

DAILY COMMENT

CHINA DECLARES VICTORY OVER BOTH THE CORONAVIRUS AND CRITICS OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY AT THE BIGGEST POLITICAL EVENT OF THE YEAR

By Barbara Demick

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President Xi Jinping at the annual Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, where Party leadership congratulated itself for China's coronavirus response. Photograph by Carlos Garcia Rawlins /

Reuters

If there was a moment during the coronavirus crisis when the Chinese Communist Party looked as if it was losing its grip, it came on the night of February 6th, as the ophthalmologist turned whistle-blower Li Wenliang lay dying in a Wuhan hospital. In a small act of bravery that is now legend, Li had warned fellow-doctors in an internal chat group, in late December, of the impending contagion, which earned him a reprimand and a threat of arrest for spreading rumors. Li's death was first reported at 9:30 P.M., but government censors quickly ordered the reports amended to say that he was still undergoing treatment; his death was not confirmed until just before three o'clock the next morning, when most of the country was asleep.

Nevertheless, virtually the entire online population followed Li's death. The hashtag #LiWenliangDies received six hundred and seventy million views. People blamed the government's coverup for what was by then a full-blown epidemic. They demanded free speech. They quoted from the Soviet dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's writings on totalitarianism and lying. They called for the Communist Party to be held accountable.

Of course, this was all happening in cyberspace, because much of the nation was under lockdown. A long-time expat told me she thought that people would have taken to the streets if they had been allowed outside, and others I talked to agreed. Funerals can be politically charged occasions in China; it was a memorial for the former Party leader Hu Yaobang, who was beloved among liberals, that sparked the Tiananmen Square protests, in 1989. This makes it all the more improbable that, within three months, the Chinese government has managed to harness and redirect public opinion to project a unified, triumphalist message about conquering the epidemic.

On Thursday, the Communist Party kicked off its largest political convention of the year, the back-to-back sessions of the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress. Delayed from March, the "two sessions," as the annual event is called, is turning into a self-congratulatory pageant to declare victory over the coronavirus—and over China's many critics and dissenters. An emboldened leadership rolled out a far-reaching national-security plan that would erode the semi-autonomous status of Hong Kong.

An increasingly confident Xi Jinping set the tone earlier in the week, at Monday's virtual meeting of the World Health Assembly, the governing body of the World Health Organization. In his most important speech on the pandemic, Xi batted away the perception that the virus had emerged from his country, describing it as a contagion that caught "the world by surprise." "In China, after making painstaking efforts and enormous sacrifice, we have turned the tide on the

virus and protected the life and health of our people,” Xi said. “All along, we have acted with openness, transparency, and responsibility.”

“Xi Jinping won the propaganda war” is how Yanzhong Huang, a senior fellow for global health at the Council on Foreign Relations, summed up the situation in a recent piece for *Foreign Affairs*. Huang, who has lived in the United States for twenty-six years, has closely followed the oscillations in Chinese public opinion, through friends and family in China. In late January, initial confidence in the government’s assurances that the virus could not be transmitted gave way to worry, and, by early February, people who were usually disinclined to criticize the government were doing so openly. “The health-care system was overwhelmed,” Huang told me. “People couldn’t get tested or admitted to the hospital. They were dying at home or in the streets in some cases. That was a horrible time with a lot of dissatisfaction, and the death of Dr. Li Wenliang galvanized that anger and frustration. It was unbelievable. We thought it was a watershed moment.”

Yet now, when Huang communicates with people in China, he senses their pity. They offer to send masks. A relative urged him to move back to China. “They are, like, ‘Wow, our government is doing a really good job. They were very competent in bringing down the cases. It is much safer in China,’” he said. “It is amazing how dramatically the national opinion can change.” I’ve heard this from other overseas Chinese. Lijia Zhang, a writer who lives in London, told me, “In the beginning, it was a mess. People were thinking this could be Xi Jinping’s downfall. Now they are saying China is in a much better position to deal with a crisis, with its authoritarian system. The West is too chaotic.” The respective failures of the United States, Italy, and the United Kingdom clearly bolstered China’s confidence. But the turnaround couldn’t have happened without an almost textbook propaganda operation, involving coercion, misinformation, and manipulation.

A report prepared for the Communist Party that leaked shortly after Li Wenliang died gives some insight into the panic at the highest echelons of the Chinese government. “A flood-level event,” is how the report, by Womin High-Tech, a consulting firm, described the doctor’s death. As translated by the China Digital Times, a Web site that tracks the Chinese Internet, the report warned:

Web users are taking advantage of this incident to voice their grave dissatisfaction toward certain systems or government officials, whose dereliction of duty led to the outbreak of the epidemic, resulting in great losses for the country and the people. . . .

All types of people both inside and outside of China who are dissatisfied with China's system see this as an opportunity to hype the situation, etc.

The only relief, the report notes, was that street demonstrations were unlikely, because “many places in the country are currently in a first-level response to a major public health emergency; that, along with the high contagion rate of the epidemic, is dissuading people from daring to go out. After all, life supersedes everything else.” The report recommended that the government “affirm Li Wenliang’s contribution to the epidemic prevention” to meet the public’s expectations, and, indeed, Li was later bestowed the title of “martyr,” a Communist Party designation for those who have given their life for the country.

Immediately after Li’s death, the censors went into action, scrubbing anything posted under what had become one of the most popular hashtags, #WeWantFreeSpeech. Xiao Qiang, the editor and founder of the China Digital Times, who has tracked reports about the virus from the outset, said that the space for commentary has been steadily shrinking. The police launched a new round of arrests, sweeping up journalists and citizen journalists who had reported on the epidemic and also a Communist Party heavyweight, Ren Zhiqiang, who had written and privately distributed an essay attacking Xi as a “clown” responsible for the mismanagement of the crisis.

Families of the dead were admonished for speaking to the press; a chat group set up for mourners was forced to close down. The names of the dead were not published, out of a fear that the families of those not listed might come forward, belying the official claim that fewer than four thousand people died in Wuhan. Chinese researchers were advised that academic papers about the origins of the virus needed to be vetted before publication. In March, Beijing announced that it would expel U.S. citizens working for the *Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*, a move that was seen as retaliation for limits, placed by the Trump Administration, on the number of employees of Chinese news agencies allowed in the United States—but one that, not coincidentally, reduced the flow of uncensored information.

When coercion wasn’t enough, propagandists seeded misinformation. A fringe conspiracy theory—that the virus was spread by U.S. military members participating in an athletic competition in Wuhan, in October—was catapulted into the mainstream after a foreign-ministry spokesman, Zhao Lijian, promoted it on Twitter. The Party’s influential *Qiushi* magazine ran a long article last weekend that tried to debunk the Chinese origins of the coronavirus by alluding to a possibility that it may have originated at a shuttered military lab in Fort Detrick, Maryland. The article made

no outright claim of this theory but, rather, coyly planted the idea by suggesting that Americans had first raised it: “US netizens launched a petition on the White House petition website asking the US government to announce the real reason for closing the Fort Detrick Biological Laboratory to clarify whether the laboratory is a research unit for new coronavirus and whether there is a virus leak problem.” A video tweeted in mid-March by another foreign-ministry representative, Hua Chunying, claimed to show Italians cheering “*Grazie, Cina,*” as the Chinese national anthem played, to thank China for sending experts and medical supplies to that country. In fact, the audio had been added to video footage of Italians applauding their own health-care workers.

As ProPublica reported in March, China has also been using fake and hijacked Twitter accounts. Ten thousand suspect accounts were linked to a coordinated campaign by a news agency that reports to the Party’s United Front Work Department. A college student in Omaha, whose social media usually shows photos of her sorority sisters and trips to the beach, was amazed when her hacked Twitter account suddenly started spouting pro-Beijing propaganda—in Chinese.

“It is the same toolbox that China was equipped with back in the nineteen-seventies, but they have added a whole host of technological upgrades and punishments,” Orville Schell, the director of the Center on U.S.-China Relations at the Asia Society, told me. He points to recently developed phone apps that color-code users by their health status, and allow police to track people who are contagious. “They are coming out of this pandemic with a better road-tested technocracy, and they will be at the Party’s service going forward,” Schell said.

The two-sessions gathering is traditionally the occasion in which to lay out economic goals for the year ahead. In the keynote speech, on Friday, Premier Li Keqiang broke with precedent and declined to set a specific growth target, citing “the great uncertainty regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and the world economic and trade environment.” The Chinese economy shrank in the first quarter of the year for the first time since the death of Mao, in 1976; economic data released last Friday showed weak retail sales and higher-than-expected unemployment rates; analysts believe that up to eighty million Chinese are jobless. “The government’s legitimacy rests on two pillars: robust economic growth and nationalism,” Yanzhong Huang said. “Now that the economy is hit, they have only nationalism to beef up their legitimacy.”

For the immediate future, Xi needs to shirk responsibility for the coronavirus debacle by blaming culprits outside China. The United States makes the most convenient target. There are obvious parallels between Xi’s strategy and Trump’s reflexive finger-pointing toward China and his

propensity to dig up facts of dubious provenance. At this moment, Xi needs Trump and Trump needs Xi. That makes it likely that the propaganda war will drag on for some time, maybe even outliving the war against the virus.

Barbara Demick is a former foreign correspondent for the Los Angeles Times and served as the Beijing bureau chief from 2008 to 2014. She is the author of “Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea” and “Logavina Street: Life and Death in a Sarajevo Neighborhood.”

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