

Covid-19 (China): When Bootlicking Overrides Fighting Epidemic

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The Wuhan Covid-19 epidemic spread in lightning speed and it has turned into a global pandemic. It was avoidable from the very beginning. There were several weeks to stop it from spreading to the whole country before the “*chunyun*” - Spring Festival travel rush, which during Chinese New Year 2018 meant 3 billion multiple trips to and from their home village or town [1]. Yet Beijing had acted too late despite Wuhan municipal government having known about the spread of the virus early on. We have witnessed similar delays in, say, the UK and the US. In many ways Trump and Xi Jinping mirror each other in terms of their arrogance, ignorance and contempt for specialists. Yet the Chinese case still displays features that are quite different from the West if we look more carefully at how the events unfolded in the crucial weeks between December 2019 and January 2020.

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What had Xi Jinping Done in Early January?

As of early April 2020, the information concerning the first confirmed case of a Covid-19 patient was on 1st December, 2019. [2] Starting from middle December, “there is evidence that human-to-human transmission has occurred among close contacts since the middle of December 2019.” [3] Local hospitals sent their samples to Vision Medical in Guangzhou for testing and on 27th December the genome sequencing, “results showed an alarming similarity to the deadly Sars coronavirus”, as reported by the Caixin.com. [4] Vision Medical immediately reported their findings to the Hubei Provincial Health Commission. Yet between 1st and 3rd January, 2020, they were told by both the Hubei Provincial and the National Health Commission that they must destroy their samples, stop doing more tests thereafter, and not report their findings to the public.

Meanwhile on 30th December unknown whistle blowers posted online two documents from the Wuhan Health Commission mentioning pneumonia of an unknown cause, forcing the Wuhan Health Commission to, for the first time, announced that there were 27 cases of “viral pneumonia” but down-tone the virus by saying that there was no human-to-human transmission. Both claims were lies.

On a national level something even bigger was going on. On 10th January the Spring Festival travel rush would start. If this was allowed to go ahead it would definitely spread the virus all through the

country at lightning speed. The clock was ticking.

Instead of the National Health Commission, it was the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that sounded an internal grade two alert for an emergency on 6th January, and the top Party leaders were notified of the newly discovered virus. The next day the Standing Committee of the Politburo convened and discussed about the novel coronavirus as a side event. A month later, in the face of mounting discontent with the authorities, Xi Jinping revealed his internal report to show that he had been leading the Party to fight against the virus all along. The earliest entry of the report relating to the virus was about his remark at the 7th Politburo meeting, where it was reported that he “made requests for the prevention and control work of the coronavirus outbreak”. He did not say what kind of “requests” they were. If the “request” was something substantial and useful he would not have forgotten to mention what it actually meant. The fact that he did not was probably because it was not anything substantial. His action, or more correctly speaking, inaction, also seemed to point to this scenario, because there was no entry of anything done by him in the period between the 7th and 20th in the published report, the moment when the virus spread like fire. He did nothing in these crucial two weeks, rather he just watched as the travel rush and the Wuhan banquet (see below) went ahead as scheduled. He finally issued a public instruction on the 20th that, “we must attach great importance to the epidemic and do our best to prevent it.” [5] The “instruction” on the 20th was slightly more substantial but it was already too late. By that time, tens of millions of passengers were already on their way back to their home town or home village. Shouldn’t Xi have said this on the 7th if he was fully aware at that time that the virus was able to transmit human-to-human and that hundreds were already infected? By making his internal speech public soon after it was made, Xi wanted to show that he had been acting on the pandemic early on. In fact, the speech suggested the otherwise.

A Ming Pao report on the on the 7th Politburo meeting suggested that Xi and/or other top leaders might have said something even more catastrophic. According to the report, “the leader” there decided that while prevention of the outbreak should be made, it “should not cause panic and affect the festival atmosphere of the coming Lunar New Year.” [6] Notice here that the first message about prevention of an outbreak was balanced by a second message which practically read “don’t you dare cause panic and affect the festival atmosphere of the coming Lunar New Year!” All the mandarins below would immediately understand which message should come first. Hence, they continued to promote the festival while repressing the news about the coming epidemic.

To make sure everything looked normal the authorities of both the Wuhan municipality and Hubei province decided to go ahead with their two scheduled meetings of the People’s Congress and People’s Political Consultative Conference, during the period of the 6 – 17th January. These were followed by a great feast on the 18th January, involving 40,000 families. Thanks to these public events the virus now spread even faster. Three days later, Xi Jinping gave his “instruction” on the 20th. Only when the top leader spoke, did his subordinates begin to act, and locked down Wuhan on the 23rd. Yet 5 million Wuhan residents had already fled, joining the hundreds of millions of passengers in the travel rush.

Hidden Rules Overrides the Law

According to some experts, if only travel bans and contact reductions, “could have been conducted one week, two weeks, or three weeks earlier in China, cases could have been reduced by 66%, 86%, and 95%, respectively, and significantly reduce the number of affected areas. [7] ”

Why did the Wuhan authorities act as they did? This leads us to a discussion of certain features of

the CCP bureaucracy. One of them is that what the laws say is not as important as what one's superiors may think. Any common Mainland Chinese, if they can speak freely, will tell you that simultaneously there were two set of rules at work, one is the law, the other is the "*qiangui*", or "hidden rules". [8] The latter is always more important. Guessing what your superiors think is considered an important element of the hidden rule as well. We would witness how this Chinese bureaucratic logic fully played out in this pandemic.

According to the Article 38 of the law of the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases, "the announcement of information concerning infectious diseases should be correct and without delay". Article 65 stipulates that government departments failing to do the above will be liable for administrative penalties or criminal prosecution. Now with the information revolution it is much easier to implement the law to safeguard the wellbeing of the people. The 2003 outbreak of SARS prompted the China CDC to develop a web-based infectious disease automated alert and response system and was implemented across China in April 2008. [9] It is also called the China Information System for Disease Control and Prevention (CISDCP). Previously "local CDCs would submit report once a month up the chain to the National CDC. With the CISDCP, hospitals and clinics now immediately and directly reported through the internet." [10] Yet on 29th December when the Wuhan hospitals reported cases of pneumonia of unknown cause to the district and municipal Health Commission, the latter, instead of telling them to make a direct report through the CISDCP, told the former "to wait for instruction from our superiors". On 5th January, the Wuhan Health Commission revised the manual for reporting which practically robbed the hospitals of their power to make direct reports altogether and handed it to the Provincial Health Commissions. On top of this change, the Commission also required the hospitals to report up the chain of district, municipal and provincial Health Commissions for double checks, one by one. [11] In one stroke, the Health officials nullified both the law and the CISDCP.

Since the pandemic spread around the globe, the CCP has engineered a great propaganda of self-promotion by mocking how Trump and other Western countries had badly handled the crisis. Trump's administration did act poorly. Yet there is one difference between the US and China to say the least. While Anthony Fauci of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) could openly criticise Trump, any Chinese expert doing this would not only risk being fired but also being put in jail or simply "being disappeared". Not only did the Party leaders stand above the laws, they stood above science and scientists as well. It is because they believe they know better than anyone, or are omniscient. However brilliant a scientist in China is, it is the bureaucrats who have the final say, including sending the scientist to jail for telling the truth. No wonder that when the Politburo founded the nine members special task force on 25th January to deal with the epidemic it did not think it was necessary to include any pandemic specialist.

Xi reminded his party quietly on the 7th January that even when it needed to do something on the coronavirus it should not affect the Festival atmosphere. Why was he so concerned about the Festival? Readers are reminded that bringing joy to the people during the Spring Festival is a state project. This is shown in the Central Television Spring Festival Gala, which has lasted for four decades and held at New Year's Eve. Upon watching such a grand show Chinese people would be grateful to the Party, again. Anyone who is a bit familiar with the history of the Chinese Empire would know that the Emperor needed to be told again and again about how his subject lived happily and remained grateful to him, to the extent that even the Yellow River became clean of its usual sediment and turned crystal clear and that the sea turned calm. He hated bad news. His subordinates knew this too well, and after witnessing the tragic fate of those who failed the lower level officials necessarily turned themselves into yes men, and never hesitated to glorify him at whatever social cost.

Modern Version of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein?

We must bear in mind that the 2019 pandemic had its prequel in the 2003 SARS epidemic. The main character in both dramas was the same CCP, which acted the same way in 2019 as it did in 2003. It is only the virus that has been different; the 2019 version has been more contagious and deadly.

Right now the Chinese government is making a new biosecurity legislation and elevate it to a national security issue. The bill, again, includes articles about punishing those who dare to lie about the epidemic. Perhaps nowadays commentators in the West are no longer as enthusiastic about the Party's self reform through making of new laws as they did in the past. Many felt deceived. Or perhaps there was a dosage of self delusion as well? The well known Hungarian economist, Janos Kornai, wrote an article in Financial Times last July with the title *Economists share blame for China's 'monstrous' turn*. He confessed that how he had advised top CCP officials in 1985 to introduce reform to China "by the electric shock of marketisation and private property", but eventually their endeavour only became "the modern version of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein" [12].

I think Clinton also owe us an apology for having said this in his 2000 speech:

"By joining the W.T.O., China is not simply agreeing to import more of our products; it is agreeing to import one of democracy's most cherished values: economic freedom. [13]"

The EU by then shared the same "change through trade" policy. [14] But history has proved that CCP's recognition of "economic freedom" had not resulted in any democratic change. Market competition is the "categorical imperative" of capital, but democracy is not.

If Kornai had ever spoken to workers long enough, he might have a different view. After China's accession to the WTO, a Hong Kong NGO had published a book *Voices from Below - China's Accession to WTO and Chinese Workers* which was a collection of interviews with workers. Years have passed since then but the memory about these interviews remains fresh with me. One of them said, "the state enterprises will become private enterprises, the leaders will also become capitalists"; the other mocked those foreigners who put too much faith on the letters of the laws and the WTO's agreements, without realizing the importance of "guanxi", or "private connection" [15].

Ironically, when Western trade unions should have known better some of them still led to believe that with the official trade union ACFTU starting to promote labour laws it implied that the official union is getting more and more pro-labour, hence they began to call for a grand strategy of "engagement policy" with ACFTU. Or when Beijing began to have laws on civil associations (NGOs) certain international NGOs leaders saw these as a big step forward towards the advancement of civil society in China..

A half modern and half premodern bureaucracy

The crux of the matter is that, however, "hidden rules" in general and "guanxi" in particular always comes before the law. A bit less than three years ago when I wrote on the 19th Party Congress I talked about the pre-modern element of the CCP. [16] This pre-modern political element demands within its own ranks a kind of loyalty and obedience similar to pre-modern personal bondage. The up-side of this level of loyalty is that it makes the top leader feel more reassured of his power, the down-side is that it is also highly divisive because it necessarily creates a mechanism of fierce competition for trust from the top leaders among subordinating bureaucracy, hence creating multiple cliques and in-fighting. This often degenerates into a crazy race to the bottom, setting in

motion what I call survival of the most unscrupulous. Secondly, its hyper centralization of power compels the lower level bureaucrats, when they implement the top leader's policies, to overdo things so as to both save their skins and reap their own benefits, without regards for the consequences. We have seen this first in the Hong Kong case and again in the current pandemic.

This return of Imperial China's political tradition tempted Fei-Ling Wang to argue in his book *The China Order: Centralia, World Empire, and the Nature of Chinese Power* that today's China "is a reincarnated Qin-Han polity" which aims at global expansion and hence necessarily comes into conflict with the US. [17] "Qin" refers to the first unified dynasty founded by Qin Shihuang in BC 221. "Han" refers to the Han Dynasty which succeeded the Qin. I think the advantage of his term is that it captures the pre-modern political culture of the Beijing regime, but there is a downside as well. Let us not forget that it was also crazily committed to mobilising the people in China's industrialisation and modernisation. Its modern features standing side by side with its pre-modern features. The Party's industrialisation drive has had an unintended consequence. The Party turned China into a country which has a highly educated people, an urbanised society, a large working class and middle class - which certain political scientists regard as democratic classes. [18] No one knows this better than the CCP. It is also one of the main reasons for the Party's constant paranoia over the slightest signs of dissidents and unrest.

That the top leaders are obsessed with self-promotion was not just out of pre-modern culture. The bureaucracies enrich themselves through the modern way, the way of capitalism, not through the old Imperial way of direct appropriation of agricultural surplus. They enrich themselves much quicker than their counterparts in the world is further because they are able to combine both the power of the coercive state and the power of capital in its hands, hence devouring an ever bigger share of social surplus at the expense of the people - ironically, with the help of the Western countries. It is aware that it has been too greedy, too noticeable an enemy of the people, therefore it has, on the one hand, spent a big chunk of public money to spy on the people, and to brain wash them about how great its leaders are on the other. It is not just out of personal vanity that Xi requires his subordinates to glorify him non-stop. It is a collective endeavour to both justify their greed and to paralyze the people's minds so that they stop thinking for themselves. Ironically, the CCP's tendency to massively overdoing things may also lead it down the road of self-fulfilling prophecy.

The present pandemic already showed signs of unrest. After Li Wenliang died, millions of netizens mourned the doctors, and hundreds of thousands of them posted greetings to him. A Wuhan resident even dared to say this:

"I hope people understand that... what they need is a government which protects the ultimate interest of each and every citizen. This ultimate interest is not just about property, but also about lives! If I am fortunate enough to live, I will no longer be concerned with the bullshit about the great revival of our nation! Nor about the dogs' fart of the belt and road! I won't even care about ...if Taiwan is independent or unified (with Mainland)! In this crisis I just wish I could have rice to eat and cloth to wear!.....I am above all an individual, a living person! Sorry, I can't afford to love a government and a country which just allows me to rot in a crisis moment! [19]"

Au Loong Yu, 2nd May 2020.

P.S.

- Article written for the Editions Syllepse which translated it into French (also available on ESSF).

Text corrected 9 and 12 May 2020.

Footnotes

- [1] A total of “trips”, not individuals: (internal) migrant workers (broadly defined, not just counting the rural migrants), on top of having to make a round trip, often have to make different smaller trips.
- [2] Coronavirus: China’s first confirmed Covid-19 case traced back to November 17:
<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3074991/coronavirus-chinas-first-confirmed-covid-19-case-traced-back>
- [3] Early Transmission Dynamics in Wuhan, China, of Novel Coronavirus-Infected Pneumonia:
<https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMoa2001316>
- [4] How early signs of the coronavirus were spotted, spread and throttled in China:
<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/how-early-signs-of-the-coronavirus-were-spotted-spread-and-throttled-in-china>
- [5] Highlights: China’s Xi recounts early role in coronavirus battle:
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-health-xi-highlights/highlights-chinas-xi-recounts-early-role-in-coronavirus-battle-idUSKBN20B1MC>
- [6] ikong zaoshang bao, zhongyang weibao jieri qifen shi liangji (CDC Reported in the Morning, the Central Prioritised Festival Atmosphere Resulted in the Missing of Opportunity), Mingpao, 17th February, 2020.
- [7] Effect of non-pharmaceutical interventions for containing the COVID-19 outbreak in China:
<https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.03.03.20029843v3.full.pdf>
- [8] The term was first coined by the writer Wu Si in his book “Qianguize—Zhongguo lishi zhong de zhenshi youxi” (Hidden Rules –The Real Game in Chinese History), Yunnan People’s Press, 2001.
- [9] Hand, foot and mouth disease in China: evaluating an automated system for the detection of outbreaks:
<https://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/92/9/13-130666.pdf?ua=1>
- [10] Internet-based China information system for disease control and prevention:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/268103880_Internet-based_China_information_system_for_disease_control_and_prevention
- [11] Yiqing chu zhibao xitong shixiao, wu yujing shiji (The Direct Report System Failed in the Early Stage of the Epidemic, Missing the Chance for Early Alarm), Mingpao, 16th March, 2020.
- [12] <https://www.ft.com/content/f10ccb26-a16f-11e9-a282-2df48f366f7d>

[13] Full Text of Clinton's Speech on China Trade Bill:

https://www.iatp.org/sites/default/files/Full_Text_of_Clinton's_Speech_on_China_Trade_Bi.htm

[14] Report on Trade and Economic Relations with China, Committee on International Trade, EU Parliament:

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=REPORT&reference=A6-2009-0021&language=GA>

[15] *Voices from Below - China's Accession to WTO and Chinese Workers*, Edited by May Wong, AMRC, Hong Kong, 2008, p. 73-76.

[16] The 19th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party - Modernisation by a pre-modern bureaucracy? ESSF (article 42297), [The 19th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party - Modernisation by a pre-modern bureaucracy?](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article42297):

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article42297>

[17] *The China Order: Centralia, World Empire, and the Nature of Chinese Power*, Chinese edition, Gusa Publishing, New Taipei City, 2018, p. 16.

[18] *Capitalist Development and Democracy*, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Huber Stephens, Evelyne Huber, John D. Stephens, University of Chicago Press, 1992.

[19] Wuhan fengcheng, mianlin rendao zainan (Wuhan Lockdown, Facing Humanity Crisis), Radio France Internationale, Chinese edition, 25th January, 2020. Translated by the author.