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China and Covid-19

How China contained Covid-19 and the dangerous world to come

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This interview with Kevin Lin explains how medical personnel in Wuhan, China sounded the alarm in late December as the coronavirus began to spread. After an initial period of denial and scapegoating, Chinese leaders took decisive actions to contain the virus, even as some of those actions produced unintended consequences. As Covid-19 deaths spike around the world, China faces a potential resurgence of the pandemic and a mounting economic crisis that will test the Communist Party. And although civil society in mainland China and street protests in Hong Kong have been quashed, the crisis may open a path for labor, feminist, and democratic organizing to spread among the youth, even as nationalist tensions rise between the US and China.

No Borders News: Can you describe the initial outbreak of the coronavirus in Wuhan? How was it identified and what actions did authorities take, or fail to take, to address it in the first days and weeks?

Kevin Lin: First indications of something novel and highly contagious could be traced back in December 2019, although it was later suspected that infections might have started earlier. Doctors in Wuhan were the ones who noticed a possible new virus that they thought was similar to SARS, but the suspicions were mostly shared only among friends and colleagues. The Wuhan government's first reaction was to quash what they branded as rumors, taking a number of them into police custody and coercing them into signing a confession to denounce the rumors.

But with increasing cases in Wuhan and surrounding cities, the Wuhan government submitted information to the national government to request instructions. It took the national government days to deliberate and make a decision to take the virus seriously. Between the identification of the earliest cases and any national government action, weeks were lost to contain the outbreak. The prioritization of social stability, of stopping any socially explosive online "rumors," over timely and careful investigations is widely believed to have cost valuable time.

NBN: Once the severity of the outbreak was understood, what measures did the local and national governments take? How complete was the lockdown in Wuhan? How widespread was testing and what happened to people who tested positive?

KL: Once the severity was recognized, the national government went into panic mode and locked down Wuhan and then the entire Hubei province. People were given little time to prepare for the lockdown, and some 5 million people fled the city in panic very likely then carrying the virus to other parts of China. By that time, options were limited as to what actions could be taken, but even then the extremity of the lockdown was criticized from within China. Media censorship followed to stop public criticism.

The lockdown on Wuhan was highly restrictive. No one could come in or out of the city. Within the city, people's movements were similarly controlled. Individual apartments and even entire apartment blocks could be sealed off if cases were confirmed. Testing lagged, and hospitals were simply overwhelmed. Those who tested positive either stayed at home or received treatment at hospitals, including requisitioned locations and newly-built prefabricated hospitals. But those with other illness suffered as hospitals prioritized treating coronavirus patients.

NBN: Why didn't the coronavirus spread to the rest of China? What is the current danger of a second round of infections?

KL: The coronavirus did spread to the rest of China but only in limited terms compared to what we have seen in other countries. The total lockdown of Wuhan might have helped contain the spread, but also sent people into fleeing the city and thus spreading it to other parts of the country. But outside of Hubei, tight restriction of people's movement (enforced by China's grid system of social management at the level of apartment blocks), pervasive temperature checks, the use of digital surveillance to trace people's interactions, as well as the police powers underlying such enforcement, implemented what appears to have been effective social distancing. People also rapidly adapted to the contagion and exercised caution.

The likely single source of the coronavirus in one city also limited its spread. In contrast, other countries are subsequently dealing with international travelers, first from China and then from all over the world. They therefore have to deal with multiple sources of spread. This makes it much harder to contain locally. China has now claimed to have almost zero domestic transmission, and the only transmissions are by international travellers. This is a challenge other Asian countries are now facing too. For this reason, China has imposed extreme measures to test and quarantine all inbound travellers in government-arranged facilities, while banning all foreign nationals except for diplomats.

NBN: Can you describe the state of the health care system in China? Are there large discrepancies between what workers and the poor have access to compared to the elite? Did these distinctions impact the quality of care in Wuhan?

KL: China's healthcare system has been in flux in recent decades. It emerged out of the Maoist universal healthcare system where healthcare covered everyone for free despite inadequacies in terms of the quality of care. In the Mao era, health clinics affiliated with urban workplace and barefoot doctors in the countryside improved health outcomes. Since the 1980s, the capitalist transition has dismantled this system over time and replaced it with a commercialized system. The government withdrew subsidies and made hospitals responsible for their own revenues.

This led to corruption of medical professionals who began chasing profits and kickbacks from drug companies, leading to a serious decline of public trust in hospitals and doctors. In the 1990s and 2000s, media reports were full of horror stories of seriously ill patients being turned away by doctors because they could not afford the treatment fees. Recognizing these problems as socially explosive, in recent years the government has expanded health coverage for the population, but obstacles to migrant workers' access to quality healthcare remain.

NBN: Explain the scale of the economic crisis facing China today both in terms of restarting production and transportation and in terms of how the global shutdown will impact China's workers and businesses.

KL: China's economic growth has already been slowing down for a decade ever since the Great Recession from over 10 percent to 8 percent and now 5-6 percent a year. But up until the outbreak, China largely managed to stay afloat, despite multiple problems associated with industrial overcapacity, local government and bank debt, and a housing bubble. It has also been grappling with an industrial restructuring from low-end to high-end manufacturing under the Made in China 2025 policy and the shift to a service economy. The economic freeze since the end of January disrupted not only local businesses but also the global supply chain. For a while, major international automakers could not continue production due to disruption in the supply of auto parts from China. By early February, the Chinese government worried the lockdown was too extreme, but the severity of the outbreak kept workers from coming back to work. Since late February, China has been slowly restarting the economy and people are returning to work, though many are still working from home and travel restrictions remain in some places, especially for migrant workers. There may be a delayed effect too, and it may take a little while before we know the full scale of the economic crisis.

NBN: How will the Communist Party respond to the crisis at the level of national economic policy? Do they

have the reserves to repeat the massive 2009 stimulus that buffered China from the Great Recession?

KL: This could very well be the worst economic crisis since China's capitalist transition. China's growth rate may not only decline, it may actually turn negative. So far it has responded with piecemeal monetary policies to support businesses. While the US and Europe are now providing large stimulus and aid packages, it is unclear if the Chinese government still has the capacity and willingness to roll out a stimulus package as it did during the Great Recession, that intervention not only saved the Chinese economy but probably the global economy as well. But it also led to local government debt that the government is still dealing with. The trade war between the US and China similarly weakened China's economic capacity. And, as China has been betting on a soft transition from manufacturing to a service economy in order to create employment that can absorb the loss of factory jobs, the economic downturn - both in China and globally - could produce massive unemployment which we are already seeing elsewhere. During the Great Recession, an estimated 20-30 million migrant workers lost their jobs but the stimulus saved them. China may not be as lucky this time.

NBN: Has the crisis opened space for a grassroots response by neighbors or health care workers or other networks of people in trade unions, community organizations, or students? Has the Communist Party monopolized the crisis response or has the crisis opened up cracks within the party bureaucracy?

KL: The crisis hit China at a time when civil society has been under sustained attack and muffled. From labor and feminist movements to human rights and civic freedom movements, state authorities have been cracking down on them for half a decade. Civil society was already severely restrained prior to that, but the last few years have seen a more concerted effort to repress social movements and all serious dissent of any kind. In fact, in late December just as the coronavirus was spreading, state authorities were in the process of arresting a group of civil rights activists and lawyers simply for gathering to discuss politics. Labor activists, too, were detained over the past year and half and their organizations closed down. All this seriously undermined a more organized grassroots response, even as the government's humanitarian efforts were distrusted.

Despite all this, Chinese citizens mobilized to buy and donate protective equipment to hospitals and medical workers, and mutual aid volunteers supported the most vulnerable in society. A campaign by feminists against domestic violence helped highlight an issue only made worse by confinement. This is definitely a moment of political awakening for the people, especially young people. The scale of the pandemic and the unnecessary loss of a large number of lives inevitably made everything political, just as happened elsewhere. If young people are able to channel their energy into progressive efforts after the crisis, we may see a revival of the movements that have been weakened for many years.

But overall, absent of a strong civil society and political organizing spaces, the government monopolized the crisis response and the narrative through increased censorship and state-directed media reporting. The strict lockdown measures at the neighborhood level, limiting people's movement in and out of their homes, also sharply constrained grassroots' mutual aid efforts, making people dependent on the state for crisis management. At the same time, this also means any success or failure will be squarely placed on the government. So far, the Chinese state seems disciplined and no serious and organized opposition within the state has developed. But there may yet be a reckoning in the coming months with respect to how the government handled the crisis.

NBN: As we have only scratched the surface, can you recommend resources and websites for readers to continue following developments in China?

KL: Chuang magazine has a great article on the coronavirus, and in general has lots of useful analysis of China. Positions has served as a space for some of the more theoretical engagements. Humans of Wuhan offers stories of individuals from a variety of backgrounds. There is also a resource page cataloguing Chinese volunteers' mutual aid

experience, which could be of practical use to people in other countries. For more general analyses, the *Made in China* journal, which I co-edit, covers many aspects of social, political and cultural developments in China.

NBN: Can you say a few words about how the coronavirus crisis has impacted the mass movement for democracy in Hong Kong?

KL: The mass protest movement in Hong Kong was already transforming at the end of 2019 - before the outbreak of coronavirus - from street protest to more everyday forms of struggles. For example, the yellow economic circle of businesses that have supported the movement became preferred choices for those sympathetic to the movement. A wave of unionization has swept a range of industries and produced many new militant unions and organizers. But street protests have quieted down because the government has arrested so many of the protesters, and others were exhausted after many months of continuous protests. The outbreak made it harder to stage street protests. However, the newly unionized hospital workers managed to organize a strike in early February to demand better protection and the closing of borders between Hong Kong and mainland China. But the outbreak has also led to a more nationalistic response within the movement, for example, yellow restaurants supporting the movement refused to serve people from mainland Chinese on the basis of preventing coronavirus. In Hong Kong, as elsewhere, the virus has been racialized which strengthens the localist and nativist currents within the movement. Perhaps the most significant development is the growing US-China conflict. The Trump administration has exploited the pandemic to ramp up nationalist and racist rhetoric against China, while China has tried to hit back at the US. This could only mean a more dangerous world after the pandemic.

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