

Chinese authorities try to contain discontent over handling of coronavirus outbreak

By James Cogan
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The death toll from the 2019-nCoV coronavirus outbreak has exceeded the number of fatalities caused by the 2002–2003 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic, and concerns are growing that the infection is spreading from person-to-person more easily than first suspected.

The SARS coronavirus infected just over 8,000 people and took 774 lives internationally between November 2002 and July 2003, before it was contained. Since 2019-nCoV emerged in early December, it has infected at least 40,350 people and caused 908 deaths—all but two in mainland China. Another 89 deaths were reported on Sunday and 2,656 new cases. On Saturday, 3,399 cases were reported. Outside mainland China, there are now 368 confirmed cases.

The vast majority of infections and fatalities are occurring in Hubei province, the epicentre of the epidemic. The virus is believed to have spread from infected bats or snakes to people working or shopping at a live food market in Wuhan, Hubei's capital and the largest city in central China, with a population of 11 million. While transmission was initially only thought to be taking place via close contact to an infected person, researchers now believe there are cases where the virus was transmitted with only fleeting exposure. If this proves to be true, the virus is more likely to continue to spread, both within China and around world.

Yesterday, the *Australian Financial Review* cited the opinion of Neil Ferguson, an infectious diseases expert at London's Imperial College, that “only 10 percent or less of all infections in China and a quarter in other countries were being detected.” Ferguson stated: “We think the epidemic is roughly doubling in size every five days. There is limited evidence of it slowing in

China.”

Authorities across China are nevertheless hoping that the measures taken to stem the spread of 2019-nCoV have been sufficient, as weeks of curtailed transport and the virtual shutdown of most industry is due to end today. Across the country, tens of millions of people will begin returning to work after the Lunar New Year holidays were extended by 10 days.

Since January 22, the government has attempted to prevent movement in or out of Wuhan. Quarantine measures were then extended to all Hubei province, affecting close to 60 million people. Throughout China, transport services have been reduced and virtually all public events and gatherings have been cancelled, or people have stayed away from them.

The social and economic impact has been enormous already. The state-owned English-language *Global Times* reported that the number of passengers on China's train network was down 85.4 percent on Saturday compared with this time last year. The *Guardian* labelled China's major urban centres as “ghost cities.” Millions of people have been remaining in their homes as much as possible to avoid infection.

The State Council, headed by Premier Li Keqiang, has instructed employers to bring back their workforces in “batches” and monitor any indications of a spike of infections. Many companies are choosing not to reopen today, electing to wait and see what happens elsewhere. Any area where an upsurge in cases occurs is likely to face state-directed industry shutdowns and strict restrictions on travel and public assemblies.

The Chinese Communist Party government and its state media are anxiously seeking to placate the immense public anger over the government's initial attempts in Wuhan and at the national level to conceal that a new coronavirus outbreak was taking place.

Wuhan doctor Li Wenliang, along with seven medical colleagues, was threatened by police for “making false comments” after they discussed on a blog on December 30 the emergence of a new SARS-like virus. He has become a symbol of the regime’s repressive incompetence and indifference to the lives of population. For weeks, provincial and national authorities knew they were dealing with a potential pandemic but issued no public health warnings, under conditions in which millions of people were travelling in and out of Wuhan for the New Year holidays.

Li Wenliang became infected himself while treating patients and died from complications caused by the virus on February 6. His tragic death has provoked an outpouring of grief and outrage on social media platforms. A statement he reportedly made, “a healthy society cannot have only one voice,” has been widely interpreted as a condemnation of state censorship and repression. A hashtag #WeWantFreedomofSpeech was taken up on Weibo—the Chinese equivalent of Twitter.

Comments made before the hashtag and discussion were shut down by censors, included: “Article 35 of the Constitution—citizens have the freedom to speak, publish, march, and protest;” “You told me that freedom of speech is a legitimate right of citizens, but you never gave me freedom;” and “We want free speech. I want freedom of speech. We want freedom of protest. Give us back our natural rights.”

The demand for freedom of speech and the invocation of the constitution of the People’s Republic of China was taken up by a group of ten academics in Wuhan. They issued an open letter on February 7 condemning the treatment of Li Wenliang and the other doctors. According to the *Financial Times* (FT), the letter stated: “What the eight doctors have done and said is fully in accordance with the spirit of [the constitution]. The punishment ... is therefore unconstitutional and against the public will.” The letter concluded with a call on the government to refrain from “any measures that limit the freedom of speech.”

The FT reported that a separate letter, addressed to the National People’s Congress, China’s fig-leaf parliament, was also published on February 7. The authors—a group of “leading public intellectuals” according to the newspaper—stated: “We assert, starting today, that no Chinese citizen should be threatened by

any state apparatus or political group for his or her speech... The state must immediately cease censoring social media and deleting or blocking accounts.”

The state-controlled media is allowing some criticism of the handling of the virus and the treatment of Li Wenliang to be published, primarily to channel public anger away from President Xi Jinping and the central regime and on to the Wuhan city and Hubei provincial governments.

An opinion column in today’s *Global Times* asserted: “It is indeed regrettable that his [Li Wenliang’s] warning was silenced and failed to motivate various authorities to take action, which has partially led to the ongoing nationwide fight against the deadly virus. Wuhan authorities owe Li an apology, and officials in Wuhan and Hubei Province owe an apology to the people of Wuhan and the entire country.”

While officials in Wuhan and Hubei appear likely to be made the scapegoats, it is far from clear if that will appease discontent.

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