

Official response to coronavirus heightens popular anger at Chinese government

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The initial attempts by Chinese authorities to conceal and downplay the public health danger posed by the outbreak of the 2019-nCoV coronavirus in the city of Wuhan has heightened already widespread alienation from, and distrust in, the political establishment. The Chinese Communist Party regime, which serves the interests of the small capitalist oligarchy that has enriched itself over the past four decades, is responding with public apologies, combined with state repression of its most vocal critics.

It is apparent that Chinese officials at all levels—from the city of Wuhan, to the provincial government of Hubei, to the national government in Beijing—were aware by late December that a new strain of coronavirus had emerged. Patients had begun admitting to hospitals in Wuhan from at least December 8, and possibly earlier, with a condition diagnosed as “pneumonia of unidentified causes” and had not responded to standard treatment. No public health alerts were issued.

On December 30, in defiance of the official silence, Wuhan doctor Li Wenliang posted a warning in an online chat group that he was treating patients infected with what he believed was a new infection similar to Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS)—the coronavirus that killed over 770 people in 2002–2003. He advised his medical colleagues to wear face masks and protective clothing. At the same time, other people clearly aware of the virus, had started a hashtag “Wuhan SARS” on Weibo.

The response of the authorities was to order Li Wenliang to report to police and compel him to sign a document confessing to “making false comments.” Any reference to a viral outbreak comparable with SARS was deleted from social media and censored from the print and television news. Tragically, Li

became infected himself and he died last night of heart failure in a Wuhan hospital.

On December 31, while concealing the outbreak from the public, Chinese health officials gave the World Health Organisation (WHO) a preliminary alert regarding a new virus. On January 1, the Huanan market in central Wuhan where live animals were sold was closed down, purportedly for “renovations.” Many of the patients admitting for treatment either worked or regularly shopped at the market. Coronaviruses move from animals to humans and it believed that 2019-nCoV has its origins in either bats or snakes.

By January 10, the virus had been identified by Chinese researchers as belonging to the same family as SARS and there were clear indications that human-to-human transmissions were taking place. Between January 2 and January 16, however, Wuhan authorities did not release any update on the number of people admitting to hospital for what they knew was an infection that could not be treated with typical medication. In collaboration with the central government in Beijing, the local administration refused to issue any public health alert as it could impact on the broader Chinese economy and the operations and profits of big business.

The most damaging impact of the official silence was that it enabled the largely unchecked spread of the virus. Most people in good health who are infected with 2019-nCoV suffer from a high fever and a dry cough—not dissimilar from a case of influenza, which infects tens of millions around the world every year. Unaware they may be carrying a new virus, people in Wuhan went about their affairs thinking they had a bad dose of the flu. They were not advised to isolate themselves, especially from their older family members, friends and associates. The vast majority of

people who have died from complications caused by 2019-nCoV are people aged over 60 with existing medical conditions.

Most seriously, the failure to issue health warnings coincided with the preparations across China for the Lunar New Year holiday. As many as five million people from Wuhan travelled to visit family in other parts of Hubei, other provinces, or other countries. Millions more came to Wuhan, the largest city in central China, from elsewhere. By the time belated notices and travel restrictions were issued on January 22, the virus had spread across the country and around the world.

The World Health Organisation, taking its lead from Beijing, did not classify the outbreak as a global health emergency until January 30. John Mackenzie, a member of WHO's emergency committee that took the decision, told the *Financial Times*: "Had they [Chinese government] been a bit stronger earlier on, they might have been able to restrict the number of cases not only in China but also overseas."

The number of cases of 2019-nCoV in China currently stands at just over 30,300, overwhelmingly in Hubei province, with at least another 24,000 "suspected" cases. Some health experts believe the official figures are a substantial underestimate, as many of those infected would not have felt it necessary to seek medical care. To date, 266 cases have been diagnosed outside of China.

The number of deaths attributed to the virus stands at 638, but the figure is rising exponentially. In the past 24 hours, Chinese authorities revealed that there had been over 70 deaths. Two people have died outside China, one in the Philippines and one in Hong Kong.

The *Guardian* reported today that Hu Lishan, a senior official in Wuhan, stated that the city was suffering a "severe" shortage of hospital beds to treat patients. According to Hu, 8,182 patients had been admitted to 28 hospitals with a total of 8,254 beds—stretching them to breaking point. There is anecdotal evidence that a significant number of doctors and nurses have fallen ill with the virus because they treated patients without adequate protection due to the government failure to issue the necessary warnings.

The virus has now led to the virtual shutdown of economic and social activity in many parts of China. Some 60 million people in Hubei province are living

under an effective lockdown, instructed to remain in their homes unless it is necessary to leave and scanned with thermometers before they enter supermarkets or public buildings. Hundreds of factories in the massive export manufacturing zones of southern and eastern China have not reopened from the Lunar New Year holiday. Millions of workers are not being paid. Most events that would draw large crowds have been cancelled, while travel bans have been imposed on Chinese citizens by dozens of countries.

The top leadership of the Chinese regime, the Politburo Standing Committee headed by President Xi Jinping, is attempting to dampen the public fury over the handling of the viral outbreak. In a statement that effectively scapegoated Wuhan and Hubei officials, it criticised the "deficiencies" in the response and declared that the government would "draw a lesson from it." At the same time, police agencies are hunting down people accused of sowing "panic" or creating instability by documenting and condemning the inaction of the state apparatus.

The news that Doctor Li Wenliang had died has nevertheless sparked an outpouring of rage on social media. The *Financial Times* reported this afternoon that reports on his death has been viewed over 360 million times on Weibo—the Chinese equivalent of Twitter—with hundreds of comments denouncing authorities. A hashtag "I want freedom of speech" was taken up widely before being censored off the social media site.

The legacy of the epidemic will be vastly increased popular anger, which is already explosive across China, over social inequality, the cost of living and official corruption.



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