

CHINA'S MID-JANUARY 2020 “PATRIOTIC HEALTH CAMPAIGN”

SHOWS WHY WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND ITS
GOVERNMENT AND POLITICAL SYSTEM

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Summary

On 14 January 2020, six days before the Chinese government announced it had set up an inter-ministerial coordinating body to tackle a new coronavirus, it had already begun a nationwide campaign to clean up markets, combat vectors of disease, and mobilize citizens to adopt behaviours to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. This campaign, which was quickly adopted by provincial governments across China, went unnoticed internationally because it did not mention the coronavirus and was led by the “National Patriotic Health Campaign Commission,” a long-standing body little known outside of China that brings together leaders from government ministries, Communist Party departments and the Central Military Commission. The fact that this body has gone unnoticed shows that we need to understand the Chinese “government” and wider political system, including its many policy making and implementing bodies, if we are to fully understand its response to the coronavirus, inform policy making internationally, and enable crucial collaboration.

Background

It is widely known that on 20 January 2020, central Chinese authorities announced a set of steps to counter a novel coronavirus. They publicized a State Council Executive Meeting on it,¹ held the first meeting² of a new inter-ministerial coordinating body (literally, "joint mechanism") set up to tackle it,³ and issued a public announcement⁴ on managing the disease it caused according to class-A measures.⁵ It was also on that date that the head of the National Health Commission's team of medical experts Zhong Nanshan spoke on China Central Television (CCTV) about human-to-human transmission.⁶ All these actions were taken by well-known, high-profile government bodies — the State Council and the National Health Commission — the first places international analysts might turn to understand the government's response.

What we know little about is a campaign launched by another central-level commission six days earlier that set sweeping measures in motion to mobilize government, Party and public in a large-scale preventative effort

against seasonal infectious diseases. Though National Health Commission Vice-Head Li Bin mentioned the campaign at a State Council press conference,⁷ clearly linking it to the epidemic, it has gone otherwise unnoticed.⁸

On 14 January, the Office of the "National Patriotic Health Campaign Commission" (NPHCC) issued a document, "NHPCC Document No.1, 2020,"⁹ addressed to its provincial-level branches. The document launched a "Winter-Spring Patriotic Health Campaign" with the aim of "lowering the risk of environmental transmission of key winter-spring seasonal infectious diseases." This earlier, little-known step focused on combatting vectors of disease, cleaning up marketplaces, and mobilizing citizens to engage in preventative behaviours.

This research briefing uses publicly available policy documents to explain the campaign and its place in the Chinese response to the coronavirus. It also shows that we need to think about what constitutes "government" when trying to understand how

¹ See "李克强主持召开国务院常务会议 进一步部署新型冠状病毒感染的肺炎疫情防控工作等" (Li Keqiang Hosts a State Council Executive Meeting on making further arrangements for work on novel coronavirus pneumonia etc.) 20 January 2020.

² See "孙春兰主持召开国务院应对新型冠状病毒感染的肺炎疫情防控联防联控工作机制会议" (Sun Chunlan hosts a State Council Novel Coronavirus Joint Response Mechanism meeting) 24 January 2020.

³ The "State Council Joint Covid-19 Epidemic Prevention and Control Work Response Mechanism" (or the "State Council Joint Mechanism") was set up to facilitate a government-wide response. It is said to have 32 member agencies (mostly government ministries) which also lead or belong to task forces established under it (such as a medical materials task force, a logistics task force, and a research task force).

⁴ See "中华人民共和国国家卫生健康委员会公告 2020 年第 1 号" (PRC National Health Commission public announcement No.1 2020) 20 January 2020.

⁵ The *Law of the People's Republic of China on the Prevention and Treatment of Infectious Diseases* divides infectious diseases into three classes (A, B and C), lists the diseases that belong to each class, and sets out measures based on this classification. The

government decided the novel coronavirus disease belonged to Class B but demanded Class A prevention and control measures.

⁶ See "钟南山: 疫情呈现人传人等特点" (Zhong Nanshan: the epidemic shows characteristics including human-to-human transmission) 20 January 2020.

⁷ See "国务院新闻办公室 2020 年 1 月 22 日新闻发布会 介绍新型冠状病毒感染的肺炎防控工作有关情况" (SCIO 22 January 2020 press conference: introducing the situation regarding novel coronavirus pneumonia prevention and control work) 22 January 2020.

⁸ A typical example is an otherwise excellent report by the Institut Montaigne (2020:11) which argues that "In China as a whole, the virus was recognized as an infectious disease only on January 20, a full 43 days after the first detection. Almost no prevention and containment measures were taken before that time."

⁹ See "全国爱卫办关于开展冬春季爱国卫生运动加强市场环境卫生整治工作的通知" (全爱卫办发[2020]1 号) (NPHCC Office notice on launching a winter-spring patriotic health campaign, strengthening corrective measures for market environmental hygiene [NPHCC Office Document No.1, 2020]) 14 January 2020.

the Chinese authorities responded to the virus. Only by taking a wide view of government in light of what we know about the political system does this earlier element of the central response become apparent. In turn, only then do we notice that some provinces, too, responded quickly to this central call, setting in motion campaigns against infectious diseases before 20 January.

What is a "Patriotic Health Campaign" and why have we overlooked this one?

"Patriotic health work," according to the State Council in 2014,¹⁰ includes "acting as early as possible to mobilize ... and control the occurrence and transmission of diseases at the source." It involves "Patriotic Health" agencies mobilizing "the masses" — getting the general public to actively participate. In the words of the State Council, it "uses prevention and control by the masses, giving play to the strengths of primary-level Patriotic Health agencies and teams within townships and sub-district offices, urban and rural communities, state agencies, and enterprises and public institutions." It is meant to "strengthen collaboration between specialist prevention and control and public participation."

Patriotic health campaigns are a distinctive feature of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) approach to governing. They are thought to have originated before the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 as a way of periodically mobilizing the Party, its governing bodies, and the local population to

take measures against disease and promote public health.¹¹ In the early 1950s a Commission was set up to take charge of organizing and mobilizing Patriotic Health campaigns. The Campaign's better-known iterations include those during the Great Leap Forward to "Eradicate the Four Pests."¹²

Like other elements of Chinese governance, these campaigns draw on participation by "the masses," while also attempting to educate them and alter their habits. They work through top-down mobilization, reaching society level by level and organization by organization to generate the most extensive possible participation. Campaigns also use occasions like Spring Festival and the Dragon Boat Festival and their associated traditions to encourage public participation.

But if this 2020 Campaign was linked to the novel coronavirus, why did we not notice it? First, in the official policy document that launched it, the campaign was not discursively linked to a specific virus. Instead, it was framed as a campaign much like any other, against seasonal infectious diseases.

Second, it was not launched by an agency that is well-known outside China or easily recognizable as an important part of the government structure. The Chinese political system features many committees and commissions that are frequently reshuffled or repurposed and are often dually, triply, or otherwise confusingly named.¹³ The 14 January 2020 campaign was launched by a little-studied organization with a formidable line-up of Party, government, military, and mass organization members.¹⁴ Unlike other

¹⁰ See "国务院关于进一步加强新时期爱国卫生工作的意见" (State Council opinion on further strengthening new-era patriotic health work) 23 December 2014.

¹¹ The name was settled on later, with the "Patriotic" part said to originate with a campaign in response to U.S. germ warfare during the Korean War.

¹² See "毛泽东起草的中共中央关于开展以除四害为中心的冬季爱国卫生运动的通知" (CCP Central Committee notice drafted by Mao Zedong on launching a winter patriotic health campaign focused on eradicating the four pests); see also Shapiro, Judith.

Mao's war against nature: Politics and the environment in revolutionary China. Cambridge University Press, 2001:86–89.

¹³ See Li Ling "Rebranding Stability Maintenance and Rebirth of Zhou Yongkang's Comprehensive Governance Committee," China Law Translate, 7 May 2020.

¹⁴ Members can be seen in "国务院办公厅关于调整全国爱国卫生运动委员会组成人员的通知" (State Council Office notice on adjusting the members of the NPHCC) 24 December 2018; a small number of adjustments were made in 2019, see "全国爱卫会关

easily recognizable elements of the political system — the State Council, the National Health Commission, or even the CCP Central Committee — it was not the place analysts looked to in order to understand the government's response.

What is the National Patriotic Health Campaign Commission?

The NPHCC is referred to officially as a "deliberative and coordinating agency of the State Council."¹⁵ Its component units and members are approved by the State Council and its head is a State Council leader, currently Sun Chunlan. The Commission's vice-heads and members are ministers, vice-ministers and other leaders from across the Party and government system. At present, first in its line-up of vice-heads is Ma Xiaowei, who is concurrently Head of the National Health Commission. Other vice-heads include the ministers of Ecology and Environment, Housing and Urban-Rural Development, and Agriculture and Rural Affairs, as well as vice-heads of the State Council Secretariat, the CCP Central Propaganda Department, the National Development and Reform Commission, and the Central Military Commission Logistics Department.

The NPHCC's Office is headed by National Health Commission Vice-Head Yu Xuejun.¹⁶ The Commission's Office, which sits within the National Health Commission, is in charge of day-to-day affairs, organizing and coordinating implementation by member organizations, supervising decision-making,

and drafting policy.¹⁷ Coordination among departments takes place partly via a "contact person" designated by each member organization. When deemed necessary, contact people come together at meetings convened by the NPHCC Office Head.

Xi Jinping's first administration (2012–2017) changed the NPHCC's composition, functions, working methods and structures, amending rules that had been in place since 1999.¹⁸ In 2014, the amended rules explicitly listed military leaders among the agencies from which vice-heads and members should come¹⁹ and placed the NPHCC's planning and policy making under "overall national economic and social development plans."²⁰ They placed a greater onus on public participation, redefining existing mobilizing functions to include "coordinating and carrying out major disease prevention and control and public health incident prevention and control by the public."²¹ The NPHCC's way of working was altered significantly, requiring member ministries and departments to "strengthen coordination and cooperation,"²² highlighting public communications, public mobilization and public oversight,²³ and focusing on guiding, supervising, and creating institutionalized standards and indicators instead of "exchanging experience, discussing problems...and promoting the work of all localities."²⁴ Annual meetings involving all provincial leaders²⁵ were swapped for "topic-specific meetings" called by the NPHCC Head (or the Vice-Head on her

于调整部分组成人员的通知 (NPHCC notice on adjusting some members) 6 March 2019.

¹⁵ See 全爱卫发 [2014] 1 号 (NPHCC Document No.1, 2014) 3 January 2014.

¹⁶ See op. cit. NPHCC, 6 March 2019.

¹⁷ See op. cit. NPHCC, 3 January 2014.

¹⁸ See 全爱卫发[1999]第 3 号 (NPHCC Document No.3, 1999) for the old version of the rules and 全爱卫发 [2014] 1 号 (NPHCC Document No.1, 2014) for the new one.

¹⁹ See 全爱卫发 [2014] 1 号: 1 (NPHCC Document No.1, 2014: Article 1). Military leaders have in fact

long been members of the commission, but this change reflects the importance placed on their inclusion.

²⁰ 全爱卫发 [2014] 1 号: 2.1 (NPHCC Document No.1, 2014: Article 2.1).

²¹ Ibid., Article 2.2.

²² Ibid., Article 3.1.

²³ Ibid., Article 3.2.

²⁴ 全爱卫发 [1999] 第 3 号: 3.3 (NPHCC Document No.3, 1999: Article 3.3).

²⁵ Ibid., Article 5.2.



behalf) and attended by members whose work the topic of the meeting pertains to.²⁶

In the past decade the Commission has clearly gained a more prominent role. In 2016 it was cited in a five-year plan (2016–2020) on prevention and control against infectious diseases.²⁷ Its work was cited both in Xi Jinping's report at the 19th National Party Congress²⁸ in 2017 and in Hu Jintao's reports at the 18th and 17th congresses in 2012 and 2007. This contrasts with the period between the end of the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s and 2002, when its work received no mention in any such report. A 2014 State Council guiding policy document,²⁹ lauded as the first of its kind for Patriotic Health work in 25 years,³⁰ called for legislating on the Commission's work, incorporating it into legal systems, and facilitating inter-departmental data sharing. It urged its members to incorporate health work into their agendas, strengthen inter-departmental cooperation, and put the people in place to assume responsibility. It called for stronger funding — via Ministry of Finance special transfers — to facilitate the work of the Commission and its local counterparts and required that Patriotic Health work be part of leading group and cadre assessments.

What makes the mid-January campaign important and what did it entail?

Though the 14 January NPHCC document that launched the 2020 Campaign makes no

mention of an epidemic or a coronavirus, we know from Vice-Head Li Bin that the National Health Commission considered it part of the authorities' response.³¹ The document's core goal was to address environmental hygiene in markets.

Based on a careful reading of more than 40 policy documents issued by the NPHCC in recent years, it is clear that this January 2020 campaign differs from the Commission's regular initiatives in a number of ways.

First, it does not fit neatly into the Commission's typical calendar. The NPHCC's work is carried out in rough annual cycles, partly to support international initiatives like Global Handwashing Day, and partly according to its own work rhythm. While it is not unheard of, it is also not typical for the national commission to launch campaigns against winter-spring infectious diseases. Nationwide campaigns against viruses often focus on spring and summer, with these seasons sometimes referred to as "a focal period for health work to protect against disease."³²

Second, while the NPHCC does respond to newly arising issues through sporadic campaigns, the policy documents that launch those campaigns usually name the specific viruses or vector-borne diseases that have prompted them. For example, in February 2016, its Office called for a Spring Patriotic Health Campaign to Exterminate Mosquitoes.³³ This campaign document cites

²⁶ Op. cit. NPHCC Document No.1, 2014: Article 5.2.

²⁷ See "国家卫生计生委关于印发突发急性传染病防治“十三五”规划（2016-2020年）的通知” (National Health and Family Planning Commission notice on the issuance of the 2016–2020 five-year plan on sudden acute infectious disease prevention and control) 15 July 2016.

²⁸ National Party Congress reports, typically produced once every five years, are among the most important overarching policy documents in the Chinese political system.

²⁹ Op. cit. State Council opinion, 23 December 2014.

³⁰ See 全国爱卫办关于开展第27个爱国卫生月活动的通知 (全爱卫办发 [2015] 1号) (NPHCC Office

notice on launching activities for the 27th nation patriotic health month [NPHCC Office Document No.1, 2015]) 17 March 2015.

³¹ See op. cit. SCIO, 22 January 2020.

³² See 全国爱卫办关于开展第25个爱国卫生月活动的通知 (全爱卫办发 [2013] 1号) (NPHCC Office notice on launching activities for the 25th nation patriotic health month [NPHCC Office Document No.1, 2013] 28 March 2013.

³³ See 全国爱卫会办公室关于开展“清洁家园、灭蚊防病”春季爱国卫生运动的通知 (全爱卫办发 [2016] 1号) (NPHCC Office notice on launching a spring patriotic health campaign with the theme of 'cleaning up our own home, exterminate mosquitoes and

clearly the Zika Virus, Dengue, the soon-to-rise temperatures in China, and the particular susceptibility of the country's southern provinces to mosquitoes. In contrast, the 14 January 2020 document names no virus or disease, it only cites concerns about high levels of trade and travel during the coming Spring Festival as the Campaign's rationale.

Third, the 2020 January document urges localities to "recognize the importance and urgency" of this campaign. Past policy documents launching spring and summer campaigns against diseases, viruses and vectors of disease tend to include other, more light-hearted activities to promote health and fitness such as skipping, dance, tai chi and football. The 14 January 2020 document does not do this.

What it does do, however, is set out in clear, simple, and detailed terms the content of the Campaign that provincial-level Patriotic Health Commission branches are expected to act on. It contains five sets of measures. They include the following:

1. Environmental hygiene measures with a focus on markets

Local Patriotic Health Campaign Commissions (PHCCs) are to "use the capacity of the Patriotic Health Campaign" to mobilize all kinds of departments and work units and take corrective action to clean up places where crowds gather, like markets, airports, stations, and commercial centres, as well as alleys, in-city-villages, belts where rural areas meet urban, building and demolition sites, and old residential areas. It calls for treating markets as a priority, collaborating with government departments and organizing for specialists to take corrective measures in and around marketplaces. This includes cleaning up stalls, cleaning and disinfecting facilities such as public toilets and water pools and addressing rubbish disposal. It also requires commissions to draw on the traditional custom of "sweeping

the dust" to mobilize the public to carry out "a big clean."

2. Control measures against vectors of disease

These measures too are detailed and clear. They include cleaning residential estates, rubbish transfer stations and building sites, and eliminating the breeding grounds for vectors like rats and mice,³⁴ cockroaches, mosquitoes, and flies. The focus is rats and mice. It demands a tightening up of control measures against vectors in all types of markets, better measures in markets to control against rats, mice and flies, and action to ensure market drainage systems are working sufficiently. In markets where there are signs of rats and mice, professionals are to be called in; and the public is to be mobilized to clean up rubbish sheds, basements, garages, wells, restrooms, and receptacles that easily collect water.

3. Public health communications

The document calls for local PHCCs to use newspapers, TV, public transport adverts, and WeChat, Weibo and TikTok for health communications. It demands that commissions organize public communications boards at the entrances to markets to "help sellers, personnel working in markets, and consumers ... to grasp health information and the key ways to protect against winter and spring infectious diseases, teach people to often wash their hands and ventilate frequently, and caution people to keep an eye on their health and promptly seek medical assistance if they find they have symptoms."

4. Marketplace regulation

These measures use an existing initiative as an inroad to ensure marketplace regulation. The document calls on local PHCCs to assess whether markets in their jurisdiction meet Healthy City Development Initiative standards (which include requirements such as the provision of hygiene management and

prevent disease' [NPHCC Office Document No.1, 2016]) 18 February 2016.

³⁴ The document uses "鼠" throughout.

cleaning personnel and the maintenance of good environmental hygiene and well-regulated transport in the areas around markets).³⁵ It prompts local commissions to ensure that existing market management measures are being fully implemented, urging them to establish a clear picture of how well markets in their area are currently being managed and to formulate plans and measures for taking corrective action for each market in their jurisdiction.

5. Organization and implementation

Measures to ensure implementation begin with an explicit statement on the importance and urgency of this campaign, urging quick action to make arrangements based on local circumstances. The document states that this Winter-Spring Patriotic Health Campaign requires strong leadership and clearly set out priorities, objectives and divisions of labour. It calls for using "public opinion guidance" and public oversight to promptly spot weaknesses, urge implementation, and ensure responsibility is taken and measures are implemented. It calls for getting all social strata and urban and rural populations involved in a mass patriotic health campaign, to carry out prevention and control by the public. Finally,

it states that all provincial commissions should report on this work to the NPHCC before the end of March, and that when deemed necessary, the national commission will make on-site visits.

Nationwide mobilization

In the days that followed this document's release, around the country a number of provincial-level PHCC branches moved quickly to launch local campaigns through similar documents. On 15 January, on China's southeast coast, Fujian Province PHCC Office issued Fujian PHCC Document No.1.³⁶ In the northwest, on 17 January, Gansu Province PHCC Office issued Gansu PHCC Document No.1.³⁷ On 19 January Shanghai's provincial-level PHCC Office issued its own instructions — in a format accessible for visually impaired people³⁸ — while also forwarding the national commission's own Document No.1, to reinforce the message of importance. Provincial-level authorities in Zhejiang³⁹ and Tianjin⁴⁰ later reported that their work on these campaigns had begun on 15 and 16 January. Sichuan's campaign document came on 20 January⁴¹ and Hunan's on 21st.⁴² While some

³⁵ See, for example, "全国爱卫会关于印发国家卫生城市标准（2014版）的通知" (NPHCC notice in the issuance of the 2014 edition of the Healthy City Development Initiative standards) 15 May 2014.

³⁶ See "福建省爱卫办关于开展冬春季爱国卫生运动的通知" (闽爱卫办〔2020〕1号) (Fujian Provincial PHCC Office notice on launching a winter-spring patriotic health campaign [Fujian PHCC Document No.1, 2020]) 15 January 2020.

³⁷ See "关于开展冬春季爱国卫生运动加强市场环境卫生整治工作的通知" (甘爱卫函〔2020〕1号) (Notice on launching a winter-spring patriotic health campaign, strengthening corrective measures for market environmental hygiene [Gansu PHCC Notice No.1, 2020]) 17 January 2020.

³⁸ See "关于转发《全国爱卫办关于开展冬春季爱国卫生运动加强市场环境卫生整治工作的通知》的通知" (Notice on forwarding the NPHCC Office notice on launching a winter-spring patriotic health campaign, strengthening corrective measures for market environmental hygiene) 19 January 2020.

³⁹ See "浙江省开展冬春季爱国卫生运动 加强市场环境整治有关工作" (Zhejiang Province launches a winter-spring patriotic health campaign to strengthen work related to corrective measures for market environmental hygiene) 26 January 2020.

⁴⁰ See "市爱卫办全力做好防控工作 环境保障并向市民发出倡议" (Municipal PHCC Office doing its best to undertake environmental supportive prevention and control work and issuing a proposal to its citizens) 27 January 2020.

⁴¹ See "四川省爱国卫生运动委员会办公室关于开展冬春季爱国卫生运动加强环境卫生整治工作的通知" (川爱卫办发〔2020〕1号) (Sichuan Provincial PHCC Office notice on launching a winter-spring patriotic health campaign, strengthening corrective measures for market environmental hygiene [Sichuan PHCC Office Document No.1, 2020]) 20 January 2020.

⁴² See "关于开展冬春季爱国卫生运动加强市场环境卫生整治工作的通知" (湘爱卫办发〔2020〕1号) notice on launching a winter-spring patriotic health

provinces didn't publish their documents on health commission or provincial government websites, authorities under them, such as Pingyin County in Shandong,⁴³ Lianyungang in Jiangsu,⁴⁴ and Ningguo City in Anhui,⁴⁵ which issued campaign documents on 20 and 21 January, cited provincial level documents, telling us that other provinces too began their campaigns earlier in January.

Conclusion

Prevention and control against infectious diseases and vectors thereof have long been part of the NPHCC's remit. Given this function of the NPHCC, and steps taken over the past decade to strengthen its role and standing more generally, opting to use this commission and its local counterparts — their existing channels and structures and dense organizational networks — may have enabled the Chinese government to mobilize in certain ways with relative speed and efficiency against an emerging epidemic. In the 2016–2020 plan cited above on prevention and control of infectious diseases, the role set out for the NPHCC was that of "vigorously carrying out campaigns in every locality, strengthening environmental hygiene corrective measures and effectively preventing against sudden emergencies caused by vectors of disease ... transmitting to humans."⁴⁶ It seems that the Campaign described above was attempting to do just that. The nationwide campaign's focus on cleaning up markets around the country could not be clearer, suggesting the Chinese authorities were particularly concerned about market hygiene and vectors in the early stage of their epidemic response. Overlooking

agencies and steps like this, particularly due to a limited notion of who in a system has the authority to take meaningful policy actions and how, could lead us to misunderstand the response in question. Going forward, if we are to understand the responses of other countries — whether that be to inform our own policy or to enable collaboration and exchange — an approach informed by social science may help to avoid missing such important parts of the picture.

campaign, strengthening corrective measures for market environmental hygiene (Hunan PHCC Office Document No.1, 2020) 21 January 2020.

⁴³ See "平阴县爱国卫生运动委员会文件"(平爱卫发〔2020〕1号) (Pingyin County PHCC document [Pingyin PHCC Document No.1, 2020]) 20 January 2020.

⁴⁴ See "关于开展冬春季爱国卫生运动加强市场环境卫生整治工作的通知" (Notice on launching a winter-spring patriotic health campaign, strengthening

corrective measures for market environmental hygiene) 20 January 2020.

⁴⁵ See "关于开展冬春季爱国卫生运动加强市场环境卫生整治工作的通知" (Notice on launching a winter-spring patriotic health campaign, strengthening corrective measures for market environmental hygiene) 21 January 2020.

⁴⁶ See op. cit. National Health and Family Planning Commission, 15 July 2016.



Key points

- The National Patriotic Health Campaign Commission launched a health campaign to protect against infectious diseases on 14 January, six days before it is commonly thought the Chinese central response began.
- A number of provincial-level commissions had begun their own health campaigns before the 20 January.
- This nationwide campaign focused on cleaning up markets and controlling against vectors of disease, and it sought to mobilize the public to engage in preventative behaviours like handwashing and ensuring good ventilation.
- The National Patriotic Health Campaign Commission has so far been overlooked in analysis of the Chinese authorities' response to Covid-19.
- The actions of the national and local commissions in mid-January are discernible through publicly available official policy documents.

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The project

Covid-19: Understanding Chinese Government Containment Measures and their Societal Impacts

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