

Milton Leitenberg, Senior research associate at the center for international and security studies at the University of Maryland is concerned about the numbers and the credibility of the Chinese government

The Question of Covid-19 Mortality in China

A review in the New York Review of Books on 5 November 2020, by the independent China scholar and journalist, Ian Johnson, bore the title: How Did China Beat Its Covid Crisis? It discussed two books: *Wuhan Diary: Dispatches from a Quarantined City* by Fang Fang, and *The Art of Political Control in China* by Daniel C. Mattingly.²

Fang Fang's book describes events that took place in Wuhan in the early months of 2020 and is by a well-known Chinese writer working within the city. This brief commentary discusses just one particular aspect of Johnson's discussion of her book.

Ian Johnson is a prize-winning author who lived and worked in China for 20 years and wrote about China for years before that. He covers a range of issues concerning China, including historical memory, religion and literature. Most recently he taught at the Beijing Centre for Chinese Studies, however, he was expelled from China in March 2020, together with several other US journalists. He was therefore not under any constraints when he wrote the review for the New York Review of Books, which would have been the case had he still been in China.

In discussing Fang Fang's book, Johnson wrote: 'The result is that China, the pandemic's epicentre, a country of 1.4 billion people, has had 4,634 deaths – a seventh of Spain's, an eighth of Italy's, a ninth of Britain's and less than a fortieth of the US's.'¹

However, the number 4,634 is fraudulent and impossible.

It is difficult to understand how a seasoned China observer could have repeated that number. The public health measures undertaken by the Chinese government after 21 January were draconian and they unquestionably saved millions of lives. The current Chinese administration's record of information suppression is equally draconian however, and Johnson certainly is aware of China's problematical 70-year record of official statistical manipulation, as well as the statistics it does not report at all.

The epidemiological pattern of SARS-CoV-2 (shortened to Covid-19) infection and mortality reported by China since January 2020 does not resemble that of any other nation in the world, including those of other nations that have succeeded in keeping mortality quite low.³

The CIA reportedly informed the US government that 'China has vastly understated its coronavirus infections and that its count could not be relied upon...' and that holds equally true for China's reported Covid-19 mortality figures.⁴ The Covid-19 mortality numbers reported by the governments of China, Russia, Iran and Brazil are considered to be highly unreliable, and those of China perhaps the most unreliable of all.

The Covid-19 virus was spreading throughout December 2019 in Wuhan and Hubei province, and possibly during November 2019 as well. At that time it was diagnosed as an atypical pneumonia. On 30 December 2019 Dr Li Wenliang reported this privately to

medical colleagues on a WeChat group, after which he was detained by the local police and reprimanded. A day later the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission verified this, by which time it was also understood that the virus was aerosol transmissible from person to person because medical personnel had become infected. No Chinese official admitted that publicly, however, until the influential hero of the 2003 SARS outbreak, Dr Zhong Nanshan, did so on 20 January. Throughout December people from Wuhan and elsewhere in China were flying to other cities in China, and all over the world from Wuhan as they always did, because Wuhan airport is a major Chinese air hub.⁵ In December 2019 and January 2020 approximately 185,000 people flew out of Wuhan to other countries.

Moreover between 31 December 2019 and 21 January 2020 when the Chinese government isolated Wuhan, between 5 and 7 million people left the city by air and railroad. Multiple maps published by the New York Times recorded this exodus and several of them displayed the relative numbers of people who arrived in different Chinese cities.⁶

It is inconceivable that two thirds of all the Covid-19 deaths in China occurred among the million or more people who remained in Wuhan, and only a third in the rest of China, including Wuhan citizens who had left the city. Several published peer reviewed papers that appeared early in the pandemic strongly indicated the number of cases, and by implication

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deaths, had to be higher than the official figure. One article outlined the shifting case definition, which would indicate that the early numbers, never subsequently revised, should have been much higher. In addition, these studies made no attempt to capture the number of mild or asymptomatic cases, which other studies have shown were more than 40% in China.⁷

In a more recent manuscript that is still undergoing publication review, and which examined Covid-19 reporting data from several countries the author wrote:

*'The underlying reasons for the two distinctly different age profiles for age specific infection rates reported from the two groups of countries included in this analysis, are not yet entirely clear. Sampling bias due to the use of case definition criteria which have either (1) restricted testing to symptomatic cases and contacts of previously confirmed cases, or (2) the exclusion of positive diagnostic testing results from persons who were judged to be asymptomatic or non-symptomatic at the time of testing appears to have been a major factor in the case of China and the US.'*⁸

As for the city of Wuhan, a local infectious disease MD who is quoted in a recent report published in the New Yorker estimated that: *'...the actual total [who died in the city] could be three to four times higher than the government's figure...'* He referred to the early period of the pandemic, when overwhelmed hospitals turned patients away. *'If you were infected and not diagnosed, then you weren't counted,'* he said. *'I think the total is probably*

*more than 10,000.'*⁹

Other informal estimates within China are far higher, and they also are for Wuhan alone: 'Some social media posts have estimated that all seven funeral homes in Wuhan are handing out 3,500 urns every day in total. Funeral homes have informed families that they will try to complete cremations before the traditional grave-tending festival of Qing Ming on 5 April, which would indicate a 12-day process beginning on 23 March.' Such an estimate would mean that 42,000 urns would be given out during that time.

Another popular estimate is based on the cremation capacity of the funeral homes, which run a total of 84 furnaces with a capacity over 24 hours of 1,560 urns city-wide, assuming that each cremation takes one hour. This calculation results in an estimated 46,800 deaths. A resident of Hubei province, of which Wuhan is the capital, said: 'Most people there now believe that more than 40,000 people died in the city before and during the lockdown.'¹⁰

The numbers derived from urns and cremation rates are obviously crude guesstimates, and should only be considered illustrative.

On 30 November 2020, CNN released a long report based on 117 pages of leaked documents from the Hubei Provincial Centre for Disease Control and Prevention.¹¹ Wuhan is the largest city in Hubei province, and the documents had been provided by a whistleblower. The documents provide some but not a very great increase in specific numbers for Covid-19 mortality

in the province, about 15%, however the 15% number is of no significance. That is because the documents demonstrate multiple reasons why the official numbers were very substantially undercounted. The authorities had little understanding of the actual prevalence of the disease for about two months. In addition, the documents primarily cover the period from 1 January to 10 February 2020, and they concern events and statistics that for the most part were within the city of Wuhan.

- They double the number of identified cases of Covid-10 in the province.
- They suggest that the first recorded case was on 17 November 2019.
- As many as 200 cases are expected to have occurred during December 2019, and not 40 as reported in a Chinese publication.
- There was also a wave of respiratory disease in Hubei province in December 2019 that was attributed to influenza. A possibly large subset of influenza-like diseases in December 2019 in Hubei province that had not been tested for flu and shown to be positive could have been Covid-19.
- On 10 February 2020, provincial officials privately reported more than twice as many Covid-19 cases in Hubei as the government of China publicly reported on that day for the entire country.
- The average time for a confirmed diagnosis was 23.3 days, at the same time as the test kits used in the first week of January 2020 regularly produced false negatives. The two factors combined to facilitate spread.



The impact of Covid on the Chinese people, and the heroism of the medical staff, can't be judged until the true figures come out ©Macau Photo Agency

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- The most significant finding in the leaked documents was the evidence of an interactive combination of flawed testing, shifting diagnostic criteria, suppression of information and confused and contradictory reporting to official agencies.

An American virologist who maintains close contact with virologists in research institutes in China has estimated that the Chinese government under-reported deaths by an order of magnitude, a factor of 10 to 20¹². Of an estimated 66,000 deaths he believes that two thirds - that is 40,000 to 46,000 - were in Wuhan and only one third in all the rest of China. Epidemiologists consider that highly implausible, and at least one has estimated Covid-19 mortality in China as being as high as two orders of magnitude (ie 100 times) the Chinese government's officially reported number.¹³

Also, China has not published any statistics on excess mortality since January 2020, that is the excess number of deaths over the same time period in 2019, 2018, or 2017, which would be attributed to Covid-19. These would

include people who died at home and were not entered into Covid-19 mortality statistics, or people whose death certificate cites pneumonia or kidney failure.

In the US excess deaths considered attributable to Covid-19 are estimated to be about 60% on top of the official Covid-19 mortality number. China has reported only an implausibly low number of Covid-19 deaths in Xinjiang province. The authorities claimed that there had not been a single case of Covid-19 infection in all of China between 15 August and 11 October. The Japanese authorities, however, reported that 16 Chinese nationals arriving from China at Narita, Haneda and Kansai International airports between 24 August and 23 October tested positive for Covid-19. Obviously, if President Xi states that the Covid-19 pandemic has been conquered in China, local public health authorities are not going to start reporting cases. If the Chinese government's officially reported numbers were real, they should change over time as early figures are revised with updated

information. The absence of such adjustments is one of the clearest indications of a problem with China's reported statistics, even though the numbers involved for this reason would be low.

Johnson also refers to China's 'highly capable bureaucracy'. While Johnson is reviewing Fang Fang's narrative about events in the city of Wuhan he never mentions that the capable bureaucracy 'disappeared' two Chinese citizen journalists who were blogging and sending videos about the pandemic from inside the city¹⁴ and they are still disappeared to this day. We have also seen the citizen journalist Zhang Zhan sentenced to four years imprisonment¹⁵. The same capable bureaucracy also forced several Chinese scientists who posted papers about the early medical response in Wuhan to retract their publications.¹⁶

Whatever the actual number of Covid-19 deaths in China, we can be certain of two things: it is definitely not 4,634, and it is likely to be somewhere between one and two orders of magnitude higher.

² "How Did China Beat Its Covid Crisis," New York Review of Books, Vol. 67, No. 17, November 5, 2020, pp. 47-49.

³ COVID-19 Global Tracker, New infections reported by region, <https://graphics.reuters.com/world-coronavirus-tracker-and-maps/>.

⁴ "C.I.A. Seeks to Verify Virus Totals in China, Dismissing Official Tallies" New York Times, April 3, 2020.

⁵ <https://www.flightconnections.com/flights-from-wuhan-wuh>.

⁶ Krvul Sheikh, Derek Watkins, Jin Wu and Mika Gröndahl, "How Bad Will the Coronavirus Outbreak Get? Here Are 6 Key Factors," New York Times, Updated Feb. 28, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/world/asia/china-coronavirus-contain.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share>.

⁷ Tsang TK et al, "Effect of changing case definitions for COVID-19 on the epidemic curve and transmission parameters in Mainland China; a modeling study." *The Lancet Public Health*, 2020, 5(5): e289-e296.

⁸ Joseph P. Dudley, "COVID-19 Transmission Under the Public Health Radar: High Prevalence of SARS-CoV-2 Infection Among Young Adults During Wave 1 of the COVID-19 Pandemic", paper under review in *Eurosurveillance*.

⁹ Peter Hessler, "Nine Days in Wuhan, the Ground Zero of the Coronavirus Pandemic", *The New Yorker*. October 5, 2020.

¹⁰ <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/wuhan-deaths-03272020182846.html>

¹¹ Nick Patton Walsh, "The Wuhan files, leaked documents reveal China's mishandling of the early stages of Covid-19," CNN, November 30, 2020. See also, Editorial, "A new report adds to the evidence of a coronavirus coverup in China," *The Washington Post*, December 6, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/a-new-report-adds-to-the-evidence-of-a-coronavirus-coverup-in-china/2020/12/06/81d880f2-366e-11eb-8d38-6aea1adb3839_story.html.

¹² Personal communication, April 3, 2020.

¹³ Personal communication, April 3, 2020.

¹⁴ "Coronavirus: Why have two reporters in Wuhan disappeared?," <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-51486106>.

¹⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/28/world/asia/china-Zhang-Zhan-covid-convicted.html?searchResultPosition=2>

¹⁶ An entirely different aspect of the global Covid-19 pandemic concerns the question of whether the outbreak was caused by the infection of a laboratory worker at the Wuhan Institute of Virology in the course of using molecular genetic technology to convert the pathogen from one that infected bats to one that could infect humans. Such research was taking place at the Institute during 2019. As this question does not directly impact the question of Covid-19 mortality in China, it has not been discussed in this paper. See, Milton Leitenberg, "Did the SARS-CoV-2 virus arise from a bat coronavirus research program in a Chinese laboratory? Very possibly," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 4 June 2020, <https://thebulletin.org/2020/06/did-the-sars-cov-2-virus-arise-from-a-bat-coronavirus-research-program-in-a-chinese-laboratory-very-possibly/>. See also, Alina Chan, <https://threadreaderapp.com/thread/1336487766117527554.html> and Moreno Colaiacovo, "The origin of SARS-CoV-2 is a riddle: meet the Twitter detectives who aim to solve it," <https://mygenomix.medium.com/the-origin-of-sars-cov-2-is-a-riddle-meet-the-twitter-detectives-who-aim-to-solve-it-5050216fd279>