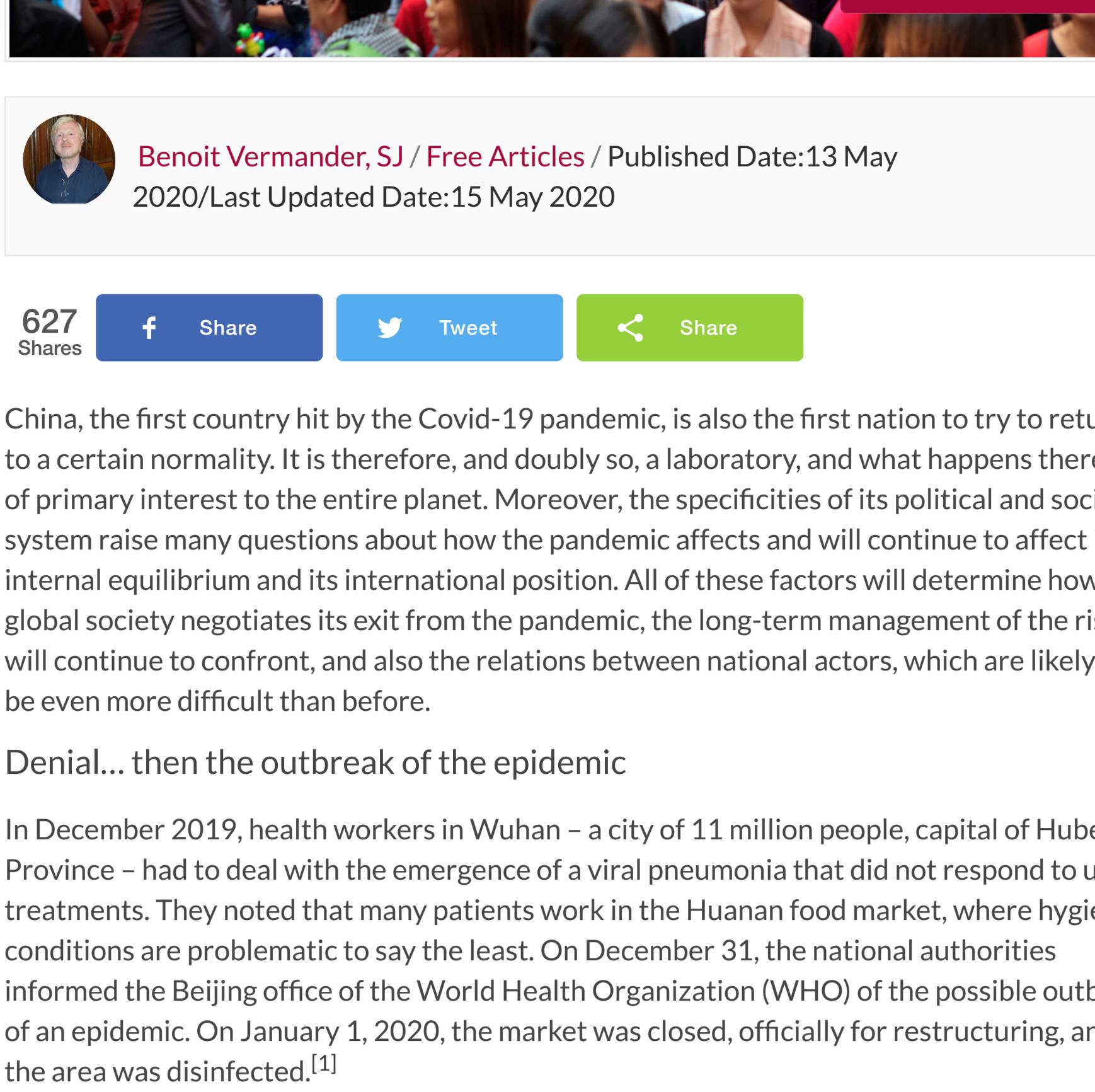


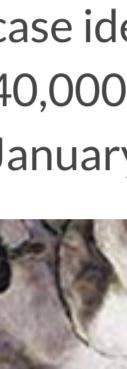
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China and Covid-19



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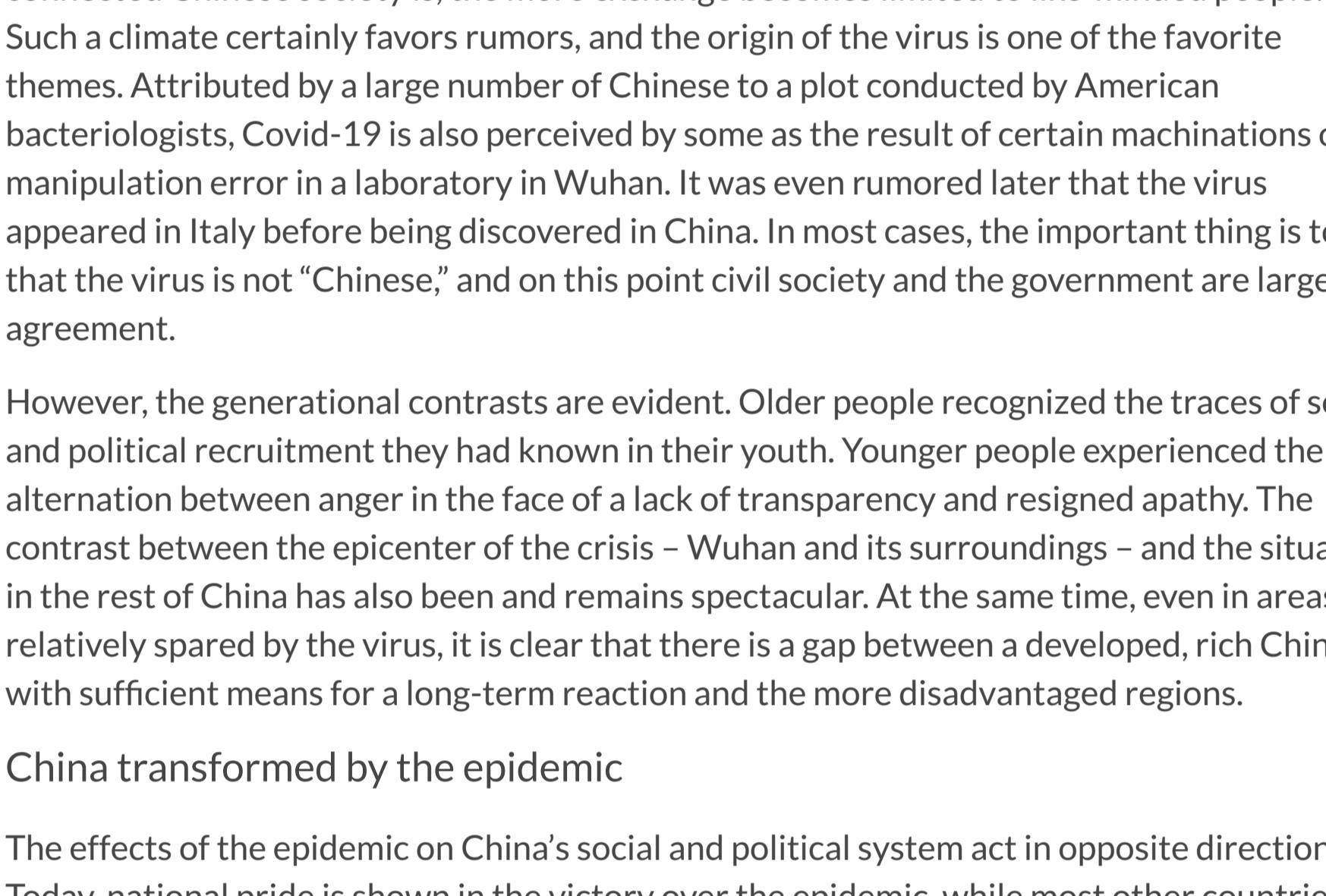
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China, the first country hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, is also the first nation to try to return to a certain normality. It is therefore, and doubly so, a laboratory, and what happens there is of primary interest to the entire planet. Moreover, the specificities of its political and social system raise many questions about how the pandemic affects and will continue to affect its internal equilibrium and its international position. All of these factors will determine how global society negotiates its exit from the pandemic, the long-term management of the risks it will continue to confront, and also the relations between national actors, which are likely to be even more difficult than before.

Denial... then the outbreak of the epidemic

In December 2019, health workers in Wuhan – a city of 11 million people, capital of Hubei Province – had to deal with the emergence of a viral pneumonia that did not respond to usual treatments. They noted that many patients work in the Huanan food market, where hygiene conditions are problematic to say the least. On December 31, the national authorities informed the Beijing office of the World Health Organization (WHO) of the possible outbreak of an epidemic. On January 1, 2020, the market was closed, officially for restructuring, and the area was disinfected.^[1]

The new virus strain was isolated for the first time on January 7. Around January 12, the number of patients increased significantly. The following day, Thailand confirmed the first case identified outside China. However, the municipality of Wuhan still held a party for 40,000 families on January 18^[2] to begin celebrations for the Chinese New Year, which fell on January 25 this year.^[3]



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On December 30, Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist, sent two messages on WeChat to warn his study colleagues about what was happening. They spread beyond the small group to which they were addressed. The ophthalmologist himself had been warned by Dr. Ai Fen, director of the emergency department at Wuhan Central Hospital, who immediately understood the seriousness of the phenomenon. On January 3, the Wuhan Security Office sent Li Wenliang a letter of complaint and then had him sign a statement acknowledging that he had spread unfounded rumors and should refrain from doing so, at the risk of more severe penalties. After contracting the virus in the exercise of his profession on January 10, Li Wenliang published a report on January 31 detailing his issues with the police: it was a turning point in social awareness of the delay in responding to the threat.

His death, at the age of 34, on February 7, triggered numerous reactions full of pain and anger on social networks, many of which were expressed by prominent personalities. Overwhelmed by the storm, the government set up a commission of inquiry into the management of the first days of the epidemic. The young ophthalmologist received posthumous rehabilitation and became a communist hero, devoted to the cause of the people.^[4]

In the first week of February the Chinese authorities seemed largely unarmed, both in the face of the nature of the threat and in the way it was eroding their system of governance. But their response was taking shape.

Isolation and instrumentalization

The variety of clinical symptoms and, often, the difficulty of diagnosis contributed to delaying awareness of the threat, perhaps as demonstrated by the first reactions of the regional authorities. The relative weight of the factors that led to the initial underestimation of the threat remains a matter of debate. It was only on January 21 that a Chinese doctor designated by the government to assess the situation publicly acknowledged that the virus is capable of transmission from person to person. As of January 23, Wuhan was under siege; its inhabitants could not move and they remained confined to their homes. The entire province of Hubei was immediately isolated from the rest of China; the isolation strategy then became systematic, although applied with rules that varied from area to area.

The implementation of the containment was facilitated by the structure of urban China: everywhere, residences of different size and social status have their space clearly delimited by a fence; entrances have guards at doors and gates; neighborhood committees disseminate official instructions. Most city dwellers live in this situation. In recent years, attempts have been made, without too much conviction, to make the fence system more flexible, but it has proved very useful in the present circumstances.

Initially caught off guard, the government then undertook to spread a "scientific" and methodical image, that of an organization capable of managing on its own a crisis that, as Xi Jinping acknowledged, put the Chinese governance model itself to the test.^[5] At the same time, it found a new field of application for the social control techniques developed methodically in recent years: facial recognition helped track and identify offenders; they were blacklisted under the "social credit" system, which is now more or less operational^[6]; drones were used to warn careless or stubborn people to wear a mask; robots equipped with sensors were used to approach people who could be infected; and a QR code system was introduced to keep track of movements and to allow people to enter public places.

Connected and fragmented, a society in dismay

Chinese society expressed itself in the fragile free space permitted through social networks. This space is essentially private, and above all fragmented, as it is in the West. The more connected Chinese society is, the more exchange becomes limited to like-minded people. Such a climate certainly favors rumors, and the origin of the virus is one of the favorite themes. Attributed by a large number of Chinese to a plot conducted by American bacteriologists, Covid-19 is also perceived by some as the result of certain machinations or a manipulation error in a laboratory in Wuhan. It was even rumored later that the virus appeared in Italy before being discovered in China. In most cases, the important thing is to say that the virus is not "Chinese," and on this point civil society and the government are largely in agreement.

However, the generational contrasts are evident. Older people recognized the traces of social and political recruitment they had known in their youth. Younger people experienced the alternation between anger in the face of a lack of transparency and resigned apathy. The contrast between the epicenter of the crisis – Wuhan and its surroundings – and the situation in the rest of China has also been and remains spectacular. At the same time, even in areas relatively spared by the virus, it is clear that there is a gap between a developed, rich China with sufficient means for a long-term reaction and the more disadvantaged regions.

China transformed by the epidemic

The effects of the epidemic on China's social and political system act in opposite directions. Today, national pride is shown in the victory over the epidemic, while most other countries, especially Western ones, seem more fragile. A little destabilized in recent months by the trade conflict with the United States and the protests that have shaken Hong Kong for a long time, the state is very careful to insist on the "sacrifices" made by China on behalf of the rest of the world: the virus is not "Chinese," and China is at the forefront of a struggle that it itself is carrying out for the rest of the planet. On social networks you can see many people who are outraged at the "ingratitude" shown by Western countries in response to the help that China is offering the rest of the world, and a nationalist narrative has developed that is exacerbated by some who even go so far as to predict or hope for military developments. This is mainly "war rhetoric" and contributes to maintaining an unhealthy climate.

On the other hand, even if the desire for more transparent, less manipulated information continues to manifest itself (openly or quietly), China is not really ready to change its "meritocratic" model. Political governance and the technocratic legitimacy of the leaders have taken on a "scientific" aura. Direct interventions by civil society in truly important issues have become even harder to predict. However, the pandemic will lead to a strengthening of social control and associated techno-political systems. One could, of course, imagine that the crisis will cause strong divisions in the leadership.

However, even though the mass of citizens will return to the concerns of everyday life, a part of the population risks coming out of this struggle by tolerating even less than before the pressures of the state. If such a phenomenon occurs, its intensity will certainly not be enough to impose lasting reforms; yet, it should be enough to increase tensions, which, though limited, were already evident before the epidemic.

The ongoing suspicions about the real death toll will fuel these tensions,^[7] especially in Wuhan and Hubei, where the trauma remains extremely painful and where the authorities, insisting on the problems of "social stability" have not allowed the population to properly express their grief, limiting funeral ceremonies to about 20 minutes.

In addition, economic recovery creates problems. The figures for the first quarter of the year all point to a very sharp contraction at a time when the excessive burden of debt is already a problem. Exports are at risk and a policy of heavy public investment, already used several times over the last 12 years, is facing clear limits. Now, a sharp rise in unemployment would be very destabilizing. It is likely that, despite its dangers, a policy of public investment will be undertaken immediately, but it is unlikely to last long. The encouragement of household consumption and the reorientation of Chinese companies toward the domestic market are great and will be even greater. If that were not enough, latent discontent would focus on income and employment. Another cause for concern is the property market, in which many citizens have invested heavily.

China in front of the world

Will China be able to play a positive role in the global reflection and reforms that hopefully can be initiated once the epidemic is at least largely controlled? On a technical level, it will certainly contribute to virological research; it will eliminate the markets for live animals that have been the cause of several epidemics over the last 20 years, and it will provide financial or technical assistance to countries carefully chosen according to strategic objectives. But it will certainly result in great tension with much of the international community when it comes to re-reading the events, and it is already actively preparing for this. It will undoubtedly praise its meritocratic model, the importance of digital tools in population control, and will criticize the alleged weakness of democratic models.^[8]

In other words, there is a danger that the coronavirus crisis will be an opportunity for China to further expand what Singapore analyst Eric Teo called "a new tribute system" back in 2004.^[9] The classic tributary system, which had established itself during the Qing Dynasty, granted favors to states that acknowledged themselves as dependent on China. Such favors today can include investments, preferential purchases, technical aid, diplomatic support and so on, provided that the state receiving such favors aligns itself at a diplomatic level with Beijing. In the first decade of this century, the system was still largely limited to the regional sphere of China; today it has spread throughout the world. The new "silk routes" have made the use of this instrument systematically, and there will be many countries requiring this type of support because of the economic and health shock.^[10]

Moreover, the values that are being reassessed today following the pandemic – sobriety, transparency, the solidarity of civil society – are not inscribed in the DNA of the development model chosen by China. Discussions on the emerging new world order will be difficult and probably unsuccessful.

If China maintains an attitude that makes attack the best form of defense, the dialogue that needs to begin may not go very far. Some questions will not easily disappear: those concerning the origin of the virus and its management in the first few days; those on the way China faces the consequences of the pandemic in order to engage on a country-by-country basis in the management of its own interests, or perhaps decides to take a more global and generous path. China must understand that the way it deals with these issues will radically influence its relations with Europe and the rest of the world.

Yet it would be dangerous and irresponsible to try to ostracize this country. The search for any points of convergence and cooperation is absolutely essential, just as one must not give up on "telling the truth." While remaining very focused in its assessment of the factors we have just mentioned, Europe will have to try to start a process with China and other global players that will rebuild the foundations of international cooperation in the face of the dangers threatening humanity, including pandemics. This process will require the truth to be sought and expressed, but it will also require us to look to the future, to cultivate a sense of shared responsibility and to explore all the consequences from a fact whose reality has entered our condition as human beings: humanity is truly united by the same destiny.

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[1]. It is not certain, however, that this market was the primary source of the virus. Some infectious disease specialists speculate that the first cases were recorded between September and November in Wuhan, but outside the market. Recently, hypotheses have been aired about a possible mistake in an epidemiological research center in Wuhan: two dispatches from the U.S. State Department in January 2018 had expressed their fears about the safety conditions of the laboratory, which had received "an American subsidy" (see J. Rogin, "State Department cables warned of safety issues at Wuhan lab studying bat coronaviruses", in *Washington Post*, April 14). This information does not prove that the virus originated from this or another location, and no hypothesis has been verified with certainty.

[2]. See news.sina.com.cn, January 21, 2020.

[3]. This is how the Chinese government has communicated its interpretation of the development of the epidemic: Xinhua, "China publishes timeline on COVID-19 information sharing, int'l cooperation," April 7, 2020, in www.xinhuanet.com.

[4]. On April 2, the Party awarded Li Wenliang the title of "martyr," along with many other deceased health workers.

[5]. Statement of January 25, broadcast by China Central Television (CCTV); Xinhua, "Xi stresses law-based infection prevention, control", in Xinhuanet, February 5, 2020, in www.xinhuanet.com.

[6]. Xinhua, "China blacklists individuals for concealing symptoms, violating quarantine", February 13, 2020, in www.xinhuanet.com/. Being ostracized from the system means, for example, not being able to buy a train ticket or obtain bank credit; there is also the risk of public stigmatization, a system operating in China even before the epidemic.

[7]. The first public questions about the exact number of deaths in Wuhan were formulated by a Chinese newspaper, Caixin, in an article of March 26, which referred to the count of coffins placed in each of the eight crematoria in the city. China then revised its estimate of the number of deaths in Wuhan during the pandemic on April 17, increasing it by 50 percent. In the new official count, in fact, the authorities explain that they have cross-referenced data acquired from hospital records, information provided by police stations and lists of funeral agencies. The total number of deaths attributed to the coronavirus has thus been increased to 3,869.

[8]. This last criticism will be partly caused by the fact that two Asian democracies have been among the countries that have managed the epidemic better so far: South Korea and Taiwan.

[9]. Eric Teo Chu Cheow, "Paying tribute to Beijing: An ancient model for China's new power", in *International Herald Tribune*, January 21, 2004. Cf. Id., "China as the Center of Asian Economic Integration", in *China Brief*, July 22, 2004.

[10]. Cf. "China's post-covid propaganda push", in *The Economist*, April 16, 2020.

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