

# Re-Branding China's Battered Image in Nigeria amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

## A Qualitative Analysis of Chinese Diplomatic Communications

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### Abstract

The outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic made China to witness not only high mortality rates and heavy economic losses in its national territory, but also an international image crisis which has since remained a veritable albatross for the Chinese government. In effect, by the time the epidemic was declared a pandemic, China's image on the international stage had perceptibly become negative as both governments and citizens across the world tended to associate the Asian emerging nation with the origin and propagation of the Corona virus in the world as well as with many other crises/challenges derived from the pandemic. If China's image crisis has attracted the attention of several commentators, little or no research has been done so far on how the Chinese government has sought to re-brand China's image in the early stages of the epidemic as well as after the public health situation was declared a pandemic. This paper attempts to fill this gap in knowledge, through an examination of Chinese diplomatic communications in Nigeria during the early stages of COVID-19 pandemic. Using critical observations and a qualitative analysis of newspapers and online articles generated and published by China's Embassy in Nigeria, the paper specifically seeks to show how China's diplomatic communications sought to rebuild China's image as Nigeria's major partner in development and a friend on which Nigeria should always count to mitigate or overcome the pandemic.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 Pandemic, Diplomatic Communication, Chinese Cooperation, China's African Policy

### Introduction

The outbreak of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) came with a host of serious socio-political and economic problems for the People's Republic of China. According to commentators like Richard McGregor (cited in Krishnan, 2020), the outbreak of this disease is China's biggest crisis since the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. In effect, when the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on 11 March 2020, China was not only one of the world's countries witnessing the greatest mortality rates and economic downturns, but also one of the world's nations whose image on the international scene was the most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Chang & Fung, 2021; Christensen, 2020; Verma, 2020). The outbreak of the pandemic actually gave birth to all manner of conspiracy theories that depict China as the origin and the principal propagator of the disease as well as the root of various global crises related to the COVID-19 pandemic (Gu, Yingwen, Xinyu, Jian-Feng, 2021; Argentino & Amarasingam, 2020). Some of these theories – notably the Wuhan lab-leak, the “zoonotic” myth and the Qanon conspiracy beliefs – even depict China as part of a dark plan aimed at releasing a bio-weapon and instituting a new social, economic and political order in the world (BBC News, 2021; Zeng, Mike & Schafer, 2021). In line with various rumours, China has been accused of concealing vital information about the pandemic and enabling the propagation of the Corona virus in the world (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020; Sudworth, 2021). The above conspiracy theories coupled with a number China's controversial policies – notably the subjection of African nationals to mandatory screenings and forced quarantine in the city of Guangzhou in mid-April 2020 – to aggravate China's image crisis. This negative development happened as from the early stages of the pandemic.

Evidence for China's image crisis could be found in the social, media and political discourses of countries across the globe right from early January 2020. Jia and Lu (2021) on one hand and Krishnan (2020) on the other hand explore how media outlets in many Western countries, particularly in the US, tended to use the naming/shaming as well as the blaming techniques to tarnish China's image as a virus and a place not conducive for foreign investors. A great part of the Western media thus, popularised the image of China as "the real sick man of Asia" (Jia and Lu 2021). In the popular imaginary across the world, the Coronavirus came to be christened, framed and seen as "the Wuhan virus", the "Chinese virus" and the "Belt & Road Initiative pandemic" among other derogatory terms (Jia and Lu 2021; Chang & Fung, 2021). Furthermore, many world leaders – notably President Trump of the US – tended to lambast and blame the Chinese leadership, political system and eating cultures for the birth and propagation of the pandemic in the world (Christensen, 2020; Verma, 2020). All these media and political discourses contributed to tarnishing the image of China not only in the West but also in the Pacific and Africa. McGregor in particular even notes that such a negative image is bound to persist in future. He points out that because of China's mishandling of the early phases of the crisis, its relationships with Western countries such as the US, Britain, Germany and France are bound to break down. Actually, relationships between China and the above countries have, according to McGregor, remained strained because "of the lack of transparency and because of the distaste at what many people see as China's efforts to exploit the turnaround in their country and gain sort of a propaganda or PR win from it" (cited in Krishnan 2020, p.12).

The COVID-19 pandemic – particularly the incidents of the maltreatment of African migrants in Guangzhou in 2020 – also seriously affected China's image in Africa, pushing the Chinese government to adopt various policies and communication strategies to salvage the situation. One such communication strategy – which many have viewed as propaganda – has been to frame early governmental responses to the pandemic as "local level mistake" while depicting China spectacular economic and public health recovery as a "vindication of China's political system" (Krishnan 2020; Muller, Brazys & Dukalskis, 2021). A second form of Chinese response to the COVID-19 has been Beijing's "Mask Diplomacy" which, though variously received, has illustrated China's interest in Africa. Thus, China's global image took a hit during the early stages of the pandemic; but the country was the first to bounce back from the crisis.

If China's image crisis has attracted the attention of several commentators, only few scholars have focused on the strategies leveraged by China to rebrand its image particularly in Africa, during the early stages of the pandemic. No research in the theoretical and professional literature available has particularly focused on how the Chinese government has sought to re-brand China's image in Nigeria during the early stages of the epidemic as well as after the public health situation was declared a pandemic. This paper attempts to fill this gap in knowledge, through an examination of Chinese diplomatic communications in Nigeria during the early stages of COVID-19 pandemic. Using critical observations and a qualitative analysis of newspaper and online articles generated and published by China's Embassy to Nigeria, the paper specifically seeks to show how China's diplomatic communications sought to rebuild China's image as Nigeria's major partner in development and a friend on which Nigeria should count to mitigate or overcome the pandemic.

### Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored in two theories namely Benoit William's (1995) Image Repair/Restoration theory and Avraham Eli's (2018, 2009) concept of multi-step model for altering place image. Originally, the Image Repair Theory was conceived to analyse phenomena in public relations, precisely in crisis communication. Rooted in political rhetoric and social sciences, the theory has mainly been used to describe personal and organisation's communication in times of crisis. However, nation branding

scholars and professionals have found the theory relevant in countries' image repair strategies. Thus, several studies in nation re-branding hinge on various tenets of Benoit's theory (Avraham & Ketter, 2016; Low, Varughese & Pang, 2011; Avraham, 2009).

As its name indicates, the Image Repair Theory refers to a set of strategies aimed at helping individuals, organisations or nations to restore their positive public image. It stresses the various tools and strategies an organisation or nation (communicative entity) employs when facing a situation that can damage or has already damaged their image. The theory is rooted in the two concepts of *apologia* and *accounts*. An *apologia* refers to a formal defence or justification of an entity's opinion, position or action, while an *account* is a pronouncement generated by a person, an organisation or a country to explain events that may be unanticipated or transgressive and harmful to a community. Grounding his theory in the above concepts of *apologia* and *account*, Benoit (1995) argues that the use of the Image Restoration Theory in image branding should focus on identifying working options rather than recommending infallible solutions.

The theory proposes five image repair strategies namely denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action and mortification (Benoit & Pang, 2008). These strategies have subcategories as explained below:

- a. *Denial*: this is when a communicative entity employs a simple denial to reject responsibility after a transgressive act has been committed. It is also a situation where such communicative entity shift blame by attributing responsibility to another person, organisation or country.
- b. *Evasion of responsibility*: A communicative entity can claim that their transgressive actions were just *provoked*, or a reaction to another organisation or country's act or policy. Such communicative entity may also defend themselves by using the *defeasibility* argument by which they lacked information or ability to avoid the transgressive/harmful action. The unit can also categorise the harmful action as an accident, or an act paradoxically driven by *good intentions*.
- c. *Reduce the offensiveness of an act*: By this strategy, a communicative entity may use *bolstering* by which they emphasise or foreground their own good traits. The entity may also use minimisation in which they present the damaging act as being not as serious as depicted by other sources. Three other techniques under this image repair strategy is *differentiation* (where the act is presented as not being as offensive as other similar ones), *transcendence* (where the communicative entity stresses more important consideration), *attacking the accuser* or *compensating victims*.
- d. *Corrective action*: Here, the communicative entity proposes a plan to arrest or prevent a problem
- e. *Mortification*: this entails *apologizing*.

Although plagued by several weaknesses, the Image Repair Theory has proven relevant in various nation re-branding strategies. The application of the theory has always warranted countries to designed well organised plan of action where the most relevant strategies are components. For instance, in the first half of the 1990s, Northern Ireland spectacularly corrected its terrorist-caused negative image by devising strategies to attract tourism through the development of new tourism products and tourist attractions, supported by heavy promotions (Witt and More 1992).

Theorists recommend that organisations and countries always carefully choose the specific strategies they wish to adopt, in order to avoid worsening or escalating the crisis or fuelling a new one. This entails the adoption of clear guidelines for choosing the relevant image restoration strategies and crisis response techniques. The adoption of the wrong strategy may therefore lead to detrimental outcomes instead of restoring the positive image of a country. Citing several authors, Murugi (2019:61) points out that:

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Unlike organizations, destinations [or countries] cannot promise to change overnight, apologize, assign blame, or take responsibility for a problematic image and reality that were created by various factors over the course of years. The argument is that after the crisis is over; restoring a positive place image is a challenging, long-term and resource-demanding task which requires a multi-step approach.

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The above citation reveals some of the weaknesses of the application of Benoit's Image Repair Theory in nation re-branding. Indeed, the use of most of the above strategies in the specific contests of country re-branding campaigns might be problematic (Avraham, 2018). In view of these weaknesses, Alder-Nissen (2014) has developed a different theoretical approach for nations' image restoration. This approach includes three strategies namely stigma recognition, stigma rejection and counter-stigmatisation. In the same line of thought, Avraham (2018) has advanced the concept of multi-step model for altering place image. This model includes 24 image repair strategies organised in three main categories: source, audience and message (SAM strategies). Avraham (2018:1) explains this model thus:

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Source strategies concentrate mainly on marketers' efforts to influence or replace the source that is perceived as being responsible for the nation's negative image ("Come see for yourself", using celebrities as an alternative source, buying news space, establishing rapport with the news people, exploiting background similarity, blocking media access and applying physical/economic threat). Message strategies focus on tackling the negative messages (ignoring the crisis, acknowledging a negative image, reducing the scale of the crisis, tackling the crisis, hosting spotlight events, hosting opinion leaders, using films, TV and books, engaging celebrities, delivering a counter-message, spinning liabilities into assets, ridiculing the stereotype, branding contrary to the stereotype, geographic isolation and changing the place's name). Audience strategies are concerned with a specific audience (similarity to the target audience, patriotism and nationalism, and changing the target audience).

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This paper focuses on how China's embassy to Nigeria used some of the above-mentioned image repair strategies to restore China's image. The paper thus examines how the above strategies enable the embassy to rebrand China as one of Nigeria's major partners in development and an ally on which Nigeria can count to mitigate or overcome the COVID-19 pandemic.

### China's Image during the early Stages of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria

To clearly appreciate the magnitude of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on China's image in Nigeria, it will be expedient to explore the available literature on Nigerians' perceptions of the China before the pandemic. The following subheading gives attention to this issue.

#### Image of China before the Pandemic

China's image in Nigeria has, in "normal circumstances" and over the years, been very ambivalent. This reading follows the observation that the Chinese nationality and government have, in the Nigerian popular fantasy, been associated with both positive and negative stereotypes. The positive stereotypes have their roots in both myths and facts around China's cooperation in Africa as a whole and Nigeria in particular (Bodomo, 2018; Umejie, 2015). Actually, over the years, China has increased its Direct Foreign Investment in Nigeria. In the last five years the Beijing government has even been among Nigeria's major investors and partners in development. Studies in the literature reveal that the Nigeria-China trade has galloped from about US\$1.8 billion in 2003 to US\$13.5 billion in 2018 (Oshodi, 2020). Literature also reveals that China's direct investment has increased from US\$ 1,026 in 2009 to US\$ 2,862 in 2017 (Jackson's 2019; SAIS-CARI, 2019). This investment has mainly been

in sectors such as transport, energy, telecommunications, agriculture, manufacturing and finance. Many Chinese companies have built or are building high profile projects in the country, this with funding from China's ExIm Bank. Some of these projects include the Ajaokuta-Kaduna-Kano gas pipeline (still in progress), the Sagamu Independent Power Plant and the Lekki deepwater Port which is expected to increase Lagos area's shipping capacity. All these developments considerably contribute to China's soft power in Nigeria.

China's status as an emerging nation, its African cultural policy – which, among other things, creates opportunities for Nigerians to study in China – and its remarkable involvement in various development projects in Nigeria have contributed to spreading China's soft power in Nigeria (Axelsson, 2010). No doubt, a 2018 Pew study indicates that 61% of Nigerians have a favourable view of China's involvement in their country. The Pew study also reveals that only 17% of Nigerians have negative views of China. Similarly, a 2017 study conducted by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) shows that 83% of Nigerians perceive China's presence in their country in a positive light. Detractors of China's presence amounted to 9% in this BBC study.

The image of China as Nigeria's development partner is present in the popular fantasy in Nigeria. In fact, China's Nigerian policy, its presence and influence in the country have made many Nigerians to perceive the Asian giant as a nation Nigeria should emulate in terms of economic and cultural policy (Umejie, 2015; Endong, 2018; Jackson, 2019; Barometre, 2020). Axelsson confirms this observation in a qualitative analysis of online contents generated by hundreds of Nigerian "netizens" in view of assessing China's presence in Nigeria. The scholar notes that many Nigerians do believe that there are immense opportunities for their nation in the Sino-Nigerian cooperation. These opportunities depend on the degree to which the Nigerian government will take its responsibilities.

An evidence of Nigerians' positive view of China is the growing interest Nigerians have, over the years, developed for the Mandarin language. The Lagos State government for instance developed a pilot program in 2014 to teach Mandarin in selected schools within the State (Adewale, 2014). Several studies reveal that many Nigerians seek to acquire the mandarin language with the prospect of one day travelling to China for better opportunities. Others simply perceive this Chinese language as the language of the future, given the growing influence of China in the world geopolitics.

Despite these positive perceptions reviewed above, China's national brand has faced some problem in Nigeria, a situation which has vindicated the popular theory that China's hegemony in Nigeria is only fragile. By this theory, China's image in Nigeria has constantly remained fragile in spite of its laudable engagement with Nigerian and African development which keeps growing year after year. Onoja (2020) relays the above theory thus: "China's hegemony or soft power or "charm offensive" is experiencing a reversal in its impact on popular consciousness in Nigeria. What is thus at stake here is the paradox about hegemony: its inherent vulnerability to counter-narratives even as it is the most effective form of power" (para 3).

The apparent successes of China's cooperation in Nigeria have easily been downplayed by both western and local narratives that depict China's essence in Africa as a whole and Nigeria in particular in a negative light. Onoja (2020) writes:

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The paradox [of China's fragile hegemony in Nigeria] is complicated [...] by the great power competition and the associated representational practice of power. The imagining and representation of "China in Africa" as a bogeyman, to an extent the world has not seen since the end of the Cold War, is specifically playing the counter-narrative against China. Led by the United States, this framing of China, especially of "China in Africa," has sedimented in the public sphere over the years. Now, the idea is producing the reality it invokes

– China as a predatory, amoral intruder. The resultant weakening explains China’s current vulnerability to discontent in Nigeria. (para 3)

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Actually, the People’s Republic of China has over the years been associated with a number of negative stereotypes. According to Axelsson (2010), the negative stereotypes of China surpass the positive ones, an observation which however, contradicts the Pew and BBC studies earlier cited in this section. One popular negative stereotype of China is that it is viewed as a producer of fake cheap products that do not last long (Patrick, Ladipo & Adada, 2016; Page, 2018). Actually, the issue of fake Chinese producer and consumer products have constantly fuelled or inspired both media and political discourse in Nigeria. An article published in the Nigerian tabloid *ThisDay* in 2015 aptly illustrates Nigerians’ perceptions of the made in China product. The article which was describing a meeting concerning the UN Millennium Development Goals states that: “As regards quality of Chinese products, everyone admitted that China has the capacity to produce very qualitative goods. Mention was made of several Chinese exports of high-quality products to many parts of Europe and America and questions were therefore raised as to why Nigeria should be the destination of inferior quality of goods” (ThisDay, 2015).

Another gloomy stereotype is that Chinese business is unfair competition to local industries and a threat to the human rights of many Nigerians (Geerts, Xinwa & Rossouw, 2014; Obiorah, 2008). It is common to come across media or political discourses which associate Chinese companies with unfair business practices, anti-Nigerian racism and labour exploitation. Jackson (2019) reviews cases of endogenous media reports, politicians and social critics who deplored the ill treatment of Nigerian labour in various development projects executed by Chinese companies in Nigeria. Kobus and Bryan (2018) similarly capture the above negative perception of China. They observe that the Nigerian intelligentsia has in various instances censured Chinese companies in Nigeria over their apparent reluctance to employ local experts and their labour practices which conform neither to the International Labour Code nor the Nigerian legislations. Kobus and Bryan (2018, p. 68) write:

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Chinese companies in Nigeria have been criticized for being ‘closed’ due to perceived low levels of employing local experts. There was even a submission that they sometimes maltreat their workers. According to some reports, the conditions of employment of Nigerians in certain Chinese firms conform neither to the Nigerian Labour Laws nor to that of the International Labour Organisation. This was highlighted when a number of Nigerian workers died after being trapped inside a locked Chinese-owned factory that caught fire in 2002.

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Another negative stereotype is that, in the eyes of many Nigerians, China is just a neo-colonial power. In effect, myths around Chinese companies dominating various sectors of the Nigerian economy and adopting exploitative labour practices have fuelled negative perceptions of China as a colonial power whose involvement in Nigeria has many strings attached to it and little to do with the long-term prosperity of Nigeria (Umejie, 2015; Onoja, 2020). Geerts, Xinwa and Rossouw (2014) highlight this negative stereotype in a study devoted to Africans’ perceptions of Chinese business in 15 countries including Kenya, South Africa, Benin, Cameroon and Nigeria among other. The three authors note that majority of Nigerians are negative about the reputation of Chinese businesses in their country. Only 33.1% of the Nigerian respondents in the study expressed positive views of China’s businesses. The authors also point out that over 82% of the Nigerian respondents think Nigeria and China are not equal business partners which could mean that many Nigerians see China as a neo-colonial power. Geerts *et al* (2014, p. 9) write that: “there is a widespread perception that Chinese investment in Africa is not benefitting Africans. China stands accused of being a ‘new colonial power’, extracting resources for their own benefit with little return for Africa”. The three authors add that “Chinese



presence in Africa is viewed with suspicion, especially from Western countries, and their human rights record, labour practices and environmental practices are often questioned”.

### Negative Impact of COVID-19 on China's Image

The COVID-19 pandemic gave birth to various conspiracy theories and myths which seriously affected China and its citizens' image in Nigeria. The simple Chinese origin of the disease pushed many Nigerians to develop various forms of suspicion against Chinese expatriates and businessmen in Nigeria. Under the fear of being contaminated and out of mere ignorance, many Nigerians developed a phobia for Chinese living in their neighbourhoods. Chinese expatriate quickly became popularly viewed as contaminators and public health dangers, this was in line with the global negative image of China as the “sick man of Asia” and “a virus” (Jua & Lu, 2021). As early as January 2020, there emerged various media reports of incidences where Chinese expatriates found themselves stigmatised in public places, resented and even discriminated upon by Nigerians who suspected them (BBC News, 2020). For instance, on January 30, 2020, Nigerian authorities raided and closed a popular Chinese supermarket in Abuja over concerns of Coronavirus propagation (Obiezu, 2020). The Panda supermarket was a major gathering point for the Chinese people living in Abuja. The authorities shut down the market on suspicion that it might become a vector of Coronavirus contamination and propagation. Thus, many Chinese-run businesses quickly became viewed or suspected as threat to public health.

Not just Chinese expatriates, but also products made in, or imported from China became suspicious in the eyes of many Nigerians (Obiezu, 2020). In the Nigerian popular imaginary, the Chinese made products became viewed as a (potential) host carrier of the virus or at least as a potential vector of the virus propagation. This somewhat reinforced all the age-old stereotypes which depict Chinese products as being fake and not reliable. The development also contributed to tarnishing the image of the made in China label. The growing “sinophobia” in Nigeria prompted Chinese diplomatic missions in towns like Lagos and Kano to develop communication strategies to neutralise the stereotype and mitigate the stigmatisation of Chinese in Nigeria. A good illustration of such efforts is Chinese Consul Mike Zhang's meeting with the emir of Kano in January 2020 where he called on Kano dwellers to develop more friendly attitudes towards the Chinese community in the town, in view of cultivating a more conducive business climate for both Chinese and Nigerian businessmen (BBC News, 2020).

Another major cause of anti-Chinese sentiments in Nigeria could be found in China's mishandling or controversial tackling of some COVID-19 related crises in the early stage of the pandemic. In other words, the Chinese government adopted a number of mitigation policies in its territory, which turned out to accidentally prove detrimental to Nigerian communities in China. These policies provoked some anti-China sentiments in Nigeria. A Kafkaesque example is China's adoption of national disease control strategies in which Nigerian students and expatriates among other Africans were subjected to forced Coronavirus testing and arbitrary 14-day self-quarantine, irrespective of recent travel history. The maltreated Nigerian nationals also saw their passport being seized by Chinese authorities. The application of the above-mentioned strategies in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou fuelled misunderstandings between the Chinese government and the Nigerian political class and the general public. The public health policy actually sparked virulent criticism from Nigerians, after a video emerged on the Internet on April 10, showing a Nigerian diplomat in China, Razaq Lawal, publicly censoring the Chinese authorities for some ill treatment against Nigerians in Guangzhou. Members of the Nigerian political class, social critics and most ordinary Nigerians quickly read the above-mentioned Chinese policy as a racist and harsh initiative. This contributed to fuelling the popular belief in Nigeria that Chinese are racist and unfriendly to Africans (Oshodi, 2020).

A third threat to China's image in Nigeria emanated paradoxically from China's COVID-19 aid to Nigeria, particularly its "Mask Diplomacy" which remained tinted by its surrounding policies, which have not always or entirely been seen in a good light by many Nigerians. For instance, in a bid to boost Nigeria's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese government sent an 18-person medical team to Nigeria. Although, Nigeria clearly needed foreign assistance to mitigate the pandemic on its territory, the Chinese aid witnessed a massive Nigerian backlash as local politicians, medical officials, journalists and other social critics promptly pushed back against Chinese medical team, claiming that the aid was not necessary. Several commentators have observed that the massive rejection of Chinese aid in such a period of dire need of foreign assistance, was more a way of expressing anti-China sentiments. The aid happened shortly after incidents of alleged racist treatment of Nigerians in China. This racist treatment influenced Nigerian politicians, journalists and medical officials in their reception of China's "Mask Diplomacy".

Besides the maltreatment of the Nigerian Diaspora in China, reports of the inefficacy of Chinese medical assistance in some other parts of the world fuelled Nigerians' hostility to the envoy. In effect, reports of faulty Chinese test kits and Personal Protective Elements (PPE) in several nations fuelled doubts about the relevance of the Chinese aid (Gupta, 2020). A third reason for the massive backlash is also found in the fact that the Mask Diplomacy has, like many other forms of Chinese investments in the country, been perceived as having neo-colonial strings attached to it. Although the Chinese diplomacy has devoted many resources in popularising the narrative that China is exclusively driven by a "win-win" partnership with Nigeria (Power & Mohan, 2010), many Nigerians have continued to see China as an opportunist (Umejei, 2015). Thus, growing debates about the underlying motives of China's aid in Nigeria as well as its perceived neo-colonial influence on the country have been analysed by commentators as some of the reasons justifying the massive hostility to China's "Mask Diplomacy". According to Onoja, bursts of discontent against China as manifested by the backlash against China's "mask diplomacy", have longer history. Such a backlash "draws mainly on anger over the timeline of the COVID-19 pandemic in Wuhan, China dateline; questions about Huawei's participation in 5G networks; claims of uniquely Chinese racial practices against Nigerians; and the image of 'China in Africa' more broadly" (para 1).

It could therefore be argued that the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to intensifying China's image crisis in Nigeria. At least four age-old negative stereotypes of China were brought to the fore by events related to the pandemic. These include: (i) China viewed as the "sick man of Asia", (ii) Chinese products – including medical equipment and PPE – viewed as problematic, (iii) the Chinese government/nationals perceived as being racist and anti-Nigerian and (iv) China's engagement in Africa viewed as a neo-colonialist strategy more than good will and win-win partnership.

### The Rebranding of China's Image in Nigeria: The Chinese Embassy's Efforts

Scholars such as Power and Mohan (2010) and Adam (2021), have argued that China has sought to neutralise negative information about its policies in Africa in a systematic manner. Any time negative narratives have arisen over Chinese financed debt in Africa, its problematic labour practices or the lack environmental responsibility in its infrastructure projects, Beijing has most often tended to utilise its traditional forms of influence to quash criticism and reshape the dominant narrative to its favour. Some of these traditional forms of influence include information operations, economic dependency and relationship with African elites. Krishnan (2020) notes that, in the early stages of the pandemic, the Beijing government leveraged propaganda as a strategy to downplay the negative narrative and stereotypes about them.

In Nigeria, such an effort was visible in a number of communication strategies designed promptly by the Chinese embassy to among other things, repair the image of its country of origin. In this section,



this author uses a qualitative content analysis to examine eighteen newspaper articles generated by the Chinese embassy and consulates to Nigeria visibly to inform Nigerians about China's response to the COVID-19 and the Chinese aid to Nigeria, in view of mitigating the pandemic in the country. The articles were published in elite Nigerian tabloids. The analysis specifically seeks to examine the various image repair strategies China's diplomatic missions to Nigeria employed in order to address/arrest the four negative COVID-19-related stereotypes of China mentioned in the preceding section.

The articles selected for the content analysis were published from January to May 2020 (five months into the pandemic) in over ten (10) Nigerian elite newspapers including *Leadership*, *Sun*, *Vanguard*, *Guardian*, *Daily Trust*, *New Telegram*, *People Daily* and *Premium Times* among others. The articles were mainly written by senior Chinese diplomats such as the Chinese ambassador and China's Consul General in Lagos. Online versions of these articles were also made available on the website of China's embassy to Nigeria.

### Putting to Question the "Sick Man of Asia" and "Coronavirus Propagator" Stereotypes

The "sick man of Asia" and Corona virus propagator stereotypes are rooted in the popular belief that China is the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic and that, the perceived ineffective policies adopted by its government immediately after the outbreak immensely contributed to the spreading of the pandemic in the world including Nigeria. The Chinese diplomatic missions to Nigeria have sought to debunk or downplay these two stereotypes by mainly employing the *reduction of offensiveness* strategy as well as the *corrective action* technique. In their efforts to reduce the offensiveness of China's ineffective policies, China's diplomatic missions tended to foreground the spectacular policies and efforts made by China from early January 2020 to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic in its territory and abroad. In all the eighteen articles considered for this study, the Chinese embassy and consulates to Nigeria reported these spectacular mitigating efforts made by their country, stressing particularly on their relative successes in China as well as in various other parts of the world. For instance, in an article titled "China will defeat the Coronavirus" and published on the 31<sup>st</sup> of January, the Chinese Consul for Lagos, Chu Maoming underscores what he presents as the drastic measures taken by China to control the COVID pandemic. He notes that "China's measures against the epidemic explicitly show China's efficiency and the advantages of China's system" (Chu 2020b, p.47).

China's ambassador to Nigeria Zhou Pingjian adopts a similar approach in his article titled "COVID-19: How China did it" which was published on 3 April 2020 in *Leadership*. In this article, the ambassador meticulously explores all the Coronavirus prevention and control strategies adopted by his country with a visible intent to sell a positive image of his country. He particularly underscores the international community's positive assessments of China's efforts thus:

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By sharing the genome sequencing of the virus at the earliest opportunity as well as the control and treatment experience without reservation, China has won admiration and support from the international community. Leaders of over 170 countries and heads of more than 50 international and regional organizations have sent messages of support and 79 countries and 10 international organizations have provided medical supplies to China (Zhou, 2020b, p. 22)

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While outlining the positive assessments of China's efforts, ambassador Zhou mentions Nigerian president's favourable rating of Chinese handling of the COVID pandemic. He writes:

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President Buhari made a statement of solidarity on February 2, "China's efforts to contain the spread of the coronavirus have been exemplary, as well as the country's collaboration with international agencies and

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other countries on the matter.” Indeed, China received strong political support and assistance in various means from the Government and good people of Nigeria at the most difficult moment in our fight against the COVID-19 outbreak. Such expressions of friendship boost our confidence in no small measure and will always be remembered and cherished by the Chinese people. (Zhou, 2020b, p.22)

In the same vein, the Secretary of Press at the Chinese embassy to Nigeria, Seum Sandong (2020) sought in an April 28 newspaper article to underline the acclaims received by China for adopting drastic but effective mitigation approaches. He writes that: “through unremitting efforts, positive trend in preventing and controlling COVID-19 has been constantly consolidated and expanded. In this process, we have received care and support from consulates general in Guangzhou, foreign governments, NGOs and friendly people, which we highly appreciate and will always remember and cherish,” says the letter” (Seum, 2020, p.27).

The three above mentioned citations clearly show how the Chinese embassy in Nigeria sought to change the narrative in favour of China. The image of China as the propagator of the Coronavirus in the world is challenged or downplayed in these citations. This is done in favour of the idea that China adopted efficacious approaches to fight the pandemic in its territory as well as to help other countries grapple with the pandemic. The citations downplay the conspiracy theories to claim that Chinese authorities’ policies instead attracted due endorsement from the international community and influential Nigerian opinion leaders.

Still in a bid to reduce the offensiveness of early Chinese ineffective policies, China’s diplomatic missions to Nigeria utilised *minimisation* in which they tended to present the failures of China’s public health system in the beginning of the epidemics as a regional rather than a national problem. In an article titled “China’s Response on COVID-19”, the Chinese ambassador to Nigeria, Zhou Pingjian utilises such *minimisation* strategy. He declares that:

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Stereotyping the story of Wuhan or Hubei and applying it to all China or the whole world cannot be more misleading. Take the confirmed cases. As of 24:00 February 15, a total of 68500 cases had been reported in the China’s mainland. Among them, 56249 cases were in Hubei (82.12%), 39462 cases were in Wuhan (57.61%, and 70.16% of the total cases in Hubei). (Zhou, 2020a, p.44)

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Also, in line with *reducing the offensiveness* of Chinese policies, the Chinese diplomatic mission in Nigeria employed the *differentiation* strategy by which it tended to present the virulent propagation of Coronavirus and the high rates of mortality in the city of Wuhan as a development which is not as uncommon and destructive as many detractors of China have claimed. By this *reduce the offensiveness* strategy Chinese diplomats tended to present the COVID-19 pandemic as being not as destructive as a number of pandemics that have happened in the US, Middle East countries and West Africa. By downplaying the severity of the COVID-19 epidemics in Wuhan, these Chinese diplomats sought to attack the logic of commentators and foreign audiences who believe that the severity of the Coronavirus as a sufficient justification for the negative profiling of China. In tandem with the above, China’s ambassador to Nigeria, Zhou, writes that:

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I wish to stress that, as of February 8, the mortality rate of the NCP is 2.18% (811 deaths out of 37198 confirmed cases), and the mortality rate in Chinese provinces and cities other than Wuhan is merely 0.91% (203 deaths out of 22210 confirmed cases), even lower than that of ordinary pneumonia. The mortality rate outside Hubei is 0.31% (31 deaths out of 10098 confirmed cases). In contrast, the H1N1 flu of 2009 in the US had a mortality rate of 17.4%; the mortality rate of the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) of 2012 was 34.4% and Ebola of 2014 in West Africa 40.4%. In fact, according to a recent CDC report, the US

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flu from 2019 to 2020 has caused 19 million infection cases and at least 10,000 deaths. There are 200 or so NCP cases of infections worldwide, far less than 1% of the case count in China, while the H1N1 outbreak in the US spread to 214 regions and countries. (Zhou, 2020d, p.30)

Finally, the Chinese diplomatic mission in Nigeria also sought to utilise *corrective action* as an image repair strategy. By this *corrective action* strategy, they emphasised the efforts made by their country towards arresting the propagation of the pandemic not only in China but also in African countries including Nigeria. All the articles considered for this study have contents which reflect the above line of action. This will be illustrated in subsequent parts of the paper.

### Rejecting the Racist Stereotype

Through their communication strategies, China's diplomatic mission in Nigeria sought to reject the stereotype that China is racist or unfriendly to foreigners, particularly Africans and Nigerians. In over seven out of the eighteen articles considered, the mission deployed *bolstering* by which they highlighted the various policies adopted by the Chinese government to give special attention and a favourable treatment to African diasporas in China in general and Nigerians in particular. By this strategy, the mission reported with a clear spin, the various programs conceived by the Chinese government to accord a preferential or friendly treatment to Nigerians and other African diasporas in Chinese cities. In his January 31<sup>st</sup> article, the Chinese Consul for Lagos noted for instance that "China's measures are not only protecting our own people, but also protecting the people in the whole world" (Chu 2020a, p.47). With the same reassuring tone, the Chinese ambassador to Nigeria Zhou notes in his article titled "China's Response on COVID-19" that:

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China will continue to take good care of foreign nationals in China like its own. We will stay in close communication with Nigeria and provide updates on latest developments, protect the life and health of the Nigerian nationals in China, thereby safeguarding the health and safety of people in both countries. Foreign nationals are safe in China. (Zhou 2020a, p.44)

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The act of rejecting racist stereotypes also involved the *denial* strategy. By this strategy, China's diplomatic mission rejected allegation of racist treatment of Nigerian after the Razaq Lawal video emerged on the Internet. The Secretary of Press at the Chinese Embassy in Nigeria deployed this *denial* strategy in his article titled "Guangzhou: Facts, Solidarity and Cooperation". In this article, Seum relays China's Foreign Ministry spoke person Zhao Lijian's remarks on Nigeria Foreign Minister's address to the press after the Guangzhou incident. Zhao's remarks say "We treat all foreign nationals equally. We reject differential treatment, and we have zero tolerance for discrimination" (Seum, 2020, p.27).

Besides, this, Seum nuances the alleged harsh experiences of Nigerian nationals in China during the Guangzhou incident. In so doing, he hinges on online contents generated by the *Agence France Press* (AFP) which attack the veracity of Chinese authorities' racist treatment of African. He writes that:

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Recently, some Nigerian friends offered to share with me photos and videos circulating on social media. I have responded with my comments. Here I wish to share some latest findings by AFP Fact Check on its website. Africans living in southern China say they have been victims of arbitrary evictions and discrimination as the country steps up its fight against imported infections, as AFP reported. On April 11, 2020, as reported by AFP, the African Union expressed its 'extreme concern' about the situation and called on Beijing to take action. However, the video circulating on social media has nothing to do with China. In fact, the clip shows

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a fight in a district of the Bronx in New York and first appeared online on March 18. You may double check it for yourself at <https://factcheck.afp.com/video-was-filmed-new-york-not-china>. (Seum, 2020, p.27)

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At some points, the Chinese embassy in Nigeria deployed the *evasion of responsibilities* strategy, by presenting the Guangzhou incident in which Nigerians and other members of African diasporas in China were allegedly maltreated by governmental institutions, as an accident/act which was paradoxically driven by good intentions. In his April 28 article, the Secretary of Press at the Chinese embassy to Nigeria, Seum Sandong claims China's drastic prevention and control measures were not driven by racist motivations but the desire to arrest the propagation of the COVID on Chinese soil and safeguard the common health and wellbeing of all. He cites an Open Letter published by the Guangdong Provincial Foreign Affairs Office on April 18. The Letter states that "Governments [...] have strictly applied undifferentiated health management service to both Chinese and foreign nationals in Guangdong in accordance with laws and regulations. All foreign nationals in China are treated equally" (Seum, 2020, p.27).

### Debunking the Myth of China's Neo-Colonialism in Nigeria

The debunking of the neo-colonialism stereotype was done through *bolstering*. By this *bolstering*, the diplomatic mission mainly emphasised how beneficial the China-Nigeria cooperation has been for Nigeria; and how such cooperation is a sine qua non to defeat the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria as in China. An egregious illustration is the Chinese missions' tendency to over emphasised China's medical teams and PPE aids in Nigeria and other African countries in seven of the eighteen articles considered for the study. In his February 2 article titled "COVID-19: Hardship reveals true friendship", Ambassador Zhou notes that:

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China firmly supports Nigeria's fight against the virus and stands ready to assist, if needed, to the best of its capacity. Despite the daunting task of epidemic control remaining at home, China will try its best to provide medical supplies to Nigeria and do whatever it could to support Nigeria. We have set up the online COVID-19 knowledge centre (<https://covid19.21wecan.com/>) that is open to all. We will continue to share information and experience with Nigeria, and strengthen cooperation on containment, treatment and vaccines in response to the COVID-19 challenge, with a view to building together a community of shared health for mankind. (Zhou, 2020c, p.22)

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Elsewhere (in his article entitled "China's response to COVID-19), Ambassador Zhou emphasises how China's assistance to African countries including Nigeria is an integral aspect of its African policy and a culture China has observed during major epidemics in West Africa. He notes that:

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The health sector is an important area in China-Africa cooperation. China has sent medical teams of altogether 21,000 members to Africa and has treated 220 million African patients. They are deeply respected by local people as some Chinese doctors even sacrificed their lives in this cause. After the Ebola epidemic raged through Africa in March, 2014, certain countries closed their embassies and evacuated diplomats and citizens from three West African countries hit by the epidemic. By sharp contrast, the Chinese government helped Africa at the earliest time possible. China sent not only urgently needed supplies but also medical teams of over 1,000 military and civilian doctors to areas stricken most severely by the epidemic. Chinese diplomats and medical experts chose to stay there instead of withdrawing. They fought together with local people until the virus was defeated. (Zhou, 2020a, p.44)

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Thus, Chinese diplomats strategically debunked – or at least downplayed – the myth of China’s neo-colonialism in Nigeria. In their various articles, they painted the picture of a China ever ready to partner with, and help Nigeria address its development issues even outside the public health sector. The explicit and implicit message conveyed by their articles is that China is a major partner on which Nigeria can count to overcome or defeat the COVID-19 pandemic. China is thus, not a neo-colonial power working exclusively for its interest in Nigeria as many “unfounded” theories tend to say (Zeng, 2021; Power & Mohan, 2010). As the Secretary of Press at the Chinese Embassy puts it, “China and Nigeria are allies in this ongoing global war against the COVID-19 pandemic. To defeat the virus, solidarity and cooperation is our most potent weapon” (Seum, 2020, p,27).

## Conclusion

The outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic made China to witness a serious international image crisis. China’s image perceptibly became negative as both governments and citizens across the world tended to associate China with the origin and propagation of the Corona virus in the world as well as with many other crises/challenges derived from the pandemic. In Nigeria, the outbreak contributed in intensifying various negative stereotypes of China. Three of such stereotypes are (i) China viewed as the “sick man of Asia”, (ii) Chinese products – including medical equipment and PPE – viewed as problematic, (iii) the Chinese government/nationals perceived as being racist and anti-Nigerian and (iv) China’s engagement in Africa viewed as a neo-colonialist strategy more than good will and win-win partnership.

To debunk or downplay the above stereotypes, the Chinese diplomatic mission in Nigeria adopted image repair strategies that integrated denial, evasion of responsibilities, reduction of offensiveness and corrective action. In various newspaper articles, China’s ambassador to Nigeria, consul in Lagos or some other senior staffers at China’s diplomatic missions in Nigeria sought to rebuild China’s image as Nigeria’s major partner in development and a friend on which Nigeria should count to mitigate or overcome the pandemic.

The above image repair strategies are classical ways in which organisations or countries tend to respond to crisis that tarnish or are susceptible to tarnish their image. If their popularity is without doubt, their effectiveness in cases like China’s image crisis in African countries, remains grossly unascertained. Subsequent research works could focus on the effectiveness of the application of Benoit’s Image Repair theory to the rebranding of China in Nigeria or other African countries.

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