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Before COVID-19, there was SARS

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By Lim Wee Kiat

COVID-19 was not China's first catastrophic public health crisis. The last time one struck the country, it transformed the emergency management landscape

Unlike natural extreme events, such as earthquakes, the COVID-19 pandemic does not have an obvious starting point. The virus didn't announce its arrival guns a-blazing, delivering sudden mass casualty and mayhem. Instead, it came quietly and namelessly, not even recognised as a distinctive virus when it was first reported in China.

However, given how the outbreak metastasized into a pandemic, some may conclude that it was because China lacked response plans when the outbreak was detected in a Wuhan wet market close to six months ago. The nation had a playbook, one that was forged in the crucible of a smaller but no less significant public health crisis that began in November 2002 when a close cousin of the current virus caused the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). The SARS epidemic infected more than 5,000 and killed close to 350 in China.

The crisis opened a window to galvanise reform in China's emergency management landscape. At the conceptual front, the Chinese were poised to inject new ideas to govern crises better.

BUILDING A POST-SARS EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT SECTOR

Discussions on adopting a more risk-based approach toward crisis response had been in the works since the late 1990s. Scholars in China were introduced to ideas such as German sociologist Ulrich Beck's 'risk society' which highlight the range of risks that modern societies need to confront as they progress, particularly those stemming from the advent of science and technology. Iconic disasters such as the Chernobyl nuclear accident and "mad cow disease" loomed large in people's psyches.

The notion of 'risk society' associated with modernity resonated well with the Chinese intelligentsia. China was ascending, on the cusp of joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) at the end of the last millennium. Along with 'risk society', related concepts such as 'risk governance', and 'disaster-risk reduction' gained traction because they gave Chinese policy elites the vocabulary to discuss and reflect upon the threats that came with development, especially the dangers associated with modernisation and China's increasing integration with the global political economy.

So when the SARS epidemic was mostly contained by July 2003, policy elites already had their conceptual toolbox readied for change. The government embarked on a series of reforms that configured the emergency management landscape we see in China today. The change was extensive in legal and organizational terms. China amended its Constitution to recognise that wars were no longer the only risk that could bring the country to its knees. The term "martial law" (jieyan 戒严) was switched out in favour of a more expansive term, "state of emergency" (jinji zhuangtai 紧急状态) in the Constitution. Most of the world missed this change. The international news cycle was more captivated by the protection of human rights and citizens' right to private property that were also introduced into China's Constitution at the same time.

In 2007, China passed the National Emergency Response Law (Tufa Shijian Yingdui Fa 突发事件应对法). Known as the "dragon head" law (longtou fa 龙头法), it was the disaster law that ruled other disaster laws. A risk-based approach was enshrined in the new law, leading to amendment

of existing regulations and disaster plans at all levels of government. New ones were immediately aligned to this approach.

Organisationally, an emergency management office (EMO) was created within the State Council (de facto cabinet) to coordinate responses across ministries and various levels of government to manage disasters. New instructional bodies also bolstered training capabilities. For example, in 2009, Jinan University in Guangzhou became the first of many to offer emergency management programmes.

The following year, the Beijing-based Chinese Academy of Governance (CAG), which trained middle to senior officials, created an instructional unit for emergency management. The landscape was further buttressed recently by the creation of the Ministry of Emergency Management (MEM). Formed two years ago, MEM consolidated State Council's EMO, as well as disaster response and relief functions across several ministries and government bodies.

Since 2003, the world has also seen China's rapid innovation and adoption of cutting-edge technology, in tandem with the reforms in emergency management. It saw the rise of digital mobile devices and the coming of age of China's tech giants, Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent (also known as BAT), as well as its formidable entrants into artificial intelligence (e.g., SenseTime), and civilian drones (e.g., DJI). The realm of genome sequencing and biotechnology also took off, with the likes of BGI, a capability that currently contributes to the race to address the COVID-19 pandemic.

THE (LONG) ROAD AHEAD

The COVID-19 pandemic remains an unfolding crisis. That being said, China is sufficiently confident with its tentative success to hold its annual political meetings in late May which has been postponed from March 2020. Known as the "two meetings" (lianghui 两会), the events are a landmark in China's governance calendar. Therefore, it is not surprising the government is pulling out all the stops to contain the virus amidst the inkling of a second wave in Wuhan. Clearly, mistakes and episodes of misjudgement were committed in the early days of the COVID-19 crisis. But it was hardly because China was incapable of response; it already wrote a playbook to improvise from.

Whether China could maintain its current containment of the virus remains to be seen. Compared to the 2003 SARS epidemic, China and the rest of the world have already entered a protracted response period. Governments need to work closely with other stakeholders, taking them into confidence, and collectively build the staying power to pull through the crisis.

Already, there are signs of the public succumbing to compliance and communication fatigue, such as stepping out more instead of staying at home and not keeping to safe distancing. Care has to be taken to ensure new measures be blended into existing ones, should the virus stage a resurgence despite our best efforts at containing it.

Dr. Lim Wee Kiat is Associate Director at SMU's Centre for Management Practice. His research interests lie at the intersection of risk, disaster, and organisation, investigating how organisations make sense of, prepare for, and respond to sociotechnical disruptions. He holds a PhD in Sociology, specialising in sociology of disaster. He is about to complete his monograph on China's ten-year institutional reforms to its emergency management policies following the 2003 SARS epidemic.