

Query Into The Origins Of The Covid-19 Pandemic: The Chinese Government's Response

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Abstract

This commentary recalls the response of the Chinese government to governments which sought answers into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic while taking an insight of the actions undertaken by China during the early months of the pandemic and finally, reviews China's response towards minimizing the impact on the global community. Sources include journals, online news and reports published between March to June 2020, interpreting the Chinese government's narratives during the initial phase of the pandemic. To summarize, the Chinese government had taken an intractable stance to requests from nations which had called for transparency and cooperation pertaining to the pandemic but continuing its expansionist endeavours when the world was combatting the pandemic.

Keywords: communication, COVID, pandemic

Introduction

In December 2019, China experienced an outbreak of a novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) causing respiratory disease and severe pneumonia (Julien & Christian, 2020) in Wuhan City, Hubei province (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020a,b,c,d). In less than three months in March 2020, the SARS-CoV-2 virus reckoned commonly as COVID-19 gained pandemic status causing massive casualties and not to mention, intense furore and misery among societies and governments worldwide (David, 2020). COVID-19 not only had spread across the globe at an unprecedented magnitude¹ (World Economic Forum, 2020) but had caused immense suffering (Indranil & Prasenjit, 2020). With more than 2 billion of the global population not having proper access to water while 4.2 billion deprived of basic sanitation, additional misery caused by the pandemic on the global population simply could not be overlooked (United Nations, 2020). At the economic front, the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimated a potential of 1.6 billion informal workers to be affected by the pandemic (Kanaga, 2020) whilst the World Food Programme (WFP) claimed that 250 million people would suffer from hunger by the end of 2020 (Thalif, 2020), summing up to around 500 million people falling into poverty (The World Economic Forum, 2020). While on the financial aspect the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (IMF, 2020) projected negative growth across all regions for the year 2020 with the emerging, developing and low-income countries face the severe brunt of negative economic growth, the consequence of the pandemic had compelled governments around the world to unleash unprecedented amounts of monetary² assistance in support of their economies

¹ As of 31st July 2020, 17,106,007 confirmed cases have been reported globally which includes 668,910 deaths (WHO, 2020e).

² United States- \$8 trillion, United Kingdom-30.2 billion pounds, Japan-108.5 trillion yen, India-21.7 trillion rupee, Australia-A\$214 billion, Indonesia-\$24.9 billion, Brazil-201 billion reais, South Korea-531 trillion won, South Africa-1.2 billion rand, Mexico-\$28 billion (Reuters Staff, 2020).

which were affected by the pandemic (Reuters Staff, [2020](#)), giving these countries valid reasons to pursue China pertaining to the origins of this pandemic. Despite the loss of millions of lives, jobs and other consequences of unsaid degree, the Chinese government opposed an independent inquiry into the origins of the virus, even after the World Health Organization agreeing for an investigation, (Brahma, [2020](#)). Owing to such a circumstance, it is imperative to explore the response by the Chinese government China in reacting to the global community which sought answers into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the arising concerns are; to discuss the Chinese government's response of alerting and cooperating with the global population on the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, to gain insights on China's actions during the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, and finally, to assess China's involvement in taking initiatives across borders to alleviate the calamity caused by the pandemic.

As it is not something new that the Chinese media had practiced control pertaining to COVID related development news and news associated to previous outbreaks namely AIDS and SARS, actions taken by media institutions worldwide in comparison to Chinese response would feature an understanding of the situation by sourcing relevant information from international news published predominantly between March and June 2020. Being aware of the political tug-of-war prevailing between the Western powers and China commonly regarded the Dragon for its economic prowess commended as an economic superpower, it does not come as a surprise that global media agencies dominated largely by Western protagonists do keep a watchful eye on Chinese related affairs which may seem as a deliberate attempt due to the existing political row. In such a context, it cannot be denied that the intensity of the Western media approach connotes a biased motive while the question remains, as to why numerous Western media institutions place intense focus and interest on the Chinese government's response while being aware of the fact that approaching the situation with a condescending motive on the Chinese government has the potential to backfire. Being global media agencies, these organizations may not be willing to put their credibility on the line, for blatant attempts without grounds would only cost these entities undesired consequence to their image and more importantly, their reputation. However, instead of taking Wallerstein's³ perspective, reporting by these agencies could shed light on the concern of the global population of which lesser nations may not be in such a position to question the origins of the pandemic. In other words, viewing it from a whistle-blower's perspective of sounding the trigger button when a situation necessitates corrective actions may justify a constructive stance. Indeed, the Western media taking-on the matter cannot be denied but to take note, is the lacklustre of the Chinese authorities in attending to the requests pertaining to such calamity which answers as to how the sources to this commentary had been identified.

Alerting and cooperating into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic

While leaders around the world expected China to assume a more prominent role in handling the pandemic, crucial information pertaining to the virus had been held for weeks upon its first emergence in January 2020, adding that Chinese health officials only shared the genetic information after ten days while taking another eight days more to alert the World Health Organisation and other governments, giving allowance for the virus to take more human lives (The [Associated Press, 2020](#)). At home, Chinese authorities restricted and arrested citizens who tried to expose the state's media control about the outbreak (Vivian, Amy & Sui-Lee, 2020). One whistle-blower, an ophthalmologist from the Wuhan Central Hospital was reprimanded in December 2020 for spreading rumours about the coronavirus (Laura, [2020](#); Guo & Jane, [2020](#)). As a contingency, the Chinese government along with media institutions, local scientists and a number of Western scientists tried to convince that COVID-19 is a

³ Immanuel Wallerstein proposed the World-systems theory which...

naturally-occurring disease transmitted from animals to humans in the Wuhan Seafood Market (Lawrence, [2020a](#); [WION, 2020](#)), concretizing the fact that COVID-19 originated from the bat population which had been transmitted to the people visiting or working in the market (Lawrence, [2020c](#)). In favour of this, in February 2020, Chinese researchers from the Wuhan Institute of Virology published an article in the much distinguished Nature journal identifying an unknown bat coronavirus as a close relative to COVID-19 ([Lawrence, 2020a](#)). In March, Western scientists published an article in the Nature further strengthening the claim that COVID-19 came from nature, in-line with the Chinese government's narrative ([Lawrence, 2020b](#); [WION, 2020](#)). To note are several key points; namely the delay in sharing and concealing vital information to the international community (Adam, [2020](#); [The Associated Press, 2020](#)), controlling access to relevant information and virus samples (Charlie, [2020](#); Peter, [2020](#)), convincing that COVID-19 is a naturally-occurring disease (Lawrence, [2020a](#); [WION, 2020](#)) and publishing articles to concretize favourable claims connote none other than a non-adherence stance to global pressure.

Actions during the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic

While certain events had occurred before the pandemic and that the connection to the pandemic is disputable, nevertheless, these series of events have been found to take place when the global population had been trampling on their social issues and local economies in their bid to reduce the implication of the pandemic. On the contrary, China opted for economic and military reactions particularly during the weeks and months into the pandemic. Australia which called for a formal investigation faced a damaging effect on its economy ([Ben, 2020](#)). Not only putting a stop to meat imports from Australia, Chinese authorities imposed higher tariffs on Australian barley export, pursued stricter import conditions on seafood, oatmeal and fruits exported by Australia while restricting the import of Australian wine and dairy ([Bloomberg, 2020](#)). On the political front, in March 2020, the Chinese government established its embassy in Kiribati, a resource-rich cluster of islands in the central Pacific where only Australia, New Zealand and Cuba have embassies ([Nectar, 2020](#)) paving the way for assumptions on China's interest within the geographic proximity of Australia. Intensifying its reactions in the South China Sea against the Philippines and Vietnam, Chinese coastguards sank a Vietnamese fishing boat near Paracel Islands in April 2020 while in May 2020, harassed a Malaysian drillship near Borneo and ramming another Vietnamese fishing boat in June ([The Economist, 2020](#); [Khanh, 2020](#)). On another front, Taiwan's fighter-jet purchase from the United States ([Ellen & Anne, 2019](#)) had disturbed the Chinese government. Unwilling to let loose of its grip on the island nation, in late May 2020, China threatened military action against Taiwan ([Anna, 2020](#); [Yew Lun, 2020](#)). As this commentary wishes not to reach any conclusions, the occurrences of Chinese activities which continued into the early months of the pandemic although may not relate directly to the pandemic but, does pave the way for assumptions, nevertheless, subject to further rigour. While the association between these events and COVID can be argued or contradicted, to a certain degree, it does reveal persistence of Chinese expansionism regardless of the pandemic.

Taking initiatives across borders to alleviate the calamity cause by the pandemic

Despite the fact that the pandemic serves as a wake-up call for international cooperation and solidarity ([Thalif, 2020](#)), the actual situation witnessed a lack of commitment. It is only upon relentless attempts from global leaders, the Chinese government agreed to render its support to the WHO to investigate the [origins into the virus, however](#) only after the pandemic is under control (Frank, 2020). While the pandemic could be regarded as an opportunity for collective actions against the disease ([Jay, Katherine, Paulo et al., 2020](#)), communication across the globe with a strong bond between nations to curb the pandemic could have been initiated

much earlier with the cooperation from Chinese government. Perhaps, in its propensity to elevate alongside the other global powerhouses whilst anchoring itself on its enormity reveals China's firm and unshaken positioning. This contrasts with an inclusive stance which puts forth the act of reaching out with regards for the other but better known for its defensive stance where it centralizes its survival on performance legitimacy, more specifically achieving economic growth (Yuchao, [2011](#)). In the cases of disease outbreaks, China's track record of its initial response had been unfavourable (Yanzhong & Christopher, [2010](#)). To cite one, response pertaining to the AIDS outbreak between 1989 to early 2000's was none other than to downplay the outbreak and its social impacts (Yanzhong, [2006](#)). Only upon pressure from the global community and due to the increase in the number of infected populations, the Chinese government introduced a national plan to combat HIV/AIDS. Identical reaction prevailed during the outbreak of SARS in 2002. While the initial cases of SARS were detected in Guangdong Province in November 2002, it was kept in secrecy until February the following year (John, [2003](#)) resulting in surging infection and the spread of the virus to neighboring countries (Li-Qun *et al.*, [2009](#)). While similar behavior is realized in China's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, such actions reveal a paradox to the notions of globalization. To counter this claim, one may argue that Chinese vaccine development is adequate to portray solidarity alongside the world. Saliently, it is agreeable. Nevertheless, from a latent perspective, one should be aware that pharmaceutical initiatives may also reflect an economic or profiting agenda. Hence, one should be able to distinguish the profit-driven pharmaceutical agenda from the noble agenda of vaccine development while also keeping in mind the non-adherence of the Chinese authorities into the origins of the pandemic upon request by several nations. Attempting not to reach any conclusions or a final say, the notion of vaccine supply may take either stance, be it purely a noble intention or intertwined with an economic agenda just like any other big pharma.

Incompetence or deliberated?

While the world desperately pushed for answers as millions succumbed to the pandemic, the global society expected commitment from the Chinese. Instead, punishing Australia for its vocal nature which requested an investigation into the origins of the pandemic (Ben, [2020](#); Steven, [2020](#)), pursuing military activities along the Indian-China border (Hannah, [2020](#); Anbarasan & Vikas, [2020](#)), displaying its naval forces in the South China Sea (Dipanjan Roy, [2020](#); John, [2020](#); James, [2020](#)) and the provocation of military operations on Taiwan (Erin, [2020](#); Yew Lun, [2020](#)) were among the scenes which had taken centre stage, particularly when the world population was battling the pandemic. Such correlation however is arguable as motives of expansionism and pandemic crisis management may have occurred unintentionally. But owing to the origins of the virus, genuine intention by Chinese authorities coming forward in urgency would have reflected China being the Asian economic giant moving along the line of integrity. On the contrary, the delay on key information pertaining to COVID-19 had hampered international response to the outbreak. This paves way for several questions such as, the reason for vital communication being concealed during the early stages of the pandemics in 2003 and 2020, the underlying reason(s) for delaying vital information, the reason behind such lagging communication response and other pertinent questions not explored within this discussion. Concealing information, putting a stop to communication agents such as the WHO, non-government organizations (NGOs) and whistle-blowers at the very early stage did not resonate well with the need to spearhead the sharing of vital and crucial information required by the global scientific fraternity and other relevant segments to overcome such a magnitude of social panic. It is undeniably certain that the pandemic related communication from the point of source should never be regarded as negligible for this reflects obligation above political or economic endeavours. A critical communication which is supposed to have cascaded with a

tone of urgency and disseminated timely had enabled the virus to take its toll. Such abstinence from communicating information at the highest degree of priority should have been weighed by the Chinese government at the very beginning prior to the eruption of a global pandemic.

Conclusion

The fact that not only is Covid-19 deadly (Victoria, 2020), this virus may never go away (BBC, 2020) which means that humans may have to live alongside a deadly threat every moment of their lives. Despite the WHO praising and thanking the Chinese government in January 2020 for sharing the genetic map of the virus without delay while commending the government's commitment and cooperation (The Associated Press, 2020) which resonated with Chinese president's vision to build a community with a shared future for mankind (Qing & Hao, 2019), the world on the contrary had battled a tug-of-war with the Chinese authorities from the very beginning of the pandemic, struggling to get the complete picture in the attempt to curb the widespread of the virus. In a constricting situation when the world needed answers, timely actions undertaken by the government would have reflected practices at the highest degree of commitment while conferring it a commendable reputation. This article does not in any sense, attempt to put forth any remark in a negative light, be it intentionally or otherwise on any nation or related parties for it is not the objective of the authors to identify one as the perpetrator and the other being the victim. This discussion views the pandemic discretely from any form of political economic or hegemonic inclination but for the sole purpose of comprehending the reactions of certain parties in such an event while gaining relevant insights which may serve as reference in the future. It is inevitably pertinent to regard this pandemic and the reactions by certain factions in comprehending socio-political ties from the global perspective and more importantly, in the bid to prevent or avoid such calamities from occurring in the future. Putting aside any political or ideological row that has remained, this discussion has been deliberated from a constructive perspective in the bid to bring awareness on the need for stronger global ties that would ensure a safer, harmonious and sustainable living environment in-line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDG).

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