

# SPREADING MISINFORMATION ACROSS BORDERS

**Mutating News Narratives  
in a Pandemic**

**MYSTERIUM.NETWORK/LABS**



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# Abstract

There is a global consensus that the COVID-19 viral pandemic is an unprecedented health crisis ([United Nations](#) and the [Organization Economic Cooperation and Development](#)). With almost 35 million [documented cases worldwide](#) and over one million deaths, the new virus has shocked the world as nations race to slow its spread.

Researchers continue to debate what catalysed its global spread. Some suspect that China's initial censorship of the virus is to blame. Others have suggested that countries were "[slow to prepare](#)" and adopt the necessary aggressive measures needed to contain the virus.

Our investigation explores the evidence suggesting that China's public communications response during the early weeks of 2020 underrepresented the magnitude of the issue, ultimately accelerating the spread of infections as civilians remained unaware. Further, we examine the role of global media and the World Health Organisation (WHO) on managing misinformation and the impact of their failure to do so effectively.

Our study compares how China's National Health Commission and *People's Daily* responded to the coronavirus outbreak with WHO's response. We measure both the volume and sentiment of report headlines released by each group, correlating their messaging with total cases and key events.

The results highlight not only clear suppression of the coronavirus news in Chinese media, but also the WHO and foreign media's circulation of false and unverified information about the virus' transmission. We find that China's National Health Commission and People's Daily intentionally reported low infection rates to downplay the severity of the pandemic, and that WHO redistributed these figures to a global audience without conducting its own objective investigation to confirm. Global media institutions then relayed this misinformation - behaviour which is [not uncommon and in fact continues](#) beyond the context of this study.

Our case study highlights the grave consequences of deliberate censorship and points to a critical need for stronger frameworks to detect and circumvent it.

# Introduction

Censorship has been labelled both disturbing and dangerous. With the rising number of COVID-19 cases worldwide, has it also become deadly?

Censorship in China is so heavily normalised that it has permeated beyond the political system and bred a thriving **culture of self-censorship**. Those who speak truth are often **shunned by their own communities**.

A previous **study on the effects of censorship** on Chinese citizens determined that censorship is “generally passive but influential”, including the influence on people’s emotional and psychological states. While distrust in Chinese media was evident, this has also led to an increased skepticism of political news reported by international mainstream media.

On the political stage, censorship is institutionalised across all levels of government, from the highest-ranks to local officials. This **chronic censorship ultimately “bends the society...”**



FreedomHouse.Org measures internet freedom and democracy around the world.

It seems the internet hasn't made things any better. Key media studies, academic reports, and investigative journalism all suggest that Chinese press is increasingly restricted, censorship is rife, and free speech falls prey to algorithms.

Both WeChat and Weibo - China's most used social media platforms - have sophisticated censorship technology embedded in their code.



Users try to bypass censors on WeChat by using emojis.

It can detect and censor its users' content in a matter of seconds, so that words and images are deleted almost as fast as they are written. With WeChat's one billion users, and Weibo's 500 million, these communication tools carefully craft and limit everyday social interactions, ensuring that public discourse is as curated as the government's official message.

In fact, user activity on WeChat is "analyzed, tracked and shared with Chinese authorities upon request as part of the mass surveillance network in China." China exports this censorship technology to other countries, suggesting that surveillance capitalism thrives in a digital economy.

## Local censorship, global threat

China is no stranger to viral outbreaks. The SARS epidemic was an "example of how China's prior restraint system allows the government to suppress freedom of expression and prevent China's media from reporting on matters of public concern."

Beijing was widely condemned for its delayed response and attempt to hide the true scale of the SARS epidemic. This included instances of state-run news media running headlines which

falsified the existence of SARS, such as “The Appearance of an Unknown Virus in He Yuan is a Rumor”. Even after Hong Kong locals began to die from the virus and truth began to surface, government-controlled Chinese media “continued to insist that everything was under control for several weeks”.

It seems China has not learned any lessons. In the wake of last December’s new coronavirus alert, multiple doctors were charged with ‘disrupting social order’.

手机人民网  
m.people.cn

社会 > 专题 > 聚焦新型肺炎疫情

微信安全中心：对散布疫情谣言的账号进行限期或永久封禁处理

2020-01-26 12:21

来源：央视新闻客户端

1月25日，微信安全中心发布《关于新型冠状病毒肺炎相关谣言专项治理的公告》。《公告》表示：新型冠状病毒肺炎正在全国各地持续传播，引发社会广泛关注。与此同时，各类“网传”、“听说”类谣言信息也不断刺激着大家的恐慌情绪。《刑法修正案（九）》明确规定：“编造虚假的险情、疫情、灾情、警情，在信息网络或者其他媒体上传播，或者明知是上述虚假信息，故意在信息网络或者其他媒体上传播，严重扰乱社会秩序的，处3年以下有期徒刑、拘役或者管制；造成严重后果的，处3年以上7年以下有期徒刑。”

微信将坚决并持续打击谣言类信息。目前已经引进专业第三方辟谣机构，对平台中的谣言进行辟谣；并根据国家相关法律法规和《腾讯微信软件许可及服务协议》《微信个人帐号使用规范》等相关协议规范，对违规的信息内容进行删除处理，并视其违规程度对违规帐号进行阶梯式处罚：包括但不限于对账号或账号功能进行限期或永久封禁处理。

微信将成立“新型冠状病毒肺炎”相关谣言的清理专项小组，持续加强整治，腾讯较真查证平台也会对新型冠状病毒肺炎相关信息进行实时辟谣；同时也欢迎用户投诉相关谣言。微信安全中心提醒：疫情面前要格外保持冷静理性，广大用户应从疾控或医疗机构、权威新闻媒体了解疫情信息，相关防疫信息以省、市卫生健康委员会官方网站发布为准；不要听信谣言，增加不必要的心理负担，做到不信谣、不传谣，提高警惕和识别能力。（总台央视记者 孙荊淮）

People's Daily 26th Jan; spreading “rumours” on WeChat punishable

Even now, still desperate to control any “negative” social media and news commentary about their handling of the virus, people face up to seven years imprisonment for criticising the government’s response.

At a critical time, Chinese officials made a conscious effort to silence the voices of their own medical community, prioritising public image and political embarrassment over the health and safety of their own people. In those weeks leading up to their first formal acknowledgement, authorities “played down the dangers to the public”, leaving the city’s 11 million residents unaware they should protect themselves.” Some of those 11 million people would also travel freely to other parts of the world, carrying the virus with them.

English >>

## WHO says no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission of novel coronavirus

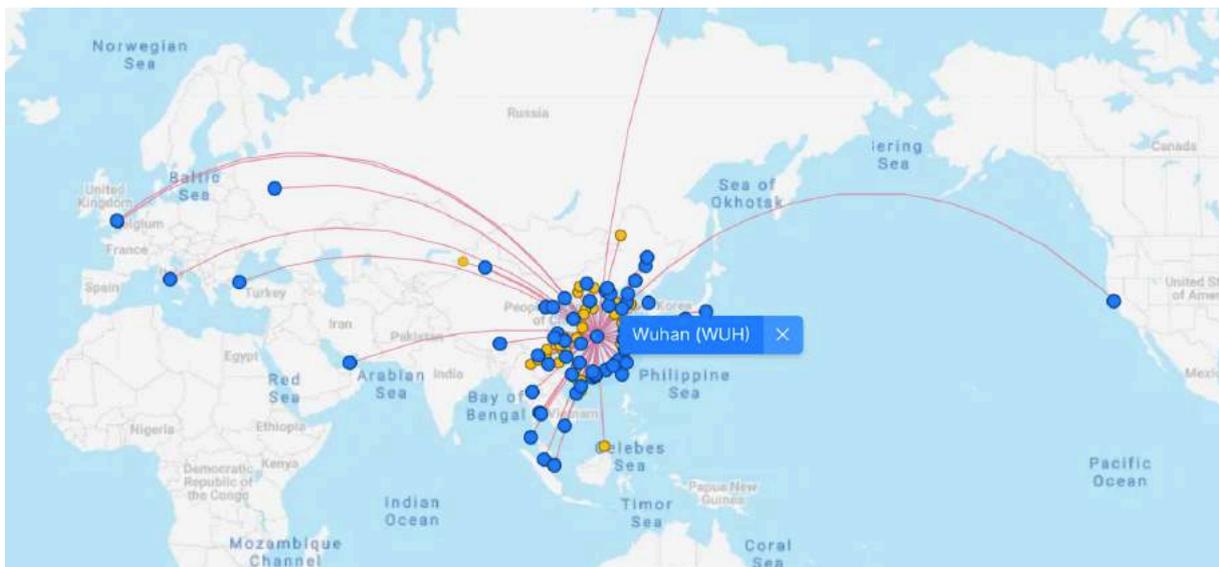
(Xinhua) 11:03, January 15, 2020

 Follow on Apple News

GENEVA, Jan. 14 (Xinhua) -- Despite the first exported case of novel coronavirus from the Chinese city of Wuhan, the World Health Organization (WHO) said Tuesday that there is no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission based on available information.

Report; "no additional cases have been detected since Jan. 3", just one week before Wuhan went into lockdown.

At this time, China was preparing for its New Year celebrations, their biggest national holiday. The accompanying travel rush, known as 'Spring Movement' (春运 Chunyun), sees hundreds of millions people take approximately 3 billion trips over the course of 5 - 6 weeks. It is the biggest human migration of the modern world. With no official warning or information about Covid-19, the virus was able to spread silently as many travelled both locally and internationally for the holidays. One report estimates that on January 1st alone, approximately 175,000 people travelled out of Wuhan.



Flight paths out of Wuhan

Months after the first breaking reports of COVID-19, the pandemic has matured into a unique beast. It has exposed the cracks in many government and societal structures: delicate health care systems crumbling under their own weight, national economies sitting at the edge of collapse, political tensions rising amidst the most significant cultural shifts of our time.

And still China's attempt to bury a "mysterious flu" is just one chapter in [its long and censored tale](#). This time, however, the story is played out on a global stage, with unimaginable outcomes.

On February 15th, WHO [Director-General claimed](#) that "we're not just fighting an epidemic; we're fighting an info-demic. Fake news spreads faster and more easily than this virus, and is just as dangerous."

A recent [study published by Cornell university](#) examined misinformation among traditional and online media in the early months of the pandemic. The study concluded that "mentions of President Trump within the context of COVID-19 misinformation comprise by far the largest single component of the 'infodemic.'"

Additionally, only 16.4% of the misinformation conversation was "fact-checking" in nature, "suggesting that the majority of COVID-19 misinformation is conveyed by the media without question or correction."

But how much of a role does the news media play during a pandemic?

## The power of the media in a crisis

**"Outbreaks of infectious disease are not only public health crises but also crises of information. Journalists have at times both built and undermined public trust, serving as both a constructive source of scientific facts and as a destructive source of rumor..."**

[AMA J Ethics. 2020](#)

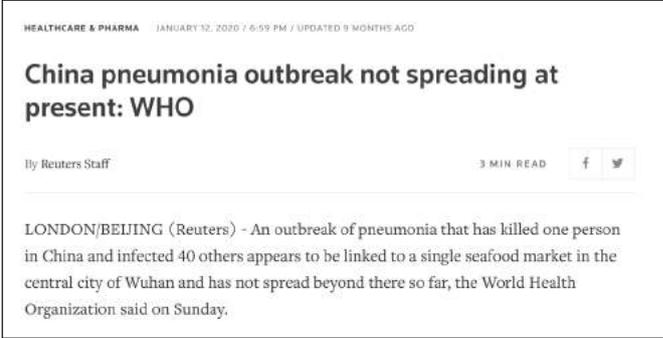
It is well recognised that the media plays "an enormously influential role in public responses to health issues. It has substantial power in setting agendas, what we should be concerned about and take action on, and framing issues." ([BMC Public Health report](#)).

In a 2018 study on [Coverage of Epidemics in American Newspapers](#), researchers looked at over 5,000 news articles from leading American newspapers. It analysed articles on three outbreaks from the last 10 years, including swine flu, Ebola, and Zika. The study determined

that there were “substantial discrepancies” between what the Center for Disease Control aims to communicate during epidemics, and what the media actually communicated to the public. What was lacking was hard information about risks and solutions, both at the individual and organizational level, which could have improved people’s intention to comply with health recommendations during an epidemic.

Media coverage is most pertinent in the early stages of an outbreak, where in the absence of accurate information, “people may look to alternative sources that are **dangerously misleading**”. Such has been the case with COVID-19.

Our findings show that in the early weeks of the outbreak, Chinese officials released inaccurate statements, claiming their investigations found no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission. This false information was repeated by WHO itself, as well as key media sources such as Reuters.



WHO Twitter, 14th January 2020.



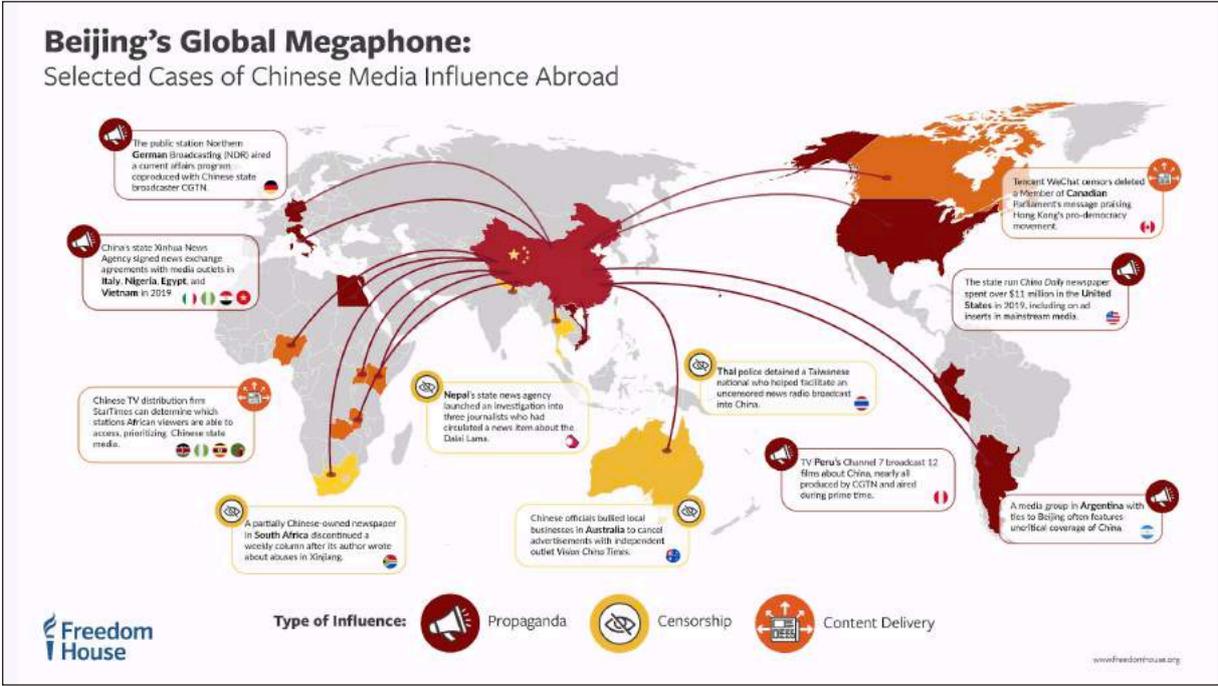
Reuters Article, 12th January 2020.

## The media landscape in China

The Chinese population are avid readers of news, whether state-supported or independent. According to China’s Cyberspace Administration, China has the world’s highest number of internet users; **over 854 million in 2019**. Yet all these online users are confined within the “Great Firewall”, with little to no access to the outside world. This means that foreign news reports on COVID-19 are largely inaccessible, creating a vacuum of knowledge for Chinese locals, though they were at the epicenter of the outbreak.

China has one of the most regulated and restricted media ecosystems in the world, while its control of the internet is **“second to none in terms of its scale and technological sophistication”**. China is also one of the world’s biggest jailers of journalists, according to a 2015 prison census by the **Committee to Protect Journalists**.

Analysis from University College London suggests that the Chinese government does not prioritize open communication and transparency, especially when it comes to COVID-19 related research. This has shown to be detrimental in matters of public health, where knowledge and transparency are powerful tools in the fight against the spread of infectious diseases.



# Literature Review

There have been multiple studies proving that China has been actively suppressing any kind of dissent or discussion surrounding COVID-19 online. However, these studies mostly examine censorship on the local user level, which are discussed below. We instead investigate the ramifications of China's censorship and misinformation on a global level.

Earlier this year, a [University of Hong Kong](#) study analysed global media coverage of COVID-19 in its early stages, illustrating the “international consequences of blocking information about such threats.” The study looked at two sets of data; Chinese social media and global news media. It found that censorship of users on social media “not only limited Chinese people to make necessary and timely responses to the outbreak, but it may have also delayed the global media attention to the upcoming crisis.” This report provides many valuable insights, concluding that “China's censorship is no longer just a local issue.”

Other relevant reports have continued to expose the overwhelming censorship of its citizens and any discourse surrounding COVID-19 online. A [Citizen Lab report](#) found that between January and May this year, more than 2,000 keywords related to the pandemic were suppressed on WeChat.

According to the report, Chinese live-streaming platform YY began censoring content as early as December 31st, 2019, the day the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission released its [first public notice](#). Keywords like “Unknown Wuhan Pneumonia” and “Wuhan Seafood Market” were censored.

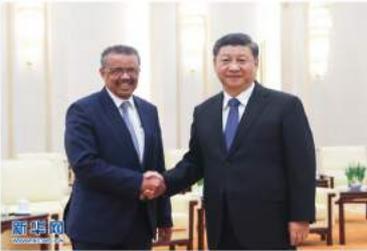
WeChat soon followed suit, censoring “a wide breadth of content related to COVID-19” from January onwards. The chat platform even blocked its users from discussing an announcement from Chinese officials that they had informed the US government about the pandemic for the first time on January 3rd, almost three weeks before they said anything to their own citizens. On February 3rd, the Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson [Hua Chunying's daily briefing](#) stated that China had “notified the U.S. of the epidemic and our control measures altogether 30 times since January 3.”

WeChat is widely depended on as a **key source of information** and communication amongst its users, with **78% of Chinese citizens using it**. Its utility and popularity has extended into the medical community. As highlighted in the Citizen Lab report, **doctors use it as a resource** for obtaining and sharing professional knowledge within their own industry.

**“Because of social media’s integral role in Chinese society and its uptake by the Chinese medical community, systematic blocking of general communication on social media related to disease information and prevention risks substantially harming the ability of the public to share information that may be essential to their health and safety.” - Citizen Lab**

Our report builds on the above findings. We move beyond the censoring of users, which is investigated frequently. Instead, we explore more deeply the communications tactics of China, the response of WHO, and how this has influenced or impacted the global mediascape, and by extension, the spread of COVID-19 on a global scale.

**January 28, 2020**



**WHO Meets with Chinese Leadership**

On January 28, 2020, WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom led a delegation to Beijing and met with Chinese leadership including Xi Jinping. At the meeting, Xi Jinping said “I’ve been *personally deploying, personally instructing* the prevention and control of the epidemic.” Part of Xi’s quote (in italics) was **modified** by Xinhua News Agency.

Xinhua News Agency [\[Source\]](#)

| Keyword | Language           | Translation   | Date Found Censored |
|---------|--------------------|---|---------------------|
| 某人+亲自   | Simplified Chinese | Someone + Himself<br>[“someone” is a code referencing Xi Jinping] | February 3, 2020    |
| 亲自+皇上   | Simplified Chinese | Himself<br>[“someone” is a code referencing Xi Jinping] + Emperor | February 3, 2020    |
| 世卫+亲自指挥 | Simplified Chinese | WHO + Personally instruct   | February 4, 2020    |

Table 4: Sample censored keywords.



Censored image

Identifying censored language, 28th January 2020. Citizen Lab report.

# Research Question

**Did China's censorship catalyse the global spread of misinformation about COVID-19 , and by extension, the virus itself?**

We seek to understand the true impact and implications of local censorship and fake news, as well as how the media becomes a vehicle for such misinformation.

We define misinformation as false or inaccurate information, especially that which is deliberately intended to deceive.

# Report Methodology

Our study analyses the communications response of three different groups:

1. the Chinese government (People's Daily and National Health Commission)
2. the World Health Organisation, and
3. the global media.

The timeframe we examine spans from November 17th 2019 to March 15th 2020 (a few days after WHO declares COVID-19 a pandemic). Analysis after this date becomes overly-exhaustive, as global media reports scale beyond 10,000 a day.

We manually collected each and every report referencing COVID-19 from the press room of China's official governing health body, the National Health Commission (NHC). We performed the same data collection method with People's Daily online (English version). We searched through the digital archives using keywords "COVID-19", "coronavirus" and "viral pneumonia".

The People's Daily is an official newspaper of the [Central Committee of the Communist Party of China](#) and is one of the most widely read news sources, with a circulation of 3 million. Since 1948, "the People's Daily has stood as the formal mouthpiece of the Communist Party: providing a dependably arid and propagandist read every morning even as Chinese society has been transformed under its gaze."

We wanted to understand how transparent and communicative these two primary sources of "truth" in China were during the earliest weeks of COVID-19.

To collect reports appropriately representing global media, we used the [GDELT Project](#) database. The GDELT "monitors the world's broadcast, print, and web news from nearly every corner of every country in over 100 languages and identifies the people, locations, organizations, themes, sources, emotions, counts, quotes, images and events driving our global society every second of every day, creating a free open platform for computing on the entire world." The GDELT project has a dedicated database which monitors online news coverage of COVID-19.

We collected up to the first 2000 random results to assess the leading news headlines each day from December 31st 2019 (first international report) until March 15th 2020.

We then analysed the [World Health Organisation's official communications timeline](#). We also referred to this timeline for key events in our data visualisation map.

We then compared the focus (headline), general sentiment (whether positive, neutral or negative) and subject matter (what the report speaks about) of all reports and communications.

We used the John Hopkins dashboard which tracks the number of COVID-19 cases across the world by nation, though this timeline begins on January 20th. Any estimates of COVID-19 cases prior to this date were collected from a range of credible sources (which are cited and hyperlinked).

From this we created a global map and interactive timeline which presents key dates and news stories as they break, to provide a visualisation of the spread of COVID-19 as compared to official communications from our three subgroups. We collated the total number of hyperlinked headlines and reports each day.

It's important to note that this report is not yet supported by an academic institution but is led by independent data scientists, journalists and technologists. The tools used and information discovered are publicly available to anyone wanting to replicate the analysis or dig deeper and understand the impact of censorship on a larger scale.

## Limitations

As an English-speaking team, we could only refer to translated articles on People's Daily online and English news articles in the GDELT database. This report is therefore limited in that it has relied on English language resources and data to construct its analysis. A far more comprehensive study would provide analysis of native Mandarin and Cantonese-speaking media sources.

## A note on numbers – accurate and official COVID-19 cases

Drawing sources for the most accurate numbers is an especially difficult task. “Accurate” is not synonymous with “official”.

WHO and Jon Hopkins databases of numbers both draw sources from official Chinese government websites; the [Wuhan Municipal Health Commission, China Centre for Disease and Control](#), and the [National Health Commission](#).

Yet between January and April, China had adjusted its definition of what constitutes a COVID-19 infection eight times. The definition changes led to fluctuations in cases reported, leading to uncertainty of the virus’ true impact in China and ultimately poor understanding among other nations on how to prepare.

Until February 12th, only positive results from a laboratory test were included in infection counts. After CT scans were included, [there was a jump in confirmed cases](#) totalling more than 14,000.

According to classified [documents seen by South China Morning Post](#), over 43,000 people in China had tested positive for COVID-19 in late February but were asymptomatic (did not show obvious symptoms), and therefore excluded from the official count. Multiple studies indicate that [“asymptomatic carriers are responsible for a significant proportion of infections.”](#) In late March, the government finally began including asymptomatic infections of the coronavirus in its official statistics for the first time.

Another [study by the University of Southampton](#) ran complex modelling “using anonymised data on both human movement and illness onset, to help simulate different outbreak scenarios for cities in mainland China.” The study estimates that by the end of February 2020 there were a total of 114,325 COVID-19 cases in China.

In March, a report on the [“Real estimates of mortality following COVID-19 infection”](#) was published in The Lancet medical journal. It statistically estimated the time-delay adjusted death risk for Wuhan, and China excluding Wuhan, to interpret the severity of the epidemic. The results indicated that mortality rate of COVID-19 could be as high as 20% in Wuhan, suggesting that the reported figures severely underestimated the potential threat of COVID-19 in symptomatic patients.

According to an [investigative report](#) by Radio Free Asia, the official death toll in Wuhan may have been underreported by almost a factor of 20. The report assesses how many funeral urns (used for cremated remains) were being handed to families every day - sometimes up to 500.

Another study estimated that cumulative infections and total deaths were actually at least 10 times the official figures. The study projected that by February 7, the more accurate numbers ranged from 305,000 to 1,272,000 for infections and from 6,811 to 7,223 for deaths. Official figures at the time were 13,603 and 545, respectively. With an implied starting time of October 2019, the numbers increase drastically; infection cases may have been closer to 2.2 million by February 7, while the estimates of cumulative deaths “based on both funeral urns distribution and continuous full capacity operation of cremation services up to March 23, 2020, give results around 36,000, more than 10 times of the official death toll of 2,524.”

We may never know for sure the “true” numbers of China’s COVID-19 cases and deaths. What is certain, is that China’s “official” reporting of approximately 85,000 cases since March seems highly improbable in comparison to conclusions made by academic research. With a population of over 1.3 billion people, such a low infection rate could not be possible, especially as “China’s statistics fall outside of recognized and accepted medical norms,” This includes the exclusion of positive COVID-19 tests on the basis of symptoms or “excluding deaths that could be attributed to other types of pneumonia.”



# Analysis

## A Timeline Of Covid-19; An Analysis Of News Reports On A Global And Local Level

**Number of estimated cases:** number of cases as reported by external sources, such as media reports and medical studies, including confirmed and projected.

**Number of official cases:** number of cases as confirmed and reported by the National Health Commission.

# November and December 2019

|  |
|--|
| <b>November 17<sup>th</sup></b>  |
| <b>Number of estimated cases: 1</b> (South China Morning Post)<br><b>Number of official cases: 0</b>   |
| <b>Key event: First suspected case of COVID-19.</b><br><p>According to a <b>report</b> in March by the South China Morning Post, Hong Kong's leading English newspaper, a 55 year-old person from Hubei province may have been the first person to have contracted COVID-19 - in as early as November 17. A further 266 people were infected in 2019, though this number could be much higher, with one to five new cases reported each day from the 17th. Some of these cases were likely backdated after patients were re-diagnosed, as it was only in mid to late-December that local doctors discovered they were dealing with a new virus that shared similarities with SARS.</p> |

|  |
|--|
| <b>December 1<sup>st</sup></b>   |
| <b>Number of estimated cases: 1+</b><br><b>Number of official cases: 0</b>   |
| <b>Key event: First known case of COVID-19.</b><br><p>A <b>report</b> approved by the National Health Commission was published in medical journal The Lancet. The report was created by Chinese doctors from Jinyintan Hospital in Wuhan, which treated some of the earliest patients, putting a date of their first known infected patient at December 1.</p> |

**December 15<sup>th</sup>**

**Number of estimated cases:** 27+ (South China Morning Post)

**Number of official cases:** 0

**Key event: First known case by WHO**

The [SCMP report](#) states that by Dec 15th, there were 27 known cases.

**December 16<sup>th</sup>**

**Number of estimated cases:** 27+ (South China Morning Post)

**Number of official cases:** 0

**Key event: Patient at Wuhan Central Hospital diagnosed with unknown coronavirus.**

One of the first known whistle-blowers, Dr Ai Fen, said in [an interview with People](#) that she first came across COVID-19 when a patient at Wuhan Central Hospital was diagnosed as having contracted an unknown coronavirus.

By December 20, the total number of identified cases had reached 60.

## December 27<sup>th</sup>

**Number of estimated cases:** 180+ (South China Morning Post)

**Number of official cases:** 0

### **Key event: China's health authorities informed of new coronavirus.**

Dr Zhang Jixian from Hubei Provincial Hospital of Integrated Chinese and Western Medicine informed China's health authorities that the disease was caused by a new coronavirus.

The Wuhan medical community became increasingly aware of the coronavirus, with some prior accounts of doctors collecting samples from suspected cases around that time, though they "could not confirm their findings because they were bogged down by bureaucracy, such as having to get approval from the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, which could take days."

They were also "ordered" to remain silent and withhold information about the new disease from the public. By the 27th, more than 180 people had been infected, though doctors might not have been aware of all of them at the time.

China's National Health Commission releases a statement on their official news webpage;

"Infectious disease situation stable in China: official"

## December 30<sup>th</sup>

**Number of estimated cases:** 180+ (South China Morning Post)

**Number of official cases:** 0

### **Key event: Wuhan doctors share warnings in WeChat. A gag order is released.**

Two doctors in Wuhan, Li Wenliang and Xie Linka, sent WeChat messages to colleagues warning them of a possible "SARS" outbreak, linked to a local seafood market. Li and Xie, along with 6 other medical staff, were summoned by public security officers two days later and reprimanded for "disseminating rumors".

A gag order is released by the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission.

December 31<sup>st</sup>

Number of estimated cases: 266+ (South China Morning Post)

Number of official cases: 27

### Key event: Epidemiological alert released by Wuhan's health authority

By this time there were reported to be hundreds of cases, if not more, though without directed and collective efforts from the Chinese Party to diagnose and track the virus, reported numbers were relatively low.

An epidemiological alert was released by Wuhan's local health authority about the existence of cases of viral pneumonia with unknown cause. The statement acknowledged 27 cases of unknown pneumonia but said there were no clear signs of human-to-human transmission, and the disease was "preventable and controllable."



Meanwhile, according to The Lancet medical report, 59 suspected cases with fever and dry cough were transferred to a designated hospital starting from Dec 31, 2019. An expert team of physicians, epidemiologists, virologists, and government officials was soon formed after the alert. The World Health Organization is informed, though allegedly not by Chinese officials.

NHC: 0

People's Daily: 1, Total: 1

The People's Daily publishes a syndicated report from Xinhua news about 27 new "viral pneumonia cases". The short article says "there were no clear signs of human-to-human transmission."



International media: 6, Total: 6

Some news outlets abroad begin to take notice. Reuters releases a report; "Chinese officials investigate cause of pneumonia outbreak in Wuhan", while the UK's Daily Mail reports "Dozens struck down with 'unidentified' pneumonia in China".

South China Morning Post covers the story; Hong Kong takes emergency steps as mystery 'pneumonia' infects 27 in Wuhan.



The report notes that "no human-to-human infection had been reports so far, officials said, and no medical staff had contracted the disease...People's Daily said the exact cause remained unclear and it would be premature to speculate"

The New York Times interviewed whistleblower Dr Li Wenliang on this date, though the article would not be published for some weeks, until after his death.

## January 2020

Earlier this year, media studies scholar Qian Gang from the University of Hong Kong **published a analysis** on coverage from various Chinese official newspapers during the first few weeks of January 2020. It includes the People's Daily and Wuhan's local newspaper *Chutian Dushi Bao*.

The research shows that during these three weeks - a critical time for the epidemic - the People's Daily did not acknowledge the virus. Instead, they used the upcoming Chinese New Year as a hallmark for political reflections and to **disseminate propaganda**. Only 7 articles refer to the term "virus", but none a literal reference, and instead a metaphor for President Xi Jinping's endeavour to "remove impurities, eliminate viruses and prevent contamination".

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| <b>January 1<sup>st</sup></b>   |
| <b>Number of estimated cases:</b> 381+ (South China Morning Post)<br><b>Number of official cases:</b> 27  |
| <b>Key events: Wuhan seafood market closes. WHO contacts China.</b><br>WHO requested information on the reported cluster of atypical pneumonia cases in Wuhan from the Chinese authorities. <b>WHO activated its Incident Management Support Team (IMST)</b> , as part of its emergency response framework, which ensures coordination of activities and response across the three levels of WHO (Headquarters, Regional, Country) for public health emergencies. |

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| <b>NHC: 0</b><br><b>People's Daily: 0, Total: 1</b><br>There is no news from People's Daily, nor the NHC. | <b>International media: 4, Total: 10</b><br>There are only four international reports that day, mostly regional to the Asia Pacific. |
|---|--|

## January 2<sup>nd</sup>

### Number of estimated cases:

381+ (South China Morning Post)

41+ (Lancet Medical Journal)

Number of official cases: 27

### Key events: Wuhan authorities punish people spreading “rumours”. WHO contacts China again.

Though the Wuhan Health Commission issued an epidemic notification on January 1st, on January 2nd the Chutian Metropolis Daily **reported** that eight people (medical whistleblowers) had spread false information about “viral pneumonia” on the Internet and were dealt with by the police.

The **Lancet medical report says** that by this day, 41 admitted hospital patients had been identified as having laboratory-confirmed 2019-nCoV infection.

A WHO representative in China wrote to the National Health Commission, offering WHO support follows up again in their request for information when there’s no response from Chinese Officials.

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| <p><b>NHC: 0</b></p> <p><b>People's Daily: 0, Total: 1</b></p> <p>There is no news from People's Daily, nor the NHC.</p> | <p><b>International media: 34, Total: 44</b></p> <p>International media coverage begins to grow. There are 30 online news reports, though more than half are the same article syndicated across local media sites in Australia; <b>"Mystery flu appears out of nowhere as 30 quarantined."</b></p>  <p>The screenshot shows a news article from news.com.au. The headline is "China on high alert following outbreak of SARS-like virus". Below the headline, it says "There are fears the deadly, dreaded SARS virus has returned after 30 people were struck down by a mysterious flu in China." The article is dated January 2, 2020, 8:27 AM. There are social media share buttons for Facebook and Twitter. Below the article, there is a "Related content" section with several video thumbnails and headlines related to the SARS-like virus outbreak.</p> |
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| <p><b>January 3<sup>rd</sup></b></p>   |  |
| <p><b>Number of estimated cases: 381+</b> (South China Morning Post)</p> <p><b>Number of official cases: 44</b></p>  |  |
| <p><b>Key events: China provides info to WHO</b></p> <p>China provides requested information to WHO on January 3<sup>rd</sup>. Chinese authorities inform them of the 44 patients with a shared case of infection.</p> |  |

**NHC: 0**

**People's Daily: 0, Total: 1**

There is still no official communication from the NHC or People's Daily about the growing number of cases, nor does the number of reported cases align with those of the medical community. There are no warnings or health advice issued. Wuhan residents continue to go about their preparations for Chinese New Year.

**International media: 20, Total: 64**

There are 20 news reports from international media, including Forbes;

**"A Mystery Pneumonia Has Afflicted 44 People In Wuhan, China."**

The source of their information appears to be dependent on the statements of local Chinese authorities.



**January 4<sup>th</sup>**

**Number of estimated cases: 381+** (South China Morning Post)

**Number of official cases: 44**

**Key events: WHO tweets about viral pneumonia cases in Wuhan.**

WHO **tweeted** that there was a cluster of pneumonia cases – with no deaths – in Wuhan, Hubei province, People's Republic of China, and that investigations to identify the cause were underway.

**NHC: 0**

**People's Daily: 1, Total: 2**

The NHC are yet to acknowledge the virus, despite their collaborating with WHO.

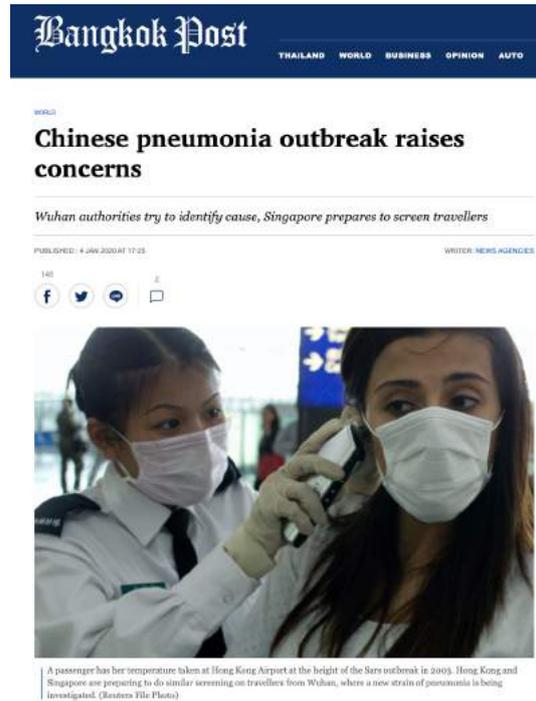
The second People's Daily online article to feature COVID-19 refers to the "infectious disease", but in a Hong Kong context; "**Hong Kong activates serious response level for infectious disease**" The serious response level is the medium level in a three-tier response system for an outbreak of Novel Infectious Disease of Public Health Significance. China does not follow suit.



**International media: 22, Total: 86**

Some international media continue the "mysterium illness" narrative, drawing parallels to SARS. There are no obvious concerns nor references to an international spread of the virus. The number of reported infections remains between 27 - 44 cases.

Bangkok Post;



January 5th - 6<sup>th</sup>

**Number of estimated cases:** 381+ (South China Morning Post)

**Number of official cases:** 44

**Key events: WHO released its first statement regarding the virus.**

WHO released its **first statement** about a “pneumonia of unknown cause - China”. It states that “Based on the preliminary information from the Chinese investigation team, no evidence of significant human-to-human transmission and no health care worker infections have been reported.”

It’s important to note also that WHO website is blocked by China’s firewall, so access to this information is withheld from Chinese public themselves.

**NHC: 0**

**People’s Daily: 0, Total: 2**

There are no articles from the NHC or People’s Daily.

**International media: 80, Total: 166**

Following WHO’s statement, global media begin to ask questions. There are over 100 relevant reports. Over the following days, a mix of headlines both draw links to and rule out SARS, but it’s mostly “mystery” still surrounding this new virus making Asia “nervous”.



A Yahoo Finance headline on January 6th reads “China Finds No Human-to-Human Spread in Widening Pneumonia Cases” (now archived - [updated headline](#)). By this time, COVID-19 cases were retrospectively thought to be in the hundreds, spread very much through human contact.

On that same day, the Chutian Metropolis Daily provides a brief notice from the Wuhan Health Commission on the virus, stating that “59 patients have been ruled out of respiratory pathogens such as SARS.” What is left unsaid is far more powerful than what is said. The leading headlines and stories maintained the spirit of the festive season as millions of people travel in and out of the region.

[In the same edition](#), Mayor Zhou Xianwang is quoted in an article, calling for a “strengthening the construction of the disease prevention and control system, and improving the emergency response and medical treatment capabilities for public health emergencies,” without mentioning the epidemic.

A critical opportunity to spark public discourse around the virus is lost.

January 7<sup>th</sup> - 9<sup>th</sup>

**Number of estimated cases:** 381+ (South China Morning Post)

**Number of official cases:** 44

**Key events: Virus identified as a coronavirus. First in-depth report by Chinese (non-state) media.**

WHO reported that Chinese authorities have determined that the outbreak is caused by a novel coronavirus. WHO's official [statement](#) again repeats that "according to Chinese authorities, the virus...does not transmit readily between people." It also provides reassurance that "China has strong public health capacities and resources to respond and manage respiratory disease outbreaks."

**NHC: 0**

**People's Daily: 1, Total: 3**

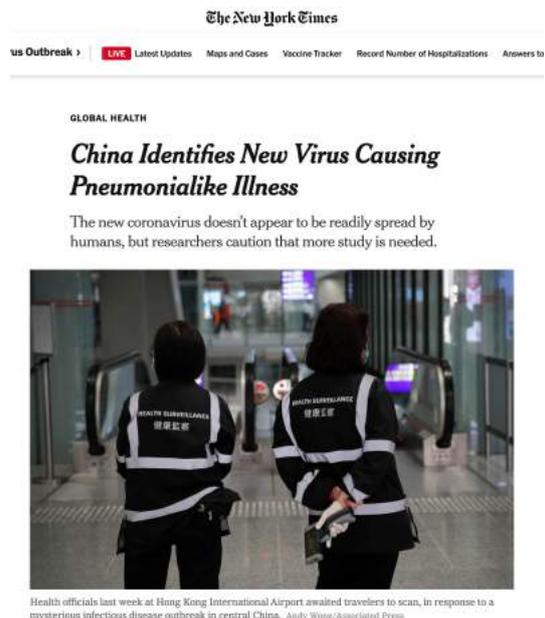
There is still no official communication from the NHC.

People's Daily publishes one article referring to Hong Kong, describing the steps they are taking to prevent the jump from mainland China to Hong Kong island; "[HKSAR gov't steps up efforts to prevent pneumonia outbreak: chief executive](#)"



**International media: 508 (7th - 9th), Total: 674**

With WHO's latest update, international news coverage begins to escalate. Over 440 online news reports are made globally, with trending headlines determined to solve the mystery - a new coronavirus has been identified as the source of unexplained pneumonia cases.



Caixin, an independent Chinese news media outlet, published **one of the first in-depth stories about the virus on Jan 9th** reporting that the mysterious outbreak had been traced to a neighborhood near a seafood market in Wuhan.

“The pathogen of unexplained pneumonia in Wuhan was initially determined to be a new type of coronavirus, and the scope of the epidemic may continue to expand.”

### January 10th

**Number of estimated cases: 381+** (South China Morning Post)

**Number of official cases: 44**

According to **Qian Gang’s analysis**, January 10th was an extremely important day in the development of the epidemic in China. The front page of the Chutian Metropolis Daily had a headline linking the pneumonia cases in Wuhan to a novel coronavirus. However, this news “was entirely ignored by the top Party leadership in Hubei province.” Instead, the “two meetings” of the political consultative conference and the people’s congress secured “blanket coverage”.

**NHC: 0**

**People’s Daily: 0, Total: 3**

No further reports or news.

**International media: 109, Total: 783**

Global news coverage continues to try and solve the riddle of the virus, with headlines introducing the “mystery bug” to readers. The leading source of information is WHO. One story in CNET presents the standard narrative at this time;

“We now know a little more about the virus behind it and how it relates to SARS.

The virus has caused severe symptoms in some, but does not seem to be highly contagious.”



**January 11th**

**Number of estimated cases:** 381+ (South China Morning Post)

**Number of official cases:** 44

**Key events: The first recorded death.**

The first death from the novel coronavirus is confirmed.

**NHC: 0**

**People's Daily: 0, Total: 3**

There are no reports of this from the NHC nor People's Daily. The Wuhan Municipal Health Commission releases a statement about the death, which is picked up by non-state Chinese media.

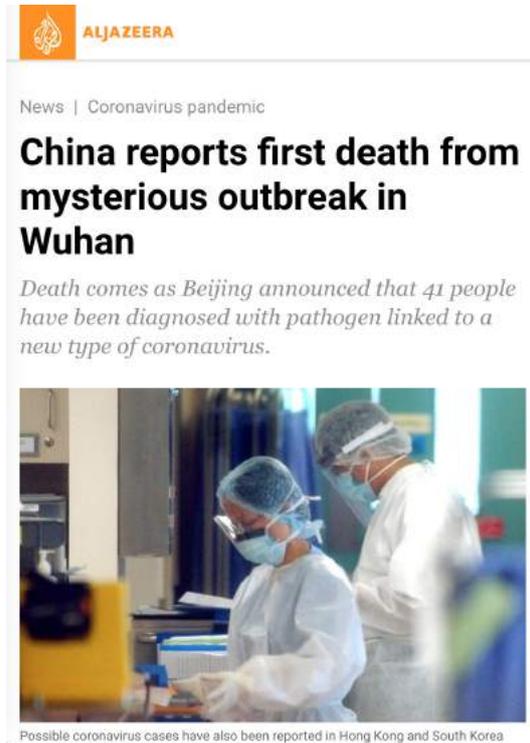
**International media: 479, Total: 1262**

Globally, the first fatality hits harder. There is a lot of syndicated news coverage in one day (over 470 articles), with major headlines breaking similar news stories;

[China Reports First Death From New Virus](#) (New York Times)

[First Death In China From New Coronavirus Pneumonia Outbreak](#) (Forbes)

[China reports first death from mysterious outbreak in Wuhan](#) (Al Jazeera)



The screenshot shows a news article from Al Jazeera. At the top left is the Al Jazeera logo. Below it, the text reads 'News | Coronavirus pandemic'. The main headline is 'China reports first death from mysterious outbreak in Wuhan'. Below the headline is a sub-headline: 'Death comes as Beijing announced that 41 people have been diagnosed with pathogen linked to a new type of coronavirus.' Below the text is a photograph of two healthcare workers in white protective suits and masks working in a laboratory or clinical setting. At the bottom of the screenshot, there is a caption: 'Possible coronavirus cases have also been reported in Hong Kong and South Korea'.

Al Jazeera reshapes misinformation provided by the Wuhan Health Commission is legitimised;

“The Wuhan Municipal Health Commission... added that no new cases had been detected since January 3. The Wuhan health authority also said that the patients were mainly vendors and purchasers at a seafood market in the city, and that to date, no medical staff had been infected, nor had clear evidence of human-to-human transmission been found.”

### January 12th

**Number of estimated cases:** 381+ (South China Morning Post)

**Number of official cases:** 44

### Key events: National Health Commission's first acknowledgement

In his government work report on January 12, Hubei Governor Wang Xiaodong (王晓东) had a section dealing with key problems, with no explicit mention of the new pneumonia outbreak. He said “without health for all, there can be no comprehensive wellness.”

**NHC: 1, Total: 1**

**People's Daily: 1, Total: 4**

On January 12th, China's National Health Commission made its first public acknowledgement of COVID-19. It was a **brief statement**, just one sentence long; "China will share with the World Health Organization information on the genome sequence of a new-type coronavirus detected in viral pneumonia cases reported in Central China's Wuhan city to safeguard global health security, the National Health Commission said on Jan 11."



People's Daily publishes an editorialised version of the above statement; "**China shares genetic sequence of novel coronavirus from Wuhan: WHO**"

**International media: 95, Total: 1357**

Various news accounts downplayed the severity of the virus, even commenting on the casual attitudes of local residents of Wuhan;

**Residents 'Not Worried' In China's Pneumonia-stricken Wuhan**  
(International Business Times);



"Residents of the central city seem just as unconcerned about the disease, ...few on the streets of central Wuhan were sporting masks this weekend."

The report does take note that "some guards appeared more concerned about the spread of unflattering images than contagion."

"Most of the building is empty," Shu said, adding that she believed more pneumonia patients would soon be transferred there. Here we get a small glimpse into the realities of a hospital at the heart of the outbreak.

A Reuters article published on the same day refers to WHO's guidance at the time;

### China pneumonia outbreak not spreading at present: WHO

HEALTHCARE & PHARMA JANUARY 12, 2020, 2:55 PM / UPDATED 3 MONTHS AGO

#### China pneumonia outbreak not spreading at present: WHO

By Reuters Staff

3 MIN READ



LONDON/BEIJING (Reuters) - An outbreak of pneumonia that has killed one person in China and infected 40 others appears to be linked to a single seafood market in the central city of Wuhan and has not spread beyond there so far, the World Health Organization said on Sunday.

The cluster of infections had raised fears of a potential epidemic after China said last week that the virus causing it was a previously unknown type but came from the same family of viruses that caused the SARS and MERS epidemics.

However, the WHO said the outbreak had not spread. The seafood market in Wuhan - a major domestic and international transport hub - is now closed and no cases have been reported elsewhere in China or internationally, it said.

“WHO said the outbreak had not spread. The seafood market in Wuhan - a major domestic and international transport hub - is now closed and no cases have been reported elsewhere in China or internationally, it said.

“The evidence is highly suggestive that the outbreak is associated with exposures in one seafood market in Wuhan,” WHO statement said, adding that the market was closed on January 1. “At this stage, there is no infection among healthcare workers, and no clear evidence of human to human transmission.”

Two days later, WHO would release a statement, based on further investigations, that contradict these initial findings.

**January 13th**

**Number of estimated cases:** 381+ (South China Morning Post)

**Number of official cases:** 44

**Key events: First infection of Covid-19 identified outside of China (Thailand)**

The Ministry of Public Health in Thailand **reported** an imported case of lab-confirmed novel coronavirus from Wuhan, the first recorded case outside of the People's Republic of China.

**NHC: 0, Total: 1**

**People's Daily: 0, Total: 4**

The first international case is not addressed by People's Daily or the NHC.

Despite a confirmed case outside of China, perhaps signifying the infectious nature of the disease, there are still no warnings in Hubei as the Chinese New Year (24th January) approaches. Four notices from Wuhan Health Committee have minimised the perceived risk of the virus. **According to the University of Hong Kong study**, the party media is doing its best to create a joyful and peaceful festive atmosphere. This narrative continues until the 20th.

**International media: 253, Total: 1610**

There are over 250 international news articles, largely covering the death;

**Traveler from China Hospitalized With Coronavirus in Thailand** (Time)

**First case of mystery SARS-like virus found outside China** (Yahoo)

"A new virus from the same family as the deadly SARS disease has spread beyond China's borders for the first time with a case emerging in Thailand, UN and Thai officials said on Monday."

**Straits Times;**

**THE STRAITS TIMES**

**First case of Wuhan virus detected outside China**



In a photo taken on Feb 25, 2020, passengers wait to board their plane at Suvarnabhumi Airport in Bangkok. PHOTO BY ELL

PUBLISHED: JAN 14, 2020, 5:00 AM GST

f s t ...

The World Health Organisation yesterday confirmed the first case of a person outside China carrying the newly identified virus that is believed to have triggered a pneumonia outbreak in Wuhan.

At this stage, the official number of confirmed cases still sits at approx. 41.

### January 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>

**Number of estimated cases:** 381+ (South China Morning Post)

**Number of official cases:** 44

#### **Key events: WHO: “limited human-to-human transmission” possible**

On January 14th, WHO **comments** on the first confirmed case outside of China (in Thailand). During their press briefing, which is shared on Twitter, they state that the potential for human-to-human transmission in the 41 confirmed cases in the People’s Republic of China existed: “it is certainly possible that there is limited human-to-human transmission”.

This is the first time the risk of human-to-human transmission is highlighted. In its risk assessment, WHO said additional investigation was “needed to ascertain the presence of human-to-human transmission, modes of transmission, common source of exposure and the presence of asymptomatic or mildly symptomatic cases that are undetected”.

Their online **report** presents conflicting (perhaps outdated) information; “based on the available information there is no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission. No additional cases have been detected since 3 January 2020 in China.”

**NHC: 0, Total: 1**

**People’s Daily: 1, Total: 5**

On January 15th People’s Daily online publishes one relevant article referring to WHO’s online report; “**WHO says no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission of novel coronavirus.**” With Twitter being blocked in China, WHO’s press briefing may have been missed.

**International media: 544 (14th - 15th), Total: 2154**

Global reports confirm the possibility for human transmission;

**WHO says new China virus could spread, it’s warning all hospitals** (Channel News Asia)

**Wuhan virus has limited human-to-human transmission but could spread wider: WHO** (Strait Times)



Wednesday, Jan 15, 2020

Home Opinions Business Military World Society Culture Travel Science

English >>

### WHO says no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission of novel coronavirus

(Xinhua) 11:03, January 15, 2020

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GENEVA, Jan. 14 (Xinhua) -- Despite the first exported case of novel coronavirus from the Chinese city of Wuhan, the World Health Organization (WHO) said Tuesday that there is no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission based on available information.

The WHO said that additional investigation is needed to ascertain the presence of human-to-human transmission, modes of transmission, common source of exposure and the presence of asymptomatic or mildly symptomatic cases that are undetected.

It is critical to review all available information to fully understand the potential transmissibility among humans and to continue investigations to identify the source of infection, the WHO added.

China: Possible that new virus could spread between humans (Economic Times)

China says it's possible that new virus could spread between humans (Fox News)

WHO warns of wider outbreak of new China virus (Nikkei Review)

WHO preparing for possibility of wider coronavirus outbreak, gives guidance to hospitals worldwide (Globe and Mail)



Apprehension begins to grow, and the international media are already shaping their own narrative - one detached from the realities presented by China. There is a clear disconnect between the tone and story narrated by People's Daily and the rest of the world media.

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| <b>January 16th</b>  |
| <p><b>Number of estimated cases:</b> 381+ (South China Morning Post)</p> <p><b>Number of official cases:</b> 44</p>  |
| <p><b>Key events: A second international case confirmed in Japan. Second death in China.</b></p> <p>Japan confirms its first case of coronavirus. The Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare informed WHO, noting that this person had travelled to Wuhan. This was the second confirmed case detected outside of China. WHO stated that considering global travel patterns, “additional cases in other countries were likely.”</p> <p>The Pan American Health Organization/WHO Regional office for the Americas issued its first epidemiological alert on the novel coronavirus. The alert included recommendations covering international travellers, infection prevention and control measures and laboratory testing.</p> |

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| <p><b>NHC: 0, Total: 1</b></p> <p><b>People’s Daily: 1, Total: 6</b></p> <p>People’s Daily covers <b>the story</b> about the spread to Japan, but does not speak about China’s second death. It is a succinct article of four sentences, which still reiterates that the virus has only “affected dozens of people in China” since the outbreak began last December.</p> | <p><b>International media: 405, Total: 2559</b></p> <p>There are almost 400 COVID-19 related articles across international news, some dedicating coverage to China’s second death, but with the large majority focused on the first documented case in Japan;</p> <p><b>China Announces Second Death From Wuhan Pneumonia Virus</b> (New Zealand Star)</p> <p><b>Sars-family’ virus claims second victim in China</b> (BBC)</p> <p><b>Japan confirms first case of coronavirus</b> (Japan Times)</p> <p><b>Japan confirms first case of new China coronavirus strain</b> (The Guardian)</p> |
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| <b>January 17th</b>   |
| <b>Number of estimated cases: 381+</b><br><b>Number of official cases: 44</b> |
| <b>Key events: Thailand reports its second case.</b>                          |

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| <p><b>NHC: 0, Total 1</b></p> <p><b>People’s Daily: 1, Total: 7</b></p> <p>People’s Daily publishes its first in-depth account of the virus; “Wuhan in all-out effort to curb outbreak of virus”</p> <p>The article states there is “no clear evidence that the new coronavirus can be transmitted between human beings, the possibility of human-to-human transmission cannot be ruled out.”</p> <p>The article goes on to reference Wang Yuedan, an immunology professor at Peking University’s Health Science Center, who said “the virus would not spread globally to any great extent, due to the limited capacity of its human-to-human transmission.” Additionally, a pandemic similar to the SARS outbreak in 2003 is “unlikely.”</p> | <p><b>International media: 1063, Total: 3622</b></p> <p>International media present very different viewpoints to that of China;</p>  <p>New Chinese virus ‘will have infected hundreds’ (BBC)</p> |
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|  <p>Medical professionals at this stage seem grossly unaligned. While “whistleblowers” were drawing direct parallels to SARS, other medical professionals projected a low impact of the virus based on current “evidence”. Wuhan city would go into lockdown just six days later.</p> | <p>“There have been more than 60 confirmed cases of the new coronavirus, but UK experts estimate a figure nearer 1,700.” reported the BBC.</p> <p>“I am substantially more concerned than I was a week ago,” disease outbreak scientist Prof Neil Ferguson, said... For Wuhan to have exported three cases to other countries would imply there would have to be many more cases than have been reported.”</p> <p>Other trending headlines follow Thailand’s second confirmed case, China’s second death in Wuhan. A large amount of global news focuses on new measures taken at US airports;</p> <p><a href="#">Coronavirus concern: passengers from China to be screened for new illness in US airports</a> (Sydney Morning Herald)</p> |
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| <p><b>January 18th - 19th</b></p>  |
| <p><b>Number of estimated cases:</b> 381+ (South China Morning Post)</p> <p><b>Number of official cases:</b> 44</p>  |
| <p><b>Key events: WHO states evidence of limited human transmission.</b></p> <p>The WHO Western Pacific Regional Office (WHO/WPRO) <a href="#">tweeted</a> that, according to the latest information received and WHO analysis, there was evidence of limited human-to-human transmission.</p> |

**NHC: 0, Total 1**

**People's Daily: 0, Total: 7**

There is no news from People's Daily or the NHC.

**International media: 1801 (18th - 19th), Total: 5423**

Globally, the media are far more concerned about the scale of the virus as identified cases continue to rise;

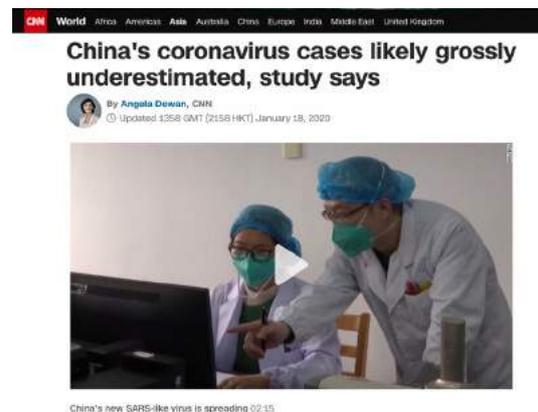


China reports new virus cases, raising concern globally before key holiday (Reuters)

New Wuhan virus cases worry world ahead of Lunar New Year (Free Malaysia)

China reports 17 more cases of new virus strain (MSN)

As experts and scientific studies outside of China begin to calculate the likely number of infections, the media begin to break away from "official" accounts to create a more accurate picture;



Coronavirus cases could be grossly underestimated, study says (CNN World)

“The number of cases in an outbreak of a new strain of **coronavirus in China** is likely to have been grossly underestimated, according to a new study, which warns that human-to-human transmission of the **mysterious virus** may be possible.”

**Deadly Chinese virus may have infected over 1700 people** (Bangkok Post)

“The true scale of the outbreak of a mysterious Sars-like virus in China is likely far bigger than officially reported, scientists have warned, as countries ramp up measures to prevent the disease from spreading.”

**China may be covering up scale of mystery virus, say UK experts** (The Times)

“Amid fears the deadly Sars-type bug will spread globally, scientists believe the outbreak is more widespread than claimed.”



**THE SUNDAY TIMES**  
SUNDAY OCTOBER 25 2020

Log in

THE coronavirus spreading through China and the Far East is related to Sars, which killed 774 people worldwide in 2002.  
GETTY

**China virus: Beijing is suspected of understating scale of threat**

Amid fears the deadly Sars-type bug will spread globally, scientists believe the outbreak is more widespread than claimed

Philip Sherwell, Bangkok, and Andrew Gregory, Health Editor

Sunday January 19 2020, 12:01am GMT, The Sunday Times

**January 20th**

**Number of estimated cases: 381+** (South China Morning Post)

**Number of official cases: 224**

**Key events: First proper acknowledgement of COVID-19 by National Health Commission.**

On January 20th, WHO conducted the first mission to Wuhan, meeting with public health officials to learn about the response to the cluster of cases of novel coronavirus.

**NHC: 1, Total 2**

**People's Daily: 2, Total: 9**

The NHC had remained silent for almost one week when on the 20th January, seemingly out of nowhere, they vowed to “take positive actions to fight the new coronavirus”. They did not reveal how many cases of the virus there were.



The [statement read](#);

**International media: 2107, Total: 7530**

International news escalates, with more than 2000 articles relating to coronavirus published.

WORLD NEWS | JANUARY 20, 2020 / 12:53 AM / UPDATED 9 MONTHS AGO

**As virus spreads to more Chinese cities, WHO calls emergency meeting**

By Se Young Lee, Golin Qian

5 MIN READ



BEIJING (Reuters) - An outbreak of a new coronavirus has spread to more Chinese cities, including the capital Beijing and Shanghai, authorities said on Monday, and a fourth case has been reported beyond China's borders.

The “sharp rise” in cases is in focus, as well as confirmation of human-to-human transmission.;

[Person-to-person transmission confirmed in China virus \(AFR\)](#)

[Coronavirus cases surge in China as virus spreads](#)

“On January 1st, the National Health Commission (NHC) immediately dispatched a national working group and experts to the city and, together with authorities of Wuhan and Hubei province, committed itself on preventing and controlling infection. On Jan 1, the NHC established a leading group to determine the emergency response to the epidemic, to discuss its development and changes, to study and deploy prevention and control strategies and to provide timely disease treatment, epidemic prevention and control and emergency response”

According to the “experts”, the disease “can be prevented and the epidemic potential is under control.”

Despite these optimistic sentiments which applaud their own efforts to control and maintain this new epidemic, between the dates of January 1st and January 20th, there were no public reports, official statements nor acknowledgement of such drastic efforts, whether on a local or national level. It took almost 3 weeks for any official news to be shared with the public.

People’s Daily online publishes 2 stories that day, confirming more cases and a 3rd death in Wuhan.



January 21st

**Number of estimated cases:** 381+ (South China Morning Post)

**Number of official cases:** 224

**Key events: President Xi announces epidemic control measures. First case documented in the USA.**

WHO tweets that it was "now very clear from the latest information that there was at least some human-to-human transmission, and that infections among health care workers strengthened the evidence for this."

The United States of America (USA) reported its first confirmed case of the novel coronavirus.

**NHC: 3, Total 5**

**People's Daily: 11, Total: 20**

President Xi Jinping breaks his silence on COVID-19. He ordered "resolute efforts to curb the spread" of the novel coronavirus, announcing China's epidemic prevention instructions.

The People's Daily publishes 9 related articles, with the front page featuring Xi's address; "All-out efforts ordered to curb spread of virus"



**International media: 5429, Total: 12,959**

On the international stage, news coverage picks up. The sentiment is not positive, unlike the news in People's Daily.

First case of deadly China virus identified in US (Politico)

Taiwan reports first case of new SARS-like virus (France24)

Coronavirus: Viral threat goes global (Daily Examiner)

Wuhan pneumonia outbreak: Asia ramps up defence against coronavirus (Channel News Asia)

“He urged Party committees and governments at various levels as well as relevant departments to make people’s lives and health a top priority, devise meticulous plans, mobilize all available resources and take concrete and effective measures to contain further spread of the sickness.”

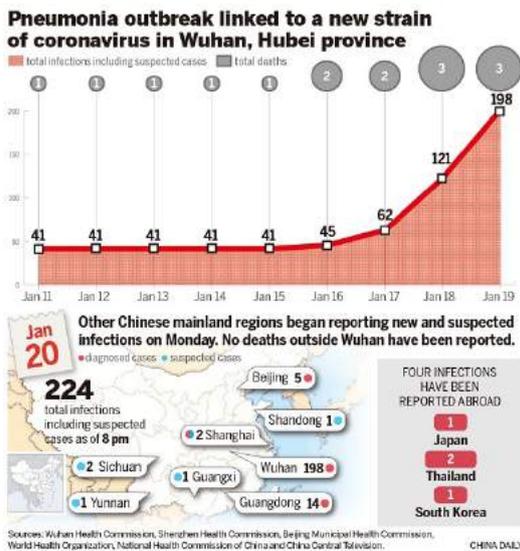
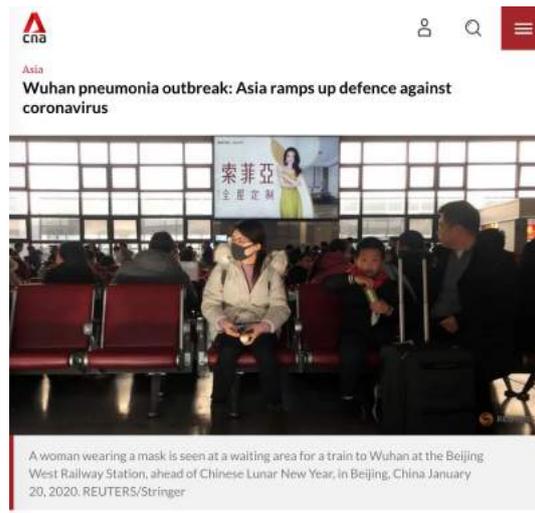
However, Xi wanted measures that would ensure “people across the country enjoy a peaceful and happy festival”. At this point, Wuhan is still kept in the dark; they will go into lockdown in just two days, the eve of the New Year. People’s Daily reported a total of 224 cases.

The NHC releases 3 reports;

Top expert: Disease spread won’t be on scale of SARS

China to attend emergency WHO meeting on new epidemic

All-out efforts ordered to curb spread of virus



## January 22nd

### Number of estimated cases:

**381+** (South China Morning Post)

**305,000+** (MedRXiv report)

**Number of official cases: 440**

### Key events: WHO: evidence suggests human-to-human transmission

Two days after WHO mission arrives in Wuhan, they issue **a statement** that new evidence suggests some human-to-human transmission. This contradicts preliminary information provided by Chinese authorities', whose stated there was no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission. WHO said that more investigation was needed to understand the full extent of transmission.

### NHC: 1, Total 6

#### People's Daily: 7, Total: 27

The NHC release one report that day;  
**Strictest measures enacted to contain viral pneumonia**

There are 7 reports in People's Daily online, reporting 440 confirmed cases of COVID-19. The narrative is centered on strict measures and emergency health responses, though provides little new insight;

### International media: 7735, Total: 20,694

A cross-section of global media that day reflects growing concerns;

**Australia's bid to keep out deadly virus** (Yahoo)

**China says new virus adapting and mutating** (Jpost)

**Chinese social media users worry over virus** (MSN)

**Global emergency measures weighed** (The Standard)

Strictest measures enacted to contain viral pneumonia

China at “crucial stage” to control novel coronavirus, experts say



### January 23rd - January 26th

**Number of estimated cases:** 305,000+ (MedRXiv report)

**Number of official cases:** 1975

#### **Key events: Wuhan placed under lockdown. France detects 3 cases.**

Following the discovery of human-to-human transmission, WHO Director-General convened an IHR Emergency Committee (EC) regarding the outbreak of novel coronavirus. The EC was comprised of 15 independent experts from around the world and was charged with advising the Director-General as to whether the outbreak constituted a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC).

France informed WHO of three cases of novel coronavirus, all of whom had travelled from Wuhan. These were the first confirmed cases in WHO European region (EURO).

**NHC: 7, Total 13**

**People's Daily: 29, Total: 56**

On January 23rd, a syndicated story was published in the People's Daily; [China's Wuhan suspends public transportation, outward flights, trains](#). It reports 444 new cases.

**International media: 36,225 (23rd - 26th) Total: 56,919**

From the 23rd, international news media explodes. There are over 9400 related articles that day, with this volume of coverage remaining consistent over the following days and weeks.

Thursday, Jan 23, 2020

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English >>

### China's Wuhan suspends public transportation, outward flights, trains

(Xinhua) 09:01, January 23, 2020 Follow on Apple News

WUHAN, Jan. 23 — Central China's megacity of Wuhan battling with a pneumonia outbreak has announced to suspend public transportation, and close the airport and railway stations to outgoing passengers, while asking citizens not to leave the city without specific reasons.

City buses, subways, ferries and long-distance coaches, as well as flights and trains for outgoing passengers will be suspended starting from 10 a.m. Thursday until further notice, said a notice issued in the wee hours of Thursday by Wuhan's headquarters for the control and treatment of the pneumonia caused by the novel coronavirus.

The measures will be taken in a bid to "effectively cut off the virus spread, resolutely curb the outbreak and guarantee the people's health and safety," the notice said.

A total of 444 cases of new coronavirus-related pneumonia and 17 deaths had been reported in Hubei Province as of 8 p.m. Wednesday, with the majority in Wuhan, the provincial capital.

While there are 4 news releases from the NHC that day, there's no mention of the lockdown.

On the 24th and 25th, there are no further reports from the NHC.

From the 26th onwards, the NHC produces multiple daily reports and statements relating to coronavirus. Similarly, the coverage of coronavirus in People's Daily begins to rise and there is consistent reporting each day, ranging between 12 - 34 articles. The tone and sentiment of these reports are largely positive and do not convey the scale or seriousness of the virus' impact.

Though the virus has not yet been recognised as a global emergency or pandemic by WHO, apprehension, fear and uncertainty begins to grip the news, especially as death tolls rise and more and more countries see their first cases appear;

[China scrambles to contain strengthening virus](#) (Vancouver Sun)

[Coronavirus: WHO decision divides experts](#) (Oxford Mail)

There are insights into the darker events unfolding in China;

[China builds 1000-bed coronavirus hospital](#) (The Age)

[China expands lockdown against coronavirus as death toll hits 41](#) (Gazette Herald)

GAZETTE & HERALD

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NEWS | UK NEWS

23th January

### China expands lockdown against coronavirus as death toll hits 41

By Press Association 2020

1 You're hired! Apprentices start engineering training

2 CORONAVIRUS: Four new cases in Ayrshire and one death at York Trust

3 LETTERS: Too important to rush during national crisis

GP idea for

People with post a poster warning about a new coronavirus at Suiseo Station in Seoul, South Korea

## January 27th - 29th

**Number of estimated cases:** 305,000+ (MedRXiv report)

**Number of official cases:** 7711

### Key events: WHO arrives in Beijing. UAE report cases

On the 27th, a senior **WHO delegation** led by the Director-General arrived in Beijing to meet Chinese leaders, learn more about the response in the People's Republic of China, and to offer technical assistance.

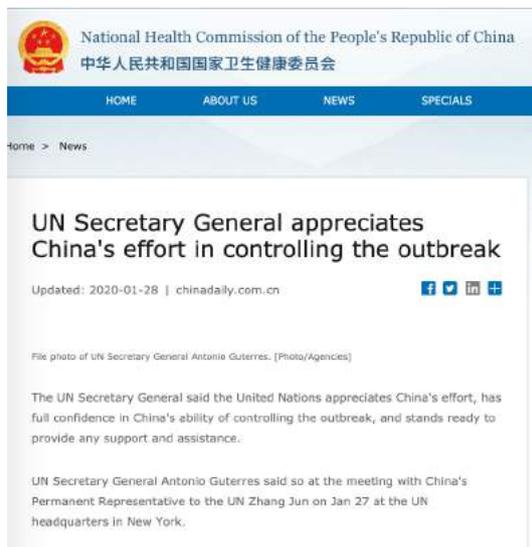
**NHC: 15, Total: 25**

**People's Daily: 104, Total: 160**

The NHC begins to publish frequent coverage highlighting international praise for Chinese leadership;

**WHO leader praises China's response to novel coronavirus outbreak**

**UN Secretary General appreciates China's effort in controlling the outbreak;**



**International media: 43761 (27th - 29th), Total: 100,680**

There is a stark contrast with many foreign news reports, which continue to cover the "growing concerns" among the international community as the virus spreads, and how this will impact the world;

**Global Concerns Grow As China Virus Spreads** (International Business Times)

**Coronavirus on verge of 'pandemic'** (Northern Star)

**Countries evacuating nationals from China** (The Australian)

**New virus poses threat to fragile world economy** (The Herald)

**Coronavirus cases exceed SARS outbreak in China** (The Hill)

Another article published on the 29th quotes an “expert” who claims that the peak of the epidemic is near;

Epidemic peak may come in a week or 10 days: Expert



## January 30th - February 2nd

**Number of estimated cases:** 305,000+ (MedRXiv report)

**Number of official cases:** 17205

**Key events: WHO declares international emergency (30th Jan).**

The Director-General **declared** the novel coronavirus outbreak a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC), WHO’s highest level of alarm.

**NHC: 30, Total: 55**

**People's Daily: 154, Total: 314**

The number of reports published by People's Daily increases in volume. There are dozens of reports each day, with a newly developed narrative which describes a "people's war" against the virus;

Xi voices full confidence in winning battle against novel coronavirus

Xi orders military to contribute to winning battle against epidemic



The NHC continue to promote the positive support of the world leaders;

Leaders of int'l organizations positively evaluate, support China's fight against virus outbreak

The positive sentiment continues in People's Daily;

**International media: 57,520 (Jan 30th - Feb 2nd), Total: 158,200**

News stories are largely focused on the rising death toll and growing number of cases both locally and across the world;

Coronavirus declared global health emergency (BBC)



Coronavirus spreads to every region in China (SAMAA)

It is a pandemic': Virus enters new phase (Daily Examiner)

Expats across China flee as virus fears mount (Reuters)

China facing global isolation as virus toll rises (Reuters)

Some media begin to call out China's lack of transparency;

China lying about death toll from coronavirus (JagoNews)

World leaders speak highly of, support China's anti-epidemic efforts

China's efforts to curb epidemic outflow effective: expert

Notably, a report released on 31st January discusses newly published research; Human transmission of virus as early as mid-Dec, says study

"The conclusion has led some people to believe that such evidence was already discovered by Chinese researchers in December. They accused researchers and officials with the center of intentionally covering up the risk of transmission among people out of self-interest to gain academic clout."



Coronavirus: Beijing clamped down on whistleblowers (The Times)

As New Coronavirus Spread, China's Old Habits Delayed Fight (New York Times)

There are also numerous reports of growing racial tensions towards Chinese nationals;

Fears of coronavirus fuel anti-Chinese racism

**February 5th**

**Number of estimated cases:** 305,000+ (MedRXiv report)

**Number of official cases:** 28018

**Key events:** N/A

**NHC: 18, Total: 73**

**People's Daily: 74, Total: 388**

The People's Daily shares a story which calls out "Disinformation and false reports" about COVID-19, which stoke "unfounded fears among netizens."

World's mainstream media fight rumors about novel coronavirus



The article draws attention to "Far-right American" radio show host Hal Turner who "highly exaggerated the number of deaths and infections from the virus."

Another story is blunt and accusatory;

Coronavirus outbreak exposes evil intentions of some American politicians

**International media: 51,259 (Feb 3rd - 5th)**

**Total: 209,459**

Some media cover "the current tensions in U.S.-China relations", however there is little reactive coverage.

Coronavirus Tests US-China Ties (Global Security)

Previous coverage has highlighted Trump's appreciation of China's efforts.

Like previous days, much of the news is centered on local outbreaks and the impact of COVID-19 on trade, stock markets and oil prices.



 Wednesday, Feb 5, 2020

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### Coronavirus outbreak exposes evil intentions of some American politicians

By Shen Yi (People's Daily Online) 08:40, February 05, 2020 [Follow on Apple News](#)

The sudden outbreak of the new coronavirus pneumonia has not only tested China's response, but also highlighted foreign attitudes and perceptions towards China.

It is not particularly surprising that American politicians such as the U.S. Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo and the U.S. Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross have taken advantage of the situation and exposed the hegemonic nature of the country by being extremely selfish and irresponsible.

In an interview on Jan. 30, Wilbur Ross said that while the emerging coronavirus in China is a "very unfortunate, very malignant disease" whose victims deserve empathy, he also saw the potential for a positive impact on jobs in the U.S. and Mexico.

Soon after, the Commerce Department, which was attempting a face-lift, issued a further statement, saying it was trying to take responsibility for the safety of U.S. companies in China and hinting at what it called Beijing's "poor record" of covering up risks.

This will be the first of many reports in which editors attempt to redirect or shift discourse from China and highlight the fake news and failings of other countries, particularly the US.

The article claims that American politicians "with evil intentions" have "taken advantage of the situation and exposed the hegemonic nature of the country by being extremely selfish and irresponsible."

The article claims that "the ultimate victory must be China" and as for America, "time will see their defeat, and history will record their ugliness."

## February 6th - 7th

**Number of estimated cases:** 305,000+ (MedRXiv report)

**Number of official cases:** 34,546

### Key events: Dr Li Wenliang, coronavirus whistleblower, dies.

One of Wuhan's **original whistleblowers** Dr Li Wenliang dies. There is no mention of his death in People's Daily. The crackdown on freedom of speech worsened as millions of Chinese people **took part in an online revolt**, vocalising their sadness and anger at Dr Li's death, and demanding free speech.

**NHC: 8, Total 81**

**People's Daily: 138, Total: 526**

A People's Daily article covers the death of Li Wenliang, though does not explain the context of his whistleblowing efforts or recount any punishment he received;

[Let's win battle against novel coronavirus for deceased Doctor Li](#)



Interestingly, the paper also syndicated news from [China Daily](#) which did reveal that on January 3rd, "Li and the seven others were summoned by Wuhan police for "spreading fake information on the internet". They were reprimanded but not fined or detained, the police said."

The article also explains that "several Weibo posts...went viral on social media, sparking immense sorrow and outrage of netizens."

**International media: 33,582 (Feb 6th - 7th)**

**Total: 243,041**

There are multiple stories covering the death of Li Wenliang;

[He Warned of Coronavirus. Here's What He Told Us Before He Died.](#) (New York Times)

[RIP Li Wenliang, Coronavirus Hero](#) (Science 20)

[Coronavirus kills Wuhan whistleblower doctor](#) (City AM)

[Outrage over virus whistleblower's death](#) (Daily Telegraph)

[A New Martyr Puts a Face on China's Deepening Coronavirus Crisis](#) (NYT)



### ***A New Martyr Puts a Face on China's Deepening Coronavirus Crisis***

The death of the doctor whose warnings about the coronavirus were silenced has become a potent symbol of Beijing's failures.



## February 8th - 10th

**Number of estimated cases: 305,000+** (MedRXiv report)

**Number of official cases: 42,638**

### **Key events: Death toll surpasses SARS (>811). WHO-CHINA mission deployed.**

WHO deployed an advance team for WHO-China Joint Mission, having received final sign-off from the People's Republic of China that day. The mission had been agreed between the Director-General and President Xi Jinping during WHO delegation's visit to China at the end of January. The advance team completed five days of intensive preparation for the Mission, working with China's National Health Commission, the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, local partners and related entities and WHO China Country Office.

**NHC: 24, Total: 105**

**People's Daily: 127, Total: 653**

On February 10th, the People's Daily again targets American politicians;

**Cold War mentality of some U.S. officials real virus threatening the world**



Monday, Feb 10, 2020

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**Cold War mentality of some U.S. officials real virus threatening the world**

By Wang Zhen (People's Daily Online) 09:45, February 10, 2020 Follow on Apple News

As Chinese people unite as one to bravely fight the novel coronavirus epidemic and take unprecedented control measures to curb the spread of the virus, some senior U.S. government officials' remarks about the epidemic, which have included gloating, sarcasm, and slander, have been particularly shocking.

On Jan.30, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo viciously attacked China's national system under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC) during his visit to UK, claiming that the CPC "presents the central threat of our times".

On Feb.6, FBI Director Christopher Wray said at a conference at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the largest research institute of international studies in the U.S., that "no country poses a greater threat than Communist China."

On the same day, U.S. Attorney General William Barr told the conference China has emerged as the "top geopolitical adversary" of the U.S.

**International media: 31,783 (Feb 8th - 10th)**

**Total: 274,824**

The first American dies due to COVID-19, which receives global coverage;

**US citizen dies of coronavirus in Wuhan (Hindu Times)**

The deadly potential of the virus is amplified, as numbers exceed that of the SARS virus in 2003;

**Coronavirus Single-Day Death Toll Reaches New High (Shanghai News)**

**Coronavirus deaths exceed Sars fatalities (BBC)**

“Some senior U.S. government officials’ remarks about the epidemic, which have included gloating, sarcasm, and slander, have been particularly shocking... U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo viciously attacked China’s national system under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC) during his visit to the UK, claiming that the CPC “presents the central threat of our times.”

There is no parallel drawn to SARS in their coverage.



A US report with nationalist sentiment syndicated in Yahoo News;

[Trump’s War Against the Coronavirus Is Working](#)

## February 11th - March 10th

### Number of estimated cases:

43,000+ (South China Morning Post)

114,325+ (University of Southampton)

305,000+ (MedRXiv report)

**Number of official cases: 44,653 (Feb 11th)**

### Key events: WHO names the coronavirus COVID-19. Governments begin closing schools and lockdown cities as the virus spreads globally.

On Feb 11th, WHO **announced** that the disease caused by the novel coronavirus would be named COVID-19. Following best practices, the name of the disease was chosen to avoid inaccuracy and stigma and therefore did not refer to a geographical location, an animal, an individual or group of people.

**NHC: 462 Total: 567**

**People's Daily: 1431, Total: 2084**

Both the NHC and People's Daily continue the "people's war" campaign, with a consistent tone of optimism and positivity.

Research paper predicts outbreak will level off in late April

China contains 99% of COVID-19 cases within borders through lockdowns, sacrifices



By March 8th, Chinese authorities claim they are already seeing a decline in overall cases, just a few days before WHO declare COVID-19 a pandemic;

**International media: 739,862 (Feb 11th - Mar 10th), Total: 1,014,686**

Over the next month, the global mediascape continues to focus on the hard and "grim" facts; rising death tolls, travel bans and lockdowns, effects on the world economy including job cuts, as well as "horror" stories from the medical front lines;

China confirms virus deaths horror (The Chronicle)

WHO warns of 'very grave' global virus threat (Yahoo News)



Deaths hit new high in China's virus epicentre (BBC)

In a Manila Bulletin article, WHO claims it is focusing its efforts on China due to it being the center of the pandemic;

China's new COVID-19 cases drop to double-digit figures since Jan. 21

The People's Daily highlight the failings of the US;

US government continues to flounder as COVID-19 situation worsens



The screenshot shows a news article from People's Daily Online, dated Tuesday, Mar 10, 2020. The article is titled "US government continues to flounder as COVID-19 situation worsens" and is attributed to (People's Daily Online) 17:25, March 10, 2020. It features a photo of Kurt Michael Campbell, former Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, speaking at a press conference. The article text discusses the rising number of COVID-19 cases in the US and the WHO's stance on the situation.

**US government continues to flounder as COVID-19 situation worsens**

(People's Daily Online) 17:25, March 10, 2020

*Kurt Michael Campbell, former Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, noted that places like nursing homes will be at enormous risk in the period ahead, and a fundamental slowdown in the global economy will possibly take place in the next several months. (Photo :Hudson Institute official website)*

As the number of people dead and infected from COVID-19 sees a significant rise across the US, uncertainties among both officials and the public continue to grow over whether the US has already missed its best window of opportunity to curb the spread of the lethal virus, or even if the government is fully prepared for even more severe consequences.

During a news briefing held on March 9, WHO Director General Tedros Ghebreyesus reiterated that in areas with community spread, "testing every suspected case and tracing their contacts becomes more challenging, while actions must be taken to prevent transmission at the community level to reduce the epidemic to manageable clusters."



The screenshot shows a news article from Manila Bulletin, dated February 14, 2020. The article is titled "WHO to focus fight vs. COVID-19 in China" and is written by Jeffrey Damicog. It features a photo of WHO Director General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus speaking at a press conference. The article text discusses the WHO's focus on fighting COVID-19 in China.

**WHO to focus fight vs. COVID-19 in China**

Published: February 14, 2020, 12:08 AM  
by manilabulletin\_admin

By Jeffrey Damicog

The World Organization Organization (WHO) said on Friday (Feb. 14) it intends to focus its fight against the 2019 novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in China.

"Like with Ebola in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, our strategy is to hammer the virus at its epicenter in China, where 99 percent of all cases have been reported," WHO Director General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said in his speech

Some media outlets begin to question the integrity and capability of WHO, even suggesting they were attempting to delay the response strategically in a "coronavirus coverup";

WHO underestimates the spread of the Coronavirus (Science Daily)

WHO denies China made it play down coronavirus crisis (The Times)

## March 11th

### Number of estimated cases:

43,000+ (South China Morning Post)

114,325+ (University of Southampton)

305,000+ (MedRxiv report)

**Number of official cases: 80,813**

### Key events: COVID-19 officially declared a global pandemic by WHO.

Deeply concerned both by the alarming levels of spread and severity, and by the alarming levels of inaction, WHO made the assessment that COVID-19 could be characterized as a pandemic. Recognising that COVID-19 was not just a public health crisis but one that would touch every sector, he restated WHO's call – made from the beginning – for countries to take a whole-of-government, whole-of-society approach, built around a comprehensive strategy to prevent infections, save lives and minimize impact.

On March 13th, The Director-General said that Europe had become the epicentre of the pandemic with more reported cases and deaths than the rest of the world combined, apart from the People's Republic of China.

### NHC: 15, Total: 582

#### People's Daily: 61, Total: 2,145

The NHC addresses the new pandemic status of the outbreak, though draws attention to Europe's growing number of cases;

COVID-19 outbreak declared pandemic as it takes rising toll in Europe

There are reports of China's average decline in numbers - a "victory" led by President Xi.

### International media: 78,102

#### Total: 1,092,788

Following WHO's declaration of an official pandemic, fears grow about the spread of COVID-19 in Europe and the US, driving much of the narrative. With a reported decrease in numbers, China is no longer the primary source of the virus; Map spells disaster for Europe (Byron News)

WHO chief says COVID-19 cases in significant decline in China, its experience 'impressive'

People's Daily;

"Turning the tide" -- Xi leads anti-virus war toward victory

Some days later, the NHC releases the following reports, refocusing much of the narrative on Europe as the new "epicenter" who could look to China as an example of how to further contain the spread;



Global COVID-19 controllable "by June" if most countries act like China: expert

Europe becomes epicenter of COVID-19 pandemic: WHO

The People's Daily also suggests that China may not have been the origin of the virus;

US army might have brought epidemic to China, says Chinese FM spokesman in tweet



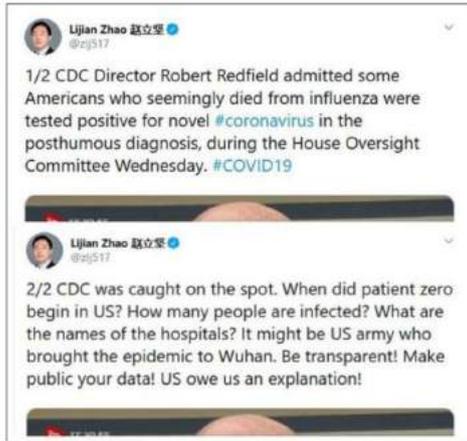
English &gt;&gt;

## US army might have brought epidemic to China, says Chinese FM spokesman in tweet

(People's Daily Online) 17:02, March 13, 2020

[Follow on Apple News](#)

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian wrote on his Twitter account on Thursday that the US military may have brought the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) to Wuhan.



"CDC was caught on the spot. When did patient zero begin in US? How many people are infected? What are the names of the hospitals?" Zhao wrote on Twitter, "It might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan. Be transparent! Make public your data! US owe us an explanation!"

# Findings

## Misinformation going viral

This research examined the impact of China's local censorship and misinformation on the global mediascape, and by extension, the spread of COVID-19 itself. Two key findings were identified: first, that WHO shared and therefore reinforced false claims made by Chinese authorities; second, that these initial reports played a domino effect of misinformation across the global mediascape.

Despite Wuhan health officials releasing their **first public notice** about the virus on December 31st 2019, it was three weeks later on January 20th that the **NHC finally communicated** about the disease. This was just one day before President Xi formally addressed the virus himself and ordered epidemic control measures.

During these few weeks, there are only 9 relevant articles in People's Daily online. Of these reports, which are mostly syndicated from other sources, one has the title; "**WHO says no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission of novel coronavirus**" (January 15th), while three focus on regions other than China (Hong Kong and Japan).

An independent Chinese publication Caixin, an influential local newsmagazine, **would later report** that between January 1st and 19th, Wuhan officials stressed that information about the outbreak could not be leaked out, especially "not to the media". They also detailed how health officials concealed early evidence that the virus showed striking similarities to severe acute respiratory syndrome, or SARS, which caused a deadly global outbreak in 2002 and 2003. "When was the alarm sounded?" it asked.

Comparatively, international media began reporting on COVID-19 from December 31st 2019. By the time President Xi had made his address on January 21st, there were already thousands of international reports for the same period. However, a large number of these articles reiterate dangerously incorrect information, shared by WHO.



In their own statements, WHO reiterated (and therefore legitimised) the false “evidence” shared by China, choosing to rely on the integrity of those preliminary investigations. This includes the repeated **claim up until January 14th** that “based on the available information there is no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission. No additional cases have been detected since 3 January 2020 in China.”

With little other sources to draw from at that time, reputable media institutions such as the BBC, Al Jazeera and Reuters relayed this misinformation. With large-scale user-censorship and the silencing of the local medical community, China’s official narrative was carried forward by WHO and the world press. The number of reported cases at this time was also relatively low, minimising the severity of the virus.

On January 11th, **Al Jazeera** quoted the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission, writing that “no new cases had been detected since January 3rd” and there was “no evidence of human-to-human transmission.”

The next day, on January 12th, **Reuters published an article** saying that according to WHO, “the outbreak had not spread” and there have been no more cases “reported elsewhere in China or internationally”.

# China pneumonia outbreak not spreading at present: WHO

By Reuters Staff

3 MIN READ



LONDON/BEIJING (Reuters) - An outbreak of pneumonia that has killed one person in China and infected 40 others appears to be linked to a single seafood market in the central city of Wuhan and has not spread beyond there so far, the World Health Organization said on Sunday.

It is only on January 14th that the world media begin to wake up to the dangers of the virus, “preparing for possibility of wider coronavirus outbreak”. From the 16th, the international spread of the virus is “concerning” to momst.

By the 17th, the media began questioning and investigating its true magnitude. Without a reliable source of truth or statistics, they turn to their own local experts for scientific reasoning and opinion. In the lead up to President Xi’s formal acknowledgment on January 21st, the global media break away from the official Chinese narrative, which appears to be “covering up” the “grossly underestimated” number of infections.

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**New virus in China 'will have infected hundreds'**  
By James Gallagher  
Health and science correspondent  
15 January  
Coronavirus pandemic  
**There were six coronaviruses known to infect people before the latest discovery**

**THE SUNDAY TIMES** Log in Subscribe  
MONDAY OCTOBER 26 2020  
The coronavirus spreading through China and the Far East is related to Sars, which killed 774 people worldwide in 2002  
GETTY  
**China virus: Beijing is suspected of understating scale of threat**  
Amid fears the deadly Sars-type bug will spread globally, scientists believe the outbreak is more widespread than claimed  
Philip Sherwell, Bangkok, and Andrew Gregory, Health Editor  
Sunday January 19 2020, 12.01am GMT, The Sunday Times

With WHO's confirmation of human-to-human transmission on the 20th, the number of international news reports escalates into the thousands. By the 21st, the "global threat" of the virus is clear.

However, China's official communications line continues to publish misleading and inaccurate reports, despite WeChat and Weibo being flooded with images and stories about the true devastation of the virus.

China's "world-class efforts" instead dominate much of the NHC's reporting. Articles frequently highlight the "praises" of international leaders and WHO, claiming China deserves "gratitude and respect" for their efforts. People's Daily routinely echo the praises of their government.

The NHC also offered reassurance that the spread of Covid-19 "won't be on the scale of SARS", information syndicated by People's Daily. On January 30th, the NHC shared the "good news" that the "coronavirus outbreak may hit its peak in a week or 10 days...."

The Party campaigns a "battle" against the virus - a "people's war". Many stories focus on everyday health workers and local heroes who are helping their fellow comrades.

The virus had been weaponized by the government. It has rallied the Chinese people together, with "fearless" leadership guiding them through the battlefield. Positive news coverage was drowning out the hard and confronting truths - people were sick, people were dying, hospitals were struggling.





 Wednesday, Feb 5, 2020

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### WHO says novel coronavirus not pandemic, fighting misinformation crucial

(Xinhua) 09:52, February 05, 2020 [Follow on Apple News](#)

GENEVA, Feb. 4 (Xinhua) -- The World Health Organization (WHO) said Tuesday that the novel coronavirus epidemic has not become a pandemic but an outbreak with multiple foci, and that fighting against the "epidemic of information," rumors or false information, is crucial.


 National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China  
 中华人民共和国国家卫生健康委员会

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### Expert: Global viral outbreak to come under control within six months

Updated: 2020-02-27 | chinadaily.com.cn 

Zhang Wenhong, the leader of the Shanghai team of experts in the treatment of the novel coronavirus pneumonia, talks to China Daily journalists in an exclusive interview on Feb 25. [Photo by Gao Erqiang/chinadaily.com.cn]

The global spread of the novel coronavirus could come under control within six months as most infection cases in foreign countries are imported and China has gained experience in coping with the outbreak, a leading Shanghai expert told China Daily in an exclusive interview on Feb 25.

Zhang Wenhong, the leader of the Shanghai team of experts in the treatment of COVID-19 patients, added that other factors include researchers having a better understanding of the disease.

The key to controlling the spread of the virus, said Zhang, lies in prevention measures as well as the scaling back and cancellation of public gatherings in major cities.

# Conclusion

**Collaborative research** done by Chinese, British and American scientists estimate that had there been a strong intervention and action at the start of January, the number of COVID-19 cases may have seen a reduction of 95 percent.

Our findings show that during the earliest and most critical weeks in January, dangerous misinformation filled the void of truth and fact. This likely prevented any meaningful intervention or response on both a local and global level, catalysing the spread of the virus as it was silently transmitted around the world.

Global media could only report on a “mystery illness”, and one that seemed far less contagious and less threatening than it revealed itself to be. However, in this fight against the ‘info-demic’, the media must also hold themselves to a higher standard. As illustrated by Cornell University researchers, COVID-19 misinformation is often carried forward by press institutions “**without question or correction.**”

Censorship is not just about erasing history. It’s omission, it’s denial, presenting insignificant “facts” in lieu of more important ones. It’s about strangling the important conversations and questions which need to be asked, and giving a voice to misinformation and propaganda instead.

But a virus is not a fact that can be altered, nor a secret to be contained. COVID-19 continued to spread until the governments were forced to lock down entire cities.

In the aftermath of global pandemic, it appears transparency and truth may be the very best antidote we have in the fight against a viral outbreak. They could be the cure to both ideological and literal sickness.

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## About Mysterium Labs

**Mysterium Labs** is the Research and Development division of **Mysterium Network**, an open-source project rewiring the internet so it becomes censorship-resistant, free and secure for all. At Mysterium Labs, you'll find us somewhere between software and hardware, coding the fabric of the Web 3.0