

The Pandemic that Wasn't: Brief Notes on the Special Issue of The China Review

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The Chinese philosopher Zhao Tingyang recently said somewhere that historical events may each have a purpose, but history is never teleological. This rare insight is eminently applicable in times of historic pandemic, as we experience and strive to make sense of it. As a native of Wuhan, it is an honor and—to my mind—a mandate to serve as the guest editor of this special issue of *The China Review*. I have found every piece of writing on COVID-19 in the two special issues to be personally relevant, with the act of reading often leading to boundless thinking. The extraordinariness of the ongoing pandemic lies in its unexpectedness. Having witnessed the unexpected origin and ongoing development of the pandemic and pondered its implications for the future, our hope is, as Slavoj Žižek wrote in the early days of the global health crisis, that “even horrible events can have unpredictable positive consequences.”¹

In the early days of the outbreak, many thought the COVID-19 pandemic would be the Chernobyl moment for the Chinese Communist Party. It wasn't. After a brief period of initial confusion and chaos, the historic lockdown of Wuhan, the creation of a national tracing and isolation apparatus, the construction of giant field hospitals, the fast-track development of effective vaccinations, proved the efficiency and high capacity of the party-state bureaucracy, long considered in decay by some Western observers.

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The penetrative capability of the country's grassroots community organizations played an important role in maintaining order. Both the old-style *danwei* system and the fancier property owners' associations enforced public health measures and provided public services to those in need. The newly reformed neighborhood management networks—from *shequ* (社區) to *wangge yuan* (網格員)—passed difficult tests and showed their capacity to govern. Wuhan was the first place in the world to be identified as having COVID-19, but it will be one of the safest places to visit as this issue goes to print. In 2021, China is returning to normal as India undergoes waves of new cases due to variants of the SARS-Cov-2 pathogen.

The unexpectedness of the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications invites scholars to conduct innovative research and report thought-provoking findings. The four articles in this special issue all speak to a large audience and a wide range of literature across social science disciplines.

Jerdén, Rühlig, Seaman, and Turcsányi analyze commonalities and variations in China's public diplomacy during the first wave of the COVID-19 crisis in the first half of 2020. The authors look at the style of Chinese public diplomacy in 10 European Union countries and the level of friendliness in the locals' concept of China's efforts to curb the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors find that the more confrontational China's public diplomacy, the less likely it was that public opinion in a country would be positive toward China. In the only outlier case, the Czech Republic, bilateral tension played a more decisive role in shaping China-related public opinion during the crisis.

Šebeňa and Turcsányi illustrate how the coronavirus pandemic has escalated polarization in Czech politics. China has become a symbol of the major fault lines. The authors demonstrate how the image of China in a faraway country is shaped to a large extent by domestic dynamics, rather than by China itself.

Johnston writes on the power of China's newly founded "electronic World Trade Platform" (eWTP) for both commerce and aid purposes. The pandemic has provided an important opportunity for the platform to test its present and future capacity to fulfil commercial and regulatory agendas. Its long-term net impact remains unclear.

Su, Su and Zhou explore the impact of the pandemic on Chinese people's trust and confidence in their local governments. Their survey data were gathered during the pandemic, and the authors find that the effective implementation of public health measures, official propaganda, and public expectations have all contributed to the public's increased

confidence in China's government at the local level.

Can scholars know the "purpose" of a pandemic? Maybe not, but the four articles in this special issue offer an illustrative examination of this historic event. They provide real-time, innovative analysis of the unexpected implications of the COVID-19 pandemic in China. They open new lines of enquiry and take scholars in new directions. I invite the readers of this special issue to join the social scientific exploration of this historic pandemic, which is casting new light on the understanding of contemporary China and the Chinese state. Setting aside differences in perspectives, frameworks, ideologies and arguments, we can agree that post-pandemic China will surely be an interesting field of social science research.

Note

- 1 Slavoj Žižek, "My Dream of Wuhan," <https://www.welt.de/kultur/article/205630967/Slavoj-Zizek-My-Dream-of-Wuhan.html>.

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