



ASIA MAIOR

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Asia in 2020: Coping with COVID-19 and other crises

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Nicola Mocci
Filippo Boni

viella

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CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

ASIA MAIOR

The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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CONTENTS

- 9 FILIPPO BONI, *Foreword. Asia in 2020: The COVID-19 pandemic and its impact*
- 19 FRANCESCA CONGIU, *China 2020: The successful struggle against the COVID-19 pandemic and the Xinjiang question*
- 45 SILVIA MENEGAZZI, *China 2020: A foreign policy characterized by growing resilience, fading responsibility and increasing uncertainty*
- 71 MARCO MILANI, *Korean peninsula 2020: Overcoming the challenges of COVID-19*
- 103 COREY WALLACE & GIULIO PUGLIESE, *Japan 2020: Abe's well-laid plans go awry*
- 147 SHELDON WONG, *Hong Kong 2020: The downfall of «one country two systems»*
- 181 AURELIO INSISA, *Taiwan 2020: Crossroads of COVID-19 international politics*
- 205 YVAN YSMAEL T. YONAHA & ESTHER MARY L. CALVO, *The Philippines 2020: The gamble of the populist leadership*
- 223 RUI GRAÇA FEIJÓ, *Timor-Leste in 2020: Containing the pandemic in a changing political environment*
- 241 SALEENA SALEEM, *Malaysia 2020: Democratic backsliding amid the COVID-19 pandemic*
- 259 MATTEO FUMAGALLI, *Myanmar 2020: Elections in a pandemic*
- 275 SILVIA TIERI, *Bangladesh 2019-2020: Issues of democracy, disasters, development*
- 305 DIEGO MAIORANO, *India 2020: Under the COVID hammer*
- 331 MICHELGUGLIELMO TORRI, *India 2020: The deepening crisis of democracy*
- 377 MICHELGUGLIELMO TORRI, *India 2020: Confronting China, aligning with the US*
- 407 SHAMARA WETTIMUNY, *Sri Lanka 2019-2020: Extremism, elections and economic uncertainty at the time of COVID-19*
- 441 MARCO CORSI, *Pakistan 2020: The PTI government amidst COVID-19 pandemic*
- 465 FILIPPO BONI, *Afghanistan 2020: The US-Taliban peace deal, intra-Afghan talks and regional implications*
- 479 LUCIANO ZACCARA, *Iran 2019-2020: The double impact of crippling sanctions and the COVID-19 pandemic*
- 505 PAOLO SORBELLO, *Kazakhstan 2020: Between a rock and a hard place*
- 521 *Reviews*
- 557 *Appendix*

CHINA 2020: THE SUCCESSFUL STRUGGLE AGAINST THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND THE XINJIANG QUESTION

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The year 2020, more than any other previous year, posed serious questions about the nature of the Chinese state and society and their relations with the world. China was the first global epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic and, in fighting it, demonstrated a highly effective management of the health emergency crisis. Differently from what happened in Europe or the United States, during the period under review daily life in China went back to normal. Nonetheless, this did not translate into a more positive view of China world-wide as, in the same period, international newspapers, magazines and international organizations dealt extensively with Beijing's repressive politics in Xinjiang and the establishment of «re-education camps» there. This article, then, firstly analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of Beijing's pandemic management, without overlooking its strategy of control and repression of public opinion. Secondly, it provides a synthetic overview of Beijing's policies towards the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. In doing this an analysis of the latest reports on «re-education camps» and the Chinese government's reaction to them is offered.

KEYWORDS – COVID-19's containment; Xinjiang conflict; China domestic politics.

1. Introduction

In 2020 a new coronavirus pandemic affected the entire world. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) database, at the moment of writing, there have been 99,363,697 confirmed cases and 2,135,959 deaths.¹ The first cases of the disease were registered in China, in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province, at the beginning of December 2019. At the end of February 2020, China registered almost 80,000 cases, and 3,000 deaths. Almost 100% of them were concentrated in Hubei. In the rest of the world, known cases were no more than 5,000. At the end of the year, the situation was completely inverted: among the almost 80,000,000 global cases, only 96,000 were registered in the People's Republic of China (PRC).² At the expense of a

1. World Health Organization (WHO), *Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard*, last updated 26 January 2021.

2. WHO, *Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), Situation Report – 40*; WHO, *Weekly epidemiological update – 29 December 2020*.

two-month severe lockdown, it seemed that China had been able to contain the virus more rapidly and effectively, in comparison to European countries or the United States. Even at the end of 2020, Western countries were exercising quarantines intermittently and frequently utilizing the juridical institute of the status of emergency; this allowed the suspension of basic rights, such as the freedom of movement, and in turn provoked a disastrous economic recession.³

The People Republic of China (PRC) was able to exercise quick and effective contact tracing through sophisticated technological means, thus allowing the spread of the disease to be contained. The temporary closure of economic activities was rescinded after three months and economic growth resumed.

However, during the same period the PRC was not generous with the guarantee and protection of freedoms and rights. Throughout the year and all around the pandemic discourse, there was a huge effort to control public opinion through two main strategies: the first was a strong policy of censorship; the second was the skilful construction of an official narrative designed to preserve the legitimacy of the Chinese leadership, at stake because of the emergence of the virus in Wuhan. While these strategies were successful in controlling the internal situation and propping the legitimacy of the political leadership, things were considerably less successful at the international level. There the problem was not only the accuses that Beijing was pursuing an aggressive expansionist policy (a problem dealt in a different article in this same volume) but the emergence of the Uyghur question. In fact, throughout 2019 and 2020, previous studies and analyses of Beijing's lib-erticide policies toward the Uyghur indigenous inhabitants of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region increasingly attracted the attention of world public opinion. In fact, reports attesting to the presence of re-education and detention camps for «suspected or ascertained Uyghur terrorists», appeared to have been confirmed by additional evidence.

The year 2020 makes it essential to reflect seriously on China and its relations with the outside world. In particular, the handling of the pandemic and the management of the Xinjiang issue can be read as strategies to defend the national interest through the protection of public health and the defence of national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Along this line of thought, it must be stressed that China is governed by a single party, which makes its leadership infinitely more able to control society and repress dissent, compared to authorities in pluralistic and democratic countries. However, the single party tries not to make extensive use of violent repressive methods, even if they are becoming a much more recurring prac-

3. 'Poteri, durata e limiti: cos'è e cosa comporta lo stato di emergenza', *Agenzia Italiana (AGI)*, 1 October 2020; Ottavio Marzocchi, 'The Impact of Covid-19 Measures on Democracy, the Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights in the EU', *European Parliament Think Tank*, 23 April 2020.

tice compared to the Hu Jintao era (2002-2012). Rather, in order to gain and reinforce popular consent, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) presents itself as the only guarantor for the realization of the so-called «Chinese dream». The realization of the «Chinese dream» – currently central in the well-known rhetoric *repertoire* of the CCP – is based on a nationwide call to arms and sacrifices to the Chinese population. Its aim is the realization of a full and complete high-level rejuvenation of the country from the industrial, technological, financial, social and commercial point of views. Objectors to the achievement of this realization need to be censored, disciplined, re-educated or punished if there are no alternatives.

This – according to the Chinese leadership’s narrative – is the case of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Their determination to defend their traditions, languages, or religious practices and their opposition to the sinization of culture, governmental and managerial economic positions – pursued by the state through long term and state-organized Han Chinese migrations – is dismissed as anti-national and generally classified as terrorism. The accusation of terrorism is the last step of a process that the CCP categorizes as «secularization of culture» under its own guide. This process is implemented through what Beijing defines vocational education and training aimed to «confine Islamic practice to a few tolerated spaces and forms». ⁴ It is worth stressing that this practice, although widely criticised in the West, does not belong solely to China, as a single-party ruled country. It relies, as argued by Bilal Zenab Ahmed, «on a classical imperial push», evident in the history of both the British Empire (for example, in South Africa) or the US (in particular through the annexation of the norther part of Mexico in 1948, followed by the dispossession and assimilation in a subordinate position of its Spanish-speaking original inhabitants). ⁵

2. *Dealing with COVID-19*

2.1. *The regulatory framework: China’s public health emergency system*

The PRC, since the previous SARS epidemic disease of 2002-3, has built up a health crisis management system. This regulatory plan was enacted in order to fill the major gaps for any future successful containment of the spread of diseases. It has indeed been predicted that new pathogens would

4. Bilal Zenam Ahmed, ‘Revolution and State Formation as Oasis Storytelling in Xinjiang’, *Made in China Journal*, January-April 2020; ‘U.N. says it has credible reports that China holds million Uighurs in secret camps’, *Reuters*, 10 August 2018.

5. Bilal Zenam Ahmed, ‘Revolution and State Formation as Oasis Storytelling in Xinjiang’.

continue to arise causing new global public health emergencies.⁶ The main objective has been to strengthen the use of information technology to facilitate the access to critical information and consequently to satisfactorily respond to medical emergencies in an appropriate and well-organized manner. These efforts implied the establishment of a «China's direct network reporting system for infectious diseases and public health emergencies» (中国传染病疫情和突发公共卫生事件网络直报系统).

According to former Minister of Health Li Bin, public health emergencies refer to events that occur unpredictably and could cause mass destruction to public health. The public health emergency system and its direct network reporting system was organized according to three levels of alert: yellow, orange, and red. The alerts should be managed at the provincial and national levels. The national plan was necessary in the event of a disease starting to spread across provinces (orange and red alerts).⁷

In 2020 (almost 20 years after the diffusion of the first SARS), the organ in charge of the above-mentioned system was the National Health Commission (NHC). It had the function of a Ministry and was established in March 2018, superseding the National Health and Planning Commission, which, in turn, had replaced the Ministry of Health in 2013. The NHC follows the administrative division of the PRC and works through three executive agencies which also follow the administrative division: National Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine; Chinese Center for Disease and Control Prevention; Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences. The health commissions' agencies and the centres for disease and control prevention, at each level of the administrative division, are the main actors of the direct network reporting system. They follow a pyramidal order in their report network communications: village, county, city, province and central state. This system should allow medical institutions at all levels to transmit the discovery of infectious cases through the internet, directly to a large database of the Center for Disease and Control Prevention. In case of «pneumonia with unknown causes», medical institutions must organize expert groups to diagnose the disease within 12 hours and should report immediately.⁸

6. James M. Hughes, 'The SARS response – building and assessing an evidence – based approach to future global microbial threats', *Journal of American Medical Association*, 2003, Vol. 290, No. 24, pp. 3251-3253; Dennis G. Maki, 'SARS: 1918 revisited? The urgent need for global collaboration in public health', *Mayo Clinical Proceedings*, July 2003, Vol. 78, No. 7, pp. 813-816.

7. Liang Huigang & Xue Yajiong, 'Investigating public health emergency response information system initiative in China', *International Journal of Medical Information*, September 2004, Vol. 73, No. 9, pp. 675-685. V.A., 'The public health emergency management system in China: trends from 2002 to 2012', *BMC Public Health*, Vol. 18, April 2018.

8. *Ibid.*

2.2. *Managing the virus between Wuhan and Beijing*

The virus was first identified in Wuhan in early December 2019. Local institutions did not inform immediately the higher levels' authorities.⁹ It seems that the NHC received the first information about the virus between the end of December 2019 and the beginning of January 2020. At that point, the commission sent the first leading group to Wuhan to monitor the situation, to give the first guidelines, and, finally, should that be the case, to identify a new type of coronavirus (冠状病毒) as the cause of the current viral pneumonia. The virus was said to have originated in bats or snakes located in a soon-to-be-closed marketplace in Wuhan.¹⁰ It seems quite evident that the health emergency system that was developed soon after 2003 helped Chinese health authorities to identify the virus more promptly than during the first SARS diffusion when it took more than four months.¹¹

Wuhan is a city of more than 11 million inhabitants at the moment of writing and is situated in the province of Hubei. There, the Chinese Academy of Sciences with the French Institut Pasteur opened the only high-level biosafety laboratory, called P4 lab, in Asia in January 2018. It is a lab where the level of biosecurity measures allows biologists to manipulate highly dangerous viruses such as Ebola, Sars and H5N1. France developed a similar lab in Lyon. During 2020, the P4 lab has been at the centre of international debate concerning the origins of the COVID-19 spread. Thus far, however, there are no concrete proofs that the pandemic originated from a leakage from the P4 lab, as suspected by some.¹²

Beijing's central political authorities started to implement a COVID-19 crisis management strategy in the last two weeks of January 2020. On 20 January, COVID-19 was included by the NHC in the notifiable report of border quarantine infectious diseases. This meant the actuation of temperature checks, health care declaration and quarantine as well as the improve-

9. '武汉市长承认前期信息披露不及时' ('Wuhan Mayor admits that the information /were/was not promptly transmitted'), *Caixin*, 27 January 2020.

10. '武汉市卫健委关于当前我市肺炎疫情的情况通报' ('Notification of Wuhan Municipal Health Commission on the current situation of pneumonia in our city'), 中国新闻网 (China News.com), 31 December 2019; '国家卫生健康委积极开展新型冠状病毒感染的肺炎疫情防控工作' ('The National Health Commission is actively launching a campaign for the prevention and control of the new coronavirus'), *Health Emergency Office, National Health Commission Website of the People's Republic of China*, 19 January 2020 (<http://www.nhc.gov.cn/yjwb/s7860/202001/de5f07afe8054af3ab2a25a61d19ac70.shtml>). See also National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China, *Timeline of China releasing information on Covid-19 and advancing international cooperation*, 6 April 2020 (http://en.nhc.gov.cn/2020-04/06/c_78861_3.htm).

11. Huang Yanzhong, 'China's Public Health Response to the COVID-19 Outbreak', *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 64, summer 2020.

12. 'Coronavirus Pandemic: a glimpse of top bio-safety level tab in Wuhan', CGTN (*China Global Television Network*), 6 July 2020.

ment of protocols for diagnosis, treatment and epidemic prevention and control. A task force, guided by Sun Chunlan, member of the Politburo and vice-president of the State Council (portfolio for Public health, Education, and Culture), was formed. It was composed by central government officials and medical experts. Sun went to Wuhan and organized the lockdown of the city and the supply of protective measures: planes and trains leaving the city were cancelled, intra-city public transport suspended, entertainment venues were closed and all public gatherings were banned. After that, containment measures were extended to the whole country, while provinces and municipalities issued their own regulations. The spring festival holidays were extended, traffic and transportation capacity were put under strict control to reduce the movement of people, allocation of medical supplies was coordinated, new hospitals were built.¹³ In order to strengthen contact tracing, new technologies were applied such as the use of big data and artificial intelligence. All public transport, for example, had the capacity to read the health insurance number of each passenger.¹⁴ Furthermore, at a high institutional level, the party organized many Leading Small Groups charged with dealing with the health crisis. The central leading one was under the responsibility of the Standing Committee of the Politburo, and chaired by Premier Li Keqiang. It was named 中央应对新型冠状病毒感染肺炎疫情工作领导小组会 (Central Leading Small Group for Work to Counter the New Coronavirus Infection Pneumonia Epidemic).¹⁵

2.3. *The role of the Central Leading Small Group for Work in countering the new coronavirus infection pneumonia epidemic*

The highest rank group, devised to deal with the health crisis, was exclusively composed of very high-level political leaders. Li Keqiang, its chief, was joined by Wang Huning, the other sole member belonging to the politburo

13. ‘孙春兰在武汉考察新型冠状病毒感染的肺炎疫情防控工作’ (‘Sun Chunlan in Wuhan to investigate on the New Coronavirus pneumonia’), *The State Council Website (Gov.cn)*, 22 January 2021; ‘Coronavirus Pandemic: How a special task force led the battle against COVID-19 in Wuhan’, CGTN, 17 June 2021.

14. World Health Organization, *Report of the WHO-China Joint Mission on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) 16-24 February 2020*, 28 February 2020 (<https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/who-china-joint-mission-on-covid-19-final-report.pdf>). See also Ai Weiwei Films, ‘Coronation’, *Vimeo.com*, 20 August 2020 (<https://vimeo.com/ondemand/coronation>).

15. ‘习近平对新型冠状病毒感染的肺炎疫情作出重要指示 强调要把人民群众生命安全和身体健康放在第一位坚决遏制疫情蔓延势头 李克强作出批示’ (‘Xi Jinping gave important instructions on the pneumonia epidemic caused by the new coronavirus, emphasizing that the safety and health of the people should be put first, resolutely curbing the spread of the epidemic, Li Keqiang issued instructions’), *Xinhuanet*, 20 January 2020; ‘李克强主持召开中央应对新型冠状病毒感染肺炎疫情工作领导小组会议’ (‘Li Keqiang preside over the meeting of the Central Leading Group for Response to the Novel Coronavirus pneumonia epidemic’), *Xinhuanet*, 26 January 2020.

standing committee, in the role of vice-chairman. Wang Huning was a political theorist, first secretary of the central secretariat of the party, director of the central policy research office and chairman of the central guidance commission on building spiritual civilization. Wang was said to be the theorist behind Chinese leadership slogans, including Xi Jinping's «Chinese dream» and advisor to main leaders.¹⁶ From his biography, it is possible to affirm that Wang was a politician strictly connected with Shanghai's power gang.¹⁷ Sun Chunlan, vice-president of the State Council (portfolio for public health, education, and culture), and Ding Xueliang, director of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) central office, that belonged to Xi Jinping's Shanghai entourage, were the other two components of the group. Furthermore, the group was also composed of Huang Kunming and Zhao Kezhi. Huang was the director of CCP central propaganda department and considered a close associate of Xi Jinping. His career has indeed taken place in Eastern China.¹⁸ Zhao Kezhi was the Minister of Public Security.¹⁹ Finally, Cai Qi, Beijing CCP secretary; Wang Yi, the minister of Foreign Affairs; Xiao Jie, the state council secretary-general, were also members of the Central Leading Small Group for Work to Counter the New Coronavirus Infection Pneumonia Epidemic (CLSG).

From its composition it is possible to understand the primary tasks of the CLSG. Firstly, there were the two leading Chinese politicians for propaganda and ideological work: Wang Huning and Huang Kunming. This suggests and confirms the great importance attached to the control of information and ideological work in managing the health crisis (on this, more later). Secondly, the centrality played by social security was underlined by the presence of the Minister of Public Security. Thirdly, the presence of the Minister of Foreign Affairs signified Beijing's awareness of the heavy global impact of a virus first discovered in China.

2.4. *Censorship, official narrative and local scapegoats*

Chinese central and local governments placed heavy restrictions on freedom of information and speech in relation to the epidemic. This decision, aimed at averting panic among the population, had nonetheless the potentiality to drastically reduce the effective response to the health crisis. At least for one month, the virus had been perceived as «non-transmittable from human-to-human» and later «preventable and controllable». An example of the resulting recklessness caused by the initial underestimation of the dangerousness of the new coronavirus was what happened on 19 January in the Baibuting community (a locality in the Jiangan District, Wuhan). Here a ban-

16. 'Brains behind the «China Dream»', *The Strait Times*, 26 October 2017.

17. 'Wang Huning', *China Vitae*.

18. 'Huang Kunming', *China Vitae*.

19. 'Zhao Kezhi', *China Vitae*.

quet with tens of thousands of participants was organized for the New Year's celebrations, with easily imaginable effects on the spread of the virus.²⁰

A further problem that the central authorities had to tackle was that information coverage could be de-legitimizing for the party itself. This last point has been pivotal in the central party's authorities' decision to later use local authorities as scapegoats in order to defend the legitimacy of the centre. This type of attitude is part of a specific kind of centre-periphery relationship present in China's long history from time immemorial. Evidence of its presence can be found in late Qing imperial China in the relations among Beijing officials, local mandarins and colonial powers; or in more recent times when local authorities were usually the only ones to be blamed for ecological disasters or labour accidents and for not abiding by the rules formulated *a posteriori* by the central political power.²¹

When the first coronavirus cases emerged, Wuhan doctors started to send samples of the pathogen to private local laboratories and, in December 2019, they began discussing the results across Chinese social networks. This kind of behaviour was soon sanctioned by political authorities. Both local and central governments decided to control the unauthorized release of information. In an emergency notice of 30 December 2019, the Wuhan Health Municipal Commission cautioned individuals and organizations about releasing information without authorization. On its part, the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention issued an order prohibiting medical personnel from speaking with reporters.²² In addition, internal notices from local hospitals informed staff who had gone to Wuhan: «Keep yourself politically disciplined» and «Do not talk to outsiders in private».

This kind of directive became the grounds for discipline and detention of those medical personnel who were discussing the issue on social networks. Among them doctor Li Wenliang, a Wuhan ophthalmologist whose story gained particular prominence in international media.²³ The doctor, who had been very active in warning his colleagues about the spreading of the illness, had been obliged by the local Public Security Bureau to sign a

20. 'Controversial Baibuting speaks up on banquet', *Global Times*, 25 April 2020.

21. Francesca Congiu, *Stato e società nella Cina contemporanea*, Carocci Editore, Roma, 2012.

22. '武汉疾控证实：当地现不明原因肺炎病人，发病数在统计' ('Wuhan disease control confirmed: there are pneumonia patients of unknown cause in the local area, and the number of cases is in statistics'), 新北报, 31 December 2019. 疫情與輿情十七年：被瞞報的SARS與被孤立的武漢, ('Seventeen years since the spreading of the epidemic and public opinion: the underreported SARS and the isolated Wuhan'), *The Initium*, 25 January 2020.

23. Doctor Li Wenliang was not the only medical staff member to be punished by the Wuhan authorities for spreading rumours about COVID-19 outbreak. See 'Minutiae: Delete «Disciplined Doctor Now in Isolation Ward」', *China Digital Times*, 30 January 2020.

letter in which he was accused of «making false comments» that had «severely disturbed social order».²⁴

Not unlike the Wuhan local leadership, Beijing political authorities were themselves very active in explicitly exercising repression and extensive censorship. This was particularly evident after Li Wenliang's death because it provoked such an extensive «online revolt», seething with indignation and coupled by calls for the freedom of speech, that it seemed capable of seriously challenging Beijing's ability to control social stability.²⁵ Notwithstanding usual censorship, people were expressing an interesting diversity of opinions and they seemed ready to take action.²⁶ In March 2020, the non-governmental organization *Chinese Human Rights Defenders*, published a list in which it collected 897 cases of netizens punished with administrative and sometimes criminal detection for «spreading rumours» about COVID-19.²⁷ It should be underlined that in February 2020, Li Jingsheng, the director of the Public Security Administrative Bureau under the ministry of Public Security, declared to the *Remin Ribao* that 5,511 cases of «fabricating or deliberately disseminating false and harmful information» were being investigated and dealt with by public security agencies in various places.²⁸

According to a report by *The New York Times* and *ProPublica*, the Chinese Communist Party worked hard to manipulate public opinion in relation to COVID-19: social platforms were ordered to remove Li's name and many other references to the epidemic from trending topic pages. Thousands of fake online commenters were activated in order to distract public opinion with other news. *China Digital Times*, that is a US bilingual media organization which aims at bringing to light Chinese uncensored news and online voices, explained that the report was produced by drawing from over 32,000 directives and 1,800 memoranda leaked from Hangzhou's Cyber-

24. 'Li Wenliang: Coronavirus kills Chinese whistleblower doctor', *BBC News*, 7 February 2020; P. Hessler, 'Letter from Chengdu. Life on lockdown in China. Forty-five days of avoiding the coronavirus', *The New Yorker*, 30 March 2020.

25. 'China's WeChat censored thousands of keywords tied to the coronavirus pandemic, Citizen Lab study says', *South China Morning Post*, 28 August 2020. See also 'A New Martyr Puts a Face on China's Deepening Coronavirus Crisis', *The New York Times*, 7 February 2020; 'China Covid-19: How state media and censorship took on coronavirus', *BBC News*, 29 December 2020.

26. The international media talked about a sort of «Chernobyl moment» for China's leadership. See 'In coronavirus outbreak, China's leaders scramble to avert a Chernobyl moment', *The Washington Post*, 29 January 2020.

27. China Human Rights Defenders, 新冠肺炎疫情下因网言受惩罚统计表 (*List of penalized Chinese netizens for online speech about covid-19*), *Chinese Human Rights Defenders Website*, 26 March 2020 (<https://www.nchr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/3.30-FINAL-%E5%9B%A0%E8%A8%80%E5%8F%97%E7%BD%9A%E7%BB%9F%E8%AE%A1%E8%A1%A8-CN-EN-1.pdf>).

28. '全国医疗救治秩序总体平稳有序', ('The national medical system is completely stable and in order), *Remin Ribao*, 22 February 2020.

space Administration Office, as well as internal documents leaked from Urun Big Data Services.²⁹

Soon after the massive repressive and censoring campaign, as death cases were increasing, the central leadership modified its way of dealing with the crisis. The highest authorities of the CCP resorted to predictable behaviour, as they do when an evident crisis of legitimacy is at stake: they find a scapegoat at the local level while proposing themselves as the best guarantor of fairness, justice, and transparency. Wuhan and Hubei leaderships became the only ones to be blamed for censoring and concealing information about the illness. To this end, the party formed a Central Guidance Group (中央指导组), under the CLSG, with the aim of examining and punishing local officials. Hundreds of local officials were penalized and dozens were fired for not properly performing their duties during the outbreak. Among them, the communist party chief of the Health Commission in Hubei and its director were fired and replaced by Wang Hesheng, the deputy director of the Central National Health Commission. Furthermore, the purge hit the highest ranks of the local party too: the communist party secretaries of both Hubei province (Jiang Chaoliang) and Wuhan (Ma Guoqiang) lost their seats; in their place two of Xi Jinping's protégés were nominated. Shanghai mayor Ying Hong became the new Hubei communist party secretary while the former Jinan province party secretary, Wang Zhonglin, became Wuhan party secretary.³⁰ As far as the specific case of Doctor Li Wenliang is concerned, the National Supervisory Commission decided to revoke the reprimand, to hold the local officers accountable and to officially recognize him as a «martyr».³¹

Repression and censorship were thus accompanied by an active propaganda campaign. «疫情防控宣傳» («Epidemic prevention and propaganda») were indeed declared, by Zhang Xiaoguo (director of the Information Bureau of the Central Propaganda Department and director of the National Emergency Information Office), as the top priorities of his work.³²

29. 'No «Negative» News: How China Censored the Coronavirus', *The New York Times*, 19 December 2020; 'CDT Censorship Digest, December 2020: The Rumble in the CCP's Narrative Machine', *China Digital Times*, 14 January 2021.

30. 'China fires two senior Hubei officials over coronavirus outbreak', *The Guardian*, 11 February 2020; 'Coronavirus: 3 Wuhan officials summoned to explain failings as China death toll reaches 1,018', *South China Morning Post*, 11 February 2020; 'Coronavirus: Beijing purges communist party heads in Hubei over «botched» outbreak response in provincial capital of Wuhan', *South China Morning Post*, 13 February 2020; 'China ousts senior officials as Beijing seeks distance from outbreak', *The Wall Street Journal*, 14 February 2020.

31. '关于群众反映的涉及李文亮医生有关情况调查的通报' ('Notice on the Investigation of Issues Related to Dr Li Wenliang') 新华网 [*Xinhua*], 19 March 2020.

32. '[武漢肺炎]加強輿論引導中宣部調集逾300名記者赴疫區採訪', ('[Wuhan Pneumonia] Strengthen the public opinion to guide the central propaganda department to mobilize more than 300 reporters to cover the epidemic area'), *Hong Kong 01*, 5 February 2020.

2.5. *The containment of the illness*

In February 2020, a joint mission consisting of 25 national and international experts from China, Germany, Japan, Korea, Nigeria, Russia, Singapore, the US and the WHO visited China and Wuhan to report on the outbreak. The visit lasted nine days, from 16 to 24 February 2020. Inspections were conducted in health clinics, hospitals, COVID-19 designated hospitals, transportation hubs, provincial health commissions and local centres for Disease Control in Beijing, Chengdu, Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Wuhan.

According to the report, the transmission rate in Wuhan was relatively high. The R number, which is the number of people to whom one infected person will pass on the virus, was about 2.0 or 2.5. Transmissions in Hubei and outside of Hubei were less intense. Intensive public health interventions employed to block the chains of transmission nationwide included intensive case and contact tracking, isolation of moderately ill patients in containment centres, extreme social distancing, shutting down public life. Thanks to this policy, case numbers and numbers of new deaths were progressively declining. On the first day of the team's work there were 2,478 newly confirmed cases, and, two weeks later, the new cases were 409.³³ The WHO reported that: «[...] China has rolled out perhaps the most ambitious, agile and aggressive disease containment effort in history. [...] The remarkable speed [...] provided the vital evidence base for China's strategy gaining invaluable time for the response».³⁴

According to the WHO's collected data, this flattering trend of the epidemic curve in China seems to have continued throughout the rest of the year helped also by the increasing use of Chinese home-made vaccines.³⁵ It must be said, though, that the WHO's evaluations were based on data received from national authorities, which may cast doubt on their reliability. Anyway, at the end of December 2020, Chinese data were as follow: 608 (cases in the last 7 days); 96,324 (cumulative cases); 65 (cumulative cases per 1 million population); 7 (new deaths in the last 7 days); 4,777 (cumulative deaths); 3 (cumulative deaths per 1 million population). In order to consider the relative meaning of Chinese data and the extent of the descending curve, it is significant to show the US data for the same period: 1,334,155 (cases in the last 7 days); 18,648,989 (cumulative cases); 56,341 (cumulative cases per 1 million population); 16,864 (new deaths in the last

33. World Health Organization, *Report of the WHO-China Joint Mission on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) 16-24 February 2020*, 28 February 2020; Bernd Salzberger, Thomas Gluck & Boris Ehrenstein, 'Successful containment of COVID-19: the WHO-Report on the COVID-19 outbreak in China', *Infection*, vol. 48, n. 2, 2020.

34. World Health Organization, *Report of the WHO-China Joint Mission on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)*, 16-24 February 2020.

35. 'Covid: what do we know about China's coronavirus vaccines', BBCNews, 14 January 2021; 'Vaccinating more than anywhere else, China still needs to speed up', *Reuters*, 29 April 2021.

7 days); 328,014 (cumulative deaths); 991 (cumulative deaths per 1 million population).³⁶

2.6. 自组织: *Mutual aid groups or self-organization*

An important role in the management of the COVID-19 crisis has been played by spontaneous grassroots organizations which emerged from outside the bureaucratic and centralized party and state system. A very active collective of writers and translators, based in Hong Kong, has provided a sort of fieldwork analysis for the actions performed by these groups.³⁷

The major problem that they addressed was a chronic unequal distribution and allocation of medical resources. The distribution was indeed centralized: the majority of resources were allocated to the capital of the main province stricken by the virus (Wuhan in Hubei). In rural areas and urban peripheries, hospitals were not adequately equipped, and medical provisions were scarce. There was a lack of masks, thermometers and other medical equipment; in any case, many people could not afford to buy them.

The contribution of mutual aid groups has been mainly aimed to mobilize donations on the internet throughout a proliferation of fundraising campaigns in order to ease these urban-rural disparities, revealed by the virus in a more crude and evident way. Individuals were helped but also marginal hospitals and sanitation workers were provided with medical supplies. Furthermore, volunteers' groups were formed to give medical assistance to those illnesses which were neglected due to the pandemic emergence.

Mutual aid groups, involving almost 40,000 volunteers, also strived to address the blockage of the transportation system due to containment measures. Although necessary, the blockage was strongly limiting the distribution of resources and the transport of medical staff. Mutual aid groups, especially in Wuhan, organized a private car service, taking turns to drive medical professionals to their workplaces, or transporting medical supplies.

Last but not least, mutual aid groups managed for a while to counteract the control of information. They started to collect data about the pandemic, to edit scientific articles, to do research, and sometimes urging local governments to listen to the local communities' exigencies. In addition, they committed themselves to constantly archive and re-publish posts that could be deleted. They made extensive use of screenshots.

Notwithstanding the overall significance of their action, the Hong Kong collective' reports documents a major weakness in their activity,

36. World Health Organization, *COVID-19 Weekly Epidemiological Update*, 27 December 2020.

37. The collective is named *Lausan/Liusan* (流傘) and it is strictly connected with the «Hong Kong Umbrella Movement». *San* (傘) means umbrella, and *liu* (流) means to flow, to disseminate and to circulate. *Lausan, Mutual aid and the rebuilding of Chinese society – Part 1/2/3*, accessed 26 December 2020 (<https://lausan.hk/2020/mutual-aid-and-the-rebuilding-of-chinese-society>).

namely a profound lack of organizing experience. This resulted in some negative outcomes, such as poor coordination skills, donated goods with lower than acceptable medical standards, and accumulation of superfluous materials.

The reports also highlight the ways in which the PRC government had dealt with the mutual aid groups: through the logic of corporatism. This logic was not new to the Chinese state and societal history. In the long history of the PRC, but also of the Chinese empire, there is a frequent recurrence of such modality in the relation between the central political power and the political and social peripheries. Local political or social elites and groups usually made up for the power gaps or inefficiencies of the central government. Sometimes this meant fractures and conflicts between the centre and the local powers. Sometimes, to restore its broken legitimacy, the centre was able to appropriate paternity of local initiatives, presenting them as part of its own policies, implemented through central institutions. This, for example, was the case with non-governmental labour rights' organizations being co-opted by the official Chinese trade union,³⁸ as well as the activities of COVID-19 mutual aid groups being incorporated into the work of the Chinese Red Cross.³⁹ At the end of January, the Ministry of Civil Affairs announced that all donations of supplies had to go through the Red Cross and that the government would take up the management and distribution of these donations. The rest of the work hitherto performed by mutual aid groups was carried out by traditional mass organizations.⁴⁰

3. *The economy*

3.1. *The impact of COVID-19*

China had been facing economic slowdown long before the COVID-19 crisis, at least from 2012. The slowdown was mainly due to the consequences of the international economic crisis which began in 2008 and brought about the shutdown of many economic activities and a critical situation for working conditions and employment. The pandemic accelerated the process and exposed the major weaknesses of China's safety net.

The critical period of COVID-19 was during the first and second quarters of 2020. During the first quarter the GDP contracted of 6.8% year on year. In particular, in the first quarter, industrial production dropped

38. Francesca Congiu, *Stato e società nella Cina contemporanea*, pp. 120-127.

39. As all formally recognized civil organizations in China, the Chinese Red Cross is strictly connected and formally dependent on the Chinese communist party's approval.

40. 'Don't be fooled by China Red Cross', *The Diplomat*, 8 April 2020.

by 8.4% on a year-on-year basis; fixed-asset investment fell by 16%; retail sales dropped by 19% while online sales of physical goods rose by 5.9%.⁴¹

The harshness of the impact was underlined in February 2020 in a survey of the top 500 manufacturing enterprises by the Chinese Enterprise Confederation. Among the 299 enterprises that responded, more than half reported losses and more than 60% had reduced either their workforce or recruitment of workers.⁴² The most affected sector was the export one. An online survey of 166 enterprises made by the China National Textile and Apparel Council in April 2020 found that 86% of the respondents had insufficient orders, 57% had order cancellations; and 79% had less than half their normal export orders.⁴³

One of the worst affected categories of workers were migrants. Migrant workers in China are those whose household registration is still in rural areas but have moved to the urban and industrial areas to work. At the end of 2019, there were 290 million migrant workers, representing one-half of the urban workforce. Since the beginning of the politics of reform and opening-up, launched by Deng Xiaoping at the 1978 Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee, migrants have suffered the same problem: they could participate in urban social programmes, such as unemployment insurance, pension, health care, maternity leave, only if they had formal employment contracts. However, in 2020, only one third of migrants enjoyed formal contract status. More or less 200 million migrant workers were not benefiting from public services even though they were contributing to local GDP and to the tax base.⁴⁴ As a consequence of COVID-19, the state introduced special health measures to be applied to the whole population.

During the second quarter, thanks to the gradual removal of mobility and activity restrictions, there was a slight recovery with a growth rate of 3.2%. In the last quarter of 2020, China GDP returned to pre-pandemic growth of about 6.5%, up from 4.9% in the third quarter.⁴⁵ Apart from maintaining social distancing, the restriction of entry from foreign countries and the ban on movement with the new clusters, most businesses as well as schools reopened nationwide in March 2020.

41. 'China says its economy shrank by 6.8% in the first quarter as the country battled coronavirus', *CNBC*, 16 April 2020; 'Coronavirus sees China's GDP record first contraction since at least 1992', *Fortune*, 17 April 2020.

42. The survey involved 160 state-owned enterprises and 340 private ones. Of the 299 respondents, 99 were SOEs and 200 were private. See in International Labour Organization, *China-Rapid assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on employment – Policy Brief*, July 2020.

43. *Ibid.*

44. Huang Tianlei, 'China's migrant workers need help in the economic downturn', *The Peterson Institute for International Economics*, 14 May 2020.

45. 'China returns to pre-pandemic growth in Q4 2020', *Statista*, 18 January 2020.

An estimated RMB 4.9 trillion (or 4.7% of GDP) of discretionary fiscal measures were announced by the Chinese authorities. According to International Monetary Fund (IMF), out of these, RMB 4.2 trillion, namely around 86% of the allocated amount, is estimated to have been spent in 2020. These fiscal measures comprised: increased spending on epidemic prevention and control; production of medical equipment; unemployment insurance and an extension to migrant workers; tax relief and social security contributions. Furthermore, additional guarantees were offered to small and medium enterprises (0.4% of GDP) and fee and tariff cuts for the usage of roads, ports and electricity were implanted (0.9% of GDP).⁴⁶

3.2. *The 14th five year-plan (2021-2025)*

At the end of the year (October 2020), the 19th Central Committee of the CCP, at its 5th plenum, enacted the 14th five-year plan (2021-2025). The introductory sections of the plan, together with Xi Jinping's speech at the plenum, announced a fundamental shift in China's development strategy. Its focus shifted from the exporting market to the domestic market, with an emphasis on the improvement and upgrading of domestic consumption coupled by the improvement of self-sufficiency production in modern technology.⁴⁷ According to the document, and Xi's speech, the shift was mainly a response to the new world tendencies brought about by the pandemic, such as unilateralism, protectionism, and hegemonism. According to Xi and the authors of the plan, the pandemic was accelerating an already ongoing trend of de-globalization, which made of the shift towards the internal market the best way to deal with the changing global environment.

Section III of the 14th five-year plan focused on innovation and technology and foreshadowed the formulation of an action plan for achieving the status as a great power in science and technology. The plan involved investing in national priority science and technology projects. This section called for the construction of national laboratories, comprehensive national science centres, and what were defined as regional innovation «highlands». It called also for the support of Beijing, Shanghai, and the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area to form international scientific and technological innovation centres. The importance of high-level education was emphasized. Likewise, the importance of creating world-class technology leaders and innovative teams, including an internationally competitive reserve army of young scientific and technological talents, was highlighted.

46. 'China Policy Responses to COVID-19', *International Monetary Fund Blog*.

47. 中共中央关于制定国民经济和社会发展第十四个五年规划和二〇三五年远景目标的建议(2020年10月29日中国共产党第十九届中央委员会第五次全体会议通过), (Proposal of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on formulating the 14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and the Long-term Goals for 2035 (Adopted at the Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on 29 October 2020).

Section IV focused on supply chains stating that China should build new competitive supply chains in order to substitute imports and to increase the dependence of the global supply chains on China. In particular the plan called for the acceleration of the growth of new generation information technology, biotechnology, new energy vehicles, green environmental protection, aerospace, marine equipment. It also aimed to improve industries such as the internet, big data, artificial intelligence, and advanced manufacturing clusters. The plan mentioned the improvement and upgrading of the service sector and the importance of infrastructure construction. Furthermore, it encouraged a comprehensive digitalization of the economy, society and government.

Section V of the plan was dedicated to the aim of forming a strong domestic market. In particular this section called for incentives in order to raise household consumption, particularly in the case of middle-income groups. Furthermore, the plan intended to discourage industry monopolies and local protectionism. In order to develop a strong domestic market, it was also necessary to promote investments. In particular an expansion of investments was required in infrastructures, particularly in rural and agricultural areas, in public safety and health, in disaster prevention, in water conservancy, and in urbanization.⁴⁸

It goes without saying that the political economy framework that emerged during 2020 had the state at its centre. The state had clearly a primary role in forging and carrying out economic strategies, where state-owned enterprises were to play a strategic role. Accordingly, they had to be strengthened and protected, as Xi Jinping stated on several occasions.⁴⁹

The decisions taken at the 5th plenum at the end of October 2020 are usually described by international analysts as a fundamental change in China's economic strategy. Nonetheless, it is worth stressing that the reorientation to a growth model centred on domestic demand and technological self-reliance is not at all an innovation attributable to Xi Jinping's leadership. It was a plan and an exigency that emerged during Hu Jintao's years, together with a reinforcement of the political decision and managing power of the central state.⁵⁰

48. *Ibid.*

49. 'Xi Jinping calls for China's state-owned enterprises to be «stronger and bigger», despite US, EU opposition', *South China Morning Post*, 3 November 2020.

50. Francesca Congiu, 'Il ritorno dello stato centrale e le implicazioni per la politica interna ed estera cinese', *Asia Maior*, XXII/2011, pp. 297-320.

4. *Beijing politics toward Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region*

4.1. *A region of conflicts*

Xinjiang is an autonomous region belonging to the People's Republic of China. It is one of the five autonomous regions that formally have been instituted to grant more autonomy to the ethnic minorities living in their territories.⁵¹ Xinjiang's main ethnic group are the Uyghurs (a Turkic group) although other ethnic groups are also present, such as the Kazak, Tibetan, Hui, Tajik, Kyrgyz, Mongol, Russian and Han Chinese. Xinjiang literally means «New Frontier» and it is an area that the Qing Dynasty conquered in the 18th century. The region is about one sixth of China's total land area and borders with Russia, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kashmir and Tibet.

Most of the administrative and economic aspects of the region are managed by the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, named also Bingtuan («Corps»), which is an economic and military institution created by the central state. The Xinjiang Bingtuan – today the only surviving among the several analogous institutions present in China in the 1960s and 1970s – has administrative authority over several medium-sized cities and retains control of several economic activities and agricultural settlements⁵². It was established in the 1950s, with the aim of promoting development, facilitating the settlements of Han Chinese immigrants, upholding security both internally and all along Xinjiang's international borders.

Throughout history, the relationship between the Uyghurs and the Chinese central authority has usually been a conflictual one, characterized by strong local resistance and opposition to the Chinese state's political, economic and social control. In the 1920s and 1930s, there were frequent rebellions leading to the establishment of a temporary East Turkestan Republic. Later, when the Chinese Communist Party began its rule in 1949, separatist tendencies were quite frequent, also apparently fuelled by the Sino-Soviet split and characterized by migrations of Uyghurs to the Soviet Union. The Beijing government responded by promoting a mass migration of Han Chinese which settled down on farms and with the establishment of the Bingtuan militia.

This latter institution, abolished in the 1970s, was soon restored as political contestation, tainted with separatism, mounted in Xinjiang in the

51. The other four autonomous regions are Guangxi, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia and Tibet.

52. Bingtuan is not a specificity of Xinjiang. During the Mao era, most provinces had their own corps. At the beginning of the 1970s, they were all dissolved, the one in Xinjiang being restored in the 1980s. James D. Seymour, 'Xinjiang's Production and Construction Corps, and the Sinification of Eastern Turkestan', *Inner Asia*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2000, Special Issue: Xinjiang, p. 182.

1980s, as in the rest of China⁵³. This was the main reason for the restoration of the Xinjiang Corps as is evident in Deng Xiaoping's words: «No one is allowed to split the country [...] anyone who attempts to do so should be punished [...] The Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, serves as an important force in maintaining local stability».⁵⁴ Since the 1990s, Han mass migrations and investments in the region's development continued within the so-called «Go to West Policy» (西部大开发). During this phase, economic and social inequality grew between the privileged Han Chinese and the Uyghur groups. State-orchestrated Han immigration was encouraged, and Han immigrants were helped to settle down on farms, and to take up government, administrative and managerial jobs. Such migrations dramatically increased the number and proportion of Han groups in Xinjiang and dramatically worsened the Uyghur group's economic and social conditions.⁵⁵

The economic development of the region, and the immigration of Han Chinese have always been considered by the Chinese state as effective at assuring local stability and protecting international borders. Accordingly, the Xinjiang Production and Development Corps – nominally responsible towards the Xinjiang Autonomous Region but effectively towards Beijing – developed and managed the local economy, based on pasture, agriculture, oil extraction and, more recently, industry and built and controlled technological, health and judicial infrastructure.⁵⁶

The above means that the present-day Xinjiang conflict involves ethnic, religious and separatist dimensions as well as issues related to economic and social exploitation and marginalization. It also has an international dimension, related to the role that the Soviet Union played in the past and the Central Asian Republics and, more importantly, the United States play in the present. Of course, such a complex problem cannot be discussed here with any hope of completeness. Within the narrow scope of the objectives

53. Joanne Smith, 'Four Generations of Uyghurs: The Shift towards Ethno-political Ideologies among Xinjiang's Youth', in *Inner Asia*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Special Issue: Xinjiang), 2000, pp. 195-224.

54. *Ibid.*

55. Arvinder Singh, 'Understanding China's 'Go-West' Campaign', *China Report*, Vol. 38, No. 1, 2002; Qiang Ren & Yuan Xin, 'Impacts of Migration to Xinjiang since the 1950s', in Robyn Iredale, Nararn Bilik & Fei Guo (eds.), *China's Minorities on the Move: Selected Case Studies*, Armonk (New York): M. E. Sharpe, 2003, pp. 89-105; David Bachman, 'Making Xinjiang Safe for the Han? Contradictions and Ironies of Chinese Governance in China's Northwest', in Morris Rossabi (ed.), *Governing China's Multiethnic Frontiers*, Seattle (WA): University of Washington Press, 2005, pp. 155-185; Anthony Howell & C. Cindy Fan, 'Migration and Inequality in Xinjiang: A Survey of Han and Uyghur Migrants in Urumqi', *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, Vol. 52, No. 1, 2011, pp. 119-139.

56. James D. Seymour, 'Xinjiang's Production and Construction Corps, and the Sinification of Eastern Turkestan', pp. 171-193.

of this article, nonetheless, it suffices to point out that, on the one hand, we have a region that has never totally accepted submission to the Chinese central state, and on the other, we have Beijing that has been implementing a complex set of repressive strategies aimed to eliminate the resistance and separatist insurgencies of the area: from Han Chinese migration and settlements, to economic development, from social control to political and religious repression.

Since the 1990s, the conflict has been escalating in terms of number of incidents, social unrest, riots and what the Chinese state defines as terrorist attacks at home and abroad. The definition of terms, such as «Uyghur Terrorism», the credibility of the data, and the difficulty related to an in-depth examination of Chinese, Uyghur and international sources are serious methodological problems when dealing with the Xinjiang question. Beijing has published a significant number of white papers on the question, defending the legitimacy of its actions.⁵⁷ Also, from 2001 it had included its struggle against Uyghur separatist insurgency into the global framework of the «war on terror». Part of this strategy was the enacting of a *Counter-terrorism law* in 2015 and of the *Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Implementing Measures of the Counter-terrorism law* in 2016.⁵⁸

4.2. *The establishment of «education and training centres»: the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner*

In November 2019, the UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner's Special Rapporteur published a letter concerning the two

57. The state council information office of the People's Republic of China, *The History and Development of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps* (full text), Beijing, October 2014

(http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2014/10/05/content_281474992384669.htm); *Historical Witness to Ethnic Equality, Unity and Development in Xinjiang* (full text), Beijing, September 2015

(http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2015/09/24/content_281475197200182.htm); *Human Rights in Xinjiang – Development and Progress*, Beijing, June 2017

(http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2017/06/01/content_281475673512156.htm); *Cultural Protection and Development in Xinjiang*, Beijing, November 2018 (http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/11/15/content_281476391524846.htm);

The Fight against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protection in Xinjiang, Beijing, March 2019

(http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2019/03/18/content_281476567813306.htm); *Historical Matters Concerning Xinjiang* (full text), Beijing, July 2019 (http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201907/21/content_WS5d33fed5c6d00d362f668a0a.html);

Vocational Education and Training in Xinjiang, Beijing, August 2019 (http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201908/17/content_WS5d57573cc6d0c6695ff7ed6c.html);

Employment and Labor Rights in Xinjiang, September 2020 (http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/202009/17/content_WS5f62cef6c6d0f7257693c192.html).

58. Justin V. Hastings, 'Charting the Course of Uyghur Unrest', *The China Quarterly*, No. 208, December 2011, pp. 893-912.

above-mentioned laws. According to the letter, the application of the laws was raising serious alarm concerning practices of arbitrary detention, absence of judicial processes, restrictions of the right to freedom of expression, of thought, conscience and religion, movement, and the right to education.⁵⁹

The two above quoted *Counter-terrorism law* and *Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Implementing Measures of the Counter-terrorism law*, in addition to a third act, the *De-Extremism Regulations* 2017, which was already been criticized in a previous UN document,⁶⁰ substantially legalized the creation and existence of so-called «re-education centres».⁶¹ However, the coercive and closed nature of these centres allowed the UN Special Rapporteur to classify them as detention centres, where forced indoctrination was taking place. The above-mentioned laws were thus considered a means to legally justify mass detention of Uyghurs and other minorities. Since 2016, indeed, as reported by the November 2019 letter of the UN Human Right Office, an estimated one million Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims had been sent to internment facilities under the pretext of counter-terrorism and de-extremism policies. Furthermore, the letter argued that the laws and regulations under analysis did not define either terrorism or extremism in compliance with international human rights standards.⁶²

Most of the information about the Xinjiang re-education centres came from secret documents, via a chain of exiled Uyghurs, that have been collected by and verified through the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists.⁶³ These reports are leaked Chinese official documents (translated into English) known as *China Cables Documents*. Among them, there is a telegram from the communist party commission in charge of the Xinjiang's security apparatus. The document appears to be signed by Zhu Hailun, the then deputy secretary of Xinjiang's communist party and Xinjiang's security official leader. The telegram stated that free vocational skills' education and training were strategic, critical and

59. UN Special Rapporteur, 'Comments on the effect and application of the Counter-Terrorism Law and its Regional Implementing Measures, the 2016 Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Implementing Measures of the Counter-Terrorism Law of the People's Republic of China – CHN 18/2019, 1 November 2019; 'Regulation on de-extremification' – OL CHN 12/11/2018, 12 November 2018.

60. 'Regulation on de-extremification' – OL CHN 12/11/2018, 12 November 2018.

61. Justin V. Hastings, 'Charting the Course of Uyghur Unrest', pp. 893-912.

62. UN Special Rapporteur, *Comments on the effect and application of the Counter-Terrorism Law and its Regional Implementing Measures, the 2016 Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Implementing Measures of the Counter-Terrorism Law of the People's Republic of China*, CHN 18/2019, 1 November 2019.

63. It is a US based non-profit organization which entails a network of investigative reporters all around the world. See the website: <https://www.icij.org/about>.

long-term measures to fight against terrorism and to maintain stability. Furthermore, the telegram contained practical instructions necessary to organize mass detention camps, among which how to prevent escapes or trouble inside the camps. The document mandated the use of mandarin as a top priority.⁶⁴

The *China Cable Documents* contained also four Chinese government intelligence briefings on hundreds of Uyghurs revealing the existence of a rich data-base system built up throughout a highly technological surveillance system. It is indeed said that there was a wide network of thousands of video access points which monitored both detainees in the camps and ordinary Uyghur citizens. Detainees, in particular, were disciplined via speaker systems if they did not behave in a proper way, namely if they were caught speaking Uyghur or adhering to Islamic traditions. Outside the camps as well, Xinjiang people were subjected to smartphone scans, location tracking, 3D facial and voice scans. This allowed the local police to create biometric databases at the service of Chinese intelligence units.⁶⁵

4.3. *The reply of the Chinese government*

In December 2019, the permanent mission of the PRC to the United Nations at Geneva transmitted the reply by the Chinese government to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

In its long response, the government stated that: «[...] unconfirmed information have (sic) been used, based on a one-sided interpretation of human rights treaties in question, to make completely unsubstantiated accusations against China and to grossly interfere in its internal affairs and judicial sovereignty [...] China expresses its strong dissatisfaction and firm opposition to this. [...] The achievements of Xinjiang in combating terrorism and extrem-

64. 发电单位自治区党委政法委釜朝壶绸募 (Autonomous Region Party Political and Legal Affairs Commissions), ‘关于进一步加强和规范职业技能教育培训中心工作的意见’ (‘Opinions on further strengthening and standardizing vocational skills and education and training centers work’), *New Party Politics and Law*, n. 419, 2017 (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/6558509-China-Cables-Telegram-Chinese.html>).

65. Autonomous Regional Party Committee Command for Cracking Down and Assaulting on the Front Lines, ‘«Integrated Joint Operation Platform» Daily Essentials Bulletin, n. 2’, 16 June 2017 (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/6558502-China-Cables-IJOP-Daily-Bulletin-2-Enligsh.html>); ‘«Integrated Joint Operation Platform» Daily Essentials Bulletin, n. 9’, 21 June 2017 (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/6558504-China-Cables-IJOP-Daily-Bulletin-9-English.html>); ‘«Integrated Joint Operation Platform» Daily Essentials Bulletin, No. 14’, 25 June 2017 (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/6558506-China-Cables-IJOP-Daily-Bulletin-14-English.html>); ‘«Integrated Joint Operation Platform» Daily Essentials Bulletin, n. 20’, 29 June 2017 (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/6558508-China-Cables-IJOP-Daily-Bulletin-20-English.html>).

ism are obvious for all to see. There is no place for vilification and malicious speculation on the part of the experts of the special procedures. [...]».⁶⁶

In its reply, the Chinese government did not once acknowledge the existence of long-term tensions and conflicts in the Xinjiang region. The advocacy to separatism is only mentioned on one occasion at the beginning of the reply. All long-term issues affecting social peace and harmony in Xinjiang – Han Chinese migrations, Han settlements, economic and social gaps between Uyghur and Han citizens to the advantage of the latter – are conflated and explained away under the double label of «terrorism» and the strategies needed to fight it. The spread of extremist thought is ascribed to poverty, low level of education and backwardness. It is to remedy these problems – it is stated in Beijing’s reply to the UN – that the Chinese government organizes vocational education and training which, allegedly, could play a positive role in «transforming people deeply affected by extremist thought». Again, according to Beijing’s reply, the Chinese government aims to «broaden outlooks» of the benighted Uyghurs through «the study of national language, laws, and regulations and vocational skills, and an understanding of the national traditions and culture». This, together with a comprehension of China’s development and of the international situation, should help Xinjiang people «to better adapt and integrate into modern society and to ward off the corrosive effect of extremist ideas and eliminate terrorism in its source».⁶⁷

The Chinese response went on to explain that the Chinese struggle against terrorism, together with the definition of «terrorism» and «extremism», abide by specific national laws, the Chinese Constitution as well as international standards and conventions. Furthermore, it explained that the implemented collection of biometric data applied only to terrorism suspects and not to ordinary citizens. Finally, in relation to the education and training centres, the reply stated that they were «educational transformation institutions aimed at assisting with employment and eliminating extremism». It continued arguing that «[i]n China, there are no special mechanisms called «detention centers», as referred to in the communication, let alone is there any so called ‘mass detention of Muslims’».⁶⁸

4.4. «Documenting Xinjiang’s detention system»

In 2020 a new report was issued by the International Cyber Policy Centre of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute. The report was based on the satellite mapping of 380 education and training facilities located in Xinjiang

66. Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva, fax N. GJ/72/2019; HRC/NONE/2020/SP/5; GE.20-04603 (E) 130520 130520 (<https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadFile?gId=35050>).

67. *Ibid.*

68. *Ibid.*

and also on previous observations and reports. The report findings appear to be a further confirmation of the existence of numerous detention centres in expansion. The satellite collected data reveal that, from 2017 to 2019, the total number of buildings in these centres grew from 2,321 buildings in 2017 to 4,366 in 2019.⁶⁹

According to the report, two were the main features that allowed them to differentiate between schools and detention centres, allowing them to classify those identified in Xinjiang as «re-education camps». The first was the presence of a combination of walls, watchtowers and extensive networks of barbed-wire fencing, which indeed prevented free movement and clearly set these compounds in a class apart from school compounds and their amenities of schools or training centres. The second key difference between schools and detention camps noted in the report was the lack of cars inside the facilities and the fact that, while aerial photographs of most schools show students walking about, between classes, and resting or playing in the outside areas, the satellite photos taken in Xinjiang showed the absence of people moving outside the purported school compounds.⁷⁰

Furthermore, the satellite observations provided a classification of Xinjiang re-education camps' prototypes and their stories, from their rising up to their closing down. The report argues that new detention sites were built between 2019 and 2020. Most of them are high-security prison-style buildings suggesting a shift in the usage from the lower-security re-education centres to proper detention centres. Among them, the report highlights a new one that has been built near a vocational and technical school in Kashgar. According to the report, the centre, until April 2020, was funded by the World Bank.⁷¹ From the description it seems effectively a detention site: surrounded by a 14-meter-high perimeter wall, with 10-meter-high watchtowers built on the top of the wall. According to the report's estimates, the facility could accommodate over 10,000 people.⁷²

5. Conclusions

Chinese domestic politics in the year 2020 has been marked, as in any other country in the world, by the development and spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. China has been, at the same time, the original epicentre of the disease and one of the countries where the infection has been better and more quickly contained.

69. Nathan Ruser, 'Documenting Xinjiang's detention system', *International Cyber Policy Center*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, September 2020.

70. *Ibid.*

71. Alan Rappeport, 'World Bank Scales Back Project in China's Xinjiang Region', *The New York Times*, 12 November 2019.

72. Nathan Ruser, 'Documenting Xinjiang's detention system'.

Beginning in 2009-2010, China has suffered a severe economic slowdown, characterized by a significant reduction of exports and the closure or reallocation of thousands of factories, followed by various forms of local protests in urban and rural areas. Since the party-state has been basing its political legitimacy almost entirely on the economic development of the country, the ongoing economic crisis, characterized by growing socio-economic inequalities, could become, to all intents and purposes, the potential source of a party-state political crisis. This possibility was evident in the self-defensive mechanisms that the party-state has put into practice at least from 2012. These include the growingly repressive legal and security methods applied to the management of industrial labour and rural area conflicts, as well as the huge efforts aimed at crafting a narrative reinforcing nationalism as the main driving force in building internal consent.

In China, as in the whole world, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the depth of an economic crisis already in place. The pandemic accelerated the process and exposed the major weaknesses of the Chinese safety net. However, in the last quarter of 2020, China's GDP returned to pre-pandemic growth – at about 6.5% – while most businesses and schools reopened nationwide in March 2020.⁷³ Perhaps, it could be assumed that the Chinese party-state has managed to transform the pandemic crisis into an opportunity to generate political consensus, further nourishing nationalistic sentiments. It succeeded in demonstrating a far greater competence than European or US democracies in containing the pandemic infection. It made extensive use of various legal and public security means to limit freedom of movement but for a much shorter period of time in comparison to Europe. Extensive use of public opinion's censure was successfully applied in an effort to control the freedom of expression. At the same time, the central authorities managed to turn public opinion anger against local state and party authorities, holding them responsible for censoring and concealing information about the disease. Besides, when the party-state perceived the emergence and spread of mutual aid groups as a potential danger to its authority and credibility, it incorporated them and their work into the Chinese Red Cross, applying traditional corporatist logics. Finally, the country has also been able to produce its own vaccines which it was providing to less developed countries in the name of «global public good».⁷⁴

In China 2020, the pandemic crisis and its developments went on in parallel with an exacerbation of Beijing's repressive politics towards Xinjiang's Uyghur inhabitants. Most relevant from this viewpoint was the tone of the Chinese government's reply to the November 2019 UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner's Special Rapporteur letter on the allegedly anti-terrorist laws enacted in China in 2015 and 2016.

73. 'China returns to pre-pandemic growth in Q4 2020', *Statista*, 18 January 2020.

74. 'Vaccine Diplomacy is Paying Off for China', *Foreign Affairs*, 11 March 2021.

By observing how the Chinese leadership has dealt with the pandemic and the Xinjiang crisis, it appears clear that it took good care of a basic social human right, namely the right to good health; at the same time, nonetheless, the Chinese leadership demonstrated, once again, its long-time aversion towards civil human rights. The latter include the right to be protected against arbitrary detention, the right to judicial processes, the right to freedom of expression, thought, conscience, religion, movement, and the right to education. In turn, the Chinese party-state justifies its scant regard for civil rights by alleging the necessity to safeguard national interests.

Indeed, the problem of the compatibility between the protection of human rights (intended in their entirety as civil, political, social and economic ones) and the safeguard of national interests remains an open question of the utmost importance. Its discussion, however, does not come within the scope of the issues that this article intended to address.