

# China coronavirus outbreak means the world is once again gripped by the six-year pandemic panic syndrome

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[scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3047569/china-coronavirus-outbreak-means-world-once-again-](https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3047569/china-coronavirus-outbreak-means-world-once-again-)

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As Chinese officials and health experts warn the virus could mutate and spread further, there have been growing concerns that the Chinese government attempted to cover up the severity and scale of the epidemic as it did during the Sars outbreak, amid widespread scepticism about its commitment to transparency.

While those concerns are understandable, it looks very unlikely this time around because of the high-profile measures the Chinese government has initiated to curb the spread of the disease since January 20, which appeared to be a watershed moment.

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Official reactions towards the disease before and after January 20 reveal a significant shift. This has raised questions about whether local officials in Wuhan and even some national health officials deliberately tried to play down the severity of the disease at its early stages, or whether the initial attempt at covering it up lowered the guard of medical professionals and helped the virus to spread. It also sheds light on how the Chinese bureaucracy and media handle a crisis at a time when the Chinese leadership is tightening controls at almost all levels of the society.

Furthermore, the latest outbreak highlights the urgent need for the Chinese government to consider more effective measures to dissuade some of its citizens from eating exotic animals, or even ban the sale of such animals, which are again suspected of transmitting the latest coronavirus to humans, just like in the Sars outbreak.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/CfclHUdOI8w>

According to Chinese media reports, the first cases of the pneumonia which were later proved to be caused by coronavirus started to show up in mid December at a Wuhan seafood wet market which also had stalls for exotic animals.

The seafood market was shut down on January 1 after the National Health Commission sent a team of experts and officials to investigate, and on January 8, their preliminary findings concluded the pathogen of the mysterious disease was a new coronavirus.

Even though local and national health officials claimed they started to release information on a regular interval starting from December 31 about the confirmed and suspected cases of pneumonia, they seemed to be very selective in information dissemination and tried to play down the possibility of human to human transmission.

### China coronavirus: what you need to know

6 Feb 2020

For instance, local officials failed to promptly disclose the critical information that one patient going through neurosurgery at a local hospital had infected one doctor and 13 nurses with pneumonia. They were forced to confirm the case only after Zhong Nanshan, one of China's top respiratory disease specialists, disclosed it in a television interview on January 20.



In fact, local officials initially tried hard to suppress online discussions about the disease by having the police track down and admonish eight so-called lawbreakers for posting unreliable information online and warning others not to believe in rumours or spread them.



Even amid growing signs that the new virus could be highly contagious, Wuhan officials continued to show everything was normal by allowing a local tradition to go ahead on January 18, with people from nearly 40,000 households bringing dishes to eat together in crowded public areas.



An ambulance is seen outside the Wuhan Medical Treatment Center after a coronavirus outbreak in the city. Photo: AFP

On January 19, national health officials were quoted by state media as saying the disease could be controlled and prevented even though they admitted they had not determined the source of the virus and how the disease was transmitted from human to human.

But the normalcy was shattered one day later when President Xi Jinping

called for effective measures to resolutely contain the momentum of the spreading disease, saying on state media that people's lives and their health should be treated as a top priority.

By the time Xi's strongly-worded instructions were made public, the confirmed cases had already jumped from several dozen mainly in Wuhan to over 200 in several more Chinese municipalities and provinces, with Japan, South Korea and Thailand also

reporting their first confirmed cases.

## How coronavirus outbreak in 'China's thoroughfare' could hit economy

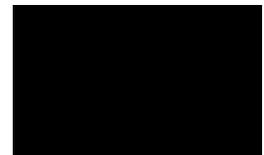
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Since then, the country's massive bureaucracy has shifted into gear by announcing a slew of measures including the setting up a joint prevention and control task force involving 32 departments, and a sudden and drastic increase of coverage on state media. Authorities have been quick to share information with the World Health Organisation and the foreign countries where the confirmed or suspected cases are reported.

The city of Wuhan, with a population of 10 million, cancelled public events and installed temperature screening equipment at transport hubs before shutting down transport networks on Thursday, blocking residents from leaving and visitors from arriving in the city.

For those people who went through the Sars outbreak, the Chinese government's response this time should be considered as progress, given that it took them less than a month to be upfront and forthright about this crisis.





An almost deserted motorway is seen in Wuhan in central China's Hubei Province, after officials cut off access to the city. Photo: AP

About 17 years ago, the first known Sars case occurred in Guangdong in November 2002 but officials concealed the information from the public until February 2003 and the government did not come fully clean about the epidemic until April 20, when the health minister and the mayor of Beijing at the time were sacked. The government later apologised for its handling and slow reporting of the outbreak and promised to improve its national emergency response.

On Wednesday, in the first public press briefing on the current crisis, officials and experts from the National Health Commission denied they or local authorities had been slow in reporting the information, saying they had acted promptly to release relevant information but that it took time to realise the severity of the disease.

Still, the flurry of activity over the past few days has made the official reaction before January 20 very telling indeed.

### Wuhan coronavirus: a visual explainer

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Despite the hard lessons from 17 years ago, the initial slow response by Wuhan officials should not come as a surprise as the propensity to play down or cover up a disaster is deeply entrenched, particularly at a time when any disruption of the Lunar New Year celebrations, China's most important holiday, could cause serious repercussions for their careers.

Ironically, the Chinese leadership's keen efforts to push for accountability from bureaucrats and promise stiffer punishment for those who shirk responsibilities have contributed to their propensity to cover up disasters.

The latest example is from Tuesday, when Xinhua reported that the neighbouring Hunan province had punished 29 local officials for covering up a blast at a fireworks factory last month which killed 13 workers and injured another 13.



China's credibility and the legitimacy of the government are again on the line.

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More importantly, as Xi has consolidated his power and urged other officials to conform completely to the party leadership, this has also strengthened a tendency to avoid making any important decisions and instead wait for specific instructions from the party leadership.

The tighter control of the media means that journalists have been discouraged from undertaking any investigative journalism and instead toe the party line, making it difficult for any dissenting opinions to be heard.

There is no doubt that Xi's instructions will greatly speed up China's comprehensive and robust response to the crisis and that should be welcomed. Acting promptly and decisively and boosting transparency are paramount as China's credibility and the legitimacy of the government are again on the line.