



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Corona-Virus reveals authoritarianism's fatal flaw

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Authoritarian blindness is a perennial problem, especially in large countries like China with centralized, top-down administration. Indeed, Xi would not even be the first Chinese ruler to fall victim to the totality of his own power. On August 4, 1958, buoyed by reports pouring in from around the country of record grain, rice, and peanut production, an exuberant Chairman Mao Zedong wondered how to get rid of the excess, and advised people to eat “five meals a day.” Many did, gorging themselves in the new regime canteens and even dumping massive amounts of “leftovers” down gutters and toilets. Export agreements were made to send tons of food abroad in return for machinery or currency. Mao didn't know famine was at hand, because he had set up a system that ensured he would hear lies. Smart rulers have tried to create workarounds to avoid this authoritarian dilemma. Dynastic China, for example, had institutionalized mechanisms to petition the emperor: a right that was theoretically granted to everyone, including the lowest farmers and the poorest city dwellers. This system was intended to check corruption in provinces and uncover problems, but in practice, it was limited in many ways, filtered through courtiers to a single emperor, who could listen to only so many in a day. Many rulers also cultivated their own independent sources of information in far-flung provinces. Thanks to technology, there is a much more robust option for authoritarians in the 21st century: big-data analytics in a digital public sphere. The public sphere in China during those years wasn't a free-for-all, to be sure. One couldn't call for collective action or for deposing the central government. But

social media gave citizens a voice and a way to make an impact, and it served as an early-warning system for party leaders. Authorities sometimes went as far as to pledge, in advance, to abide by the decisions of these bodies. For many years, such experiments flourished all over China and, combined with the digital public sphere, led scholars to wonder whether the “deliberative turn” in the country’s otherwise authoritarian state was not a means of weakening authoritarianism, but of making it more sustainable. An earlier hint that Xi’s China was falling into authoritarian blindness came during the on-going Hong Kong protests. The demonstrations had started over a minor demand—the withdrawal of an extradition bill of little strategic importance to Beijing. Protest is the traditional way that Hong Kongers, who do not have full voting rights, express discontent. But this time the Beijing insiders miscalculated. They genuinely believed that the real cause for the Hong Kong unrest was the high rents on the densely populated island, and also thought that the people did not support the protesters. Authoritarian blindness had turned an easily solvable problem into a bigger, durable crisis that exacted a much heavier political toll, a pattern that would repeat itself after a mysterious strain of pneumonia emerged in a Wuhan seafood market. In early December 2019, a strange cluster of patients from a local seafood market, which also sold wildlife for consumption, started showing up in Wuhan hospitals. These initial patients developed a fever and pneumonia that did not seem to be caused by any known viruses. Given the SARS experience of 2003, local doctors were quickly alarmed. With any such novel virus, medical providers are keen to know how it spreads: If the virus is unable to spread from human to human, it’s a tragedy, but a local one, and for only a few people. If it can sustainably spread from human to human, as was the case with SARS, it could turn into a global pandemic, with potentially massive numbers of victims. Given exponential growth dynamics of infectious diseases, containing an epidemic is straightforward early on, but nearly impossible once a disease spreads among a population. So it’s maximally important to identify and quarantine candidate cases as early as possible, and that means leadership must have access to accurate information. Before the month of December was out, the hospitals in Wuhan knew that the corona virus was spreading among humans. Medical workers who had treated the sick but never visited the seafood market were falling ill. On December 30, a group of doctors attempted to alert the public, saying that seven patients were in isolation due to a SARS-like disease. On the same day, an official document admitting both a link to the seafood market and a new disease was leaked

online. On December 31, 2019, facing swirling rumours, the Wuhan government made its first official announcement, confirming 27 cases but, crucially, denying human-to-human transmission. Teams in hazmat suits were finally sent to close down the seafood market, though without explaining much to the befuddled, scared vendors. Things went on in this suspended state for another 10 days, while the virus kept spreading. Incredibly, on January 19, just one day after the death of yet another doctor who had become infected, officials from across the populous Hubei province held a 40,000-family outdoor banquet in Wuhan, its capital, as part of the official celebrations for China's Lunar New Year. The dam broke on January 20—just three days before Wuhan would initiate a draconian lockdown that blocked millions of people from leaving. On that day, the respected SARS scientist Zhong Nanshan went on national television, confirming the new virus and human-to-human transmission. That same day, Xi Jinping gave his first public speech about the corona-virus, after he returned from an overseas trip to Myanmar. (1)

Can the Corona virus Strengthen China's Authoritarian Regime?

In its race to combat COVID-19 – the disease caused by a novel strain of corona-virus that originated in Wuhan in December 2019 – China has embarked on a draconian path. The government started a “people's war” against the virus, locked down cities and provinces, and sought to use its giant industrial complex to try to limit the virus' spread. After weeks of ever-increasing numbers of infections and fatalities, we see, at least according to official Chinese governmental data, that the proliferation of the virus has begun to drop off from its peak. In its efforts to contain and battle the virus, the Chinese government has deployed a wide array of high-tech solutions in tandem with limiting population movement. It has, among others, developed and widely deployed the Health Code, developed by Ant Financial, a sister company to tech giant Alibaba, in initial cooperation with the local government of Hangzhou, where both the Alibaba and Ant Financial headquarters are based. As The New York Times reported in an article, the app sends user data – including locations and identifying code numbers – to the police and other authorities. Not to be outdone, China's other tech giant, Tencent, which owns We Chat, is working in collaboration with the government on digital health (and tracking) systems that send similar information. Combined with the government database of travels within the nation, as well as hotel stays, linked to national identity card numbers, these empirically observable efforts suggest that Chinese government is endeavouring to implement a nation-wide tracking

system in the name of containing the virus. As such, the health scare has created the latest node in the (continued) rise of China's networked authoritarianism model. Until now, much of the high-tech surveillance blanket was limited to "hotspots of trouble" like Tibet and Xinjiang. The government implemented regional wide surveillance systems in Tibet after the uprisings and incidents between 2012 and 2015. In Xinjiang, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has created a high-tech mass-surveillance blanket, supported by a region-wide police presence and in combination with forced labour, re-education, training camps, and prison systems into which millions of Uyghurs, and others, have vanished. The CCP actively defended and even lauded these efforts, in the name of "stability maintenance. Despite the obvious economic and human-related downsides of the virus outbreak and its persistence, COVID-19 has presented the Xi regime and the CCP with an opportunity to consolidate and proliferate this model further, eventually encompassing most, if not all, of China. Accordingly, the virus can be used as an expedient excuse for deepening totalitarian control, and abolishing what remained of the already-limited free, individual space within the state. In a dictatorship, all other aspirations and goals are dependent on regime security. COVID-19 may be considered as a quasi-internal security threat, albeit one that is shared by other nations and governments and does not pose the same kind of threat as a popular revolt or uprising by the people. On the other hand, COVID-19 cannot be treated entirely as an external security threat, either, which states typically respond to by prioritizing economic and military development. We therefore see the Xi regime, as both rational and preoccupied with survival, responding to the COVID-19 pandemic as something that falls between an internal and external security threat (though leaning slightly more toward a threat from within the state), borrowing characteristics from both response strategies to take advantage of a window of opportunity to entrench control under the guise of protecting the people. The 2002-2003 SARS outbreaks in China put the gaps of China's mass surveillance and state control apparatus into sharp focus. This is one of the reasons why the CCP has responded differently and so aggressively in contrast to what was seen during the SARS outbreak. While some arguments might point to this as evidence of China's progress in addressing outbreaks, the sudden emergence of COVID-19 reveals some of the direct benefits that dictatorships can extract from health emergencies when placed in a security context. The argument developed so far suggests that the economic costs of COVID-19 are not severe enough to cause major

concern for China. Thanks to the pandemic, China's economic growth for 2020 has been optimistically set at between 5-6 per cent – approximately half of the state's exceptional growth rate in 2009 and 2010, and around 2 to 2.5 percentage points below the average for the period between-2012 to 2019. Thus the spread of COVID-19 does not warrant concern that the internal security of the regime is threatened – in fact, the disease has done much to limit individual agency, as people have become increasingly reliant on the capacities of the state to protect them. In that light, the pandemic exposes a unique opportunity for the CCP to advance the necessary justification for a tightened security policy. COVID-19 in a regime-state security context can be cast as a similar imperative as terrorism, requiring a build-up of the necessary structures for full-spectrum surveillance of China's citizens: using drones to enforce quarantines, lockdowns, mask wearing, and so on. What we see afterward is the impossibility of de-escalating the security imperative and returning to a state of "normalcy," even for contemporary dictatorships. When health crises are treated with the severity as any one of the CCP's "three evils," they are elevated to the level of existential threat, necessitating beyond-normal politics and policy responses. Events and practices observed in China since December 2019 lead to the general conclusion that China has moved past developing and implementing surveillance-based, high-tech security and control in troubled spots and is rolling out the model on a nation-wide level. Using the virus, the CCP appears to be acting on its concern over regime survival. For a long time, the regime would not extend beyond its unspoken social contract, lest it intrude on the limited freedom/surveillance model too much. However, the corona virus scares in combination with Xi Jinping's emphasis on control — it might be the right moment for a change. This might also foreshadow future CCP responses to issues impacting states such as climate change, recessions/depressions, and further health crises. Dictators have been shown to act with partial responsibility for broader society beyond the state but in ways that are either predominantly or concomitantly self-serving. The COVID-19 case and China's response suggests the CCP has a plausible pathway to control the population, deter unrest, and enhance stability maintenance. Every new innovation introduced to combat the virus also provides evidence of just how invasive and controlling Xi's reign has become. Quarantines and lockdowns can gain time that enables governments to seek solutions, whether medical, social, and economic – but these are not enduring solutions in and of themselves. Recent decades suggest many Chinese have tolerated the political excesses of Big

Brother, even when they disliked them. However, in return, Big Brother was expected to protect lives and livelihoods from economic, social, environmental, and health threats. Whether people think that deal still stands may determine if the country can pull off the swift economic recovery that China, and the world, needs. (2)

Protecting China's Preferred COVID-19 Narrative

First of all, we need to be clear—the U.S. and Chinese actions are not equivalent. The U.S. restrictions affected Chinese media outlets such as Xinhua and CGTN, which are under the control of the Chinese Communist Party. China has argued its moves to revoke U.S. press credentials in response were “entirely necessary and reciprocal countermeasures” and “legitimate and justified self-defence in every sense.” But restrictions on independent media, which can play an important role in holding governments accountable, and on state-run media, which cannot challenge government actions, do not lie on the same plane. It should also be clear that China's move to expel journalists is not separate from Beijing's efforts to influence the global narrative surrounding COVID-19. Now that China appears to have brought the domestic outbreak under control, Beijing has sought to showcase the successes of its approach and cast itself as a leader in the global response. To this end, the Chinese government has mounted a campaign to supply much-needed testing kits, masks, and ventilators to countries in Europe, Africa, and Southeast Asia, and has sent its medical experts and hosted teleconferences to meet with other countries' health experts. With fewer foreign journalists working for foreign, independent media in China, there will be fewer journalists to report stories that deviate from this message. President Xi Jinping already has taken what amounted to a victory lap through Hubei Province, where the corona virus outbreak originated, and pointed to China's success in flattening its curve of new infections after a broad crackdown there. China is one of only two countries so far, along with South Korea, that have proceeded up and then down its curve of infections. New cases continue growing everywhere else. China's global messaging is not only deliberate, but focused: Twitter is banned inside the People's Republic; the intended audience for these messages are outsiders and nations, such as those in Europe, which China's leaders have selected. American officials' complaints about Chinese communists' repression have become muddled and intermingled with what critics call racist or ethnocentric language, including that used by Trump himself. But if the United States won a minor victory in the

messaging war this week, so, in this context did China. After a stream of news conferences in which Trump insisted upon using the term "Chinese virus," the president ditched that phrase. Trump hasn't abandoned his complaint about how much information he says China's government concealed about the early phase of the coron-virus outbreak, but he did abandon the phrase "Chinese virus."

The Need for International Reporting on China

Independent reporting on how COVID-19 is affecting China still matters even though China appears to have weathered the peak of the crisis. Last week, China appeared to hit a milestone when its national health commission reported no new locally transmitted cases for the first time since the outbreak, though concerns remain about possible unreported cases, particularly asymptomatic ones. But China remains worried about people who contracted the virus elsewhere coming into the country, and has instituted strict screenings and quarantine for those arriving from abroad. As China lifts the lockdowns that curbed infections and daily life begins to return to normal, concerns about the risk of a potential second wave could grow, particularly as the virus spreads among China's neighbours. Even after the outbreak winds down, there will continue to be surveillance and privacy concerns about the cell phone tracking app and other technology used to monitor those with the virus. The expulsion of U.S. journalists casts lingering doubt on information disclosed by China about how the country is preventing new infections or rolling back the strict controls that were put in place. And in Washington, the expulsion of journalists has deepened the U.S.-China diplomatic rift at a time when constructive cooperation is needed most. It also coincides with the U.S. evacuating much of its diplomatic staff from China, limiting many levels of communications just as tensions at the top run high. To be sure, U.S. officials risked retaliation against U.S. reporters when they imposed the limits on Chinese state media, and a global pandemic is no time to be playing a blame game. But China's restrictions on foreign journalists do nothing to help address the crisis. A global crisis is when trust in information matters the most. There are many civil liberties and personal freedoms that may need to be sacrificed or limited to grapple with a public health crisis—but press freedoms that help guarantee access to information should not be among them. Allowing media to report on the full picture of China's COVID-19 experience can help other countries weigh the costs and benefits of the measures they are considering. Ultimately, expelling reporters from the country that was the source of—and is still grappling with—COVID-19 is not conducive

to the trust that's needed to move forward. Things have dramatically escalated since then. Just one month later, by some estimates, more than 700 million people in China are living under some form of restrictions to their movements, in addition to the severe lockdown in the Hubei province. Domestic social media has erupted in anger at both China's central leadership and local officials in Hubei province, where the disease began. There are calls for free speech, fury over the death of one of the early medical whistle-blowers from the virus, and frustrations with the quarantine. It's not clear why Xi let things spin so far out of control. It might be that he brushed aside concerns from his aides until it was too late, but a stronger possibility is that he did not know the crucial details. Hubei authorities may have lied, not just to the public but also upward—to the central government. Just as Mao didn't know about the massive crop failures, Xi may not have known that a novel corona virus with sustained human-to-human transmission was brewing into a global pandemic until too late. It's nearly impossible to gather direct evidence from such a secretive state, but consider the strong, divergent actions before and after January 20—within one day, Hubei officials went from almost complete cover-up and business as usual to shutting down a whole city. Another reason to think Xi did not know is that he would have every incentive to act quickly given China's experience with SARS, during which he was already a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Both SARS and the Wuhan virus (which causes the disease now dubbed COVID-19) are zoonotic corona viruses, with similar origins and pandemic potential. SARS was contained, though barely, and not before significant economic costs following a failed cover-up. Such an experience should have made it clear that cover-ups are futile when it comes to pandemics, because viruses don't respect borders. It's hard to imagine that a leader of Xi's experience would be so lax as to let the disease spread freely for almost two months, only to turn around and shut the whole country down practically overnight. In many ways, his hand was forced by his own system. Under the conditions of massive surveillance and censorship that have grown under Xi, the central government likely had little to no signals besides official reports to detect, such as online public conversations about the mystery pneumonia. In contrast, during the SARS epidemic, some of the earliest signs were online conversations and rumours in China about a flu outbreak. These were picked up by the Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network, who alerted the World Health Organization, who then started pressuring China to come clean, which finally triggered successful containment efforts. If people are too

afraid to talk, and if punishing people for “rumours” becomes the norm, a doctor punished for spreading news of a disease in one province becomes just another day, rather than an indication of impending crisis. Later, under criticism, Xi would say he gave instructions for fighting the virus as early as January 7, implying that he knew about it all along. But how could he admit the alternative? This is his system. Contrary to common belief, the killer digital app for authoritarianism isn’t listening in on people through increased surveillance, but listening to them as they express their honest opinions, especially complaints. An Orwellian surveillance-based system would be overwhelming and repressive, as it is now in China, but it would also be similar to losing sensation in parts of one’s body due to nerve injuries. Without the pain to warn the brain, the hand stays on the hot stove, unaware of the damage to the flesh until it’s too late. During the Ming dynasty, Emperor Zhu Di found out that some petitions to the emperor had not made it to him, because officials were blocking them. He was alarmed and ordered such blocks removed. “Stability depends on superior and inferior communicating; there is none when they do not. From ancient times, many a state has fallen because a ruler did not know the affairs of the people,” he said. Xi would have done well to take note.

Is COVID-19 China’s ‘Chernobyl Moment’?

With the epidemic spreading throughout China, the Ministry of Public Security, which controls all of the police departments in the country, has swung into action. A February 28 directive ordered all police throughout the country to make “wartime preparations.” The police are to “maintain social stability” by “severely” punishing any public or online reporting about the spread of the epidemic. They are also to help “control the disease” by enforcing quarantine orders and helping to speed the distribution of medical supplies. In other words, China’s leaders know they have a national emergency on their hands but, for political reasons, are still trying to control the narrative by downplaying the seriousness of the epidemic. The Communist Party’s penchant for secrecy drives it to punish those who report honestly and accurately about this unfolding disaster. Even though, honest and accurate reporting would save lives. Dr. Li Wenliang, 34, died from the corona virus after trying to spread word of the disease weeks before China would admit it was a serious threat. When Wenliang first warned his medical school classmates on Dec. 30 about the outbreak, police detained him for “rumour-mongering” and his posts were censored. Instead of

transparency, party leaders at all levels engage in multiple deceptions. They attribute many deaths to other causes, like simple pneumonia, and then cremate the bodies before an autopsy can be performed. They limit the number of corona virus test kits that hospitals are given each day, thus reducing the number of “proven cases” that can be diagnosed. They deliberately underreport the number of deaths, while keeping the crematoria furnaces going day and night to destroy the evidence of their deceit. Now the scope of the disaster is coming through even in official pronouncements. There is some suggestion that, like the deadly SARS virus of 2004, the new corona virus escaped from a research lab in China. But whether the virus itself is the result of evil or incompetence, the epidemic itself is a creation of the Chinese Communist Party. Had party leaders not delayed taking action for weeks after the first corona-virus infections appeared and had they been transparent about the danger it posed to the Chinese people, the epidemic would likely already be under control. Instead, the victims of Beijing’s man-made epidemic are being cremated as fast as the ovens can burn without even a chance for their relatives to say goodbye. After COVID-19 emerged in November 2019, China failed to report the outbreak for nearly two months. This facilitated the virus’ spread, causing a global economic and political crisis of unforeseen proportions. Theoretically, the United States could hold China legally accountable for negligence and the committing of an internationally wrongful act. The International Health Regulations (IHR) adopted by the World Health Organization (WHO) requires states to notify the WHO of events that may constitute “a public health emergency of international concern.” China similarly broke its obligations under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which stipulates a right to “the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.” Also, China’s behaviour is a threat to global security and constitutes a violation of Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which authorizes the UN Security Council to take action to “maintain or restore international peace and security.” China’s delayed failure to inform the WHO on time violated international law. Under customary international law on state responsibility China has an obligation to make full reparation for the injury caused by the internationally wrong act. Hence, there is definitely a legal case for full reparations, for moral and material injury that would take in the form of compensation (such as monetary payment) and satisfaction (such as public apology). It will be hard to enforce those legal obligations, though, and our article suggests that instead of relying on international law, states would be better off using a self-help mechanism. For

instance, the U.S. could use targeted sanctions on specific Chinese Communist Party leaders and their supporters by freezing their assets and prohibiting their travel or the U.S. can seize the assets of Chinese state-owned companies. The WHO's constitution allows this organization to refer cases to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for dispute settlements. Because international disputes are adjudicated based on states' consent, China would certainly challenge the ICJ's jurisdiction. China already employed this strategy in a landmark case with the Philippines regarding the South China Sea before the Permanent Court of Arbitration. Also, there is a nonbinding dispute resolution mechanism within the WHO where states can first seek to settle a dispute through negotiation. The WHO lacks the authority to enforce compliance with a judgment and this responsibility would be left to China's domestic legal system, in a country notorious for fabricating data, spreading misinformation, and censoring its critics. Now, let's assume that China loses this case before the ICJ and Beijing refuses to comply with its decision. A traditional international lawyer will tell you that you should not worry because the UN Charter allows the Security Council to take all necessary measures to enforce the judgment. Well, that's correct but we should not forget that China is one of five permanent member states that can veto any such resolution. Putting "China" and "international law" in the same sentence is an oxymoron. China respects international law only when it serves its interests, despite Beijing's grandiose statements. Chinese President Xi Jinping said that China must "lead the reform of the global governance system with the concept of fairness and justice." As the UN is celebrating its 75th anniversary this year, Beijing is only weakening international liberal institutions with its actions. Russia and China adopted a common Declaration on the Promotion of International Law in June 2016, when the two countries committed to respect international law. Then, a month later China lost a landmark case concerning the South China Sea against the Philippines and it refused to adhere to this ruling. A former Chinese diplomat openly said that this judgment was "nothing more than a piece of paper." Why should we expect anything else from China in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic? Beijing has already corrupted the international legal system. The U.N. has 15 specialized agencies and China has installed its officials in top posts in four of them. Also, the WHO has been promoting Beijing's interests during the COVID-19 pandemic and China's ties with the WHO have to be scrutinized. So a legal case against China will be effective and states should opt for a self-help mechanism to protect their interests and punish China. (3)

Conclusion

Over the past seven years, Xi has presented himself as a new leader for a new China, diverging from the cautious conservatism of his predecessors with uncharacteristically aggressive military, economic and political gambits. Unlike past presidents, he has positioned China's authoritarian government as a model for other nations to follow. Further missteps could threaten both China's position in the world and the regime's authority at home expectations were high, and the consequences for failing to deliver could be far-reaching. 'Black swan' events like the corona virus outbreak tend to expose the central weakness of authoritarian regimes: they cannot be seen to fail, even under circumstances that almost always include a few highly public failures. The corona virus may only be the beginning. According to an independent panel of WHO and World Bank experts, 'There is a very real threat of a rapidly moving, highly lethal pandemic of a respiratory pathogen killing 50-80 million people.' With authoritarianism on the rise across the globe, the effects of a global pandemic could include widespread political chaos as authoritarian regimes struggle to muster the resilience necessary for taking on a public health crisis. Moreover, black swan events are costly: the corona virus outbreak has already worsened China's economic slowdown, and the impact is hitting the local level first and hardest. For Xi Jinping, the highest costs have yet to be counted.

Notes and References

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