WIDER Webinar | Yuen Yuen Ang | University of Michigan
Chair: Rachel Gisselquist

When COVID-19 Meets Centralized, Personalized Power

UNITED NATIONS UNIVERSITY
UNU-WIDER

2 June 2020

WHEN COVID-19 MEETS CENTRALIZED, PERSONALIZED POWER

YUEN YUEN ANG

UNU-WIDER Webinar Series

June 2, 2020

Has China failed or succeeded at handling the COVID-19 pandemic?

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Poll No. 1

Has China failed or succeeded in handling the COVID-19 pandemic?

(a) Failed
(b) Succeeded
(c) Both

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Are democracies or autocracies better at handling pandemics?

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Poll No. 2

Are democracies or autocracies better at handling pandemics?

(a) Democracies
(b) Autocracies
(c) Neither

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XINHUANET

Editions

Xinhua Headlines: Seven things China has done right to battle coronavirus

Source: Xinhua | 2020-03-13 22:24:33 | Editor: huaxia

WHITE HOUSE

Trump says blame China. His supporters are listening.

At rallies, one protester yelled, "Go to China." In state legislatures, anti-China bills are being proposed. On conservative radio, callers want to punish China over the coronavirus.

'So yes, I do blame the Chinese' for coronavirus pandemic ...

George Stephanopoulos interviews Peter Navarro on "This Week." #ABCNews #ThisWeek #Pandemic ...

May 17, 2020 - Uploaded by ABC News

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Let's now look at the poll results

1. Has China failed or succeeded at handling the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. Are democracies or autocracies better at handling pandemics?

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Has China failed or succeeded at handling the COVID-19 pandemic?

BOTH

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As the US-China “Cold War” intensifies, global public opinion is becoming deeply **polarized** and **politicized**

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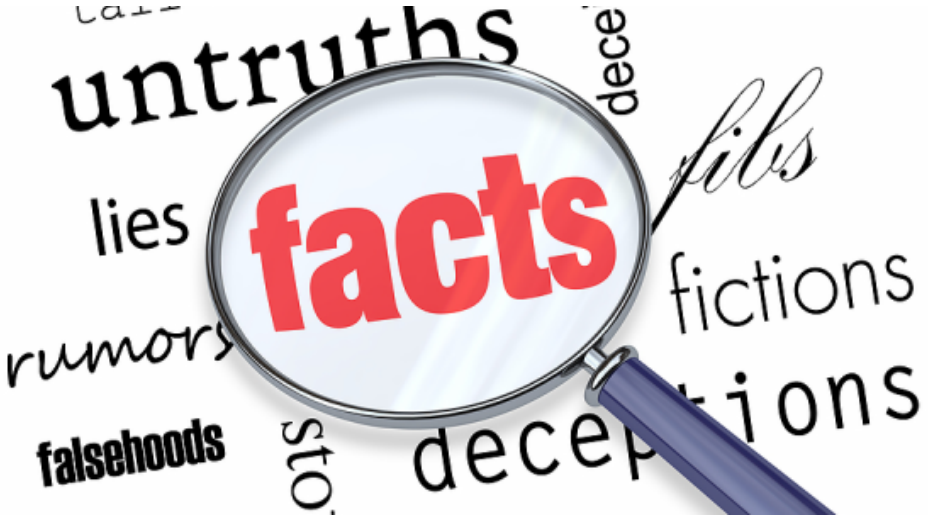

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Comment | Published: 09 April 2020

When COVID-19 meets centralized, personalized power

Yuen Yuen Ang

Nature Human Behaviour **4**, 445–447(2020) | Cite this article

5810 Accesses | **96** Altmetric | Metrics

The debate over whether autocracies or democracies are better at fighting epidemics is misguided. Under President Xi Jinping's centralized command, his administration has both succeeded and failed at handling the COVID-19 crisis. While it effectively curbed infections within China after the virus had spread, it failed to stem the outbreak before it went global.

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Associated Content

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COVID-19 and human behaviour

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About this article

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PREVIEW

- China's strong authoritarian regime has both **strengths** and **weaknesses** in dealing with an outbreak.
  - **Strengths (+):** Mass mobilization + determined national responses, once a decision is made at the top
  - **Weaknesses (-):** Lack of transparency + weak civil society + outcomes entirely hinged on top leader's decision
- Under President Xi Jinping's centralized, personalized style of governance, both + and - become **amplified.**

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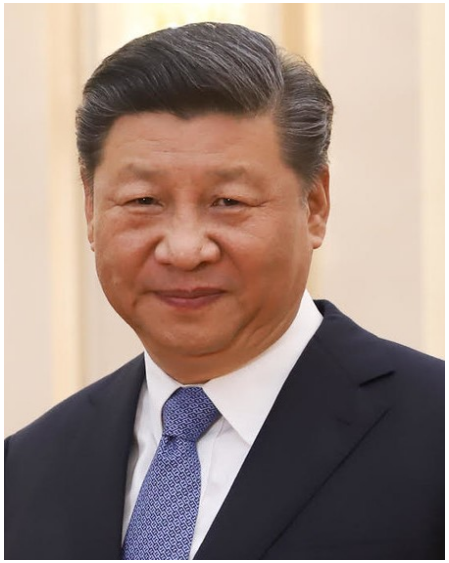
Part 1:
Chairman of Everything

THERE ISN'T JUST ONE CHINA, BUT AT LEAST 3 DIFFERENT CHINA/S SINCE 1949

MAO

DENG



XI

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THERE ISN'T JUST ONE CHINA, BUT AT LEAST 3 DIFFERENT CHINA/S SINCE 1949

MAO

- A **personalist** dictatorship
- Power concentrated entirely in his hands

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THERE ISN'T JUST ONE CHINA, BUT AT LEAST 3 DIFFERENT CHINA/S SINCE 1949

DENG

- Pioneer of China's market reform
- A **party-based** dictatorship
- Collective leadership, decentralization, and pragmatism
- "Autocracy with democratic characteristics" (Ang, *Foreign Affairs* 2018)

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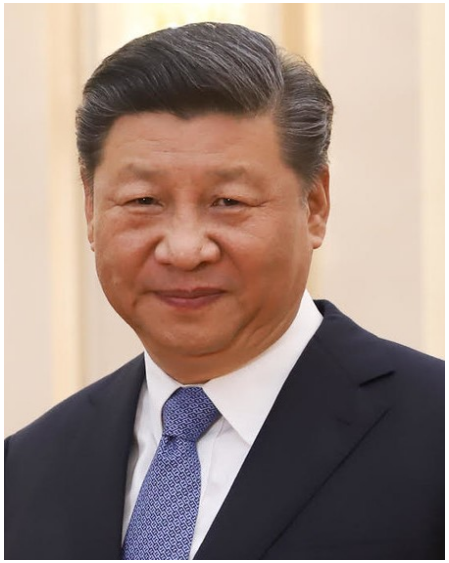
THERE ISN'T JUST ONE CHINA, BUT AT LEAST 3 DIFFERENT CHINA/S SINCE 1949



XI

- Took office as top leader in 2012
- Broke from Deng era's traditions
- "Chairman of Everything" (Allison 2017)

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Part 2:

Tightened up & stressed out

TIGHTENED CONTROLS

- Xi's administration clamped down on civil society, muckraking journalism, transparency & public deliberation initiatives
- China's vast bureaucratic apparatus also experienced tighter controls, under a sweeping anticorruption campaign
- Anti-corruption campaign extended from policing graft to ensuring correct political thinking and conformity to Xi's orders.

(See also, *China's Gilded Age*, Chapter 6 "All the King's Men", on Xi's anticorruption campaign)

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“LAZY GOVERNANCE”

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Part 3:
The Price of Absolute Power

SARS VS COVID

- Although governmental denial and delays occurred both during SARS and COVID-19, some striking differences in political and bureaucratic dynamics between the two crises

- During SARS, they resulted from “a fragmented bureaucracy and an oligarchic political structure” (Huang Yanzhong 2004).

- During COVID, timeline of communication appears more compressed, and news went straight to the top.

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In Party magazine *Qiushi*, Xi reported his actions from Jan 7 to Jan 22, the day before Wuhan's lockdown.

"**rare** disclosure… under heavy domestic and international pressure" (SCMP, 15 Feb 2020).

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ON
OFF

Wuhan mayor Zhou Xianwang: “As the head of a local government, I can only release information after I am authorized.”

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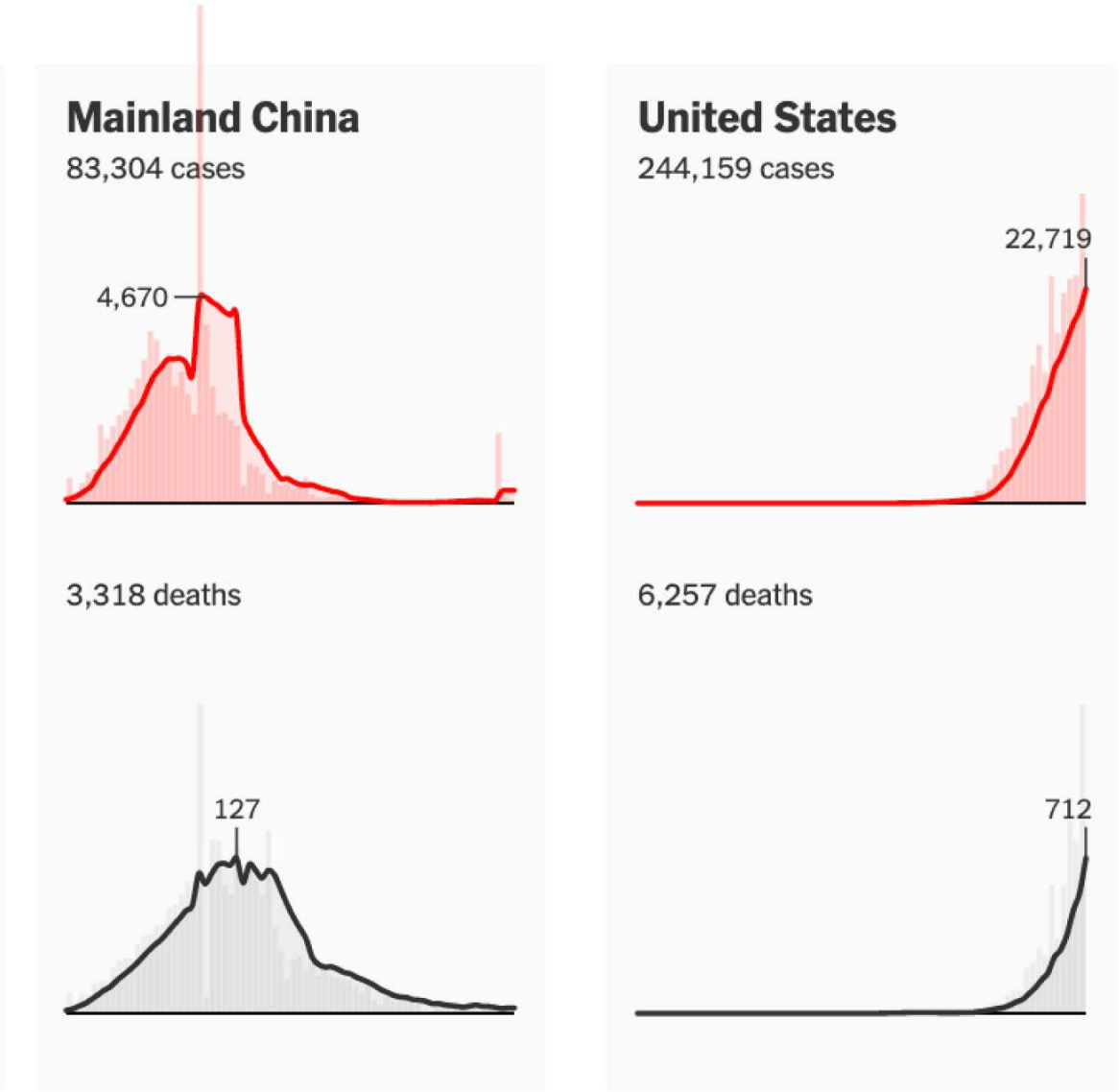
ON
OFF



Source: *The New York Times*, 19 March 2020

Part 4:
Conclusion & Lessons

Has China failed or succeeded at handling the COVID-19 pandemic?

BOTH

While it effectively curbed infections within China after the virus had spread, it failed to stem the outbreak before it went global.

Meanwhile, some governments are keen to blame China entirely for the pandemic, but this is to deflect attention from their own failures.

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Sections

The Washington Post

Democracy Dies in Darkness

Opinions

Trump can't blame China for his own coronavirus failures

China did a lot wrong, but it's not China's fault that Trump didn't listen to the warnings of the U.S. intelligence community starting in early January.

Are democracies or autocracies better at handling pandemics?

NEITHER

Both democracies and autocracies have strengths and weaknesses at handling pandemics.

For democracies to perform well, they need **other qualities**: sound leadership, respect for science, bureaucratic autonomy, state capacity, health care coverage and social safety nets

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How is COVID-19 changing development? WIDER Webinar Series

At UNU-WIDER we're responding and adapting to the coronavirus pandemic. This has meant reorienting our research focus and changing how we facilitate knowledge exchange. We are making the most of the technology available and are pleased to launch a new online webinar series.

1. COVID-19 has intensified US-China rivalry, which means everything becomes **politicized**.
2. We need **balance** and **facts** more than ever.
3. Development professionals must be informed about **Chinese domestic politics** and **US-China relations**.

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Thank You!