

12 The Coronavirus as the ‘Final Straw’ of the CCP’s Performative Legitimacy?

A New Economic Model in the Post-COVID-19 Era

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Abstract

While COVID-19 is still raging worldwide, the Chinese Premier Li Keqiang confidently stated that China had pulled out of the pandemic faster and in better shape than much of the world because of the ‘hard work and sacrifice of [the] entire nation’. However, this ‘hard work and sacrifice’ in curbing the spread of COVID-19 came at a price. The global COVID-19 crisis has further worsened the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s ‘shrinking’ performative legitimacy because it has led to a slowdown of economic growth. Considering the ongoing Sino-US trade disputes and the rising suspicion of China and Chinese firms in western economies, the chapter examines to what extent the CCP can save its performative legitimacy through the new economic strategy dubbed the ‘dual circulation strategy’.

Keywords: dual circulation strategy, non-pharmaceutical interventions, Wuhan lockdown, performative legitimacy

Introduction

We live in unprecedented times. COVID-19 has become a pandemic that is having tremendous impacts on societies around the world. After the extent of the pandemic emerged, pharmaceutical companies began to pour considerable efforts into finding a COVID-19 vaccine. While several promising vaccines have been launched since early 2021, before vaccinating the majority of the population, countries have employed an array of

Van der Veere, Anoma P., Florian Schneider, and Catherine Yuk-ping Lo (eds), *Public Health in Asia during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Global Health Governance, Migrant Labour, and International Health Crises*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press 2022

DOI: 10.5117/9789463720977_CH12

non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) in attempts to flatten the infection curves. These include school and workplace closures, bans on public events, restrictions on mass gatherings, stay-at-home requirements, and internal movement limits.

China is no exception. Three weeks after the first officially reported cases in China, the Chinese authorities ordered a lockdown of Wuhan and its neighbouring cities for a total of 76 days. Travel in and out, for any reason, was prohibited. Authorities stopped public transport and banned most private cars. The authorities suspended free movement and started enforcing mandatory quarantine (BBC News 2021a). While it was a priority to contain COVID-19 as efficiently and quickly as possible, the NPIs China used are likely to have both short and long-term economic repercussions on the Chinese economy. This chapter will first discuss these impacts. After this, it will discuss the extent to which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) can sustain its performative legitimacy by adopting a new economic model, which has been called a 'dual circulation economy'. It will also discuss the implications of Chinese economic development in the post-COVID-19 era. In this discussion, the chapter will consider the ongoing Sino-US political disputes and the rising suspicion of China and Chinese firms in Western economies.

Shaking Performative Legitimacy: Economic Impacts of COVID-19 NPI Measures

The legitimacy of a state can be defined as 'the belief that in spite of shortcomings and failures, the political institutions are better than others that might be established and [that these institutions] therefore can demand obedience' (Yang and Zhou 2015, 70). Weber (1978, 28) proposed three ideal-typical aspects of legitimacy as the basis of state power: First, a state enjoys traditional legitimacy when the people see its power as inherited or always existent. Second, a state has charismatic legitimacy when the state's leader or leaders are perceived as having exceptional quality as a result of their experiences or personal attributes. Finally, a state possesses legal legitimacy when the state's power is derived from a set of judicial and administrative principles that bind all members of society. Based on the Weberian classification, Yang and Zhou (2015, 70) developed three pillars of legitimacy with which state power can be justified, including legal-electoral, ideological, and performance legitimacy. A state's justification of its power is based on legal-electoral legitimacy when top leaders are elected by the

public. Meanwhile, ideological legitimacy means that a state's right to rule is justified by a specific value system. Finally, performance legitimacy implies that a state's right to rule is justified by its economic and/or moral performance (Yang and Zhou 2015, 70).

In the case of the CCP, the Party lacks legal-electoral legitimacy because it is not democratically elected by the public, based on liberal understandings of democracy and democratic election (Yang and Zhou 2015, 70).¹ The role of communism in giving ideological legitimacy to the CCP has been viewed to be declining, because the party has implemented capitalist Open Door economic policies since the 1980s (Yang and Zhou 2015, 73).² The CCP's ideological legitimacy was further destabilized in the aftermath of the crackdown of the democratic movement during the 1989 Tiananmen Incident (Zheng 2008, 788).³ Therefore, in the absence of political legitimacy and with fading ideological legitimacy, performative legitimacy serves as the main pillar that justifies the rule of the CCP (See Zhao 2017). However, the performative pillar has been weakened since 2012 because the Chinese economy has reached the limits of its quantitative growth, which had been driven by investment and exports over the past thirty years. China's real GDP growth rate was on average more than 10% for the period 1981 through 2010, but it dropped to 7.86% in 2012 and to 6.11% in 2019 (The World Bank 2019). The Chinese authorities refer to this gradually declining trend as the 'new normal'. This concept was first used by Chinese President Xi Jinping to describe China's economic development to an international audience when he delivered a keynote speech at the opening ceremony of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation

1 In a democratic country: (a) there is political pluralism; citizens are permitted to participate in the political system, (b) legitimacy is obtained via a fair and free election, (c) the human rights of the citizens are protected, and (d) the state is founded on the principle of the Rule of Law. That is, the law applies equally to all citizens, including the president and those who make and enforce the law. Therefore, China lacks legal-electoral legitimacy, a point also argued by Yang and Zhou (2015).

2 There was a shift from ideological to performative legitimacy during the 1980s. The open-door policy attracted a large number of overseas Chinese from Taiwan, Hong Kong and other parts of the world. These people not only brought into China new ways of life and ideas, but shocked their mainland relatives by their affluence. The old state propaganda on the superiority of socialism over capitalism, that many Chinese people had believed in, was invalidated (See Yang and Zhou 2015).

3 After the crackdown on demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in 1989, the Chinese government knew that continuous economic reform was key to remaining in power. Facing resistance from the leftists in the Party, Deng started his southern China tour in 1992, calling for more radical economic reforms. Deng's southern China tour was decisive. After the tour, top Chinese leaders all stepped out to show support, leftist propaganda disappeared from mainstream media, and the state seemed to have quietly abandoned communist ideology as the basis of state legitimacy (See Yang and Zhou 2015).

(APEC) CEO summit in November 2014 (Xinhua 2014). Apart from slowing economic growth, the continuous rise in the debt-to-GDP ratio in China has further jeopardized the CCP's performative legitimacy. As of 2009, China's total corporate, household, and government debts amounted to 189% of its GDP (China Power Team 2017). The debts reached 303% of GDP in the first quarter of 2019 (Reuters 2019). Although a debt-to-GDP ratio exceeding 100% is not unusual, China's credit expansion over the past decade has been so large and rapid that this could threaten the long-term stability of the CCP's performative legitimacy. The three pillars of legitimacy developed by Yang and Zhou (2015, 71) suggest that a one-party government could collapse if the performative pillar is no longer sustainable. As a result, some commentators have speculated that a big crisis, like COVID-19, could be the 'ultimate' cause of the collapse of the one-party system in China (Zhou 2020).

The CCP, however, has attempted to boost its legitimacy in the way it contained the COVID-19 outbreak. On 20 January, President Xi gave 'important directions' for responding to the coronavirus (Xinhua 2020). This was the first public speech that Xi made after the first cases were reported in China in December 2019 (Wang et al. 2020). In Chinese bureaucratic politics, officers tend to care about self-preservation. Local officials fear to take actions that would anger their superiors; they would rather wait for their superiors to make decisions and are only accountable to their superiors instead of to the people (Li 2020). As such, when the top leader openly admits to an outbreak, all related departments and officials understand that they are granted the permission to react to the outbreak. Following the speech given by Xi, two State Council special meetings were held, the first on 20 January and the second between 23 and 24 January. On 26 January, the Chinese authorities established a policymaking and coordination body in the State Council, chaired by Premier Li Keqiang and named the Central Leading Small Group for Work to Counter the New Coronavirus Infection Pneumonia Epidemic, also known as the Coronavirus Leading Small Group (China Daily 2020).

This proactive approach from the Chinese authorities resulted in a series of non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) that some commentators have described as being 'draconian' (Gunia 2020). One well-known measure that the Chinese government implemented on 23 January was the lockdown of Wuhan and two neighbouring cities. The restriction banned travel in and out of the three cities for any reason. Authorities suspended public transport and banned most private cars. They eventually began house-to-house inspections and enforced quarantine (BBC News 2021a). In terms of the number of people being quarantined (which was around twenty million in three cities), the scale of lockdown was unprecedented in human history.

Other cities in China were also placed under semi-lockdown. For instance, many residential districts and housing estates put in place a system of 'enclosed management'. Under this system, non-residents were not allowed to enter residential districts. One person in each household was permitted to go out for grocery shopping every two to five days. This person had to wear a surgical mask and present their identity card upon entering and leaving. They were given a temperature check at the gate (Gunia 2020). The government has also used a system to monitor the health status of individuals through digital barcodes on an app (the Alipay Health Code) that is installed on people's smartphones (Burgers and Sicinski 2020, 15).

To deal with the outbreak, the Chinese government also built two new hospitals in Wuhan, with construction of these taking only ten days. These hospitals can admit and treat around 2000 patients (Williams 2020). Another sixteen makeshift hospitals were later set up in Wuhan to admit patients with mild symptoms. In 2003, during the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak, the Chinese government had similarly built a hospital on the outskirts of Beijing, with construction taking seven days in total (BBC News 2020). This previous experience with the rapid construction of emergency hospital facilities may have helped the Chinese government in its response to the new COVID-19 pandemic seventeen years later.

China was the first country to implement large-scale lockdown measures and also the first country to ease COVID-19 restrictions. At the opening of the National People's Congress (NPC) on 22 May, Premier Li confidently stated that China had pulled out of the pandemic crisis faster and in better shape than much of the world because of the 'hard work and sacrifice of our entire nation' (Li 2020).

However, this claimed 'hard work and sacrifice' of the 'entire nation' in curbing the global spread of COVID-19, came at a price. Global supply chains have been disrupted due to complete and partial lockdowns in various industrial provinces of China. One prominent example of such disruption has been the way in which COVID-19 has affected the China-based production of Apple's iPhone. In February 2020, Apple warned of global 'iPhone supply shortages' as a result of its Chinese factories being shut because of the coronavirus outbreak. The Californian company told investors that it would fail to meet its quarterly revenue target of US\$63-67 billion because of both a 'temporarily constrained' supply of iPhones, as well as a dramatic drop in Chinese shoppers during the health crisis (Neate 2020).

In February 2020, the manufacturing purchasing managers' index (PMI) registered 35.7%, which was the lowest it had ever been, indicating a serious

contraction of manufacturing activity.⁴ However, the figure released in August 2020 showed that the index rebounded to its baseline of 50% (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2020). A private manufacturing survey in China, the Caixin Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI), also indicated that manufacturing activity expanded in September with an index figure of 53% (Trading Economics 2020). Furthermore, China's economy has seen a strong rebound since July 2020, from a contraction of 6.8% in the first quarter of 2020 to a positive growth of 6.5% in the fourth quarter of the same year (BBC News 2021b). Overall, China's economy grew 2.3% in 2020, making it the only major economy that had a positive GDP expansion during that year (BBC News 2021b). Nevertheless, despite these positive figures, the prospects for economic development in China remain uncertain. China's key trading partners, including South Korea, Japan, Europe, and the US, are still struggling with the impact of coronavirus. That the Chinese government did not set a target for economic growth during the 2020 National Congress might imply that the authorities are being cautious about COVID-19's impact on other economies and the possibility that COVID-19 could resurge in China.

US-China Economic Decoupling amid the Sino-US Cold War

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, the CCP's performative legitimacy had already been challenged as a result of changes in the long-standing US policy of engagement with China. The radical turn to a more critical US posture towards China was first seen in the speech delivered by former Vice President Mike Pence at the Hudson Institute in October 2018 (White House 2018). Another speech delivered by Pence in 2019 then further outlined the end of US engagement with China:

As history will surely note, in less than three years, President Donald Trump has changed that narrative forever. No longer will America and its leaders hope that economic engagement alone will transform Communist China's authoritarian state into a free and open society that respects private property, the rule of law, and international rules of commerce (White House 2019).

4 PMI is a critical indicator of China's manufacturing activity. An index value above 50% indicates a positive development in the industrial sector, whereas a value below 50% indicates a negative situation.

The speeches by Pence have been materialized in a 'trade war' between China and the US. The US delivered three rounds of tariffs on Chinese goods in 2018, then a fourth round in September 2019. Together, these mean that the US has imposed tariffs on more than US\$360 billion of Chinese goods (Yong 2019). Meanwhile, in response to the US tariffs, China has imposed tariffs on more than US\$110 billion of US products (Yong 2019). Negotiations between the two sides resulted in the 'phase one' deal signed on 15 January 2020. China agreed to increase purchases of American products and services by at least US\$200 billion (The Straits Times 2020). The deal also includes stronger Chinese legal protections for intellectual property rights, and to some extent China also made concessions to financial services by agreeing to speed up the offering of business licenses.

While the Sino-US trade war is still ongoing, the current pandemic has accelerated the decoupling of the Chinese and American economies (Rachman 2020). The naming and origin of the new coronavirus is one source of diplomatic tensions between the two countries. The virus was called 'Wuhan Pneumonia' (*Wuhan feiyan*) by the Chinese authorities when the first cases were reported in Wuhan. Later, the central authorities replaced the name 'Wuhan Pneumonia' with 'New Coronavirus' (*xin guangzhuang bingdu*) so that people in other parts of the world would not connect the virus with China. To divert the anger of domestic and international audiences regarding the initial slow response to the outbreak, in mid-March 2020, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian promoted the theory that the virus had originated in the US and was brought to Wuhan by a US delegate who attended the Military World Games (Westcott and Jiang 2020). Responding to the Chinese accusations about the spread of the 'American coronavirus' to Wuhan, President Trump engaged in a war of words by framing the disease as the 'Chinese virus'.

In May 2020, Trump also announced the termination of the US's relationship with the WHO. This can be seen as another move by the US to show dissatisfaction with the ostensibly growing Chinese influence in the international organization. Trump alleged that, by covering up the COVID-19 outbreak, the Chinese government had caused the loss of more than 100,000 lives in the US and over one million lives worldwide. He also alleged that the WHO has been effectively controlled by Beijing. Based on the survey conducted by the Pew Research Centre in 2020, around two-thirds of Americans (64%) say 'China has done a bad job dealing with the coronavirus outbreak'. Around three-quarters (78%) 'place a great deal or fair amount of the blame for the global spread of the coronavirus on the Chinese government's initial handling of the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan' (Silver et al. 2020).

The political rift between the US and China has deepened during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in further economic decoupling between Beijing and Washington. During 2020, the Chinese smartphone apps TikTok and WeChat were singled out for attention by the Trump administration. In mid-September 2020, the US Department of Commerce said that it would ban both TikTok and WeChat from app stores and would bar the apps from accessing critical Internet services in the US (Arbel et al. 2020). A US federal judge later issued a temporary injunction blocking the WeChat ban. However, TikTok faced having to shut down operations unless its Chinese owner ByteDance could sell TikTok's US operations to a domestic company to satisfy US national security concerns (Arbel et al. 2020). The dispute was supposed to be settled when Trump approved a deal in which Oracle and Walmart partnered with TikTok to form a new, US-controlled company, but the final deal has been pushed back indefinitely by the Biden administration (Feiner 2021). That said, with the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee passing the Strategic Competition Act in April 2021, it is speculated more US decoupling actions might continue under the Biden administration (Hsu 2021).

Chinese Responses to the US Economic Decoupling: Dual Circulation Strategy

To sustain its performative legitimacy, the CCP has implemented consistent economic reforms during the past four decades. One of these has been the 'supply-side structural reform' (SSSR) policy implemented in 2015. This has attempted to reduce overproduction in selected products such as coal, iron, and steel. Another such policy is the 'Made in China 2025' plan announced in 2018. This plan intended to shift China from being an 'export and investment-led' economy to a 'demand and innovation-driven' economy by using government subsidies, mobilizing state-owned enterprises, and pursuing intellectual property acquisition to catch up with – and then surpass – Western technological prowess in advanced industries.

In response to the US's recent economic decoupling, in October 2020 China unveiled its own decoupling strategy, named the 'dual circulation strategy' (DCS). In this strategy, 'circulation' refers to the production and consumption of goods and services. The first or international circulation in the 'dual' formulation concerns maintaining integration with the rest of the world. The second or internal circulation focuses on increased reliance on domestic demand and reducing economic dependence on the rest of the

world (Garcia-Herrero 2020). President Xi is demanding that China both continues its commitment to global integration and exports, or international circulation, and also emphasizes domestic production for home consumption, or internal circulation (Pettis 2020). The 'dual' formulation has become a key priority in the Chinese government's 14th five-year plan (2021-2025), replacing the supply-side structural reform (SSSR) and 'Made in China 2025' designated in the previous five-year period (Huang 2021).

The concept of 'internal circulation' remains contested. Some analysts believe that it is an attempt to present old wine in a new bottle. A similar concept was proposed in 2011 by the then-premier Wen Jiabao in the country's 12th Five-Year Plan, claiming that the Chinese government would prioritize domestic consumption-led growth over export-led growth (China's National People's Congress 2011). Pettis (2020) argues that internal circulation conflicts with international circulation. Boosting domestic consumption requires policies that would increase wages and benefits for workers. This would weaken international circulation, which requires low labour costs to maintain export competitiveness. Blanchette and Polk (2020) state that the dual circulation strategy will be inward-looking and that if the authorities focus on internal circulation, China will close its door to the outside world. Young (2020) suggests that China will retreat into the kind of 'self-reliance' developmental policy begun by Mao Zedong during the Chinese Civil War (i.e., 'regeneration through one's own efforts,' or *zili gengsheng*).

Given that the dual circulation strategy is the Chinese response to the US decoupling, internal circulation entails greater technological self-reliance. The vulnerability of Chinese companies to bans on sales of US computer chips has intensified China's drive to become self-sufficient in critical technologies. In light of the US sanctions, Huawei announced that a chip plant would be set up in Shanghai to secure supplies of semiconductors for its core telecom infrastructure business (Hille et al. 2020). Xi has likewise stepped up calls for China to achieve 'self-sufficiency' for crucial components. During a meeting of the CCP's Central Committee, Xi declared that China would make enhanced technological self-reliance a priority over the next fifteen years and would make it 'a strategic pillar of national development' (Buckley and Myers 2020). From a technological development point of view, China may benefit from the current situation because this could move it to shake off its over-dependence on US chips. That said, the success of international circulation depends on the openness of the existing liberal world order established by the US. If the US decides to further decouple from China, its allies might follow suit with similar policies. Recently, for example, Australia has decided to diversify its export markets and supply

chains away from China. Some European countries have similarly begun to reconsider trade and investment ties with China (Johnson and Gramer 2020). Again, the dual circulation strategy cannot be successful in the absence of international circulation.

Concluding Remarks

In 2019, the CCP celebrated the 70th anniversary of the founding of New China in 1949. Historically, one-party governments have rarely survived longer than 70 years. I would argue that because of a lack of ideological and political-electoral legitimacy, especially in recent years, economic performance has been the key pillar legitimatizing the CCP's rule. The slowdown of economic growth since 2015 and the possible financial repercussions of the Sino-US Trade War since 2018 have threatened to impact the Party's legitimacy. The COVID-19 crisis and the related NPIs that were implemented in China further risk eroding the CCP's performative legitimacy. Therefore, the CCP recently put forth the dual circulation strategy as a new economic model to respond to the US economic decoupling from China. While the internal circulation contributes to the advancement of Chinese technology and innovation, continuous US decoupling could have a detrimental effect on the success of this strategy.

Acknowledgement

I want to thank Yow Shuning for helping me with the data collection. Any errors remain my own.

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