The global media's latest anti-China salvo: "Won't somebody please think of the hamsters?"

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An average of two thousand Americans die of COVID-19 every day. Nearly 1 million children were infected with COVID-19 in the United States last week. Over the past two years, millions have died worldwide of a disease that can be eliminated and whose spread could have been halted at any point. The reader of the mainstream press would be excused for not knowing these facts, as they were confronted by a far more pressing story: the death of two thousand hamsters in Hong Kong.

The furor over the death of pet rodents is the latest iteration of a concerted campaign among the major capitalist powers and leading news outlets throughout the world to manufacture outrage over China's Zero-COVID policies, depicting the necessary public health measures that China alone implements as draconian and authoritarian.

China's policies of mass testing, contact tracing, quarantine and, when necessary, lockdowns, have saved millions of lives. The measures have been strikingly effective. There have been 136,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in China since the beginning of the pandemic, and only 5,700 people have died. More than 850,000 Americans have died of COVID in the same period, more than six times the number of total confirmed cases in China, despite the fact that China has four times the population.

The fate of hamsters in Hong Kong is the latest salvo of the media propaganda campaign. Authorities in Hong Kong investigating the city's first untraceable Delta variant infection in more than three months determined that a plausible vector for transmission was in a small population of hamsters recently imported from the Netherlands. The infected man worked in a pet shop, where 11 hamsters were found to test positive for the virus.

On Tuesday, Hong Kong authorities announced that they would be culling 2,000 hamsters as a necessary public health measure to prevent the spread of the pandemic among humans. The culling of an animal population to prevent the spread of disease is a standard public health measure. Denmark in 2020 killed 17 million minks when some of those minks were determined to be carrying COVID-19. The British government killed 4.4 million cows to prevent the spread of "mad cow disease."

Within 24 hours of the announcement in Hong Kong, however, the hue and cry of moral outrage was heard from the press around the globe.

Bloomberg ran an op-ed that used language usually reserved for world-historic crimes. It bore the headline, "Where were you when they came for the hamsters?" One anticipates that only satire would run under such a banner, but no. The culling of 2,000 hamsters marks "a surrealist watershed, a moment that brought home the nature of Hong Kong's dystopian journey more vividly than any other." The paper blamed China's Zero-COVID policy: "Would Hong Kong officials really have taken such a rapid and draconian step were they not adhering to China's own strategy for keeping Covid at bay?"

The news anchor on CNN spoke of it as a "disturbing story" and concluded in the hushed tone that has been trademarked for use with mass casualty events. A commentator on Deutsche Welle pulled a profoundly concerned face when he spoke of the Chinese "crackdown on the hamster community."

Hamsters have an average life span of two years.

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They are rotund little rodents that spend the majority of those two years in cages, sleeping and running on plastic wheels—that is to say, if they are not lab animals. More than 98,000 hamsters were experimented upon in the United States in 2019, yet there was not a hint of moral outrage at the curtailed lives of these cuddly creatures.

One imagines jackboots when the BBC breathlessly reports, “Authorities in Hong Kong have swooped in on a pet shop, seizing a number of hamsters.” Did the authorities demand to know if the pet shop was hiding any hamsters, and warn that the consequences for disobedience would be severe?

The *Sydney Morning Herald* ran the headline, “Pets the latest sacrifice in China’s attempt to hold fortress COVID-zero,” and wrote, “the hamsters’ doom, perhaps more than any other recent example, has highlighted a growing divide between China and the rest of the world on strategies for managing COVID-19.” The divide between China and the rest of the world is 6 million human beings dead of a preventable disease, not 2,000 hamsters.

AFP opted to run a human interest story, writing of the “heartbreak” of the family that had to part with Pudding, a hamster with a pink cage, and Marshmallow, a “grey twitchy-nosed hamster scurrying through plastic tubes.”

“Time was running out for Pudding,” Agence France-Presse reported sadly. Not a word of the 2,000 dead Americans that day, but let us all mourn for poor Pudding.

The *Wall Street Journal* ran the headline, “Fuzzy Hamsters are Hong Kong’s Newest Enemy in Its Covid-Zero Campaign.” France 24 claimed that there was “Fury over Hong Kong’s mass cull of hamsters and small pets,” but the only evidence of “fury” in the article was a single unnamed pet owner who was quoted, “No one can take my hamster away unless they kill me.”

There is an unmistakable element of racism in the outrage in the Western media over Chinese practices in treating domestic animals. It was a standard claim of British colonialism—as it brutally conquered and crushed India, Burma, Malaya, and sought to dominate China—that the local treatment of domestic animals in a manner akin to livestock was proof of “Oriental barbarism.” Now, as millions of human beings die in Europe and the United States, the Western media decries the treatment of pet rodents.

Last week, the *New York Times* compared China’s COVID policy to the Holocaust and analogized public health workers to Nazis. This week the international media raises a piteous sob, “Won’t somebody please think of the hamsters?”

The coverage of China in the world’s press over the past six months has seen many of its leading representatives become the subject of unintentional self-satire. They stand exposed by the things for which they can muster outrage. They have treated mass death and human misery on an unprecedented global scale with misanthropy and indifference, but find their conscience roused over the pettiest of things: a dead corgi in an apartment in China and 2,000 hamsters in Hong Kong. One is reminded of the fact that Hitler was a vegetarian.

The thrust of all of this manufactured outrage is that China’s Zero-COVID policy is irrational, verging on insanity, and is brutal and inhuman. There is a political imperative behind the sudden concern for the well-being of rodents in Hong Kong: to prevent the idea from taking root in the consciousness of the world’s working masses that COVID-19 can be eliminated and their lives saved.

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