error experiment conducted by the Government, which allowed on purpose more freedom of expression to facilitate transparency after learning from the "calamitous" handling of SARS, but the consequent tightened media control signaled its failure. *El Periódico* pointed out that the same system that enabled swift reaction also strengthened the virus, due to the long-standing flaws of China's vertical hierarchy that hardly stimulated transparency, and that the fury on the Chinese Internet suggested a paradox, or an imminent conflict between a society that demanded freedom of expression and a Government that had just seen the risks of granting it moderately. *El Periódico* expressed much pessimism about the prospects of free speech in China, arguing that the revolution that many Western experts were expecting would not be triggered even if Li was revered by Chinese citizens.

In *The virus that threatens the Chinese regime* published on February 11, *La Vanguardia* also noticed the short-lived relaxation of censorship, adding that Dr. Li was also a member of the Communist Party of China and he did not intend to act against it. The article observed that Li's death provoked a political and social crisis, leading to emerging opinions from the West that China could be on the verge of collapse. In *La Vanguardia's* interview with Jason Y. Ng, a Hong Kong dissident writer, the interviewee argued that Chinese citizens, increasingly unconfident about the communist leadership, started to question its ability to handle the crisis, but he also expressed his disappointment at Chinese citizens who were too satisfied with the economic achievements brought by the communist leadership to react against it.

China's Machiavellian image was even strengthened by its remedial actions for the incident of Dr. Li, such as the follow-up censorship. In *The anger over virus management poses unprecedented challenge for Xi Jinping*, *El País* noted the alarmed Chinese Government was responding to the looming political crisis by prioritizing the control of media and Internet. *El Periódico* also informed about Xi's order of tightening media control, since "(the media) continued to collect evidence of the Chinese Government's irresponsible acts", commenting that "these instructions metaphorize the dysfunctions of a system where officials are more concerned with personal salvation than with solution of problems". *El Mundo* also quoted Beijing's justification of maintaining censorship from the state-run media *Global Times*: "Some people had been using the widespread grievance caused by Dr. Li's death to incite anti-China sentiments on social networks, and even social movements."

Further remedies included the Central Government's dispatch to investigate Li's death, which, according to *El País*, not only was a strategy apparently to appease the public, but it also drew a clear distinction between the central and the local government; in other words, the Central Government tried to shift the blame to its subordinates, while trying to label itself as efficient. In *The virus that threatens the Chinese regime*, *La Vanguardia* quoted a Chinese columnist, who predicted that once the virus was contained, the Chinese leaders would again praise the superiority of the authoritarian model, the key to mobilizing resources nationwide.

With regards to *Diary of Wuhan: 60 days of a city in quarantine* authored by Fang Fang, most Spanish newspapers regarded it as a courageous testimony amid censorship and the suppression of dissidence.

El Mundo first noticed the writer in April, who reportedly was censored by Beijing because of questioning the official number of deaths, and highly valued her work: "Unintimidated by censorship and criticisms, her diary was an antidote to the shower of deceitfully positive and heroic Chinese propaganda", which depicted the sufferings of a nation and condemned those who hid the truth.

In July, *El País* labeled Fang Fang as dissident and praised her bravery in its article *Bear witness*, where it claimed that dictatorships now take new forms as technology advances, exemplified by Internet censorship, a more effective weapon against dissidents such as Fang Fang. *El País* described China as "a regime where everyone obeys and where the only acceptable reality is the one dictated by official media", and Fang Fang's act as dangerous and heroic. "The Chinese political power and its propaganda wrap up facts with decorations, aiming to strengthen its despotism and privileges, as well as hiding up its incompetence, corruption, errors and negligence," criticized the newspaper.

Table 7 Sources of Subsection 3.3.2

3.3.2 Opinions about China concerning its domestic measures and its aid in Spain: Censorship and data manipulation

	Newspaper						
	Source Category	<i>El Mundo</i>	<i>El País</i>	<i>La Vanguardia</i>	<i>El Periódico</i>	<i>ABC</i>	
Author	Correspondent in Spain Correspondent in China The newspaper's editorial office/Columnist	2	1 2 2	1 1*** 3	1	(3)	1 1
Author/Source	Expert/Scholar US/UK news agency News agency of continental Europe News agency of Japan Other/Unspecified Writer WHO		3*	1*	1		1**** 1
Source	US/UK media & newspaper Leader/Spokesman of UE/European countries except Spain Leader/Spokesman of UK/US Hong Kongese media & newspaper Mainland Chinese official media & newspaper Other mainland Chinese media & newspaper Spanish leader/authorities Chinese leader/authorities Interviewee in China NGO	1 1	1* 1	2**	1		1 1

Note: * Includes opinions from the sinologist Bill Bishop.

** In one of the articles authored by the newspaper's editor/columnist Lluís Amiguet, the interviewee is a Hong Kongese writer and dissident.

*** Authored by Ismael Arana, the newspaper's correspondent in Hong Kong SAR, China.

**** Author marked as "EP".

ABC also applauded the female writer's courage to testify at the risk of being deprived of freedom and Internet access, and spared no effort in criticizing the Chinese regime as "monolithic and impenetrable", as well as its lack of transparency and flagrant censorship that the pandemic had revealed: "(The *Diary*) denounces the official's incompetence in a country which claimed to be perfect but screwed up from the first minute [...] and accused the dissidents of being traitors and beat them up publicly."

La Vanguardia viewed the *Diary* differently, highlighting Fang Fang's modesty, her ability to empathize with the Spanish people, the objectivity of her writing, and her partial trust in the Chinese Government, instead of praising her bravery or delving into her ideological resistance: "In a constant fight against the censors [...] she insists on cooperating with the Chinese Government, which she praises whenever she thinks appropriate actions are taken."

Regarding the source of information in 3.3.2, the NGOs cited by *El País* and *La Vanguardia* were Reporters Without Borders and Amnesty International, which had long been condemning censorship in China. Fang Fang's accounts of the censorship she had undergone were amply used by these newspapers except *El Periódico*. *El Mundo* and *El Periódico* both cited *Caixin*, while the most cited official Chinese media was *Global Times*. *El País* and *ABC* both quoted *South China Morning Post*.

3.3.3 Demands for China's Transparency during the Outbreak in Europe: *Deceptive and Evasive*

As COVID-19 swept Europe in March, major Spanish newspapers launched new criticisms of China's information transparency, calling its official statistics "deceptive or misleading (*engañoso*)" and condemning the country's evasion of responsibility.

"Many experts doubt these numbers because of the habitual opacity of Beijing which tends to conceal or minimize any sensitive information that undermines the image of the CPC and President Xi Jinping," claimed *ABC*'s article "*Deceptive*" *coronavirus numbers in China make Europe fear a worse catastrophe* on March 21st, which blamed China for worsening the crisis in Spain and other European countries, calling the Chinese figures "dangerously deceptive" because they principally referred to the situation of Wuhan instead of the whole of China, while any large European cities could easily repeat the Wuhan scenario. Similarly, *El Mundo*'s article *The shadows of efficacy in the Chinese battle*, citing Reporters Without Borders, blamed China's media control for escalating the disease into a pandemic, illustrated by the delayed and uncomplete information provided to international media before January 13th. *El Mundo* further questioned the official statistics, especially the

relatively small amount of infections and deaths compared to Europe, which, according to various sources cited, were achieved at the cost of patients rejected by hospitals and unregistered asymptomatic cases. In April, *El País's* editorial *China: the coronavirus and papier-mâché* recognized China's capacities of epidemic prevention, but still insisted that the country could not provide truthful information and again criticized the data manipulation.

Suspicious arose again as the Chinese authorities revised the death toll in Wuhan. On April 17th, *El Mundo's* *The world distrusts China: deaths from coronavirus in Wuhan go up by 50%* claimed that China still intended to divert criticisms when the focus on the pandemic's origin and accountability was increasingly shifting to the country, as confirmed by the urges from the US, UK and France.

The same day, *ABC's* editorial *China should answer* examined Beijing's suspicious reluctance to allow investigation into the Wuhan Institute of Virology, and the dubious shutdown of the laboratory which published the virus genome, commenting that "The Communist Regime's horror of transparency can have catastrophic effects" for impeding the development of vaccines. *ABC* described Xi Jinping as "not interested in telling people the truth" "a self-proclaimed benefactor of humanity" for his lavish aid of medical supplies. *El Periódico's* *Did China tell all the truth about the coronavirus?* claimed that deaths in Wuhan could be ten times that of the official figure and emphasized China's biggest mistake was the delay and the poor quality of information provided to WHO, citing AP and *South China Morning Post*. In *All the truth*, *El País* argued that Chinese authorities possessed more extensive information about the virus, and referred to the infection count in democratic countries as benchmark for China's honesty: "If there is a big difference in the statistics between China and other countries, especially democracies, then the suspicions are well-founded that China is not telling all the truth".

When demanding transparency from China, *El Mundo*, *El País* and *La Vanguardia* quoted the accusation from Mike Pompeo in an interview with *Fox News*, as well as urges from Emmanuel Macron and Dominic Raab, UK Minister of Foreign Affairs. Sources from US/UK news agencies were those from Associated Press and Bloomberg. It is worth mentioning that the anonymous doctor who denounced data manipulation in Wuhan to Kyodo was cited by both *El Mundo* and *ABC*. Newspapers except *El País* used sources from *Financial Times*, *Wall Street Journal* and *The Washington Post*. Apart from the *South China Morning Post*, a range of Hong Kong media such as RTHK and *Apple Daily* were quoted by *El Mundo*, which also cited Chinese official media like *Global Times* and *People's Daily*, the liberal Chinese magazine *Caixin*, an interviewee in Wuhan, and Reporters Without Borders. Both *El Mundo* and *La Vanguardia* used sources from Chinese authorities and official media.

Table 8 Sources of Subsection 3.3.3

3.3.3 Opinions about China concerning its domestic measures and its aid in Spain: Demand for transparency

	Source Category	Newspaper	<i>El Mundo</i> (2)	<i>El País</i> (1)	<i>La Vanguardia</i> (2)	<i>El Periódico</i> (1)	<i>ABC</i> (2)
Author	Correspondent in Spain Correspondent in China The newspaper's editorial office/Columnist		2	1	1** 1	1	1 1
Author/Source	Expert/Scholar US/UK news agency News agency of continental Europe News agency of Japan Other/Unspecified Writer WHO		1 1 1	1	2 2 1**** 2**	1 1*** 1	1 1
Source	US/UK media & newspaper Leader/Spokesman of UE/European countries except Spain Leader/Spokesman of UK/US Hong Kongese media & newspaper Mainland Chinese official media & newspaper Other mainland Chinese media & newspaper Spanish leader/authorities Chinese leader/authorities Interviewee in China NGO		1 1 1 1* 1 1 2 1 1	1 1 1	2 1 2 1 2	1 1	2

Note: * *Apple Daily HK* and 47 News were erroneously marked as Japanese media in the article.

** Correspondent in Hong Kong SAR, China.

*** Source marked as "agencies".

**** Source from *Radio Free Asia*.

3.3.4 *Villain Turned Hero: Opportunist and Weak*

China was once considered “a villain” due to its numerous “mistakes” when COVID-19 first broke out, but some Spanish newspapers noticed the changing role of the country as it tried to control the coronavirus, starting from *La Vanguardia*, which predicted on March 10 that China would attempt to improve its damaged international image through the denominated “medical diplomacy” (see articles in 3.1.3 in Appendix). According to *China, from villain to antiviral hero*, *El Mundo* thought the negative perception of authoritarian China began to change in February as WHO praised its draconian measures, and then “the mouthpieces of Beijing had been launching editorials boasting about China’s deeds at home and abroad”, especially after Chinese aid to coronavirus-stricken countries were made known. *El Mundo* concluded that China wanted to set itself as an example for the world even if the country struggled to resume normality. Similarly, *El Mundo’s The forgiveness from Li Wenliang, the doctor silenced by China who warned about the coronavirus* said in retrospect that China was observed trying to clean up its mistakes and to “set itself up as a savior” now that it had proclaimed victory over the virus.

Despite coverage of the aid from the Chinese Government and entrepreneurs, the major Spanish newspapers hardly considered it genuine: None of them said China was doing the right thing at the right time, but instead they said the country was taking advantage of the inaction of the EU and the US to expand its geopolitical influence. Moreover, *El Mundo*, *El Periódico* and *ABC* depicted China as “outwardly strong but inwardly weak”, contrasting the “iron fist” of the Communist Party and its combative diplomacy with China’s weakened domestic economy and its inability to lead the global economy. Particularly, *ABC* said that China was making a fortune through medical aid and called China “not trustable”. The speech from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China quoted by *El Mundo* even seemed to portray a condescending China that pointed out the inaction of Spain and then flaunting its ability to support.

When writing about Jack Ma and other Chinese participants in aiding Spain, on March 19 and April 9, respectively, *El Mundo* said the Chinese wanted to improve their image, changing “from villains to heroes” if “(they) knew on which side to stand in these moments”. In *The four Chinese benefactors to the aid of Spain*, *El Mundo* argued the global configuration presented opportunities for China: the European Union’s inaction and the dearth of solidarity among European countries (also see articles in 3.2.2 in Appendix).

On March 29, *ABC’s* article *China launches the “mask diplomacy” to improve its image* claimed that China and the US are vying for global hegemony, but the former’s image has been greatly damaged amid the COVID-19 outbreak due to the authoritarian regime’s usual lack of trans-

Table 9 Sources of Subsection 3.3.4

3.3.4 Opinions about China concerning its domestic measures and its aid in Spain: Opportunist

	Newspaper		<i>El Mundo</i>	<i>El País</i>	<i>La Vanguardia</i>	<i>El Periódico</i>	<i>ABC</i>
	Source Category		(3)	(1)	(0)	(0)	(1)
Author	Correspondent in Spain Correspondent in China The newspaper's editorial office/Columnist		3*		2		1
Author/Source	Expert/Scholar US/UK news agency News agency of continental Europe News agency of Japan Other/Unspecified Writer WHO		1 1 1 1**	1			1
Source	US/UK media & newspaper Leader/Spokesman of UE/European countries except Spain Leader/Spokesman of UK/US Hong Kongese media & newspaper Mainland Chinese official media & newspaper Other mainland Chinese media & newspaper Spanish leader/authorities Chinese leader/authorities Interviewee in China NGO		2 1 1 1 3				1 1 1

Note: * China correspondent Lucas de la Cal as source, not author, who verified if Llosa's books were banned in China.
** Mario Vargas Llosa.

parency and not being a trustable partner of the international community. “The ever-skillful Chinese regime is taking advantage of the containment of the coronavirus in its territory to send medical aid to countries in distress,” said *ABC*, pointing out that China was accumulating wealth since only a small proportion of the aid was donation. The newspaper concluded China could cultivate its soft power and improve its image but would be further weakened by the crisis due to its seriously affected economy, which was not expected to recover quickly.

Similarly, *El Periódico* also questioned China’s economic capacity, “The fiascos of defective masks and test kits [...] have shown that China is in no condition to lead the global economy.” Its editorial *Did China tell all the truth about the coronavirus?* on April 17 (also see 3.3.3) also criticized China, where “savage capitalism prevails, led by the iron fist of the Communist Party”, for taking advantage of the shortage of medical supplies to showcase its power.

Regarding Chinese diplomacy in the pandemic, *El País’s Activism of Chinese diplomacy in the era of COVID-19* warned against the expansion of China’s governance model. The author, a China specialist at the European Union Institute of Security Studies, argued that China’s diplomacy not only aimed to promote its “superior” model, presenting itself as saviour of the world, but also to accelerate the restructuring of global governance, especially given the wide use of controversial Chinese technologies and their possible exportation to other countries.

El Mundo also observed the “combative spirit” promoted by Xi Jinping and described the Chinese diplomats as combatants in its article *‘Wolf Warriors’: fighters of the Chinese diplomacy* on May 18, who flooded the global social networks with threats, attacks, sarcasms and conspiracy theories with the purpose of diverting the focus on the pandemic’s origin. On March 17, *El Mundo* reported on the refutation of Mario Vargas Llosa’s “defamation” and “irresponsible and biased opinions” by the Chinese Embassy in Peru, which could be regarded as evidence of China’s more aggressive diplomacy.

3.3.5 *Expansion of Authoritarianism: Opportunist and Fallacious*

When Europe struggled to cope with the health crisis, *El País* became increasingly critical of the authoritarianism characteristic of China, exemplified by the article *Return to the Middle Age?* by Mario Vargas Llosa, who called China a “dictatorship”. *El País* was also wary of the expansion of authoritarianism in democracies, exemplified by the growing attractiveness of the successful “fallacious example of China”, and central government’s increased executive power conferred by emergency laws and measures.

Table 10 Sources of Subsection 3.3.5

3.3.5 Opinions about China concerning its domestic measures and its aid in Spain: Expansion of authoritarianism

	Source Category	Newspaper	<i>El Mundo</i>	<i>El País</i>	<i>La Vanguardia</i>	<i>El Periódico</i>	<i>ABC</i>
Author	Correspondent in Spain Correspondent in China The newspaper's editorial office/Columnist		(0)	(3)	(0)	(0)	(0)
Author/Source	Expert/Scholar US/UK news agency News agency of continental Europe News agency of Japan Other/Unspecified Writer WHO			1			
Source	US/UK media & newspaper Leader/Spokesman of UE/European countries except Spain Leader/Spokesman of UK/US Hong Kongese media & newspaper Mainland Chinese official media & newspaper Other mainland Chinese media & newspaper Spanish leader/authorities Chinese leader/authorities Interviewee in China NGO			1*			
				1**			

Note: * Mario Vargas Llosa.

** Source from Human Rights Watch.

In his article, the Nobel Prize laureate denied the Chinese example, a “combination of free market and political dictatorship”, as an ideal model for developing countries, compared the pandemic to the medieval Black Death and vehemently condemned the Chinese political system, accusing it of cover-up and censorship, “None of these could be happening all over the world if the PRC were a free and democratic country, instead of being the dictatorship it is.”

The authoritarian fallacy warned China’s rapid recovery led to praises for authoritarianism in the West, reflected by the increasing attractiveness of China’s efficient model to leftist European politicians. In *Crisis and opportunity for authoritarianism*, the same newspaper argued that the virus created an opportunity to consolidate authoritarianism, a trend already on the rise “not only in the US and China, but also among democracies”.

Apart from Llosa’s article, the other two were authored by columnists, quoting Francis Fukuyama’s affirmation about the gradual death of the democracy of today, as well as concerns from Human Rights Watch.

3.3.6 Praises: *Efficient and Unenviable*

Scarce praises came from *El Mundo* and *La Vanguardia*, highlighting China’s efficiency. Also, *El País* acknowledged the tremendous global responsibility that China was bearing.

El Mundo’s *The figures of the successful experiment of Wuhan* on March 23 commented that the Chinese model to control the virus had worked as far as efficiency was concerned, introducing several key characteristics of the victory in Wuhan, how the city was returning to normality, and train cargos of medical supplies bound for Spain. In 3.1.3, *La Vanguardia* affirmed the positive effects of the quarantine in China for the world, and in 3.1.4, the newspaper also called the epidemic information from the Chinese Government diffused to citizens “clear, consensual and logic”.

El País in *China is moving forward* recognized China’s strategy proved to be successful and even exemplary, described Chinese society as “modern and mature” and able to confront global challenges, saying that China’s public health system equipped with dutiful staff, disciplined citizens and facilities enabled by the authoritarian system had managed to stop the coronavirus, which, however, was “not at all enviable nor imitable (by the West)”. Although *El País* argued opportunist China had taken advantage of the inaction of the West and would spread propaganda about its victory, it also affirmed that China was playing the role of “responsible global partner” and “even the most responsible one”, one “pivotal in coping with the current crisis.” That contradicted views from *El Mundo*, *El Periódico* and *ABC* about China’s inability to lead the global economy.

Table 11 Sources of Subsection 3.3.6
 3.3.6 Opinions about China concerning its domestic measures and its aid in Spain. Praises

	Source Category	Newspaper	<i>El Mundo</i>	<i>El País</i>	<i>La Vanguardia</i>	<i>El Periódico</i>	<i>ABC</i>
Author	Correspondent in Spain Correspondent in China The newspaper's editorial office/Columnist		1	1	(0)	(0)	(0)
Author/Source	Expert/Scholar US/UK news agency News agency of continental Europe News agency of Japan Other/Unspecified Writer WHO		1				
Source	US/UK media & newspaper Leader/Spokesman of UE/European countries except Spain Leader/Spokesman of UK/US Hong Kongese media & newspaper Mainland Chinese official media & newspaper Other mainland Chinese media & newspaper Spanish leader/authorities Chinese leader/authorities Interviewee in China NGO		1				

4. Discussion: Source of Information and the Similar Stance between Spanish and US/UK Media

Evidence contributing to a more negative China image was mainly from US and UK news agency and media, and secondarily from Kyodo, Hong Kong media and *Caixin*. In subsection 3.1.4, the claims of China's abuse of personal data during epidemic prevention were supported by *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and Hong Kong media. In section 3.3, Chinese censorship was exemplified by the writer Fang Fang and condemned by Amnesty International and Reporters Without Borders. The key evidence of China's "cover-up" was provided by Associated Press, and evidence of data manipulation was from Hong Kong media (mainly *South China Morning Post*), the Chinese magazine *Caixin*, Kyodo, and interviewees in China, including a Hong Kong dissident. When no evidence could be presented about the causality between China's "cover-up" and the spread in Europe, such as the discovery of identical viral genome in both regions, Spanish newspapers then quoted the urging that China be transparent from the US, UK and French leaders. Sources from the Spanish EFE and other news agencies of continental Europe were mainly about the initial development of COVID-19 in China and Chinese aid in Spain. No sources from the US or UK media were used in the coverage of Chinese aid nor the acknowledgement of China's achievements. Even *La Vanguardia*, considered ideologically center-leftist by Spaniards (Pew Research Center, 2018) and less critical of China, cited numerous sources from the US and UK, a reflection of the considerable influence of the two countries' discourse of China.

As already noted by Mao Wei (2020b) in his study of Anglophone media framing of China amid the pandemic, there were overwhelmingly more negative and stereotypical interpretations of the country than neutral or positive ones. Apart from quoting US and UK media, *ABC*, *El Mundo* and *El País*, considered rightist or center-rightist (Pew Research Center, 2018), also exhibited similar criticisms regarding China's epidemic information disclosure, draconian quarantine measures, censorship and political system (Mao, 2020a; 2020b). The three newspapers tend to share these opinions with the Anglophone media probably for the following reasons:

(1) Blame-shifting tactics

Given that the coronavirus was first reported in China, the country became an easy target for criticisms. After Spain became increasingly affected by the pandemic, it naturally needed a diversion. Therefore, apart from criticizing the Spanish Government, Spanish media picked up on reports by the US media and news agencies to condemn China's domestic cover-up and censorship as transforming the epidemic into a pandemic.

(2) Spain’s transition from dictatorship to democracy

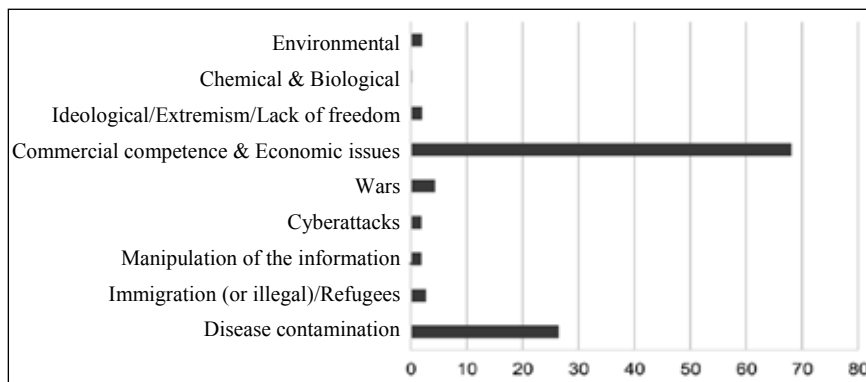
The lingering influence of the Francoism, particularly international isolation from the 1940s to 1950s, have made the Spaniards sensitive to ideological differences. As the draconian quarantine measures were implemented in China and then in Spain, the revival of totalitarianism or authoritarianism heightened the alert of *ABC* and *El País*. For example, *El País* warned against the rise of authoritarianism and defended parliamentary democracy in editorials in 3.3.5.

(3) Economic competence between democratic Spain and authoritarian China

As numerous reports observed the exceptional efficiency enabled by the authoritarian systems during epidemic prevention, such efficiency can deductively be applied to the domain of commerce, represented by China’s state-owned enterprises. The poll “Threats from China” (Figure 3) conducted from March 2 to 19, 2020 also revealed that nearly 70% of Spanish respondents who rated China’s level of threat over 3 (out of 10) still consider economic competence as the predominant threat from China. *El Periódico* also acknowledged “savage capitalism prevails in China”. Therefore, questioning the authoritarian political system which gave birth to and directs the state capitalism in China is marketable in Spain, because these criticisms, especially those from *El País* in 3.3.5, highlight democracy, which Spain still enjoys, as the core of Western superiority, and thus can provide some sort of consolation for Spaniards in economic distress.

Even though the newspapers have correspondents in China, who experienced in person the epidemic prevention measures and acquired first-hand information through remote interviews with affected citizens, they can make mistakes about the basics of the country: *ABC*’s Shanghai correspondent

Figure 3. Threats from China (2020): Multiple spontaneous response



Source: *Barómetro del Real Instituto Elcano (BRIE) n°41* (2020): 12.

mistook Canton (Guangzhou) for the whole Guangdong Province, when reporting on the number of infections in megacities. So did *El Mundo's* correspondent in the mention of “racist attacks” in Guangdong. Besides, the credibility of interviews was also questionable. For example, in *El Mundo's The Shadows of the Chinese Efficiency*, the claim of asymptomatic patients rejected by hospitals was corroborated by the pseudonymous Wuhan resident Lily via Telegram, who was informed about these cases by several WeChat group chats. It was possible that such information circulating in the instant messenger apps was comprised of mere hearsay sparked by the aftershock of panic or generated for sensationist purposes.

5. Conclusion: Varied Acceptance of Depictions, Limited Damage to China's Image

Shadowed by the infamous history of cover-up of SARS, China was depicted as slow and passive, wasting time before human-to-human transmission was confirmed, but not unresponsive to the looming political crisis triggered by the epidemic. With the shutdown of Wuhan, China was described as draconian and bold, conducting an “unprecedented social experiment”. As the country imposed strict and resolute epidemic prevention measures, its image became more Machiavellian, trying to achieve the target at all costs.

Criticisms against China's censorship and data manipulation broke out following the death of Dr. Li in February. As more “evidence” was gathered, his death also shifted the media focus to the supposed delay and cover-up of epidemic information by Chinese authorities before February. The Spanish newspapers used negative views from Chinese citizens who questioned the Government and called for transparency and free speech under censorship to further strengthen the government's Machiavellian image. The release of *Diary of Wuhan* in Spain revived criticisms of censorship and suppression of dissidents. Chinese technologies to combat the epidemic, including their use against dissidents, further characterized the Chinese Government as one that attempts to control almost every aspect of society.

With the mention of the term “medical diplomacy” by *La Vanguardia* on February 11, and as China started to send aid worldwide, the country was then regarded as opportunistic and a “saviour of the world”, intending to propagate its “superior” authoritarian ideologies with its more proactive diplomacy. Spanish newspapers regarded the Chinese Government as a helper of some value, since Spain could not afford losing any partner in the battle against the COVID-19 (Esteban et al., 2020), but the image of China was not as genuine and respectable as the ethnic Chinese living in Spain. The Spanish media consensus was that the Chinese in Spain shared a sense of identity with Spaniards and were spontaneously helping Spain. Also, due to a major

revision of the death toll in China, and the global responsibility China was already bearing, the newspapers urged China to be more transparent, with some framing China as an unreliable partner evasive about the truth. Jack Ma, one of the entrepreneurs sending aid to Spain, was even considered as a puppet of Communist propaganda. China was also depicted, particularly by *El Mundo*, *El Periódico* and *ABC*, as “outwardly strong and inwardly weak,” due to its affected domestic economy and inability to lead the global economy. *El País* is the newspaper that is most wary of China’s ideological expansion and the only one to call China a “dictatorship”, while *La Vanguardia* never expressed similar concern.

These Spanish newspapers continued to recognize China as a power and refer to it as “the Asian Giant (*El Gigante Asiático*)”. *ABC* and *El Mundo* described the country as “totalitarian”. On the other hand, praise helped build up China’s image as a bearer of global responsibility and efficient fighter against COVID-19. However, China’s efficiency was also questioned by *El Mundo*.

Regarding the acceptance of these images of China by Spaniards, the newspapers did not make the Spanish citizens’ perception of China significantly more negative. According to Elcano Royal Institute’s survey carried out from March 2 to 19, 2020, while there was even a slight improvement of China’s rating (from 4.7 to 5) from 2018 to 2020, what has drastically changed was the perception of China as a threat: the threat level rose from 4.1 to 5.3 (Royal Elcano Institute, 2020). That was partially linked to COVID-19, given the continuous coverage of the disease in China since January 3. Among those Spanish respondents who rated China’s threat level over 3 (out of 10), 25% identified “disease contamination (*contagio de enfermedades*)” as a threat to Spain, but economic competence (almost 70%) continued to be the most important source of threat (Figure 3).

Moreover, neither criticisms of China’s politics were widely accepted by Spaniards. Despite intense criticisms concerning censorship following the death of Dr. Li Wenliang in early February 2020, as well as of authoritarian systems, it can be noticed that “ideological threats/extremisms/lack of freedom (*Ideológica/extremismos/falta de libertad*)”, “immigration/refugees (*Inmigración/refugiados*)” as well as “manipulation of information (*Manipulación de la información*)” are not considered to be notable menaces (Figure 3), and the rise in their level are insignificant compared to the survey by the same institute in 2017; by then, none of the 291 respondents who rated China’s threat level above 3 thought China’s politics posed threats, and only 2 of them were worried about China’s manipulation of information.

Since the most intense criticisms against China failed to amplify the “ideological threats” from China, COVID-19 has not exerted a very significant

positive nor negative effect on the perception of China in Spain, probably due to the existence of several trends counterbalancing each other.

Firstly, governance failures such as lack of transparency and censorship reported by the five major Spanish newspapers can be linked to the initial spread of the virus in China, and even in Europe (though no solid evidence was presented), which resulted in the item “disease contamination” increasingly perceived as a threat from China. Secondly, the support from the Chinese Government, companies, and the aid from the Chinese community in Spain in particular, were known and felt by the Spaniards (Esteban, 2020). A 2020 survey by Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS) also indicated that 49% of 1,500 Spanish respondents thought China had helped Spain (Tursányi et al., 2020).

There is probably a third factor that accounted for the limited damage to China’s image: Spaniards blamed their own government more for the domestic outbreak than governments of other countries. According to a joint survey by *ABC* and GAD3, a Madrid-based consulting firm, 35.1% of respondents considered adequate the Spanish Central Government’s measures to combat the crisis between March 12 and 16, but the percentage fell to 31.1% between March 23 and 27, and to 27.7% between March 30 and April 3. In May, only 26.3% welcomed the measures taken by the Spanish Central Government (GAD3, 2020; Calleja, 2020). This was also corroborated by public distrust sparked by the purchase of unlicensed Chinese medical products by the Spanish Ministry of Health, as reported by *El Mundo* and *El País*. Towards the defective Chinese products, the Spanish Government adopted a conciliatory attitude (Esteban et al., 2020) instead of blaming China, which further angered the Spaniards.

In other words, the “rally round the flag effect,” or the increased short-run popular support of a country’s government or political leaders during periods of international crisis (Goldstein and Pevehouse, 2008), was insignificant in Spain. Neither the leaders of Spanish Central Government nor the King demanded compensation from China. Instead, Chinese assistance and cooperation, though never rated above the aid from other countries, have been regarded positively by the heads of Government and State (Esteban et al., 2020).

Although Spanish citizens do not appear to be interested in suing China, this does not mean they think China is an upright hero and a “great and responsible nation”, as proclaimed by the Chinese official media *Global Times*. None of the newspapers ever wrote China was doing the right things at the right time. The above mentioned CEIAS report also showed that approximately 47% of respondents thought China gained economically due to the pandemic; 17% agreed that China’s international reputation improved, while more than 40% agreed that Spain’s foreign policy priority should be

stopping Chinese geopolitical expansion (Turcsanyi et al., 2020), an indication that the depiction of an opportunistic China is well received by readers.

Despite praises about the exceptional performance of the Chinese authoritarian system, skepticism still prevailed. *El Mundo*, *El Periódico* and *ABC* observed that despite the enormous global responsibility assumed by China and the precise timing of its opportunistic moves, the country kept stumbling with its affected domestic economy and quality issues of medical products, and therefore they might use the slogan “great and responsible nation” as a satire, while *El País* was more alert to the expansion of authoritarianism beyond China since it was playing an increasingly influential role in the solution of the global health crisis.

6. Appendix

6.1 Articles in 3.1

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6.2 Articles in 3.2

6.2.1 Articles in 3.2.1

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Notes

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