

Fighting the demon within

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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The Chinese government learned a lot from SARS: That was the message that Beijing and the WHO have been trying to hammer home for the past few weeks, even as the WHO on Thursday declared the 2019 novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) outbreak a global health emergency.

Instead, as we saw with SARS in 2002 to 2003, the contaminated milk scandal of 2008, avian flu outbreaks and the outbreak of African swine fever in August 2018, to name but a few crises, the instinctive response of local governments and Beijing has been denial, obfuscation and the harassment or arrest of whistle-blowers, followed by downplaying the problem, and repeated pronouncements that everything is under control and will soon be over.

If anything, thanks to Chinese President Xi Jinping's (习近平) crackdown on the media and civil organizations, and his demand for adherence to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) line, it has been harder to get accurate information.

In a meeting on Tuesday last week with WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Xi promised transparency, said China was confident of containing the crisis and that it "cannot let this demon hide."

Yet doctors in Wuhan who in late December tried to call attention to what they believed was a public health threat were called rumormongers and "educated" by the police, and while Beijing finally did notify the WHO about the virus on Dec. 31, it did not inform the Chinese.

As with SARS, which began in November 2002, the government has appeared obsessed with not letting a public health problem disrupt the Lunar New Year holiday, despite the risks posed by the mass migration of people for the holiday.

China stayed silent as the Lunar New Year began on Feb. 1, 2020, and while the National People's Congress met in Beijing the following month.

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It was not until Jiang Yanyong (江燕勇), a surgeon at Beijing 301 Military Hospital, broke ranks in early April that year to notify television stations in China and Hong Kong about the number of patients with the disease, and talked with foreign reporters, that the CCP changed its tactics, with the politburo announcing on April 17 that it was determined to fight the new disease.

That was a full month after the WHO issued its first global alert about SARS, after a patient hospitalized in Hanoi infected several of the Vietnamese medical staff treating him.

Although the kinds of internal and international communications that took months during the SARS outbreak have been compressed into days, as have the research efforts to identify the virus and create testing kits, so much of the work needed could probably have been alleviated — or at least better preparations made — had China really learned the lessons of SARS.

The rest of the world now has to face the new coronavirus, hence the willingness of Canada and Japan to speak up this week in support of Taiwan's participation in the World Health Assembly and the WHO.

Little has changed in China, where students are taught that Jiang was unpatriotic, a traitor basically, for alerting the world to the extent of SARS.

The CCP has put the health of thousands of people at risk, left China's medical system woefully unprepared and cost the lives of more than 200 Chinese so far. It has forced other nations to scramble to evacuate their citizens from Wuhan, batten down their borders and establish quarantine procedures.

Health experts say that people's best defense against catching 2019-nCoV is to frequently wash their hands with soap and hot water.

In reality, the best defense against 2019-nCoV or future outbreaks is to wash our hands of the idea that Beijing's leadership will ever change or be willing to act responsibly as a member of the global community. The demon that Xi talked about is actually the CCP's authoritarianism itself.

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