

## Perspectives

# COVID-19 and taking a principled stance



**Yun Jiang**

*Yun Jiang is a director at the China Policy Centre, an editor of the China Story blog, and a researcher at the Australian National University.*

Many people (myself included) who had been paying attention to what was happening in Wuhan in January this year were highly critical of the People's Republic of China (PRC) government's initial handling of the COVID-19 outbreak. And rightly so – the authorities suppressed information and downplayed the severity of the situation at the crucial early stage. The most prominent example of this was the authorities' silencing of Wuhan doctors in late December, including Dr Li Wenliang who this year succumbed to the virus. So it was disheartening to see similar responses being repeated in other countries in February and March, as the outbreak spread globally.

Yet these similar responses by other countries are reported differently. The COVID-19 pandemic provides clear examples of double standards when it comes to judging PRC government actions and those of other governments as the virus subsequently spread beyond PRC borders. Western narratives about the PRC's response to the virus are vastly different from those about Western governments' responses despite many points of similarity.

Three examples in particular are discussed below: attempts to suppress information related to the virus outbreak, the promotion of conspiracy theories, and the trade of medical supplies.

### **Suppression of information: a 'communist problem'?**

When the outbreak was at its height in China, much ink was spilled over the role the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) played. Some commentators suggested that democracies would have acted differently and therefore could have prevented such an outbreak. For those that see themselves as involved in an ideological battle with Beijing, COVID-19 was [held up](#) as proof that the democratic system of governance was superior.

But as other countries also saw rising infection figures, some governments showed a similar willingness to suppress information. The United States, for example, removed US Navy Captain Brett Crozier from his position after he wrote a memo to navy leaders expressing concern for the health of crew members aboard his coronavirus-stricken ship. The acting Secretary of Navy's decision to remove the captain was [supported publicly](#) by the Secretary of Defence and the President. Over in the United Kingdom, healthcare professionals were [threatened with disciplinary action](#) for speaking to the media about a lack of personal protective equipment.

But unlike the PRC's missteps, these incidents were not portrayed as an issue of ideology or a problem to do with the system of governance. Nor were other actions such as the US government's [downplaying of COVID-19](#) in February, the UK's [brush with 'herd immunity'](#) or the [strategy](#) favoured by Sweden which resulted in a high death toll. If the PRC had done the same, however, it is not hard to imagine what the reaction would be.

## Promotion of conspiracies and disinformation

The PRC has been rightly condemned for spreading disinformation on the origin of COVID-19. Among some of the most grievous instances are the [suggestion](#) by a [spokesperson](#) for the PRC's Ministry of Foreign Affairs that the virus originated in the US, and quiet [state support](#) for the wide dissemination of a theory that the virus is a US weapon.

Similarly, US officials have also spread conspiracy theories on COVID-19. Most prominent is a claim by the [Secretary of State](#) that the virus originated in a Wuhan lab, contradicting US intelligence and most scientific evidence. A dossier purportedly reflecting Five Eyes intelligence supporting the theory was published by News Corp in Australia, but this was later [denied](#) by Australian intelligence.

A [report](#) by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) on COVID-19 disinformation noted: 'A range of actors are manipulating the information environment to exploit the COVID-19 crisis for strategic gain'. Both China and the US' spread of conspiracy theories are examples of disinformation. Yet ASPI's report on disinformation only examined case studies on China (and to a lesser extent, Russia). 'Disinformation' is rarely a term used for the US, but rather the term 'fake news' is more often used, suggesting a more benign intention than 'disinformation'.

## 'Hoarding' medical supplies

During the height of the pandemic in the PRC at the beginning of this year, it imported medical supplies from countries around the world. These goods were obtained through both official and unofficial channels. For example, individuals based overseas with relatives in mainland China, as well as Chinese companies, organised shipments of medical supplies. Those efforts were publicised on Chinese and diasporic media but did not receive much attention in the mainstream Western media at the time.

But as COVID-19 intensified globally, the shipping of these medical supplies earlier in the year suddenly became suspicious. For example, [a Nine/Fairfax article](#) on March 26 interviewed a 'whistleblower' who detailed how a Chinese property development company was shipping medical supplies to China in January and February.

Other commentary emerged (including from [the US government](#)), accusing the PRC of 'hoarding' medical supplies in January. The actions of PRC companies and the mainland Chinese diaspora were portrayed as, at best, selfish; at worst, sinister. Stories began to circulate of masks that were donated from Italy to China that were then re-exported to Italy for profit, with the [originating source](#) being a 'senior Trump Administration official', who in the same interview blamed China for the delay in US response. No Italian source confirmed this story.

Yet when the US was purchasing essential medical supplies from overseas, including ['hijacking' masks originally destined for Germany](#), there was no insinuation of sinister intent. Companies or individuals that helped the United States import medical supplies were not cast in a suspicious light as those assisting the PRC were. The US measure to [block the exports of 3M masks](#) under their Defence Production Act did not raise much public discussion about the implications for global supply chains, as an export ban from China would.

## Different responses

The above serves to highlight the different prisms used to interpret actions cast from the same mould. When the PRC and the US governments take similar actions, such as suppression of information or purchasing medical supplies, sinister intentions are often imputed to the PRC. The interpretation allotted to the US, on the other hand, is the incompetence of the Trump administration or individual officials, or that the US government is simply looking out for itself with America First, but usually not malice.

Of course, the US and China are very different countries. Most prominent differences are the freedom of press, a viable and active opposition, and the checks and balances inherent in the US system. These characteristics go a long way to ensure the US government has some degree of accountability that is mostly absent in the

PRC system. They help in preventing the more egregious behaviours that we see from the PRC government. These ought to be strongly condemned, especially the mass internment of Uighurs in Xinjiang, the continuing oppression and prosecution of dissidents within its border and overseas, and ever-increasing censorship of journalists and academics.

But we should strive to uphold principles equally across the board. This means criticising the US for actions that we have also criticised China for. This is neither a pro-China nor a pro-US stance, but a pro-principles stance.

### **Author**

Yun Jiang is a director at the China Policy Centre, an editor of the *China Story* blog and a researcher at the Australian National University.

Prior to this, she has worked for the Australian Public Service for eight years, including the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, the Department of Defence, and Treasury. Her research interests include geoeconomics, cross-cutting issues on China, Australia-China relations, and Chinese-Australians. Yun holds a Master of Public Policy and Master of Diplomacy from the Australian National University (ANU). She speaks Mandarin.