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No leadership: Hong Kong's government is sleeping on the job as the coronavirus adds to challenges facing globalisation

Sunday 16 February 2020, by [BOWRING Philip](#), [CHOW Holden](#) (Date first published: 16 February 2020).

Hong Kong should be alive to the coronavirus threat to globalisation, yet unlike in Singapore, another international city dependent on free trade, the government has shown no leadership, leaving medical workers to strike for better protection and domestic workers open to further abuse

It may be too early to draw conclusions about the long-term impact of the novel coronavirus. It may prove a passing issue that caused fear and inconvenience out of all proportion to its mortality rate, whether in China or elsewhere. But it has emphasised the importance of transparency, and the need for measured and firm responses.

It also poses an additional challenge when free trade and economic globalisation are already facing their biggest challenges in decades.

The interruption of supply chains [\[1\]](#) due to the closure of factories in China and the cancellation of flights, conferences, sporting events and the like is providing a lesson for manufacturers in the potential dangers of overconcentration of production in a tiny number of locations.

US President Donald Trump's trade wars, in particular against China, have sparked a diversification of supply [\[2\]](#). This has barely made a dent in the US trade deficit, as some production has shifted to locations such as Vietnam and Mexico, or has been brought back to Taiwan or South Korea.

Maybe some will go back to higher-cost Western countries because of real or feared tariffs. That process will now speed up, not because China is necessarily more prone to disruption due to the epidemic, but simply because its size favours concentration. Diversification is an economic cost that is, perhaps, now worth incurring.

Another push in this direction may be coming from the Extinction Rebellion movement which has taken hold among many, mostly young people, in the developed world. Pressure is building to cut the environmental costs of transport by air and sea, which could well mean increased costs for these industries as improvements in technology lag behind demands to cut pollution.

It is often forgotten how much falling transport costs have contributed to the growth of global trade since 1960. Similarly, the possible ending of the age of throwaway clothing in the developed world will reduce demand for garments and other basic manufactured goods from poorer countries [\[3\]](#).

These factors do not amount to a perfect storm of reaction against globalisation but the shifts cannot be ignored, least of all by trading cities such as Hong Kong. So, it is particularly sad that the response to the novel coronavirus has showed up glaring differences in the competence of the Hong

Kong and Singapore governments.

One was early and decisive in banning entry from China and imposing quarantines [4]. The other was hesitant, imposing them gradually [5] and only under huge pressure from the public and health professionals. Even then, it relied all too much on individual compliance.

A government which had demanded sledgehammer tactics against demonstrators [6] fail to use its existing powers for public health protection. Singapore had sufficient masks but also advised that their use was not essential unless a person had a cough, cold or other illnesses. Taiwan did likewise while rationing masks to prevent hoarding and price gouging.

It is not as though the body of civil servants in Hong Kong is any less competent than in Singapore. It is question of leadership – from Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor and her top tier of policymakers and implementers. It was bad enough that medical personnel, the most at risk, had to go on strike [7] to demand more effective antiviral efforts.

But the malaise seems to extend to much of the service, due to a lack of respect for the competence of those at the top to put Hong Kong people's interests above allegedly "national" ones, even as cities on mainland China were introducing strong local controls on people's movements.

Hong Kong may not be on the way to being a "failed state" as one columnist recently suggested [8], but a lack of local accountability is at the root of its fall from grace. In their different ways, the months of demonstrations and the days of the viral spread through Hong Kong say the same thing.

Singapore may be much more authoritarian but its leaders have to stand for elections in which all citizens (though not the non-citizen 40 per cent) vote for the whole legislature. An election is due soon, so the pressure is on to show that the government is on top of issues.

The virus has also been a reminder of the institutionalised ill-treatment of domestic helpers. The Hong Kong Labour Department is notorious for doing little to halt underpayment, excessive working hours, illegal agency commissions, lack of privacy, seizure of passports, and the other abuses to which so many are subject.

Yet it had the temerity to urge helpers to stay at home on their day off. "Home" on the kitchen floor or granny's bed? How many, then, found themselves forced to work on their day off or be sacked? If going outside was such a danger, why should they also not have been advised to refuse to go to the local market to shop for their employer?

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<https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3050531/hong-kongs-government-sleeping-job-coronavirus-adds-challenges>

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Hong Kong government falling behind Macau in handling public health crisis

- **Hongkongers returning from the mainland must quarantine themselves while the government should track down people who have come in from Hubei province**
- **The government must also ensure the supply of masks and hand sanitiser**

In stark contrast to the Macau government and what it has done so far [\[9\]](#), including taking over control of face mask distribution, the Hong Kong government has been widely criticised for its slow response.

The Hong Kong government finally stepped up its efforts recently by closing some border checkpoints, including the West Kowloon high-speed railway station. At the same time, the central government accommodated our request by halting the issuing of individual travel permits to Hong Kong.

This, together with earlier measures announced by the central government stopping tours to Hong Kong, would vastly reduce the number of mainland visitors entering the city, to around 20 per cent of the usual number who visit every day.

Leaving some border checkpoints open to a certain extent would allow Hong Kong residents who had travelled to the mainland to return to Hong Kong. Let's not forget the enormous number – possibly hundreds of thousands – of Hong Kong people returning from the mainland after the Lunar New Year holiday. If no appropriate measures are taken, these people could well be a source of the spread of the virus in Hong Kong.

Indeed, to it play safe, the government ought to openly encourage every single Hong Kong resident who had travelled to the mainland and returned to Hong Kong lately to quarantine themselves.

In addition, the Hong Kong government ought to make full use of the Immigration Department to track the whereabouts of visitors from Hubei province. If they are still in Hong Kong, the government should closely monitor their health and, if necessary, carry out mandatory testing, quarantine and departure arrangements.

Sadly, we have not seen any steps taken in this regard. In stark contrast, many provincial governments in the mainland have successfully implemented such policies.

Last but not least, we have seen a shortage of masks and hand sanitiser, which has caused fear and panic within the city [\[10\]](#).

The government ought to source these items from suppliers worldwide and take over their distribution in the market, prohibiting speculation over such necessities and ensuring that Hong Kong residents can access them regardless of their economic condition.

Now that we are confronting a crisis, the Hong Kong government has no excuse to sit on its hands and rely on traditional free market advocacy to avoid stepping in.

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- South China Morning Post. Published: 7:00am, 31 Jan, 2020:
<https://www.scmp.com/comment/letters/article/3048194/china-coronavirus-hong-kong-government-falling-behind-macau>
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Footnotes

- [1] <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3049412/could-coronavirus-epidemic-trigger-china-led-global-recession>
- [2] <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3042132/us-china-decoupling-would-spell-end-globalisation-and-chinas-growth>
- [3] <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/fashion-beauty/article/2185376/how-end-waste-fashion-stop-making-clothes-or-value-ones-we>
- [4] <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3048779/coronavirus-singapore-wont-rule-out-extending-travel-ban>
- [5] <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3049703/has-carrie-lams-tardiness-closing-hong-kongs-borders-condemned-me>
- [6] <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3032119/carrie-lams-mask-ban-ineffective-stick-violent-protesters-where>
- [7] <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3048705/hong-kong-hospital-strike-kicks-top-doctor-backs-mainland>
- [8] <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3050075/city-has-trappings-failed-state>
- [9] <https://www.scmp.com/comment/letters/article/3047493/china-virus-macau-showing-way-swift-action-and-healthy-change>
- [10] <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/health-environment/article/3048176/china-coronavirus-tensions-high-thousands-queue>