

**FOCUS: CONFRONTING THE COVID-19
EPIDEMIC AND CONTROL:
REPORTS AND REFLECTIONS
FROM CHINA**

Introduction

Confronting the Covid-19 Epidemic and Control: Reports and Reflections from China

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Early in 2020, while we were preparing for the Chinese lunar calendar's New Year's Day and Spring Festival on 25 January, the Covid-19 first appeared in Wuhan, the capital city of Hubei Province and one of China's biggest cities. The virus quickly spread through the entire country, causing thousands of people to lose their lives and many more to be hospitalized or quarantined. As a natural disaster suddenly appearing in the present world, the virus is a kind of revenge of nature upon human beings, who have exhausted the earth's natural resources, ill-treated nature, and sometimes continued eating wild animals during the past few decades, as the grand project of modernity led to a process of globalization. The Butterfly Effect of this Black Swan, the coronavirus, set off a global upheaval. In China itself, through the joint efforts of ordinary people and medical personnel as well as central and local government intervention, the virus was effectively contained. Cases imported from abroad still flare up now and again though, and the epidemic escalates globally. Since this is a global health emergency, it should be contained by global governance.

At the time of writing this introductory article, altogether 90,351 people had been infected with Covid-19 in China. Of these, 84,948 were declared cured after hospitalization. Unfortunately, 4728 patients lost their lives.¹ The United States, which is almost as big as China but with a much smaller population, has fared much worse. Even worse is that the virus has become epidemic in almost all parts of the world. The total number of infections worldwide stood at over 25 million by the end of August 2020. However, by then, many had already recovered.

1. For the most up-to-date statistics about the epidemic in present-day China, see https://voice.baidu.com/act/newpneumonia/newpneumonia/?from=osari_aladin_banner (accessed on 30 August 2020).

Reflecting on the origin and spread of the global health crisis caused by Covid-19, this *European Review Focus* aims to share with colleagues abroad some lessons and experiences drawn from Chinese practice. Four Chinese humanities scholars, from Beijing, Shanghai, Wuhan and Chongqing, four of China's biggest cities hit to varying degrees by Covid-19, report on how the epidemic affected their cities. Wuhan was most severely hit, but by August 2020 the lockdown was lifted and people were free to travel again. Shanghai and Chongqing, two of China's four most populous cities, from the very beginning took severe measures to effectively contain the epidemic. Beijing, China's capital and political and cultural centre, witnessed several hundred newly emerging cases after over 50 days without a single case. Still, the city managed to suppress the epidemic within a short period. How did China, such a big country with the biggest population in the world, succeed in containing Covid-19 so effectively?

Weihua He reports how the coronavirus suddenly appeared in Wuhan before the Spring Festival and spread far and wide in the entire province and then the country. He discusses how the virus was first overlooked and how it was contained through such measures as lockdown, coordination, management and governance at different levels, and how peace, vitality, and prosperity were restored in the city. He also critiques Giorgio Agamben's suggestion that the epidemic was somehow 'invented' by the government to limit the freedom of citizens. In order to protect people's lives, it is sometimes necessary to adopt severe or even 'violent' measures. Faced with imminent danger and death, people understand this.

Ye, Yang and Sun describe how the coronavirus was effectively contained in Shanghai, the city with the largest population in China and a unique cosmopolitan culture. When Wuhan was hit, people worried whether Shanghai would become 'the next Wuhan', as Shanghai is more open to the outside world than Wuhan, and has a much higher population density. However, Shanghai has weathered things very well, with all companies having returned to work, all government institutions and agencies continuing operating since early February, and school having started up earlier than all big Chinese cities mentioned earlier. Thus, the former mayor of Shanghai, Ying Yong, was appointed Party Secretary in Hubei, the very top leader of the province, at the most critical moment of the Covid-19 epidemic. What is more, the 23rd Shanghai International Film Festival was held from 25 July to 2 August with over 160,000 attendees. Immediately after that event, the 10th Beijing International Film Festival was held from 22 to 29 August 2020.

Zou Li, whose hometown is Chongqing, China's biggest municipality when it comes to territorial expanse, focuses on the function of the mass media. As the mouthpiece of the Party and government of Chongqing, the *Chongqing Daily* played a unique role in the local fight against the Covid-19 epidemic. It not only reported in good time on the situation in Chongqing, but also featured articles lauding the timely fight of the medical personnel against the epidemic, which played an important role in encouraging people in their own fight against the virus. This is why the central and local governments in China attach great importance to the leading role of the media.

Liming, discussing the pandemic in Beijing, tries to analyse the so-called ‘co-presence of the biopower and the sovereignty’ which to her ‘has never been as crystalized and intensified as it is now’. Obviously, as human beings, we always maintain our sovereignty, not only that of a country, but also that of an individual. But in such a critical period as that of the coronavirus epidemic, taking some strict measures to contain its spread is all the more necessary. This is perhaps the function of ‘biopolitics’. Unfortunately, just as quarantine was lifted across the country and people were jubilantly preparing for the Dragon Boat Festival (25 June), there was a new outbreak at Beijing’s Xinfadi seafood wholesale market in Fengtai District. This situation is entirely local, and only parts of Beijing were affected since the city is so big, and most of the previous cases had been imported from abroad. Therefore, the local government immediately took decisive measures to impose nucleic acid testing of the relevant personnel as well as many more people in the nearby areas. This brought the outbreak under control, leaving the city’s population once again free to travel at will. When the health and lives of the many are threatened, it may be necessary to take severe measures that may even curb human sovereignty.

The most significant symbol of China having early on achieved at least a partial victory in the fight against the epidemic is that the country’s ‘two top conferences’ were held in Beijing in late May 2020.²

The efforts of one government and one people alone cannot effectively contain a pandemic affecting people of all countries on the globe. The most effective way would be to adopt global governance measures to control the spread of the epidemic. Since we all live in the same global village, in a sense we all belong to a ‘community’ with a common destiny, and in which we all share some common interests, but also the effects of common disasters. Never should one side gloat while the other is in trouble. Thus, we should not blame other countries for the outbreak and spread of an epidemic in our country. It is obviously an irresponsible attitude to make unrealistic claims on other countries at every turn. At the same time, this sort of claim lacks basic scientific data to support it. As a country deeply affected by the new coronavirus, China cannot but reject such claims as a matter of course, but it also cannot rule out continuing to provide necessary help and support to the victims in other countries.

At the same time, and starting from China’s battle with Covid-19, as Chinese humanities scholars we cannot avoid reflecting on why in the past few decades so many natural disasters have hit humanity. Each author of this Focus will do so from her or his perspective. I will start off with some reflections of my own.

First of all, we should readjust the relationship between man and nature. For the longest time, as human beings, we have striven to bend nature to serve mankind in

2. The Third Session of the 13th National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) opened on 21 May and concluded on 27 May, shorter than usual. The third session of the 13th National People’s Congress was held in Beijing on 22 May, and concluded on 28 May, shorter than usual as well. These two significant events are viewed as the ‘two top conferences’ in China, especially the latter, which must review and approve the report delivered by the premier on the work of the government and approve the relevant laws.

the best possible way. When this cannot be realized, we sacrifice nature to satisfy our desires. Such a 'people-oriented' attitude is understandable when we try to modernize our countries. Still, by and by, a sort of anthropocentrism has come to dominate. The post-human theorist Cary Wolfe points out that recently human beings have come to occupy a new position in the universe. Technical innovations have pre-empted many of the functions traditionally exercised by human beings. Consequently, human beings have become 'nonhuman subjects' in a place they share with other 'subjects' (Wolfe 2009, 47). Sooner or later, the overuse of natural resources and the ill-treatment it has served upon nature will turn against mankind. The realization of this should encourage us to adopt a perspective of global environmental ethics.

The natural disasters succeeding one another in the past few years – earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, typhoons, floods, droughts, tsunamis, repeated giant forest fires – suggest that the capacity of the earth to be exploited by mankind has reached its limit. The Earth, in the guise of nature, is revenging itself upon mankind, killing innumerable people. The impact of SARS over 17 years ago in certain countries, especially in China, already overshadowed the continuity of mankind. The Indian Ocean tsunami only a few years later was another warning. The current Covid-19 epidemic is perhaps the most serious punishment to date inflicted by nature on mankind.

The severe earthquakes in China's Wenchuan area in 2008 likewise served as a warning that it is absolutely necessary to treat nature well, or suffer the consequences in years to come. We should cherish not only our own lives, but also those of our offspring. It is our responsibility to take care of nature and our living environment so that we leave behind a beautiful and comfortable environment for the next generations. As humanities scholars, we should speak up for protecting nature and our living environment and build up some sort of environmental ethics. This ethical view holds that man and nature should always be in harmony with one another, for man was originally part of nature. Human beings need to develop themselves, but should not do so at the expense of sacrificing nature and the natural environment (Wang 2009). Guided by such new global environmental ethics, humans should treat nature as an equal, looking upon the natural environment as our friend and neighbour, respecting its rules. This means that human beings should develop themselves without destroying the natural environment so as to reach a harmonious relationship with nature.

Second, we should also readjust our relationship with animals, as neighbours and friends to humans. As Mario Ortiz Robles puts it, '[E]veryone knows that animals frequently appear in literature and that literature, from its inception, has used animals in a variety of imaginative and figural registers' (Robles 2017, 303). In some parts of China, people like very much to eat wild animals. There is no denying that some wild animals have a great nourishing effect and that their meat is delicious, giving people enjoyment. But some animals, such as rats, pangolins, bats and so on, carry and spread different viruses, which can be fatal to humans. Moreover, over-consumption of such animal meat, or of animal viscera in general, can not only cause human diseases, such as avian and swine flu, which have been circulating for

decades, but also lead to the disruption of the biological chain. This is a consequence of hyperinflated anthropocentrism: it is all about satisfying human desires regardless of the laws of nature. From an anti-anthropocentric point of view, we should not eat wild animals, but protect them at all costs so that the natural biological chain is maintained. Derrida, in deconstructing the anthropocentric sense, recognizes that man too is also an animal species, and that animals, as creatures on Earth, are somehow also human, and trying to communicate with humans (Derrida 2008). When taking a bath he found a cat looking at his body. This led him to the above insight. But 'he did not become curious about what the cat might actually be doing, feeling, thinking, or perhaps making available to him in looking back at him that morning' (Haraway 2008). This is perhaps the difference between humans and animals. We should realize that we are doing this simply for the sake of our own survival and reproduction. If we treat nature and animals as our equals, we can maintain a harmonious relationship between man and nature and other animals without being constantly harmed by them. Everything in nature, human or animal, lives in a vast, 'imaginary community', sharing vital interests and a common future. This should be one of the lessons we draw from the worldwide spread of this new coronavirus.

Third, as university teachers of the humanities, we have to adjust our teaching and research to 'post-epidemic times'. In this we are no different from all other people. The temporary closure of restaurants forces people to cook at home or order takeout food; the closure of tourist attractions and the isolation of communities lead people who like to travel and go sightseeing to stay at home and enjoy beautiful landscapes on TV or on the internet; real-life visits and gatherings are replaced by internet exchanges; teachers have to master network technology and online teaching so that the normal teaching work can be kept up by different means. All these have completely disrupted our existing work and life order, and we have to try to adapt to the new situation.

Faced with these phenomena, some anti-globalists argue that since globalization causes the spread of disease, a strategy of de- or anti-globalization should be adopted. For me, the implementation of similar contingency measures around the world is a manifestation of the power of globalization in another way: global connectivity and big data management. In this regard, the internet plays a vital role. So what steps should we as humanities teachers and researchers take to meet the new challenges in this changed context? This is what I touch upon in concluding this introductory article.

First, the global spread of the new coronavirus has forced us to change from physical teaching to online teaching, including online graduate thesis defences. To some extent, this model will continue in the 'post-epidemic era'. This puts high demands on our teachers. Humanities teachers, in particular, who adhere to traditional ways of teaching and do not like, or even resist, high-tech teaching methods, in many cases are still used to walking into the classroom with a textbook and a piece of chalk in hand, and to interpret classical philosophical and literary works through face-to-face lectures and live improvisation. Indeed, it is often a delight for students to listen to these learned professors, gaining direct theoretical and aesthetic lessons from their facial expressions and the cadence of their voices. You cannot get that experience

on the internet. But this also means that professors have to master the technology of computer and network operation. They may have to take into consideration possible technical glitches, interrupting their thinking and interaction with the students. In order to successfully use online or video teaching, we have to prepare our lessons more carefully; revising, updating and refining our lecture sheets with care. After completing an online class or a lecture, I am surprised to find that, because of my careful preparation, I almost have the draft of an academic paper. With only a few further touches to the text and verification of citations and references, I can send a paper based on my lectures out for publication. Academics reluctant to cope with the change, on the other hand, may discover after the outbreak that they have accomplished nothing after months of working at home. This shows once again that success lies in hard work and that opportunities always come to those who are fully prepared.

Second, the spread of the epidemic has led us to cancel large-scale ‘academic conferences’ and forums in favour of video conferencing and online discussions. This has not only saved a large amount of funds, manpower and material resources; it also enables more young scholars – who are unable to attend international conferences due to busy teaching and limited funding – to meet, albeit virtually, the academic masters. Simultaneously, we save travelling time and so find time to read books that, before, we could not because of tight schedules, and also find time to complete our research projects and submit the results by the deadlines set. In addition, we find the time and, via the internet, also the means to read the latest papers published in academic journals, and so enrich our future teaching and research.

Moreover, because of the spread of the epidemic, graduate tutorial work in the humanities has also been affected. Graduate supervisors in the humanities often direct students through regular meetings and discussions, and the spread of the epidemic has disrupted the traditional ‘face-to-face’ style of mentoring. Instead, email, WeChat and telephone exchanges now steer the guidance of the dissertation. This undoubtedly poses a new challenge to the graduate advisor. I do not use WeChat myself, but I always ask students to send me their first draft by email so that after reading it I can revise it carefully, and then send the revised paper to the students along with my suggestions. This by no means delays the work of thesis guidance, but allows students to revise the thesis by following the supervisors’ remarks, and so finally reach the level of defence or publication.

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