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China versus the US in the pandemic crisis: governance and politics confronting systemic challenges

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ABSTRACT

Because of its peculiar nature as a systemic challenge, the control of the COVID-19 crisis requires strong and rapid actions. It appears that China has employed a “tough model” whereas the erratic measures of the US have formed a “loose model”. This article seeks to characterise and assess the two models from the perspective of the governance structures and the corrective capabilities of the two different political establishments. The exposition draws on the framework of “exit, voice, and loyalty” developed by Albert Hirschman, and questions the hegemonic ideology of the “liberal democracy versus authoritarianism” dichotomy.

RÉSUMÉ

Du fait de son statut particulier de défi systémique, contrôler la crise de COVID-19 nécessite des actions fortes et rapides. Il semble que la Chine ait employé un « modèle dur » pour répondre à cette crise, tandis que les mesures erratiques des États-Unis représentent un « modèle souple ». Le but de cet article est de caractériser et d'évaluer ces deux modèles en portant une attention particulière aux structures de gouvernance et aux capacités correctrices de ces deux milieux politiques si différents. Cette étude base son analyse sur le concept de « défection et prise de parole » développé par Albert Hirschman, et interroge l'idéologie hégémonique de la dichotomie entre démocratie libérale et autoritarisme.

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Introduction

In the early phase of COVID-19, when the epidemic was confined to China, international commentators were quick to jump to the assertion that politics is the problem. This assertion has come out not only from journalists or politicians, but also from scholars. Almost a reflex, economist-philosopher Amartya Sen's (1989) dictum “[disasters] relate closely to the absence of freedom of information and criticism” is, consciously or unconsciously, adopted as the intellectual underpinning of the assertion.

This Sen-type assertion can be challenged from various angles. It is debatable that what actually happened in China, in the initial outbreak of the epidemic, can be adequately captured by the assertion. More important, the subsequent spread of the

epidemic worldwide appeared to be anomalous for the assertion. Countries that are often labelled “liberal democracies” did not perform well. The United States of America, in particular, performed miserably both in combating the epidemic and in terms of the social and economic cost incurred. China performed much better than most of them.

Prima facie, therefore, for making sense of the COVID-19 crisis, Sen’s theoretical framework needs to be substituted or supplemented by more appropriate alternatives. A possible candidate is Albert Hirschman’s (1970) “exit, voice, and loyalty” framework, within which Sen’s can be contextualised. As will be expounded below in the article, information transparency and political competition are of central importance to both the “exit” and “voice” options, but they are inadequate for the “loyalty” option. Yet, the nature of combating the epidemic crisis is such that it requires mainly the “loyalty” option, where knowledge acquisition and political co-operation is essential.

This article seeks to provide a comparative analysis of the experiences of China and the US in the epidemic crisis. It is submitted that, in view of the experiences of both countries, the transparency-competition thesis is called into question. At the level of governance, knowledge acquisition is more crucial than information transparency. At the level of politics, co-operation is more crucial than competition. These being the case, the comparative performance of China vis-à-vis the US in the epidemic crisis seems to have exposed the fundamental flaw of the oft-invoked dichotomy of “(liberal) democracy versus authoritarianism” for understanding real-world politics. It points to the need of exploring for alternatives that take into consideration of not only the form but also the content of democracy, in term of the political establishments’ accountability to and representativeness of the people.

In quest of an appropriate theoretical framework

Regarding the politics of disasters, such as COVID-19, the “democracy versus authoritarianism” dichotomy has proved to be as influential as almost hegemonic. Sen (1989) coins his famous comment on China’s Great Leap Forward famine of the early 1960s in the following way: “this failure is certainly one connected closely with the absence of a relatively free press and the absence of opposition parties free to criticise and chastise the government in power”. In an even more assertive tone, Sen (1999) further contends that “in the terrible history of famines in the world, no substantial famine has ever occurred in any independent and democratic country with a relatively free press”.

Analytically, Sen’s contention is consisted of two points. First, lack of information transparency in governance constrains the capability of the political establishments for coping with disasters. Second, lack of competition in politics curtails their incentive. At both levels, the contention hinges on the assumption that information exists irrespective of the acting agents. What causes problems is the negligence, or even suppression, of the essential information by the acting agents.

Hirschman’s (1970) framework of “exit, voice, and loyalty” appears to be more comprehensive, and, therefore, less dependent on the assumption. “Exit” entails pure exchange relationships that are arm’s-length in nature and can be set up or terminated any time at will by the acting agents. The premise of the relationships is that the

product being traded is well-defined and clear to both sides, i.e. full information transparency. “Voice” and “loyalty” entail long-term relationships, which are necessary if the product in question is idiosyncratic in nature. There is a fine difference between these latter two options, though. The “voice” relationships are still competitive exchange. They are necessary to safeguard the exchange, in the conditions where information incompleteness or asymmetry could undermine the exchange. The “loyalty” relationships imply that the problem with defining the product is lack of knowledge, rather than information. Information exists objectively, while knowledge is the outcome of acquisition via learning – and learning by collective efforts. Hence, co-operation, as opposed to competition, is necessary for yielding the desirable outcomes.

Concerning the politics of COVID-19, the “product” refers to state-led actions for combating the crisis. These actions necessarily confront uncertainties that are deficiency in knowledge, given the fact that the epidemic – its mechanisms of transmission, its impact on different groupings of people, its transmission and death rates, etc. – was mainly an “unexpected unknown” in the initial outbreak and has hitherto remained, at best, an “expected quasi-known”. To effectively combat the epidemic, it requires co-operative, active interaction between the multiple acting agents and, ultimately, between the state and the people.

Theoretically, liberal democracy centres on competitive politics. With downward accountability due to competition, liberal democracy tends to be associated with “loosely-coupled” systems. Authoritarianism, in contrast, tends to be associated with “tightly-coupled” systems where subunits of the systems are “connected and co-ordinated by the same chain of command” (Zhou 2020). Xueguang Zhou (2020) submits that the inclination of liberal democracy towards politicising public governance is constrained. State-led endeavours such as those of combating the epidemic are likely to follow the logic of professionalism, rather than that of politics. In contrast, China-type (quasi-)authoritarianism is intrinsically prone to politicisation. Upward accountability is the norm for different parts of its political systems. Political desires tend to supersede, or override, professionalism.

Irrespective of his exposition at the theoretical level, Zhou’s characterisation of Chinese politics as (quasi-)authoritarianism is conventional yet at the same time controversial. Daniel Bell (2015) rather depicts the “China model” as being consisted of “meritocracy at the top, experimentation in the middle, and democracy at the bottom”. Inasmuch as this depiction has significant elements of truth, the dynamics of Chinese politics in the face of the epidemic can be seen in different light. Most importantly, the COVID-19 crisis is a systemic challenge, and coping with it requires politicisation of a particular type – political determination at the top and society-wide activism at the bottom. In comparison, in the US case, it has been politicisation of a different type. At the top, political determination appears to be deficient for combating the epidemic, because meritocracy has been overridden by election engineering. At the bottom, society-wide activism for combating the epidemic is also deficient, because of multiple factors including the fact that the poor and vulnerable people have had to bear the economic burdens of the epidemic and hence are not at all free to choose. These differences in politicisation in the two countries might have, in a significant measure, accounted for their diverse performance in combating the epidemic.

Governance and response to COVID-19: the China “tough model”

What is the tough model?

To evaluate the whole policy package that the Chinese government has been using since the COVID-19 broke out in Hubei Province, it is not difficult to find that it is tougher than that of most other countries. Insofar as contact tracing and social distancing are needed, there is an immediate issue concerning individual freedom and privacy. It is especially in this respect that China’s response to the epidemic, in the very tough form of comprehensive lockdowns, has been severely criticised. Conceivably, during this process, there were many cases of excessiveness in the conduct of grassroots-level officials and their assistants, causing resentment from people that have been offended. Still, on the whole, there does not seem to have emerged anti-state, anti-establishment feelings of any significant scale.

Given that the coronavirus was still at best a “quasi-known”, the toughest form of social distancing was taken to cut off the source of infection: the lockdown of an increasing number of cities, starting from Wuhan on 23 January 2020, and subsequently, the entire urban China, which entailed restricting every citizen to mostly stay at home. The lockdown lasted for more than two months for major cities in China, with Wuhan being the last city being lifted from lockdown.

For contact tracing and social distancing, local authorities, down to the grassroots level of urban neighbourhoods or suburban villages, were mobilised to enforce the implementation. With the inspections of top leaders to the critical area, the spirit of their meetings and speeches were widely disseminated by the media, coupled with non-stop reports about nation-wide updates of the infections, containing the epidemic soon became a political priority instead of simply a professional issue of public health. In this light, not only key workers in the front lines but also bureaucrats down to the lowest level regarded it as a battle that they cannot afford to lose. This has been particularly true in “super-infectious” cases, and for people who returned China from overseas. But the tracing seems have gone too far in many cases. Their full name would not be revealed, but their family names, home addresses, working places, as well as the places they have been to during the previous days would all be made public.

Centralised and professionalism-oriented governance structures

Once the epidemic albeit still a “quasi-known” became expected, the Chinese state leadership set up a Taskforce of Epidemic Coordination (“Taskforce” hereafter). On 25th January, the Taskforce held a meeting to deploy the nation-wide campaign of epidemic prevention and control, and to order local governments to set up working groups for ensuring policy implementation. Since then, containing the epidemic has become the unanimous goal and top political priority of the state as a whole. This goal has been concretised to become specific tasks allocated to lower-level authorities, including local governments, state-owned enterprises (SOEs), and all other public institutions.

With the consistent goal across the whole country, drastic policy measures in the form of the all-out lockdown were allowed to apply quickly by the system. There followed all kinds of state-led efforts both to contain the epidemic and to mitigate the economic fall-outs and the adverse impacts on people’s living. In Wuhan, the first and the most

seriously-hit epidemic centre, the medical resources and hospital capacity were overwhelmed. Having the top-down deployment from the central government, a national mobilisation of healthcare resources and logistics were ensured to support Wuhan. SOEs were ordered to expand the production and supply of protective equipment for healthcare personnel and ordinary citizens. Moreover, specialised hospitals for critical patients and mobile cabin hospitals for the much larger number of non-critical patients were also swiftly constructed by SOEs.

Professionalism was another key to ensure the effectiveness of handling the epidemic. Experts played vital roles in decision-making. Before the central Taskforce was formed, renowned epidemiologists Zhong Nanshan and Li Lanjuan were invited to State Council Executive Meeting as special consultants. Their professional advice was incorporated into the national deployment and local policy implementation. By taking professional advice, contact tracing and social distancing were exceedingly strict for ensuring that no single suspicious case could escape the radar of the system. Similarly, a large scale of testing was conducted to mitigate the infection caused by asymptomatic patients.

There should be no dispute that the successful containment of the epidemic in China was mainly achieved by the co-operation of various agents, including the government from the top to the bottom, enterprises, and every ordinary citizen. However, the centralised governance structure did have intrinsic problems when facing the “unexpected unknown”. With bottom-up accountability, local authorities tend to ignore or even suppress the “voices” from the grassroots because they intend to minimise their mistakes or inactions by solving, downplaying, or even covering the problems so as to avoid the political consequences. These did happen in Wuhan at the early stage of the outbreak.

In the crucial period from the 6th to the 17th of January 2020, announcements by the Wuhan City Health Commission (WCHC) repeatedly claimed that no single new case was found, which did not live up to the actual situation. It was precisely during this period that the Wuhan municipality and the Hubei province held the annual sessions of their respective People’s Congress and the People’s Political Consultative Conference. Inevitably, this coincidence has led to the suspicion of deliberate concealments by the local authorities, for the sake of smoothly running the political activities.

Insomuch as this indicates some degrees of mishandling of the epidemic at the early stage when the coronavirus was still an “unexpected and unknown”, the failure should be ascribed to the principle of upward accountability that governs the working of the National Health Commission system and local authorities. In other words, the mishandling was due to the institutions far more than the agents. However, meritocracy ensured self-improvement and self-correction. When the delay and concealment in the early stage were found in Wuhan, two main leaders in Hubei Province and Wuhan Municipality were removed from their positions. They were held accountable as the chief leader (*yibashou*) of the critical area because of their inactions at the early stage. The remedy plan also had a function of warning a wider range of bureaucrats at any level that their political lives would be at risk if they were found “dysfunction and misbehaviours”. In turn, the remedy reinforced the implementation of the “tough model”.

Governance and response to COVID-19: the US “loose model”

What is the loose model?

Hitherto, the US appears to be not having explored an effective rescue package that suits its condition. Measures of epidemic containment are far loose than China's. For one reason, unlike the Chinese state putting the control of the epidemic as its first and foremost political priority, the US treats it as just one of many objectives – not even the most important one. For another, the decentralised political system in the US simply does not allow the operation of the China-type tough model because of the lack of co-operation or consistency between the federal and state governments. The premature “re-opening” of the economy in May is a clear sign of this “loose model”. In contrast to the bell-shaped curve that depicts the evolution of the scale of the epidemic in China within a duration of two months or so, the curve for the US rather tends to continue to move upward after more than three months. Shockingly, by early October, even the White House became an epicentre.

Contact tracing has been rare, as it inevitably infringes on individual privacy. In this event, government intervention has tended to tip the balance to individual rights far more than collective values. And tests have not been done on a large enough scale. When the US badly needed higher test capacities in May, President Trump repeatedly complained and questioned the need for a large-scale testing, commenting that “if we didn't do any testing, we would have very few cases” (Blake 2020). When a national state of emergency was declared by the federal government on 13th March, some state governments (California, Florida, Arizona, etc.) had already declared emergency well before. The President wanted to reopen the economy way ahead of the situation per se would allow. There were many people resenting the social distancing policy and similar virus-containment measures and going onto the street to press the state governments to reopen the economy. In response, the President tweeted, in capital letters, “LIBERATE MINNESOTA”, “LIBERATE MICHIGAN” and “LIBERATE VIRGINIA, and save your great 2nd Amendment. It is under siege”.

Decentralised governance structures

There should not be any disagreement that the mishandling of the epidemic is a failure on the part of the Trump Administration. The question is: to what extent, the failure of the Trump Administration, the agent of US political institutions, reflects the failure of the institutions themselves? Or, why did the institutions lose their corrective capability on their agent's misbehaviour? The federalism system of the US guarantees the sharing of power between the federal and state governments, but, at the same time, it is prone to result in a lack of co-operation between the two sides. When the “dysfunction and misbehaviour” and the re-election come simultaneously, liberal-democratic system may lose their self-corrective abilities if “the short-term political considerations that bear on their chances of getting re-elected” is prioritised (Bell 2015, 172–173).

A fundamental characteristic of US-type federalism is the high autonomy of state governments. When dealing with the “expected known”, it could be a good system where the state government reserves the right to flexibly customise its policy in accordance with its legal framework and specific conditions. Facing the “unexpected unknown”, it could still

have the advantage of preserving information transparency as the state government has no incentive to cover or conceal the fact. However, the lack of consistency of policies in different states and the lack of co-ordination from the federal government tend to lead to ineffectiveness. The disadvantages of US-type federalism would be more significant when facing the “unexpected unknown”. Another factor that adding to difficulties of political co-operation is inter-party political competition. Given the already insufficient power of either the state government or the federal governments, prioritising party interests and re-election consideration undermines co-operation. In this light, it is no surprise to see, when the medical staff urged the government to provide support on their personal protective equipment (PPE), President Trump even called the PPE shortage in New York (traditionally a democrat-dominated state) “fake news”.

For containing the epidemic, it requires the nation acting strongly and consistently as a whole, including certain restriction of people’s activities. It also requires the nation promptly mobilising professionals and supplies to the critical areas. Instead of any form of nation-wide lockdown or resources mobilisation, piecemeal responses and even contradicting policies from each state were witnessed. Instead of reassuring people and backing up governors, the federal government contradicted and undermined the authority of local governments, sending mixed signals to people and making the already “loose model” even more confusing. In fact, none of the federal-level authorities – the Department of Health and Human Services, Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, etc. – has sufficient power to mandate the local authorities to take united actions (Gordon et al. 2020).

In contrast to China’s centralised power structures, the US decentralised structures might have causes serious delay of actions and undermined professionalism. It has been persistent that during the epidemic the President gave misleading medical recommendations, such as those of injecting disinfectant and taking Hydroxychloroquine, in disregard of medical professional advices. The President exercised power to appoint or to remove members of his administrative staff sidelining professionals (Luce 2020). Rather than taking advices from the World Health Organization (WHO), the Trump Administration baselessly accused WHO of being China-captured and announced that the US would quit the WHO.

Facing any “dysfunction and misbehaviour” of the agents of the institutions, the corrective capability of liberal democracy is typically realised by people electing a new candidate for the President and then form a new Administration in the hope of repairing the mistake. In the case of COVID-19, such recuperation has been badly needed. Yet, there is no certainty that this is to happen. There is no sign of political forces strong enough to hold him accountable to the failure of coping with the epidemic crisis. There is even no certainty that he will be replaced by a more responsible, or at least a reasonably functional, candidate in the re-election.

It is clear that the President has included the epidemic crisis as part and parcel of his re-election strategy. When the US started to deal with the domestic outbreak in March, the epidemic had already become “expected” and at least a “quasi-known”. The federal government made little efforts to prepare for combating it. Instead, it rather squandered valuable time from January to March mainly on politicising it. The main endeavour of the Trump Administration pursued was to blame others and make its people looking away from its own mishandling by targeting China. Without any evidence of the

origin of the virus, President Trump kept referring the coronavirus as the “Wuhan virus” and/or “China virus” to stir up hatred towards China.

Reflexion: from governance to political economy

In the early months of COVID-19, the term “China’s Chernobyl moment” was in vogue among Western commentators and politicians. By late April, when the number of infections both in the European Union and in the United States exceeded a million, this term seemed to completely lose its currency. In place of it was another Soviet-related term, “China’s Sputnik moment”. This latter term shows admitting, reluctantly, China’s superior performance, while also warning that celebrating the superiority is premature (Milanovic 2020).

The prematurity claim is both politically and intellectually motivated. It is deeply rooted in the “liberal democracy versus authoritarianism” dichotomy. Philosopher Francis Fukuyama (2020) asserts: “it is wrong to hold up the CCP’s [the Communist Party of China] totalitarian approach in dealing with the virus as a model to be emulated by other countries”. Likewise, economist Daron Acemoglu (2020) depicts a worrying “China-lite” scenario that could turn true in the West: “in times of deep uncertainty, when there is a need for high-level coordination and leadership, many people’s first instinct is to turn once again to Hobbesian solutions”. In a more intellectual tone, economist Branko Milanovic (2020) asserts: “the Soviet Union’s Sputnik moment proved fleeting, and so might China’s, if the other side [the US] chooses to tap into its significant advantages, such as flexibility of decision-making, accountability of local governments, and transparency”.

To appraise these assertions, it is necessary to go back to the exposition on the different theoretical frameworks of Amartya Sen and Albert Hirschman. The criticism concerning information transparency, implicitly or explicitly based on the “voice” option, seems having elements of truth, in view of the early mishandling by local authorities and/or NHC professionals described above. Yet, these elements cannot be the main truth, as the critics clearly ignore the “unexpected unknown” nature of the epidemic in its initial outbreak.

More important, by passing on the blame from governance structures to the political system, the critics face difficulty of explaining China’s subsequent success in containing the epidemic. The aforementioned scholars seem to share the same vision of characterising the Chinese system as merely “authoritarian”. They tend to perceive the drastic measures that successfully contained the epidemic – resources mobilisation, comprehensive testing, universal tracing, full-scale lockdowns, etc. – as being superimposed by the authorities on the people. In contrast, Chinese New Left scholars such as Wang Hui (2020) and Wei Nanzhi (2020) rather contend that China’s efforts of combating the coronavirus epidemic have involved the active co-operation between the state and the people. Without the co-operation, the drastic measures initiated by the state would not have been effectively implemented, let alone achieving the objectives. The revolutionary tradition of the “People’s War” has been said to be in action.

Milanovic, sticking to the “liberal democracy versus authoritarianism” dichotomy, has drawn the opposite conclusion. By praising the “flexibility” of the governance structures

and basic political system of the US, he seems to believe that the “exit” option is probably better for combating the epidemic. Conceptually, “exit”, or market relationships, are characterised by flexibility, as opposed to the rigidity of the long-term relationships of “voice” or “loyalty”. In the face of the epidemic as an objective existence entailing compulsion for individuals, rather than an ordinary good or service where individuals are free to choose, flexibility could be a disadvantage rather than an advantage. It requires compulsory measures underpinned by long-term relationships between the state and the people, and indeed active co-operation between the two sides, for coping with the epidemic as a “quasi-known”.

What has actually happened in the United States is the predominance of the “exit” options exercised by both the state and individuals – existing from the endeavours of combating the epidemic. The actions of both the federal and state governments have been far from adequate, while the general public has been far from co-operative. The anti-lockdown protests in May were vivid demonstrations of exiting from the endeavours. The anti-racist protests in June inevitably had adverse effects on the endeavours. Both of these protests were probably related to the fact that the poor and vulnerable people in the US society were forced to bear the main burdens of the epidemic crisis. In the end, the state and individuals both seem to give up. The US seems to destine towards a peculiar “herd immunity”, one that is in the unknown about when vaccines will turn up and how the coronavirus will mutate.

Fearing that liberal democracies are losing out to authoritarianism in the coronavirus crisis, Fukuyama (2020) makes the following appeal: “Before we can think about changing China, we need to change the United States and try to restore its position as a global beacon of liberal democratic values around the world”. But how to achieve it?

Political scientist David Stasavage (2020) seeks to provide an answer: “There are several paths that we could take in response to this crisis, and only one of them is desirable – strengthening the federal government by first making investments to reduce distrust among the citizenry”. This answer indicates recognising the importance of the content of the political system, i.e. the state-people relationship, rather than just focusing on its form. The intellectual insight of the “democracy versus authoritarianism” dichotomy is severely limited in this regard.

Whatever the precise attributes of a desirable state-people relationship, trust is at the centre of it. In this light, it seems clear that, in the COVID-19 crisis, the state-people interaction has formed a virtuous circle in China in combating the crisis, whereas that in the US has formed a vicious circle. In the official ideology of the People’s Republic, the Chinese political-economic system is labelled “people’s democratic dictatorship”. The emphasis is on the content, rather than the form, of the system. The “content” refers to the state’s accountability to, and representativeness of, the people. It is claimed that this system with uniformity of interests between the state and the people is superior to the alternative, or rival, system of “bourgeois democratic dictatorship” that is characterised by state-people antagonism. This claim is underpinned by the Leninist tenet that “bourgeois democracy”, after all, is still “bourgeois dictatorship”. It stands as a rival to the “liberal democracy versus authoritarianism” dichotomy, both of which, in a sense, are subject to test in this (still on-going) epidemic crisis.

Conclusions

Because of its peculiar nature as a systemic challenge, the control of the COVID-19 crisis requires strong and rapid actions. It appears that China has employed a “tough model” whereas the erratic measures of the US have formed a “loose model”. This article has attempted to characterise and assess the two models from the perspective of the governance structures and the corrective capabilities of the two different political establishments.

The Chinese governance structures are characterised by upward accountability, and this could easily make mistakes with respect to “unexpected unknowns”. Yet, with meritocracy as its guiding principle and co-operation as its main functionality, the Chinese political system also seems capable of quickly correcting its mistakes, particularly when the epidemic becomes “expected”. In comparison, the US governance structures are characterised by downward accountability. This is advantageous in avoiding mistakes when confronting “unexpected unknowns”. Yet, with competition – and election engineering in the year 2020 – as both its guiding principle and functionality, the US political system appears to be rather handicapped in handling the epidemic crisis.

Ultimately, the contrasting patterns of the politicisation of governance in the two countries have their roots in the respective state-people relationships. There exist rival ways of conceptualising the relationships: the Chinese state contends that it is “people’s democracy versus bourgeois democracy”, whereas the mainstream view among Western commentators is “liberal democracy versus authoritarianism”. Both are put to test in the pandemic crisis of 2020.

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