

# The China Syndrome?

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**T**he recent history of the People's Republic of China has inspired a combination of awe and fear at the meteoric rise of its economic and political power, especially in the last forty years. China has had its share of past cultural success from the invention of gunpowder, moveable print and the compass to modern high-speed rail networks and cities, motorways and bridges built at a speed and efficiency that has impressed and even shocked the rest of the world. China has had its share of hard times too, from the colonial oppression and famines in the nineteenth century under US and European domination to repeated Japanese invasions and massacres in the twentieth century before national liberation in 1949.

The increasing size and integration of China's economy has meant an increasingly contradictory attitude culturally to China, where fear can be simultaneously held about its success or failure, depending on whether it is being viewed as friend or foe in the world of international relations. Is this China Syndrome something novel or is it recognisable as the result of a phase of rapid capitalist development, with strong state capitalist support in neoliberal conditions, in the most populous country in the world? A look at the current Coronavirus epidemic (ongoing, with signs of community transmission in Iran, Italy and South Korea, that is, a pandemic, as we went to press) and Trump's Trade and Tech wars may give an insight into the nature of China's place in the world and the prospects for the future.

## Coronavirus epidemic

The recent outbreak of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19), first detected in December 2019 in the city of Wuhan in Hubei province, called Covid-19 by the World Health Organisation (WHO), has caused much attention to focus on China and its handling of what the

WHO has declared to be a Public Health Emergency of International Concern'. This viral infection is spread by contact with respiratory droplets from infected individuals coughing or sneezing into the air or onto surfaces around them. Covid-19 causes a Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome with some asymptomatic cases reported.

The majority of cases, 80.9%, were reported by a Chinese study, as being mild, 13.8% severe, 4.7% critical and 2.3% fatal. Covid-19 is more likely to be severe and to kill older people, smokers and those with long-term illnesses like diabetes or respiratory and heart diseases like asthma or coronary artery disease.<sup>1</sup>

The epidemic has mobilised a massive Chinese government response of civil and health resources and was regularly featured as the number one news story on TV news programmes throughout January and February this year. The concern was that the outbreak within one region, an epidemic, would develop into a pandemic, that is spread to other regions of the world with onward community spread there. There is an incubation period, where an infected person shows no symptoms, averaging about five days so far but which may be longer, up to 14 days being reported, which can greatly complicate detection and containment measures. Early estimates of infectivity, the basic reproduction number, the number of people one infected person is likely to infect, is just over three, meaning that about 75% of infections must be prevented by vaccination (probably at least three months away as I write) or by isolation and resolution through recovery or death, to halt the spread of the disease.

At first a common concern was that an infection as deadly as the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), caused by a similar coronavirus, in 2002-2003, which infected 8,096 people, killing 774 (a case fatality rate of 9.6%), could spread across the globe and perhaps

even kill as many as the tens of millions who died in the 1919 H1N1 influenza pandemic which had a case fatality rate estimated at about 10% also. As the figures slowly emerged throughout January and February of deaths in the low thousands and a case fatality rate hovering between 2% and 3%, the opposite notion arose of the risks to health being overstated. People also wondered why the seasonal flu did not generate the same level of concern when the annual deaths for seasonal influenza was in the hundreds of thousands every year with a case fatality rate less than 0.1%.

Of course, the 1919 pandemic happened at a time, just after the ravages of the first world war when nutrition was poor, health systems and infrastructure destroyed and movements of civilians and soldiers difficult to control. On the other hand the importance of deaths from seasonal flu is probably underemphasised as it certainly causes a large number of deaths which could be prevented by vaccination and better management of long-term illnesses such as heart disease, asthma or diabetes and it regularly overwhelms health service resources, particularly inpatient beds, in countries like Ireland with below average bed capacity compared to other developed countries. Seasonal flu infects hundreds of millions every year and shows that even at a low level of fatality a lot of people can die if large enough numbers are infected.

Another obvious comparison is with the most recent H1N1 influenza pandemic, or 'swine flu' in 2009 which killed hundreds of thousands of people; a Lancet study estimated between 151,700 and 575,500 deaths in the 12 months following the outbreak.<sup>2</sup> To know how serious a concern an infection poses then requires knowledge of the infectivity, how easily it can spread, the case fatality rate, the number who will die from the illness and the total number of people who end up being infected. This data only becomes clear as the actual spread of an infection proceeds. The rate of infection and fatality rates can change as the virus mutates as it replicates and moves from person to person. In general, the more severe the effects and the shorter the incubation period the less infective a condition becomes. But an illness that spreads easily with a range of effects from no symptoms at all to fatal is a very worrying pattern and requires the full attention of health and public services to analyse incoming data and react in a timely

manner without panic or procrastination and with good communication with services and the public to advise on health measures and restrictions on movement and social gatherings.

The response of the Wuhan authorities to the shortage of hospital beds in building two hospitals with a total of 2,500 beds in ten days was an impressive logistical achievement. However, there were also concerns at an early stage that Chinese authorities might have suppressed information on the illness, as they had eventually admitted happened with the SARS outbreak in 2003, and potentially missed opportunities for a more coordinated public health response. Initially these concerns focussed on the plight of a Chinese doctor,<sup>3</sup> Dr Li Wenliang, who had posted concerns about the illness in an online chatroom, and who received a reprimand from medical and police authorities, and who subsequently died of the infection. While the response to the doctor may have been heavy handed and his death tragic, it was not clear that an earlier intervention had been missed, nor indeed how any country was to decide on measures of control of public gatherings and travel for example. The case also highlighted the risk for health workers contracting the illness in the earliest stages when protective clothing and procedures for identification and isolation had not yet been effectively implemented.

According to the WHO, the public health response in containment measures, identifying those infected, contact tracing and healthcare support including protective masks, isolation and intensive care support were unlikely to have been better implemented anywhere else in the world. Bruce Aylward, head of the WHO-China joint mission on Covid-19 commented on China's response:

"They used standard, old-fashioned public health tools and applied these with a rigour and innovation of approach on a scale that we've never seen before in history."

Director General of the WHO, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, commented that: "The steps China has taken to contain the outbreak at its source appear to have bought the world time." But the WHO was concerned with the lack of urgency in funding from the international community; with the levels of rumours and misinformation hampering the response; and with

the potential havoc the virus could wreak in countries with weaker health systems:

“For too long, the world has operated on a cycle of panic and neglect. We throw money at an outbreak, and when it’s over, we forget about it and do nothing to prevent the next one...This is frankly difficult to understand, and dangerously short-sighted”.<sup>4</sup>

The breaking story as a health question then posed some clear questions. First, how many people would be infected and how many would suffer a serious illness and die. Second, would the efforts of the Chinese civil and health authorities succeed in containing the spread of the illness. Third, if the illness was not just detected in other countries but started to spread in those countries, how would their health services cope? Finally, why was the international community doing little to help in funding preparedness for such predictable disease outbreaks?

The Irish government advice emphasising case detection and containment was appropriate for isolated cases: handwashing, contact to health services by phone, face masks and further medical management where necessary, but this was poorly communicated initially with confusion between hospitals as to what they were to advise. However, the assurance that Ireland had the capacity to cope in the event of a situation of onward community transmission, that is in the event of a pandemic involving Ireland, was less convincing. Ireland’s low number of total hospital beds at about only three quarters of EU norms and intensive care beds at half that required, means that bed occupancy in Irish hospitals is the highest in the EU and is almost continuously in excess of 100%, with people treated on trolleys in overcrowded corridors, especially in winter during a seasonal flu outbreak. So, the notion that we have the capacity to deal with an outbreak of an additional epidemic was just plainly untrue. Ireland along with other rich countries and countries with weak health systems was relying almost solely on the ability of China to contain the epidemic there. Not even one of the meagre 2,500 beds proposed by Sláinte care reforms since 2017 have been provided to date. Cutbacks and staff shortages in the NHS in the North mean similar concerns for coping there also.

The questions of a public health response to the potential for a Covid-19 pandemic also require an

urgent political response, as public health expert, Rob Wallace,<sup>5</sup> highlights:

“Within any one locale, there is a left program for an outbreak, including organizing neighbourhood brigades in mutual aid, demanding any vaccine and antivirals developed be made available at no cost to everyone here and abroad, pirating antivirals and medical supplies, and securing unemployment and healthcare coverage as the economy tanks during the outbreak.”

The absence so far of any obvious coordinated response at EU level also reinforces the need for a strong political response by left-wing political organisations including trade unions and other advocates for decent healthcare at national level, with calls for international solidarity and combatting misinformation and racist scapegoating blaming Chinese people or any other ethnic groups.

While the source of the virus is currently unclear, a route from wild animals such as bats via an intermediary animal, such as domesticated pigs, and then to humans is a possible route. The initial focus for onward community transmission in China was on a live animal market, a ‘wet market’, in the city of Wuhan, where rural small farmers, retailers and urban shoppers met. Farmers or people working closely with animals, wild and domesticated, possibly pigs, were the likely first humans to contract the illness and pass it on at the market. Wallace draws attention to the missed opportunities to deal with the underlying causes in order to stop this regular spread of new viruses from the wild to humans that is encouraged by unregulated capitalist agricultural methods, particularly in China, the EU and the US, and their interaction with the increasing use of animals in the wild for food:

“Many a smallholder (farmer) worldwide, including in China, is, in actuality, a contractor, growing out day-old poultry, for instance, for industrial processing. So, on a contractor’s smallholding along the forest edge, a food animal may catch a pathogen before being shipped back to a processing plant on the outer ring of a major city. Spreading factory farms meanwhile may force increasingly corporatized wild food companies to trawl deeper into the forest, increasing the likelihood of picking up a new pathogen, while reducing the kind of

environmental complexity with which the forest disrupts transmission chains...Let's choose an ecosocialism that mends the metabolic rift between ecology and economy, and between the urban and the rural and wilderness, keeping the worst of these pathogens from emerging in the first place. Let's choose international solidarity with everyday people the world over."

### **Economic concerns**

The economic effects of the Covid-19 epidemic on China and the world economy are evidence of the severity of the disruption caused by it but also of the increasing importance of China as a high-tech industrial exporter and as an increasingly important market for goods and services from other countries including the US, the EU and Japan. While Apple's iPhone production has been hit by closed factories, they have also reduced their profit forecasts on the basis of falling sales of their phones in China. The SARS epidemic knocked 2% off China's national GDP in the second quarter of 2003, but the effect this time will be larger due to the greater numbers affected, the timing of the epidemic in the first quarter around the Chinese New Year and the increased size of the Chinese economy. China accounted for just 4% of world GDP in 2003 but now accounts for 16% of world GDP due to phenomenal growth of 8-10% average a year (and for the past 40 years), though falling last year to a 30 year low of 6% GDP growth due at least in part to the Trade War with the US.

Measures taken to control the spread of Covid-19 have meant restrictions to travel within and in and out of China. Disruptions to travel and public gatherings within China, most notably the family reunions typical of celebrating the Chinese New Year, this year on Friday January 23<sup>rd</sup>, particularly for the 288 million migrant workers there, have drastically reduced domestic consumption with hospitality, retail, air travel, transport, entertainment and tourism sectors hardest hit. At one point in January, provinces accounting for 69% of China's economic output were 'closed for business'. The effects on the supply chains of foreign multinationals, commodity prices of raw materials like crude oil and copper, tourism, bankruptcies and bank failures as well as stock market fluctuations have yet to be fully appreciated as the epidemic, while appearing to be declining in

early February has not yet run its course. The full health and economic effects may take some time to emerge depending on how widely Covid-19 spreads across China and the rest of the world.<sup>6</sup>

### ***PHASE 1: TRADE WAR AND TARIFFS***

China's economy has grown at a speed unparalleled in human history over more than four decades since the economic reforms started in 1978 under President Deng Xiaoping of 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics' representing a gradual move from a centralised control economy to a market led economy, involving the selloff of state owned industry and the encouragement of private sector capitalist development, increasingly open to world markets, until as much as 70% of the modern Chinese economy is in the private sector and, in 2019,<sup>119</sup> (increasing from just 10 in 2001) of the Fortune Global 500 list, the largest companies in the world, are based in China.<sup>7</sup>

The US and Chinese economies are interdependent, with the Chinese economy in effect lending the US a large part of the money it needs to pay its bills. The US spends more on goods and services than it takes in, running an annual current account deficit averaging around 2-3% of GDP, that is, the US borrows to keep its economy going. This imbalance is largely due to the trade imbalance between the US and China which was almost \$350 billion in 2019 a sizeable chunk of the just over \$600 billion of the total US trade imbalance which is also due to trade imbalances with other East Asian economies such as Japan.<sup>8</sup>

As Alex Callinicos explains:

These payment imbalances reflect the massive flow of manufactured goods across the Pacific, from East Asia to the US. The sums add up, thanks to the lending back to the US of some of the dollars accumulated by the East Asian economies... thereby allowing American consumers to continue buying East Asian goods.<sup>9</sup>

The stability of this arrangement depends on the functioning and stability of each end of the circuit, the US and Chinese economies, and also of the global economy as a whole. The Chinese Communist Party has reduced the accumulating surplus in foreign exchange holdings partly with massive state investment in infrastructure and lending through state banks to local

enterprises. They have postponed, but not got rid of, the risk of an ‘overaccumulation crisis’ due to domestic overinvestment and underconsumption and there remains a constant political risk of rising inequality and political discontent in and the potential for precipitating a global economic crisis. The US, following the financial crisis of 2008 has had a prolonged but low growth recovery with growing political polarisation around the election of Trump and the rise of popular left-wing arguments against rising inequality. The state of the world’s capitalist economy, with Japan in long-term stagnation and likely recession and with the EU powerhouse, Germany, having zero growth in the past 9 months, gives the world’s capitalists little reassurance for the future.

Into this picture the Trump solution to US economic problems has been first to give a massive tax cut to the rich and second to attack China and other trading partners, blaming them for the trade imbalance and imposing tariffs, despite the impact of tariffs on imports in many cases raising domestic US prices. Trump demanded changes to China’s state subsidies on commodities like steel and solar panels, currency controls, intellectual property and technology transfer arrangements. After two years of tariffs, tension and talks, the ‘Phase 1’ trade deal announced on 16 January 2020 involved only minor concessions by China on additional purchases of agricultural and manufactured products while only slightly reducing the imposed tariffs on \$370 billion worth of trade.<sup>10</sup>

The agreement, despite Trump’s claims, involved much that had already been agreed by China and the promise to increase purchases of US goods by \$200 billion, contrary to any notion of the US commitment to ‘free trade’, will be dependent on ‘market conditions’, that is, they may not materialise. Trump’s attack on China’s subsidies to Chinese firms, though not included in the deal, were always hypocritical as the US state subsidised US companies through tax breaks of \$5.5 trillion in 2018, subsidised export costs and massively subsidised Research and Development costs through: “US taxpayer financed technology developed by DARPA, the NSA, National Institutes of Health, and many other means.”<sup>11</sup>

While this phoney trade war has focused in Phase 1 on the absolute deficit in trade between the US and China, and may be explained by Trump’s desire to

influence the presidential election this year, it also includes and gives cover to the even more important and specific issue, to be addressed in Phase 2, of the ‘tech war’ over China’s increasing advantage in high-tech areas of manufacturing such as Artificial Intelligence, 5G mobile phone technology, Solar panels and electric vehicles, an issue of quality rather than just quantity of manufacturing and trade. The threat issued by the Trump administration to NATO allies that they should not use 5G products made by Chinese company Huawei, or face restrictions on intelligence sharing from the US, exemplify this issue. The very public spat between Trump and UK Tory Prime Minister when the UK included Huawei 5G products in its plans, partly citing the increased costs, British Telecom alone citing an additional £500 million, clearly demonstrated the Chinese advantage, high technology at low cost, and the US weakness of declining economic hegemony in both quantity and quality of production, with contingent declining diplomatic leverage despite its overwhelming global hegemony in military terms. In 2019 the US spent more on its military budget, \$684 billion, than the next ten countries put together, including China spending roughly 10% per capita what the US spends on its military budget.

## PHASE 2: TECH WARS AND HUAWEI

If the trade war signals the US deficit in current trade and production of goods and services, the tech war also demonstrates its fears and weakness for the near future including high-tech production.

As Jack Rasmus in a Counter Punch article explains: Behind the trade war with China has always been the most important tech war between the two countries...It’s about next generation technologies like Artificial Intelligence, Cyber security, and 5G wireless...So far the US is ahead in AI but behind in 5G. It has no latter product of its own. Globally, it is Huawei and Europe’s Ericsson that are leaders in the product development. The US once premier tech company, AT&T, is now preoccupied with investing in entertainment software and content, driven by its shadow bankers demanding more profits sooner than later. The US is thus forced to try to stop Huawei instead of out-competing it in tech development of 5G.”<sup>12</sup>

If the potential for China climbing the ‘value-chain’ of production into, not just competing at a high tech level but, leading the field in certain areas, was bad enough for US economic hegemony, the fact that China is leading in areas of importance for developing military technology is also directly threatening US military hegemony.

As Rasmus explains:

“Artificial Intelligence and 5G are key to the development and functioning of next generation hypersonic missiles and hyper-smart torpedoes; for future military drone technology and targeting; and for future battlefield communication and coordination between machine and human.”

He concludes that:

“The offensive against the giant China telecom company, Huawei, now the world leader in 5G, is the harbinger of a much greater, wider, and longer conflict between the US and China over next gen tech...The China-US tariff/trade war may be over, but the China-US tech war has just begun and will now accelerate...Trump believes he can engage China over tech in Phase 2 negotiations. But Phase 2 is a fiction. It will not happen. Even if the two countries’ representatives meet it will be a fruitless discussion. Neither will ever come to an agreement. China will never trade next gen technology for tariff reduction. It won’t trade tech for anything the US can offer.”

### **The China Syndrome**

Ireland’s relationship with China reflects the developing ‘China Syndrome’ of increasingly contradictory economic and political interests in relations with China and the US, involving a desire, by the Irish ruling class, to develop trade with China while avoiding a clash with US economic and political interests. Chinese trade in agricultural, chemical and IT products and even tourism are increasingly important here and China’s state-owned commercial bank, Bank of China, plans to buy Irish stockbrokers Goodbody this year. In 2019, celebrating 40 years of diplomatic relations with China, one year after the Deng Reforms of 1978 began, the *Irish Times* reported:

“While relations can be complex, business between the two nations was booming and bilateral trade hit

€17 billion in goods and services last year...Irish food exports to China continue to grow and were valued at €758 million last year, according to Bord Bia, up 6 per cent in volume terms from the year before... there are about 37 Chinese companies in Ireland, employing more than 3,200 people, according to the IDA. The mobile company Three Ireland, owned by CK Hutchison from Hong Kong, is the largest Chinese employer in Ireland, with about 1,400 employees. Huawei Technologies employs nearly 200 people in Dublin, Cork and Athlone. The telecoms giant has been a controversial player in the rollout of 5G as the US and other countries accuse it of being a cyber security risk because of its close links to the Chinese government.”<sup>13</sup>

The Irish ambassador to China, Eoin O’Leary, commented:

“In regard to Huawei in Ireland, “a security review is going on and this was raised in the Dáil”, Mr O’Leary said. “To date, however, Huawei and Ireland have a very good relationship... that’s very successful”.

The article goes on to mention recent concerns raised in the Dáil regarding:

“China’s human rights situation, in particular in Xinjiang where an estimated 1.5 million ethnic Uighurs and other Turkic Muslims are being subjected to “mass arbitrary detention, forced political indoctrination, restrictions on movement, and religious oppression”, according to Human Rights Watch...

“The Irish embassy and the political leaders who visit from Dublin raise these issues with the Chinese side “in a respectful way”, Mr O’Leary said, adding they had called for full access to the re-education camps for European ambassadors and Michelle Bachelet, the UN high commissioner for human rights. “Ireland is a strong supporter of human rights and we don’t hide that,” he said. “but we don’t I suppose believe in megaphone diplomacy.”

Being a strong supporter of human rights did not include calling for the closure of the camps or an end to the oppression of the Uighurs, just ‘access’ to the camps.

### PHASE 3: US, CHINA AND IMPERIALIST WAR

China's economic growth is unquestionably impressive, with its share of the global economy rising, its rise up the value chain from low-tech assembly to high tech R&D challenging the US economically and militarily; its infrastructural development of motorways, high-speed train networks, from none in the 1990s to more than the rest of the world combined today, and exemplified in its 'Belt and road' development of sea routes and overland highways linking Chinese cities westward to Central and Western Asia. China has strong trade relations with Indonesia, Pakistan, Cambodia and Thailand and has reduced tensions with countries in the region such as Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, India and Australia and scored economic victories with the setting up of the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), while the most important US alliances in the region, notably Japan, South Korea, Singapore and the Philippines are not as strong as they once were:

"South Korea for example 'wants a rock-solid US commitment with respect to the North Korean threat, but does not want to be explicitly asked to support US strategies vis-à-vis China...Singapore tempers its enthusiasm for 'a long-term, implacable, inexorable presence' from the US with its preference that US-China relations are stable so that 'we don't have to choose sides'."<sup>14</sup>

The US response to these developments has been the 'Pivot to East Asia' policy under the Obama administration, with Hilary Clinton as secretary of state, first announced in 2010, which has meant a reorientation of diplomatic and military resources from the Middle East and Europe to East Asia, reflecting a reduced focus on dominating the Middle East oil supply and the encirclement and containment of Russia and towards a similar policy of encirclement and containment of China.

As we have seen in the case of overall production, and particularly high-tech production, the US is attempting to use its economic and military muscle to restrict the rise of Chinese companies. While this has not given rise to direct military conflict, it has involved economic sanctions and the instruction of military allies, NATO in particular, to boycott Chinese products in the case of Huawei and 5G technology in particular. It has also involved increased military tension in East Asia and a

build-up of US, particularly naval military resources there.

These developments between the US and China at the interstate level are rooted in the social relations of capitalism as a competition between rival capitals. Capitalism is a system based on the economic exploitation of labour and competition between rival capitalists, driven to competition between states defending their 'own' capitals, that is capital which is owned and controlled by individuals or corporations based there. Capitalists are driven to endless competition because of the need to maintain profit rates which in turn depend on keeping up the level of productivity of capital through technological development. Any capitalist falling behind in technological development means that a rival can develop a productive advantage, allowing them to cut costs and raise profits or lower prices and increase market share. State managers and capitalist managers cooperate to defend their position by improving their own productivity or by obstructing the development of rivals.

Besides the pressure of Imperialist aggression from the US, China also faces economic and political pressures from declining GDP growth, underpinned by rising domestic debts and falling export profits and increasing challenges from movements against oppression in Tibet and Xinjiang, protests for democratic reform in Hong Kong and strikes and protests against low wages, inequality and corruption from an increasingly restless Chinese working class.<sup>15</sup> The coronavirus outbreak, trade wars and tech wars will develop in this context and in the wider context of a US imperialism under threat from China's rising economic and military capabilities.

While capitalist development in China has seen it rise to Great Power status, it has also developed a style of state and capitalist management that is increasingly indistinguishable from its US and EU counterparts. While state capitalist intervention with investment and capital controls have been successful in the past, China's ruling class are still faced with the same dilemmas of a falling rate of profit and weak international demand that face other capitalist nations and the same options for survival of intensification of exploitation, environmental destruction and war that other capitalist countries are forced to choose by the blind competitive logic of capitalism.

Exploitation of workers, suppression of trade unions (as brilliantly displayed in the documentary film *American Factory*),<sup>16</sup> the oppression of minorities or other groups and environmental destruction are as linked to uncontrolled capital accumulation by Chinese firms at home and abroad as by any other capitalist corporations. The solution to these problems will not come from the leadership of rival US or Chinese imperialisms but from the movements of resistance to these systems and particularly from the genius of the working classes that built them.

## Notes

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