

Governance in a Digital Age and Wuhan's Fight against the Coronavirus

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Shortly after hosting the Seventh CISM Military World Games, the city of Wuhan was hit by Covid-19, and thus became a centre of global attention. To protect the life and health of the people in Wuhan, China declared an all-out war to contain the virus. Using drastic measures that exacted high socio-economic costs, Wuhan was gradually restored to peace, vitality, and prosperity. In a city under lockdown, coordination, management, and governance at different levels were facilitated by information and communication technologies. This article examines the enhanced capabilities of individuals and institutions in a digital age to respond to crises, and the debates and ideological entanglements relating to the virus. It concludes with an anticipation of the 'New Normal' after the pandemic by responding to Giorgio Agamben's views on the 'state of exception'.

Introduction

Infectious diseases threaten, disrupt, and shape the course of human history. The competition for territories, sustenance, and the right to live on earth has never ceased, and '[i]nfectious disease is one of the great tragedies of living things – the struggle for existence between different forms of life [...] Incessantly, the pitiless war goes on, without quarter or armistice – a nationalism of species against species' (Zinsser 2008, 7). The frightening memories of infectious diseases such as the Marburg virus, AIDS, 'mad cow' disease, SARS, Ebola, and avian flu were still fresh in people's minds when the world was struck by Covid-19, a pandemic that was first identified in Wuhan, the largest city in central China. At the time of the earliest confirmed cases, Wuhan's 11 million inhabitants were still celebrating the success of the Seventh CISM Military World Games in October 2019, with more than 9300 participants from around the world. Although the euphoria surrounding this grand international event was still lingering, the city responded quickly to the unprecedented crisis by adopting drastic, systematic, and effective measures.

As part of the battle launched against this ‘invisible’ enemy, the city went into lockdown on 23 January 2020, just before the Spring Festival. Instead of the usual festive cheer, bustling streets, and noisy crowds, the city now experienced stillness, uneasiness, and anxiety. Five million inhabitants had already left before the lockdown. In the deserted streets, only policemen, delivery workers, and street cleaners could be seen, and only occasionally so. For the first time in my life, the Spring Festival passed without celebrations with friends and relatives. With the closure of schools, factories, restaurants, travel agencies, cinemas, and almost all public facilities, the whole city came to a halt. Public transportation was suspended, and the roads were blocked. Checkpoints were set up to keep out strangers, and all communities in the city were isolated from one another. The city cut off connections with the outside world, and people from outside were forbidden to enter. Travel and outdoor gatherings were banned. Because of the travel restrictions, those who had gone to visit friends in other parts of China had to wait for more than two months before being allowed to come back. Some local officials went to extremes in implementing the quarantine measures, causing unnecessary difficulties and troubles for many people. For example, some travellers stranded in Wuhan during the pandemic could not find a proper place to stay following the closure of hotels. The sudden increase of confirmed cases of Covid-19 also overwhelmed the hospitals, with patients lining up for beds and medical help. Online videos showed patients desperately waiting in hospitals, at the risk of exposing themselves to the virus. Owing to the severe shortages of beds, face masks, gloves, goggles, ventilators, gowns, and other medical equipment, some patients, who were asked to go into self-quarantine, passed away at home before they were able to see a doctor. Wuhan experienced extreme difficulties trying to prevent the virus from spreading. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), openly acknowledged the sacrifices of Wuhan people in a press conference, and the WHO praised Wuhan for ‘the most ambitious, agile and aggressive disease containment effort in history’ (World Health Organization 2020). After a strenuous fight against the virus, the decisive measures taken began to yield results when, on 23 May 2020, China’s mainland recorded zero new cases for the first time since December 2019.

Scholars such as Slavoj Žižek, Giorgio Agamben, and Jean-Luc Nancy have offered their insights on the pandemic and its global impact. As a witness in Wuhan, I would like to reflect upon how information and communication technologies (ICT) have transformed the ways people deal with the virus. Literary works such as *A Journal of the Plague Year* by Daniel Defoe, *The Plague* by Albert Camus, and *Blindness* by José Saramago all recorded people’s misery during the outbreak of infectious diseases in more traditional societies. However, Wuhan’s scenario is rather different, as measures such as isolation of infected people, social distancing, and spatial segmentation were put into practice in new, efficient, and more effective ways with the help of ICT. This article examines the coordination, management, and governance in Wuhan during the lockdown, and the ideological entanglements embedded in the controversies relating to the outbreak. It concludes with an

anticipation of the ‘New Normal’ in the post-pandemic era by responding to Agamben’s assertion of the ‘state of exception’.

Solidarity in the Digital Age and Life under Lockdown

With massive investment in ICT in China, cities such as Wuhan have entered a digital age in which both individuals and communities are endowed with greater capabilities to respond to emergencies and crises. During the lockdown period, internet connectivity ensured community solidarity among people in quarantine.

Although a latecomer that only became connected to the internet in 1994, China caught up rapidly, with a high-speed national grid of information superhighways linking all provinces and major cities together by the end of 1998 (Dai 2003, 13). After more than 20 years, people can now use their smartphones to access internet services even when they are stranded in remote villages in rural China. According to the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), the number of internet users has reached 854 million, and 847 million people used their smartphones to surf the internet in 2019. In addition, 61.2% of Chinese people are using the internet for information, shopping, learning, communication, entertainment, and other online services (China Internet Network Information Center 2019). In the digital age, governance is also highly dependent on ICT:

To govern is to shape and regulate social order. This is not a task that is carried out by a single body – the government or state, but is shared by a variety of agencies, often acting with little or no knowledge of what the others are doing. (Coleman 2008, 4)

With websites, social media, and other web-enabled products and services, governance has now become more responsive, effective and efficient. As the city with the largest number of university students in the world, Wuhan is an educational, cultural, and industrial centre, leading scientific and technological innovations in many fields. With the extensive and systematic application of digital technology in all aspects of social life, Wuhan has become a ‘smart’ city that is better equipped to improve the quality of life of its residents, the performance of government institutions, and the competitiveness of the financial sector. Digital connectivity has also enabled efficient cooperation and coordination between government organizations, medical institutions, the civil society, private businesses, and international organizations in the fight against Covid-19.

The prevention, detection, and containment of the virus have been made easier by ICT, and the enhanced abilities of both individuals and institutions can be seen in information sharing, marshalling of resources, and management of production during the havoc. The ‘coordination of production and distribution’ (Žižek 2020, 12) that characterized China’s national effort to help Wuhan would be a great challenge for any government. With more efficient information exchange, the latest updates on the coronavirus were shared online, and people could use mobile phones to look up all the confirmed cases in their neighbourhoods. During the pandemic,

more than 40,000 medical workers from around the country rushed to help Wuhan and other parts of Hubei (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China 2020), and large quantities of medical supplies, daily necessities, and other resources were sent to the front line. Shared information on the needs of individuals, institutions, and communities allowed personnel and resources to be allocated efficiently to designated sites while minimizing personal contact. Internet connectivity helped not only to share information about available hospital beds, daily necessities and transportation, but also to debunk rumours. When the cabin hospitals were ready, all home-isolated suspected and confirmed patients could be admitted to these temporary treatment centres, in order to minimize infections among family members. However, many were unwilling to go due to concerns about the living and medical conditions. These concerns evaporated once videos showing that these makeshift hospitals were well-equipped began circulating online. The patients were provided with free meals and medical treatment, and some of them even amused themselves with square dancing, playing tai chi, and learning Five Animal Frolics (Wu Qin Xi) Qigong while they were there. The near-instantaneous exchange of information prevented people from panicking.

ICT also made timely, safer, and more efficient medical help possible during the pandemic. With the fast development of e-health in China, there are over 2000 healthcare-related smartphone applications on the market (Milcent 2018, 192). In many drugstores, people can video-call doctors and buy prescription medicines without seeing the doctors in person. Because Covid-19 is highly contagious and has a particularly long incubation period, remote medical service was the safest option during the pandemic. Many people became infected in hospitals when seeking medical help or visiting patients there. With telemedicine, people can obtain medical advice remotely without running similar risks, and videoconferences can assist in the treatment of patients with severe symptoms. Internet connectivity also ensures community solidarity among people in quarantine. Residents' committees can arrange vehicles to transfer patients to designated medical institutions. When necessary, community volunteers can also help deliver medicines and other necessities. To ensure early identification, isolation, and treatment of the patients, all citizens report their body temperature and health status to the community residents' committees daily. With the help of WeChat, the most popular messaging and calling app in China that can share videos, images, texts, files, and web links with an individual or a group of people in an instant for free, most of these tasks can be done in seconds. After the easing of the lockdown, digital QR codes on cell phones are scanned when people take a taxi, enter a supermarket, or check into a hotel. The green code turns red if a person becomes ill with the virus; a yellow code means that the person once had close contact with an infected person. This app uses mobile technology and big data not only to indicate its user's health status but also to help track infected people.

E-commerce boomed during the lockdown. Risks were high for crowds in the supermarkets in a city with more than 50,000 confirmed cases. E-commerce ensured social distancing and minimized personal contact while keeping the city well provided. During the pandemic, popular online websites quickly adapted their

businesses to cater to the needs of their customers, and online shopping surged. In addition to well-known online shopping websites such as Jingdong, Taobao, and Dangdang, new modes of e-commerce also emerged, with community group buying the most popular. Residents in the same neighbourhood place orders in WeChat or QQ groups, and payments are made electronically. The orders are then delivered to a designated nearby site for the buyers to pick up. Some sellers even offered zero-touch home-delivery services. With hundreds of buyers living in the same neighbourhood, produce from small farmers could be sold off within minutes through these new channels. Both farmers and customers benefited from this model of e-commerce because it helped people under lockdown obtain fresh vegetables and other necessities at lower prices and also allowed farmers to sell their produce, and thus continue to make money, rather than letting their crops rot in the fields.

Controversies as the Symptoms of China's 'Anxieties'

Faced with rapid social change, modern transformation, and the inevitable trend towards globalization, China is caught between the local and the global, the traditional and the modern, the East and the West. The task of integrating all of these elements into an organic whole has not produced a consensus among scholars, and isolation at home has only made the debates more heated. To prevent the virus from spreading:

China rolled out probably the biggest public health strategy of containment and cure coupled with universal temperature monitoring, masking, hand washing, massive screening, and dramatic increase in hospitalization facility. Thousands of health workers and massive supply of tons of vital protection gears along with ventilators poured into the province and the city. (Samaddar 2020, 10)

However, these measures brought with them high socio-economic costs, the service industry being hit hardest, with many people losing their jobs and facing challenges to their livelihood. Undoubtedly, these socially disadvantaged groups suffered the most, and life became even more difficult for them during the whole process. With such an unprecedented crisis, people's hidden 'anxieties' resurfaced, and many people exchanged thoughts about and reflections on various social issues over social media platforms. These debates about the pandemic offer us a unique opportunity to investigate 'anxieties' or ideological entanglements in a rapidly-changing country.

The pandemic again alerted Chinese people to the urgency of environmental protection. As the new 'workshop of the world', China has faced severe environmental problems caused by its rapid industrialization and urbanization:

[W]hile benefiting from the boom of the market economy and the rapid paces of industrialization and urbanization, Chinese people also begin to taste the bitterness of the disastrous ecological backlash and its accompanying adverse effects. Devastating effects such as species extinction, resource depletion, and pollution explosion have alarmed the Chinese society. (He 2018, 762)

About ten years ago, heavy smog in Beijing brought environmental deterioration to public attention. In the eyes of environmentalists, the outbreak of Covid-19 constitutes another ecological crisis due to people's encroachment upon the natural habitat of wild animals over the course of their 'triumphant' march towards modernity. Some scientists believe that SARS, which broke out in 2003, originated in bats and then skipped to the civet cat, an intermediate animal host. Human beings became infected when civet cats were consumed as delicacies by people in Guangdong. In the initial stage of the outbreak, Covid-19 was believed to have originated in the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market where fresh seafood was sold, as wild animals – which were blamed for spreading the virus to humans – were being illegally sold for consumption. Although no proof for this hypothesis was found, people began to denounce the cruel treatment and consumption of wild animals. Policymakers noticed the debates online and, on 24 February, they banned the trade and consumption of wild animals, denouncing such habits with harsh words such as 'unhealthy', 'corrupt', and 'uncivilized'. As a disruption in China's march towards modernity, the pandemic again reminds us of the importance of building a harmonious relationship between human beings and nature.

With an awareness of the 'anxieties' in China's process of globalization, it is easier to decipher the uproar around the publication of Fang Fang's diaries abroad. Fang Fang, a well-known writer based in Wuhan, began an online diary of the pandemic on 25 January 2020. The 60 entries chronicled her anxiety, the helplessness felt by the people of Wuhan, and the difficulties the city faced when the virus first broke out. They provide a personal account of life in a quarantined city. Her diary entries combine lamentations about the misery and loss of lives in Wuhan with criticism of the government's missteps in containing the virus in the initial stage when people knew little about it. As a window into a city in quarantine, the diary entries were eagerly read by people who were sympathetic with the suffering of Wuhan. Her influence peaked. However, when news came that the diary would be published abroad in English and German, her readers were instantly divided into two hostile camps: one who saw her as a cultural hero, and the other who saw her as a negative figure. Some readers, who once whole-heartedly supported her, also reversed their attitudes. With the entrenched positions of both sides, the contention over her work flared up, and eventually became fierce, bitter and acrimonious. The social media were flooded with all sorts of opinions. Although numerous reasons for the controversy have been raised, it can more readily be seen as a symptom of the Chinese people's 'anxiety' about the process of globalization. After suffering from successive defeats in their encounters with the West in the nineteenth century, Chinese people came to harbour a deep sense of shame and humiliation. When its economy overtook that of Japan to become the world's second-largest economy in terms of GDP in 2010, China began to draw overwhelming attention from the rest of the world, and its achievements made its people eager to build an image of a modern China in the international arena. However, as Susan Sontag has pointed out, disease can become a weapon for stigmatization and discrimination: '[f]eelings about evil are projected onto a disease. And the disease (so enriched by meanings) is projected onto the world'

(Sontag 1990, 58). Worrying that Fang's diary might generate prejudices against Chinese people, many readers naturally felt betrayed, infuriated, and offended, believing that the work might affect Western perceptions of China and of Chinese people.

The pandemic also rekindled debates between proponents of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) and of Western medicine. TCM, which represents an essential part of Chinese tradition, was widely used in the prevention and treatment of Covid-19 in Wuhan. Following the May Fourth Movement, Chinese people developed a firm belief in science and technology. According to Henry C. Lu, '[i]n Western medicine, germs and viruses are considered to be the primary culprits, but in traditional Chinese medicine disease is thought to be caused by disharmonies within the body or between the body and the environment' (Lu 2005, 13). With the balance between Yin and Yang as one of its fundamental theories, TCM, which mainly uses acupuncture, moxibustion, and complex mixtures of plant extracts to treat patients, is seen by some as 'unscientific'. When they began to criticize TCM during the pandemic, the enraged supporters of TCM fought back, creating online controversies that could not be defused even by the successful use and the remarkable practical effects of TCM in Wuhan hospitals. Apart from disagreements concerning the effectiveness of two different traditions of medication, the debate has also been partly triggered by concerns over the loss of tradition in China. The unresolved relationship between 'Chinese learning' and 'Western learning' that dates back to the late Qing period is at the heart of this debate. However, with hybridity as the most salient future of the global era and with unprecedented exchanges between cultures, relying only on TCM or Western medicine while belittling the other is unwise, and the best way forward is the combined use of both.

The 'New Normal' and a Response to Giorgio Agamben

Digital technology enables new relations between people and institutions. People benefit from online services that are efficient, cost-effective, and environmentally friendly. Wuhan's efforts at containing Covid-19 have been successful in that 'these measures prevented cases from increasing by 67-fold – otherwise, there would have been nearly 8 million cases by the end of February' (Cyranoski 2020). As discussed above, the fight against the virus not only offers a chance to examine how ICT has reconfigured the mechanism of governance, but also constitutes a testimony to the enhanced abilities of both individuals and institutions. However, in his response to the measures taken to contain the virus, Giorgio Agamben maintains a critical attitude towards 'the tendency to use a state of exception as a normal paradigm for government' (Agamben 2020a). Instead of endorsing the government's efforts to save lives, he has raised the controversial opinion that the epidemic was somehow 'invented' by the government to limit the freedom of citizens. The following discussion explores some of the fallacies in his argument.

First, Agamben's understanding of the 'normal' is problematic, as 'normality' is a relative concept, and any essentialist notion of the 'normal' is mere fantasy. Betraying his mentor Foucault, Agamben turns a blind eye to the constructive nature of his 'normal,' which is a result of the negotiations and re-negotiations between diverse social forces. The 'normal', which is always in the process of transformation, will most likely take new forms in the digital age. After having been criticised from all sides, Agamben clarified his argument by drawing a gloomy and 'apocalyptic' picture of post-pandemic life:

What's worrying is not so much the present, not only the present at least, but the aftermath. In the same way as the legacies of wars in peacetime have included a whole range of nefarious technologies, from barbed wire to nuclear plants, so it is very likely that there will be attempts to carry on pursuing, even after the medical emergency is over, many of the experiments governments hadn't been able to implement: may universities and schools remain shut, with lessons and lectures taking place online, may an end be put once and for all to meetings and gatherings to talk about political and cultural questions, may we only exchange digital messages and may wherever possible machines replace any contact – any contagion – between human beings. (Agamben 2020b)

Although the measures that have been taken during the pandemic worried Agamben, most of them are not new. Instead of advocating a return to the 'normal', which is virtually impossible, I propose the concept of the 'New Normal' for the post-pandemic world. Many of Agamben's worries will become 'true' or common practice after the pandemic, but their large-scale application will make life easier. During the havoc, educational institutions have been offering online courses, and online teaching, which with the right methodology and necessary technical support can bring about exciting and fruitful results. Despite the physical restrictions, students at different levels in Wuhan were able to receive education and interact with their teachers and friends at home. Schools, universities, and other educational institutions will reopen after the pandemic, but online courses will become an even more critical part of education. Many scholars not only carried out their normal job duties but also remained productive with the help of the materials collected online. Also, contrary to Agamben's observations, people still have 'meetings', which are now mostly convened online. Online academic meetings can save time, money, and the trouble of long-distance travel, and they are also 'democratized' by allowing more people to participate, including scholars in less developed countries who could not otherwise afford to travel. With access to technology, greater numbers of people can participate in cultural, academic, and artistic activities that were once privileges of the elite. Therefore, 'contagion' in Agamben's sense is more likely to take place because discussion of 'political and cultural questions' among people from around the world has been made easier.

The second fallacy in Agamben's argument is his consistent antipathy towards technology. All technology is a double-edged sword, with the capability of either reinforcing control over or empowering individuals. Without acknowledging the enormous benefits and conveniences of 'emerging' technology and measures adopted

during the pandemic, Agamben is preoccupied with their ‘nefarious’ aspects. In the digital age, people can interact with each other and with the outside world more efficiently and more creatively if they do not want to remain passive onlookers. Raymond Williams once anticipated a democratic system of communication in which ‘all men have the right to offer what they choose and to receive what they choose’ (Williams 1967, 128). To a certain extent, this dream has been partially realized with the help of ICT. Regardless of their social, financial, and/or racial backgrounds, people can ‘speak’ to the public by posting and sharing their opinions, thoughts, and cultural products online. Historically, most people were denied such opportunities due to the elite classes’ monopolization of various channels of communication.

Information circulates quickly on social media platforms, and an urgent message can instantly draw the attention of the whole world. As with SARS, which emerged in 2003, people were first alerted about Covid-19 by information circulated online. A friend working in a hospital sent me a WeChat message about the virus; the message had initially been sent by Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist at Wuhan Central Hospital who became known as the whistle blower for sending the first warnings. Unfortunately, after contracting the coronavirus on the front line a few days later, Dr Li died on 7 February 2020, and people from all over the world mourned, on social media, the loss of this heroic doctor. Furthermore, medical and scientific discoveries that are posted online can be accessed almost immediately by scholars and practitioners throughout the world, as compared with more traditional means of access that were limited to the rich and powerful. Agamben’s fantasy of the ‘carefree’ old days has thus left him unable to map the reconfigured social mechanism in a more comprehensive way.

Agamben has a rather narrow understanding of governance and surveillance and appears unable to discern between good governance and bad governance. His signature animosity towards governance leads to his assertion that governments are intentionally ‘inventing’ this crisis and spreading ‘a state of panic’ to limit people’s freedom. At the time of writing (July 2020), Wuhan has already been reopened; however, the severity of the crisis should not be underestimated, as lately new cases have been reported in some other Chinese cities such as Beijing, Dalian, and Urumqi, causing a new wave of panic among many Chinese people. And globally confirmed cases have already exceeded 17 million, with over 673,000 fatalities. Indignant over Agamben’s attitude, Žižek points out that ‘Agamben’s reaction is just the extreme form of a widespread Leftist stance of reading the “exaggerated panic”’ (Žižek 2020, 75–76). Similarly, Jean-Luc Nancy has recalled that Agamben opposed his heart transplant about 30 years ago, and that if he had followed Agamben’s advice, he would have died (Nancy 2020). Agamben’s dogmatic interpretation of Foucault’s theoretical formulation of surveillance, which aims to produce more docile, productive, and efficient ‘bodies’, impeded a more rational and balanced attitude towards government efforts to contain the viral outbreak. Some measures that have been adopted to contain Covid-19 go against Foucault’s conception of surveillance, as they both reduce people’s productivity and disrupt the normal social order, as seen

in the numerous protests and demonstrations throughout the world. As we know, '[g]overnance has always been dependent upon technology, in the broadest sense of knowledge, skills, techniques and epistemological strategies, as well as devices, hardware, software and power circuits' (Coleman 2008, 4). By taking advantage of the devices, strategies, and new modes of coordination made possible by the digital age, governance and 'surveillance' can follow the politics of life, which seeks to promote the health, well-being, and preservation of people. However, they can also serve a politics of death, which seeks the limitation, exploitation, and destruction of people. Thus, Agamben's vocabulary should be updated and enriched to map, to interpret, and to reflect upon altered social realities.

There is no turning back, and the 'New Normal' is our only choice. Digital technology has reordered our ways of managing life, and the altered social reality invites new modes of governance, the signs of which can be seen in Wuhan's response to Covid-19. To date, 87,956 confirmed cases and 4666 related deaths have been reported in China. The total number of confirmed cases in Wuhan is 50,340, with 3869 fatalities. However, other countries have fared worse, as can be seen in, for example, India, Brazil, and the United States.¹ The world is now 'a community of shared fate' and 'the more our world is connected, the more a local disaster can trigger global fear and eventually a catastrophe' (Žižek 2020, 55). With the expansion of cities, the decline of forests, and the irreversible trend of globalization, people are at greater risk of 'infection' from others, although this does increase the opportunities for the ICT market in order to preserve people's lives and health. The reorganization of life is inevitable in the digital age, and our task is to imagine the 'New Normal'. Although nobody can yet be sure about its exact form, structure, and mechanism, it will undoubtedly make full use of digital connectivity, new modes of governance, and global coordination, with the politics of life as its guiding principle.

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