

China and the origins of Covid-19

Interviewed last week on the BBC, China's ambassador to the UK, Liu Xiaoming, called for an end to the blaming and scapegoating swirling around the Covid-19 pandemic. The nations of the world, he suggested, need to stand above petty rivalries and treat the pandemic for what it is – a challenge to humanity as a whole.

The ambassador's appeal to our collective global spirit should be applauded. United we stand, divided we fall.

The defence being mounted by the Chinese authorities over their conduct in respect of the pandemic has three strands to it. All three were evident in Mr Xiaoming's interview. The first strand is about origins: where the pandemic started and how. The second is about disclosure: who the authorities told and when. The third is about management: how the authorities fought the virus and with what success.

Across all three strands, Beijing is facing scrutiny and cross-examination.

In terms of disclosure, many doubt the authorities really did reveal, to the Chinese people as well as the international community, all they knew as soon as they knew it. Some attribute this to weaknesses within the communist party bureaucracy in transmitting messages from bottom to top, others to a failure to appreciate the severity of the Covid-19 threat, and others still to a deliberate effort to buy time so as to cover their tracks and thereby deflect subsequent criticism.

With regard to management, the claims made by the authorities are again being met with international scepticism. At one end of the spectrum stand those who say the authorities are simply not telling the truth about how many Chinese citizens have lost their lives to the virus. The official figures, they say, have been cooked to make the communist party look good: whatever the means, the ends are phony. At the other end are those who challenge not so much the claims being made about outcomes as the methods used to achieve them. Those methods, they say, were totalitarian and thereby wholly unsuited to a free society: whatever the ends, the means are repugnant.

We want to concentrate here on the first strand of the argument, concerning origins. Begin here with the *where* of the issue. Pressed several times on this point, the ambassador resisted the suggestion that Covid-19's origins in China were an established fact. To be sure, he allowed, the virus was *discovered* in his country. But that does not demonstrate China was its source. For all we know, he argued, the virus began its life elsewhere, many months earlier. Thus, the ambassador felt able to say:

[The virus] was found in many other places that have no connection with China at all. So you can't point your fingers at China for the outbreak, and we have done our best. China is a victim of the coronavirus, but China is not a source of this problem. China is not the producer of this epidemic, and that is something we have to come clean about.

Why was the ambassador so keen to deflect the charge that the virus started in China? After all, if the virus is a natural disaster – akin to a tsunami or an earthquake – then, for the purposes of attributing blame to one country rather than another, it does not matter where the virus began. No country is to blame. If China was the source, it would amount to no more than it happened to be in the-wrong-place-at-the-wrong-time.

In fact, the authorities have four reasons for resisting the charge the virus has its origins in China. The first three reasons do not require China's handling of the outbreak to have been at fault. Only the fourth does.

First, being the source of the virus plays to an image of China that, historically, it has so much resented – that of a cauldron of disease waiting to infect the rest of the world. Establishing there was nothing more the authorities could have done to prevent the outbreak would only re-enforce that image. At least if it turned out that there *was* something more – *a lot more*, perhaps – that could have done, the rest of the world would be re-assured that the virus was, in principle, a controllable event that, because of human failings, went uncontrolled. But if it was not, in principle, a controllable event, it is a short step to the idea that China is home to uncontrollable events of which the rest of the world should be afraid. In this set-up, the authorities in Beijing cannot win. They lose if they admit failure and they lose if they don't.

Second, there is the principle of vicarious liability, according to which you can be responsible for putting something right even if you are not at fault for its happening in the first place. Many doubt this principle could be applied in international law to the country in which Covid-19 was found to originate. But that may not matter. The pressure on the originating country would most likely be political rather than legal anyway, with the call being for it to compensate those countries that had suffered economic losses as a result of the pandemic. Pressure to pick up a gigantic economic bill faces the country to whom this vicarious liability sticks. The wrong-place-at-the-wrong-time argument would not necessarily get China (or any other country) off the economic or diplomatic hook.

Third, the Chinese authorities want to save face and project confidence. Being the victim of someone else's bad luck does not make you appear a loser. Being the victim of your own bad luck just might. The government in Beijing is keen to be seen as a pillar of the international community, accepting responsibilities in return for exercising rights. It does not want the world to view China as the hapless new kid on the block who burned down the school by accident.

It is with the fourth reason that the *where* of the origins story shades into the *how*. To concede you were the source of the virus is thereby to narrow the list of potential suspects to one. To deny it is to throw your would-be inquisitors off the scent, dilute their efforts, and create divisions among them. As soon as you are established as the prime suspect, you face the full glare of scrutiny. How confident are the Chinese authorities that they could withstand

an independent investigation into their conduct? If such an investigation came, no doubt the authorities would push the line that they did *everything humanly possible to prevent the virus*. They might even add to this a dose of humility. They might concede that, with the benefit of hindsight, there are things they would have done things differently. After all, nothing is more human than to err in the face of the unknown. The important thing is to learn lessons and to share those lessons. That is what China has done.

Attempting to occupy the moral high ground is, however, a risky strategy and one whose success is not guaranteed simply by running down the clock: any revelations that emerge in the weeks, months, and years to come will magnify the sin of not having come clean at the time. If it is found there was something China's authorities did to provoke the disease (such as causing trauma to the local ecosystem in a rush to urbanise) or that they did not do to prevent it (such as stopping the importation of disease-transmitting wild animals or clamping down on unhygienic markets), their international and domestic standing will suffer a terrible blow. And they will suffer that blow regardless of how good a story they have to tell in the matter either of what they disclosed at the time about the outbreak or of how they subsequently managed it.

That is why the origins story is the most important part of the puzzle here. That is why Mr Xiaoming adopted the line he did.