

# Research on the Interactive Mode of International Relationship Actors in Global Public Emergencies ——Taking the interaction between China and WHO in COVID-19 as an example

Peiqi Zhang<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*School of International Relations, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, 710128, China*

m15353625917@163.com

## ABSTRACT

The global spread of the new coronavirus epidemic shows that responding to global public emergencies is beyond the unilateral ability of any international relations actor. This also imposes major challenges on the supranational governance of the international community to control global public emergencies. Taking the interaction between China and WHO in the COVID-19 epidemic as an example, this article conducts a longitudinal comparative analysis of official dynamics and mainstream media reports after global public emergencies, clarifies the interactive mode between China and international organizations in global public emergencies based on 283 pieces of relevant information from December 31, 2019 to May 1, 2020, and explores the dynamics and paths of sovereign states and international organizations in the global governance cooperation mechanism. This article proposes that the interaction between China and the WHO in the new coronavirus epidemic can be decomposed into four stages: the information notification period from December 31, 2019 to January 19, 2020, the cooperation establishment stage from January 20 to February 20, 2020, the phased victory stage from February 21 to March 20, 2020. In addition, from March 21, 2020 until now is the fourth phase of expanding the anti-epidemic cooperation to global assistance.

**Keywords:** *New Coronavirus Epidemic, Interaction between China and International Organizations, WHO, Global Hygiene Governance, Non-traditional Security*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of COVID-19 at the end of 2019 has brought major challenges to global health governance. It also shows that the governance of global public emergencies is beyond the control of one country. There are defects in the interaction and cooperation among international relationship actors in this global public health emergency. As a result, millions of people are in a severely vulnerable position in the crisis of the pandemic. The COVID-19 shows that it is necessary for the international community to establish a benign interaction model between international relationship actors to prevent and alleviate similar emergencies that may arise in the future, so as to improve the structural and systemic obstacles in the interaction of current actors.

As an emerging power and the first country to detect the COVID-19, the effective interaction between China and the World Health Organization (WHO) since December 2019 has quickly brought the possible explosive growth in the number of cases under control. In addition, China has also actively participated in vaccine development under the advocacy of the WHO, and has also provided medical assistance and anti-epidemic experience to other countries with epidemic. By studying the interaction between China and WHO in the epidemic, this article summarizes the

interaction model of sovereign states and international organizations in global public emergencies and the experience of supranational governance.

In addition, compared with traditional security, non-traditional security is a relatively new field of security, which focuses on the expansion of global public health security, economic security and other non-traditional securities. Using a case analysis method, this article adopts an innovative perspective of non-traditional security under the framework of global governance to study the four different stages of interaction between China and the WHO in resisting the epidemic from December 30, 2019 to present. On the basis of the official documents issued by the Chinese government and the "COVID-19 pandemic" section of the WHO official website, Chinese and English media that hold diversified political positions and have greater influence at home and abroad, such as the "Main News" section of the People's Daily, the "Anti-epidemic" section of The Paper, the International section of the Guardian, the New York Times, and special reports on the epidemic plate, etc., this article sorted out 283 relevant information points about the epidemic, and tried to sort out the four stages of interaction between China and the WHO during the epidemic.

The basic conclusion of the article is that all parties should positively and actively cooperate, and improve the trust mechanism in continuous cooperation to promote the

cooperation of different international relationship factors in dealing with the global emergencies, thereby creating good conditions of cooperation for the proper resolution of global public emergencies. At the same time, at different stages of cooperation and interaction, various international relationship actors should adopt a friendly and active attitude, develop and integrate relatively dispersed global governance platform institutions, strive to create a favorable environment for international public opinion, and promote cooperation to achieve faster results.

## 2. A RESEARCH ON THE INTERACTIVE MODEL BETWEEN CHINA AND WHO IN RESISTING THE EPIDEMIC

The interaction between China and WHO in the new coronavirus epidemic can be divided into four stages. The first stage is the information notification stage, which lasts from December 31, 2019 to January 19, 2020. At this time, the epidemic situation showed an explosive trend in China. The second stage is the initial establishment of cooperation stage, from January 20 to February 20, 2020. At this stage, leaders of China and WHO met and launched a series of cooperation. The third stage is the relative consolidation of the relationship between the two parties, from February 21 to March 20, 2020. At this stage, China and WHO have achieved initial results in the joint fight against the epidemic. The fourth stage is "Cooperative Anti-epidemic to Global Assistance", which lasts from March 21, 2020 until now. During this period, the cooperation and interaction between China and WHO changed from "one-to-one" to "one-to-many", and the two parties are cooperating on related issues arising from the epidemic.

### 2.1. The first stage: information notification stage(from December 31, 2019 to January 19, 2020)

This stage covers the time period when the new coronavirus epidemic was first detected in China and began to spread across the country. After discovering the epidemic, China promptly and proactively notified the WHO, the United States and other countries of the epidemic information, and announced the virus genome sequence. At this stage, there are six key time points as to the interaction between China and WHO, involving the notification and announcement of epidemic information, exchange between Chinese and WHO leaders on the epidemic, notification of the epidemic from China to WHO everyday, and the nomination of WHO to the virus, etc. In the first stage of the interaction between the two parties, China and WHO established a closer epidemic information communication mechanism based on the original communication and interaction. The timely communication between the top leaders of the two parties and the information exchange between the disease control agencies of the two parties laid the foundation for the establishment

of a sound epidemic response cooperation framework in the subsequent stage. The information communication between Chinese officials and WHO is reflected by the fact that the National Health Commission, as the executive agency that communicates with international health organizations, provides timely information on the epidemic situation to WHO with the support of domestic professional disease control agencies. Since the detection of the new coronavirus pneumonia in Wuhan, China at the end of 2019, the heads of the National Health Commission and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention have held work calls with the heads of WHO on the response to the epidemic. Furthermore, the Health Commission designated three professional institutions, which are respectively Chinese Center for Disease Control, Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences and Wuhan Institute of Virology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, to conduct research on the new coronavirus, and it submitted the new coronavirus genome sequence information to the WHO, thus effectively reflecting the instant interaction between the two parties in information communication and sharing. In the first stage, the initial communication of information between sovereign states and international organizations also reflected some institutional issues that need to be improved. For example, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention lacks administrative power and voice. Disease control information needs to be reported through government departments at all levels, which makes multi-sectoral and multi-path repeated communication when China notified the WHO during the initial period of the epidemic. Another example is that China does not have a sound expert voice mechanism in disease prevention and control. Therefore, in the first stage of the epidemic, the Hong Kong expert team quickly evacuated from Wuhan after predicting the severity of the epidemic, which caused false rumors about the epidemic to spread in the international community. In the end, "Chinese virus", "Wuhan virus" and even anti-China remarks appeared in the media of many Western countries. At this time, by inviting medical experts including Zhong Nanshan, Li Lanjuan, Zhang Wenhong to conduct daily online interviews in mainstream Chinese media such as CCTV, the Chinese government has stabilized the panic at home and abroad to a certain extent.

### 2.2. The second stage: the initial establishment of cooperation stage (from January 20 to February 20, 2020)

In the second phase of the interaction between China and WHO, the interaction between the two parties transformed from the exchange of epidemic information between health institutions to the direct exchange of high-level leaders. Such a transformation has allowed China-WHO to establish a more direct dialogue mechanism on the epidemic and strengthened the foundation of trust between the two parties, thereby enabling the two parties to cooperate more coordinately and orderly in the field

investigation of the epidemic and the release of authoritative information. On the basis of the WHO epidemic segment, the notice of China Health Commission and other official authorities [1] and the news reports of People's Daily, the article selects January 28, January 31 [2], February 8, and February 16 as the four key interactive time points. In detail, on January 28, Chinese President Xi Jinping met with WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus in Beijing, and emphasized that China is willing to work with WHO and the international community to jointly maintain regional and global public health security[3]. At the same time, the two parties respectively released the preliminary identification and treatment plan information for the new coronavirus disease epidemic two days later, and conducted an authoritative interpretation of the actual situation of the epidemic. From February 16, a China-WHO joint expert investigation team composed of 25 experts from China, the United States, Germany, Japan, South Korea, Russia, Nigeria, Singapore, and the WHO spent 9 days on carrying out in-field investigation to Beijing, Chengdu, Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Wuhan.

In the interaction and communication between China and WHO, the Chinese Disease Control and Prevention System (hereinafter referred to as the "China Disease Control System") has also played a key role. However, it also reveals to a certain extent the interaction between experts, bureaucrats, and systems in epidemic prevention and control. The Chinese disease control system began with the sanitation and epidemic prevention system in 1953, which has its own defects including unclear function positioning, lack of administrative capabilities, and lack of staffs. Different from the CDC system in the United States and other countries, "Our CDC (Center for Disease Control) is too low. The CDC is just a technical department and a public institution under the leadership of the Health Commission. The special status of CDC has not received enough attention in China." On February 27, Academician Zhong Nanshan put forward at the news conference on the prevention and control of the new coronavirus pneumonia[4]: "In many countries like the United States, the CDC is direct and does not need to be declared at all levels. Even under special circumstances, it can be directly announced to the public, but this is not the case in China." Due to the shortcomings of China's disease control system and its unique hierarchical reporting bureaucracy, the voice of experts acts as a warning only. In addition, the Chinese bureaucracy has malfeasance and abuse of power. For example, the Dali City Government and Wuhan Red Cross staffs privately detained medical supplies, etc., which exposed the shortcomings of the Chinese disease control system during the crisis. However, during the epidemic, the Central Government of China quickly replaced officials who violated disciplines, temporarily making up for the lack of institutional development in the field of public health and disease control in China, and the negative impact of epidemic prevention and control.

### ***2.3 The third stage: relative consolidation of the relationship between the two parties (from February 21 to March 20, 2020)***

At this stage, China-WHO jointly announced the survey results of the epidemic. The two parties have promoted cooperation in epidemic control, financial assistance, etc., which shows that the interactive mode of the two parts has entered in-depth cooperation. During this period, the United States, Italy and other countries became the "severely afflicted area" of the epidemic. In particular, the "group immunization" policy implemented by the United Kingdom at this time allowed the domestic epidemic to spread rapidly.

There are three key time points in the third stage, which are respectively the news briefing held by China-WHO joint expert investigation group in Beijing on February 24 [5], judgment of China-WHO epidemic joint investigation report on the epidemic prevention and control in China, and the contribution of the Chinese government to WHO of USD 20 million to support developing countries to cope with the epidemic and participate in the "Solidarity Clinical Trial" of the WHO leadership [6]. China actively cooperates and proactively provides assistance funds to the WHO. Compared with the suspension of payment of dues in mid-April by the United States accusing WHO of ineffective response to the new crown epidemic, and the current development trend of China and the United States in fighting the epidemic, it highlights that during the emergencies of global public incidents, China maintains goodwill, support and trust in existing mainstream and professional international organizations, and actively engages in interactive cooperation, which is of positive significance for stabilizing the emergent situation and achieving initial results.

### ***2.4 The fourth stage: "from cooperated epidemic resistance to global assistance" stage(from March 21 to now)***

In the fourth stage, China-WHO global cooperation in the fight against the epidemic has achieved basic results. The interaction between China and WHO has transformed from a "one-to-one" model to a "one-to-many" model. China seeks to integrate more multilateral platforms, and seeks to provide assistance and cooperation to more sovereign countries through mainstream international organizations. This is mainly reflected in three key time nodes: On March 26, President Xi Jinping attended the G20 special summit [7]; on April 14, Premier Li Keqiang attended the special meeting of ASEAN and China, Japan and South Korea leaders to fight the new crown epidemic; on May 18, President Xi Jinping delivered a speech at the opening ceremony of the 73rd World Health Assembly video conference [8]. At this time, the epidemic situation in the international community is still severe. In addition, other issues derived from the epidemic (ie. debt relief issue) have gradually attracted attention, reflecting that the

interaction is gradually become more diversified and complicated.

The problems of decentralization and fragmentation in global governance still exist. This makes it necessary to seek support from multiple platforms for the management and control of sudden transnational public issues. At this stage, China not only communicated anti-epidemic information through WHO at the international level, but also used Chinese leaders to speak on multiple international platforms other than WHO, introducing the experience of China in promoting epidemic prevention and control and accelerating economic and social development, raising the proposal of international close cooperation, and publicizing the “Chinese experience” and “Chinese action” on the international platform, thereby eliminating the discrimination and misunderstanding from the international society, especially western countries to China since the epidemic outbreak, generally constructing the image that China is a responsible country in going against epidemic actively.

### 3. CONCLUSION

In the process of responding to the new coronavirus epidemic, the four-phase progressive cooperation between China and WHO has shown different characteristics of interaction modes. This provides a reference for improving the response and interaction of international relationship actors in global emergencies in the future. The basic conclusions of this article are: the first point is to actively and promptly track and report on the process of public emergencies in the interaction and cooperation of different international relationship actors, so that all parties can fully understand and follow up on the severity and urgency of the incident, thereby laying a cognitive foundation for the supranational governance of global public emergencies; the second point is China has consolidated its trust foundation through direct meetings with top leaders and international joint research and investigation teams, quickly established an effective trust mechanism for the proper resolution of global public emergencies, and created good conditions for promoting cooperation among all parties under the framework of global governance; The third point is that the interaction between China and WHO in the new coronavirus epidemic shows that sovereign states have adopted a kind and positive attitude of cooperation with international organizations in confronting global public events, which is more conducive to the advancement of international cooperation and emergency elimination; the fourth point is that after the domestic epidemic has stabilized, China actively assisted other countries through the WHO, trying to integrate a relatively decentralized global governance framework, striving to create a favorable international public opinion environment, and promoting in-depth cooperation between international relationship actors in the future.

The transition to the world being created by COVID-19 was always going to be difficult. The main question now is

whether policymakers will take the steps that are most likely to make it easier.

### REFERENCES

- [1] Notice of the National Health Commission of China and the General Office of the National Health Commission on Strengthening the Medical Treatment of Severe Cases of Pneumonia Infected by the Novel Coronavirus [EB/OL], China Government Website, [http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2020-01/23/content\\_5471831.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2020-01/23/content_5471831.htm), 2020-01-22, Website Landing Date: June 20, 2020.
- [2] World Health Organization, Novel Coronavirus(2019-nCoV) Situation Report-11[EB/OL]. [https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200131-sitrep-11-nCoV.pdf?sfvrsn=de7c0f7\\_4\\_2020-01-31](https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200131-sitrep-11-nCoV.pdf?sfvrsn=de7c0f7_4_2020-01-31), Website Landing Date: June 10, 2020.
- [3] Xi Jinping meets with Director-General of the World Health Organization Tan Desai[N], People's Daily, 2020-01-29 (Edition 01 Highlights).
- [4] China Xiaokang Net, reporter Mai Wanhua, “‘Prevention First’ is the ‘Golden Rule’ of the Chinese Disease Control Reform”, THE CURRENT PLANNING|China Disease Control System Construction Section.
- [5] Director-General of WHO Dr. Tan Desai, Director-General of WHO's speech at the media briefing on the 2019 new coronavirus pneumonia epidemic on February 24, 2020 [EB/OL], WHO website homepage (Speech by the Director-General), <https://www.who.int/zh/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19--24-february-2020>, 2020-02-23, landing date: March 3, 2020.
- [6] World Health Organization, “Speech by the Director-General of the World Health Organization at the Media Briefing on the 2019 Novel Coronavirus Pneumonia (COVID-19) Epidemic on March 18, 2020”, March 18, 2020, <https://www.who.int/zh/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---18-march-2020>, login time: June 10, 2020.
- [7] Xinhuanet, Special Summit Statement of G20 Leaders on Coronavirus Pneumonia (full text) [EB/OL]. Xinhuanet (International), [http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2020-03/27/c\\_1125773916.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2020-03/27/c_1125773916.htm), 2020-03-27, landing time: March 29, 2020.

- [8] World Health Organization, Chinese President Xi Jinping, webcast of the 73rd World Health Assembly [Z], Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization, 2020-05-18. <https://www.who.int/zh/about/governance/world-health-assembly/seventy-third-world-health-assembly>, landing time: May 21, 2020.
- [9] Yang Jiemian, A Preliminary Study of the Interaction between the Epidemic and Contemporary International Relations [J], "Research on International Issues", 2020, Issue 3, pp. 33-38.
- [10] Yu Hongjun, When the epidemic is raging around the world, the four persistences of China [EB/OL]. Research on International Issues, Issue 3, 2020, [http://www.ciis.org.cn/gyzz/2020-06/08/content\\_41178053.htm](http://www.ciis.org.cn/gyzz/2020-06/08/content_41178053.htm), 2020-06-08.
- [11] Li Haidong, The epidemic has profoundly changed the pattern of international relations [EB/OL], World Wide Web, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1662622978382677014&wfr=spider&for=pc>, 2020-03-31.
- [12] Zhang Yuyan, New Coronavirus Epidemic and World Pattern [J], "World Economy and Politics", 2020, Issue 4: 4-7.
- [13] Yu Xiaoqing, Interview with Yan Xuetong: will the epidemic permanently change the world order? [EB/OL]. The Paper, [https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_7194686](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_7194686), 2020-04-29.
- [14] Kissinger, H. A. (2020). The Coronavirus Pandemic Will Forever Alter the World Order. [online] Available at <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-coronavirus-pandemic-will-forever-alter-the-world-order-11585953005>> (04/04/2020 20:10)
- [15] Johnston, A. I. (2019, October 29). "China in a world of orders: Rethinking compliance and challenge in Beijing's international relations". International Security, Vol.44, No.2, pp.9-60
- [16] Christensen, T. J., (2020) A modern tragedy? COVID-19 and U.S.-China relations. [online] Available at <<https://www.brookings.edu/research/a-modern-tragedy-covid-19-and-us-china-relations/>> (02/07/2020 08:06)
- [17] Pouliot, Vincent, Thérien, Jean-Philippe. (2018) Global Governance in Practice. Global Policy, Vol.9, No.2, pp.163-172
- [18] Kishore Mahbubani, (2020). "A More China-Centric Globalization. "How the World Will Look After the Coronavirus Pandemic". Foreign Policy, [online] Available at <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/20/world-order-after-coronavirus-pandemic/>> (12/06/2020 10:16)
- [19] Brown, T. M., Cueto, M., & Fee, E. (2006), "The World Health Organization and the transition from 'international' to 'global' public health," American Journal of Public Health, Vol. 96, No.1, pp.62-72.
- [20] Prem and colleagues, (2020). Sustaining containment of COVID-19 in China, .The Lancet, Vol. 395, pp.12-30
- [21] Menon, S., "This Pandemic Can Serve a Useful Purpose: How the World Will Look After the Coronavirus Pandemic". Foreign Policy, [online] Available at <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/20/world-order-after-coronavirus-pandemic/>> (22/05/2020 11:20)
- [22] Davies, S.E., "What contribution can International Relations make to the evolving global health agenda?" International Affairs, Vol. 86, No.5, pp.1167-1190.
- [23] World Health Organization, Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) Situation Report-10 [EB/OL]. [https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200130-sitrep-10-ncov.pdf?sfvrsn=d0b2e480\\_2,2020-01-30](https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200130-sitrep-10-ncov.pdf?sfvrsn=d0b2e480_2,2020-01-30).
- [24] China National Health Commission, Notice of the General Office of the National Health Commission on Strengthening the Medical Treatment of Severe Cases of Pneumonia Infected by the Novel Coronavirus [EB/OL], China Government Website, [http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2020-01/23/content\\_5471831.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2020-01/23/content_5471831.htm), 2020-01-22.
- [25] World Health Organization, Report of the WHO-China Joint Mission on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) [R], Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization, January 16-24, 2020. <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/who-china-joint-mission-on-covid-19-final-report.pdf>.