

Simon X.B. Zhao · Johnston H.C. Wong ·
Charles Lowe · Edoardo Monaco ·
John Corbett *Editors*

COVID-19 Pandemic, Crisis Responses and the Changing World

Perspectives in Humanities and Social
Sciences

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Foreword

In the opening two decades of the twenty-first century, it became something of a cliché to echo the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2000) in describing the globalized, post-modern condition as ‘light’ or ‘liquid’. The recent digital revolution had collapsed time and space, allowing instantaneous communication with practically all parts of the planet, and society was transformed. Liquid modernity was characterized by transnational flows: flows of capital from one financial center to the next, flows of migrant workers across borders, flows of ideas via the internet and social media, and flows of popular culture, first by disc and radio wave, and then by streaming services. In this new millennium, personal identities were fragmented and reassembled, and, for many, they were defined by the consumption of brand names. Everything was in flux, the ‘gig’ economy grew, and the consequent instability of the world gave rise to new forms of anxiety.

And then, on January 22, 2020, the WHO mission to China confirmed that the novel coronavirus COVID-19 was disseminated by human-to-human transmission, and liquid modernity froze. A new set of anxieties blossomed as cities and then whole nations went into lockdown. International travel shuddered to a halt. Businesses suspended their activities and watched their profits tumble. Citizens stayed at home, only venturing outdoors with a mask, keeping a safe distance between themselves and their neighbors.

Of course, under the layer of ice there was continued turbulence. The digital communications that had sparked the new era of globalization became even more vital to the continuing welfare of families, communities, and businesses. Members of families, whether separated by a few miles or many thousand miles, continued to communicate by social media, local authorities posted updates on changing regulations on websites, and enterprises such as restaurants and retailers moved their sales wholly online. In China and a few notable countries, the swift and strict application of uniform lockdown measures drastically reduced rates of contagion, and a measure of normality returned to daily life after only a few months. In others, notably the United States and Brazil, the response to the threat was slower and more chaotic. Some decried the pandemic as a hoax and saw instructions to wear a mask as an affront to their freedom to choose their own lifestyle. Others, more seriously,

weighed the risk of infection versus the risk of economic ruin. There were demonstrations against public health restrictions, even riots. Meanwhile, millions were infected, and thousands died.

The pandemic, then, saw both discipline and irresponsibility, foresight and negligence. And there was also scientific brilliance. Very early in 2020, China shared the genetic code for the novel coronavirus, sparking an international race between multinational pharmaceutical giants to find a vaccine. By the end of the year, with unprecedented speed, the first vaccines were approved, offering the possibility of a gradual and general thaw. The question remains, a year after the first surge of the pandemic, with the rolling out of vaccines just beginning: will the world ever be the same? Or, as Aleksandra Borovitskaja (2020) has asked, will the Covid-19 crisis function as a ‘cosmopolitan moment’ (p. 3) that prompts a global rejection of the structures of inequality and exploitation that threaten our living environment and the continuing existence of our species?

This collection of articles marks an attempt by a group of scholars, largely at a single higher education institution in China, BNU-HKBU United International College, to address some of the possible consequences of the global pandemic that followed the outbreak of COVID-19. Our institution is a young liberal arts college, the first in China to use English as its medium of instruction, and consequently we have an energetic, largely youthful, and multinational faculty. Our colleagues found themselves locked down and many were stranded throughout the world during the peak of the pandemic; nevertheless, they strove to keep the university running, and also to respond constructively to the problems caused by the pandemic. Thus, the chapters in this volume, mainly from our colleagues in the humanities and social sciences, address aspects of the *experience* of the COVID-19 pandemic as it was endured by countries, businesses, educational institutions, and individuals at the height of the crisis. It is a series of varied snapshots of how the pandemic gripped different parts of the world, affecting different areas of the economy, society, the media and education, and impacting on different groups of people. It is also a record of how a community of scholars perceived the unfolding of this outbreak narrative, interpreted the developing plot, and assessed the possible consequences, even as the pandemic raged. I salute the vision of Professor Zhao Xiaobin and his editorial team, who instigated this volume and whose energy and enthusiasm sustained its development, and I congratulate the editors and all the contributors. Their insight affords a valuable historical perspective on a global crisis that has deeply affected us all.

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Preface

This collection of essays in response to the COVID-19 crisis is an admittedly ambitious but necessary enterprise that has drawn upon the scholarly talents of members of BNU-HKBU United International College. It is increasingly recognized across the globe that the humanities and social sciences have a key role to play in addressing the ‘grand challenges’ of the twenty-first century, not only in disciplines such as history, languages, the arts, social sciences, the media and other cultural industries, but also in less obvious domains like technology, sustainable development, climate change, conflict resolution and healthcare. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic it is, for example, incumbent upon social scientists and humanities scholars to add their voices to those who are urgently assessing the immediate impact of the health crisis on national, professional and other communities.

Thus, in the first part of the present volume, we have solicited contributions on global economics, politics and public health responses to COVID-19. Our contributors suggest that, in many cases, it is a simplification to suggest that the pandemic alone has transformed social life; rather it has accelerated deep-rooted processes that were already in train. For example, the rivalry between the United States and China and the general reconfiguration of global supply chains both predate the outbreak of COVID-19, but the pandemic has exacerbated national economic and political tensions, and further prompted multinational corporations to redistribute their supply chains, to the extent that it seems like we are indeed moving inexorably toward a fundamentally different world. Our contributors critically assess the implications for this new world order, turning their eyes upon such diverse topics as European integration and the lessons learned for sustainable healthcare in Greater China.

One of the great misconceptions about globalization, of course, is that the world has become homogenous. The comparative country reports in this volume show similarities but also many differences in regional responses to the COVID-19 outbreak. These studies may not encompass the world as a whole, but they offer a balance of perspectives from the Global North and South, coming as they do from East and South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, and North and South America. While certain recurring themes are evident in the country reports, they offer distinctive national experiences of the pandemic and consequently offer a range of perspectives on the successes and failures of governmental responses to the crisis. Priscilla Ward (2008)

observes in her prescient study of outbreak narratives, ‘The ever-present health threat [...] signals at once the (presumed) need for the power of the state to regulate its borders and protect its citizens and the limits of that power’ (p. 58). Each state also needs to spin its actions so that they meet with popular approval. The responses to the threat of COVID-19, and the war of words against ‘the Asian virus’, and, latterly, ‘the Brazilian variant’ or ‘the South African variant’ demonstrate the populist tensions that all too easily arise when a disease that respects no borders infects the citizens of communities whose governments need to adopt a rhetorical as well as a practical stance toward it.

Viruses, then, are not just epidemiological phenomena; they are protagonists in narratives that transform the complex experience of pandemics into social dramas that have their own moral, educational, persuasive and aesthetic functions. The final part of this volume, accordingly, shifts from the social sciences toward the humanities and education. The chapters solicited here reflect on how this and earlier pandemics have been represented, in fields as diverse as literature, university public relations, health-care communication and translation, commercial marketing, and journalism. The contributors also consider the implications of changing working practices in the arts, commerce, media and education in response to the necessary and abrupt shift online.

The volume cannot, of course, be comprehensive in its treatment of such a broad range of topics as the new world order, national responses to the pandemic, and the impact of COVID-10 on business, education, culture and society. It aims, however, to gather a stimulating set of interventions that offer distinctive insights into the first great global health crisis of the twenty-first century. It is tempting, in the midst of such a crisis, to believe that the observations and emotions it provokes are new. Yet one need only look at an entry in *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* to realize that many of the sentiments we now feel were expressed with uncanny familiarity in the middle of the seventeenth century. In the final days of a pestilence that had severely afflicted London in the 1660s, Pepys wrote the following (pp. 191–2):

31st December 1665

But now the plague has abated almost to nothing, and I [am] intending to get to London as fast as I can. [...] My whole family hath been well all this while, and all my friends I know of, saving my aunt Bell, who is dead, and some children of my cousin Sarah’s, of the plague. But many of such as I know very well, dead; yet, to our great joy, the town fills apace, and shops begin to open again. Pray God continue the plague’s decrease!

It is to be hoped that the present volume will give future commentators some sense of how this generation has dealt with its own health emergency, and that future crises may be better managed as a result. And, in conclusion, as the pandemic slowly recedes, we can only echo Pepys’ final, fervent wish.

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—Editorial Team

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Introduction



Edoardo Monaco

This volume represents an ambitious project aiming at capturing the intense impact that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has been exerting throughout the globe in a variety of domains across humanities and social sciences.

This undertaking does not aspire in any way to be exhaustive or definitive, as the events of the pandemic are still unfolding at the time of writing. It stems from the need to, at least, begin taking stock of global dynamics of vast proportions, which started manifesting themselves in 2020, but whose effects will inevitably reverberate across continents and disciplines for years to come.

The COVID-19 crisis has certainly been a truly extraordinary—although not entirely unpredictable, given the numerous scientific warnings over the years—event that has tested established notions and consolidated practices, and profoundly affected billions across the globe, with massive social implications, across economic, political, cultural domains. Lives have been endangered and lost, livelihoods have been threatened in both developed and developing nations, governance and business patterns have been severely tested and profoundly altered—possibly for good.

Yet, first and foremost, it's probably fair to say that the crisis has affected us all as a species, serving as a “wake up call”, a stark reminder of our own very limitations and shortcomings. In particular, it has highlighted in the most humbling of manners the importance of striking a proper balance in our relationship with nature and its very forces—too often challenged, exploited, ignored in the name of unfettered growth and “progress”.

If anything, the pandemic has reminded us of the highly multidimensional nature of real societal progress, which, to be truly sustainable, requires simultaneous achievements across domains, territories and generations—hence, across relevant dimensions of “time and space”. For long—especially from the reconstruction of a

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neo-liberalist world order at the end of World War II onwards—economic achievements have in fact been conceived as predominant and distinct from environmental or social ones, with the needs of present generations being prioritized to the potential detriment of future ones. This has inevitably led to the destruction of natural environments and to the shrinking of “wild” spaces for the sake of urban expansion, commercial agriculture and increased industrial output. Even the threat of highly resistant strains of viruses and bacteria was often denounced by the scientific community over the past decades in light of the growing incidence of zoonotic epidemics across the world, yet ultimately ignored.

Despite attempts to fence the crisis within specific borders, or to even brand it as one particular country’s responsibility, the COVID-19 crisis has represented a truly global challenge—the likes of which the world had not seen since perhaps the first half of the twentieth century—ideally requiring, as such, a global response.

While successful examples of international cooperation at bilateral or regional levels have indeed been produced, the overall reality so far has shown a world that, as a whole, has been essentially unable to identify the origins of the crisis, devise containment measures and implement response mechanisms in a truly concerted, coordinated manner. This represents a major concern that transcends the current pandemic, given the increasingly global—and to some extent existential—nature of modern challenges, such as climate change, for instance.

Much of the response to the spread of COVID-19, in fact, has so far been left to national (or regional, as in the case of the EU) authorities who have had, in many cases, to fend for themselves in search for effective solutions and to leverage traditional diplomatic alliances for aid and assistance.

Strict lockdowns, mandatory use of personal protective equipment, restrictions of movement, compulsory quarantines and closures of borders appear to have produced remarkable public health effects in countries where they were proportioned to the actual capacity of the health care system, as well as accurately enforced and widely participated by both authorities and citizens alike. The very same measures appear to have encountered significant resistance in contexts where the inevitable trade-offs in terms of personal liberties and pursuit of economic activities were considered too burdensome—from political, cultural or merely financial points of view.

Thus far, the response to the crisis has therefore essentially consisted of a variety of national public governance initiatives which deserve to be assessed, given the diversity of both the factors that inspired them and of the results they produced.

This volume intends precisely to constitute an initial survey of this diverse range of approaches, measures, impacts, achievements and shortcomings across social sciences.

Many of the authors of this book are faculty members of the “United International College” of Beijing Normal University and Hong Kong Baptist University (BNU-HKBU UIC), an English-medium, liberal arts joint-venture located in Zhuhai, Guangdong Province, China—the country considered, initially, the very epicenter of the crisis and, soon after, a prominent example of successful containment and effective response.

Right from emergence of the COVID-19 menace, in January 2020, the activities of the college were severely affected, with students and teachers alike being forced to devise, in the shortest time possible, alternative solutions to keep pursuing their educational mission. Online platforms were swiftly established, allowing the college community to interact, share and communicate despite the tragic exponential growth of the surrounding public health threat.

In particular, the college's Division of Humanities and Social Sciences (DHSS) perceived very early on the need to allow faculty members from a variety of countries and backgrounds to share how the pandemic was affecting them, their context and their areas of expertise. A series of online lectures was therefore organized between April and June 2020: this enlightening and somewhat cathartic experience planted the seed for the present volume, which collects some of the contributions initially made in that very series.

The book is organized in three parts, the first of which deals with "Global Economics, Politics and Public Health Responses". In this section, authors have delved into the politico-economic governance side of the pandemic, mostly from a transnational perspective. Zhao Suiheng, Zhao Xiaobin and Zhang Zhen, for instance, have notably assessed the bilateral relations between the world's two largest economies—namely the USA and China—highlighting how their increasing "competition" was further exacerbated by the 2020 pandemic. The authors explore how Sino-American interactions have deteriorated in particular regard to intellectual property rights, technology transfers and South China Sea disputes. They also highlight how the Trump presidency has often insisted on labelling the pandemic as China's exclusive "responsibility", rather than engaging in constructive dialogue and seeking concerted solutions that would have benefitted both the USA and the world as a whole right from the early stages of the crisis. Lapses in global leadership are further assessed in the second chapter of the section, while in the third global supply chains—and China's role within them—are analyzed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic to identify possible trends of "de-globalization", the likes of which were already observed in the aftermath of major natural disasters affecting manufacturing hubs in Thailand or Japan.

The chapter entitled "[Actions Across Government and COVID-19: The Experience of Mainland China, Macao and Hong Kong](#)" attempts to present a diversified, holistic "whole-of-government" approach as key to the ultimately successful containment of the crisis in Mainland China, in the Macao Special Administrative Region (SAR), as well as, albeit to a different extent, in the other Chinese "SAR", Hong Kong.

COVID-19 has also severely impacted Europe, where the "Union", at least initially, proved itself rather slow in reacting to the challenge in a truly cohesive manner. In the EU, in fact, the onset of the public health crisis inevitably added fuel to the ongoing fire of intra-union economic disparities and diverging views over the fiscal management of the regional block, still ailing from the 2008 financial crisis and struggling to identify a common strategy that would effectively balance rigor and inclusion across its diverse membership base. As discussed in the chapter

“COVID-19 and the Political Economy of the European Union: New Crisis, Old Concerns”, existing problems of sovereign debt, deficit and sluggish growth especially among southern EU members states have only been exacerbated by the severe economic contraction and large public expenditures that COVID-19 brought about, setting the stage for a crucial debate on fiscal discipline and economic recovery in a time of emergency that may characterize European politics for years to come.

The composite global overview of impacts and responses across a series of pandemic hotspots that is initiated in the chapter “Government Emergency Responses During the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Context of Health Emergency and Disaster Risk Management: A Comparative Study” by Johnston H.C. Wong, is then developed in further detail in Part 2, which assesses a diverse range of countries across four continents, with particular regard to Asia.

The chapter “Experiences of and Responses to COVID-19 in East Asia: The Cases of Japan and Korea” looks at the unfolding of the COVID-19 crisis in Japan and Korea, and at the measures implemented to contain the number of cases especially across the older population—a particular concern to governments in both nations, yet more urgent in Japan, where the median age of males and females combined exceeds 48 years.

The city state of Singapore is then presented as a case of relatively successful containment of the crisis, with factors such as high trust in government, close coordination among concerned government entities, swift implementation of “circuit-breaker” lockdowns and high levels of community mobilization and engagement playing crucial roles. In a vast country like India, on the other hand, a large, highly diverse population prompts an analysis that transcends the mere epidemiological dimension of the pandemic: Nazrul Islam, in fact, engages in a timely study of the early socio-economic impact of the public health crisis in a context still plagued by various forms of poverty and inequality.

Africa features in this section of the volume with a chapter on Ghana: government as well as wider society’s response—often relying exclusively on locally available resources—have yielded positive results in terms of reducing the mere public health impact of the pandemic in the country. Yet, as for India, broader socio-economic consequences have been registered, such as increased poverty and marginalization among the most vulnerable sections of the population, as well as severe disruptions to traditional patterns of social and cultural interaction.

The attention then shifts to the Americas: in their chapter on the United States, Charles Lowe and Benjamin Barber explore the extent to which the recurrent theme of American “exceptionalism”—combined with the Trump presidency, the anti-intellectualism typical of the constituency it represented and, in general, a growing distrust in both central government and mainstream media—may have informed the failure to provide adequate public safety measures and to produce an effective overall strategy to control the spreading of COVID-19 in the country. John Corbett, instead, presents the case of Brazil, where the *laissez-faire* attitude of President Jair Bolsonaro—a right-wing populist leader elected in 2018, who, not unlike Trump, often downplayed the dangers of COVID-19 with rather unscientific arguments—and of the federal government as a whole contributed to high rates of infection and mortality, in a national context of political fragmentation, slow economic growth and

persisting inequalities. The chapter holistically assesses the role that humanities and social sciences can play in helping Brazil recover from the crisis and end a stalemate which, once again, seems to transcend the mere sphere of public health.

The third section is less geographically bound, yet still very diverse, as it contains a series of chapters assessing the early COVID-19 impact on a variety of social science domains: Jiang Mengying, for instance, investigates how translation services—and their providers—can actively and effectively contribute to international crisis management. Ge Song looks at the phenomenon of online exhibitions as a timely tool to promote cross-cultural engagement and understanding during a pandemic. Lessons from the journalistic coverage of the COVID-19 crisis in the USA are drawn by Jesse Owen Hearn-Branaman, who laments in particular the lack of experienced medical reporters, the inaccurate reporting of statistics as well as the distracting “fact-checking loops” that many outlets fell victim of in response to the (mis)information coming from the Trump administration. Jesse Owen Hearn-Branaman also co-authors a chapter with Johnny Bliss, whom he interviews to learn how his long experience as a travel journalist has evolved over the years, amid new technologies, changing cultural trends, restrictions to physical travel and new forms of “exploration”.

Benjamin Barber looks at the sheer complexity of human nature and its range of its responses to traumatic events through the prism of literature, as he embarks on a timely and evocative review of Boccaccio’s “Decameron” and Albert Camus’ “The Plague”, while Edith M. Y. Yan instead examines recent trends and methodologies of online teaching and learning in higher education—another landscape profoundly transformed by the pandemic.

The role that public relations and advertising play at a time of severe uncertainty is then assessed in a series of chapters, the first of which, by Lan Xiaomeng, looks at how corporations can chart their way out of the pandemic in a manner that aptly inspires solidarity, trust and optimism, but also positively contributes to social values and political debate, thus effectively managing “postmodernist” tides. The second, by Lim Chai Lee, focuses more specifically on relevant trends in media consumption and on the advertising strategies that major brands may adopt amid COVID-19 so as to engage new types of consumers, accelerate the digital outreach and in general actively respond to an increasingly widespread expectation for “empathy” and participation. Qian Hong and Zhang Jia, then, employ a multimodal approach to present a specific case study of university image building against the backdrop of the pandemic, focused on the very “United International College” of Beijing Normal University and Hong Kong Baptist University (BNU-HKBU UIC) in Zhuhai, Guangdong Province, China, that cradled the present book project and its particular use of a locally-prominent social media platform, “WeChat”. This very same platform is also central to Jiaqi Liang and Xiaying Xu’s assessment of the “native advertising” phenomenon, which the pandemic appears to have significantly promoted.

A conclusion chapter by Charles Lowe will then summarise the “journey” across borders and disciplines that this volume is pleased to take the reader on, at a time in which challenges are steep, yet opportunities for a brighter, safer, more sustainable future remain well within reach of an aware, conscious, proactive global community.

Global Economics, Politics and Public Health Responses

US-China Rivalry and Its Implications for the Post-Pandemic World



Suisheng Zhao, Simon X.B. Zhao, and Zhen Zhang

Abstract The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the tension and underscores the importance of cooperation between the United States and China on shared interests even as they compete ferociously on almost all fronts. While a duopoly with China and the United States working in tandem is unlikely because of their increasingly competitive relationship, a large-scale conflict shall be extremely costly as neither is strong enough to prevail. Under above background, this paper describes the grim nature of the current Sino-US relations and the expected trend of Sino-US rivalry in the post-pandemic era. We expect that both United States and China can mutually prevent deeper and larger conflicts from happening, as well as maintain rational economic and political interactions under an integrated and effective global governance mechanism.

1 Introduction: The Unprecedented Deterioration in Sino-US Relations

In December 2019, when China and the United States signed the first phase of a trade agreement, many people believed that US-China rivalry had come to an end. However, after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation changed completely as the two countries criticized each other furiously; the Trump administration started attacking China on almost all fronts, affecting bilateral relations. In 2020 July, the United States forcibly closing the Chinese Consulate in Houston in July. In response,

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China also closed the U.S. Consulate in Chengdu. In September, the U.S. Government once again put forward a number of restrictions on Chinese diplomatic officials, which evoked serious protests from the Chinese Foreign Ministry. On July 24, 2020, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo delivered a speech titled “Communist China and the Free World’s Future” at the Nixon Library in California where he declared that the U.S. Policy of “engagement” with China over the past 41 years had failed, and called on the United States to unite with other partners in the “free world” against China (Pompeo 2020). This speech was full of hostility towards China and indicated an atmosphere conducive to declaration of war. It was compared by the international community with the “Sinews of Peace” Speech delivered by the former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in 1946, regarded as a sign that Sino-US relations are approaching the US-Soviet Cold War pattern in the eyes of many scholars of international relations.

Looking at the deterioration in Sino-US relations since Donald Trump took office, this worry is not illogical. Since the United States imposed tariffs on China in 2018 and vigorously suppressed Huawei, ZTE and other Chinese high-tech firms like Byte Dance and Tencent, and even 13 universities in China, economic, trade and political relations between China and the United States have begun to decline at an unprecedented pace. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, a new round of Sino-US rivalry had been launched, and the future of Sino-US relations once again faces new uncertainties.

This chapter describes the grim nature of current Sino-US relations and expected trend of Sino-US rivalry in the post pandemic era (that is, to mutually prevent deeper and larger conflicts from happening, as well as to maintain normal economic and political interactions under the current global governance mechanism), with quantitative data and qualitative details. This chapter also shows that for China and the United States, complete decoupling is totally unrealistic. Peace should be the most important characteristic of the relationship between these two great powers.

This chapter is divided into five parts. First there is a discussion of what we shall describe as the “Thucydides Trap” and the future of Sino-US relations, and a digest of perspectives from various scholars and politicians, from both China and the United States, on the US-China rivalry and its implications after the outbreak of the COVID-19. Then we provide a historical review of Sino-US relations over the past 41 years, which might be considered the “good old days” in the eyes of the Chinese and American people. After this brief review, this chapter illustrates recent changes and conflicts in Sino-US relations in areas such as trade, economy, geopolitics, military, the pandemic issue, and ideology. At the same time, the shaken foundations of Sino-US relations and the outbreak of the accumulation of contradictory positions between China and the United States are explained. Finally, the possible future development of Sino-US relations is described, with particular attention given to the potential for starting a “New Cold War,” the need to avoid further escalation, and the efforts required to recover a basic pattern of coordination for these two great powers.

2 The “Thucydides Trap”: Competition for Power and Cultural Confrontation

Since the unprecedented deterioration of Sino-US relations after Donald Trump took office in 2017, scholars of political relations between China and the United States have had different views on the future of interaction. Among them, Allison and Mearsheimer, hold a pessimistic attitude, while Nye and Ikenberry insist that there is still a huge space available for the avoidance of war and the maintenance of peaceful development. We turn to a summary of their viewpoints as well as others concerning recent changes and the surging conflicts between China and the United States following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The “Thucydides Trap” describes a recurring situation whereby a new rising power will inevitably challenge the existing power, and the existing power will inevitably respond to this threat, so that war becomes inevitable. This theory originates from Thucydides, the ancient Greek historian who believed that when a rising power competes with the existing ruling power, the ensuing mutual antagonism inexorably leads to war. Thucydides’ book *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, relates the circumstances that gave rise to armed conflict between Athens, a rising polis, and Sparta, a traditional powerful polis, as the two were contenders for political dominance on the Aegean Sea. This unavoidable conflict was the earliest case of the “Thucydides Trap”.

Graham Allison (2017), founder of Harvard Kennedy School, published *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides Trap?* In this book, he listed 16 cases of challengers and defenders in history. Among them, 13 cases ended in war, and only 3 cases ended in peace. Consequently he concludes: “War between the U.S. and China is more likely than is being recognized at the moment. Indeed, judging by the historical record, war is more likely than not” (Allison 2015).

However, political and academic commentators in the United States and China have taken varying positions on the likelihood of these two nations falling into a “Thucydides Trap.” For example, former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger (2018) believes that although in 12 of the 16 cases cited by Ellison there was a war, the two cases since the end of the WWII went on to have peaceful outcomes. Most recent experience indicates that the “Thucydides Trap” is not a satisfactory model for contemporary relations between great powers.

Even so, the “Thucydides Trap” may still be valid for reasons that go beyond economic and strategic dominance. Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations” Theory considers that the root of international conflicts in the future will be mainly cultural rather than economic, and that the core of international politics will be a competition between Western Civilization and Non-Western Civilizations (Huntington 1997). Like Huntington, Wang (2020) argues that the reason for the aggravation of current conflicts between China and the United States lies in the difference between their cultures, values, political systems, and concepts of development. These “soft level” differences and contradictions are also important factors that could still lead the two countries to fall into the “Thucydides Trap” and may eventually lead to war.

3 Arguments Between Realism and Liberalism: War or Peace in the Future

Mearsheimer (2018) emphasized that international politics, especially Sino-US competition, is basically a zero-sum game, in his book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, while Nye (2019) believes there is a risk that policy makers and citizens of China and the United States will expect the worst from each other, a situation which they need to avoid. On the one hand, this phenomenon is caused by the long-term accumulation of resentment between the two sides over the past few years. On the other hand, it is also because of the strong nationalist sentiment in both countries.

Ikenberry et al. (2015) emphasizes that the United States should give China a certain space in the regional order to accommodate the rise of China and its aspirations, in exchange for Beijing accepting and accommodating the core strategic interests of the United States, including the United States continuing to serve as the leading security guarantor in East Asia. Yan (2019) also believes that there will be no war between China and the United States because, first, both countries have nuclear weapons, and, secondly, the progress of globalization has also prevented the two countries from having a war.

4 US-China Rivalry and Its Implications After the Pandemic

After the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, the Trump administration accelerated its actions to force China to delink from U.S. high-tech industrial sectors, and is trying to force its allies to follow this strategy (Niblett and Vinjamuri 2020). Besides, during the pandemic, the economic and technological decoupling between China and the United States has become an irreversible trend, because now there is a lack of mutual trust between these two great powers, and their official relations are almost frozen (Wang 2020).

Additionally, while facing the current pandemic, there's no way any one country can solve the consequent problems by itself. Accordingly, the important thing is that China and the United States should be looking for some common projects. They could do them together to symbolize the fact that they have more to gain from cooperation than from rivalry (Nye 2020). At the same time, in a pandemic situation, if the world's two most powerful countries—the United States and China—cannot put aside a verbal war on who should be held responsible for the crisis and turn to more effective leadership, the credibility of both countries could be seriously damaged (Burns 2020).

5 Historical Resumé of Sino-US Relations: The “Good Old Days”

Before we begin to analyze the current deterioration of Sino-US relations, let us first review the “good old days” since the establishment of Sino-US diplomatic relations.

In 1972, U.S. President Richard Nixon’s visit to China marked a thaw in Sino-US diplomatic relations that had been sour since the founding of People’s Republic of China. In the late 1970s, China’s political leader Deng Xiaoping seized the opportunity to establish ties with the United States and formal diplomatic relations were instated on January 1, 1979. 27 days after the establishment of diplomatic relations, Deng undertook the first head of state visit to the United States in the history of the PRC. After his trip, with the support of the U.S. government, more than 50 Chinese students received full scholarships from the top American universities such as Princeton, MIT and UC Berkeley that year itself. On July 7, the Carter administration also granted MFN status to China which was still under the planned economic system. It can be seen that the United States at that time gave China the greatest encouragement for market opening through preferential policies.

In 1984, U.S. President Ronald Reagan visited China and signed four agreements and protocols to avoid double taxation and prevent tariff evasion, and initialed the Sino-US cooperation agreement on peaceful use of nuclear energy. That is when diplomatic relations between China and the United States were viewed by both sides as having officially entered the “honeymoon period”. After Reagan’s visit, Sino-US relations developed greatly and became one of the most important bilateral relations in the world.

Since the formal establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the United States, economic and political cooperation between the two sides has been constantly upgraded. With the support of the United States, China successfully joined the WTO in 2001. After the “9/11” incident, Chinese President Jiang Zemin immediately called U.S. President George Bush to express his sympathy, and America’s anti-terrorism military actions against the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan also received political support from China. After the global subprime mortgage crisis broke out in 2008, the Chinese government purchased a large number of U.S. Treasury bonds, which provided vital economic support to America’s rapid economic recovery and the continuous positive growth of GDP from 2010 to 2019.

As the largest and the second largest economy in the world, China and the United States are also each other’s largest trading partners. Before the Trump administration imposing tariffs on China, the total trade volume between China and the United States reached an all-time peak in 2018, totaling \$659.84 billion, ranking first in global bilateral trade. In addition, China and the United States have also been insisting on expanding access to each other’s domestic market. While more American enterprises are entering the Chinese market, more Chinese capital is also entering the American market, which brings employment opportunities to American workers. Both the Foxconn assembly plants throughout Mainland China, and the

automobile glass processing plant set up by Chinese Fuyao Glass Industry Group in Ohio, symbolize win–win developments brought about by Sino-US cooperation.

It can be seen that Sino-US bilateral relations imply not only political cooperation and competition between governments, but also the well-being of the people on both sides. In addition, as permanent members of the UN Security Council and sovereign states with the most political influence in the new and old continents, any change in Sino-US relations will inevitably have an important impact on peace in and the development of the whole world. Therefore, many people hope that Sino-US relations can continue to develop smoothly and the two cooperate for a long time.

In the process of long-term competition and cooperation, owing to the differences in political systems, the opposing ideologies, and the competition between geopolitics and global political influence, some contradictions, conflicts and even crises are inevitable. In the past 41 years, although the relations between the two countries have experienced various problems and crises, including America's sanctions against China triggered by the "Yin-he" incident in 1993, the "Accidental Bombing of the Chinese Embassy" in Yugoslavia in 1999, and the "Battleplane Crash in the South China Sea" in 2001, the general direction of Sino-US relations has not been fundamentally shaken.

6 Recent Changes and Conflicts in Sino-US Relations

We now turn to the escalation of the confrontation between China and the United States on economy and trade, geopolitics and military, technology and ideology, since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Then we discuss the causes of the deterioration of Sino-US relations, including China's overreach and the US's overreaction. Looking at the changes in Sino-US relations since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is clear that after the pandemic started spreading in the United States in March 2020, tensions between China and the United States have gradually expanded from the dispute over the origin of and accountability for the COVID-19 virus to confrontation and competition that cover five key aspects which we outline below.

6.1 Shrinkage of Financial and Economic Interactions

Trade friction between the two sides has dealt a blow to the investment confidence of both investors, resulted in US-China FDI flows declining from more than \$60 billion in 2016 to less than \$10 billion in 2019, rapidly falling to the level before 2005. At the micro level, American sanctions against Chinese enterprises have been expanding. In response, China has also begun to impose sanctions on American enterprises including General Motors and Lockheed Martin, to restrict their business and transactions in China. At the international level, the economic confrontation between China and the United States has had a huge, negative impact on global

economic development. IMF chief economist Gita Gopinath (2019) said “Under roughly 2 years of US-China economic frictions, economies of 90% of countries and regions in the world have slowed down. If geopolitical and economic risks continue to increase, the world economy will be close to depression.”

6.2 Governmental and Social Rivalry Over the Pandemic Accountability Issue

In a speech delivered digitally to the UN General Assembly on September 22, 2020, Trump accused China of controlling the WHO, and demanded that China take full responsibility for the spread of the pandemic. On July 14, 2020 White House Trade Adviser Peter Navarro (2020) had criticized China for “attacking the United States with a deadly, weaponized virus.” The United States accused China of being “the manufacturer and original disseminator of COVID-19”, and called on the EU and the world to jointly investigate China for the pandemic. At the same time, China has repeatedly criticized the U.S. government for “lack of transparency and concealment of key information” on the issue of pandemic prevention and control, and suggested that the United States may also be the source country of COVID-19. The conspiracy that the outbreak of covid-19 was caused by the leakage of biochemical virus weapons in Fort De Crete has been widely hyped on Chinese online social media.

From a social perspective, according to survey data from Pew Research Center (2020), as of the second quarter of 2020, 73% of Americans, including 83% of Republican supporters and 68% of Democratic supporters, already held negative views on China. In addition, compared with 2018, in a short period of two years, the American people’s concerns about China’s continued growth in science and technology and military strength, as well as China’s negative impact on the global environment and human rights, have also risen rapidly.

6.3 Conflicts in the Field of Science and Technology

In August 2020, then US Secretary of State, Pompeo announced the launch of the “Clean Network Program”. Under this plan, more than 2500 Chinese IT products and services were banned from sale or subscription in America. Products involved in this plan are mostly intelligent terminal technology equipment, software, cloud services, submarine cables, etc. What’s more, 7 Chinese ICT enterprises, including Tencent, Huawei and Byte Dance, were specifically targeted in a press conference given by the U.S. government. Pompeo issued a statement saying that software such as Tik-Tok and WeChat would be banned, and data access hitherto granted to various Chinese operators would henceforth be restricted.

Among these restrictions, Tik-Tok is required to implement a property right transfer within a given time limit, and domestic enterprises in the United States would take over all the business and operations management rights. In addition, on May 22, the U.S. Department of Commerce expanded the “entity list” for export control, and a total of 13 Chinese universities involved in domestic military technology were included in the “red-flag ‘unverified’ list”, members of which are restricted from buying specified products containing American technology. As a result, for example, Harbin Institute of Technology (HIT) and Harbin Engineering University (HEU) will not be able to use licensed MATLAB software in an international mathematical modeling competition.

6.4 Military Tensions Over the South China Sea Issue

In the past 10 years, the U.S. Navy’s reconnaissance exercises in the South China Sea have doubled, and now it conducts nearly 2000 sorties a year. And the presence of Chinese surface military power in the South China Sea has also increased by 60%, while large-scale military exercises have also increased by about 30%. By the first half of 2020, the United States had dispatched about 3000 fighter planes and 60 warships to the South China Sea, and launched “double carrier operation” in the South China Sea. It can be said that the U.S. Navy has invested far more troops in the South China Sea than in the rest of the world. At the same time, China has also launched several military exercises in the South China Sea which are directed at the Taiwan Army and the U.S. Navy stationed in the Asia Pacific region. Therefore, the South China Sea has become one of the most militarized areas in the world, with maximization of military confrontation between the two powers.

7 Causes of the Mounting Tensions: China’s Overreach and US’s Overreaction

In the first 10 years of the twenty-first century, there were two major crises in the United States, namely, the crisis triggered by the “9/11” Terrorist Attack in 2001 and the subprime mortgage crisis in 2008, which greatly weakened the economic and political confidence of the United States. In contrast, in the twenty-first century, China has shown a rising trend and gradually shifted its diplomatic approach from keeping a low profile to building up its own leadership in an attempt to change the US-led liberal world order.

Naturally, the result of the collision between the two sides is that the United States has begun to defend its international status by preventing and containing China in an all-round way. Susan Shirk (2019), Assistant Secretary of State for China Affairs

during the Clinton administration made a very accurate exposition of the state of play, which can be summed up as “China’s overreach and the US’s overreaction”.

On the one hand, China’s overreach is manifest in its expanding nationalistic mentality and its tough stance on international issues. In the promotion of self-confidence at the national level, the assertiveness of many Chinese people and officials has been over inflated, resulting in the “Wolf Warrior Thinking”, which has repeatedly resulted in too tough an attitude being presented on the international stage.

After 2010, China’s strong actions on issues relating to the South China Sea, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Africa have resulted in a high degree of vigilance from the United States., China’s strong economic support for Russia in the blockade following the Crimea Crisis, as well as its commercial relations with Iran (which has violated the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty and is also sanctioned by the United States) has been treated as a signal of China’s intent to challenge the current US-led world order.

Moreover, China has repeatedly declared that the issues of human rights in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, and sovereignty in the South China Sea and Taiwan, are China’s internal affairs, and other countries are not allowed to interfere. However, based on the current world order and the international legal framework, these series of behaviors have shown China to be an economy that has benefited from the US-led global economic system but one that now refuses to acknowledge global concerns about human rights and the pursuit of the freedom on sea voyage.

On the other hand, the United States is obviously overreacting to changes in China’s diplomatic posture. At the instigation of the United States, Trump’s Hawkish foreign policy making team has turned this misjudgment into a mainstream social consensus. They believe that they have suffered losses in the development of Sino-US relations, that is, China has taken advantage of the open market and open society of the United States, and then turned to its rising power to destroy the whole liberal world order.

At the 18th CPC National Congress in 2012, the need for China to build a “maritime power” was explicitly raised. The strategic policy is that China hopes to further enhance its sea power and realize complete protection and utilization of its surrounding waters. But this is considered by the United States as a major strategic threat to replace the American maritime status in the Pacific region and even across the whole world.

Therefore, the need for taking further containment measures against China to defend the current America’s global political leadership has become a strategic consensus between Democratic and Republican parties in the United States. Under this strategic consensus, the political buffer space between China and the United States has been further squeezed, which directly led to the all-round confrontation between the two countries during Trump’s presidency. After Joe Biden came to power, although the new U.S. foreign policy team headed by its new Secretary of State Antony Blinken has more professional diplomatic literacy and better understanding of China, whether they can really promote the Sino-US relations back to the “good old days” is still unknown.

8 The Possible Future of Sino-US Relations: A Temporary New Cold War?

In this context, whether China and the United States will move towards escalation of all-round confrontation and finally start a “New Cold War” is a matter of great concern for everyone in all walks of life. It is undeniable that more and more commentators are taking up the new strategic concept that emphasizes the “Sino-US” bipolar global political system. As mentioned above, according to Mearsheimer’s analysis of structural contradictions, China and the United States will almost certainly fall into the quagmire of a “New Cold War”, and the current trade war represents the opening skirmish. However, even if the “New Cold War” is inevitable, it is still necessary for us to see the difficulties in China and the United States achieving complete decoupling.

8.1 Shaking the Foundations of Sino-US Relations

In essence, any consideration of U.S.-China policy has mainly to be based on 3 aspects: geopolitical considerations, economic interests and political values. The most important factor that prompted the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the United States in 1979 was geopolitical, because the two countries acknowledged that they had a common adversary, namely the Soviet Union. In other words, the reason why China and the United States came together to begin with was not because they recognized each other’s basic values. Moreover, at that time, there were not many common economic interests between the two countries. Later, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, geopolitical considerations no longer played such a decisive role. However, the relationship between China and the United States continued mainly because of the increasing importance of economic interests and, it may seem strange to suggest, political values.

It should be noted here that economic and political factors do not work independently. The United States once hoped to change China by helping it to develop its economy. Its strategic plan was to allow China to enter the post-war international system built and dominated by America, so that China could develop its economy, induce political changes, and establish democracy, finally aligning with American values. This is also the root of the Americans’ general adherence to the “engagement” strategy over the past 41 years. From Carter to Obama administration, the United States saw helping China to modernize and integrate into the US-led liberal world order as a strategic intervention in their own interests. The reasoning was that if China promotes modernization with the assistance of the United States, it will gradually form values consistent with its liberal democracy. With these common values, China will have fewer conflicts of interest with the United States, and finally respect America’s global leadership. Under the guidance of this assumption and vision, Americans believed they should open up their markets to China, transfer technology,