

**POLITICS OF CHINA'S CRISIS
MANAGEMENT AGAINST
COVID-19**

CHEN Gang

EAI Background Brief No. 1510

Date of Publication: 5 March 2020

Executive Summary

1. The deadly novel coronavirus, known officially now as COVID-19, that hit Wuhan in China has triggered a public health emergency that is testing the Chinese leadership's crisis management capacity. Wuhan's pivotal geographic location and China's modernisation of transport networks have increased the difficulties of the government's responses to the coronavirus.
2. The outbreak raises concern for China's crisis management capability, particularly in the public health realm. Initial reporting and information flow through government apparatus failed to trigger the Level I responses in time, which only came late between 23 and 25 January.
3. According to the National Plan for Responding to Public Health Emergencies (2006), Level I emergency response has to be activated immediately in the case of a SARS-like virus spread or human infection from avian flu. Any unidentified epidemic that involves cases in multiple provinces also requires a Level I response.
4. The contagious coronavirus is not only challenging the fulfilment of the government's ambitious economic blueprint in 2020, but also testing Chinese Communist Party's plan on governance capacity building, a highlight at the Fourth Plenum in 2019.
5. Like other epidemics, the outbreak has immediate impact on party official reshuffling, while the ripple effects may also have long-term influence on institutional building and personnel arrangement in Chinese politics.
6. Beijing removed Hubei provincial Party Secretary Jiang Chaoliang and Wuhan municipal Party Secretary Ma Guoqiang over botched outbreak response.
7. Shanghai Mayor Ying Yong became the new party boss of Hubei province, while Wang Zhonglin, the party secretary of Jinan city, was appointed party secretary of

Wuhan city. Both Ying and Wang have work experience in the political and legal system that includes police and other law enforcement departments.

8. Although the inter-agency leading small group (LSG) and central government group to guide epidemic control work are headed by Premier Li Keqiang and Vice Premier Sun Chunlan respectively, Xi Jinping, the paramount leader, has played a vital role in commanding the prevention and control work, indicating the Party's strengthened grip over state apparatus since the administrative reform in 2018.
9. The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) plays a prominent role in public emergency response. As chairman of the Central Military Commission, Xi has mobilised the PLA to respond to the epidemic.
10. The National Supervisory Commission sent an inspection group to Wuhan to thoroughly investigate the death of Dr Li Wenliang, a whistleblower, signalling how seriously it is taking public anger over the handling of the outbreak.
11. In a centralised one-party political system, local apparatus is not prepared to play an independent role in most response and recover actions. As in other policy realms, China's public health emergency management, to a large extent, is still vertically organised.

POLITICS OF CHINA'S CRISIS MANAGEMENT AGAINST COVID-19

CHEN Gang^{*}

Initial Government Reactions: A Comparison of COVID-19 and SARS

- 1.1 Two months after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) convened its Fourth Plenum that emphasised modernisation of China's governance capacity, a novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak in the likes of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) erupted in the central Chinese city of Wuhan in December 2019 (Appendix), which spread like wildfire to other provinces and abroad in the beginning of 2020, causing massive cases of death and panic across the country and the world. On 30 January 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the coronavirus a global health emergency, a declaration accorded for extremely dangerous pandemics such as Ebola and Swine flu (H1N1 virus).
- 1.2 The outbreak was reportedly associated with exposures at one seafood market in Wuhan city, Hubei province. COVID-19, or the Wuhan virus, which was initially labelled as 2019-nCoV, was detected in Wuhan in December 2019. The human-to-human transmission of the virus was confirmed on 20 January 2020 (Appendix).¹ COVID-19 is caused by a betacoronavirus, like MERS and SARs, all of which may have their origins in bats.²
- 1.3 COVID-19 has triggered another public health emergency after SARS that is testing the Chinese leadership's crisis management capacity. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has drawn lessons from the SARS outbreak 17 years ago: the Hu Jintao-

^{*} Chen Gang is Senior Research Fellow and Assistant Director of the East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore.

¹ "Human-to-Human Transmission Confirmed in China Coronavirus", <https://time.com/5768404/china-coronavirus-human-transmission/>, accessed 17 February 2020.

² "Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Situation Summary", <https://www.nih.gov/health-information/coronavirus>, accessed 17 February 2020.

Wen Jiabao leadership, right in their first year in power, sacked incompetent senior officials for their covering up and mishandling of the SARS outbreak. Strict quarantines and travel restrictions, together with transparent reporting and communication systems, had helped the Hu-Wen administration pass the first stress test and consolidate power at home. China adopted the anti-SARS measures as the natural policy response to the H1N1 outbreak in 2009 and to the Wuhan coronavirus-affected areas in 2020.

- 1.4 While the SARS epidemic started in southern China's Guangdong province, the coronavirus erupted in Wuhan city, a densely populated megacity with a population of more than 11 million and right at the nexus of China's transportation webs. Wuhan has a nickname of "*jiu sheng tong qu*" (九省通衢), which literally translates as 'the main thoroughfare of nine provinces'. On land, in addition to conventional railway networks, Wuhan is one of the main stops on two of the main long-haul high-speed railway lines: Beijing-Guangzhou (from north to south) and Shanghai-Chengdu (from east to west). In the air, Wuhan Tianhe International Airport is the only airport in central China to have direct flights to five different continents. At sea, Wuhan is a bustling river port along the Yangtze River that connects the coastal area with the hinterland.
- 1.5 Wuhan's pivotal location in China's terrain and modernisation of transport and logistical networks in recent years has significantly increased the risks and difficulties in the government's responses to the lethal coronavirus. In 2003, there was no high-speed railway, and the number of people travelling by air and across borders was only a fraction of today's scale. For example, about 68,000 railway passengers left Wuhan on the first day of the Spring Festival in 2003 while in 2020, the figure surged by about four times to 270,000, a factor for the rapid spread of the virus. On 20 January 2020, only four provinces including Hubei reported of confirmed cases; by 24 January, the number increased to 30 out of 31 provinces. It took months for SARS to transmit to 26 provinces in 2002/2003.
- 1.6 By 21 February 2020, China updated the total number of infected cases to 75,567, with 2,239 deaths, both of which were much higher than the figures during SARS, which stood at 5,327 and 349 respectively for mainland China. The first death from

the Wuhan virus was reported on 11 January 2020 in Wuhan. According to WHO data, most of the infected cases were found in China.

- 1.7 The Chinese government reported to WHO on 31 December 2019, less than a month from the detection of the virus, which was much quicker than the case for SARS. On 12 January 2020, China shared the genetic sequence of the novel coronavirus with the international research community and in public databases such as GenBank, the US NIH (National Institutes of Health) genetic sequence database.
- 1.8 On 26 January 2020, a leading small group (LSG) on the prevention and control of the outbreak of new pneumonia caused by the novel coronavirus was established at the central government level led by Premier Li Keqiang (the first leading group he is leading) and with Politburo standing committee member Wang Huning as the deputy leader. Having served as an adviser to three Chinese presidents, namely, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping, Wang Huning is now the top party official in charge of ideology, propaganda and party organisation.³
- 1.9 Li and Wang's roles in the LSG however do not necessarily mean that Chinese President Xi Jinping is outside of top decision-making on anti-epidemic work. On 28 January, Xi met the executive director of WHO, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, and told Tedros that he "personally directed" the government's response to the outbreak.⁴ Xi presided over two top-level CCP Politburo Standing Committee meetings on 3 February and 12 February, both of which were shown at length on Chinese television. Xi declared a "people's war" and "total war" on the coronavirus outbreak, saying "the success of the nationwide response hinges on Hubei province, and the success of Hubei's response hinges on Wuhan city".⁵

³ "Wang Huning: the low-profile, liberal dream weaver who's about to become China's ideology tsar", <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2116964/wang-huning-low-profile-liberal-dream-weaver-whos-about>, accessed 17 February 2020.

⁴ "Where's Xi? China's leader commands Coronavirus fight from safe heights", <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/wheres-xi-chinas-leader-commands-coronavirus-fight-from-safe-heights/articleshow/74043927.cms?from=mdr>, accessed 17 February 2020.

⁵ "Xi Urges Resolute Action in All-out, People's War Against Virus", https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1743314.shtml, accessed 17 February 2020.

- 1.10 Local governments also took a number of draconian measures. An unprecedented lockdown was imposed on Wuhan city. Since 10 in the morning of 23 January (local time), all public transport including buses, trains, subways and ferries have been shut down in the city. Major roads linking Wuhan have also been blocked. More than a dozen cities (located mostly in Hubei province) have taken similar measures on public transport. By 25 January 2020, 30 out of 31 provinces in China had activated the highest-level emergency response for public health (Level I). Tibet activated the second highest level emergency (Level II) on 27 January 2020.
- 1.11 According to the National Master Plan for Responding to Public Emergencies (国家突发公共事件总体应急预案) enacted in 2006 by the State Council, public emergency events in China can be classified into four categories: public health emergencies, natural disasters, accidents and emergencies threatening public security.⁶ The State Council has set up a four-level response system on all emergencies based on their severity and controllability, namely, Level I (most severe, red-coded), Level II (very severe, orange-coded), Level III (severe, yellow-coded) and Level IV (general, blue-coded). According to the National Plan for Responding to Public Health Emergencies (国家突发公共卫生事件应急预案), which was also enacted in 2006, the spread of any contagious SARS-like virus or human infection from avian flu, requires the government to immediately activate Level I emergency response.⁷ Any unidentified epidemic that involves cases in multiple provinces also deserves Level I response.⁸
- 1.12 The outbreak raises several serious concerns about China's crisis management capability, especially in the public health realm. Level I responses were not triggered in time, which came late between 23 and 25 January. Despite the framework for national emergency responses that was put in place by the State Council after SARS, the initial reporting and assessment of the epidemic, as well as the coordination of government departments, proved to be inadequate.

⁶ "State Council releases National Master Plan for Responding to Public Emergencies," http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2006-01/08/content_150878.htm, accessed 17 February 2020.

⁷ Article 1.3, China's National Plan for Responding to Public Health Emergencies (in Chinese), http://www.gov.cn/yjgl/2006-02/26/content_211654.htm, accessed 21 February 2020.

⁸ Ibid.

- 1.13 Specially, the Regulation on Handling Public Health Emergencies in May 2003, Law on the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases in 2004 to clarify the responsibility of local government and health authorities in infectious disease surveillance and reporting, and regulations on contingency plans during a public crisis for central ministries and local governments in 2006 and 2011 apparently did not measure up. Information disclosure was still not swift enough for COVID-19. The delay in information disclosure could be a result of an ineffective coordination between Wuhan municipal government and other government departments.

Political Changes after the Outbreak

- 2.1 Like other major disasters and emergency events, the outbreak has immediate impact on party official reshuffling, while the ripple effects may have long-term influence on institutional building and personnel arrangement in Chinese politics. During the the public outrage over officials' cover-up of SARS outbreak in 2003, the top leadership sacked both Beijing Mayor Meng Xuenong and Minister of Health Zhang Wenkang, while in the case of COVID-19, Beijing removed Hubei provincial Party Secretary Jiang Chaoliang and Wuhan municipal Party Secretary Ma Guoqiang over 'botched' outbreak response.⁹ In contrast to Beijing's punishment during SARS that was targeted at administrative chiefs, the initial purge this time was aimed at party chiefs who generally have a final say in local affairs and thus are more accountable for poor governance.
- 2.2 Shanghai Mayor Ying Yong, 61, a close ally of Xi Jinping, became the new party boss of Hubei province, while Wang Zhonglin, 57, party secretary of Jinan, the capital city of the eastern province of Shandong, was appointed party secretary of Wuhan city.¹⁰ Both Ying and Wang have work experience in the political and legal system (政法系统) that includes police and other law enforcement departments.

⁹ "Coronavirus: Beijing purges Communist Party heads in Hubei over 'botched' outbreak response in provincial capital of Wuhan", <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3050372/coronavirus-beijings-purge-over-virus-takes-down-top-communist>, accessed 18 February 2020.

¹⁰ Ibid.

- 2.3 Ying was police chief of Shaoxing city in Zhejiang province, chief of the Zhejiang provincial court and Shanghai municipal court, while Wang worked for local police and procuratorate departments in Shandong province.¹¹ Xi Jinping himself had worked in both Zhejiang province and Shanghai municipality before joining the Politburo Standing Committee in 2007.
- 2.4 Chen Yixin, secretary-general of the Commission for Political and Legal Affairs of the CCP Central Committee, was appointed deputy head of a central government group to guide epidemic control work in Hubei province. Chen was former deputy Party chief of Hubei province and former leading official of Wuhan before he was transferred to the Commission for Political and Legal Affairs in Beijing.¹² As they have work experience in the political and legal system, the appointment of Ying, Wang and Chen shows Beijing's strong political will to control the epidemic through draconian social management approaches, including strict quarantine, information control, and regulation of social and economic activities.
- 2.5 Various cities near Wuhan have also stepped up quarantine efforts. The small centre of Wuxue on 15 February announced that with the exception of people working to contain the epidemic, anyone seen walking along the streets would be sent to a stadium for "study sessions".¹³ Beijing also appointed two senior firefighting commanders to the Ministry of Emergency Management's leading group – Xu Ping, head of the ministry's Forest Fire Bureau, and Qiong Se, director of its Fire and Rescue Bureau. Xu was a general from the People's Armed Police, while Qiong Se had previously worked for the local police in Zhejiang province and the Ministry of Public Security in Beijing.
- 2.6 The Chinese government will generally set up *ad hoc* inter-agency mechanisms in catastrophic disasters, which are normally built on existing state apparatus

¹¹ "Ying Yong becomes Hubei Party Secretary, and Wang Zhonglin becomes Wuhan Party Secretary" (in Chinese), https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_5964830, accessed 18 February 2020.

¹² "Former Wuhan official to guide prevention and control efforts", <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202002/11/WS5e41f84fa3101282172767bc.html>, accessed 18 February 2020.

¹³ "Xi Jinping 'put China's top echelon on notice' in early days of coronavirus outbreak", *South China Morning Post*, 15 February 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3050815/xi-jinping-put-chinas-top-echelon-notice-early-days-coronavirus>, accessed 18 February 2020.

responding to public emergencies. During the 8.0-magnitude Sichuan earthquake in 2008, the central government set up the Earthquake Relief Headquarters, while in the 2010 Yangtze River floods, the State Flood Control and Drought Relief Headquarters commanded the disaster relief campaign.¹⁴

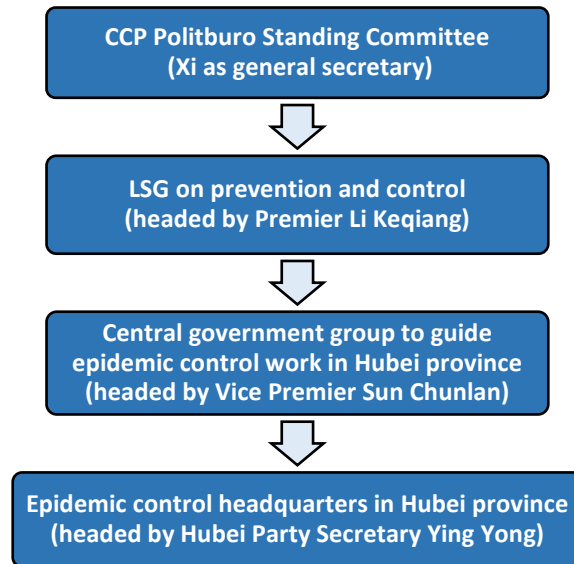
- 2.7 The central government this time established the LSG on the prevention and control of the outbreak of new pneumonia caused by the novel coronavirus (中央应对新冠肺炎疫情工作领导小组), with Premier Li Keqiang and Wang Huning, a Politburo Standing Committee member, as the respective chief and deputy chief. Since Wang is in charge of party affairs instead of state affairs, his role in the LSG is to ensure the party's control of the state apparatus in the fight against the epidemic.
- 2.8 Another two *ad hoc* institutions were respectively set up at the central and local levels to ensure the supervision and implementation of directives from Beijing. Vice Premier Sun Chunlan headed the central government group to guide epidemic control work in Hubei province (中央赴湖北指导组), which supervised the local government's work against coronavirus, while the Hubei party secretary and governor led epidemic control headquarters in Hubei province (湖北省新型冠状病毒感染肺炎疫情防控指挥部), which directly organised epidemic control work and implemented central directives on the frontline (Figure 1).
- 2.9 Although both the LSG and the central government group to guide epidemic control work were headed by leaders from the State Council (Premier Li Keqiang and Vice Premier Sun Chunlan respectively), Xi Jinping, the paramount leader, has been playing a vital role in commanding the prevention and control work of the outbreak, indicating the Party's strengthened grip over state apparatus since the administrative reform in 2018.¹⁵ According to a report from China's official *Xinhua News Agency*, entrusted by Xi, Vice Premier Sun Chunlan inspected a newly built hospital in

¹⁴ Chen Gang, *The Politics of Disaster Management in China*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 112.

¹⁵ For details of this reform, please refer to Chen Gang and Xue Jianyue, "China's Massive Restructure of Party and State Apparatus in 2018", *EAI Background Brief*, No. 1358, 2018.

Wuhan,¹⁶ indicating Xi's prerogative in directing the central government group on epidemic work. In meeting with Tedros Adhanom, WHO director general, in Beijing on 28 January, Xi said he was "personally commanding" the response to the outbreak.¹⁷

FIGURE 1 CHINESE GOVERNMENT'S COMMANDING SYSTEM OF NOVEL CORONAVIRUS CONTROL WORK



Source: Compiled by the author.

2.10 The death of Dr Li Wenliang, a whistleblower, almost turned the issue into a public confidence crisis for Beijing in February. Li, a 34-year-old ophthalmologist, was one of the eight whistle-blowers disciplined by the police in early January for "rumour mongering" after he posted a message on a closed online WeChat group about a number of "SARS-like" cases at his hospital. He became infected himself from treating patients and his death has made him an icon.¹⁸ The National Supervisory Commission, the top anti-corruption state agency, sent an inspection

¹⁶ "Chinese vice premier inspects newly-delivered hospital to combat coronavirus", http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-02/03/c_138750379.htm, accessed 19 February 2020.

¹⁷ "Taking credit, avoiding blame? Xi Jinping's absence from coronavirus frontline", <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/04/blame-xi-jinping-absence-coronavirus-frontline-china-crisis>, accessed 19 February 2020.

¹⁸ "Death of coronavirus doctor Li Wenliang becomes catalyst for 'freedom of speech' demands in China", <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3049606/coronavirus-doctors-death-becomes-catalyst-freedom-speech>, accessed 19 February 2020.

group to Wuhan to thoroughly investigate issues related to Li, signalling how seriously it was taking public anger over the handling of the outbreak.

Central versus Local

- 3.1 The resilience to catastrophes is fundamentally local, which involves the strengths of the local government and community to prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters. As such, an axiomatic principle is that the remedy in terms of protection and relief must be applied at the grass-roots level of local communities and administrations.¹⁹ Local capacity-building and solutions to disaster management therefore are essential for the effectiveness of risk management, disaster responses and recovery efforts; in today's interconnected and bureaucracy-laden crisis management field, however, local disaster resilience is often constrained by limited fiscal and human resources, unengaged citizens and conflicting local government priorities.²⁰
- 3.2 Local authorities since the early 1990s have been allocated greater political and fiscal autonomy in dealing with local issues that include public emergency jobs. Nevertheless, in a still centralised one-party political system, local apparatus is not prepared to play an independent role in most response and recover actions. As in other policy realms, China's public health emergency management, to a large extent, is still vertically organised.
- 3.3 Local officials could only play a very passive role in control, relief and recovery, often finding themselves being excluded from the process of decision-making, organisation and coordination. However, limited power does not necessarily come with limited responsibilities. In a centralised system of cadre promotion, local officials are accountable for local crisis management results, bearing unavoidable responsibilities which may add risks to their political careers.

¹⁹ D Alexander, "Globalization of disaster: Trends, problems and dilemmas", *Journal of International Affairs*, 59 (2), 2006, p. 11.

²⁰ A D Ross, *Local disaster resilience: Administrative and political perspectives*, New York: Routledge, 2014, p. 2.

- 3.4 For many people in China, Dr Li Wenliang's death offered a release of pent-up anger and frustration with how the government mishandled the situation with the withholding of information and silencing of whistle-blowers.²¹ It indicated that the government had not learnt lessons from previous crises like SARS 17 years ago and continued to quash online criticism and investigative reports that provide vital information.
- 3.5 In response to the widespread outcry, the CCP's bimonthly journal *Qiushi* on 15 February published an internal speech given by Xi on 3 February, instructing the Politburo Standing Committee to tackle the outbreak of the coronavirus, almost two weeks before the Chinese authorities announced that there had been human-to-human transmission of the disease.²²
- 3.6 In his speech on 3 February, Xi also accused local officials of not carrying out edicts from the central government, vowing to punish incompetent officials. "I issued demands during a Politburo Standing Committee meeting on January 7 for work to contain the outbreak. On January 20, I gave special instructions about the work to prevent and control the outbreak and I have said we have to pay high attention to it", he said.²³
- 3.7 In that speech, Xi said that the outbreak not only endanger the health of the Chinese people, but also jeopardise the country's economic and social stability – even its open-door policy. The speech, published by journal *Qiushi* 12 days after its delivery, was also featured on state television and other official mouthpieces, showing Xi's active engagement in handling the crisis from an early date and that local government officials should be held accountable for the dereliction of duty.
- 3.8 Xi and his team are facing a severe test with the Wuhan coronavirus. The outbreak happened at a time when China is to achieve its first centenary goal of becoming a

²¹ "Online Revolt in China as a Doctor Is Lionized", *The New York Times*, 8 February 2020, p. 1.

²² "Xi Jinping 'put China's top echelon on notice' in early days of coronavirus outbreak", <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3050815/xi-jinping-put-chinas-top-echelon-notice-early-days-coronavirus>, accessed 18 February 2020.

²³ Ibid.

full *Xiaokang* (moderately well-off) society before 2021, as denoted by the doubling of the 2010 per capita GDP. The contagious coronavirus is not only challenging the fulfilment of the government's ambitious economic blueprint, but also testing Xi's plan on governance capacity building, a highlight at the Fourth Plenum. In China's 4,000 year-long history and modern development, disaster politics has always been the ultimate test for the top leadership in power.

- 3.9 China's annual parliamentary meetings, scheduled for early March, are set to be postponed because of the COVID-19 outbreak. The parliamentary sessions of the National People's Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) in every March, commonly known as the "*lianghui*" (literally the "two meetings"), constitute one of the most important events on China's annual political agenda and an important forum for debates on socioeconomic issues and approval of laws, policies, budget and government report. The delay will slow down China's law-making process, as well as the State Council's work relating to budgeting and economic planning.

Military Forces in China's Crisis Management

- 4.1 Like many other countries, the Chinese leadership often calls upon its armed forces to assist with large-scale rescue and relief operations in times of natural catastrophes. The frequency, scale and types of rescue and relief works that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has conducted are seldom matched by military forces elsewhere. In recent years, when the PLA was shifting its strategic focus to non-traditional security issues (*feichuantong anquan wenti*), its tasks in domestic rescue and relief activities became even more important.
- 4.2 Since the PLA has its own autonomous administrative and operation process, central and local government officials often have an awkward relationship with the PLA in the crisis management system where the PLA only obeys orders from the Central Military Commission (CMC) instead of administrative leaders. Neither the LSG on the prevention and control of the outbreak nor the central government group to guide epidemic control work could directly command the PLA in handling the epidemic.

- 4.3 In China's unique system of "Party commanding the Gun" (*dang zhihui qiang*), the Party's CMC is in full command of PLA affairs, with only the Party's general secretary sitting in as commander-in-chief and assisted by top generals. As compared to Hu Jintao, Xi's predecessor, who left its operation largely to the PLA, Xi managed to consolidate his power in the military through daunting anti-corruption investigations. Xi has repeatedly emphasised the importance of the PLA's absolute loyalty and firm faith in the Party leadership, reiterating the party's supremacy over the PLA on various occasions. Xi's dominance over the PLA was evident during the second Sichuan Earthquake in Ya'an in 2013 when the PLA troops were immediately deployed to disaster-stricken areas at the request of the State Council.
- 4.4 Likewise for the epidemic, military forces were mobilised. On 2 February, Xi deployed 1,400 medical staff from the armed forces to treat patients in Huoshenshan Hospital, one of the two makeshift hospitals dedicated to COVID-19 infected patients. The management of Huoshenshan Hospital was formally handed over to military medics on 2 February.²⁴
- 4.5 On 13 February, Xi deployed 2,600 more military medics to virus-hit Wuhan. They were in charge of patients at Wuhan's Taikangtongji Hospital (860 beds) and Hubei Provincial Women and Children's Hospital (700 beds), running services similar to their colleagues at Huoshenshan Hospital, which was already in full-scale operation.²⁵ The medical team consisted of personnel from units including the Ground Force, Navy, Air Force, Rocket Force and Strategic Support Force.

China's System of Responding to Public Emergencies

- 5.1 China's national system on responses to public emergencies was formalised in 2006 when the State Council enacted the National Master Plan for Responding to Public

²⁴ "Xi Jinping approves sending 1,400 military medical staff to Huoshenshan Hospital in Wuhan", <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-02-02/Military-medical-staff-to-treat-patients-in-Huoshenshan-Hospital-NKECxLtqxO/index.html>, accessed 20 February 2020.

²⁵ "Xi Jinping orders 2,600 more military medics to virus-hit Wuhan", <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-02-13/Xi-approves-sending-2-600-military-medical-workers-to-Wuhan--O2JiE4fITy/index.html>, accessed 20 February 2020.

Emergencies based on lessons learnt from the SARS outbreak in 2003. The system includes contingency plans on four categories of public emergencies, namely, public health emergencies, natural disasters, accidents and events threatening public security. The State Council has been designated the highest administrative apparatus in charge of responses for all public emergencies.²⁶

5.2 The State Council has set up a four-level response system on all emergencies based on their severity and controllability, namely, Level I (most severe, red-coded), Level II (very severe, orange-coded), Level III (severe, yellow-coded) and Level IV (general, blue-coded).²⁷ Any public emergency that falls into Level I or II category should be reported to the State Council within four hours after the occurrence.²⁸

5.3 According to the National Plan for Responding to Public Health Emergencies (国家突发公共卫生事件应急预案), which was also enacted in 2006, the government should activate Level I emergency response immediately if it is the spread of any contagious SARS-like virus or human infection from avian flu.²⁹ Any unidentified epidemic that involves cases in multiple provinces also deserves Level I response.³⁰ According to the National Master Plan for Responding to Public Emergencies, information on the occurrence of any public emergency should be publicly publicised as soon as possible.

5.4 Under the leadership of the State Council, the National Health Commission³¹ should play a pivotal role in organising and coordinating the responses to public health

²⁶ “Interpreting National Master Plan for Responding to Public Emergencies”, (in Chinese), http://www.gov.cn/zwhd/2006-01/08/content_151018.htm, accessed 21 February 2020.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Article 1.3, China’s National Plan for Responding to Public Health Emergencies (in Chinese), http://www.gov.cn/yjgl/2006-02/26/content_211654.htm, accessed 21 February 2020.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ The National Health Commission is a cabinet-level executive department under the State Council, which is responsible for sanitation and health in China. Throughout most of China’s rule since 1954, the national health portfolio had been the responsibility of the Ministry of Health until 2013 which was superseded by the National Health and Family Planning Commission. In March 2018, the National Health and Family Planning Commission was dissolved and its functions were integrated into the new agency called the National Health Commission.

emergencies.³² The Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, a national agency under the National Health Commission, is especially important for national responses to public emergencies caused by epidemics.

- 5.5 Despite the State Council's effort to set up a national system in response to public emergencies after the SARS outbreak 17 years ago, the authorities still failed to curb the COVID-19 at the early stage. The contagious coronavirus is not only challenging the fulfilment of the government's ambitious economic blueprint in 2020, but also testing CCP's plan on governance capacity building. An overhaul of the national system of managing public health emergencies is very likely after the COVID-19 has been gradually brought under control.

³² Article 2.1, China's National Plan for Responding to Public Health Emergencies (in Chinese), http://www.gov.cn/yjgl/2006-02/26/content_211654.htm, accessed 21 February 2020.

APPENDIX

TIMELINE OF CHINESE GOVERNMENT'S REACTIONS TOWARDS OUTBREAK OF COVID-19 (BY 24 FEBRUARY 2020)

31 December 2019, China alerted WHO of several cases of unusual pneumonia in Wuhan city in the central Hubei province. The virus was unknown.

3 January 2020, Dr Li Wenliang was apprehended by Wuhan local police for spreading “rumours” that a SARS-like virus was spreading in Wuhan.

5 January 2020, Chinese officials ruled out the possibility that this was a recurrence of the SARS virus.

7 January 2020, officials announced they had identified a new virus, according to the WHO. The novel virus was named 2019-nCoV and was identified as belonging to the coronavirus family. On the same day, Xi Jinping issued demands during a Politburo Standing Committee meeting for work to contain the outbreak.

11 January 2020, China announced its first death from the virus, a 61-year-old man who had purchased goods from the seafood market.

20 January 2020, Zhong Nanshan, a Chinese expert on infectious diseases, confirmed human-to-human transmission to state broadcaster CCTV, raising fears of a major outbreak on the eve of the Lunar New Year holiday. Xi gave special instructions to work on preventing and controlling the outbreak, emphasising that the government had to pay high attention to it.

22 January 2020, the death toll in China jumped to 17 with more than 550 infections.

23 January 2020, Wuhan was placed under effective quarantine as air and rail departures were suspended. Beijing cancelled events for the Lunar New Year, while officials reported the first death outside Hubei province.

25 January 2020, travel restrictions were imposed on five more cities in Hubei and 30 out of 31 provinces in China had activated the highest-level emergency response for public health (Level I).

26 January 2020, a leading small group (LSG) on the prevention and control of the outbreak of new pneumonia caused by the novel coronavirus was established at the central government level led by Premier Li Keqiang and with Politburo standing committee member Wang Huning as the deputy leader. Meanwhile another two *ad hoc* institutions were respectively set up at the central and local levels to ensure the supervision and implementation of directives from Beijing. Vice Premier Sun Chunlan headed the central government group to guide epidemic control work in Hubei province (中央赴湖北指导组), which supervised the local government's work against coronavirus, while Hubei party secretary and governor led epidemic control headquarters in Hubei province.

28 January 2020, Xi Jinping met the executive director of the WHO, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus and told Tedros that he “personally directed” the government’s response to the outbreak.

2 February 2020, Xi deployed 1,400 medical staff from the armed forces to Huoshenshan Hospital in Wuhan city. Huoshenshan Hospital, with a capacity of 1,000 beds, is one of the two makeshift hospitals dedicated to treating patients infected with the novel coronavirus. Its management was formally handed over to military medics on 2 February.

3 February 2020, in a speech to the Politburo Standing Committee, Xi outlined a contingency plan to respond to a crisis that he said could not only hamper the health of people in China, but also jeopardise the country’s economic and social stability – even its open-door policy.

7 February 2020, Dr Li Wenliang died of the COVID-19, sparking collective anger and grief on Chinese social media. The National Supervisory Commission sent an inspection group to Wuhan to thoroughly investigate issues related to Li.

10 February 2020, Xi Jinping presided over a meeting and listened to reports on epidemic prevention and control work in Beijing. Meanwhile, many enterprises in China resumed production to ensure the supply of protective materials and other products on the market to fight against the novel coronavirus epidemic.

13 February 2020, Beijing removed Hubei provincial Party Secretary Jiang Chaoliang and Wuhan municipal Party Secretary Ma Guoqiang over botched outbreak response. Shanghai Mayor Ying Yong, 61, a close ally of Xi Jinping, was named the new party boss of Hubei province, while Wang Zhonglin, 57, party secretary of Jinan, the capital city of the eastern province of Shandong, was appointed party secretary of Wuhan city.

13 February 2020, Xi deployed 2,600 more military medics to Wuhan’s Taikangtongji Hospital (860 beds) and Hubei Provincial Women and Children's Hospital (700 beds), running services similar to their colleagues at Huoshenshan Hospital.

14 February 2020, first temporary TCM (Traditional Chinese Medicines) hospital received COVID-19 patients in Wuhan.

19 February 2020, the National Health Commission issued an updated version of the diagnosis and treatment plan for the COVID-19.

20 February 2020, in his letter to Bill Gates, co-chair of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Xi wrote: “I deeply appreciate the act of generosity of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and your letter of solidarity to the Chinese people at such an important moment”.

21 February 2020, local authorities said Wuhan planned to build another 19 makeshift hospitals to receive more infected patients.

23 February 2020, the Chinese authorities released a document listing measures to strengthen protection and care for medical workers, as part of the efforts to fight against the novel coronavirus outbreak.

23 February 2020, at a teleconference that was unprecedentedly open to every county government and military regiment throughout the country, Xi Jinping said the coronavirus epidemic was the country's most serious public health crisis and promised more pro-growth policies to help overcome it.

Source: Compiled by the author.