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On June 24 the World Health Organization lifted its Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) advisory warning the world against traveling to Beijing, in effect officially declaring that China had survived the first global public health crisis of the 21st century. The new Chinese government of Hu Jintao had survived its first political crisis as well. At the height of the media-fueled frenzy about SARS, some China-watchers speculated that Beijing's mishandling of an emergency it had itself created might even topple communism. Hu and his supporters ought to heave a collective sigh of relief since they have come out of the crisis stronger than they were half a year before.

Hu's recent formal accession to power has been curiously punctuated by SARS. In November of 2002 he took over the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), just as doctors in the southern province of Guangdong saw the first cases of a mysterious and nasty strain of atypical pneumonia start to fill hospital beds — and morgues — and just as Chinese officials began months of denying that anything was wrong. March 15 Hu became president of China, the very same day WHO issued a worldwide health alert about SARS, and just weeks before Hu was forced to admit his government had been lying and SARS really was a serious problem. WHO's declaration of the end of the SARS crisis came just a week before Hu was to deliver his first major speech as head of China, at the anniversary of the formation of the CCP. To combat the disease his government had promised unprecedented accountability and transparency, which many hoped would continue after the emergency had ended. Some even thought Hu might use the occasion to announce new steps toward a more democratic China.

That SARS would lead to “glasnost with Chinese characters,” much less to democracy, clearly was expecting too much. The crisis did, however, shine a spotlight on forces gradually changing Chinese politics, from skittish international businesspeople to information swishing uncontrolled across China's borders, to the very real sense of professional responsibility and ethics taking root in many influential groups within the country. The crisis vividly illuminated deep inequalities at the core of China's remarkable economic transformation that might some day contribute to a genuine political upheaval. It showed the fragility of power in China, and the constraints on those who wield power. We knew these things before, now we understand them better.

More than telling us new things about China, the episode tells us new things about our understanding, or misunderstanding, of China. It seemed at first clearly to confirm many comfortable assumptions about the necessity and direction of political change in China ... and then deflated them. Midway through the crisis, it seemed obvious that democracies perform better than dictatorships: the health of China and the world were jeopardized by crude attempts to impede the free flow of information about the illness. It seemed incontrovertible that engagement in the global economy would subvert the power of despots: efforts to squelch news of the crisis were defeated by the internet and text messaging, and hitherto disregarded and powerless multilateral institutions such as WHO

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turned out to possess the ability to force China's rulers to admit the truth, despite a massive loss of face. Finally, it seemed all but certain that China's incompetent dictatorship, wrenched open by actors and factors outside its control, would proceed even more quickly toward democratic reform.

Reality is more complicated. By the end of the crisis, these complacent assumptions had not been falsified so much as they were deflated, made less self-evident. The political implications of SARS are ambiguous. Authoritarian governments may respond better to emergencies such as SARS than democracies. The bungling of SARS may have little to do with the essence of despotism or even Chinese Communism; a once-in-a-generation confluence of particular events may have been more to blame. To satisfy outside critics and help resolve the emergency, Hu's government let slip the Chinese press and allowed information to flow more freely. But when the crisis ended, the clamps tightened again. There seems to be no irresistible momentum toward institutionalizing freedoms for the Chinese press or society.

What accounts for the complacent assumptions about democratization and political reform that SARS initially appeared to affirm, then deflated? And now that they have been deflated, what can we confidently say about China's future?

Deflated assumption #1: Democracies necessarily outperform dictatorships

"Democratize or die" seemed the political moral halfway through China's bout with SARS. Months after November 2002, when the first case of atypical pneumonia was identified in Guangdong province, the Chinese government at all levels behaved appallingly. Officials in Guangdong denied any sickness, then denied any connection between their cases and the growing number of those stricken in Hong Kong, Vietnam, and Canada. Local journalists received a memo ordering them off the story (for reasons unexplained, several publications based in Guangzhou, first major city stricken heavily by SARS, were closed). When World Health Organization officials visited Beijing to investigate how serious was the crisis, at least 31 SARS patients were driven around the city in ambulances for the duration of the visit, and 40 patients were moved from a military hospital to a hotel to deceive WHO's inspectors. As word of the mysterious illnesses continued to trickle out, national leaders steadfastly refused to acknowledge they had a problem, permitting the official Chinese media to speculate that Guangdong might be the victim of bioterrorism, perhaps because of China's disapproval of the American invasion of Iraq.

It's the World Health Organization's job to prevent these sorts of things from happening, but it is powerless to investigate within a country unless invited by the host government. Repeatedly, Chinese authorities declined to provide medical data or specimens, and refused to admit WHO scientists. In addition to aggressively obstructing WHO from investigating in China, Beijing stubbornly blocked WHO from visiting Taiwan, which begged WHO for help after it witnessed its first deaths of SARS in early March. China

did not permit a WHO team to visit its “renegade province” until May, some 1,300 infected cases later.

“Democratize or die.” A more transparent government accountable to its people would have been unable and unwilling to conceal information touching the lives and well-being of its citizens. Moreover, by the time it was forced to admit it had lied, the Chinese government exhausted its people’s reserves of trust in their rulers, greatly complicating the task of defusing the crisis. “Now everyone can see that democracy isn’t a luxury,” said a typical article in *Business Week*. “They can see that authoritarianism doesn’t even guarantee stability. A government that represses information not only kills its people — and those of other countries — but it spreads panic and disbelief as its credibility erodes.”²

But there’s a problem: Not all dictatorships performed badly in this crisis. Vietnam’s Communist government responded swiftly and capably. The superstars of the crisis were Singapore’s authoritarians, who in this instance (as so often before) intruded in the private lives of their people in ways that citizens of liberal democracies would probably find intolerable. Those suspected of being infected were quarantined at home, fitted with the electronic monitoring anklets placed on criminals, and several times a day instructed to appear before video monitors placed in their apartments. Anyone evading these measures was fined heavily and imprisoned. Singapore encountered no resistance from its people, who understand that this is the purpose of a nanny-state, to prevent the disintegration of public health and order.

Once Hu’s government acknowledged the crisis, it swung into action vigorously and effectively. Many of the most potent tools at its disposal, in fact, were leftovers of the darker days of China’s more repressively authoritarian past. Neighborhood volunteers sporting red armbands and prying into apartments in search of medically suspicious behavior evoked memories from previous decades, when the predecessors of today’s health monitors snooped for signs of ideological sickness. The Red Army mobilized behind anti-SARS efforts, soldiers singing revolutionary songs as they constructed isolation clinics.

After a student at McGivney Catholic Academy in Toronto displayed SARS-like symptoms in late May, Canadian public health officials requested the 1,500 students to spend ten days in voluntary quarantine. When several chose to spend their quarantine at the mall, officials nagged them about the public good and threatened to tell their parents. Contrast this with China, which announced on May 15 that anyone intentionally spreading SARS could be subject to the death penalty. “Break quarantine and we will shoot you, and send your family a bill for the bullets used by the firing squad.” People take that sort of message seriously, especially when their government executes more criminals every year than anyone else, including Texas.

Deflated assumption #2: Globalization erodes the power of despots

² Mark Clifford, “China’s deadliest plague: Authoritarianism,” *Business Week* 18 April 2003.

As well as affirming the superiority of democracy, Beijing's stumbling and bumbling seemed to support another comfortable belief: Engaging in the global economy strips authoritarians' ability to control what their people know. Chinese officials' efforts to suppress news about the medical emergency were thwarted by numerous independent information channels. Local journalists were barred from investigating the story in Guangdong, but ordinary people could send text-messages about illnesses to their friends in Beijing and Hong Kong. A schoolteacher in California received an e-mail from an electronic pen-pal in Guangzhou about hospitals forced to close by large numbers of dying people; she forwarded it to a neighbor with an international public health consulting firm, who posted it on ProMed (Program for Monitoring Emerging Diseases), a website with 30,000 subscribers around the world. This posting immediately led WHO and doctors around Asia to pull together previously disconnected pieces of information that at least told them something big was happening.

The deathblow to Beijing's denial efforts came in early April, after Health Minister Zhang Wenkang announced on television that Beijing had only twelve cases of SARS and three deaths. A retired Red Army surgeon, Jiang Yanyong, who knew of hundreds of cases in three Beijing military hospitals alone, and sent an e-mail pointing this out to the Chinese government-owned CCTV-4 and Phoenix TV. Although they did not respond, within days he was swamped calls for interviews with the Western press. Hu Jintao's government could dissemble no longer. April 17 Hu instructed the CCP Politburo to cover the crisis without cover-up, and on April 20 fired Zhang Wenkang and Beijing Mayor Meng Xuenong.

At the same time they discovered their inability to control flows of information, China's rulers found themselves under intense pressure from unexpected sources. Before SARS, for example, they viewed the World Health Organization as no more than another forum for an annual ritual of blocking Taiwan's membership application. Early in the emergency, they treated WHO with contempt, lying to it and denying its officials access to hospitals or the countryside. WHO's response was sounding a global alarm, unleashing a barrage of criticism from multilateral agencies and foreign governments, and sending China's economy reeling as potential investors in China proved reluctant to sink money into an apparently dangerous country governed by deceitful rulers.

The global economy does constrain heavy-handed autocrats, but keep in mind that engagement in the global economy drove local and national officials to try to cover up the outbreak of SARS in the first place. It was not a desire to preserve the infallible reputation of Chinese Communism or to prevent China's enemies from observing any strategic vulnerability. Provinces such as Guangdong compete ferociously with other provinces for foreign investment; likewise, in a time of global economic slowdown, Beijing is frantic to continue the flow of foreign investment into China. No one wants bad news that might spook already nervous investors.

Deflated assumption #3: With their incompetence revealed and their power eroded, dictators will give way to democrats

The SARS crisis seems to confirm the complacent assumption that if they want to continue the rapid economic growth their country has experienced for the past 25 years, Chinese Communist leaders will have to change their style of governing. Once it was forced to own up to the severity of the outbreak, the new government of Hu Jintao began sacking hundreds of local officials who had covered up the truth, as well as the Beijing Mayor and the Health Minister. Such senior leaders had never been held accountable for lying and incompetence. Repeatedly, Hu and members of his government promised that the news media would cover the crisis accurately and openly, even if the government would be embarrassed.

The change in governing approach forced by the SARS seemed to reinforce a direction that many observers had believed Hu wished to take. A phrase he often used was “putting the people first” (*yi min wei xian*). Although not a particularly egalitarian sentiment coming from someone who is, after all, the head of history’s largest Communist Party, it does seem to underpin his advisors’ notion of a “service-oriented government,” which listens to the people, shifts policy emphasis from economic growth to providing public services, and admits and corrects its mistakes. Perhaps, optimists said, SARS was providing the opportunity for Hu to implement his new vision.

Thus as the crisis subsided in May and June, many hoped a self-sustaining momentum toward more independent and aggressive news coverage might reinforce Hu’s quiet reform inclinations. A few hopeful signs were spotted. A submarine accident in late April was openly admitted in a rare show of candor. The Chinese press apparently would be allowed to cover a government inquiry into corruption in Shanghai, even though the case involves cronies of former president (and, as head of the Chinese military, current power behind Hu’s throne) Jiang Zemin. Rumors swirled that a team of several dozen liberal scholars were working on constitutional revisions that would enshrine the right to a free press, or at least the people’s right to know what its government is doing. Some hoped would use the anniversary of the formation of the Chinese Communist Party to announce further opening of local elections to multiple candidates, a policy that could stymie future efforts by despotic provincial and village authorities to control and manipulate information to their benefit.

Great expectations for Hu’s speech fizzled when he merely called on the country to redouble its study the “Three Represents,” the particularly vacuous ideological innovation of Hu’s predecessor Jiang Zemin. That Hu declined to say anything remotely significant (much less revolutionary) in his anniversary speech ought to confirm that reform may be slower and more problematic than optimists believe. Thus Chinese reporters were allowed to report the government’s announcements about the submarine accident, but were forbidden to carry out any inquiries of their own. The popular magazine, *Caijing*, which was among the most aggressive in its criticism of government officials’ handling of SARS, had its June 20 edition seized from newsstands because of its cover story about the Shanghai scandal.

As though to emphasize its unwillingness to change its governing style, Beijing allowed — or encouraged — its junior partners running Hong Kong to try to push through repressive changes to Article 23 of the “Basic Law,” the mini-constitution negotiated when the United Kingdom handed its former colony back to China in 1997. Made illegal by these changes would be:

- newspapers using materials labeled classified by the Chinese government (which could give authorities in Beijing arbitrary control over the sources and even content of Hong Kong’s rambunctiously unfettered press);
- groups advocating what the Chinese government defines as subversion or secession (thus ending the Free Tibet movement’s freedom to operate in Hong Kong); and
- groups linked to organizations banned in China (thus allowing China to suppress the hitherto open activities of Falun Gong and Tiananmen memorialists in Hong Kong).

The proposed revisions to Article 23 clearly attacked Hong Kong as a reservoir of groups and forces that make the rulers in Beijing nervous.

To protest the changes to Article 23, half a million orderly Hong Kong residents took to the streets July 1, almost at the same moment Hu was delivering his disappointingly tepid speech. Those who hoped that SARS would set a precedent for a more open press in China could only be disappointed by the fact that the Chinese press completely ignored the biggest demonstration since the repression of the protests centered in Tiananmen Square in 1989.

Thus was deflated the third complacent assumption, that China is moving steadily toward democracy, and that SARS might accelerate that movement. Deflated but not refuted, however. Although revolution has not occurred, that doesn’t mean changes aren’t coming. It could mean SARS was simply not a significant enough crisis to budge the politics of a very big country.

SARS matters because of what it revealed about the politics of public health in China. Just as local and national governments’ actions and inactions in late 2002 and 2003 helped turn SARS from a problem into a crisis, so too are the same officials responsible for turning such public health problems as smoking-related diseases and HIV/AIDS into potentially nation-crippling nightmares. China’s history reveals that public health disasters have often led to very major political transformations.

SARS and the politics of public health in China

As a public health crisis, SARS barely registers compared to the genuine crises China faces. 348 deaths made it only the fourth most fatal infectious disease in the first half of 2003, after rabies, viral hepatitis, and tuberculosis. Compare the 5,327 cases infected with SARS to the number of Chinese people infected with HIV/AIDS. The Chinese government acknowledges a million, which is surely more accurate than the 30,000 it claimed early in 2002. But most experts agree is still short of the total number infected.

The number is expected to increase to 15 million in 2010 if the government doesn't dramatically change its current policies. *That* is a genuine public health crisis. Or compare SARS with the looming catastrophe caused by the high rate of smoking among Chinese men, who consume a third of the world's cigarettes. Today, one out of eight male deaths comes from smoking-related diseases; by the year 2050, it could be one out of three.

Understanding the significance of SARS as well as these much larger public health crises requires historic context. The world was bemused in the late 1990s, when the Chinese government was shaken by Falun Gong, a curious blend of the old, the new, and the strange: traditional Chinese practices such as deep-breathing meditation called *qigong* and slow motion exercise, a message of moral renewal and universal salvation, and a messianic leader based in the United States. Practitioners of Falun Gong number perhaps 70 million around the world, with as many as 20 million in China at its peak. That peak was April 25, 1999, when ten thousand adherents caught the authorities completely off guard with a demonstration in Tiananmen Square protesting restrictions on the practice of their beliefs. If they thought they were restricted before ... The Chinese government crashed down upon Falun Gong with all the repressive powers at its disposal, arresting thousands, killing dozens, and vilifying the movement as an "evil cult" in the media. Why such a harsh response to a peaceful spiritual movement?

Part of the answer is that the Chinese government remains communist, and an essential element of communism is that the Communist Party ought to penetrate and possibly direct any organization. A tea-drinkers' society would seem threatening if 20 million members declined granting the CCP a leading role. Part of the government's fierce assault on Falun Gong was the threat posed by its adept use technologies such as the internet and cell phones to communicate with fellow believers around the world and to organize clandestinely massive demonstrations at the rulers' very doorstep.

A deeper cause for the authorities' alarm is the repeated recurrence of similar movements over the course of Chinese history. From the mystical Yellow Turbans two thousand years ago to the Taiping and Boxer Revolts that in the 19th century badly weakened the last imperial dynasty, China has been convulsed by violent uprisings of tens of millions of people, protesting against government corruption and immorality, calling for moral and spiritual rebirth, and promising new health for adherents. Viewed through the lenses of imperial decline and collapse, Falun Gong did not necessarily look harmless at all.

Famine and plague often contributed to the rise of these movements in the past, making them part of the politics of public health in China. Authorities fear that popular anger about poverty, inequality, and corruption could combine with a public health crisis to undermine the government's legitimacy and provoke protests, even large-scale uprisings. If publicizing health problems might provoke instability, covering up could make sense, especially if these problems could be blamed on the government or on social dysfunctions for which the government ought to bear responsibility.

Consider HIV/AIDS. The Chinese government hesitates to acknowledge the extent of HIV infection in part because the causes are so troubling. Around 2001, when the Chinese government first seemed to realize that the problem of AIDS had spiraled so far out of control that it was impossible to ignore, it identified three leading causes of the disease's spread. First, and by far the greatest, was by intravenous drug users sharing needles. This cause of spreading infection could be ignored when addicts were mostly non-Han Chinese minorities near the borders Southeast Asia's "Golden Triangle." Now drug use has spread to the Han population in every city of the country, and in a few years China will have the world's largest number of heroin addicts. Mao often claimed the communists had rid China of drug abuse, assuaging the deep humiliation still felt after the Opium Wars. Who wants to admit the struggle against drugs is again being lost?

Second, AIDS rapidly spread in the 1990s by rural blood harvesting. Impoverished rural residents would sell blood, which would be pooled and the plasma extracted; then the remaining red blood cells would be re-injected to the donors so they could sell blood again in a few days. Thus a single HIV carrier could very quickly infect dozens, even hundreds of people. Long after almost all of the blood being donated tested AIDS-positive, blood harvesting continued, in part because these families had few economic options, in part because corrupt local officials were profiting as middlemen.

The third leading cause of the spread of HIV/AIDS is also related to poverty. Young males from these AIDS-wracked communities are among the 150 million rural workers who today form the "floating population" of migrant laborers working illegally in the cities. Their counterparts are the large number of young women moving to the cities as part of the booming sex industry servicing all classes of society, foreigner as well as Chinese. Another proud claim made by the architects of the Chinese Revolution was that they had ended the pervasive prostitution that they claimed permeated the Republic of China ... that claim has become much more hollow of late.

The Chinese government's reason not to educate the population aggressively about the risks of smoking may be even less savory than its squeamishness about the historical and moral implications of the leading causes of the spread of HIV/AIDS. China is by far the world's biggest cigarette merchant, and taxes on tobacco generate more than \$12 billion revenue every year, the government's single largest source of revenue. That the social costs of diseases resulting from smoking (hospitalization, loss of working years, and so on) outweigh greatly the revenue from taxes on cigarettes does not enter the government's calculations.

Thus the poor, the unprotected, and urban and rural workers are the main victims of the politics of public health in China. Silicosis, or what Chinese call "dust lung disease," illustrates how hard it is for the government to take responsibility for a serious public health problem. Twelve million people suffer from silicosis, the leading occupational sickness in China. Although the government recognized silicosis as a hazard as early as 1950, the cause of "building socialism" as rapidly as possible meant precautions were rarely taken to protect workers. Today, in a China that is building a capitalist rather than communist economy, workers are sacrificed to the desire to attract investment to suppress

labor costs, and keep up the country's rates of economic growth. The irony cannot escape those who still are told by their rulers that they live in a "workers' state."

China's transition to a market economy has devastated health care for the majority of the population. Many Westerners laughed at the "barefoot doctors" of Maoist days, barely trained medics fanning the country, dispensing a mix of cheap pharmaceuticals and traditional folk remedies. But barefoot or not, these "doctors" were better than nothing, which was what's left for most Chinese after the rapid privatization of health care. Today ninety percent of the country's 800 million rural workers have no insurance, and among the "floating population" that has illegally migrated to the cities, the percentage without insurance is probably even greater. A recent WHO study of the fairness of government spending on health ranked China 188th of 191 countries. No wonder memories of mass uprisings in the past, fueled by popular anger at inequality and health crises, may haunt the imaginations of China's current rulers.

Observers may have been looking for Chinese political changes in the wrong places. The greatest potential for change to the political order in China comes not from top-mandated openings of the news media and political competition. It's protests from below. While SARS did not seem to contribute much to the already large numbers of workers' and farmers' demonstrations and riots that flicker across China every week, some people violently expressed NIMBY ("not in my back yard") sentiments. Neighborhoods tried to prevent isolation clinics from being constructed, and regions tried to prevent strangers from entering towns. But they were not like the dozens of angry protests occurring every day over issues of job loss and corruption.

Perhaps SARS failed to stir up the bubbling ferment of daily worker and rural protest because it was a disease that struck rich as well as poor, foreigner as well as Chinese. Reporters in the country did detect and hear resentment that to reassure investors the government seemed much more solicitous of the health of foreigners than of ordinary Chinese. The politics of public health may become a more important issue if the next public health crisis strikes disproportionately at the less wealthy. If so, it may prod the glacier of political change much more than did SARS.

The pace of political change in China — prodding the glacier

By providing a glimpse into the politics of public health, SARS reveals many of the weaknesses and fragilities of the Chinese political order itself. Most disturbing from Beijing's perspective was probably not that local authorities in Guangdong tried to cover up the emergence of atypical pneumonia. Everyone understands the urgency with which officials feel they must attract investment. The problem was that they were able to conceal things from Beijing as long as they did. It was yet another demonstration of how local officials have slipped the center's control.

Something similar can be seen in the deceptively positive economic statistics local authorities pipe up to Beijing, statistics that are increasingly discounted and ignored by

insiders and outsiders alike. Imagine how impressive the American economy's performance would be if the governor of each state were in charge of collecting economic data for Washington, and if the governors' prospects for promotion and enrichment depended on how impressive her state's economic numbers look. Add up all of those rosy estimates and, in such a world, we too might be posting growth rates of ten percent. In the US, of course, we avoid this problem. Multiple government offices at a local and national level, universities, and think tanks all collect and process data. An independent press is rewarded when it aggressively seeks to uncover government officers' faulty claims. Competitive politics means an opposition party is always eager to confront incumbents' boasts. And American federalism ensures that governors' or mayors' political advancement depends on satisfying the real needs of constituents more than impressing superiors in Washington.

University of Pittsburgh economist Thomas Rawski heroically draws from as many sources as are available to counter the wildly inaccurate over-assessments of economic performance provided by local authorities. He estimates that far from growing at double digit rates, the Chinese economy may barely be growing at all. Without access to accurate information, the Chinese government finds it nearly impossible to make coherent plans for reform. But without reform, they won't get much better numbers.

Local authorities' autonomy can be seen too in their resistance to Beijing's periodic anti-corruption drives. Central authorities have no way to identify who is in fact genuinely corrupt, save for very obvious and dramatic signs such as eruptions of large-scale local protests or delegations of workers who travel to Beijing to lodge complaints. This gives corrupt officials even more of an incentive to suppress discontent and intimidate potential squealers, further bottling up discontent and creating pressure for an even greater future explosion.

While Beijing started losing control over the provinces during the anarchy of the Cultural Revolution, its transition to a market economy accelerated the process. Attracting foreign investment means lucrative contracts that provide opportunities to skim off a share for corrupt power-holders and their clans of patrons and supporters. Since rewards – either through foreign investment or through promotions granted by Beijing – depend on a region's performance, it pays to play down bad news, especially bad news that is likely to draw attention. The early stages of the SARS crisis might have revealed abuses of power by local authorities by highlighting the appalling state of the public health infrastructure, probably resulting from the pilfering of public funds.

While the center has difficulty monitoring the performance of local government and Party officials, Beijing still can punish underlings by denying promotion, firing, even imprisonment and execution. The stakes of not slipping up are enormous, and the key is not to avoid offending powerful patrons. For the past year or so, as leadership slowly (and in some cases reluctantly) passes from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao, from the "third generation" of communist leaders to the "fourth leaders, power has been in a delicate and uncertain balance that reinforces local officials' normal independence with a curious passivity in the face of a crisis. Before taking aggressive action, local officials wait to see

who comes out on top in the quiet jockeying for power and influence in Beijing. It may have seemed safer to deny a health crisis than to risk incurring the enmity of one faction or the other over a wrong decision. Add to this the fact that when the first signs of SARS appeared in November, no one wanted bad news to provoke the anger of Jiang by upstaging his triumphal exit with bad news; and no one wanted to upset Hu and his new team as they took over.

Thus the careful balance of power marking China's slow passing of leadership today grips the entire country, at the top as well as in the provinces. While Jiang Zemin has handed the presidency and chairmanship of the CCP, he remains head of the military. Moreover, Jiang's supporters make up about half of most of the crucial party and government committees. Chinese politics since the passing of Mao has rested on a search for consensus among the leaders, on a desire not to return to the often murderously fractious days of the Cultural Revolution. It perhaps became more difficult to achieve consensus when power was so evenly split between new and old generations, between Hu and Jiang. This could explain the delay between when Dr. Jiang Yanyong began telling Western reporters that China's SARS problem was much more serious than the government had admitted and when Hu fired the Minister of Health and Mayor of Beijing: there was probably a careful process of negotiating among leaders and factions. Even the firing of senior officials reflects the balance. The sacked Health Minister Zhang Wenkang was a close ally of Jiang Zemin (his personal doctor, in fact); the sacked Mayor of Beijing was a close ally of Hu. Tit for tat to reflect the balance. In this case, the balance may have shifted slightly toward Hu: even though both sides sacrificed a critical player, The new Health Minister was Vice Premier Wu Yi, a hard-nosed pragmatic reformer and supporter of Hu.

How stands the delicate interplay of power now that the crisis is over? Perhaps SARS subtly pushed along changes already underway. Most observers agree that once it admitted the problem, Hu's government handled the situation capably. Hu's moderately populist tone of government serving the people seemed to resonate with the public, especially when contrasted with Jiang's "Three Represents," a fuzzy code for recruiting wealthy Chinese businesspeople into the Communist Party. Hu continued his mild populism by canceling Party leadership's annual retreat to Beidaihe, a posh resort on the Bohai Sea where China's leaders have spent the swelter of August every year for the past half century making plans for ruling the country. Better to stay home, he said, doing the people's work.

Media openness creeps at a nearly imperceptible pace, like much else these days in directions that are difficult to identify unambiguously. For example, the issue of *Caijing* addressing the Shanghai corruption probe was removed from newsstands; but it was mailed to *Caijing* subscribers. Reporters who have their stories spike from newspapers for political reasons sometimes can publish the article on their paper's webpage. One step forward, one step backward, one step sideways. There's no reason to think the press will be less free than in the past. A more open press could be used by Hu's regime to uncover abuses and corruption at lower levels, to bring social problems to light, and perhaps to let off the pressure of popular discontent. An aggressively independent investigatory press

could also undermine authority of central government. Rather than unleashing the press, it is most likely that the government will try carefully to constrain the press's increased openness in order to pull it back if it goes too far, and perhaps to use the news media as weapons against Hu's enemies. From the other direction, reporters are likely to continue pushing the bounds of what is permitted and will resist being played as pawns in power games. One of the significant developments of the SARS crisis may have been a greater sense of their position in China for journalists. Look what happened when they were unable to do their jobs and uncover the truth about the disease early on.

The SARS crisis was contained without provoking the masses into the streets condemning the government and demanding transparency and accountability. This does not mean the Chinese government escaped the wrath of its people unscathed. Hong Kong may show how a public health crisis contributes to a movement demanding political change. Feeding residents' grievance about Article 23 was unhappiness about the persistent economic slump and growing unemployment rate, as well as dissatisfaction with the government's mishandling of SARS. But underlying the protests was a deep sense of bitterness toward China and its inability or unwillingness to protect the interests of the Chinese people ... and the people of Hong Kong who found themselves at the mercy of decisions made by distant autocrats in Beijing or corrupt officials in Guangdong. In a very real sense, the protests over Article 23 were fed by SARS.

Could demonstrations in Hong Kong ripple across China itself? On one level, the Chinese government would be fortunate if they were to experience protests as tidy and orderly as Hong Kong's, where demonstrators dutifully picked up their trash afterwards, and used glow sticks rather than candles to avoid marring the streets with wax. Protests in Chinese cities tend to be much rowdier and more destructive. Calm, well-organized Hong Kong-style demonstrations could look very appealing to China's rulers in coming years if violent actions spread.

Differences in styles of protests highlight how much Hong Kong differs from the rest of China. It is not a question of class, with Hong Kong's a disciplined protest by well-educated professionals and China's spontaneous protests by uneducated workers and peasants. Nor is the difference only that issues driving unhappy Chinese into the streets — humiliation by corrupt officials and loss of livelihood — are more visceral than Hong Kong's civic grievances. The critical difference is that Hong Kong's protests were carried out by organized civil society; China's are by groups that have been fragmented and prevented from organizing by the state.

Hong Kong's protests remain within a civic structure because the opposition leaders can focus on a limited set of political demands. The Basic Law allows the possibility of direct legislative elections in 2006 and direct elections for the chief executive in 2007. The impending dates provide a sense of urgency: if repressive changes are made to Article 23, it could make elections meaningless; on the other hand, demanding too much might provoke Beijing into cracking down and forbidding the election from being held at all.

In the long-term, SARS could indirectly contribute to the peaceful transition toward the open and democratic China that optimists see emerging as a result of the pressures of globalization and the inadequate responses to crises displayed by China's local and national autocrats. Three crucial groups may emerge from the crisis with a greater self-awareness of their professional responsibilities, of how corrupt and inept politicians stand in the way of being able to do their jobs, and of the terrible consequences for the country that resulted when they were not allowed to perform their jobs.

First, doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals are justly celebrated as heroes who risked their lives to combat SARS. They are well aware of how the mishandling by politicians jeopardized everything. They now know the importance of maintaining independent informational links with their peers inside and outside China. And they may not be willing to trust political officials with crucial health issues in the future. Jiang Yanyong, the retired Army surgeon who told the world about the crisis that was being covered up, may emerge as a role model worthy of emulation. (Although Hu's government has grudgingly acknowledged Jiang Yanyong's contribution, he has been told not to talk to the press any more.)

Second, Chinese scientists feel government officials excluded from an opportunity to take the world leadership on this issue of research and development of solutions to the crisis. Like medical professionals, scientists may become even more self-conscious of their interests. News accounts since the end of the crisis report that biological and medical scientists complain that they are still not being allowed to cooperate fully with their peers around the world. Especially as China tries to move toward an economy that is driven by science and advanced technology as well as by cheap labor, scientists as a profession will see an increase in their status and bargaining position relative to the government. Their integration into the international scientific community will continue. And it is not trivial that scientists view their profession as searching for "the truth," which complicates their relation with a government that behaves the way the Chinese government behaved during this crisis.

Finally, journalists in China see vividly what happens when they are prevented from doing their jobs. They may not accept exclusion so meekly in the future. SARS may best be remembered as a step toward the self-organized and self-limiting civil society that will be essential if China is to navigate its way in one piece toward a stable democracy.

SARS and China Timeline

November 2002: First cases of a mysterious respiratory illness in Guangdong province in southern China.

15 November: Hu Jintao takes over as head of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As part of his “Three Represents” theory, outgoing CCP leader Jiang Zemin formally invites wealthy businesspeople to join the Party. Jiang remains effectively commander in chief of the Red Army, and his supporters occupy roughly half the positions in the important Party committees.

December: After hearing stories of a nasty influenza killing people and sickening health workers in Guangdong and requesting patient specimens and permission to send team to province, Chinese government tells WHO scientist that it is only the flu and no investigation will be allowed.

10 February 2003: Rumors of the outbreak are posted on the ProMed global infectious disease alert system. At least 305 people in Guangdong sick, at least five dead.

11 February: The Chinese Ministry of Health notifies the WHO of an outbreak of an unknown respiratory disease but does not allow officials to investigate

21 February: A doctor from Guangdong stays at a Hong Kong hotel, infecting 16 people, who spread the disease to Hanoi, Toronto and Singapore

28 February: Carlo Urbani, a WHO doctor in Hanoi, treats one of the people infected in Hong Kong. He names the new disease severe acute respiratory syndrome, or SARS

12 March: WHO issues global alert over SARS

15 March: WHO declares SARS a worldwide health threat. As expected for the past decade, Hu Jintao confirmed as president of China; fellow pragmatist Wen Jiabao named Premier.

25 March: Chinese Health Ministry announces: “We have not found a single case of atypical pneumonia in Beijing or any other place in China recently.”

29 March: Urbani dies from SARS in Thailand

2 April: Health Minister Zhang Wenkang says Beijing has only seen 12 SARS infections and three deaths.

4 April: After hearing Zhang’s claim on TV, retired PLA doctor Jiang Yanyong writes to CCTV-4 and Phoenix TV exposing a SARS outbreak in Beijing.

8 April: In interviews with Western press, Dr Jiang says the seriousness of the epidemic is being covered up in Beijing.

- 16 April: Work by 13 laboratories around the world confirms that the virus responsible for SARS is a previously unknown coronavirus
- 17 April: President Hu Jintao tells a Politburo meeting that all SARS cases must be reported and no cover-ups will be tolerated. Authorities maintain that Beijing city has only had 37 infections.
- 20 April: The Chinese government sacks Minister of Health Zhang Wenkang and Beijing Mayor Meng Xuenong for covering up the outbreak and failing to take the action required to stop the disease spreading. The number of cases in Beijing jumps to 346.
- 22 April: Universities and colleges in Beijing start closing and several dormitories are put under quarantine.
- 23 April: The Red Army starts construction of an infectious disease hospital in Xiaotangshan. The WHO issues its Beijing travel warning.
- 26 April: Vice-Premier Wu Yi is named new minister of health.
- 29 April: Premier Wen Jiabao appeals for understanding at an ASEAN conference in Bangkok and acknowledges that China has made "mistakes" in its handling of the epidemic.
- 1 May: More than 10,000 people in Beijing city have been put under quarantine.
- 3 May: China grudgingly allow WHO team to visit Taiwan, two months after Taiwan's first deaths from SARS
- 7 May: Figures show the death rate from SARS averages 15 per cent, far worse than thought
- 20 May: Ms Wu addresses the WHO Assembly in Geneva and promises that China will co-operate with foreign countries to fight SARS.
- 23 May: The WHO lifts its advisory against travel to Hong Kong and Guangdong.
- 26 May: Beijing city for the first time reports new infections in the single digits.
- 12 June: Mr Gao says the decision to sack Zhang Wenkang was "entirely correct".
- 13 June: WHO lifts its advisory against travel to all areas of the mainland except Beijing.
- 20 June: The last 18 patients of the Xiaotangshan hospital are discharged.
- 24 June: WHO takes Beijing off its advisory and infectious areas lists. The city now has 43 confirmed SARS cases.

30 June: WHO announces that there have been no new cases anywhere for two weeks. Overall, SARS has infected 8450 people and killed 810 in over 30 countries worldwide.

1 July: Hu Jintao speech commemorating the 82nd anniversary of the formation of the CCP announces no reforms, only a commitment to study Jiang’s “Three Represents.” In Hong Kong, 500,000 demonstrators peacefully protest tightened security laws. Chinese state TV and newspapers ignore the event.

Cumulative Number of Reported Probable Cases of SARS

Country	Cumulative number of cases	Number of deaths	Number recovered	Date last probable case reported
Canada	250	38	194	9/Jul/2003
China	5327	348	4941	25/Jun/2003
Hong Kong	1755	298	1433	11/Jun/2003
Taiwan	671	84	507	19/Jun/2003
Singapore	206	32	172	18/May/2003
United States	75	0	67	23/Jun/2003
Viet Nam	63	5	58	14/Apr/2003
World Total	8437	813	7452	

Source: World Health Organization, www.who.int/csr/sars/country/2003_07_11/en/

Deaths by infectious diseases in China, January—July 2003

Rabies	490
Viral hepatitis	426
Tuberculosis	372
SARS	348
Other infectious diseases	592
Total deaths by infectious diseases	2,228

Source: Chinese Health Ministry study reported in “China’s most fatal infectious disease not SARS, but rabies,” *Asian Economic News* 22 July 2003.