

SARS — AN IMPERATIVE TO THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA TO RE-EXAMINE ITS “SOCIAL MANAGEMENT”

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This past year, as China began to merge into the fast lane of economic development as a new member of the international society, it unexpectedly encountered a roadblock that would drastically change the course of its political evolution—SARS. This rare and astonishingly potent disease destroyed patterns of everyday life for the general public, disturbed the economic indexes for the entire nation, and most importantly, challenged the leaders of the PRC to redefine its role and responsibility in social management.

For Power or for Society?

On the eve of the SARS epidemic in early November 2002, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) held its 16th National Congress. Jiang Zeming, stepping down from his position as the CCP General Secretary, delivered his keynote address on behalf of the CCP Central Committee. Jiang’s speech, “Build a prosperous society using all necessary means and establish a new phase of socialist development with Chinese characteristics,” was by definition the future guiding document for the CCP and the federal government. Jiang argued that the CCP must reform and improve its leading and ruling skills, its decision-making procedures, and its administration management. Detailed instructions for improving managerial skills and administrative efficiency, lowering governmental costs, and establishing a well disciplined, coordinated, fair, and transparent system of administration garnished the pleasing address. It was, perhaps unsurprisingly, yet another flowery speech that ended with the orthodox conclusion that one must protect social stability while maintaining political power.

Soon after that propitious gathering, an unidentified virus with a fatally strong penetration began to quietly spread throughout Guangdong Province. It was late November/early December of 2002. In the beginning, a few deaths resulting from this novel disease did not alarm officials in the local and provincial governments. It wasn’t

until February of 2003, upon the arrival of the traditional Chinese New Year, when people in Guangdong began to panic as the situation worsened. Crowds stormed local drug and grocery stores, grabbing anything and everything that seemed to have an effect on preventing or curing the disease. The outbreak spread into Hong Kong, and unofficial, private websites and other forms of media began to report and publish in-depth analyses of the epidemic crisis. Mainstream media, however, controlled by the central government, blocked all news related to SARS, and official newspapers and magazines offered little to no news on the epidemic. An early warning system to notify the public did not exist, and no comprehensive statistics were collected.

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The CCP’s tradition of noted secrecy and non-transparency severely hindered its ability to combat the outbreak or to have prevented it in the first place. Since the Tiananmen Square incident on June 4, 1989, the highest and most unassailable priority of the CCP has been social and political stability. Thus, any deviations from the social norm, including an

epidemic outbreak, are viewed as dangerous to China’s social equilibrium. Consequently, the presence of the SARS crisis was not acknowledged. To make matters worse, the Chinese tradition of “saving face” and keeping internal affairs shielded from the foreign eye prevented Beijing and Guangdong provincial governments from contacting the WHO in a timely manner, missing their chances for receiving crucial advice and cooperation from the international community.

While SARS ravaged through southern China, it was, unfortunately, business as usual for the federal government. High-level officials instead focused their attention on the upcoming National People’s Congress, scheduled to convene in early March. As leaders sat around discussing changes in key governmental positions and the new “Five Year Plan,” private news channels reported that SARS had invaded Beijing and was spreading into Shanxi prov-



ince. In contrast to Hong Kong, where at least a transparent media system was able to publish SARS statistics daily, Beijing's official SARS statistics were restricted to a small number of institutions while the general public was repeatedly misled as to the extent of the outbreak and the number of victims. In the SARS news conference on April 18, 2003, the freshly re-appointed Minister of Public Health, Zhang Wengkang, appeared unconcerned, and thinking only of social stability, purposely downplayed the seriousness of the SARS situation. Meanwhile, the epidemic has been quietly and mercilessly spreading into larger and larger regions. Population mobility and traveling were not properly controlled. Healthcare workers were not sufficiently protected. In general, public health and environmental safety were not given necessary attention, and by

April 24 there were, according to recently published PRC statistics, 2,753 infected, 1,285 recovered, 154 newly infected and 122 dead (5.95% of infected).

The Turning Point

April 20, 2003 was a turning point in China's fight against SARS. Though cases of the epidemic have existed as early as November of 2002, the Chinese government officially recognized the first incidences of the disease on April 20th, 2003, finally releasing official statistics to the public. In a news conference on April 24th, the Deputy Minister of Public Health, Gao Qiang, reluctantly admitted that high level government officials have made mistakes in their handling of SARS, all the while dodging attacks from both domestic and foreign reporters. It was

the first time in decades where a senior ranking official openly admitted that the government had been wrong. It was also the first time where a nearly accurate number of SARS patients in Beijing and in neighboring regions was released. Gao declared that the government will use every measure to combat the outbreak, beginning by releasing the national SARS statistics daily, canceling this year's national holiday, May Day, and setting in place new regulations to restrict cross-regional traveling. The new party general secretary, Hu Jintao, and the new government premier, Wen Jiabao, visited hospitals and research institutions, and finally gave the fight against SARS the attention and support it deserves. Perhaps most shocking was the CCP and government's decisions to dismiss Zhang Wenkang, the Public Health Minister, and Mon Xuenong, the mayor of Beijing. Rarely were high-ranking officials punished publicly.

In the fight against SARS, the State Council established a SARS Command Center that would be in charge of coordinating disease control on a national level. The Finance Ministry allocated 2 billion RMB as part of a special budget to fight SARS. Local party and governments established similar disease control institutions and prevention networks, strengthened education and training efforts, tightened monitor and control over densely populated locations, and mobilized large numbers of medical research institutions to analyze and fight SARS.

Despite the devastation of the SARS epidemic, which not only included human lives but an economic downturn as a whole, it did provide an unique opportunity for the Chinese government to review and reform its governing behavior and function. Since the CCP came to power, the party has tightly controlled its administrative functions. Due to China's unique history and culture, the CCP has yet to change its role from a successful power grabber to a successful national administrator. As a result, China's infrastructure lags far behind its economic progress.

Duo Roles: Ruler and Administrator

In 1997, former CCP General Secretary, Jiang Zeming, delivered his speech, "The Three Representations." According to this address, the CCP represents the necessary tool for efficient development, an orientation towards a progressive culture, and the fundamental interests of the general public in China. He believes that the CCP is destined to rule China forever. This does not reflect China's

reality. At the onset of the SARS crisis, government leaders met in a series of conventions to discuss personnel changes and power transfer within the party. During the National People's Congress in early March, the epidemic situation in Guangdong escalated, and yet none of the legislatures put forth dared to mention SARS. The most crucial opportunity to clamp down on the outbreak disappeared. Because Chinese officials are appointed by their superior party committees, a system is created whereby each official only tries to please their superiors without paying attention to the people's interests. The SARS epidemic is a typical example of a situation where officials who knew about the crisis were afraid to deliver the bad news to their superiors, resulting in a complete lack of timely and effective responses. The extent to which the epidemic developed was not surprising.

The SARS crisis also demonstrated that government-controlled media not only hinders the fight against SARS, but also creates more panic in its attempt to cover up the truth. When the public is unable to obtain accurate and dependable updates during a public health crisis, rumors become the only other available source of information, leading to more panic than that would have otherwise resulted.

Conclusion

The SARS crisis forced the Chinese government to open its doors and engage the World Health Organization and other international institutions more than ever before. Consequently, its positive experiences in working with these foreign organizations helped to assuage the CCP's previously felt hostility toward the western world. For the first time in a long time, China was forced to adopt the same international values and codes of behaviors as that of other countries. In the long run, SARS will have a positive impact in accelerating reform within the Chinese ruling party and government. It not only forced China to look outward for help from the international community to which it now belongs, but also pressured it to look inward, at its own relationship between the government and the people. As China becomes more prominent in the global arena, the CCP will do well to remember that before it becomes a world leader, it needs to first adopt the role of a public servant.

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