The Big Read **Coronavirus pandemic**

Coronavirus: the cost of China's public health cover-up

A crackdown on information about the virus in Wuhan allowed the disease to spread far more widely

James Kynge in Hong Kong, **Sun Yu** in Beijing and **Tom Hancock** in Wuhan
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On January 18, roughly six weeks after China's deadly coronavirus started to spread in Wuhan, the city's Baibuting district was preparing for its annual mass banquet. On the 20th anniversary of the event, the organisers would be attempting to break a world record for the largest number of dishes served.

Long tables in 10 locations were laid out with a total of 13,986 dishes, some bearing patriotic names such as Motherland in My Heart (cucumber and ham), and One Belt One Road (vegetable salad). The platters were prepared by members of some 40,000 families, according to media reports, with many of them showing up to eat the food and smile for the cameras.

Despite those happy scenes, the Baibuting banquets now stand as a symbol of China's mishandling of a viral outbreak that has killed 565 and infected more than 28,000, and spread to at least 27 countries and territories.

Residents wear masks as they buy vegetables at a market in Wuhan. They have been told to stay in town in order to help stop the outbreak of the coronavirus © Getty

The district is now facing a rising toll of infected citizens. Notices saying “fever block” in red and black letters were pasted this week on 57 communal stairwells in the district, according to local reports and photographs seen by the Financial Times.

“I feel very lucky I didn’t take part in the banquet, as I have two young kids and thought it was inconvenient to bring them along,” says Sally Zhang, a Baibuting resident. “There are now more than 10 infections among my neighbours”.

The epidemic ranks as the biggest crisis to have hit Xi Jinping, China’s Communist party leader, since he took power in 2012. Not only has the outbreak brought large swaths of the world’s second-largest economy to a grinding halt, it also undermines the party’s aura of competence.

Piecing together the events in Wuhan shows that for at least three weeks before the banquet, city authorities had been informed about the virus spreading in their midst but issued orders to suppress the news. In effect, they engineered a cover-up that played down the seriousness of the outbreak, according to officials and medical professionals.

Residents sit around a table full of homemade dishes on February 9 2018 in Wuhan. The mass banquets in the city's Baibuting district now stand as a symbol of China’s mishandling of a viral outbreak © Wang He/Getty

The most fateful consequence of the official silence was that it facilitated the exodus of some 5m people in the weeks before the city was quarantined on January 22, thus helping to transport the virus all over the country and overseas. Slow and sometimes contradictory statements from the World Health Organization, which is responsible for warning the world of public health emergencies, also hampered early efforts to combat the crisis.

Just as with China's Sars outbreak that killed 800 people worldwide in 2002-03, the central shortcomings in China's response have derived from its rigidly hierarchical political system.

"There is no question that the Wuhan government underestimated the disease," says a senior adviser to China's central government, who declined to be named. "The mayor of Wuhan has neither the expertise nor the willingness to follow health experts' advice. His concern is that an escalation in disease prevention may hurt the local economy and social stability."

He adds: "In the current political atmosphere, which values obedience more than competence, local officials have an incentive to avoid taking responsibility."

Jude Blanchette, a China analyst at CSIS, a Washington-based think-tank, also sees a political dimension behind the health emergency. "There's a natural inclination for party officials at all levels to bury negative information and censor dissenting views irrespective of who's in charge in Beijing," says Mr Blanchette. "But under Xi Jinping, the inclination to suppress has become endemic and, in this case, contributed to a prolonged period of inaction that allowed the virus to spread."

Coronavirus

Timeline of an outbreak

Vice-premier Sun Chunlan inspects the new Huoshenshan Hospital in Wuhan on February 2 © Chen Yehua/Xinhua/eyevine

DEC 8

The first patient to be later diagnosed with Wuhan coronavirus presents with symptoms. Chinese medical experts later trace an earlier case of a patient who experienced the symptoms of the virus on December 1.

DEC 30

Li Wenliang, a Wuhan doctor, informs fellow doctors in an online chat group of seven new pneumonia cases. But Wuhan medical authorities forbid doctors from making public announcements and order them to report cases internally.

JAN 2

Hospitals admit 41 patients in Wuhan, 27 of whom had direct exposure to a local seafood market which is regarded as one of the sources of the virus.

JAN 10

Scientists publish the first gene sequencing data on the virus, showing it to be from the same family as the Sars coronavirus.

JAN 18

The number of infected patients rises to 62. Wuhan city government holds an annual mass public banquet in Baibuting with some 40,000 families making and sharing food.

JAN 21

The US reports the first laboratory-confirmed case as the virus starts to spread beyond mainland China.

JAN 23

Wuhan suspends all public transportation from the city, including bus, metro and ferry lines. Additionally, all outbound trains and flights are halted.

FEB 5

The count of countries and territories to have reported confirmed cases rises to 27.

Several claims made by the Wuhan authorities about the virus, which began to spread as “pneumonia of unidentified causes” from early December, conflict with the testimonies of health professionals. The first issue was the repeated claims by officials that human-to-human transmission of the virus was limited.

Zhou Xianwang, mayor of the city of 11m, was still citing this explanation in a state television interview on January 21, when the number of cases had risen to 312. “The reason why the Baibuting community continued to host the banquet this year was based on the previous judgment that the spread of the epidemic was limited between humans, so there was not enough warning,” he said.

But Wuhan authorities had been informed weeks earlier that the virus could indeed be spread between humans. In an interview with Huxijie, a medical website, Zhao Jianping, a pulmonologist at Tongji Hospital in Wuhan, said he diagnosed patients with suspected coronavirus as early as December 27.

“We didn’t expect the disease to be so severe,” said Mr Zhao. “But we were sure it could spread from human to human.” Mr Zhao said he immediately reported the situation to the Wuhan Centre for Disease Control and Prevention.

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus (L), director general of the World Health Organization, with President Xi Jinping at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on January 28 © Naohiko Hatta/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

In addition, the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission, a body that reports directly to the mayor, said as early as January 16 that the virus may have been spread by human contact — two days before the banquets were held and six days before the city was finally quarantined. Scientists in the New England Journal of Medicine said there was transmission between humans in close contact from the middle of December.

The other glaring inconsistency in the Wuhan authorities’ account is why the official number of patients identified as having the disease did not rise between January 2 and January 16 — a crucial two-week period when millions of Wuhan residents were starting to return home for Chinese new year.

This period coincided with key dates in the city's calendar. Between January 6 and 11, cadres from across Hubei province gathered in Wuhan for the annual session of the local People's Congress. At this time, too, Wuhan authorities handed out some 200,000 free or subsidised tickets to local attractions.

Premier Li Keqiang, (C), talks to medical workers at Wuhan Jinyintan Hospital on January 27 © Li Tao/AP

Nevertheless, several accounts have emerged to show that even though the official count of coronavirus cases did not rise, the number of people becoming infected was surging. A radiologist in a Wuhan public hospital was quoted by Caixin, a Chinese news website, as saying he identified 50 new cases on January 15. The official Xinhua news agency, meanwhile, ran a story on a doctor who fell ill with the virus on January 11.

Reinforcing such accounts of a cover-up, Li Wenliang, a doctor at the Central Hospital of Wuhan, informed fellow medics in an online chat group on December 30 of seven new pneumonia cases. But on the same day that Dr Li mentioned his cases, the WMHC was forbidding hospitals from making public announcements and telling hospitals to simply report cases internally.

This approach was causing consternation in Dr Li's chat group, with one writing that "the government still hasn't determined whether to announce". The same person added in a subsequent post that "last Friday [December 27], our department was the first to report it to the city centre for disease control".

Despite of the authorities' attempts to control the flow of information, news of the virus soon seeped out. By the evening of December 30, a hashtag of "Wuhan Sars" was trending on the popular Chinese microblog Weibo, before censors removed it.

An aerial photo taken on February 2 shows Huoshenshan Hospital, which was built to treat coronavirus patients © STR/AFP/Getty

The information crackdown continued with Dr Li being reprimanded by Wuhan police, who made him sign a document saying his statements were inaccurate, according to a photo of the document he shared with Chinese media. At least seven other medical professionals were similarly warned over "rumour-mongering".

Dr Li was by no means the only Wuhan resident to realise something was amiss as early as December. One resident, who identified himself only by his surname, Wu, says: "I heard about it in December, but it wasn't clear what was going on. There were small news items online, but the government said it wasn't a problem so we didn't pay too much attention."

Mr Wu says the moment of realisation in the city was when Zhong Nanshan, an epidemiologist who became famous for his work during the Sars epidemic, confirmed on state television on January 20 what many other health professionals had been saying in private or in online chat groups for weeks: the virus could be spread from human to human.

When the FT arrived in Wuhan on January 19, the streets were busy, restaurants and shops were open as usual. The mood transformed overnight on January 22, when the city announced it would close its public transport links the next day. Suddenly, the streets became quieter and almost everyone who ventured outside wore a mask. Most businesses began to close and tens of thousands of people streamed into hospitals with suspected symptoms.

Medical staff transfer patients to the newly completed Huoshenshan Hospital on February 4 © EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

Eventually, China's supreme court acknowledged that the suppression by Wuhan authorities of Dr Li's warnings over the virus along with those of seven others had been wrong. On January 29, the court said the Wuhan police should have been "tolerant" rather than accusing them of rumour-mongering. On Thursday, Dr Li died after being infected by the virus.

On the same day, Zeng Guang, chief epidemiologist at China's Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, criticised local governments for failing to consider public health issues from a purely science perspective.

"What we said is only partially incorporated into the decision-making process," Mr Zeng was quoted by the official Global Times newspaper as saying. "[Local governments] take a political perspective and consider social stability, the economy and whether people could happily enjoy Lunar New Year."

Despite the evidence of a cover-up, some aspects of China's response to the crisis have been impressive. By January 10, researchers at Fudan University in Shanghai had sequenced the coronavirus gene, a key step in understanding characteristics of the epidemic. In addition, authorities in Wuhan moved fast to build two new hospitals. A 1,000-bed facility called Huoshenshan, was constructed in just 10 days.

Nevertheless, the enormous human and economic costs of censorship — both for China and for the rest of the world — are starting to come into sharp relief. Several respected scientists have estimated that the true number of people infected by the coronavirus may be several multiples higher than the official figures from China suggest.

Officials in protective gear disinfect Indonesian students as they disembark upon arrival at Hang Nadim international airport in Batam, after being evacuated from Wuhan © Indonesian Embassy/AFP/Getty

Gabriel Leung, dean of the University of Hong Kong's medical school, said on January 31 that in Wuhan alone some 75,800 people may have been infected. Mr Leung's estimate compared with an official number of confirmed cases in all of China of 11,791 on the same day.

The economic cost is also mounting. Li-Gang Liu, chief China economist at Citi, forecasts that the country's first-quarter growth will slow to 4.8 per cent compared with a full-year rate of 6.1 per cent in 2019. Disruptions to global supply chains are set to deepen.

But as the world counts the cost, the WHO's conduct faces increased scrutiny. It declared a global health emergency on January 30, by which time the virus had spread well beyond China, reversing its own decision of a week earlier to hold off on such a declaration.

The WHO said it did not declare a global health emergency at the earlier meeting largely because there had been no evidence of human-to-human transmission outside of China.

This was its second public reversal. On January 14, a WHO epidemiologist said there had been "limited" human-to-human transmission of the virus. But later that day the WHO said there had been a "misunderstanding" and that there was "no evidence" of human-to-human transmission.

"The WHO is so much in thrall to China's influence, they have felt compelled to stay close to China's line on this crisis," says one UN diplomat who spoke on condition of anonymity. "China wanted to downplay this virus and the WHO felt it had to fall into line, at least until its position became untenable."

However, John Mackenzie, a member of the WHO's emergency committee, laid the blame for the slow response at China's door. He told the FT that China must have been withholding information on new cases from the WHO. "Had they [Beijing] been a bit stronger earlier on, they might have been able to restrict the number of cases not only in China but also overseas," he said.

The WHO said it has held "frank" discussions with Chinese leaders. "Keeping open lines of communication between Chinese authorities and WHO has been critical in helping China, and the world, respond to this outbreak," it said.

Many closer to the outbreak's centre have a more critical view of the Chinese authorities. Li Kun, a resident of Huanggang City close to Wuhan, where more than 1,400 cases have been confirmed, has cut his number of daily meals from three to two after the local government last week ordered every family to send no more than one person out once every two days. "I believed in the government when the disease first broke out," he says. "Now I think twice whenever officials say something."

Additional reporting by Christian Shepherd in Beijing, Sue-Lin Wong and Qianer Liu in Shenzhen

This article has been amended to include a direct response from the World Health Organisation.

FT Magazine Coronavirus pandemic

Inside Wuhan: China's struggle to control the virus – and the narrative | Free to read

Beijing is keen to portray a city returning to normal, but many still question what really happened

Don Weinland in Wuhan APRIL 23 2020

A seemingly endless line of masked patients fills a crowded hospital corridor. The sick are bundled in heavy coats and scarves in the icy, fluorescent light as they wait to see a nurse or doctor. These photographs, stealthily taken on Hao Jun's mobile phone, are a silent record of the crisis that engulfed Wuhan just two months ago.

Sitting with Hao under a camphor tree on a warm spring day in the city's Liberation Park last week, the images feel almost unreal. On April 8, Wuhan was liberated after a 76-day quarantine that had trapped 11 million residents within its boundaries. Now, fields of wild flowers have bloomed across the park and a few visitors stroll through the sycamores.

But the pain of two months ago never seems far from Hao's mind. From early February, he — like most residents in the city — was surrounded by affliction and death. He spent days accompanying family and friends to hospitals in search of beds and medicine. Most eventually recovered but several died of the virus, among the more than 3,800 fatal cases in Wuhan.

Throughout the chaos of the outbreak that started in late January, Hao spent hours secretly taking photos, keeping a citizen's record of what he described to me as "disorder" and "madness".

Hao, in his late forties, is one of a small but tight-knit group of dissidents based in Wuhan who took it upon themselves to document the earliest days of coronavirus, a period that has become a closely guarded secret by China's Communist party.

The city, a sprawling metropolis at the heart of central China, is ground zero for the outbreak now sweeping the planet, with 2.5 million infected globally and 165,000 dead at the time of going to press.

Many scientists suspect the disease may have been first transmitted to humans in a local wet market, where wildlife such as bats — which can host highly transmissible viruses — was once sold as a delicacy.

Wuhan's place at the geographic centre of the country and at a number of key junctures in history has also made it a hub of political awareness. It hosts some of China's top universities and, over the years, has gained a reputation as an outpost for dissidents, who have faced increased government surveillance since the outbreak began.

Even so, Hao's willingness to speak frankly about gross mismanagement of the disease by the Communist party puts him in a tiny cohort. Local officials are accused of not only reacting slowly in late December, but also of aggressively silencing those who tried to raise concerns early on. Many people who watched loved ones overcome by the illness have felt deep anger and frustration.

Wuhan's official death count was revised upward last week by more than 50 per cent, vindicating those who argue that the state under-reported the number of deaths. Many experts still question whether the official data is accurate. Office workers, state employees and dissidents alike have asked why their lives were so suddenly upended by the outbreak — and whether there was a better way of handling it.

"Of course it could have been different," says Hao, who notes that his activities are monitored closely by the local police and has asked to use a pseudonym. "Different leaders could have done things differently. They would have protected the people instead of just protecting themselves . . . We [record what's happening] because this is the only way people can know what the real situation is. We have to do this ourselves because you cannot rely on the government news."

I return to my hotel room in central Wuhan to find a package from the local government waiting for me. They have sent foreign journalists two large bottles of hand sanitiser, 20 masks and a 55-page comic book dedicated to sanitation. In one cartoon, a grinning bottle of ethyl alcohol reminds readers to wipe down their phones up to four times a day.

But the main item in the care package is a hastily bound white booklet with a cover that reads simply: *The Chinese Way*. Most of the content is a selection of state-media stories about the pandemic, in seemingly random date order. But it also includes a carefully curated timeline of the crisis in China — a window into the Communist party's construction of its narrative around the outbreak.

The story begins on an unspecified date in late December when Wuhan's Centre for Disease Control detects "cases of pneumonia of an unknown cause". By January 7, President Xi Jinping has given instructions on responding to the oncoming epidemic. On January 20, a veteran doctor warns the country of human-to-human contagion, while the first patients — an elderly man surnamed Wan and his wife — are successfully discharged from the hospital.

In February, the official timeline has Chinese experts and officials spreading their knowledge across the globe, advising Estonia on the 17th and briefing the crown prince of Abu Dhabi on the 25th.

As fear and contagion began to run wild in the US and Europe in March, the booklet suggests that China's story was drawing to a neat conclusion. The entry for March 24 says: "Xi stressed that the international community has already recognised that China made enormous sacrifices in the fight against Covid-19 and bought precious time for the world."

But the omissions in the document are often more telling than the official timeline itself. *The Chinese Way* makes no mention of Dr Li Wenliang, the national hero of the epidemic. On December 30, Li raised an early alarm when his hospital in Wuhan began seeing patients with a Sars-like strain of pneumonia.

In a chat group among physicians, he advised them to protect themselves from the virus. Days later, Li was summoned to the local Public Security Bureau and forced to sign a document admitting that he had made false statements that disturbed the public order. Many experts have argued that these early attempts to cover up the outbreak and silence Li may have prevented coronavirus from being contained to just a few Wuhan hospitals.

Also absent from the official timeline is an entry for Li's death. He died of coronavirus on February 7: the image of his masked visage became a symbol of a government cover-up and the poorly managed response in the first weeks of the outbreak, long before the virus had spread widely elsewhere. In some drawings of Li shared online, his surgical mask has been replaced with barbed wire.


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不该只有一种声音。
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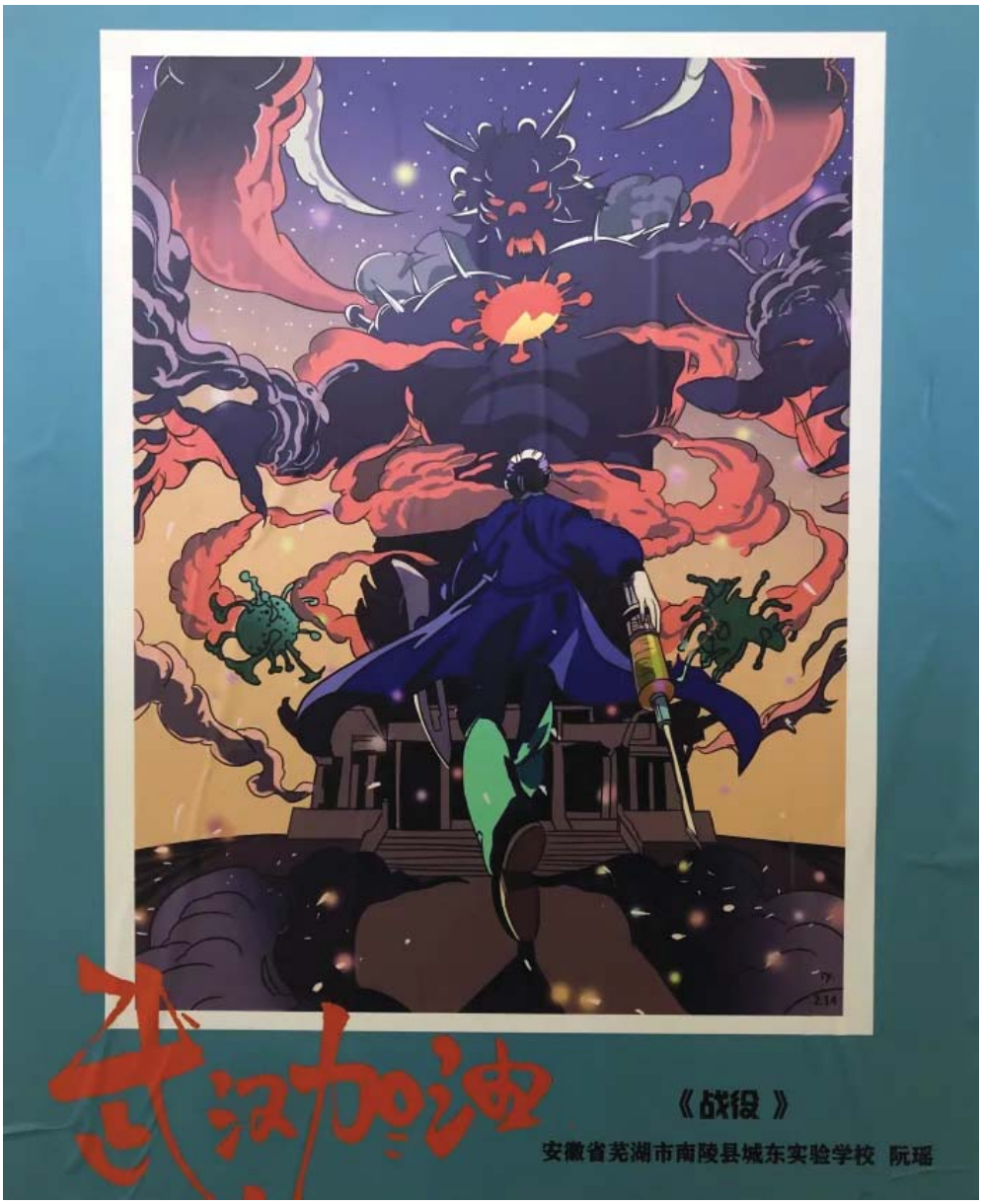

Despite the government's initial censure of Li, after his death his image was quickly co-opted by the party as a model of selflessness and a representative of the doctors working on the frontlines in Wuhan — a motif that is still being employed.

Meanwhile, other images of Li have been scrubbed from Chinese social media, deemed too sensitive to be allowed to propagate in the country's often unruly online circles.

Ai Fen, the head doctor at a hospital in Wuhan and one of Li's colleagues, confirmed to a Chinese publication in March that there had indeed been a local government effort to limit public discussion of the outbreak in January.

In an interview titled "The One Who Hands Out the Whistles", which was quickly removed from the publication's website, Ai said: "Had I known the situation would be like it is today, I wouldn't care if I get criticised or not, I would have told everyone." Since then, reporters have been unable to reach her.

When it comes to controlling the public narrative over coronavirus, the stakes for the Communist party are high, says Zhou Xun, a reader in modern history at the University of Essex and a specialist on health intervention and delivery under the party.

An incident in early March — in which one of China's vice-premiers was greeted with shouts claiming "it's fake, it's fake" as she toured a Wuhan residential district — highlighted the growing frustration and audacity of ordinary Chinese people who felt government efforts had fallen short.

As Zhou points out, a key element of the party's legitimacy is derived from its ability to provide health services to its people — an idea that was undermined by photographs showing long lines of sick patients desperate for assistance. In recent weeks, the government has worked hard to guide attention away from the early missteps of the crisis, including seeking to turn the virus into a "menace from the outside", Zhou says.

Several senior Chinese diplomats have actively promoted the idea that coronavirus may have been planted by the US military during the "Military World Games" that took place in Wuhan in October. "Such nationalistic rhetoric will also allow people to forget the earlier tragedy in Wuhan," she says.

When it comes to China's timeline of the crisis, Li Yuanyuan has several entries of her own to add. The temperature had dropped to 6C on the morning of February 6, when Li, an office worker in her thirties, brought her ailing 63-year-old mother to Wuhan No 4 Hospital.

Several days earlier, Zhang Shiying had been struck with a raspy cough and high fever, one of several people in her building to be overcome with such symptoms. The more she coughed, the worse it got, until she could hardly move from her bed.

A local clinic confirmed she probably had coronavirus. When the pair arrived at the hospital bundled in down jackets to protect against the cold, they joined the back of a queue that wrapped around the building.

It would be six hours before Zhang, who struggled to stand, would see a nurse and receive an intravenous injection of saline fluids often given to those who have a common cold. They made the trip on three consecutive days until her mother could no longer stand.

Following hundreds of other Wuhan residents in early February, Li took to social media as a last resort. In a short message posted on Weibo, a Twitter-like social media platform in China, she sought any help she could get, a desperate cry in cyberspace.

The message gave grisly details of her mother's condition: "Difficulty breathing . . . constant vomiting and diarrhoea, bodily weakness, cannot eat." Li went on to describe an exercise in hopelessness: "I've called the mayor's hotline many times . . . I've downloaded the State Council's app [for assistance], I've asked for help from community officials all without any results. So in the end I've had to post this here and wait." She signed off with two namaste emojis.

"It was a terrible feeling, standing there in the cold for so long with so many people," she tells me. "We were begging for anyone to help us. My last hope was to beg for help on Weibo."

Assistance eventually arrived when volunteers moved Zhang to a small hotel that had been converted into a quarantine centre. She was then taken to Leishenshan Hospital, a sprawling emergency field hospital built in about 10 days to take in 1,500 patients.

All told, Zhang's ordeal lasted from January 28, when she first became ill, to April 11, when she returned home. I speak with Li one day after her mother has arrived back safely at the flat. We talk over the phone because the household is now under lockdown, but stress and fatigue are noticeable in her voice.

She says she doesn't know who to blame for the weeks of torment her family suffered but she knows that things were not right and that someone should be accountable for what happened.

When I ask if everyone in her building has recovered, she pauses briefly before offering a subdued response. "No, not the auntie below us. She passed away. My mum and her were friends. They were always chatting. Her symptoms were much worse early on. They went for an injection early and waited in line until midnight. Once she got into bed [back home], she did not get out. There was nowhere for her to go. The hospitals were full."

As Wuhan awakens from the 76-day ban on travel, the streets of Hankou district are buzzing with the release of pent-up energy. There is a noticeable increase of cars on the road. On Liberation Park Avenue, a wide boulevard in central Wuhan, families have come out to bask in the early spring sunlight. For many, it is the first day in months that they have been able to walk freely on the streets.

But the damage to Wuhan is not hidden, and the fear of a second wave of disease is palpable. Many of the shops that have dared to open their doors have placed benches, tables or chairs across the threshold to keep people out. From a safe distance, customers point to the pack of cigarettes or the bowl of instant noodles they want instead of walking the aisles themselves.

The Huanan seafood market in the centre of the city, where the virus is thought to have first infected people, has been boarded up. When I visit on April 6, a large temporary wall has cordoned off the area and several police keep watch over the now-dark shops barely visible behind it.

The only evidence that the area was once a market with live animals is the almost unbearable stench that hangs over the nearby streets — a sign that, after the power in the market was shut off, proprietors had left in a hurry without cleaning out their fridges.

Elsewhere, a wartime air still lingers. Many sections of the city remain physically walled off with large blue fencing. A stroll through Hankou district reveals section after section of closed residential areas, where people are allowed to leave only to buy essential goods.

I am told by guards outside one section that an asymptomatic case of coronavirus has been found inside and the entire residential area has been shut down. Testing has become ubiquitous to root out hidden cases. One district has set up a hotline and has offered a reward for reporting people with asymptomatic cases, despite these being undetectable without a proper test.

Like many, Hao seems overjoyed to be outside and back on the streets of his city. He had his hair cut a day earlier, the first time in 100 days, he says. Several fluffy seeds falling from the sycamore trees have collected on his freshly cropped head.

Distrust has been part of Hao's outlook since his days as a university student in Wuhan in 1989, when protests swept campuses across the country, culminating with the Tiananmen massacre that June.

Some of his anger against the Communist party runs deeper. With tears in his eyes, he tells of an impoverished childhood, when his family was forced to eat radish skins while officials lived in comfort.

Local officials are accused of not only reacting slowly to the outbreak, but also of aggressively silencing those who tried to raise concerns

Activism and revolution are also part of Wuhan's tradition. In 1911, the city sparked off the initial unrest — now called the Wuchang Uprising — that eventually led to the overthrow of the Qing dynasty, China's last feudal dynasty.

In 1967, the Cultural Revolution came to a head in the city when students and workers clashed in deadly riots in the streets, forcing China's leader Mao Zedong and other revolutionary elites to tone down the movement, lest they lose control over it. Hao's father participated in the clashes, he says, and he insists that revolution and disobedience run strong in Wuhanese blood.

"When I was a child my father told me that there was a rotting body left in the streets for a month [after the clashes] — not far from here," he says pointing toward the city's old quarters. He tells the story with the same sense of intrigue as a child who has overheard some unspeakable detail and cannot quite grasp its significance. "The corpse swelled up to five times the normal size."

Hao looks up and points at the camphor tree we are sitting beneath and smiles. "I like to come and sit here when it rains. The raindrops mix with the oil on the tree and it produces a lovely fragrance. The whole park smells of it."

Surreptitiously monitoring the outbreak is a risky occupation. Hao has not posted his pictures online publicly but several of his friends actively sought to record events in an attempt to inform the public.

Among these was Fang Bin, a businessman and activist, who vanished in early February after recording and publishing a 40-minute video on YouTube in which he is heard commenting on the number of corpses accumulating at a hospital. "Why isn't the media coming to the hospitals to report the real situation?" he asks.

Chen Qiushi, a lawyer and citizen journalist, began posting videos from around Wuhan in which he showed long lines of weak, frustrated patients waiting to see doctors. He, too, has disappeared and has yet to resurface. My attempts to locate and speak with both men while in Wuhan failed.

In what has been perhaps the most direct written attack on the Communist party during the outbreak, real-estate tycoon and high-ranking party member Ren Zhiqiang, based in Beijing, penned a missive in early February in which he accused the party of incompetence and called Xi Jinping a clown.

"When shameless and ignorant people attempt to resign themselves to the stupidity of the great leader, society becomes a mob that is hard to develop and sustain," he wrote. His essay was shared online with a group of friends, and later circulated more widely on Chinese social media.

Ren became incommunicado in March, a close acquaintance told the FT. Some have noted that his credentials as a party insider made his criticisms an unignorable threat to the government's narrative of a quick and transparent handling of the crisis.

On April 7, one day before Wuhan reopened to the outside world, the local party discipline watchdog announced an official investigation into the businessman.

In the early days of the outbreak in China, as the Communist party came under mounting pressure over its inability to contain the spread, some experts saw a small glimmer of hope for political change in the country, says Huang Yanzhong, a senior fellow for global health at the New York-based Council on Foreign Relations. But mismanagement of the disease elsewhere in the world quickly took the onus off the party.

The announcement of the investigation into Ren on the eve of Wuhan's reopening was a strong signal that any political change was off the table. "It was quite calculated they did that on the day before Wuhan opened up," says Huang. "They have closed the window on any political change with the investigation into Ren."

While the Trump administration has sought to blame China for the outbreak, the bungled US response in cities such as New York, which has more than double the number of official deaths in Wuhan, has been useful for China in deflecting criticism of its authoritarian system.

"The failure of many governments from around the world to deal with Covid-19 only goes to show that governance failure comes in many different flavours," said Jude Blanchette, a China expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. "But for the CCP, it can now point to open political systems and say, 'See? This is what liberal democracy gets you.'"

Only when Xu Xu pulls down her mask for a sip of coffee do I realise that I have not seen her face until that moment. In fact, almost all the conversations I have had over the past week have been faceless, mask to mask. Her nose quickly disappears again and will be visible only a few more times until her cup of latte is empty.

Xu, a 28-year-old in Wuhan, was among thousands of volunteers recruited to help build the city's biggest hospital. On December 30, rumours of an unknown virus began to proliferate on her WeChat account.


A东-2

Social media is heavily censored in China and sensitive topics are often quickly scrubbed from the internet. But Xu, who has asked to use a pseudonym, and many other Wuhan locals say that knowledge of a mysterious illness was widespread enough to break through at least some level of censorship — or perhaps it had not yet grabbed the attention of government internet monitors. If her friends' friends had heard about it, authorities must have known much sooner, Xu believes.

"This is just information shared among friends, nothing official. We really didn't think much about it at the time and just went on like normal. We kept hearing about it but there was no real alarm for almost a month," she says.

Looking back, she does not fully accept the narrative put forward by the government. "There are definitely questions about the early days of the outbreak . . . When they closed the city, we were terrified. I never heard the words '*feng cheng*' before. I didn't know that was possible."

Feng cheng means to seal the city. On January 22, just two days after officials confirmed human-to-human transmission of the virus, the central government said it would close all transportation in and out of Wuhan at 10am the following day.

Over the next few days, the province of Hubei, where the city is located, followed suit, putting into effect a cordon sanitaire covering about 60 million people, the largest in history. In many areas with recorded cases, stepping outside one's home became illegal. All taxi, bus and city transport was suspended.

As people were forced inside and the streets emptied, Xu volunteered to head to the frontlines. She says she felt it was her duty as a young, able-bodied person to come to the assistance of the weak and dying.

On January 28, she joined a team of thousands of volunteers to build the Huoshenshan Hospital, another sprawling complex of fever wards erected in about 10 days. Xu spent that week carrying materials.

Days later she was dispatched to a neighbourhood in central Wuhan where she began delivering rations to quarantined families and also helping elderly people reach the hospital for doctors' appointments. "We went to where no one wanted to go," she says, referring to her many trips into areas known to have high infection rates.

Keting Field Hospital is empty by April 8, when I and other reporters are given an official tour. I never catch a glimpse of Dr Zhang Junjian's face as he leads a group of reporters around. But above the surgical mask, his eyes show the signs of sleepless nights.

As vice-president of Wuhan's Zhongnan hospital, over the past two months he will have seen thousands of patients, many of them deathly ill. Before it became a field hospital, Keting was a large cultural centre in the northern reaches of the city. A massive poster of South Korean pop star Rain overlooks hundreds of empty beds in the section of the auditorium we tour.

As a hospital, it treated 1,760 patients, with more than 1,400 people lying in beds in the tightly controlled fever wards at the peak of the outbreak. On one divider wall, Post-it Notes form a large heart, each with a handwritten message. It is a tribute to the patients, created by a team of doctors that came to work in the hospital from the neighbouring province of Fujian. "We are together with you Wuhan," is written on paper cut-outs beside the memorial.

Today Keting has become a museum of sorts, dedicated to the Communist party's narrative of success in tackling coronavirus. Standing in front of the yellow sickle and hammer on one of the many party flags pinned to the walls, Zhang tells reporters that not a single patient died there, though he admits the most serious cases were moved to a hospital next door.

Still, the field hospital stands as evidence of the party's quick and effective work, to be shown off to visitors looking for signs of mismanagement. Steering critical questions away from the origins and early days of the outbreak, Zhang's message is one of a return to normality in the shaken city.

Though it has not yet been added to *The Chinese Way*, the trip around Keting feels like we are walking to the end of China's official timeline for the disaster in Wuhan, where the final line of the story is punctuated by an empty hospital with a flawless record.

But for people such as Hao, the outbreak has been less of a linear tale of adversity and triumph. Instead it is a reminder of the constant struggle to live outside the Communist party's sanitised narrative.

"Some of us will disappear. This is nothing new," he says from his seat in the park, his mask pulled down to his chin, exposing a cheerful grin. "But we will keep trying to show you what is real."

Don Weinland is an FT Beijing correspondent. Additional reporting by Wang Xueqiao in Shanghai.

The main pictures for this article were taken by a photographer who wishes to remain anonymous

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Letter in response to this article:

The inquisition on Wuhan needs to stop / From Niccolo Caldararo, Dept of Anthropology, San Francisco State University, CA, US

Life & Arts

My travels through a China in lockdown

FT correspondent Yuan Yang charts the impact of the coronavirus on friends, family and daily life

Yuan Yang JANUARY 31 2020

On the eve of Chinese New Year, I set off from Beijing for my grandparents' home in northern China. It is the day after the city of Wuhan has in effect been placed under quarantine. I am headed some 600km from Wuhan, but this New Year holiday is very different: almost everyone on the train from Beijing is wearing a face mask. I take mine off when I arrive at my grandparents' crowded flat, where they, along with a total of seven aunts, uncles and cousins, are already folding dumplings for the pot.

They are chatting about the virus outbreak, but the mood is still calm: everyone is busy dealing with a more immediate concern: making dinner for a large family. So far, only Wuhan has taken city-wide preventive measures, but we are now discussing our own. To some relief, my grandparents announce they are cancelling our usual visits to relatives.

Traditionally, the eve and first day of the New Year holiday are reserved for immediate family: parents, children, grandparents. Then, on the subsequent days of the week-long break, the elders stay at home while the younger generations visit more distant relatives.

In my case these are the great-aunts, the second cousins twice removed, whom I might see once a year. I know very few of their names, but that is normal: in Chinese families, everyone is addressed according to what relation they are. If you can't remember the exact relation, then "auntie" or "uncle" will do. Fei Xiaotong, an anthropologist of rural China, famously argued that using names was an urban invention, only necessary for those who had not grown up in the same village.

There are dozens to pay respects to. In my father's generation, before China's one-child policy was enforced in the 1980s, rural families were large — all the better to help on the farm. Nearly everyone has since left the farm. At New Year I meet my uncles, the university-educated bureaucrats working in big cities, and my father's cousins, who are construction workers and truck drivers flung across China. Almost everyone in my father's generation left to pursue work in the cities, and so this is the one time in the year they gather together.

Some families, like mine, are ambitious in their itineraries: on the second day of the holiday, my father and uncles would usually pack in visits to six aunts' and uncles' homes and be back at my grandparents' in time for lunch. This year, there were to be no such visits.

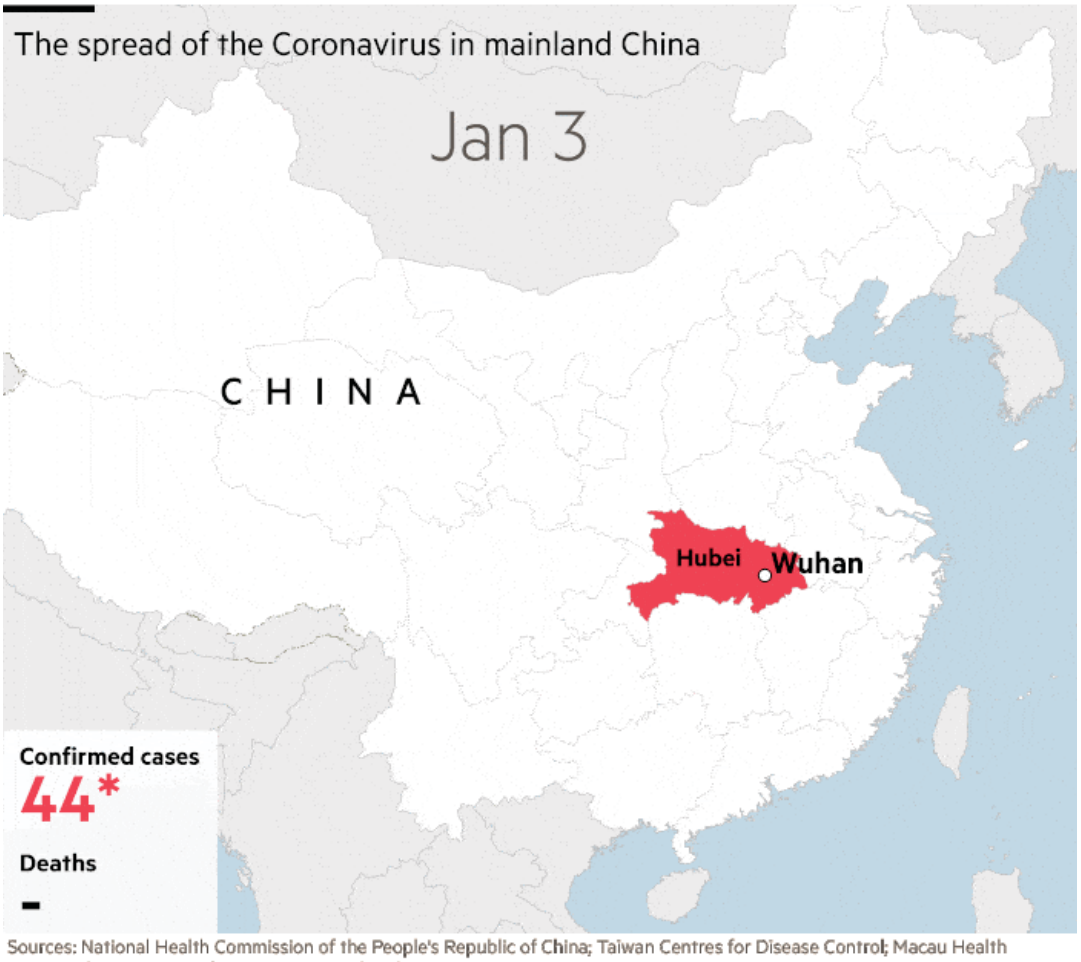
Like me, some travellers managed to reach home before transport links started shutting down, and are at least holed up with loved ones. But for late travellers, those who cancelled travel plans out of fear of contagion and transport disruption, let alone the 9m people stuck in Wuhan, the situation is far worse. For many in China, the New Year is the only time in the year they see their parents and even their children.

China is a country of long-distance internal migrants: go back one or two generations, and most people's families were subsistence farmers living in the countryside. Over the past 50 years, a vast rural-urban migration has spread those families across the country. Those who are lucky enough to go to university often settle down in the big cities of Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen and smaller provincial capitals. Those who don't settle in the cities go everywhere as migrant workers fuelling the low-paid casual labour of China's economic development. Because the government makes it very difficult for migrant workers to access education in the cities, many leave their children with relatives in the countryside, and visit them at New Year.

So Chinese New Year is a crucial annual migration that is easier for some than for others. Rail tickets sell out quickly, and those with the money might buy plane tickets instead. Many migrant workers travel by long-distance bus — the same services that multiple provinces have since suspended in the wake of the virus outbreak. One of my father's cousins drives for three days or more, covering 4,000km each way.

My journey from Beijing was made simpler 15 years ago, after my grandparents left their old farmstead in favour of an apartment in the nearby town with hot water and the company of my urbanised aunt and uncles. On the first day of the holiday, we make plans to visit the old farmstead the next day, to sweep my great-grandma's grave and light firecrackers for her.

I like visiting the old village, but it is increasingly deserted. The old farmsteads are as they were in my father's childhood: a square courtyard surrounded by single-storey rooms on each side, without any heating. By law, my father's relatives are entitled to a portion of the farmland in the village, but they have mostly leased their plots to companies, which farm on a mass scale. One of my father's few cousins who stayed in the countryside used to make his living not from farming, but from making traps: when I visited his cold farmhouse on a previous New Year holiday, he pulled a live Siberian weasel out of a sack.



Sources: National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China; Taiwan Centres for Disease Control; Macau Health Bureau; The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
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On the evening we are making plans to visit the village, Beijing announces it will stop long-distance buses going into the city. The next morning, we wake to the news that our county has started asking its villages to block their road entrances, and that public bus services from the city are being suspended. Across China, other friends tell me of villages and townships embarking on self-quarantine in the national spirit of viral defence.

Much of it may be over-zealous, as there is an ongoing debate over the effectiveness of government-imposed city-level quarantines: borders are always leaky, and quarantines give possible viral carriers a reason to lie about their whereabouts. In my grandparents' old village of some 500 people, there have been no coronavirus victims to date, and some 70 detected infections in a province of 80m people.

As the news landscape shifts, my relatives now discuss preventive measures with more urgency than before.

But news of spurious quality proliferates both online and offline. One of my uncles recommends that we all chew garlic to stave off the virus. As he describes the idea, I recognise it as coming from a much-shared article on WeChat, China's main social-messaging platform and incubator of various unreliable articles over the viral outbreak. There are a few peer-reviewed studies on the possible antiviral properties of garlic, but I doubt the author or sharers of that article had gone to the trouble of looking them up. More pernicious rumours floated on the Chinese internet, such as the old rumour that Sars (severe acute respiratory syndrome) had been manufactured by the US to specifically target Chinese people.

I can only condense one helpful piece of advice: wash your hands and dry them on clean towels

The English-language internet is hardly much better: an old video of a street protest is recirculated as if happening now in Wuhan (untrue), and a video of Wuhan with firecrackers going off in the background is flaunted as evidence of police shooting people trying to leave (also untrue). Much social media commentary is overlaid with disgust at Chinese people as a racial group and over their eating habits.

The worst part of the outbreak, for many of my friends, is the terrifying headlines they feel compelled to consume about it, which leave you feeling powerless and panicked. On social media, some share tips of varying helpfulness for staying safe, while others share a petition to extend the national holiday, or even lists of places in Beijing where virus victims are said to be staying. Some simply wish their friends were well, and hope we stay calm. Out of the dozens of articles I've read about the virus, I can only condense one helpful piece of advice: wash your hands properly and dry them on clean towels.

On my second morning at my grandparents', my uncle suggests that I go back to Beijing early, fearing more transport options would be shut down as the holiday went on. I pack my suitcase quickly, glad that the load is lightened by the presents I've offloaded.

But I have forgotten to reckon with the customary food parcels from my aunt. The next morning, as I leave for Beijing, she hands me a heavy bag packed with northern Chinese staples: steamed buns stuffed with sweet bean paste, salted duck eggs, breaded cabbage, deep-fried meatballs, and an entire cooked rooster. She thrusts on me another bag filled with a dozen pink apples and a dozen oranges, saying I can eat them on the way. I am running out of hands to carry it all.

“It’s a three-hour train ride,” I reply, laughing, “I can’t eat that many oranges in three hours.”

“Well, you can eat them in Beijing!”

“Beijing is a big city. Beijing has oranges,” I say, leaving the second bag behind.

My uncle’s friend drives us to the railway station, as the local buses have been suspended. As we pull in to the station, he reminds us: “Put on your masks — I hear they’re not letting people in without them.”

On the way home, I message friends on WeChat, telling them I’m returning early. The responses I get back range from anxiety to boredom. Two ask me if any of the attendees of a group hiking trip I organised a week ago had recently been to Wuhan. A few more, also unexpectedly stuck in Beijing, urge me to organise another hiking trip to relieve the holiday humdrum. Two others invite me to their dinner parties, joking that Chinese grain liquor will help disinfect our throats.

I hesitate for hours before replying, wondering whether a yes or no would be overly cautious, rude or irresponsible. How are you meant to assess the risk of going to see friends, when you're probably more likely to be killed from a traffic accident on the way there than from the coronavirus, yet people around you are panicking?

Back in Beijing, the city streets are emptier than they usually are in the new year's holiday week. But there are reassuring signs of normal life: I brush past green-coated guards still marching in formation around the embassy district, now with face masks on. Through a restaurant window, I see a few people eating Beijing barbeque skewers. And on the streets, the city's migrant workers are still busy: delivering, cleaning, hurrying everywhere.

When I arrive at my apartment block, the guard at the gate to the compound hands me a pink slip of paper from the local district government. It tells us to register ourselves if we have been to coronavirus-infected areas, to wear masks outside and to keep warm. "We can't cut corners on preventive measures," the paper reads, "but we also don't need to panic."

The next morning, I venture out for groceries. In the cramped convenience store on my block, I am the only customer, but there are bags filled with other people's groceries standing on the till. As I enter, a delivery man dressed in blue electric-scooter gear is leaving.

"I'm afraid we're mostly out of fresh vegetables," the shopkeeper says, seeing me enter. I'll have to walk a bit further to a larger supermarket to get mine. "We've had very few customers in person, but we're getting all these delivery requests," she adds. As she explains, her smartphone's loudspeaker blares out another order. This shop, like most small shops in big cities, has understocked for the New Year holiday, expecting a dearth of customers.

"We plan to restock in a week, but really, I don't think the shipments will come through for another two weeks," she says.

"Where do you get your food from?" I ask, thinking of the farmland around Beijing and the villages that have sealed off their roads.

“Where it’s produced,” she replies, flatly, as if speaking of places that do not need to be spoken of.

Development economists have theorised that urbanisation can happen only when agricultural productivity rises above subsistence levels — that is, when there is surplus food being produced in the countryside that can be sent to the cities. Cities do not support their own life; farms do. For every farmer’s son who leaves for the city, a problem arises: how do you send them their lunch? After her youngest brothers went to secondary school, my aunt would sometimes walk the five kilometres into town to deliver them steamed buns made from homegrown wheat.

When my father left the countryside for university in the early 1980s, 20 per cent of China’s population lived in cities, according to government figures. That has now reached roughly 60 per cent. China’s highways and food logistics networks have developed accordingly. The food is mostly driven and delivered by migrant workers from the countryside — a class of people likely to be unable or unwilling to return to work because now they can’t get back to the cities. They are also more likely to be in poor health and to lack access to healthcare.

Back in the convenience store, another blue-jacketed delivery man runs in to pick up a bag of groceries. I consider trying to stop him for a quick interview on how online delivery services are enjoying a peak in demand, but I decide against it: delivery people work one of the most high-pressure jobs in the digital economy, rushing from door to door, and their performance is timed to the second by the apps that dictate their schedules. If I want to speak to them, I'll have to catch them off shift.

I fish out a couple of apples from a small crate on the shop floor. I wish I had taken my aunt's oranges.

Yuan Yang is the FT's China tech correspondent in Beijing

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