

SARS crisis under Globalization

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China turned to be the central character of global crisis in public health in 2003. From the emergence of the first SARS case in Guangdong province, to the quick spreading of this contagious disease to the inland of China and Hong Kong, Vietnam, Taiwan and Singapore, there are many lessons to be learned, and the impact of SARS on the society, the economy and politics all together mark the year 2003 a special one for China.

In April 1986, the Chernobyl accident happened in the former Soviet Union. However, the leaders of Ukraine pretended as if nothing serious had happened and the grand May Day procession was launched unchanged. They attempted to deliver an open message to the public that “if we fear of nothing then so should you!” The manner of the Chinese government’s early response to SARS is just the Ukraine’s to Chernobyl. Having opened to the world over 20 years, and under a background of globalization, when challenged with an unexpected public health crisis, the Chinese government still took concerns and critiques from the international community as “intervention on internal affairs”. International cooperation was considered only a diplomatic measure. Human lives and people’s rights were neglected. The Chinese Government was using the rigid socialist bureaucratic approach as the tradition to rely on, wishing the problem can be covered up and get by as before, when similar problems had busted in non-coastal areas in China. The stupidity has brought lessons to China and the whole world at the cost of human lives.

By March 2003, the spreading of SARS in north China had become more than dangerous. Yet the responsible agencies in the government were still blocking the information to not only the general public but also the medical institutions. It caused the hospitals totally unprepared in terms of knowledge and materials. Up to early April, when the epidemic ran rampant in Beijing, an

official of the Ministry of Health insisted in public that there were only 12 SARS patients and 3 SARS-related deaths. “The SARS in part of China is under control; it is safe to work, to live and to tour in China!”

The official media got in when the government agencies could no longer effectively block up information. The CCTV elaborated on broadcasting noisy happy “news” and interviews with foreign tourists, to make an image of “beautiful spring time with tourists pouring in”. It was brought to an abrupt stop all together after April 6th, when an ILO employee was killed by SARS in Beijing.

There were newspapers and media who initiated to break the information blockade and to challenge the administrative intervention, such as the magazine *Money*, which carried SARS outbreak information from February 20th and on; the newspaper.

According to the scientists, viruses did not become strong all of a sudden during recent years. However, the ever-changing environment on the earth means that a new virus is able to spread throughout the world in an unprecedented speed. As the scale of population movement is getting larger and larger and the exchange of personnel is becoming more and more frequent, a contagious disease that breaks out in one country may spread to other parts of the world swiftly. The crisis in one country may lead to a global crisis. (*Time*, April 7, 2003).

The SARS outbreak took place in the most economically active regions over the world, where the density of population is very high. For example, the sum of local population plus migrant workers in Canton Province plus Hong Kong accounted for more than 100 million; and it is also highly mobile. The economically advanced regions in China under a dual-economic background are most dangerous to epidemic outbreak, because of the close ties they hold with the developed countries in terms of financial connections, and on the other hand, they absorb great amount of migrant population, most of which came out of poorer neighbor regions. In the case of Canton Province, in 2001 alone there were 12.92 million people entered, accounted for 14.9% of the nation-wide migrating population. The total number of seasonal and floating workers in Canton is estimated to be over 20 million. Therefore once there is a contagious disease outbreak, it can be easily and quickly spreading all over. The SARS virus was carried by international flight, big hotels to many places in the world. An unexpected global health crisis was thus triggered.

On March 12th, the WHO formally issued the global warning on the outbreak of SARS. At

the time Hong Kong, Vietnam, Singapore and Taiwan all cooperated by publicize information, mobilize the media for supervision and etc. However the mainland China government was taking a denying “Chernobyl manner”. It is a style the government officials acquired from their political experience; they focus on their reputation and image through media whenever disastrous events happen. They pay attention to the wording in newspapers rather than the cause of the disasters. A convention is to narrow down the range of information release in early stage of the event, and to take tighter internal controls under a care-free appearance.

However, under a globalization background, with the ever-upgrading communication and information technology, the people will be able to find ways to break up the blockage by administration and the powers. In mid March, the information about SARS outbreak in Beijing on the internet was widely spread. From 20th to 22nd of March, someone posted information online under the pen name of “A Resource Person” to list the hospitals under SARS attack, the death number and warning not to go to these hospitals, because some of them had closed down emergency room under the guide of plumbing service, and their staff were banned to reveal the truth to the patients. People learned that the SARS was not under control, and to the contrary it was spreading. Under this circumstance, the administration control by disguise would surely fail, which in turn push the government to squeeze out partial information only to feed more suspicion and to fuel more anger of the public.

Under the background of globalization, not only public health issues but also other unexpected events would eventually bring out global impact, such that the outbreak international events will quickly spread their influence to impact local affairs, and *vice versa*. If the outbreak of unexpected events is not responded with prompt and appropriate measures due to rigidity of administration, then bad consequence would result internationally, and worse still domestic crisis would follow.

The containing force on the worsening SARS epidemic in China was “globalization”! Well known economist János Kornai pointed out that, intervention from international organizations can sometimes and at certain levels protect people from the abusive bureaucrat and negligence of the government. It was the intervention from WHO which pushed the Chinese government to finally admit the existence of the SARS outbreak, and to take adequate measures. When facing the international community, a country carrying open-up policy will have to mach with the international society and modify its behavior under pressure from the world.

Just because of the reasons mentioned above, we observed a trace of changes China went through the SARS crisis: from refusing to cooperate and communication, to passively then spontaneously communicate and cooperate with international organizations.

However, one cannot expect a thorough change of a system over night. The Chinese government traditionally responds to unexpected events with a strong social mobilization system; it could “spare no cost” to fight a “people’s war” against any such unexpected events. For instance, after April 20th, the government released SARS information to the public on a daily basis and took strong measures to insulate the SARS patients; a hospital of 1000 beds was built within a week, a big amount of doctors and nurses were selected and mobilized, etc. However in many aspects these measures are still “conventional”. Along with these actions the news media went all out to broadcast on the good people and good deeds, as well as the leaders’ solicitude, “to make funeral as merrily as happy event”. Shortly after, the government picks only the medical system to reflect on the problems with the SARS epidemic, although it is a part of the whole problem; a discussion on political aspect of SARS was brought to the end almost right after it is started. As someone puts it, we are still unable to bear the exploration on “transparency” in depth.

Most of the reflections worthwhile to be mentioned are from senior scholars, for example “SARS and the Spirit of May Fourth” by Zi Zhongyun. It takes a while to solve a problem accumulated over time. It will be good to have a comprehensive contemplation by the decision makers, to promote science and democracy, to set off further reform at deeper levels. As Professor Wu Jinglian puts it, “to build an open, transparent and accountable government”, and furthermore he points out that it is not so much of what is written in the constitution, rather it is important to have a clear constitutional procedure to build up the basic human rights, to regulate and supervise the government administration. Wang Yuanhua, a renowned writer, proposes a theme of “Life, humanities, and political civilization”, and that prerequisite of proper use of administrative means is the ethics on responsibility and human rights, otherwise government power will turn into neo-authoritarianism rather than genuine modern democracy. Jiang Ping, a Jurist, proposes a theme of “public power with accountability”, he argues for the idea of balance of power and the right to access information by citizens; and that the right to access information should cover not only the truth about the epidemic and also those who are responsible for the epidemic control.

Undoubtedly these arguments are all of great importance to China. A well known media editor expressed a pity that if the SARS epidemic had lasted longer, it could have shifted China

further into the favorable direction. However, I would say that the progress of any system will be a gradual process, and that China did experience great changes in the year 2003, if we take a deeper look at the following events. Some scholars call the year 2003 the year of awakening of human right.

The case of Sun Zhigang. A college graduate was taken as vagrant and was detained, and later was beaten to death at the detention center. Law experts including Professor Ji Weidong of Kobe University launched an investigation of “violation of constitution” and petitioned to conduct the special investigation procedure. In their words, they are aiming at waking up the “sleeping beauty” in the constitution on relevant articles. On June 20th, the Chinese government initiated a quick action to abolish “Measures for Internment and Deportation of Urban Vagrants and Beggars”, therefore avoided a big shock of possible investigation by the National People’s Congress on unconstitutional deed of the government.

The case of Li Siyi. On June 4th, a three-year old girl starved to death at her home in Chengdu, due to absence of mother Li Siyi, who was detained by the police for multiple days. The event was broadcasted on the internet and attracted public attention in September and October on no-act of the police and negligence of human life. It eventually resulted in a public law suit against the police on abuse of power.

The case resulted in the discussion of judicial impartiality and judicial independent. A Shanghai lawyer once worked for the protection the lawful rights of people to be relocated due to housing development. But he was finally accused of criminal deed. This case aroused special concerns at home and abroad. Some lawyers volunteered to defend him in the court. Although the case itself is unchanged, a heated discussion was triggered on judicial impartiality and independent and the theme of respecting private property rights in the surges of commercial housing development.

The case of Liu Yong. The argument on where a mafia chieftain should be executed immediately triggered a hot debate on procedural justice. It brought related ideas into the vision of the general public in a great range.

The outbreak of SARS has lead to the introduction and dissemination of the ideas of people’s right to access information, transparency of administration, government accountability, and the right of human life. It was said that over the last 20 years, economists have introduced

and disseminated ideas about market economy, property rights, transaction cost, and rent seeking to the Chinese people. Today the judicial experts and intellectuals are introducing the concept of constitution, rule by law, judicial impartiality, procedural justice, citizen participation and matching of international standard into the general public. These changes based on non-government activities are of great implication. There is nothing more important than enlightening of the people, which can be grown into great constructive power to push forward reform and progress in general. In a speech delivered at Harvard University on December 10, 2003, Premier Wen Jiabao said, “All the progresses are facilitated by the reform and open-up policy; and they are creations made on the basis of freedom by the Chinese people.”