

Three things the Chinese government tried to hide during the novel coronavirus outbreak

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FROM OUR OBSESSION

Because China



Even small changes in China have global effects.


China [has been praised by the WHO](#) for being transparent and collaborative in taking on the outbreak of the novel coronavirus in Wuhan. They've been sharing information about the disease, now known as Covid-19, with the international community since late December when Wuhan reported the first cluster of patients carrying an unknown pneumonia virus. Chinese scientists figured out the genetic sequence of the new virus on Jan. 12, less than two weeks into the research.

The everyday people of China, however, [didn't know any of this](#). Inside China, government officials downplayed the severity of the virus and tightly controlled information related to it including its ability to transmit from person to person, the number of people infected, and the circumstances around the death of [Dr. Li Wenliang](#), a whistleblower.

Here's how the coronavirus narrative pushed by Chinese authorities changed during the outbreak:

Dec. 31, 2019

NUMBER OF INFECTIONS AND DEATHS

 A doctor, Li Wenliang, tells his friends on Wechat that there were seven cases of SARS-like pneumonia in the hospital he worked at.

Dr. Li's message is one of the first acknowledgements by a healthcare worker of the coronavirus.

NUMBER OF INFECTIONS AND DEATHS

 Wuhan Health Commission public bulletin

27 cases identified

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The first acknowledgement of the virus by the Wuhan government indicated there were a few dozen people with an “unknown pneumonia.”

Jan. 3, 2020

NUMBER OF INFECTIONS AND DEATHS

 Wuhan Health Commission public bulletin

44 cases of unknown pneumonia identified

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HUMAN-TO-HUMAN TRANSMISSION

 A [warning letter](#) issued by the Wuhan police to Dr. Li.

You're warned and reprimanded for your illegal activity of publishing false information online.

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Instead of acting to contain the spread of the virus, the Wuhan government moved to stop the spread of information. Eight doctors were reprimanded by the local police for spreading “rumors” online.

Jan. 11

HUMAN-TO-HUMAN TRANSMISSION

CT scan of Li Wenliang confirmed that both of his lungs were infected.

Knowing that Dr. Li had contracted the virus should have indicated to officials that the virus was likely to be transmitted person-to-person, rather than just animal-to-human.

HUMAN-TO-HUMAN TRANSMISSION

 Wuhan Health Commission public bulletin

So far no infection found among medical staff, no proof of human-to-human transmission.

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Despite Dr. Li's scan, and other cases of infected doctors, the Wuhan Health Commission maintained that the virus had "no proof of human-to-human transmission."

NUMBER OF INFECTIONS AND DEATHS



Wuhan Health Commission public bulletin

We've identified 41 confirmed cases of coronavirus and one death. No new cases discovered since Jan. 3, 2020.

[Show original in Chinese](#)

In the same bulletin, authorities identify the unknown pneumonia as a new type of coronavirus. They claim that in the eight days since their first statement, they have seen no new cases, but say one person has been killed by the virus. The total confirmed cases drops after some cases were deemed false positives.

Jan. 14

HUMAN-TO-HUMAN TRANSMISSION



Wuhan Health Commission public bulletin

We have not found proof for human-to-human transmission. The possibility of limited human-to-human transmission cannot be excluded, but the risk of sustained transmission is low.

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The local government's message starts to change. It acknowledges that it is possible that the virus can be transmitted from person-to-person. At the same time, it says the risk of that is low.

Jan. 16

NUMBER OF INFECTIONS AND DEATHS


 Wuhan Health Commission's public bulletin

We have confirmed 41 cases of novel coronavirus in Wuhan, and two deaths.

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The local authorities say there were no new cases confirmed between Jan. 3 and Jan. 16.

NUMBER OF INFECTIONS AND DEATHS

 Ta kung Pao, a newspaper in Hong Kong, publishes an interview with Guan Yi, director of the State Key Laboratory of Emerging Infectious Diseases at University of Hong Kong

The maximum incubation period for coronavirus is 15 days. Since there were no additional cases found in mainland China since Jan. 3, the epidemic should be under control. The public can be assured for a good new year holiday.

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The official figures painted an optimistic picture that the epidemic was under control.

Jan. 17

 US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) press briefing on the novel coronavirus

Beginning today CDC will be screening passengers on direct and connecting flights from Wuhan... Regarding exit screening in Wuhan, to the best of our knowledge, it is not ongoing at this time.

While authorities in China played down the epidemic and allowed travel to continue as usual, the international community took action to prevent the spread of the virus.

Jan. 18

NUMBER OF INFECTIONS AND DEATHS

 Wuhan Health Commission public bulletin

We confirmed 45 cases of coronavirus in Wuhan, and two deaths.

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Jan. 19

NUMBER OF INFECTIONS AND DEATHS

 Wuhan Health Commission's public bulletin

198 confirmed cases of coronavirus in Wuhan, three deaths.

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In statements on consecutive days, officials announce that the number of confirmed cases is on the rise again, more than quadrupling from the first statement to the second.

HUMAN-TO-HUMAN TRANSMISSION

 Press conference with Wu Gang, the director of Wuhan CDC

According to preliminary findings, the virus is not very infectious. The possibility of limited human-to-human transmission cannot be


excluded, but the risk of sustained transmission is low.

[Show original in Chinese](#)

Local authorities finally stop saying that there is “no proof” of the virus transmitting person-to-person. They still say the risk of it happening is low.

Jan. 20

HUMAN-TO-HUMAN TRANSMISSION

 State television interview with Zhong Nanshan, a top coronavirus expert at China’s national CDC during the outbreak

There’s clear proof for human-to-human transmission in Wuhan.

[Show original in Chinese](#)

This was a turning point in the effort to control the information about the virus. An official of the national government took to state television to warn the public of the outbreak in a way local officials had never done.

Jan. 21

NUMBER OF INFECTIONS AND DEATHS

 China CDC public bulletin

Nationwide we have 291 confirmed cases of the novel coronavirus.

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It had only been two days, but the number of confirmed cases increases by 93.

Jan. 23

 Announcement from Wuhan's special task force combating coronavirus

Starting at 10 am, city buses, subways, ferries and long-haul passenger buses will stop operating. Wuhan citizens without special reasons should not leave the city. Exits from the airport and train stations will be closed temporarily. Time to resume upon further notice.

[Show original in Chinese](#)

China took unprecedented action to quarantine an entire city two days before the lunar new year, a clear signal to the public of the severity of the epidemic. Five million people [had already left Wuhan](#) during the lunar new year transportation rush.

Jan. 27

[HUMAN-TO-HUMAN TRANSMISSION](#)

 State television interview with Zhou Xianwang, the mayor of Wuhan


I hope people could understand [the reasons led to] the delayed information disclosure. There are laws regulating infectious diseases, which have to be disclosed accordingly. As someone in the local government, after obtaining the information, I need to get approval before disclosing it...

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The mayor of Wuhan admits that the information about the virus was intentionally kept from the public and says bureaucracy is to blame for the delay.

Jan. 29


HUMAN-TO-HUMAN TRANSMISSION

 The New England Journal of Medicine, “Early Transmission Dynamics in Wuhan, China, of Novel Coronavirus–Infected Pneumonia”

Among the first 425 patients with confirmed NCIP... reported by January 22, human-to-human transmission among close contacts has occurred since the middle of December and spread out gradually within a month after that.

A paper published in a US medical journal reveals that person-to-person transmission of the virus was occurring in mid-December, well before Dr. Li sent his Wechat.

Feb. 4

 Press conference with Hua Chunying, spokesperson for the foreign ministry of China

China has shared information about the epidemic and related preventive measures 30 times with the US since Jan. 3. The centers for disease prevention and control of the two countries had multiple communications.

[Show original in Chinese](#)

Chinese people were enraged to hear that they were being kept in the dark about the virus even when officials thought the situation was serious enough to have ongoing communication with the US. The foreign ministry later deleted the press release it posted on Weibo.

Feb. 6, 9:30pm Beijing time

[LI WENLIANG'S DEATH](#)

☰ State newspaper tweet reporting Dr. Li's death.

Chinese doctor Li Wenliang, one of the eight whistleblowers in #Wuhan who tried to warn novel #coronavirus outbreak on Dec. 30 but was summoned by local police for “spreading rumor”, dies from coronavirus infection on Thurs night, sparking national grief

This is apparently the time Dr. Li lost his heartbeat. A number of medical professionals announced his death at 9:30pm Beijing time on Weibo.

Feb. 7, 12:25am Beijing time

LI WENLIANG'S DEATH

☰ World Health Organization (WHO) [tweet](#) about Dr. Li's death

We are deeply saddened by the passing of Dr Li Wenliang. We all need to celebrate work that he did on #2019nCoV ...

The WHO perpetuated the report of Dr. Li's death, but later deleted the tweet and said they couldn't confirm he died.

Feb. 7, 12:38am Beijing time

LI WENLIANG'S DEATH

🗨 Weibo post from the hospital where Dr. Li worked

In an effort to combat the novel coronavirus epidemic, our doctor Li Wenliang unfortunately got infected. He's in critical condition. All effort is now put into rescuing him.

[Show original in Chinese](#)

On top of all of the untrustworthy information the government was putting out about the virus, state media was reporting that Dr. Li had died, but the hospital was saying he had not.

Feb. 7, 2:58am Beijing time

LI WENLIANG'S DEATH

🗨 State newspaper tweet reporting Dr. Li's time of death.

We deeply mourn the death of #Wuhan doctor Li wenliang, who unfortunately got infected with novel #Coronavirus while battling the epidemic. After all-effort rescue, Li passed away on 2:58 am, Feb. 7.

The 5.5-hour gap between the first report of his passing and the time of death reported here stirred confusion. Some thought the authorities feared Dr. Li's death

would spark mass grief and anger toward the government. They suspected government officials ordered the hospital to keep trying to rescue Dr. Li when he would have otherwise been announced dead sooner. What really happened is still unknown.

The delayed information disclosure by the government combined with the population migration during the lunar new year caused the virus to spread quickly all over China. By Feb. 13, 1,383 have died from the virus around the world, and all except three took place within mainland China. On the same day, Beijing [replaced the top officials of Wuhan and Hubei province](#) with new party officials to contain the outbreak.

With [canceled conferences](#), [suspended flights](#), and [closed factories](#), the extent of the virus has now raised fears that it could ignite a global economic slow down.