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The Role of the Chinese Communist Party in the COVID-19 Crisis

Matthew Farrell

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Abstract

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has received plaudits from international press and organizations for their handling of the COVID-19 crisis, with some describing it as a win for China in terms of propaganda. In this essay, I explore an alternative view: That the CCP is responsible for the origin and extent of the pandemic, and that much of their perceived altruism is carefully disguised opportunism and propaganda. Facts are drawn from scholarly work and the popular press to support my arguments. This essay carries strong implications for interpretation of recent events.

Keywords: Chinese Communist Party (CCP), World Health Organization (WHO), COVID-19, pandemic, propaganda, disinformation

“The force at the core leading our cause forward is the Chinese Communist Party. The theoretical basis guiding our thinking is Marxism-Leninism.” - Mao Zedong

The COVID-19 coronavirus crisis, still ongoing at the time of this writing, has already led to the worst economic recession in history (Winck, 2020) and nearly half a million deaths worldwide (Johns Hopkins, 2020). In this essay, I examine how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s structural flaws have exacerbated the impact of the crisis and how, rather than correct such flaws, the party has used the crisis to further its geopolitical objectives.

While its ruthless tactics and self-serving policies have increasingly brought it into conflict with the rest of the world based on business matters (e.g., Li & Farrell 2020a; b), the CCP, despite some market reforms, is still fundamentally a Leninist party (Chou & Nathan, 1987). Among other things, this means that the party has absolute power, is highly centralized with obedience to higher-ups being key, and is infallible and thus does not permit criticism or freedom of speech. All of these factors contributed to the spread of the novel coronavirus both within China and throughout the world.

Origins

COVID-19 is thought to have originally spread from animals to humans at a “wet market” in Wuhan province (Rothan & Byrareddy, 2020). In a remarkable coincidence, this market was in close proximity to the Wuhan Institute of Virology, China’s first biosafety level 4 laboratory (Cyranoski, 2017) which had been warning of viruses similar to SARS circulating in the local bat population since 2015 (Nandi, 2020). Further, US embassy officials had cabled the state department as long as two years ago regarding concerns about safety standards at the lab (Rogin, 2020). However, the ultimate origin may be forever unknown since the CCP has banned research into the virus’s origins without its direct approval (Gan, Hu, & Watson, 2020).

Concealment

Early Efforts. Almost as soon as the threat of the virus became known, steps were taken to conceal its existence. Such a lack of transparency is a feature rather than a bug in China’s system of governance (Alon, Farrell, & Li, 2020). Had action been taken as little as three weeks earlier, the pandemic could have been avoided (Lai et al., 2020) along with all of its concomitant damage.

After the 2003 SARS outbreak, the Chinese government spent roughly 100 million dollars to set up an early alert system that could be utilized if doctors suspected the appearance of a new disease or other health events. This would permit rapid dissemination of information regarding the threat to local and central governments (Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019; Cidiwuyan, 2020).

Despite this, doctors who first noticed the appearance of the virus were subjected to reprimands and other punishment. Li Wenliang, a local doctor, was forced to write a self-criticism after issuing an early warning to colleagues (Rui & Cai, 2020). And Ai Fen, director of the emergency department at the Central Hospital of Wuhan, was officially reprimanded for reporting a new SARS-like virus to other departments (Kuo, 2020). Ultimately, eight “rumormongers” were arrested for “spreading misinformation” on January 3rd (Xinhua, 2020).

Doctors were also successful in collecting early samples, but these efforts were crushed by the CCP and agencies under their control. For example, the *Times of London* reported that a gag order was promulgated from China’s National Health Commission that mandated tests be stopped, all samples of the virus be destroyed, and any news about the virus suppressed (Sherwell, 2020). Efforts by the U.S. to obtain samples were also hampered, with Beijing intervening as late as January 24th, 2020 to block lab-to-lab transfers of virus samples with the University of Texas (Abutaleb et al., 2020).

Information about the virus was concealed in other ways that prevented early efforts at combating it. In one instance, authorities froze testing between January 6th and 14th, leaving the official case number at 41 (Xu, 2020) even as foreign authorities estimated that hundreds more cases had developed (Gallagher, 2020). And although it was known that human-to-human transmission was possible since medical professionals were falling victim to the virus (Buckley, Myers, & Lee, 2020), China maintained as late as January 15th that there was no evidence of person-to-person transmission and that the risk of such transmission was low (Page, Fan, & Khan, 2020).

Authorities were also negligent in taking action to curb the spread amongst the population. A gathering of 40,000 families on January 19th was allowed to proceed as scheduled (Buckley et al., 2020). When the city was finally quarantined, 5 million people fled, helping to aggravate the spread of the virus across China and the world (First Caijing, 2020).

Enlisting the World Health Organization. The WHO entered the sphere of influence of the CCP long before the crisis, with the election of Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus in 2017. Tedros hails from Ethiopia, or “Little China” as it has become known due to massive Chinese investment in the area through China’s Belt and Road initiative (Thayer & Han, 2020).

Several examples of this influence have surfaced throughout the course of the COVID-19 crisis. First, the WHO held off on declaring the crisis a pandemic until March 11, 2020, long after it had met the established criteria for doing so. German news organization *Der Spiegel* reported that Tedros held off on issuing a global warning about the pandemic as well as about human-to-human transmission of the virus due to direct pressure from Xi Jinping (Moore, 2020). Even if this is not the case, Tedros has certainly been effusive in his praise for China. “China is actually setting a new standard for outbreak response,” Tedros said in February as he urged other countries not to restrict travel to destinations therein (Page & McKay, 2020).

Second, and similarly, the WHO tweeted on January 14th that there was no evidence of widespread human-to-human transmission of the novel coronavirus, citing a preliminary Chinese report in so doing (WHO, 2020). In fact, Taiwanese medical officials had already warned them weeks earlier that they had found evidence to the contrary (Manson, 2020), but the WHO opted to continue to support China's coverup, possibly due to the fact that China forbids conceiving of Taiwan as a separate nation-state. As such, any acknowledgment of their autonomy is perceived as a slight by the CCP.

Zero Cases and Other Disinformation

"Seek truth from facts." - Deng Xiaoping

The Wuhan Urn Count. In late March of 2020, families of the victims were finally allowed to collect the remains of persons who passed away during the Wuhan outbreak. As a matter of course, they had to be accompanied by an official and could not show outward signs of grief. Official reports showed a total body count of 2,535 (later adjusted to 3,869; Page & Fan, 2020). Yet, a large number of urns were shipped to Wuhan funeral homes (something on the order of 64,000 according to one source). Given an estimated 'baseline' of 5,000 normal deaths during the period, the actual number of COVID-19 related fatalities must number around 59,000 (Bloomberg, 2020a; Caijing Lengyan, 2020).

Victory? Chinese Premier Li Keqiang declared victory on March 24th, claiming that the outbreak was controlled throughout China. However, several independent news sources doubt that this is actually the case (Bloomberg, 2020b; Financial Times, 2020).

US-based blogger Fang Zhouzi (a Chinese national) claimed that "nobody should believe the local authorities, who are lying about the statistics for the sake of the economy" (DW.com, 2020). He similarly claimed that he would not believe the pandemic had been curbed until the National People's Congress reconvened, thus demonstrating that no danger was perceived by the ruling class. In another incident - one often censored by the CCP when posted about online - an account described a patient desperately seeking help from several Wuhan hospitals, only to be rejected by all of them in order to maintain the zero cases fiction (New Tang Dynasty Television, 2020).

Further, Beijing and Shanghai continued to bar entry for those from Wuhan, Hubei, even when cleared of the virus, indicating that they do not trust official proclamations and statistics (Radio France Internationale, 2020). Other sources that believe China is lying about its statistics regarding the virus range from Human Rights Watch to the American Enterprise Institute (Sobey, 2020).

This has not stopped the CCP from touting its leadership, praising its own response, and generally using the crisis for propaganda purposes. Wuhan's party secretary launched a campaign encouraging the citizens to express gratitude to Xi and the party for their handling of the epidemic. In general, the party's propaganda

organs have gone to great lengths to bolster Xi's reputation (Shih, 2020), with supporters going as far as writing a book-length hagiography of Xi's efforts for distribution in foreign countries as well as domestically (Barme, 2020).

Abroad, "wolf warriors" (so named after China's equivalent of *Rambo*) take to Twitter and other social media accounts to defend the party's actions. Born of the idea that one cannot go too far in terms of pro-China zeal, some have gone as far as pushing conspiracy theories that the virus was engineered by the US and planted in China (Bengali & Su, 2020). Similar conspiracies include one which claims that the virus was planted in Wuhan by the US military athletes participating in the 2019 Military World Games, which was endorsed by a spokesperson from China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Budryk, 2020).

And the bullying has gone beyond mere words: China has increased its military aggression, bullying Taiwan through violating its airspace (New York Post Editorial Board, 2020) and engaging in border skirmishes with India that have resulted in fatalities (BBC, 2020).

Propaganda efforts have also taken a more positive tone, such as donations of medical equipment abroad. One advantage of keeping the extent of the outbreak secret was that this allowed China to obtain personal protective equipment (PPE) at artificially low prices on international markets (Cooper, 2020). In other instances, China was able to sell back PPE that had initially been donated to help fight the Wuhan epidemic to the countries that donated it - for example, Italy (Athey, 2020) or Mexico. Other PPE still was donated according to political calculations (Cooper, 2020), making China appear benevolent and generous on the international stage.

Conclusion

"We have the Marxist-Leninist weapon of criticism and self-criticism. We can get rid of a bad style and keep the good." - Mao Zedong

All of the problems discussed in this essay - the pandemic, the coverup, the propaganda glorifying the system that brought this destruction to the world - could, as I have argued, been avoided with more openness, transparency, and accountability by government officials. I would call on senior members of the CCP to rethink their attempt to remake the world in their image when their own system, applied domestically, can have such catastrophic results. Democratic reforms will not only benefit the democratic, open societies, but China, the Chinese people, and indeed the world.

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