



REASONS OF STATE IN THE PANDEMIC



Chinese Perspectives

Interview with political scientist Heike Holbig about China's successful politics in relation to the pandemic

The coronavirus started off from China on its victory march around the world. After initial chaos, the autocratic regime quickly had the pandemic under control, and the aspiring superpower seems to be emerging from the crisis stronger than before. Which experiences can be transferred?

The images from China at the beginning of the crisis were alarming. The health system seemed to be collapsing. How could this news get out?

Heike Holbig: Yes, the images were alarming. Back then, such scenes still seemed a long way away for us. Unlike those from the European hotspots, however, such images from Wuhan only came in the first weeks of 2020, that is, before the country's strict censorship took hold. Like terrorist attacks or natural disasters, epidemics are also a highly sensitive topic in China, and disseminating corresponding information is reserved for party-state media at the highest level. Local reports and ones by those directly affected are unwelcome because they are suspected of stoking rumours and triggering panic. Maintaining social stability is the top priority.

The images of the countermeasures were also dramatic: People were unable to return to their homes, others were not let out. There was a lot of criticism about these repressive measures in the country itself too.

At least in the case of epidemics, which measures can be classified as "repressive" and which as "resolute" is rather a question of perspective and previous experience. In democratic Taiwan too, quarantined households were electronically "sealed" to prevent infected people from leaving their homes. Here, as in China and neighbouring countries, the SARS

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epidemic in 2002/2003 has left lasting memories and heightened acceptance towards infection control and prevention measures. It was therefore not so much the strict measures that were criticised, but rather the initial cover-up of the new disease and the delay in introducing infection control measures which went on for weeks. While Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore had already imposed restrictions on entering the

country at the turn of the year, Mainland China only began implementing consistent measures in the last week of January, after human-to-human transmission had been officially confirmed there. These included cordoning off Wuhan and other cities in Hubei Province with over a million inhabitants, strict curfews and rigorously monitored isolation and quarantine measures.

Who held the reins?

The party-state leadership under Xi Jinping set up a central leading group for the fight against the coronavirus epidemic as well as an inter-ministerial coordination mechanism to align measures undertaken by all the 32 ministries involved in the areas of infection control, prevention and production of protective equipment as well as mitigation of economic losses. Premier Li Keqiang was entrusted with heading the central leading group. His deputy, Sun Chunlan, was dispatched to Wuhan to coordinate measures at local level. As long as the situation was not yet under control, government representatives were sent

Applause for the head of state: Xi Jinping walks past rows of delegates at the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. His crisis management was criticised at the beginning, but he is now styling himself as a valiant commander-in-chief in the fierce war against the virus.

on ahead. The media only reported on party leader Xi Jinping going into action on the frontline once things started turning for the better.

The Chinese government declared a national crisis. Was that supposed to help contain the pandemic or domestic criticism?

Both. On the one hand, the purpose of declaring a national crisis was to mobilise

journalists, intellectuals in the public sphere, but also high-ranking party representatives accused above all central government's leaders and Xi Jinping personally of having deliberately covered up the outbreak of the epidemic, reacting far too late and thus of having run the risk of the virus propagating on an epidemic scale. When, at the beginning of February, the *Wall Street Journal* called China "the real sick man of Asia", alluding to the social Dar-

In the meantime, we no longer hear anything from domestic critics.

The most vociferous critics were arrested, some sentenced to imprisonment or banned from publishing. Domestic critics are gagged – and this in social media too – with the intimation that they are playing into the hands of hostile forces from abroad and betraying national interests. As far as we can judge from here, the indignation, boosted by propaganda, at what is perceived as undue criticism from the West by all means ensnares people.

How did the state apparatus get the population behind it again?

Firstly, presumably through the effectiveness of the measures. The number of infections in Wuhan and the surrounding cities was already under control by mid-March, and at the end of March it was possible to end the lockdown and the economy gained momentum again. Media coverage plays an important role in this, whether non-stop videos on state television showing how hospital construction in Wuhan is progressing or the styling of Xi Jinping as a valiant commander-in-chief in the fierce war against the virus. However, the best publicity for its own epidemic control were the pictures from Italy, Great Britain, Iran and other regions of the world where the virus claimed far more lives in a short space of time than it did in China. The news from the USA under President Trump, who first gambled away precious time and then failed entirely in the fight against infections, was grist to the Chinese party-state's mill and restored its lost legitimacy. When it then transpired in the second half of 2020 that China would emerge from the pandemic as one of the few economies worldwide with economic growth of over two per cent, this is likely to have reconciled most people with their political leaders.

What do you think: Do people in China believe the government's propaganda or are they primarily afraid of reprisals?

In general, it's likely that most of the population is very well aware that they are dished up a streamlined "published opinion" in the state media that is prop-



Press unwelcome:
On 3 February 2021, a WHO team arrives at the Wuhan Institute of Virology to investigate the origin of the coronavirus. A security guard denies journalists access.

Photo: picture alliance/ASSOCIATED PRESS | Ng Han Guan

extensive material and human resources as quickly as possible. We learned how two hospitals were built in Wuhan within just ten days. Equally remarkable, however, are the partnerships between 16 hotspot cities in Hubei Province and 16 other Chinese provinces, which were organised centrally and obliged to send medical personnel, apparatus and protective equipment to the respective partner city. In this way, it was possible to compensate swiftly for bottlenecks in the health sector like were happening in Europe. On the other hand, the national crisis also served to contain criticism from at home and abroad, which reached a peak around the Chinese New Year. Online

winist vocabulary of the 19th century, that was the final straw: The article was indignantly dismissed, and three WSJ correspondents had their accreditation revoked. This indignation and the orchestration by the media of the people's wrath are also an integral part of the national crisis.

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agandist and heavily edited. However, the search for alternatives is difficult because the Western media have lost credibility. Even before Trump, US-American, European and especially also German reporting on China was often perceived as one-sided. The Western press finally gambled away its reputation once fake news became the norm under Trump. During the pandemic, China's state media systematically borrowed from Western media debates: Foreign criticism of China was dismissed as "fake news", international "conspiracy theories" were debunked with pro-government "fact checks". Under such circumstances, harsh repressive measures to make the population behave in the desired way are not necessarily needed – it's enough just to discredit alternative interpretations from at home and abroad.

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Officially, there were only 100,000 infections in China overall, and at just around 5,000 the number of dead is comparatively low. How credible do you think these figures are?

There is no absolute certainty, but at any rate a lot of testing was done, and this made it possible to quickly contain smaller local outbreaks. The low number of cases, especially in terms of deaths, is likely to be reliable and at least follows the trend, also in view of the fact that other East and Southeast Asian countries, such as South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore or Japan, were also relatively successful in containing the pandemic.

What can we learn from China?

What we certainly CANNOT and do not want to learn is its authoritarian approach to dealing with criticism and information or the state-integrated deployment of state-of-the-art surveillance technology in private domains. In a positive sense, we could learn how to make sufficient hospital and staff capacities available quickly or how to establish routines



Comprehensive preventive measures were also taken outside the hotspot cities in Hubei Province directly affected by the epidemic – like here in the megacity of Shanghai.

in testing and tracking infection trajectories and digitalising healthcare in order to address the critical bottlenecks in contact tracing with which our public health departments are still struggling to this very day. However, these techniques have been used not only in China but also in other East Asian countries. The successful countries do not share the same authoritarian one-party system as China, but they do share a developmental state tradition.

What do you mean?

Characteristic of this tradition are a long-term pursuit of nation-state development goals under central control and close interrelationships between political, bureaucratic and entrepreneurial forces that can also be activated at short notice. This allowed the production of masks and test kits to be ramped up very quickly during the pandemic, as democratic South Korea has taught us. South Korea has also set standards in the testing and tracking of infected persons and some of these standards could also be compatible with the data protection expectations of European societies. And finally, we can learn that it's important to learn long-term lessons from a pandemic. Because of their experience with

SARS and MERS, these countries had a head start. We ought to have the same head start in the next pandemic.

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The EU has recently decided on sanctions against China because of the human rights situation there. Is it possible to make an impression on China's leaders by banning them from travelling abroad and blocking their accounts?

Well, the sanctions have certainly made an impression on China's leaders, otherwise they wouldn't have reacted so incisively with countersanctions. But the question is whether the EU sanctions will have the intended effect. As far as human rights are concerned, for example, Chinese officials are now mounting a full offensive: In a showdown with US



Built from scratch in ten days:
The aerial photo from
2 February 2020 shows
Huoshenshan Hospital in
Wuhan, which was built
solely for the fight against
the coronavirus.

Photo: picture alliance/Photoshot

Secretary of State Anthony Blinken in mid-March 2021, top diplomat Yang Jiechi accused the USA of neither representing international public opinion nor being authorised to demand compliance with universal values on behalf of the entire Western world. They should, continued Yang, rather take care of the human rights violations taking place at home that have come to light through the “Black Lives Matter” protests. These comments are not only of a tactical nature to show that China is no longer going to let itself be intimidated by the West. They must also be understood as a strategic signal that China is no longer prepared to acknowledge Western sovereignty in the interpretation of universal values and global norms. We’re dealing with a counterpart that sees itself not only on the road to success in terms of *realpolitik* but also as morally superior, if not even also superior as a civilisation.

“A counterpart who also sees itself as morally superior, if not even also superior as a civilisation.”

China’s rulers are using the failure of the West to master the pandemic to present their own system as superior. How successful are they in this?

In the eyes of China, Western liberal democracies have failed miserably in fighting the pandemic. As a Chinese colleague expressed it, the political elites there are “worried” about the proper functioning of Western states, which are less and less in a position to “deliver”, that is, provide essential public goods for the broad population. I can’t gauge how that resonates with the Chinese popula-

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tion. In view of massive propaganda and censorship, critical voices are being heard less and less; trips to China are no longer possible due to the pandemic. I suspect that the feeling of moral superiority really does ensnare the population, also because it promises to heal the old inferiority complex that has accompanied and shaped the process of Chinese nation building since the mid-19th century. The danger of this metamorphosing into a nationalistic superiority complex cannot be brushed aside.

“In a sense, the Chinese party-state is coming into its own during the crisis.”

In conclusion, can we say that China has emerged from the pandemic stronger than before and has improved its status in the world?

In its self-perception, China has gained considerably in status. Like the financial crisis, the current global coronavirus crisis has given China a boost at international level – but the pandemic is not over yet. As we are painfully discovering, our federal institutions and democratic processes with their inherent need for coordination are proving sluggish and partly counterproductive. In contrast, the Chinese party-state is coming into its own during the crisis, as it were, by creating legitimacy for itself, at least at home, through a strict and comparatively effective pandemic response regulated from the top down. It remains to be seen how much recognition it will reap for this on the international stage



Photo: picture alliance/Xinhua News Agency | Ju Peng

at the end of the day. While some Asian neighbours and African and Latin American partners are paying tribute to China's leaders for their resolute control of the pandemic, vaccine diplomacy and self-confident performance in the area of foreign policy, the country's international status seeking is increasingly meeting with resistance in the West. The pandemic seems to have triggered a spiral of escalation from which the parties involved are finding it more and more difficult to extricate themselves and work together on mastering global challenges.

The interview was conducted by Anke Sauter.

Via video call, Xi Jinping, head of state and party leader, talks to patients being treated for COVID-19 at Huoshenshan Hospital. The pictures are intended to demonstrate that he cares about local concerns in the dramatic fight against the virus.

About Heike Holbig



Heike Holbig is professor of political science with a focus on Chinese and East Asian area studies at the Faculty of Social Sciences. She also teaches and is a researcher at the Interdisciplinary Centre for East Asian Studies. In the framework of her studies in sinology and economics, she spent two years in Beijing between 1989 and 1991 and has since travelled regularly to China for field research and conferences. While research visits on social science topics had been taking place under difficult political conditions for several years

already, travel to the People's Republic has not been possible at all since the outbreak of the pandemic and will remain so until further notice. Examining China's political, economic and social developments in (post-)coronavirus times can therefore almost only take place from an external perspective. This makes a comparison with China's East Asian neighbours and the experiences of other countries in dealing with the pandemic all the more important.

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