How Did China manage its COVID-19?

Avinash Godbole

International Relations and China Studies,

Jindal School of Liberal Arts and Humanities, Jindal Global University, Sonipat (Haryana)

Email : avingodb@gmail.com

Since the Coronavirus or the COVID-19 emerged in China, it has led to a serious amount of backlash against China's early handling and response to it. The Chinese Communist Party is clearly responsible for the initial cover up as well as underestimation of the gravity of the situation and for denying for days that human to human transmissions were happening at a rapid rate. The World Health Organization (WHO) also shares the blame for letting China continue with its practice and being a bit too late perhaps in declaring COVID-19 a global pandemic. WHO also shares a blame for not verifying the data emerging for China since the global rate of spread appears much larger than what was seen in China. In fact, even as one writes this, Wuhan is nearly back on its feet after close to three months of lockdown. Moreover, China is doing everything it can to counter the negative image created by the pandemic, not only because it creates business and markets immediately for medical equipment and supplies, but also because continuation of COVID-19 hampers connectivity and globalization on the basis of which China's power and image are built.

All this put together has caused a lot of damage to China's status globally and is being seen in various forms, from outright racism, to ban-China messages circulating in the social media recently. This raises serious questions on the future of China's role in world affairs and how it would come out of this. As things look as of now, China has emerged stronger after managing to control the spread of COVID-19 much better than what has happened in the western world. The US today with its more than 50,000 deaths and Europe accounting for more than 1,00,000 deaths as of today have messed up the situation. It is often said that the West values human life better and the East values order and cohesion. However, the collective response of West and East seems to be turning these assumptions on its heads.

The first question is did China hide its numbers and why is it revising it now. It can be argued that the numbers appear to be underestimated by up to 20 percent after the first revision. This was bound to happen as China's medical system was overwhelmed due to early spread of the virus. Thus, many deaths that happened when test results were not available at the time of deaths are being corroborated now, to be counted as COVID-19 deaths. Second, there was also a theory based on the declining mobile phone numbers that close to 21 million mobile phones were unsubscribed and that was an indication of the spread of COVID-19. However, as it happens often, a co-occurrence was taken as a causal connection in this case. There are four main reasons for this. A majority of Chinese phones are prepaid. As per 2016 data 65% of all phones are prepaid. Migrants returning home for new year festival and not renewing their phones as they did not go back is one potential reason. Also, important to remember is that migrants often pay for more than one phone; one for themselves, one for their parents and one for kids if they are in a third city. Since all are likely to be back home, they would mostly have not recharged their numbers. Second, this happened also due to reduced business and social activities resulting from the COVID-19 outbreak. So a lot of service outlets, delivery industry and call-centers numbers went offline. Third, expats and students leaving China and going out is another reason. At any point there are close to a million foreign nationals in China, most of who went back early February.

The next question that comes often is, did China do this as part of a plan? One gets asked this often. The easy answer to this is that "You don't cut the branch you are sitting on", and that branch is trade. That tree is globalization and that is what has made China rich and such a pivotal player in the system. China's power and status globally is built upon being the factory of the world. China is not foolish to get off it now. It may be a lab accident, which is what looks more likely as of now, or negligence or bad luck or bad food habit, I do not see this as a deliberate act by China. Not in the present times when it is getting squeezed on trade, religion etc. They simply cannot afford to fall off the growth wagon (below 6% rate) or they are staring at a certain middle-income trap.

The next question often comes whether, did the party suppress it? Yes, it did and that is a massive problem born out of the inertia to glorify achievements and to suppress anything remotely bad news. Changing that will need changing of the party's working culture which is really difficult, even with all the reforms Xi is claiming to be undertaking. It is now clear that the local officials in Wuhan who reprimanded the whistleblower doctor Li Wenliang have been responsible for the damage. Li was one of the eight to have received this warning and notice and he was reinstated only after the gravity of the issue became clear. Unfortunately

Li became a victim of Corona on 8th of February and became a public hero in China and a face of resistence to the party across the world. He was exonerated of any wrongdoing later in March 2020 and the party also did a lot of reshuffling of politicians and officials in that month for their ineffective and slow response to the virus.

And on China responding fast to global medical demand, that's their habit now to respond to markets quickly. They just have this massive capacity in production. You only have to land in Guangzhou and look out of the window and you notice the massive warehouses and production facilities and railways and roads that connect those. China used its massive domestic capacity and production sites in an attempt to wipe down a lot of negative publicity that the early suppression of COVID-19 brought its way.

China restarted the China-Europe freight train on March 28, signaling resumption of normalcy. This train carried medical equipment and masks destined for Germany and other European nations, besides having construction and telecom equipment on board. China has also sent medical teams and equipment to Italy, Iran, and in Africa to Nigeria and to other countries. In South Asia, there is a Chinese medical team in Pakistan; Bangladesh has requested for one team to help mitigate the challenges and Chinese equipment and supplies have reached Sri Lanka and Maldives as well. Recently, China has also decided to support the WHO after the US withdrew its funding signalling, growing Chinese global role due to abdication of responsibilities by the US.

The last question is, how did China manage to control the virus at home? This is perhaps the easiest one to answer. China is a single party rule and the government is always looking for signs of the next rebellion. It is not affordable to be unprepared, is a lesson China learnt the hard way in 1989. It has left no stone unturned to become a garrison state and a surveillance state. The digital age, internet and database has helped it achieve this objective even strongly. Thus, China is the panopticon that Michel Foucault warned us of long ago. China uses digital intelligence, cameras at all corners and Artificial Intelligence to manage its population. Chinese people have moved to e-money and digital payments through wechat and Alipay. China used these apps to track travel history of people in order to develop contact tracing for seeing the likelihood of a person getting the infection.

Wuhan went through lockdown and social isolation for 76 days and the apps mentioned above helped control the spread of the virus. India is using green, yellow and red zone strategy for localities. China used it for individuals and alerted people on whether they need to be isolated or quarantined or hospitalised. The people who were given red status were denied permissions to exit their buildings as guards scanned their phones at exit points.

Everyone was also supposed to upload their body temperatures on the wechat app and the app would monitor variations and alert the authorities. If one did not upload temperatures for two consecutive days, the health officials would reach home and do a more thorough check up.

These are some of the things China did right after the initial cover up. Domestically its challenges may be far from over. However, the challenge may not destabilise Xi Jinping as many are anticipating. In the last three weeks China has gone back to nationalism and this always helps the party become a centre of people's attention and a rallying cry for unity works. This is what seems at play as of now.