



## Vaccine narratives in Chinese state media

Politicized “friendships”, national image management, and China as the poor world’s inoculator

By Karl Ståringe, May 2021

- This report identifies and scrutinizes the main narratives that the Chinese propaganda apparatus is spreading about vaccines from China. It is a software-empowered analysis of 12,000 articles in Chinese state media, fact-checking of prominent stories, and decoding of the Communist Party’s terminology.
- The report shows that while China’s vaccine exports vastly outnumber its donations overseas (and China-made vaccines tend to be among the more expensive), state media characterize China as an altruistic provider of vaccines to the world’s poor.
- Meanwhile, Chinese state media downplay concerns that China is trading vaccines for political influence, instead suggesting that other countries—particularly in the West—engage in self-centered “vaccine nationalism”. Moreover, they have raised suspicions about the mRNA technology used in multiple vaccines outside China.

## Introduction

Since the beginning of the pandemic, China has been engaged in a struggle for control over coronavirus narratives.<sup>1</sup> This struggle is still ongoing. The People's Republic of China's (PRC) vast array of state media outlets are striving to shape the global discourse by inserting particular narratives into the debate. They have joined hands with Chinese diplomats on the frontlines of this struggle for narrative dominance, collectively broadcasting messages of the PRC's commitment to international cooperation.<sup>2</sup> Other discernible methods include downplaying failures in China's initial pandemic response, blame-shifting, and pointing out the failures of other countries.<sup>3</sup> In some cases, certain individuals have even amplified conspiracy theories surrounding the origins of the virus.<sup>4</sup> This paper will focus primarily on aspects related to the following narratives:

- 1) **Vaccine nationalism** and **vaccine diplomacy**, centered around PRC narratives of Western prejudice towards Chinese vaccines and allegations of Western politicization of vaccine quality and distribution
- 2) **Chinese innovativeness**, with emphasis on differences in vaccine technology used by Chinese and foreign biotech companies
- 3) **International cooperation**, wherein state media construct an image of the PRC as a future global leader in public health
- 4) The PRC's distribution of vaccines as **global public goods**, a phrase commonly used in official Chinese communication to signify fair distribution of vaccines to developing countries.

## The Chinese vaccine discourse and its main themes: Methodology

This study is based on Chinese state media newspaper articles retrieved from the newspaper database Factiva. From January 1, 2020, to February 28, 2021, Chinese state media published 9,000 Chinese-language articles that contained the word “疫苗” (*yimiao*, vaccine) and 3,000 English-language articles that contained at least one of the words “vaccine(s)”, “vaccinate(s)”, or “vaccination(s)”. The search covered articles from People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency, China Daily, Global Times, and China Central Television (CCTV). The content of the articles was subsequently analyzed through the agile analytics platform Dcipher Analytics. Based on Dcipher, we were able to identify the most frequently recurring words as well as how these words were used in proximity to each other in a body of text.

By subjecting the dataset to a topic modeling operation in Dcipher, the software discerned several clusters of key phrases in the texts. After manually filtering out superfluous metatext, these clusters were analyzed and categorized as several recurring themes. The categorization was based on qualitative examination of the source material—specifically how key terminology and phrasing is connected semantically and contextually. The themes are included in the following bar charts, where each bar reflects the number of times that words and phrases (referred to here as *tokens*) identified within each specific theme are mentioned.

<sup>1</sup> Vanessa Molter and Renee DiResta, “[Pandemics & Propaganda: How Chinese State Media Creates and Propagates CCP Coronavirus Narratives](#)”, Misinformation Review, June 8, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Cui Tiankai, “[中国筑起抗疫长城](#)” [China has erected a Great Wall of disease control], Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, February 28, 2021; Xinhua, “[China vows COVID-19 vaccine at fair, reasonable prices](#)”, Xinhua News Agency, February 4, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, “[Beijing's coronavirus propaganda blitz goes global](#)”, Axios, March 11, 2021; Sui-Lee Wee, “[From Asia to Africa, China Promotes Its Vaccines to Win Friends](#)”, The New York Times, September 11, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Luiza Bandoira, Nika Aleksejeva, Tessa Knight and Jean Le Roux, “[Weaponized: How rumors of Covid-19's origins led to a narrative arms race](#)”, Atlantic Council, February 2, 2021; see also Harvard Kennedy School's special Covid-19 issue (volume 1, issue 3) of Misinformation Review.

Key topics in Chinese state media reporting on vaccines: Chinese-language vs. English-language



Source: Factiva/Dciphcr

The data visualized above shows that there is a high degree of thematic correlation between Chinese- and English-language coverage of vaccines in Chinese state media. Two notable facets discernable here are the dominance of cooperation-related discourse and the existence of a theme which is primarily focused on foreign media and politics, presenting keywords such as “United States,” “European Union,” and “Taiwan,” as well as a selection of verbs and nouns with negative sentiment, such as “oppose” (反对), “attack” (攻击), “lie” (谎言) or “smear” (抹黑). The following table summarizes the themes and includes a selection of key phrases (provided by Dciphcr) that are representative of the news coverage in which they appear. The key phrases have been analyzed to categorize their overarching themes. To clarify, these key phrases are all part of themes that relate to the vaccine discourse as a whole.

Themes in Chinese state media reporting on vaccines – key phrases

Category	Key phrases
International cooperation	Africa, ASEAN, assistance, battle, bilateral, China, community, cooperation, deepen, destiny for mankind, enhance, fight, help, international, multilateralism, public good, solidarity, support, WHO
Vaccine R&D	Clinical trial, corona, development, virus, expert, inactivated vaccine, research, patient, Pfizer, Sinopharm, Sinovac, variant

Economic recovery	Enterprise, guarantee, increase, investment, law, need, policy, refine, reform, service, stable, strengthen
Foreign politics and media (ch), American politics (en)	Accept, America, attack, Biden, criticize, deny, election, EU, media, oppose, politicize, report, ruin, sanction, slander, Taiwan, Trump, the West
Disease spread, control measures	Children, city, distancing, elderly, hospital, inoculation, isolate, lockdown, measure, personnel, public places, school, social, travel, wear facemask
Economy, finance	2019, 2021, donate, Euro, export, hopeful, plan, predict, quarter, show, surpass, USD, Yuan
The Chinese spirit	CCP, Chinese nation, civilization, compatriot, destiny, hardship, health, hero, history, life, motherland, responsibility, spirit, struggle, victory
Economic development	Construct, development, economy, environment, era, future, green, industry, jointly, new, One Belt One Road, open, society, standard, strategy
Disease control within China	Epidemic control and prevention, Hubei, normalize, science, struggle, work, whole country, Wuhan, Xi Jinping—the core of the Central Committee of the CCP
Statistics	Case, case accumulation, cause, death, decrease, increase, restriction, risk, strain, transmission

#### “Vaccine nationalism” and “vaccine diplomacy”

Chinese media outlets strive to amplify the notion that Chinese vaccines are universally accepted. For instance, state media enthusiastically reported that the Presidents of Indonesia and Turkey, Joko Widodo and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, were inoculated with Chinese vaccines in the presence of journalists. Public endorsement of China's domestic vaccines by high-profile individuals such as these is used to legitimize its vaccines on the global stage.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, it was not until January 2021, when Serbia received its first batch of Chinese vaccines that Chinese state media began to direct their narratives of cooperation towards Europe more intensely. This happened in the wake of AstraZeneca's announcement in January that it would not be able to deliver on its promise to distribute vaccines during the first quarter of 2021. On February 2, German chancellor Angela Merkel stated that “[e]very vaccine is welcome in the European Union”, to which nationalist tabloid Global Times reacted, referring to her statement as a step in the right direction for EU-China relations and a move away from “vaccine nationalism”.<sup>6</sup> The Global Times suggested that Merkel's comments would silence the “unjustified nitpicking and slander” of Chinese (and Russian) vaccines and instead move towards strengthening global and equitable distribution of vaccines.<sup>7</sup>

On the opposite side of the spectrum from “vaccine nationalism” is the Chinese state media's talking point that vaccines have no nationalities, mirroring a previous discourse

<sup>5</sup> Lin Ri, Chen Kang and Liu Yupeng, “8 位首脑接种中国疫苗！美媒：中国疫苗成众多发展中国家抗疫最可靠依赖” [Eight heads of state inoculated with Chinese vaccines! American media: Chinese vaccines have become the most dependable way to fight the pandemic for numerous developing countries], Global Times, February 18, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Global Times, “欧盟向中俄疫苗示友好·这是好事” [European Union shows friendliness towards Chinese and Russian vaccines, this is a good thing], Global Times, February 4, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Qing Mu, Zhao Fengying, Zhao Jiaocheng, Wei Hui and Liu Yupeng, “塞尔维亚凭借中俄疫苗“逆袭”令舆论震动·欧盟接连“示友”中俄疫苗” [Serbia relying on Chinese and Russian vaccines to “counterattack” shakes up public opinion, European Union successively “expressing goodwill” towards Chinese and Russian vaccines], Global Times, February 4, 2021.

about how viruses know no borders and will not discriminate based on an individual's country of origin. It is often utilized in tandem with the narrative that vaccines should not be politicized and that countries should refrain from engaging in vaccine diplomacy, i.e. using power over vaccine production and distribution to influence other states with less sway over international politics. Yet despite insisting that vaccines should not be used as diplomatic tools, there have been exceptions to this principle. For example, a Global Times editorial asserted in March 2021 that the US and EU actively engage in "vaccine nationalism", while a senior executive with state-backed drugmaker Sinopharm penned a People's Daily op-ed where he claimed that the PRC's success in controlling the pandemic was proof of the advantages of its political system.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, the PRC has offered to sell the International Olympic Committee (IOC) doses of its domestic vaccine for athletes competing in the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics. And for every purchased dose, the IOC will be able to buy two additional doses to be administered in the population in the athletes' respective countries. This complicates the ongoing debate of a potential boycott of the event by leveraging vaccines during a global vaccine shortage.

Another example of how China is politicizing the discourse about vaccines is the idea of "vaccine passports" being considered around the world. As of April 2021, the PRC is ahead of the US and EU in this effort. The plan is to allow domestic and international travel to resume by having individuals verify their inoculation status with these so-called passports accessible through the WeChat app. However, only Chinese vaccines will qualify.<sup>9</sup> While the Chinese regime rejects what it perceives as egoistic policies by Western governments, requiring inoculation specifically by Chinese vaccines to enter the country fulfills the self-interest of promoting acceptance of China's domestically produced vaccines.

A study by the Alliance for Securing Democracy, a transatlantic advocacy group, found that representatives of the Chinese government and its media outlets focused solely on promoting China's own domestic vaccines, and not vaccines from other countries.<sup>10</sup> There are no indications that Russia and China have promoted each other's vaccines. Nevertheless, their vaccines have, on several occasions, been denoted by Chinese state media as parts of the same "camp", separated from so-called Western vaccines.<sup>11</sup> The term "Chinese and Russian vaccines" (中俄疫苗) has figured prominently in the Chinese edition of the Global Times since September 2020.

### "Chinese innovativeness"

Rivalry between vaccine producers is not only a matter of international competition. A substantial amount of Chinese discourse is focused on the science underpinning the different types of vaccines. China strives to gain international recognition that the quality of its domestically developed vaccines matches, and sometimes even surpasses, those of its competitors. Importantly, they are portrayed as safer than vaccines from Western drugmakers.

As of April 2021, globally there are in total 13 vaccines approved in different jurisdictions for emergency or general use, four of which are developed by Chinese companies.<sup>12</sup> Currently, there are six major Chinese vaccine candidates, two in phase IV

<sup>8</sup> Wang Wenwen, "West 'weaponizes' vaccines to divide world aimed at maintaining hegemony", Global Times, March 15, 2021; Yang Xiaoming, "中国新冠疫苗筑起免疫防线 (新论)" [Chinese corona-vaccines are constructing a defensive line of immunity (new view)], People's Daily, January 29, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Chao Deng, "Traveling to China Just Got Easier—If You Take a Chinese Covid-19 Vaccine", The Wall Street Journal, March 16, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Bret Shafer, Amber Frankland, Nathan Kohlenberg, and Etienne Soula, "Influence-enza: How Russia, China, and Iran have shaped and manipulated coronavirus vaccine narratives", Alliance for Securing Democracy, March 6, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Wang Wenwen, Op.cit.

<sup>12</sup> Jeff Craven, "COVID-19 tracker", Regulatory Affairs Professionals Society, accessed on April 12, 2021.

(being monitored in the wider population after approval) and four in phase III (large-scale international trials to test their impact on Covid-19).

### Chinese vaccines in phase IV and III trials

Producer	Vaccine type	Phase
Sinovac Biotech	Inactivated	IV
Beijing Institute of Biological Products (Sinopharm Group)	Inactivated	IV
Wuhan Institute of Biological Products (Sinopharm Group)	Inactivated	III
CanSino Biologics Inc.	Viral vector	III
Anhui Zhifei Longcom Biopharmaceutical, Institute of Microbiology, Chinese Academy of Sciences	Protein subunit	III
Institute of Medical Biology at the Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences	Inactivated	III

Source: Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance<sup>13</sup>

Notably, there are no Chinese vaccines in use or in late-stage trials that employ RNA technology, the foundation of both the Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna vaccines. The only Chinese vaccine using this technology is being jointly developed by the People's Liberation Army Academy of Military Medical Sciences, Suzhou Abogen Biosciences, and Walvax Biotech. As of March 2021, their vaccine has entered phase II trials.

One of the main contentions between the PRC and other vaccine companies is the public's perception of their vaccines' efficacy and safety. Chinese state media have directed particular attention to the differences between its own inactivated vaccines, and the mRNA vaccines developed by Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna, and also to a certain degree Oxford/AstraZeneca's viral vector vaccine. While staying clear of any disparaging reference to the mRNA technology, Chinese state media tend primarily to highlight the pros of traditional inactivated vaccines.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, as Chinese companies also strive to develop their own mRNA vaccines, there is limited incentive for China to reinforce narratives about their technological drawbacks. As early as April 2020, a Chinese scientific magazine suggested that the efficacy of mRNA vaccines was higher than that of inactivated vaccines, but that they were less safe.<sup>15</sup> This preference of safety over efficacy has been visible in Chinese state media coverage, which directed recommendations to countries to suspend the use of Pfizer/BioNTech's vaccine due to reports of deaths following inoculations in Europe.<sup>16</sup>

Chinese attempts to discredit mRNA may create skepticism toward such vaccines that could be difficult to reverse once it has taken hold. This could mean foregoing future possibilities for domestic companies to be internationally competitive within mRNA. Notably in the PRC, where several scandals in the health sector have set terrifying precedents, many are conscious of the risks of unsafe medical products, not least vaccines.

<sup>13</sup> Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, "The COVID-19 vaccine race – weekly update", gavi.org, accessed on April 12, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Wen Chang, "新冠病毒灭活疫苗和 mRNA 疫苗有何不同?" [What are the differences between inactivated and mRNA corona-vaccines?], People's Daily, January 27, 2021; Global Times, "辉瑞疫苗致挪威多人死亡, 美媒为何沉默?" [Pfizer vaccine causing several Norwegian deaths, why is American media silent?], Global Times, January 15, 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Tao Lina, "新冠疫苗研发五大技术路线全解析" [Complete analysis of the five major coronavirus-vaccine's R&D itineraries], 北京科技报 [Beijing Sci-Tech Report], April 6, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Zhang Hui, "Chinese health experts call to suspend Pfizer's mRNA vaccine for elderly after Norwegian deaths", Global Times, January 15, 2021; Zhang Hui, "Chinese health experts advise Australia to halt approval for Pfizer vaccine following Norwegian deaths", Global Times, January 19, 2021; Global Times, "Danger of mRNA vaccines to elderly under spotlight after 16 deaths in Switzerland", Global Times, February 28, 2021.

In contrast, the Global Times has cited an Ipsos poll from January 2021 which concludes that the Chinese population is one of the most willing to get vaccinated (83 percent, 3<sup>rd</sup> place after Brazil and the UK).<sup>17</sup> Despite these positive results, the poll also showed that Chinese are among the most concerned regarding potential vaccine side-effects (the Global Times report on the poll failed to mention this important finding).

### International cooperation with Chinese characteristics

The Chinese state's approach to vaccine distribution conforms to its view of multilateralism, a type of "multi-bilateralism" that values bilateral partnerships as equally important as international rules-based consensus, or even more important.<sup>18</sup> In other words, China accepts the idea of multilateralism but not the mechanisms by which it is generally practiced. Considering the previous US administration's absence from the COVAX alliance, a multilateral initiative aimed at securing equitable global access to Covid-19 vaccines, Chinese state media continuously amplified messages that the world was facing "catastrophic moral failure" due to unequal vaccine distribution across developed and developing countries. It has also drawn parallels between two prevalent Chinese narratives: that of China's goodwill towards the developing world, and that of the superiority of the PRC's political system.<sup>19</sup> China believes that international politics should strive towards the Chinese version of multilateralism—in CCP parlance a "community of common destiny for mankind" (人类命运共同体).

The term "community" has become prevalent in the Chinese vaccine discourse, with buzzwords such as "community of common health for mankind" (人类卫生健康共同体) and "community of global disease control" (全球抗疫共同体). These catch-phrases for international cooperation relate to all aspects of PRC foreign policy, such as foreign aid, the "Belt and Road Initiative" and its public health component, the "Health Silk Road" (健康丝绸之路). They form a central pillar of Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy and serve as an ideological contrast to the CCP's perception of Western and Indian "vaccine nationalism".

Stemming from its discourse on multilateralism, the most common narrative in Chinese state media coverage of Covid-19 vaccines has been that of Beijing's support for "international cooperation". The larger Chinese narrative on cooperation goes back to the founding of the PRC in 1949 and stresses that cooperation should be "friendly, mutually beneficial, and promote common development".<sup>20</sup> An important aspect of "mutually beneficial" (or "win-win") cooperation is that neither side should interfere in the domestic affairs of its counterpart. In essence, this reciprocity also entails that China's partners should offer Beijing their political support—e.g. by voting with China at the United Nations or refraining from political contacts with Taiwan—and to never openly criticize the Communist Party. In order to comprehend the intentions behind PRC narratives about vaccines, it is crucial to understand how these types of relationships work. By emphasizing its dedication to international cooperation, the PRC is implicitly questioning the commitment of other countries to a fair distribution of vaccines.

Chinese government officials have declared on multiple occasions that the PRC is committed to multilateral cooperation, including through its entry into COVAX. When the PRC announced its membership in the alliance in October 2020, it also declared that

<sup>17</sup> Ipsos, "Attitudes to COVID-19 vaccines [featured at the Davos Agenda 2021]", ipsos.com, January 25, 2021; Global Times, "Chinese people among most willing to be inoculated: Ipsos poll", Global Times, January 26, 2021.

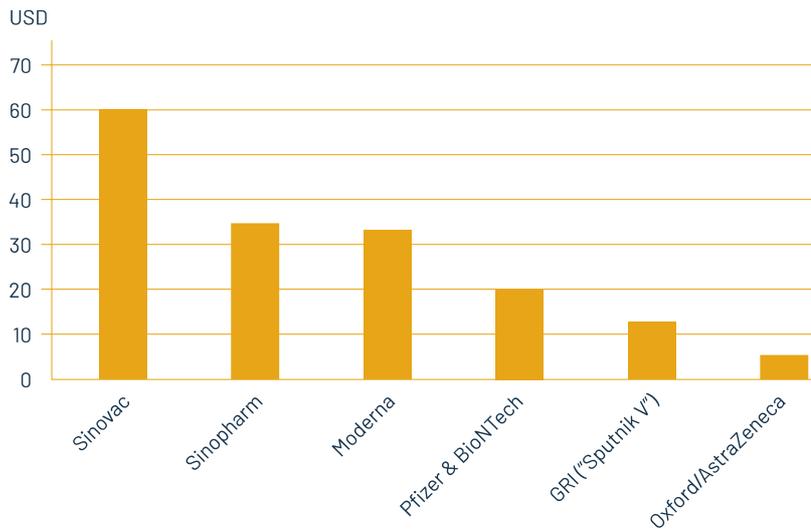
<sup>18</sup> Marina Rudyak, "Multilateralism 多边主义", *The Decoding China Dictionary*, March 4, 2021, pp. 38–40.

<sup>19</sup> Yang Xiaoming, "中国新冠疫苗筑起免疫防线 (新论)" [Chinese corona-vaccines is constructing a defensive line of immunity (new view)], *People's Daily*, January 29, 2021; Tang Bei, "狭隘国际权力观加剧疫苗" 政治化" [Narrow concept of international authority exacerbates vaccine "politicization"], *Global Times*, January 23, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Marina Rudyak, "Cooperation 合作", *The Decoding China Dictionary*, March 4, 2021, pp. 11–12.

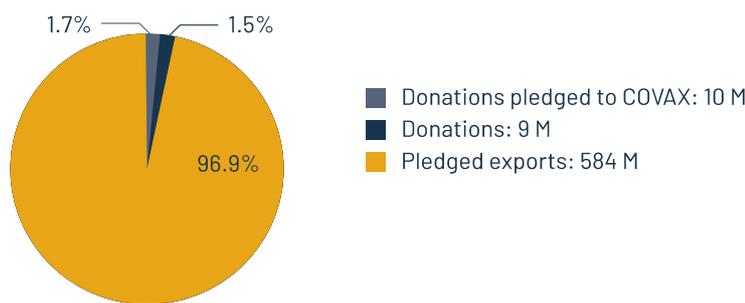
it would be donating 10 million doses of its domestically-produced vaccines. The recipients would be developing countries including those which lacked the ability to independently procure vaccines.<sup>21</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed in March 2021 that China is donating Covid vaccines to 80 countries and exporting vaccines to over 40 countries.<sup>22</sup> The Ministry has previously turned down a request from the Associated Press to obtain the list of countries.<sup>23</sup> Since then, China Global Television Network (CGTN) has published a list of 62 countries receiving vaccine aid from China, referencing publicly available information.<sup>24</sup>

Approximate export prices for Chinese vaccines in an international comparison



Sources: South China Morning Post, Financial Times, BBC, Biospace.<sup>25</sup>

Exports vs donations as share of China's total distribution of vaccines (percent and total amount of doses)

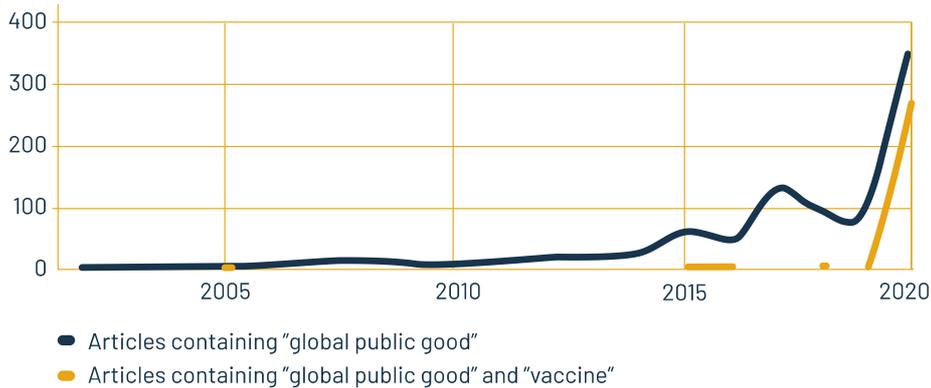


Source: The Diplomat<sup>26</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Leng Shumei and Li Xuanmin, "China joins COVAX, to provide vaccines to developing countries first", Global Times, October 9, 2020.  
<sup>22</sup> Hua Chunying, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on March 30, 2021", Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 30, 2021.  
<sup>23</sup> Huizhong Wu and Kristen Gelineau, "Chinese vaccines sweep most of the world, despite concerns", The Diplomat, March 3, 2021.  
<sup>24</sup> CGTN, "China's vaccine map: Aid more countries with 1st EU GMP certificate", CGTN, April 5, 2021.  
<sup>25</sup> Official information on vaccine pricing is generally not publicly available. This data has not been verified by the author and should therefore be understood as an estimate for prices, which also differ between recipient countries.  
 Jitsiree Thongnoi, "Coronavirus: in Thailand, vaccine inequality fears grow as private hospitals eye p. rofits", South China Morning Post, March 12, 2021; Christian Shepherd, "Doubts overshadow China's pledge to vaccinate developing countries", Financial Times, March 24, 2021; BBC, "Covid: What do we know about China's coronavirus vaccines?" January 14, 2021; Mark Terry, "Comparing COVID-19 Vaccines: Timelines, Types and Prices", BioSpace, Feb 8, 2021.  
<sup>26</sup> Ivana Karásková and Veronika Blablová, "The logic of China's vaccine diplomacy", The Diplomat, March 24, 2021.

In the absence of an official tally of PRC donations and exports, researchers with China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE) compiled an unofficial summary of countries that had received Chinese vaccines, which showed that China's donations were dwarfed by its regular exports of vaccines.<sup>27</sup> The summary concluded that, as of March 17, 2021, available information put the amount of donated doses at 8.9 million (excluding the 10 million doses pledged to COVAX) and pledged exports at 583.8 million doses. A report by the Wall Street Journal in April found that China had exported roughly 200 million doses.<sup>28</sup> For several countries, the extent of Chinese vaccine exports remains unknown.

### Usage of the term "global public good" in all PRC newspapers (Chinese language) 2000 - 2020



Source: China National Knowledge Infrastructure, 中国知网 (CNKI)

#### Chinese vaccines as "global public goods"

In 2020, there was an explosive increase in articles mentioning the term "global public goods" accompanied by the word "vaccine" (see graph above). The sudden increase occurred after a speech by Xi Jinping on May 18, 2020 at the 73<sup>rd</sup> World Health Assembly (WHA) in which he pledged to the world that Chinese vaccines would become "global public goods". The narrative of vaccines as "global public goods" has become even more prevalent in early 2021. According to CNKI, a database of Chinese publications, the term averaged nearly one mention per day in Chinese state media newspapers during 2020. The first ten weeks of 2021 saw approximately two mentions per day. In other words, the term "global public good" (全球公共产品) has become central to Beijing's official vaccine communication.

A "public good" is ordinarily defined as a good that is both non-rival in consumption (i.e. that someone's consumption of the product is not affecting the consumption of others) and non-excludable (i.e. that one's access to the product cannot be prevented by another actor).<sup>29</sup> Vaccines do not currently meet either criterion. Until supply exceeds demand—which can be achieved through increased production—there will be rivalry of consumption. And even when that hurdle is passed, vaccines will be excludable, as intellectual property rights and export regulations enable public and non-public actors to prevent others from accessing any given vaccine.

Vaccines, whether from China or elsewhere, can therefore at best become what in academic terms is called a "club good," in other words something non-rivalrous but excludable. The power to exclude consumption can be used as political leverage, of which

<sup>27</sup> Ivana Karásková and Veronika Blablová, "The logic of China's vaccine diplomacy", *The Diplomat*, March 24, 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Jason Douglas and Kyle Kim, "The Covid-19 Vaccine Club: How the World's Biggest Producers Depend on Each Other", *The Wall Street Journal*, April 30, 2021.

<sup>29</sup> James Love, "The use and abuse of the phrase 'global public good'", *Pandemic Discourses*, July 9, 2020.

there are some signs that China has already attempted. For example, the Paraguayan government reported that it had received offers of Chinese vaccines in exchange for cutting diplomatic ties with Taiwan.<sup>30</sup> Not meeting this requirement would consequently exclude Paraguay from being able to acquire Chinese vaccines.

Despite the prevalence of the term, neither official communication from the Chinese government nor news coverage by state media clarify what a “global public good” actually is, beyond its general meaning as something that should be fairly distributed to benefit the global community.

Chinese foreign aid comes with underlying intentions of reciprocal actions by the recipient, often in terms of political support.<sup>31</sup> Brazil reportedly pleaded with the PRC for doses of its domestically produced vaccines, as it was experiencing its highest levels of Covid-19-related deaths so far. Two weeks after reaching out to Beijing, the Chinese telecom giant Huawei was no longer barred from participating in the upcoming auction to develop Brazil's 5G infrastructure.<sup>32</sup> The New York Times noted that no connection between the two had been proven, but that the timing indicated a quid pro quo.

In the case of Covid-19, individual companies or countries have the power to decide who gets access to its vaccines. Therefore, Beijing's repeated assertion that Chinese vaccines be made global public goods was problematic at the outset, as it is yet to make its domestic vaccines a property of the global community and exclusively free to use. According to a report by Doctors Without Borders the PRC, along with most of the “Global South”, supports a proposal to waive Covid-19 vaccine patent protection.<sup>33</sup> This would require Chinese vaccine companies to openly publish their data, which they have so far not done.

On May 20, 2020, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres issued a statement where he noted that vaccines should be made a global public good. This came merely two days after Xi Jinping made his address at the WHA.<sup>34</sup> Xi took this initiative at a time when the United States was about to exit the WHO while Chinese state media further amplified the message that the PRC was ready and willing to step up to the task of global leadership, arguing that the developing world could count on China to provide equitable access to its vaccines. A key message was that the Trump administration's “America First” rhetoric could be seen as diametrically opposed to that of the PRC.<sup>35</sup>

What has become increasingly clear as vaccine agreements are signed and deliveries surge is that the Chinese government has benefitted from the benevolent connotations that arise from the term “global public good”. Despite the reported dominance of China's vaccine exports, Chinese diplomats and state media emphasize donations of vaccines. For example, in their coverage of Chinese vaccine deliveries to Pakistan, Chinese state media have focused on donations rather than exports—and international media have followed suit.<sup>36</sup> Pakistan was one of the first countries opting to *purchase* Chinese vaccines in December 2020, and also among the first to receive them.<sup>37</sup> The first batch of *donated* vaccines were delivered in February 2021, an event that garnered substantial media attention.

<sup>30</sup> Chris Horton and Ken Parks, “[Paraguay says Chinese vaccine offers tied to dumping Taiwan](#)”, Bloomberg, March 24, 2021.

<sup>31</sup> Marina Rudyak, “Cooperation 合作”, [The Decoding China Dictionary](#), March 4, 2021, pp. 11–12.

<sup>32</sup> Ernesto Londoño and Leticia Casado, “[Brazil need vaccines. China is profiting](#)”, The New York Times, March 15, 2021.

<sup>33</sup> Doctors Without Borders, “[Countries obstructing COVID-19 patent waiver must allow negotiations to start](#)”, Médecins Sans Frontières, March 9, 2021.

<sup>34</sup> Pan Zhaoyi, “[Chinese vaccines will be made global public good, says Xi](#)”, China Global Television Network, May 19, 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Hua Song, “中美疫苗：公共产品 VS “美国优先” [Chinese and American vaccines: public good VS “America First”], Global Times, August 19, 2020.

<sup>36</sup> Xinhua, “[Pakistan kicks off COVID-19 inoculations with Chinese vaccines](#)”, Xinhua News Agency, February 2, 2021; Eleanor Albert, “[China gifts Pakistan 1.2 million COVID-19 vaccine doses](#)”, The Diplomat, February 4, 2021.

<sup>37</sup> Xinhua, “[Pakistan to purchase vaccine from China's Sinopharm: health authority](#)”, Xinhua News Agency, December 31, 2020.



[Tweet](#) by China's ambassador to Pakistan, Nong Rong, emphasizing Chinese donations of vaccines.

### Concluding remarks

While China seeks to improve its international image, its vaccine-producing companies strive to conquer new markets and increase revenue, drivers that are reinforcing one another. The PRC envisions itself as a future global leader in public health, with a strong position for its companies in biotech markets in Europe and elsewhere. Consequently, the Chinese state's interest in promoting drugmakers such as Sinovac, Sinopharm, and CanSino will not diminish as the pandemic slowly abates.

Knowledge of CCP terminology, narratives, and political discourse in general is crucial to our understanding of China's ambitions as a future global superpower. Beijing's outlook on vaccine-related diplomacy cannot be understood by taking phrases such as "international cooperation" or "global public good" at face value; they need to be decoded and analyzed to gain a firm grasp on their implications. This process is important for both public and private actors that engage with China as these concepts affect policymaking on all levels. 📖