

GOING THROUGH THE HARD TIMES TOGETHER: AN ANALYSIS OF THE CHINESE EXPERIENCE ON FIGHTING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT: *This paper argues that, regardless of the advantages in China's political system, the efficiency and success of China's fight against the COVID-19 pandemic should be attributed to three factors. First, the Chinese leader, the CPC and the Chinese governments at all levels have been attaching great importance to the pandemic and playing a rather crucial and positive role in fighting the pandemic, thus providing China with a strong political and institutional guarantee for imposing targeted measures and effectively preventing the further spread of the pandemic. Second, the enterprises, communities, medical workers, media and ordinary people in China all contribute to the success of China's fighting against the pandemic in different aspects, thus leading to a rather positive state-market-society interactions in combating the pandemic. Third, China's equal exchanges, close cooperation and mutual assistance with many other countries and the WHO in combating COVID-19 not only helped China and the international community achieve better performances in fighting the pandemic, but also made it easier for more countries to perceive China's sense of responsibility and the trustworthiness of China's capabilities and intentions, and eased international pressure to China in the context of the deterioration of China-US relations during the pandemic.*

KEY WORDS: COVID-19 pandemic, Xi Jinping, the CPC Central Committee, Chinese government, State-market-society interactions, international cooperation.

INTRODUCTION

The sudden onslaught of COVID-19 and its rapid spread across the world has not only been a huge blow to China and the world economy, but has also posed severe challenges to the global governance system and governance capacity of each country. Meanwhile, due to the significant difference between China and some western countries, such as the US regarding the efficiency of fighting the pandemic, many people believe that this crisis also provided an important opportunity for China to enhance its international credibility and showcase its image as a responsible major power in the world (He Wenping, 2020; Wang Chen and Chen Yiping, 2020; Wang Yiwei, 2020).

By far, many scholars and media have attributed China's success in fighting the pandemic to its advantages in political system, and criticized the inefficiency of western democratic systems. Admittedly, the Chinese political system does have some institutional advantages in crisis management, but only attributing the different countries' responses to the pandemic to their differences in political system is too one-

sided and insufficient. More importantly, emphasizing too much on the institutional differences between China and other countries would largely politicize and add ideological attitudes to the pandemic prevention and control, thus doing harm to summing up the experiences and lessons and enhance international cooperation in fighting the pandemic. In this light, this paper tries to conduct a more in depth analysis on the Chinese experience on fighting the pandemic from three different perspectives, so as to provide other countries with more experience and confidence in going through the hard times together, and contribute to the overall victory over the pandemic both within China and abroad.

The Role of the CPC and Chinese Government in the Pandemic

On the eve of the Chinese Spring Festival in 2020, the sudden outbreak and rapid spread of COVID-19 across China not only drew the attention of hundreds of millions of Chinese people, but also posed a severe challenge to the Chinese government in terms of its domestic governance system. However, through multifaceted efforts, the CPC and the Chinese government have gradually successfully transformed this crisis into an opportunity to enhance its comprehensive governance capacity. First, the CPC Central Committee under the leadership of Xi Jinping attached great importance to pandemic prevention and control, and made timely and science-based decisions and a series of institutional arrangements, thus providing China with a strong political and institutional guarantee for imposing targeted measures and effectively preventing the further spread of the pandemic.

Since the outbreak, Xi has made a series of important speeches and instructions for the efficient prevention. In his word, “This pandemic is a major public health emergency with the fastest spread, the widest range of infections and the most difficulties of prevention and control since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (Xi Jinping, 2020a). Therefore, it is necessary to make sure that the CPC committees and governments at all levels resolutely obey the unified command, coordination and dispatch of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council” (Xi Jinping, 2020b). Under the leadership and instructions of Xi, also based on previous observations and researches on the coronavirus, the CPC central committee rapidly developed a working mechanism characterized as “implementing policies precisely based on science, division and classification”, identified such four basic principles for the local governments as “early detection, early report, early quarantine and early treatments, and conducted a grand strategy of “concentrating patients, concentrating experts, concentrating resources and concentrating treatments”. Moreover, in order to provide technical support for the pandemic prevention and control, the Party Central Committee also decided to establish the Chinese national interdisciplinary scientific research team as soon as possible, which has been mainly concentrated on clinical treatment, testing technology, and vaccine research and development and so forth. To a large extent, these decisive countermeasures put forward by the CPC Central Committee not only ensured the effective prevention and control of the pandemic domestically, but also provide the other countries in the world with important experience and reference for fighting the

pandemic.

Second, various departments, provinces and municipalities across China have strictly implemented the measures put forward by the CPC Central Committee, taken decisive actions, and actively coordinated and cooperated with each other in combating the pandemic, thus making a positive contribution to the effective control of the pandemic across China.

In order to ensure that patients are not affected by the cost of medical treatment, the Ministry of Finance and the National Healthcare Security Administration (NHSA) have cooperated in introducing a series of financial supporting policies for fighting the pandemic. They pledged that the cost of testing and treatment for all Chinese citizens will be borne by the central government and all levels of local governments, which has provided a solid financial guarantee for stopping the further spread of the pandemic and reducing the mortality rate of patients. Different regions, provinces, cities and townships all established the joint prevention and control mechanism, concentrated superior medical resources and technical forces to treat patients, carefully collected and timely published relevant data, and made every effort to ensure transparency of information and integration of pandemic control and treatment. Meanwhile, each region still had a different focus and conducted diversified policies according to the risk level of the pandemic. For instance, in the low-risk regions, the focus of the local governments has been mainly on “preventing importing patients from other regions”. In the mid-risk regions, the governments have been strengthening measures including both preventing importing cases from other regions and controlling the spread of the pandemic within the region. Meanwhile, even stricter pandemic prevention and control measures have been conducted in the high-risk regions, such as “locking down Wuhan”, “closing all main roads out of Hubei Province” and quarantined medical treatment. Third, during the fight against COVID-19, the central government has successively held local governments accountable for and dealt with their inaction or violations of disciplines and regulations, and have seriously cracked down on pointless formalities and bureaucratism, which have thus alleviated to a certain extent the public grievances and pressure of domestic public opinion resulted from ineffective pandemic prevention and control by local governments and dereliction of duty by government officials.

While Wuhan, the capital city of Hubei Province, is the place where COVID-19 cases were first found and hardest hit by the pandemic, the Hubei Provincial Government and Wuhan Municipal Government failed to respond efficiently and effectively to the outbreak and even made a number of poor decisions in the early days of the outbreak. And mistakes made by local governments at all levels in Hubei Province, such as misprision and abuse of power for personal gains, were successively witnessed in the process of combating the pandemic, which once aroused great concern among the Chinese people. In such a context, the Chinese central government quickly made a major adjustment to the leadership of Hubei Province, deciding to remove Jiang Chaoliang from the position of Secretary of the CPC Hubei Provincial Committee and

Ma Guoqiang from the position of Secretary of the CPC Wuhan Municipal Committee at the same time, and successively held accountable and punished over 1000 Party cadres who had violated relevant disciplines and regulations from a number of departments in various places in Hubei Province, including the Hubei branch of the Red Cross Society of China. Also, the central government promoted a large group of Party cadres who had made active contributions to the control and treatment of the pandemic, and reopened the investigation into the “incident of the whistleblower Doctor Li Wenliang”. Such actions have, to some extent, relieved the negative emotions of the Chinese people towards the government and eased the pressure of domestic public opinion.

To sum up, the Chinese leader, the CPC and the Chinese governments at all levels have been playing a rather crucial and positive role in fighting the pandemic in China. To a large extent, it has not only facilitated the enhancement of the Chinese people’s trust in and recognition of the governments at all levels as well as their awareness of the sense of responsibility and reliability of China, but has also helped to increase the confidence of the Chinese people in winning the fight against the pandemic, as well as their willingness to cooperate actively with national actions and take the initiative to assume social responsibilities.

The Interactions among the State, Market and Society

In addition to the positive role of the CPC and the Chinese government, the enterprises, communities, medical workers, media and ordinary people of China all contribute to the success of China’s fighting against the pandemic in different aspects. For one thing, an emphasis and reliance on the “people” has been the primary principle in fighting against the pandemic in China. On January 20, Xi Jinping proposed that “putting people’s life and health first” should be the primary principle and general policy in the pandemic prevention and control. As he pointed out, all party committees, governments and relevant departments must try their best to protect the lives of the people and take practical and effective measures in cooperation with the public to resolutely contain the spread of the pandemic.

Guided by this instruction, on the one hand, not only did the governments, hospitals, communities, and media spare no effort in saving people’s lives, they also spent lots of time and energy in comforting the emotions of the patients, their families and the public. On the other hand, the state has been giving full play to the initiative and creativity of the people in winning the fight. As a result, various communities, social groups, media and the mass across China have been attaching much importance to the pandemic and joined the fight against it in different ways. For examples, during the pandemic, wearing masks and self-quarantine have gradually become self-consciousness and a new normal habit of the Chinese people, who consider these actions as sharing responsibilities both for themselves and others. A great number of medical workers from all over the country have willingly risked their lives to come to the aid of Hubei Province. Their selfless dedication and fearlessness as well as their careful care for the patients have touched

many Chinese people. In addition, the great emphasis attached by governments at all levels to protecting the health and safety of medical workers during the pandemic, the national mourning held for martyrs who died in the fight against the pandemic and compatriots who died of the disease, the vigorous and positive publicity given to medical workers by the media and so forth have stimulated the enthusiasm of medical workers and the public in the fight against the pandemic from different aspects, and have also increased the understanding, trust and recognition of the government and medical workers in Chinese society.

For another, the government has taken a series of emergency measures to ensure that there are sufficient medical and living supplies within China while the prices are stable, giving full play to the active role of domestic enterprises and entrepreneurs in combating the pandemic and encouraging enterprises to assume greater social responsibilities, which has basically maintained social stability during the pandemic . For instance, in order to safeguard the life and health of medical workers and the general public, over 3,000 enterprises in the domestic textile, automobile, oil, mobile phone, electrical appliance industries and so forth have “switched” to producing masks and protective suits. Also, in order to ensure the provision and quality of medical and living supplies during the pandemic, and to avoid the phenomenon of stockpiling and jacking up prices, the central authorities and departments at all levels have been keeping a close watch on the domestic market and taken a variety of measures, and have even imposed price controls on some enterprises. Besides, in the face of the pandemic, the Chinese enterprises such as Alibaba, Tencent, Jingdong and Baidu as well as many entrepreneurs such as Jack Ma and Dong Mingzhu have taken the initiative to donate money or medical supplies to the central government and local governments at all levels as well as front-line medical workers and the general public to support pandemic prevention and control. These efforts made by the central authorities, enterprises and entrepreneurs have not only further enhanced the Chinese people’s trust in and recognition of the Chinese government and enterprises, but have also set a positive example in Chinese society on sharing the responsibilities and effectively avoided such problems as social panic.

Moreover, both the Chinese government and enterprises have been actively prepare for a new round of economic crisis and contribute to resolving the development difficulties in the economy. Since achieving initial results in fighting the pandemic, the government has been trying to increase domestic employment, support small, medium and micro enterprises, expand domestic demand, stimulate investment, and provide jobs for poor, low-income families and the unemployed. In response to the countermeasures of the government, many large enterprises such as Alibaba and Jingdong have been trying to further enhance the online transactions and boost domestic consumption in cooperation with tremendous small, medium and micro companies. Many small, medium and micro enterprises have been trying hard to adapt to the new situation in the post-pandemic era, some of which are even transforming and upgrading their business model for survival. Above all, during the pandemic, the state-market-social three dimensional interactions

have been relatively positive, which has laid the social and economic foundation for the victory against the pandemic and economic recovery in the post-pandemic era in China.

The Power of International Cooperation

Since February this year, pandemic control within China has begun to bear fruit, but the number of confirmed cases and deaths in Italy, the U.S., Japan, South Korea, Iran and many other countries has begun to surge, thus soon turning the pandemic into a serious global public health crisis. In this context, China has been attaching greater importance to international cooperation with other countries and international organizations, which has been helping both China and other countries fighting the pandemic.

For one thing, at the early stage of the pandemic, China has obtained medical material donations from other countries such as Russia, Japan, Pakistan, which has helped enhance the confidence and efficiency of China in combating the pandemic. In return, when other countries were hit by the pandemic, China extended a helping hand to Japan, Italy, Pakistan, Iran, Serbia, Spain and many other countries, and offered them assistance to the best of its ability even when the domestic pandemic was not yet fully under control and domestic medical supplies were not yet sufficient. Also, China reciprocated acts of friendship and kindness from them by donating \$20 million to the WHO to support developing countries in coping with the pandemic.

For another, besides material mutual assistance, since the outbreak of the pandemic, China shared with the World Health Organization (WHO) and published the genome sequence of the novel coronavirus at the earliest time possible. In the past half year, in stark contrast to the ineptitude, buck-passing and even treachery of some western countries such as the United States, China has been actively carrying out information exchange with the international community through various channels, ensuring timely release of relevant information and data at home and abroad, striving to stop the cross-border spread of the pandemic, sharing its experience and knowledge of pandemic control with other countries, and strengthening inter-state policy coordination with the support of the WHO.

To a large extent, China's equal exchanges, close cooperation and mutual assistance with other countries and the WHO in combating COVID-19 not only helped China and the international community achieve better performances in fighting the pandemic, but also made it easier for more countries to perceive China's sense of responsibility and the trustworthiness of China's capabilities and intentions, which has contributed to more trusting and cooperative relationships between China and other countries during the pandemic, and eased international pressure to China in the context of the deteriorating China-US relations.

CONCLUSION

All in all, both the Chinese government and the public has been attaching great importance to the outbreak and spread of COVID-19. To a large extent, the pandemic

has demonstrated the superior governance capacity and boldness of the Chinese government in the face of this major crisis in making quick decisions and plans, mobilizing all kinds of domestic resources in a flexible manner and raising people's enthusiasm and consciousness in fighting the pandemic. Also, it has highlighted the great advantages of China in terms of its manufacturing industry with a complete range of sub-sectors, the great flexibility of its supply chain and enterprises. It is almost equally important that, the positive interactions among the state, market and society and China's close cooperation with many other countries and the WHO have added to China's success and efficiency in combating the pandemic. However, by far, it is still too early to say that China has won the fight completely. In a world that countries rarely stand or fall alone, not until the international community goes through the hard times together and most countries achieve the victory in pandemic prevention and control, could China lower its guard and enjoy the fruits.

Moreover, the huge blow of the pandemic to the world economy, as well as its profound impact on the international political landscape has put forward more difficulties and challenges for China and other countries in the post-pandemic era. On the one hand, the rapid spread of the pandemic has seriously affected economic growth in all regions around the world and brought a new crisis to the already difficult world economy. Taking into account the importance of China to the world economy and the unwillingness of the US to take more international responsibilities, only when China plays a more active role in addressing the global economic crisis and assumes greater international responsibilities, will it be possible for China and the other countries overcome the economic crisis and development difficulties together. On the other hand, the pandemic also witnessed further deterioration of the China-US relations and "decoupling" between the U.S. and Chinese economies. This has not only made it more difficult for the international community to work together to combat the pandemic and to handle global economic crisis, but may also further exacerbate the "peace deficit" and "trust deficit" in the China-U.S. strategic competition and in the international community. In this context, China trying its best to maintain a relatively stable and reciprocal China-US relations and avoid the "Thucydides Trap" and "the tragedy of great powers" is not only crucial to China's own development, but also to the peace and development of the international community as a whole.

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