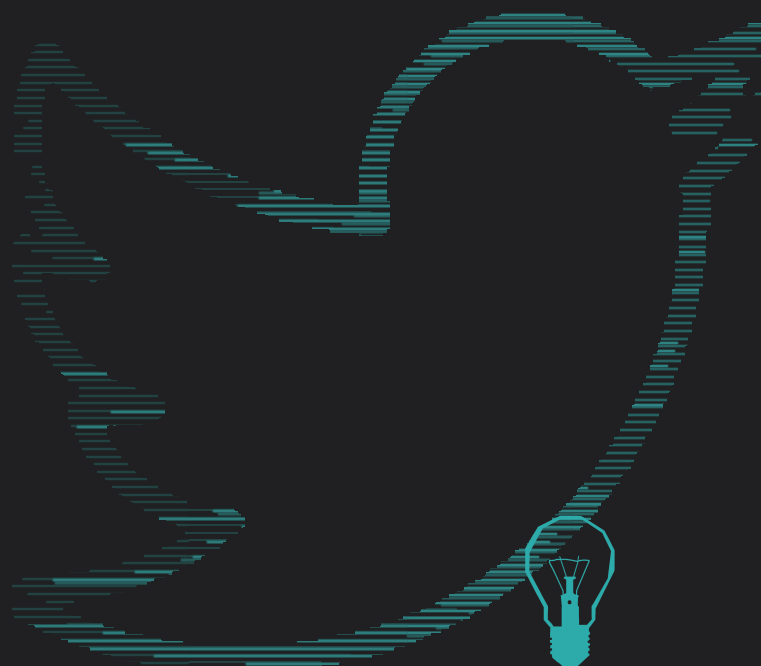


# Face Masks and Cheap Fakes: China's Italian Twitter Campaign

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NextGen 5.0 is a pioneering non-profit, independent, and virtual think tank committed to inspiring and empowering the next generation of peace and security leaders in order to build a more secure and prosperous world.

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As Covid-19 ruthlessly spread across Europe and the rest of the world, so did China's public relations/ propaganda campaign on Western social media (especially on Twitter), in an effort to shape and manipulate the global perception of China and its role in the Covid-19 pandemic. Unleashing its army of *Twiplomats*,<sup>1</sup> China has been trying to push pro-Chinese narratives, fighting American counternarratives – sometimes with amusing Lego-style content<sup>2</sup> – spreading disinformation, and praising the Chinese *modus operandi* during the pandemic, often criticizing other countries.<sup>3</sup> In an economically and politically challenged European Union, China promoted itself as a reliable partner at the expense of the concept of European solidarity.<sup>4</sup> In this context, Italy's dramatic situation (Italy was the first Western and first European country to face a dramatic Covid-19 outbreak) and the initially slow incoming support from the country's traditional allies and partners, provided China with a fertile ground to test its Twitter efforts to project its "sharp power."<sup>5</sup>

## CHINA'S "TWIPLOMATS"

While Western social media platforms are banned in China, the Chinese government has understood their value – Twitter especially – in helping control the Chinese narrative on the international stage by shaping global public perception. With the 2019 protests in Hong Kong,

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<sup>1</sup> Landale, James, "Coronavirus: China's new army of tough-talking diplomats," BBC News, May 13, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-52562549>

<sup>2</sup> Ambassade de Chine en France (@AmbassadeChine), "Once Upon a Virus...", Twitter, April 30, 2020, <https://twitter.com/AmbassadeChine/status/1255873178632687622?s=20>


<sup>3</sup> France 24, "China denies criticising France's response to Covid-19 crisis," France 24, April 15, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200415-china-denies-criticising-france-s-response-to-covid-19-crisis>

<sup>4</sup> EUvsDisinfo, "EEAS Special Report Update: Short Assessment of Narratives and Disinformation Around the Covid-19/Coronavirus Pandemic (Updated 2 – 22 April)," EUvsDisinfo, April 24, 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-update-2-22-april/>

<sup>5</sup> Walker, Christopher. "What Is 'Sharp Power'?" *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (2018): 9-23. doi:10.1353/jod.2018.0041.

China began strengthening its Twitter presence,<sup>6</sup> building an actual Twitter propaganda machine not only with fake and hijacked accounts,<sup>7</sup> but with a team of Chinese diplomats, embassies, and consulates<sup>8</sup> scattered worldwide that have taken their presence on Twitter on a public diplomacy mission to “tell China stories well.”<sup>9</sup>

Of the accounts of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) officials that have joined the platform in the past year, of particular interest in the context of the current global health crisis are the following:

| Name/Description   | Twitter Handle          | Verified  | Joined In      |
|--|-------------------------|--|----------------|
| PRC Embassy in the United States   | @ChineseEmbinUS         | Yes  | 06/2019        |
| Cui Tiankai, PRC Ambassador to the United States   | @AmbCuiTiankai          | Yes  | 06/2019        |
| PRC Embassy in Poland  | @ChinaEmbPoland         | No   | 07/2019        |
| PRC Embassy in France  | @AmbassadeChine         | Yes  | 08/2019        |
| Li Xiaosi, PRC Ambassador to Austria   | @li_xiaosi              | Yes  | 09/2019        |
| PRC Embassy in Spain   | @ChinaEmbEsp            | Yes  | 09/2019        |
| PRC Embassy in Venezuela   | @Emb_ChinaVen           | No   | 09/2019        |
| Chang Hua, PRC Ambassador to Iran  | @AmbChangHua            | No   | 10/2019        |
| Liu Xiaoming, PRC Ambassador to the United Kingdom   | @AmbLiuXiaoMing         | Yes  | 10/2019        |
| PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs  | @MFA_China              | Yes  | 10/2019        |
| <b>Hua Chunying, Spokesperson and Director General, Department of Information, MFA PRC</b>                                   | <b>@SpokespersonCHN</b> | <b>Yes</b>   | <b>10/2019</b> |
| PRC Embassy in Hungary   | @ChineseEmbinHU         | Yes  | 10/2019        |
| PRC Embassy in the UK  | @ChineseEmbinUK         | Yes  | 11/2019        |
| Zhang Ping, PRC Consul General in Los Angeles  | @CGZhangPingLA          | Yes  | 11/2019        |
| Xu Hong, PRC Ambassador to the Netherlands   | @PRCAmbNL               | No   | 11/2019        |
| PRC Embassy in Germany   | @ChinaEmbGermany        | Yes  | 12/2019        |
| Cao Zhongming, PRC Ambassador to Belgium   | @ChinaAmbBelgium        | No   | 12/2019        |
| Liao Liqiang, PRC Ambassador to Egypt  | @AmbLiaoLiqiang         | Yes  | 12/2019        |
| PRC Embassy in Finland   | @ChinaEmbFinland        | No   | 12/2019        |
| PRC Embassy in Austria   | @chinaembaustralia      | Yes  | 01/2020        |
| Zhao Qinghua, PRC Consul General in Zurich   | @Dr_ZhaoQinghua         | Yes  | 02/2020        |
| Wang Kejan, PRC Ambassador to Lebanon  | @ChinainLebanon         | Yes  | 02/2020        |
| PRC Embassy in Ireland   | @ChinaEmbIreland        | No   | 02/2020        |
| Huang Xingyuan, PRC Ambassador to Cyprus   | @Ambassador Huang       | No   | 02/2020        |
| Chen Bo, PRC Ambassador to Serbia  | @AmbChenBo              | No   | 03/2020        |
| PRC Embassy in Cuba  | @EmbChinaCuba           | No   | 03/2020        |
| Hu Zhaoming, Spokesperson & Director General, Bureau of Public Information and Communication, International Department, CCP* | @SpokespersonH2M        | No   | 04/2020        |

\*This account differs from the others as it belongs to the Chinese Communist Party and *not* the Chinese Government.

<sup>6</sup> Zhao Alexandre Huang, Rui Wang. Building a Network to “Tell China Stories Well”: Chinese Diplomatic Communication Strategies on Twitter. International Journal of Communication, University of Southern California, Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism, 2019, 13, pp.2984 - 3007. fhalshs-02169217f

<sup>7</sup> Kao, Jeff, Shiang Li, Mia, “How China Built a Twitter Propaganda Machine Then Let It Loose on Coronavirus,” ProPublica, March 26, 2020, <https://www.propublica.org/article/how-china-built-a-twitter-propaganda-machine-then-let-it-loose-on-coronavirus>

<sup>8</sup> Feng, Zhaoyin, “China and Twitter: The year China got louder on social media,” BBC News, December 29, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-50832915>

<sup>9</sup> Zhao Alexandre Huang, Rui Wang. Building a Network to “Tell China Stories Well”: Chinese Diplomatic Communication Strategies on Twitter. International Journal of Communication, University of Southern California, Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism, 2019, 13, pp.2984 - 3007. fhalshs-02169217f

Twitter seems to have actually provided support to set up these officials' Twitter presence,<sup>10</sup> for example, by supplying their accounts with the coveted blue verified badge: the verification program has been paused since 2017 due to the confusion that surrounded it,<sup>11</sup> but the platform has been making exceptions for the sake of advancing the global, public conversation.<sup>12</sup> For example, Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte joined Twitter in May 2018 and received the badge, so did young activist Greta Thunberg who joined Twitter in June 2018, or the City of Chicago who joined the platform in January 2020.

Social media platforms find themselves in the difficult position of arbitrating content and fighting disinformation, while guaranteeing the free expression of diverse opinions. This becomes even more difficult when the actors in question are political figures and world leaders. On the matter, Twitter has stated that "Blocking a world leader from Twitter or removing their controversial Tweets would hide important information people should be able to see and debate,"<sup>13</sup> clearly stating that public-interest exceptions are made if the content "directly contributes to understanding or discussion of a matter of public concern"<sup>14</sup> even when content violates the platform's rules.<sup>15</sup> While Twitter has taken further action to face the Covid-19 pandemic by adopting measures that promote reliable information, label misleading information as such, and protect the public conversation,<sup>16</sup> exceptions still exist which leave an easily exploitable grey area.

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<sup>10</sup> Banjo, Shelly, Frier, Sarah, "Twitter Helps Beijing Push Agenda Abroad Despite Ban in China," Bloomberg, August 21, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-08-21/twitter-helps-china-push-agenda-abroad-despite-ban-in-mainland>

<sup>11</sup> Lecher, Colin, "Twitter pauses verification process after controversy over Charlottesville organizer," The Verge, November 9, 2017, <https://www.theverge.com/2017/11/9/16628290/twitter-jason-kessler-charlottesville-verification>

<sup>12</sup> Twitter Inc., "World Leaders on Twitter," Twitter Inc. Blog, January 5, 2018, [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2018/world-leaders-and-twitter.html](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2018/world-leaders-and-twitter.html)

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Twitter, "About public-interest exceptions on Twitter," Twitter Help Center, <https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/public-interest>

<sup>15</sup> Twitter, "The Twitter Rules," Twitter Help Center, <https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/twitter-rules>

<sup>16</sup> Twitter Inc., "Coronavirus: Staying safe and informed on Twitter" Twitter Blog, April 3, 2020, [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2020/covid-19.html](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/covid-19.html)

On the other hand, it must be noted that Twitter – as well as other platforms – have been working against fake, automated accounts believed to be connected to state-backed information operations:<sup>17</sup> this was the case for about 200,000 accounts originating from within the PRC between July - September 2019 during the protests in Hong Kong.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps we will see similar actions in the coming months, given that new swarms of accounts have emerged,<sup>19</sup> amplifying Beijing's voice in the current global narrative battle, although it is still unclear whether the Chinese government is behind them.<sup>20</sup>

## CHINA'S OBJECTIVES

Having fought the pandemic before others, China used its temporal advantage by sending aid to countries in distress and launching a massive public relations/propaganda campaign to shape perceptions by exploiting political tensions and the void in global leadership created by the crisis. Pushing two macro-narratives aimed at domestic and international audiences (on Chinese and Western social media respectively), China has been seeking to be seen and portrayed as a victor and solidarity champion, rather than a mere survivor of the pandemic, and has been attempting to sow confusion on the origin of the outbreak and deflect the blame. The Chinese government, in fact, has been facing domestic and international criticism for the growing

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<sup>17</sup> Twitter, "Information Operations," Twitter Transparency Report, <https://transparency.twitter.com/en/information-operations.html>

<sup>18</sup> Twitter Safety, "Information operations directed at Hong Kong," Twitter Inc. Blog, August 19, 2020, [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2019/information\\_operations\\_directed\\_at\\_Hong\\_Kong.html](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/information_operations_directed_at_Hong_Kong.html)

<sup>19</sup> Zhong, Raymond, Krolik, Aaron, Mozur, Paul, Bergman, Ronen, Wong, Edward, "Behind China's Twitter Campaign, a Murky Supporting Chorus," The New York Times, June 8, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/08/technology/china-twitter-disinformation.html>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



reports<sup>21</sup> of an initial attempt to cover up the outbreak<sup>22</sup> by censoring Chinese social media and silencing whistle-blowing doctors,<sup>23</sup> and has been disputing that Covid-19 originated in China which, however, seems to be confirmed by phylogeny.<sup>24</sup>

China's *Twiplomats* – spearheaded by Hua Chunying, Spokesperson and Director General of the Department of Information of the PRC's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Lijian Zhao,<sup>25</sup> Spokesperson & Deputy Director General of the same department (who joined Twitter in 2010 as @zlj517) – have been on the frontlines of this campaign. They have been actively sharing pro-Chinese content (the essence of public diplomacy), reacting to President Trump's use of the terms "Wuhan virus" or "Chinese virus," and the shameful wave of anti-Chinese discrimination and racism triggered by the crisis, of which there have been instances in Italy as well. They have been pushing the idea that China's transparency and endeavor to combat the epidemic bought the rest of the world time,<sup>26</sup> highlighting the successes of its crisis management model. They have been sharing China's well-advertised *donations* of medical supplies as facemasks, testing kits, or ventilators

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<sup>21</sup> Allen-Ebrahimian, Bethany, "Timeline: The early days of China's coronavirus outbreak and cover-up," Axios, March 18, 2020, <https://www.axios.com/timeline-the-early-days-of-chinas-coronavirus-outbreak-and-cover-up-ee65211a-afb6-4641-97b8-353718a5faab.html>

<sup>22</sup> Dotson, John, "The State Response to a Mystery Viral Outbreak in Central China," Jamestown Foundation, January 17, 2020, [https://jamestown.org/program/the-state-response-to-a-mystery-viral-outbreak-in-central-china/?mc\\_cid=75572b67c0&mc\\_eid=67780830df](https://jamestown.org/program/the-state-response-to-a-mystery-viral-outbreak-in-central-china/?mc_cid=75572b67c0&mc_eid=67780830df)

<sup>23</sup> Ruan, Lotus, Knockle, Jeffrey, Crete-Nishihata, Masashi, "Censored Contagion. How Information on the Coronavirus is Managed on Chinese Social Media," The Citizen Lab, March 3, 2020, <https://citizenlab.ca/2020/03/censored-contagion-how-information-on-the-coronavirus-is-managed-on-chinese-social-media/>

<sup>24</sup> NextStrain, "Genomic epidemiology of novel coronavirus - Global subsampling," NextStrain, <https://nextstrain.org/ncov/global?branchLabel=aa&p=full>

<sup>25</sup> Smith, Ben, "Meet The Chinese Diplomat Who Got Promoted For Trolling The US On Twitter," BuzzFeed, December 2, 2019, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/bensmith/zhao-lijian-china-twitter>

<sup>26</sup> Spokesperson发言人办公室 (@MFA\_China), "China has been updating the WHO & other countries including the US on #COVID19 in an open, transparent & timely manner. China's endeavor to combating the epidemic has bought time for int'l preparedness. Our contribution is there for all to see. @WHO," Twitter, March 9, 2020, [https://twitter.com/MFA\\_China/status/1237000481219571713](https://twitter.com/MFA_China/status/1237000481219571713)

arriving at airports worldwide, showing the country's production capabilities for this in-demand equipment, and presenting China as a self-less and reliable partner of first resort. But such accounts have also gone as far as sharing doctored content such as cheap fakes or spreading disinformation like conspiracy theories suggesting that Covid-19 was brought to Wuhan by the U.S. Army.<sup>27</sup> It must be noted that in this battle of narratives, the U.S. government has also pushed false claims, such as that suggesting that Covid-19 originated in a laboratory in Wuhan.<sup>28</sup>

Scrolling through these official Twitter accounts, one can notice how the content varies in language and is tailored depending on the audience and target nation, but that it is ultimately similar across all accounts, pushing the same narratives in a seemingly coordinated manner. Content from accounts like those of Hua Chunying and Lijian Zhao, or content shared by Chinese state-media outlets as *China Xinhua News*, *People's Daily*, *China*, *Global Times*, or *CGTN* is meticulously retweeted by the *Twiplomats* and an army of bots,<sup>29</sup> creating coordinated echo chambers across the platform. Nevertheless, some accounts are more active or *aggressive* than others,<sup>30</sup> indicating a certain degree of "strategic" independence (or maybe lack of "strategic" cohesion).

In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, the world has witnessed China's Twitter propaganda machine at work, especially in Italy.

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<sup>27</sup> Lijian Zhao 赵立坚 (@zlj517), "2/2 CDC was caught on the spot. When did patient zero begin in US? How many people are infected? What are the names of the hospitals? It might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan. Be transparent! Make public your data! US owe us an explanation!" Twitter, March 12, 2020, <https://twitter.com/zlj517/status/1238111898828066823>

<sup>28</sup> Sanger, David E., "Pompeo Ties Coronavirus to China Lab, Despite Spy Agencies' Uncertainty," *The New York Times*, May 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/03/us/politics/coronavirus-pompeo-wuhan-china-lab.html>

<sup>29</sup> Bechis, Francesco, Carrer, Gabriele, "How China unleashed Twitter bots to spread COVID-19 propaganda in Italy," *Formiche*, March 31, 2020, <https://formiche.net/2020/03/china-unleashed-twitter-bots-covid19-propaganda-italy/>

<sup>30</sup> Martin, Peter, Li, Jing, "Rare Spat Between Chinese Diplomats Signals Split Over Trump," *Bloomberg*, March 22, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-23/china-s-top-envoy-to-u-s-breaks-with-foreign-ministry-on-virus>

## CHINA'S ITALIAN TWITTER PROPAGANDA CAMPAIGN: A CASE STUDY

Within China's global propaganda efforts, Italy offered a unique operational environment.

Italy was the first Western and first European country to face a dramatic Covid-19 outbreak and, regrettably, did not receive much initial solidarity from its historical allies and European partners, some of which, for example, blocked the much-needed export of facemasks.<sup>31</sup> Once other European member states began experiencing serious outbreaks, European solidarity started to kick in. While the help received hasn't been too little (Germany and Austria, for example, have flown Italian patients in need of intensive care to their hospitals), it was perhaps, too late in terms of optics, especially given the lack of an effective communication strategy to complement this mobilization,<sup>32</sup> and provide a strong counternarrative. In a recent blog post,<sup>33</sup> the High Representative of the European Union, Josep Borrell, highlighted this shortcoming and the "need to defend Europe against its detractors [...] with facts" in the current global battle of narratives, and a much debated<sup>34</sup> European External Action Service report<sup>35</sup> confirmed Chinese (and Russian) disinformation efforts to the detriment of the European Union.

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<sup>31</sup> Hall, Ben, Johnson, Miles, Arnold, Martin, "Italy wonders where Europe's solidarity is as coronavirus strains show," Financial Times, March 13, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/d3bc25ea-652c-11ea-b3f3-fe4680ea68b5>

<sup>32</sup> Ghiretti, Francesca, "China, Italy and COVID-19: Benevolent Support or Strategic Surge?," IAI, March 26, 2020, <https://www.iai.it/it/pubblicazioni/china-italy-and-covid-19-benevolent-support-or-strategic-surge>

<sup>33</sup> [https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/76401/eu-hrvp-josep-borrell-coronavirus-pandemic-and-new-world-it-creating\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/76401/eu-hrvp-josep-borrell-coronavirus-pandemic-and-new-world-it-creating_en)

<sup>34</sup> Borrell, Josep EU HRVP "The Coronavirus pandemic and the new world it is creating," Delegation of the European Union to China, March 24, 2020, [https://eeas.europa.eu/topics/countering-disinformation/78074/disinformation-%E2%80%93-media-coverage-alleged-influence\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/topics/countering-disinformation/78074/disinformation-%E2%80%93-media-coverage-alleged-influence_en)

<sup>35</sup> EUvsDisinfo, "EEAS SPECIAL REPORT UPDATE: SHORT ASSESSMENT OF NARRATIVES AND DISINFORMATION AROUND THE COVID-19/CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC (UPDATED 2 – 22 APRIL)," EUvsDisinfo, April 24, 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-update-2-22-april/>

Given the tragic unfolding of events in Italy, its need for medical supplies, the tense relationship with its E.U. partners, and a mounting anti-European feeling in response, Italy represented a fertile ground for China's information campaign to project its "sharp power." Italy's recent politics and relationship with China have also been facilitating factors. Since 2018, the Five Star Movement –a main proponent in the Italian political landscape for an intensification of ties with China<sup>36</sup> – has been part of Italy's governing coalition. The party and its former political leader, Luigi Di Maio,<sup>37</sup> have played an active and crucial role in strengthening bilateral relations with China: as Minister of Economic Development, in fact, Di Maio was one of the institutional architects behind Italy's signing of a non-binding MoU in March 2019 (re: Silk Road).<sup>38</sup> Italy became the first G7 country to take such a step, raising some concerns among Italy's Western allies and partners, despite the fact that Chinese investments pervade all European economies<sup>39</sup> and that the memorandum was drafted in accordance with European standards.<sup>40</sup>

In a March 24 interview,<sup>41</sup> now Minister of Foreign Affairs Di Maio took the opportunity to gloat about how Italy's much criticized decision to invest in its friendship with China (the aforementioned MoU) was

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<sup>36</sup> De Maio, Giovanna, "PLAYING WITH FIRE. Italy, China, and Europe," Brookings, May 2020, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/FP\\_20200519\\_playing\\_with\\_fire.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/FP_20200519_playing_with_fire.pdf)

<sup>37</sup> Perrone, Manuela, "Di Maio lascia la guida dei Cinque Stelle: «Rifondiamoci, al nostro interno i peggiori nemici». Crimi reggente," *Il Sole 24 Ore*, January 22, 2020, <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/di-maio-comunica-sue-dimissioni-crimi-reggente-m5s-ACe77XDB>

<sup>38</sup> Ministero dello Sviluppo Economico, "Italia-Cina: Di Maio firma tre Memorandum d'intesa su Belt and Road Initiative, E-Commerce e Startup," Ministero dello Sviluppo Economico, March 23, 2019, <https://www.mise.gov.it/index.php/it/per-i-media/notizie/2039474-italia-cina-di-maio-firma-tre-memorandum-d-intesa-su-belt-and-road-initiative-e-commerce-e-startup>

<sup>39</sup> Zeneli, Valbona, "Mapping China's Investments in Europe," *The Diplomat*, March 14, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/mapping-chinas-investments-in-europe/>

<sup>40</sup> European Union External Action, "EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation," [http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/china/docs/eu-china\\_2020\\_strategic\\_agenda\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/china/docs/eu-china_2020_strategic_agenda_en.pdf)

<sup>41</sup> M5sParlamento, "Luigi Di Maio ospite a TG2 Post Rai 2 24 03 2020," YouTube, March 24, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0W7JRf6qaog>

paying off, showing gratitude for the provision of facemasks and ventilators. These comments and Di Maio's initial propensity to primarily highlight China's generous efforts have definitely had an enabling effect on China's narrative in Italy, but they've also ignited criticism from other parties.<sup>42</sup> In fact, Italy's political spectrum includes the Democratic Party, which has compensated for Di Maio's remarks by actively emphasizing and reiterating Italy's historical alliances;<sup>43</sup> and the Lega's Matteo Salvini, who shared a 2015 (real) video that fed into the conspiracy theory on the laboratory origin of the virus in Wuhan, and who stated that if China did initially cover up the outbreak, then it has committed a crime against humanity.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, there has been a widespread concern from across the political spectrum for China's possible ulterior strategic motives: to this point, Italy has put her hands forward and empowered the country's "Golden Power Law" to further "protect strategic assets of companies active in key sectors of the Italian economy."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Grignetti, Francesco, "Aiuti cinesi, lite tra Pd e M5S per le parole di Luigi Di Maio. "Sbilanciato". "No, ringrazia tutti"" La Stampa, March 25, 2020, <https://www.lastampa.it/esteri/2020/03/25/news/aiuti-cinesi-lite-tra-pd-e-m5s-per-le-parole-di-luigi-di-maio-sbilanciato-no-ringrazia-tutti-1.38635468>

<sup>43</sup> Cristiani, Dario, "China's Charm Offensive Meets Italy's Euro-Atlantic Resilience," The German Marshall Fund of the United States, June 9, 2020, <https://www.gmfus.org/blog/2020/06/09/chinas-charm-offensive-meets-italys-euro-atlantic-resilience>

<sup>44</sup> Corriere della Sera, "Coronavirus, Salvini: «Se la Cina sapeva ha commesso crimine»" Corriere della Sera Video, March 26, 2020, <https://video.corriere.it/politica/coronavirus-salvini-se-cina-sapeva-ha-commesso-crimine/1d5cc730-6f56-11ea-b81d-2856ba22fce7>

<sup>45</sup> Chiomenti, "Foreign Direct Investments Screening. Italy expands its "golden powers" to new key sectors," Chiomenti, 2020, <https://www.chiomenti.net/public/files/3246/Newsalert-Foreign-Direct-Investments-Screening---Italy-expands-its-golden-powers-to-new-key-sectors.pdf>

## CHINA'S TWITTER TACTICS AND NARRATIVE

With the news of the Covid-19 outbreak in China, Italy and other European countries (including Germany, France, and Britain) <sup>46</sup> demonstrated solidarity by shipping supplies. Italian help also came from many companies, smaller entrepreneurs,<sup>47</sup> sister cities,<sup>48</sup> and non-profits.

When, weeks later, Italy became the party in need, China reciprocated the help received. However, while delivering aid to Italy, China managed to frame and spin facts to better fit its desired narrative through PR efforts equipped with ad hoc vignettes, slogans, and hashtags like *#ForzaCinaeItalia* (Come on China and Italy).

Between February 24 and mid-April, most of the content posted on the Twitter account of the PRC Embassy in Italy (@AmbCina – account that was created in 2018) focused on Chinese donations and help to Italy: donations of supplies and equipment from the Chinese Government, Chinese cities with sister city relations, Chinese companies,<sup>49</sup> and Chinese communities in Italy have been scrupulously reported on @AmbCina. When comparing the content posted by @AmbCina to that posted by the account of the Italian Embassy in China (@ItalyinChina), one notices the lack of display of the many Italian donations to China: while there is nothing wrong with flaunting

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<sup>46</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Daily Briefing Online on February 7, 2020," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, February 7, 2020, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/t1742022.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1742022.shtml)

<sup>47</sup> Gonews.it, "Firenze aiuta la Cina: donate 250mila mascherine grazie a un gruppo di imprenditori," Gonews.it, February 15, 2020, <https://www.gonews.it/2020/02/15/firenze-aiuta-la-cina-donate-250mila-mascherine-grazie-a-un-gruppo-di-imprenditori/>

<sup>48</sup> Città di Asti, "Comunicati Stampa Città di Asti. Solidarietà alla Cina," Città di Asti, February 11, 2020, [http://www.comune.asti.it/index.php?id\\_oggetto=10&id\\_doc=15627&id\\_sez\\_ori=0&template\\_ori=9](http://www.comune.asti.it/index.php?id_oggetto=10&id_doc=15627&id_sez_ori=0&template_ori=9)

<sup>49</sup> Ambasciata Repubblica Popolare Cinese in Italia (@AmbCina), "La multinazionale delle telecomunicazioni @ZTEPress ha donato all'Italia 5 respiratori per la terapia intensiva. Gli apparecchi sono arrivati alla Protezione Civile con un volo cargo dalla #Cina e destinat al centro #Covid19 di Napoli. #ForzaCinaeItalia," March 23, 2020, <https://twitter.com/AmbCina/status/1242136603855745033>

donations, in this case one can only talk about a missed communications opportunity for Italy.<sup>50</sup><sup>51</sup><sup>52</sup><sup>53</sup> While the solidarity is undisputed, one can't help but also notice some targeted donations by state-backed enterprises with strategic interests: telecom firm ZTE,<sup>54</sup> which opened a 5G research and innovation center in the city of L'Aquila (home to a high-tech business incubator) donated ventilators, and Genoa and Trieste, two port-cities eyed for the Belt Road Initiative, received facemasks by the Cosco Shipping Corporation<sup>55</sup> and the China Communication Construction Company respectively.<sup>56</sup>

Furthermore, among these donations were also facemasks and equipment purchased by the Italian government<sup>57</sup> that were not clearly labeled as such when posted on Twitter. While some Italian journalists

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<sup>50</sup> Stamp Toscana, "250mila mascherine per la Cina grazie a un gruppo di imprenditori cinesi e fiorentini," Stamp Toscana, February 15, 2020, <https://www.stamptoscana.it/250mila-mascherine-per-la-cina-grazie-a-un-gruppo-di-imprenditori-cinesi-e-fiorentini/>

<sup>51</sup> Gonews.it, "Cina chiama e Lucca risponde: Comune e Confindustria Toscana Nord in aiuto contro il Coronavirus," Gonews.it, February 9, 2020, <https://www.gonews.it/2020/02/09/cina-chiama-e-lucca-risponde-comune-e-confindustria-toscana-nord-in-aiuto-contro-il-coronavirus/>

<sup>52</sup> Torino Oggi, "Coronavirus, da Torino 400mila maschere per aiutare le aziende cinesi in difficoltà," Torino Oggi, February 21, 2020, <http://www.torinoggi.it/2020/02/21/leggi-notizia/argomenti/attualita-8/articolo/coronavirus-da-torino-400mila-maschere-per-aiutare-le-aziende-cinesi-in-difficolta.html>

<sup>53</sup> La Nazione, Prato, "Coronavirus, il Rotary manda in Cina 18mila mascherine," La Nazione, Prato, February 6, 2020, <https://www.lanazione.it/prato/cronaca/mascherine-coronavirus-1.5016995>

<sup>54</sup> ZTE, "ZTE IN CAMPO PER L'ITALIA: donati alla Protezione Civile Nazionale 5 respiratori per la terapia intensiva," March 23, 2020, <http://www.zteitalia.it/2020/03/23/zte-in-campo-per-litalia-donati-alla-protezione-civile-nazionale-5-respiratori-per-la-terapia-intensiva/>

<sup>55</sup> La Stampa, "Arrivate in Liguria le 50 mila mascherine donate da Cosco di Shanghai," La Stampa, March 19, 2020, <https://www.lastampa.it/savona/2020/03/19/news/arrivate-in-liguria-le-50-mila-mascherine-donate-da-cosco-di-shanghai-1.38612243>

<sup>56</sup> Saracino, Zeno, "La CCCC (Cina) dona 10mila mascherine per il Porto di Trieste," Trieste All News, March 21, 2020, <https://www.triesteallnews.it/2020/03/21/la-cccc-cina-dona-10mila-mascherine-per-il-porto-di-trieste/>

<sup>57</sup> Protezione Civile, "Emergenza Coronavirus. Contratti attivati dal Dipartimento della Protezione Civile per l'acquisto di dispositivi di protezione individuale, medicali e di ausilio," <https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrljoiNzA1YmQ0NDctYzY3ZC00ZTIkLW11MTQtMTNmNTEwNWY3NjM4IiwidCI6IjIhMDZhOTA3LTA2OTUtNDA0YS05NmY4LTRhMWU5YTJmYjQxZCIsImMiOiJ9>

have raised the issue,<sup>58</sup> Italian authorities on Twitter have not put much effort in setting the record straight by classifying shipments on their Twitter posts. While ambiguity is not sanctionable behavior, it is a further element that – unchallenged – has enabled China’s narrative.

It does, however, get more problematic when Chinese media and officials spread disinformation.

When, on March 19, Dr. Giuseppe Remuzzi, Director of the Pharmacological Research Institute Mario Negri, was interviewed by NPR, he said that “practitioners remember having seen very strange pneumonia, very severe, particularly in old people in December and even November [...] This means that the virus was circulating, at least in [the northern region of] Lombardy and before we were aware of this outbreak occurring in China.”<sup>59</sup> This statement, which did not indicate that the virus originated in Italy as opposed to China, was spun by Chinese media to suggest exactly that.<sup>60</sup> In a later interview with an Italian newspaper, Dr. Remuzzi defined what occurred as an instrumental insinuation for the sake of propaganda,<sup>61</sup> and that the origin of the virus in Wuhan, China, is scientifically confirmed. *The Global Times*, *China Xinhua News*, *CGTN* and *China Daily*, all shared the misleading statement on Twitter. This happened several days after Lijian Zhao pushed the idea that Covid-19 was brought to Wuhan by the U.S.

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<sup>58</sup> Michelin, Ferruccio, “Ecco il mistero dei doni cinesi all’Italia,” *Formiche*, March 13, 2020, <https://formiche.net/2020/03/mistero-dei-doni-cinesi-allitalia/>

<sup>59</sup> Poggioli, Sylvia, “‘Every Single Individual Must Stay Home’: Italy’s Coronavirus Surge Strains Hospitals,” *NPR*, March 19, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/03/19/817974987/every-single-individual-must-stay-home-italy-s-coronavirus-deaths-pass-china-s>

<sup>60</sup> Capone, Luciano, Pompili, Giulia, “Propaganda virale. “Altro che italiano, il virus è cinese”. Parla Remuzzi, lo scienziato usato da Pechino come arma di propaganda,” *Il Foglio*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.ilfoglio.it/esteri/2020/03/24/news/propaganda-virale-307012/?underPaywall=true>

<sup>61</sup> Luciano Capone (@lucianocapone), ““Non c’è alcun dubbio che il virus sia cinese. Questo è un esempio da manuale di come si possa manipolare l’informazione scientifica a fini di propaganda”, dice al Foglio il prof. Remuzzi, dopo che i media cinesi hanno strumentalizzato una sua frase.” *Twitter*, March 24, 2020, <https://twitter.com/lucianocapone/status/1242385221548421120?s=20>



Army.<sup>62</sup> The only government Twitter account – of the ones listed above – that shared Dr. Remuzzi's decontextualized statement was the account of the PRC Embassy in France.<sup>63</sup>

Finally, the most disturbing element of China's information campaign featuring Italy is the use of cheap fakes.

Cheap fakes are audiovisual manipulations that rely on conventional techniques like speeding, slowing, cutting, re-staging, or re-contextualizing footage (as opposed to deep fakes, which are the product of AI-reliant techniques).<sup>64</sup> On March 15, a couple of videos showing Italians clapping, shouting "Thank you China!" with the Chinese anthem playing in the background were shared by Chinese media Twitter accounts, by Hua Chunying, and by Lijian Zhao. While Italians have definitely appreciated China's help and solidarity, the gratitude displayed in the videos was, well, fake.

The video shared by Hua Chunying<sup>65</sup> is actually a collage of two videos as uncovered by Open.<sup>66</sup> The videos used were respectively shot

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<sup>62</sup> Lijian Zhao 赵立坚 (@zlj517), "2/2 CDC was caught on the spot. When did patient zero begin in US? How many people are infected? What are the names of the hospitals? It might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan. Be transparent! Make public your data! US owe us an explanation!" Twitter, March 12, 2020, <https://twitter.com/zlj517/status/1238111898828066823>

<sup>63</sup> Ambassade de Chine en France (@AmbassadeChine), "Le directeur de l'Institut Mario Negri pour la recherche pharmacologique, Giuseppe Remuzzi, a déclaré récemment dans une interview, que des cas de pneumonie suspecte de COVID-19 avaient été traités en décembre, voire même en novembre dernier en Italie." Twitter, March 23, 2020, <https://twitter.com/AmbassadeChine/status/1242009404716843011>

<sup>64</sup> Paris, Britt, Donovan, Joan, "Deepfakes and Cheap Fakes. The Manipulation of Audio and Visual Evidence," Data & Society, September 18, 2019, [https://datasociety.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/DS\\_Deepfakes\\_Cheap\\_FakesFinal-1.pdf](https://datasociety.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/DS_Deepfakes_Cheap_FakesFinal-1.pdf)

<sup>65</sup> Hua Chunying 华春莹 (@SpokespersonCHN), "Amid the Chinese anthem playing out in Rome, Italians chanted 'Grazie, Cina!'. In this community with a shared future, we share weal and woe together." Twitter Video, March 15, 2020, <https://twitter.com/SpokespersonCHN/status/1239041044580188162>

<sup>66</sup> Puente, David, "Coronavirus. La propaganda cinese e il montaggio fake del video «Grazie Cina»," Open, March 20, 2020, <https://www.open.online/2020/03/20/coronavirus-la-propaganda-cinese-e-il-montaggio-fake-del-video-grazie-cina/>

in the city of Turin<sup>67</sup> and in Rome,<sup>68</sup> showing Italy's flash mobs organized to show appreciation for Italy's hospital workers. Hua Chunying's video cut and recontextualized footage from both videos, with added Chinese subtitles to frame the images, locating the events solely in Rome and featuring a slowed-down voice saying "Grazie Cina" (Thank you China). The result was a cheap, poorly edited video that, however, garnered attention, and played into China's narrative.

Lijian Zhao also shared a video that same day,<sup>69</sup> showing the Chinese anthem being played in a neighborhood in Rome. A similar video was shared by *China Daily*,<sup>70</sup> which – when comparing it with the previous one – seems to have been filmed from the same vantage point (same window or balcony): in this video, however, two voices say "Grazie Cina," an element not present in the one shared by Lijian Zhao, which points to a possible post-production addition. A third video uploaded by *CGTN* (again featuring the Chinese anthem and a voice thanking China)<sup>71</sup> was filmed in the same neighborhood as the previous two

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<sup>67</sup> Corriere della Sera, "Coronavirus, gli applausi di Torino: «La gente come noi non molla mai»" Coronavirus, gli applausi di Torino: «La gente come noi non molla mai» Corriere della Sera TV, March 14, 2020, [https://video.corriere.it/cronaca/noi-stiamo-casa-contributi-lettori-in-quarantena-coronavirus/coronavirus-applausi-torino-la-gente-come-noi-non-molla-ma/coronavirus-applausi-torino-la-gente-come-noi-non-molla-mai/c7139b4a-65e8-11ea-a287-bbde7409af03?refresh\\_ce-awe\\_video&counter=2](https://video.corriere.it/cronaca/noi-stiamo-casa-contributi-lettori-in-quarantena-coronavirus/coronavirus-applausi-torino-la-gente-come-noi-non-molla-ma/coronavirus-applausi-torino-la-gente-come-noi-non-molla-mai/c7139b4a-65e8-11ea-a287-bbde7409af03?refresh_ce-awe_video&counter=2)

<sup>68</sup> Corriere della Sera, "Coronavirus, si applaude dai balconi della Capitale," Corriere della Sera TV, March 14, 2020, [https://video.corriere.it/cronaca/noi-stiamo-casa-contributi-lettori-in-quarantena-coronavirus/coronavirus-si-applaude-balconi-capitale/3eb74f02-65ee-11ea-a287-bbde7409af03?refresh\\_ce-cp](https://video.corriere.it/cronaca/noi-stiamo-casa-contributi-lettori-in-quarantena-coronavirus/coronavirus-si-applaude-balconi-capitale/3eb74f02-65ee-11ea-a287-bbde7409af03?refresh_ce-cp)

<sup>69</sup> Lijian Zhao 赵立坚 (@zlj517), "In Rome, with the Chinese anthem playing, some Italians chanted 'Grazie, Cina!' on their balconies, & their neighbors applauded along. Against #COVID19, humanity lives in a community with a shared future! Italy is a heroic nation. At this trying moment, Chinese #StandWithItaly!" Twitter Video, March 15, 2020, <https://twitter.com/zlj517/status/1239112822908276736>

<sup>70</sup> China Daily (@ChinaDaily) "'Grazie Cina!' Chinese national anthem was ringing in a neighborhood in Rome, Italy, on the evening of March 14. An Italian man even learned Chinese as well as Chinese national anthem. #Covid\_19 #coronavirus" Twitter Video, March 15, 2020, <https://twitter.com/ChinaDaily/status/1239136795993853953>

<sup>71</sup> CGTN (@CGTNOfficial) "'Grazie Cina' National anthem played in a 'balcony concert' in Rome as gratitude to China's aid to Italy Over 30 tonnes of medical supplies and nine experts arrived from Shanghai to Rome to help fight against the virus" Twitter Video, March 15, 2020, <https://twitter.com/CGTNOfficial/status/1239134806358675456>

videos (the filming locations are less than 300 m apart),<sup>72</sup> suggesting a likely organized, staged effort.

Finally, *People's Daily, China* posted a video<sup>73</sup> showing a law-enforcement motorcade in Milan with the caption “A team of 13 Chinese medical staff arrived in #Milan, #Italy to help contain the #Covid\_19 #pandemic. They will share their experience with local experts and provide guidance and consultation for #coronavirus control and treatment. #CoronaOutbreak.” The motorcade was actually organized by Italian law enforcement forces and aid workers to comfort and reassure local citizens and had nothing to do with the arrival of the Chinese medical staff, as the decontextualized footage and text hinted at.<sup>74</sup>

While Italians have shown appreciation for the help received by China in different ways, some of the instances shown by Chinese media and officials on Twitter have been manipulated and posted to be deliberately misleading to advance China's narrative.

## ITALY'S PERCEPTION OF CHINA

China has used its temporal advantage in this pandemic by playing an active international role and attempting to fill the void in global leadership. China has reciprocated the aid received during its domestic emergency and went beyond that, but it has also used such opportunity to project its sharp power. To complement these actions, China launched a complex (ongoing) information campaign aimed at

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<sup>72</sup> Puente, David, “Coronavirus. La propaganda cinese e il montaggio fake del video «Grazie Cina»,” *Open*, March 20, 2020, <https://www.open.online/2020/03/20/coronavirus-la-propaganda-cinese-e-il-montaggio-fake-del-video-grazie-cina/>

<sup>73</sup> *People's Daily, China* (@PDChina) “A team of 13 Chinese medical staff arrived in #Milan, #Italy to help contain the #Covid\_19 #pandemic. They will share their experience with local experts and provide guidance and consultation for #coronavirus control and treatment. #CoronaOutbreak” Twitter Video, March 19, 2020, <https://twitter.com/PDChina/status/1240717173682774016>

<sup>74</sup> *Milano Today*, “Coronavirus, corteo da brividi per le vie di Sesto: applausi dai balconi a forze dell'ordine e soccorritori,” *Milano Today*, March 19, 2020, <https://www.milanotoday.it/video/sesto-inno-carabinieri-polizia.html>

international audiences: China is seeking to be seen and portrayed as a victor and a solidarity champion, rather than just a survivor of the pandemic, and has, at the same time, been attempting to sow confusion on the origin of the outbreak and deflect the blame.

In China's Italy-focused information efforts on Twitter – which was just a small component of China's wider global information operations<sup>75</sup> – both narratives were present, offering a glimpse into how Chinese media and officials have resorted to the use of manipulated content to push such visions. In terms of effectiveness of China's Twitter – and wider information – campaign, a report by the Italian think tank IAI and the University of Siena analyzed Italian public opinion during the Covid-19 crisis and found that the majority of those interviewed perceived Chinese aid as a gesture of genuine solidarity, as opposed to politically motivated. The report highlights how this result needs to be read in light of the parallel Chinese information operations that took place on social media.<sup>76</sup> However, while Italians have demonstrated appreciation for the help received, and the many instances of Chinese generosity, others have shown skepticism towards China's bogus online content, especially when aware of the political intent behind it: the comments on the Twitter posts are a mix of authentic manifestations of gratitude, bots, and skeptical, anti-Chinese remarks.

Italy's perception of China is, in fact, more nuanced, even inconsistent at times. The majority of Italians seem to blame China for the global pandemic and say that the country should admit its responsibility, but they have also appreciated the way the country domestically managed the emergency, seeing the Chinese model as

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<sup>75</sup> Cook, Sarah, "Welcome to the New Era of Chinese Government Disinformation," *The Diplomat*, May 11, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/welcome-to-the-new-era-of-chinese-government-disinformation/>

<sup>76</sup> Angelucci, Davide, Piccolino, Gianluca, Isernia, Pierangelo et al., "Emergenza coronavirus e politica estera. L'opinione degli italiani sul governo, l'Europa e la cooperazione internazionale," DISPOC/LAPS (Università di Siena) e IAI, May 2020, [https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/laps-iai\\_2020\\_covid.pdf](https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/laps-iai_2020_covid.pdf)

one to follow.<sup>77</sup> The aforementioned report also indicated that about 55% of the respondents viewed the conspiracy theory that Covid-19 originated in a Chinese laboratory as plausible.<sup>78</sup> Yet, a different survey, carried out by SWG, reported that 36% of respondents indicated that Italy should develop its extra-European alliance with China, against the 30% that indicated the U.S., while the remaining 34% did not know.<sup>79</sup>

It remains to be seen if these perceptions are sticky in the long run, if they are merely a reaction to European disappointment, and if they will have geopolitical consequences once this global health crisis has passed, giving way to a global recession. One thing is sure though: China has developed and, most importantly, deployed a new information operations approach<sup>80</sup> and the world will likely see more of the “Chinese playbook” in the future.

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<sup>77</sup> Angelucci, Davide, Piccolino, Gianluca, Isernia, Pierangelo et al., “Emergenza coronavirus e politica estera. L’opinione degli italiani sul governo, l’Europa e la cooperazione internazionale,” DISPOC/LAPS (Università di Siena) e IAI, May 2020, [https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/laps-iai\\_2020\\_covid.pdf](https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/laps-iai_2020_covid.pdf)

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> De Palo, Francesco, “W la Cina! Il sondaggio Swg che non ti aspetti. Parla Pier Ferdinando Casini,” Formiche, April 7, 2020, <https://formiche.net/2020/04/cina-usa-sondaggio-swg-casini-ventura/>

<sup>80</sup> Cook, Sarah, “Welcome to the New Era of Chinese Government Disinformation,” The Diplomat, May 11, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/welcome-to-the-new-era-of-chinese-government-disinformation/>



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