Briefs | Analyses

What does the coronavirus crisis tell us about China?

Health crisis management and autocratic power Perception of the Chinese diaspora in Europe

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TURNING A "GREY RHINO" INTO A "BLACK SWAN"?

China's early response to the coronavirus crisis

Three years ago, on 17 February 2017, Bill Gates took the podium in the very telling context of the Munich Security Conference to warn his audience that an outbreak of flu pandemic could well be expected within 10–15 years. The core of his message? The world needs to dramatically enhance its preparedness levels because the risk of a deadly epidemic—either natural, or at the hand of terrorists—has become as existential a threat as nuclear war and climate change.

Vigilance and rapid reaction capacity are especially paramount in the case of fast-moving airborne viral pathogens such as the one causing the 2019 coronavirus disease (Covid-19). Left unchecked, a flu epidemic naturally grows exponentially and spreads globally, particularly in today's heavily interconnected world. The first few weeks are thus critical to defuse a potential pandemic, which at the time of writing the World Health Organization has not yet declared, though it raised the global risk level from Covid-19 to "very high" on February 28th. **Since the current international public health crisis originated in its territory, it is China that has had to rise to the challenge of being the gatekeeper of world health.** It has been a peculiar test of global leadership, where performance was defined by actions in the all-important temporal window between the identification of a pneumonia of unknown etiology—a new illness for which the human body is unprepared—and its propagation beyond the possibility of reducing to less than 1 the basic reproductive number (R0), that is the expected number of additional cases that one case will generate through contagion. The higher the R0 number, the greater the urgency for containment measures, especially if the outbreak occurs in a densely populated region.

In the coming months, scholars and government propaganda will find it expedient to focus comparatively on the different methods and results of democracies and authoritarian regimes in managing the full-fledged crisis currently developing across all continents but Antarctica. It would be wrong, however, to

lose sight of the fact that, in the case of epidemics, leadership is more appropriately measured against a benchmark defined by capacity for early detection of a health hazard (phase 1),

In the case of epidemics, leadership is more appropriately measured against a benchmark defined by capacity for early detection of a health hazard, political responsiveness to health imperatives, and effective implementation of policies preventing widespread diffusion.

political responsiveness to health imperatives (phase 2), and effective implementation of policies preventing widespread diffusion (phase 3). Xi Jinping's China has impressed the world in the 1st and 3rd phases of this governance sequence. The political process in between, however, may have turned an expectable event with large potential impact and highly probable consequences—in other words, a "grey rhino"—into a "black swan". After all, on 21 January 2019 Xi himself had been warning of this particular risk during a study session on "risk management" with provincial leaders, ministers and top military officers in Beijing.

The first studies on Covid-19 indicate that in its initial stages, until early January 2020, this new epidemic doubled in size every 7.4 days, with an R0 of approximately 2.2. This number has subsequently been revised upwards, with estimates surpassing that of the 2003 SARS epidemic, which had an R0 of 2.9-3.3, and which eventually claimed over 750 lives and took some six months to contain. **When an outbreak of this kind occurs in a densely populated area such as the Wuhan city cluster, the timeframe for containment is measured in weeks. If the time of the year is that of the run-up to the lunar new year holidays, when an estimated 100 million Chinese citizens get on the move to reunite with their families—including 15 million through the Wuhan transport hub—every day matters.** Beijing has learned some important lessons from the SARS crisis, though the 2019 Global Health Security Index still ranks China only 51st out of 195 countries. Chinese health authorities can now rely on an online system that connects hospitals around the country with the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (China CDC) to reduce the delay between frontline health workers noticing an unusual emerging disease and that information reaching top decision makers. Neither frontline vigilance nor communication procedures were thus lacking when test results from multiple laboratories in mid-December 2019 suggested that an outbreak of an infectious virus was occurring in Wuhan. On the epidemiological front, within weeks the genetic code of the new virus would be uploaded into a global open-access database and shared with the World Health Organization (12 January 2020), a remarkable achievement and a crucial step in tackling the disease. Early detection stimulated global awareness and laid the foundations for local reaction. Thailand reported the first case of Covid-19 beyond China's borders on January 13th. Meanwhile, **the Wuhan health authority had issued an initial alert on 31st December and**

the highest organ of the Chinese Party State was informed at least since January 7th. From this point, two weeks would elapse before draconian containment measures were taken and Xi Jinping approved the virtual lockdown of Wuhan and its Hubei province on January 23rd, effectively quarantining some 60 million people. A central leading small group—an emergency inter-agency body that is erected only in extreme circumstances—was established two days later, accelerating the roll-out of an astonishing mix of Mao-era neighborhood policing and other grid-based urban management tools, and high-tech personalized surveillance including apps that dictate quarantines and can send personal data directly to the police. At the time of writing most of these measures are still in place across China and while key industrial engines such as the provinces of Guangdong and Zhejiang have relaxed controls, Beijing itself remains at risk of new outbreaks and the annual meeting of the National People's Congress—constitutionally the supreme organ of state power—has yet to be rescheduled.

In a recent study, China's most senior epidemiologist and former chairman of the Chinese Medical Association, Zhong Nanshan, estimates that if the implementation of control measures had been delayed for five days, the outbreak in the Chinese mainland would have tripled in size. By the same logic, a more timely response might have saved significant extra cost—domestically and internationally. Shortcomings have been acknowledged by China's own official news agency and while a newly enacted set of tighter regulations for online debate will moderate the calls for freedom of speech that have been resonating on Chinese social media recently, questions remain on the slow political responsiveness of the Chinese Party-State between January 7th and 23rd. Leaving aside conspiracy theories, including the allusions to the timeline of the US-China "phase one" trade deal signed on January 15th, **many have blamed bureaucratic bottlenecks within the Chinese system. Xi Jinping himself has appeared to endorse this reading, choosing to directly address some 170,000 cadres around the country in a televised speech on the epidemic designed to avoid his instructions being "distorted" (in the words of the People's Daily, the Communist Party's official newspaper).** This is no mere administrative bungle: it reflects the current nature of the Chinese polity, which dictates the priorities of those with governance responsibilities at all levels. Xi has consistently been centralizing power since taking office in 2012. This indirectly and perhaps inadvertently fueled a reactive culture among officials who often have a stronger incentive to avoid blame by deferring decisions to higher authorities than to respond promptly and creatively in situations of uncertainty. That this should be the case even when a health hazard threatens a largely unaware public is symptomatic of China's unresolved tension between individual deference to domestic hierarchies and national aspirations to global leadership. Because ultimately, in an epidemic, we are all only as safe as the most fragile among us.

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Kristin Shi-Kupfer
[EURICS Fellow, spring 2020]

"SILENT" CITIZENS?

New wave of racism against the Chinese diaspora highlights the importance to engage with its communities in Europe

Struggling with the many unknowns of the spreading coronavirus, we are all longing for mutual support. Unfortunately, racism against people with Asian facial features is happening all across the globe and shared via social media. Some people have spoken up against these xenophobic sentiments, criticizing media for their choice of pictures and headlines and calling on support for people facing discrimination and violence. The World Health Organization (WHO) has also strongly denounced any form of racism in the wake of the coronavirus.

Most remarkable, however, have been actions by the people affected by racism themselves: on January 28, a tweet with the hashtag "JeNeSuisPasUnVirus" (*IamNotaVirus*) went viral. Posted by Lou Chengwang, a tweeter-user seemingly living in France, the hashtag has since then been translated and used in other languages as a new slogan for protest. On February 2, Massimiliano Martigli Jiang, a Chinese-Italian, staged a performance in Florence called "I'm not a VIRUS, I'm a HUMAN. Eradicate the prejudice". He stood blindfolded and his mouth covered with a mask. They send a strong signal to European societies: **from the often considered "silent" Chinese migrants/Chinese-Europeans, committed citizen voices can emerge and they should be engaged with.** They could be bridge builders in times when not only political, but also economic relations between Europe and China have become challenging.

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For the time being, this societal engagement is alienated by racism. **In order to have a better understanding of the Chinese diaspora's concerns analyzing Chinese-language digital media primarily addressing the Chinese diaspora in Europe provides an important starting point.** Looking at it since the outbreak of the virus, three findings stand out.

First, while wearing a facial mask is described by Chinese-language media to feel natural and safer for many Chinese in Europe, this behavior is also considered to add to a "bad image" of the Chinese (Asian) diaspora as "sick people" or people of "another kind" and a source for discrimination. An article in Nouvelles d'Europe from February 24 points out that although Chinese people would prefer to wear one, they rather avoid it due to the above-mentioned reasons. A background article on the platform *Falanxi 360* explains at length the reasons French experts have given not to advocate wearing facial masks when not being sick oneself. While many masks are not very protective, wearing them might add to shortages in hospitals or doctors (general practitioners) offices. The author doesn't give a clear recommendation for Chinese in France. However the article ends with a question: "And who is willing to bear an insulting title like 'East Asian Sick Man' because of a misunderstanding around a misleading mask?"

Second, and non-surprisingly, the opportunity to interact with European friends provides Chinese migrants another perspective to digest acts of racism. In that regard, several authors and netizens commuting on digital media have pointed to the importance of learning French language well to be able to interact. Also, many users hope to share videos and posts with foreigners so they could better understand the struggles Chinese migrants face. Commenting on a xenophobic experience shared by a Chinese-French woman, one user on the platform *China Town* wrote: "At first, I felt the same as you, and I was very angry. But after talking with my French friends, I also looked at the problem from another angle. Of course, when we encounter injustice, we must safeguard our rights and interests. I just don't want that because of this incident, Chinese people feel that French people are very discriminatory. Many French people are rational."

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Third, **the Chinese embassy is a challenging point of reference for many members of the Chinese diaspora.** In the discussion forum of the digital media Huarenjie, comments on reports about experienced racism in France often bring up the question why the Chinese embassy is not doing more to stand up for their own citizens abroad.

Other Chinese in Europe struggle with the influencing efforts of the PRC. This can also effects the trust among Chinese overseas, beyond a common ground of unity against racism: a recent article in the Hong Kong-based media *The Initium*, well known among young Chinese professionals both in the People's Republic of China and abroad, has sparked controversial comments online. Titled "Masks and whistle, action and panic: European Chinese in the epidemic", the article quotes Chinese voicing criticism of what they sense a "staged" and "misused" and "non-rational" commemoration event for the Chinese doctor Li Wenliang. Li discovered the coronavirus, was silenced and died from the disease in the city of Wuhan. Several users, self-referred citizens of the People's Republic of China, shared their fear of being considered a "person with ulterior motives" by the Chinese embassy while wanting to participate in the event. Others, seemingly from Hong Kong and/or Taiwan, attacked those for not being able or willing to understand and practice democracy, like making a political stance, because they are "Mainland Chinese".

Providing a safe space for expression, to rebuild trust

The Chinese Communist Party is actively pursuing its geo-strategic, economic and political interests across the globe, using a wide toolkit from the overt to the covert. It includes reaching out to Chinese diaspora communities appealing—and pressuring—them for "patriotic support". In Europe, the Chinese diaspora as well as governments and societies, seem to struggle with these growing influencing efforts. Europeans tend to apply general black-and-white labeling and not actively incentivize engagement with European society, culture and politics: their priority is to mitigate against potential security risks. On the other hand, the communities of the heterogenous Chinese diaspora are facing pressure from official China, sometimes also extended to their families back in the PRC. They lack representatives and independent public platforms to voice their concerns and interests.

So what could European societies do? Here are two ideas:
1- Set up and support online platforms for deeper knowledge sharing and opportunities to interact between the Chinese diaspora and European societies. These platforms ideally would be bilingual or even trilingual, offering moderated and password-protected spaced to exchange on current affairs in Europe. A growing user community could then be supported to self-organize offline gatherings and exchange.

2- Provide protected channels for overseas Chinese who get under pressure from the Chinese embassy or other official Chinese organs. From a legal perspective, this is seemingly more difficult concerning Non-EU-Chinese citizens, but a "whistleblower" or "risk-taker" mechanism or should be considered to support those Chinese, who would like to embrace universal human rights as global citizens.

These developments could help to reduce distrust that might otherwise generate nationalist reactions or socio-political unrest. Rebuilding trust could also prevent the old continent from losing the talents of the Chinese diaspora. Talents that are valuable both professionally and ideationally: talents that are essential to Europe's future.

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