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Comment / Opinion

Amid the coronavirus crisis, China is paying a high price for its authoritarian system

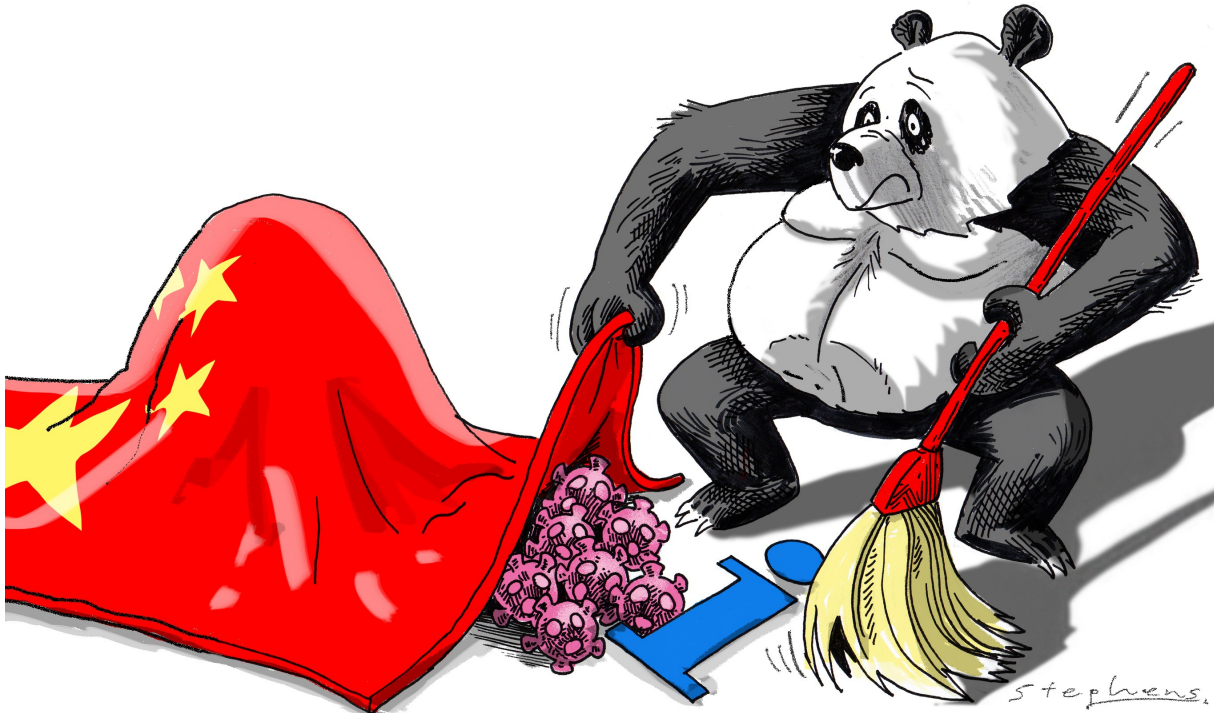
While blame for the epidemic cannot be pinned solely on the government's attempts to control and manipulate information, its heavy-handed approach has further eroded public trust. Beijing should beware the high price of an authoritarian regime

Topic | Health in China



Wenfang Tang

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Since the outbreak of the coronavirus, Chinese social media users, Western media commentators and news reports have strongly criticised the Chinese government's handling of the crisis. The consensus seems to be that censorship is to blame for the outbreak.

Some people point their fingers directly at China's authoritarian political system for its inability to handle such a public health crisis. Is authoritarianism really to blame?

One of the earliest warnings was sounded on December 30 by Dr Li Wenliang [1], an ophthalmologist at the Wuhan Central Hospital, who told his medical school classmates that there had been seven cases of a virus similar to severe acute respiratory syndrome.

After his message was leaked and circulated online, he was hauled up before local police for spreading rumours and warned about the consequences of causing social instability. He had to sign a letter promising not to do it again.

As the epidemic got out of control, it became clear that the authorities in Wuhan, the epicentre of the outbreak, were late in warning people [2] about the infections. Chinese social media users did not hesitate to voice their opinion.

While some defended officials' decision to censor information [3] about the unconfirmed Sars-like outbreak, many others criticised them for trying to hide the information and missing the window for early prevention.

In another blow to local authorities, Li later contracted the coronavirus and died on February 6. Local officials tried to delay [4] the release of the news until late at night, hoping most people would be asleep. But their clumsy effort did not succeed.

With the news of his death, his treatment by the authorities also came to light. It triggered an even bigger public outcry [5]. Many called for the loosening of information controls and for freedom of speech [6].

How Li Wenliang's death sparked Chinese demand for freedom of speech



14 Feb 2020

[7]

What were the censors thinking when they tried to [8] block information [9] during an apparent public health crisis? One explanation is that they did not at first grasp the seriousness of the problem. There seems to be some truth in this, particularly when there was no clear evidence about human-to-human spread [10] during the early days.

Yet evidence shows local authorities were not oblivious to the problem. On the same day that Li posted his message about the seven patients in his hospital, the Wuhan health commission issued an urgent notice [11] warning of the emergence of a novel coronavirus and proposing measures against its spread.

The authorities' understanding of the virus might not have been correct in terms of human-to-human spread, but they were alarmed.

Another explanation for the censorship is that officials believed the virus could be controlled without causing public panic during the Lunar New Year season or interrupting the annual legislative meetings across the country.

Public panic and an interruption of the local People's Congress meetings could threaten economic growth, social stability and even national security, which is a top priority for the government.

Some Wuhan officials were probably overly confident that China's omnipotent authoritarian political system could handle any crisis.

While we need more evidence to conclude that censorship was indeed to blame for the coronavirus spread, the more apparent damage has been the breakdown in public trust. People watched in horror as the number of infected people climbed while officials were busy delaying the news of Li's death.

The mourning of Li's passing turned into a public campaign against government ineptitude. Chinese social media was flooded with posts paying tribute to Li, and also sarcastic comments on local officials' ignorance, incompetence, corruption and arrogance.

The public outburst is a reaction to the tightened censorship in the name of social stability and national security since President Xi Jinping came to power in 2012.

Some criticised Xi for his style of tight control [12]. Yet others called for the protection of freedom of speech as a basic right of citizens. Reading these posts, one gets the impression that popular support for the government has dropped significantly.

Coronavirus:
what Xi
fears most is
people
turning on
the party



8 Feb 2020

[13]

There are reasons to believe that the authoritarian Chinese government is capable of fighting the crisis and maintaining public support. It has built a 1,000-bed hospital [14] in record time, sent tens of thousands of medical personnel to the affected regions and quarantined tens of millions of people.

It has been using the state-controlled media to demonstrate its strong leadership in curbing the virus, developing new treatment methods, boosting public morale and promoting national unity. Many Chinese who watch the official network news may still believe in the government. Netizens may not.

In the meantime, the government has also shown its ability to quickly respond to public opinion. It sent a team from Beijing to investigate the handling [15] of Li's case; provided financial compensation to Li's family, after his death was ruled a workplace injury; dismissed local officials [16] who appeared incompetent in the public eye, and; announced new policies to supervise local government agencies.

These measures may assuage public anger. It doesn't seem likely that the authoritarian regime will collapse any time soon as a result of its botched handling of the virus outbreak.

Authoritarianism is a double-edged sword. Political scientist Charles Lindblom described such a system as “strong thumbs, no fingers”. It is capable of national mobilisation, rapid resource allocation, and implementing large-scale projects, but incapable of managing things at the micro level. Indeed, it can build a 1,000-bed hospital in 10 days with its big thumb but, with no fingers, it is unable to handle a doctor’s early warning of the virus spread.

Wenfang Tang is head and chair professor of the Division of Social Science at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

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- [9] <https://www.scmp.com/tech/policy/article/3049342/coronavirus-china-tightens-social-media-censorship-amid-outbreak>
- [10] <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3047843/debunking-myths-around-chinas-deadly-coronavirus-outbreak>
- [11] <https://www.dw.com/en/china-investigates-sars-like-virus-as-dozens-struck-by-pneumonia/a-51843861>

- [12] <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3049940/how-xis-control-ocracy-lost-control-coronavirus-epidemic-sweeping>
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globe.harmony.1

Joining the western charade on Dr. Li? Is the professor either too lazy to learn the fact, or being ignorant or whatever?

Didn't the professor know even WHO calls on leaders to stop stigma and hate amid reports of discrimination against people of Asian descent? So the professor piled on more misinformation and defamation thinking it would benefit his children or family member for temporary western fame?

CenterBalance

In 2009, US's outbreak of H1N1 kills 500,000 people and spreads to 1 billion worldwide. So far, China's outbreak of coronaVirus kills 2,000 and infects 75,000. So decide for yourselves: who kills or who saves - democracy or socialism?

Jonnested

Dr. Li should informed his superior and the health authority. Did he? No where did Wenfang Tang proof that Li did.

Dr Li Wenliang through social media messaged that it could be SARS. He wrongly identified the virus. In addition, such health information should never be transmitted through social media. The police did the right thing to stop him from instilling fear. It's not an official who cover it up, it just police who were doing their work diligently. Unfortunately, being non medical personnel the police did not insist that Dr Li report his findings to his superiors.

The blogger, Wenfang Tang and his family are living in the US, just made a fool of himself by repeating what was written by fake news media several times before. Nothing new at all.

In addition, if not for an authoritarian leadership, Wuhan would never be lockdown so quickly and stop the spread of the virus to other countries and throughout China. This action gained praises from WHO while Human Right Group in the US as usual condemned China of abusing human rights.

Wenfang Tang should be grateful that his much hated authoritarian government prevented his kids and parents from catching the virus than to spread fake information without any proof. I really like to spit on people like Wenfang Tang who make money out of a crisis instead of helping in Wuhan.

ghichi2000@*****

"China is paying a high price for its authoritarian system".

Yes, indeed, the damages of Communists systems are very profound in the society, and therefore it takes a long time to overcome it.

Norah

It is a fallacy to suggest that the strength of an authoritarian political system lies in its unsurpassed ability to mobilize resources to address disastrous situations when others, not as authoritarian, have proven to be as collective (e.g. Australia vs forest fire) in similar challenges.

The issue is not in its ability to deal with disastrous situations, or battle congenital conflicts, rather the issue is the "immunity system" (in the body of Sin) against attacks of global magnitude is ineffectual.

You need global alliances to survive and thrive but your political body is incapable of achieving the required "peace" - either on home ground or beyond one's shore.

Nevertheless, nations attempted peace through either legalized might or political deviousness in tricking or fearmongering their citizens. When you shed blood as the way, blood shall be on you to repay.

"And according to the law, I may almost say, all things are cleansed with blood, and apart from shedding of blood there is no remission." Heb 9:22

lfp7933@*****

Another anti-China literate.

These are the people that have poisoned the students' mentality from 1997 onwards.

shuik

What a pathetic & heartless attempt to use a tragedy to spread hate & propaganda against China! With hindsight we're all experts at criticising for what should be done right!

.

Like WHO says, we should all be grateful to China for containing the virus & at great cost.

griffinwarrior@*****

How easy it is to criticize when a misfortune occurs. How difficult it is to take unpopular and necessary measures to address such a serious problem as coronavirus. How unfortunate it is to do a cheap demagoguery by hypothesizing what might have happened, above all knowing what has already happened and exposing what might have been but was not. Thinks someone that these criticisms contribute to solving some problem, because if someone thinks that way, let them be clear that the answer is NO.

actuarius

Covid-19 is an unfortunate disaster, with over 2,000 lives lost so far and rising. But everyone coming out of the woodworks now politicising the whole episode, which is equally unfortunate. Of course there are things the CCP can do better, and you can say that with every natural or man-made disaster the world has experienced. No one is ever fully prepared when something like this hits, and it's really with the forceful measures being taken by China that this has not morphed into a worldwide pandemic. At minimum, they have brought us time to get prepared for it.

But no, it's all the CCP's fault.

Why didn't people call for the dismantling of the Japan parliament with the Fukushima nuclear disaster? Or how about disbanding US congress when they oversaw one of the worst financial crisis in decades? The list goes on.

The CCP is not perfect. Far, far from it, and hopefully they learn from it. But just because the system doesn't suit your eyes, don't exploit this disaster by politicising it. Let's give the people of Hubei all our support, and hope they get through it.

lim.thientee@*****

China is paying high price for its authoritarian system, and this is a wrong header statement. Who don't pay a high price for a virus outbreak for any system? The USA don't pay for its H1N1 system, was that true? Why said nonsense during the hard times, when the Chinese government is fighting to contain the outbreak? Too much negative view on presence situation doesn't help China. Unless you are anti Chinese communist writer.

GNNBCCB

When an epidemic outbreak occurs in such densely populated city, casualties are inevitable. Believe it or not, no one single city on planet Earth is ever ready nor having enough resources to counter a new-breed virus outbreak. It has nothing to do with governance. If this happens in NYC, it could have been no better in fact, there could be more casualties, most likely die from civil unrest than the outbreak.

sensiblehk@*****

Even Japan a highly developed and democratic country cannot handle an outbreak in the cruise ship. They just let people get sick there...

arrhetos

hey dude, please flush yourself down the toilet

LoveHKNotCCP

It is 2020 and people are too smart and informed to put up with the CCP's BS anymore. Adapt or perish CCP.

graceston55@*****

@LoveHKNotCCP Granted you are part of 2020 but you ain't one of the smart one. Heed your own advice: adapt or thou shall perish by thy own bias and ignorance.

Jonnested

@LoveHKNotCCP - you are deeply in hate.

joychiulee@*****

Everyone knows who is responsible for this Coronavirus, Karma is coming !🔥🔥🔥🔥🔥

Jonnested

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LoveHKNotCCP

@Jonnested LOL, even the Supreme Court of China disagrees with you as they also chastised the police response in Wuhan.

Jonnested

@LoveHKNotCCP Oh, now you believe there is fairness in China's justice system, you have some improvement, except that the supreme court of China did not 'chastise' the police but merely criticized them and did not charge any policemen for wrong doing. Sure, the police could have done more, like insisting that Dr Li inform his superior besides stopping him from spreading through social media. I am sure you would agree with me if you are a reasonable person.

Ryu Lee

@Jonnested absolutely agree with you. As a trained medical doctor, he knew well that he should escalate the case to his superior as part of the country's public health reporting system. Spreading this to the public or colleagues was totally unacceptable and a crime.

David Terrence Baldwin

Thanks for this wonderfully balanced article. Although I suspect you don't want to be censored. How can a government so set on copying the worlds best designs and "making them better" due to a sharing culture on the other hand say, we are keeping something like this a secret from our people and the world. Its either you are a sharing country and believe its a good world ethos to share, including information, or you are not.

Jonnested

@David Terrence Baldwin Wenfang Tang is living in the US. What did he know about Dr Li's details issue? Probably Tang read from some other media and wrote this article from a second-hand perspective. Therefore, his writing is very much unreliable. Furthermore, many Chinese who migrated to the US are fugitives who have an axe to grind and smear the Chinese government at all cost.

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