

What goes up must come down

BY KUNI MIYAKE



“Spinnin’ wheel got to go ‘round ...” That is the first line of a great 1969 song by the Canadian-American jazz-rock band Blood Sweat & Tears. Those who remember the band’s name must be real rock, soul and fusion geeks. What is to be discussed here, however, is not music but the ongoing coronavirus outbreak in China.

Pride comes before a fall. Arrogant people reaching their peak often start losing reputation more than they gained. Tokyo recently witnesses so many examples of such ambitious celebrities and politicians. This applies, however, not only to individuals but also to nations like China.

While the victims of the new virus in Wuhan — the outbreak’s epicenter — and elsewhere in China deserve sympathy and condolences, the speed and scope of the virus’ spread is not surprising. The current tragedy comes as a reminder of the outbreak of SARS in 2002 and 2003, during my assignment in Beijing while serving as a Japanese diplomat.

What were the lessons of the SARS epidemic? What has the Chinese government learned in the past 18 years? Why has it been so slow once again in seriously dealing with the disease? And, finally, how damaging will this outbreak be to China and its relations with the rest of the world? What goes up must come down. As

a famous English proverb says, "The longest day must have an end." Honesty and accountability pay, while lying and cheating doesn't. The following are the sad lessons of the SARS outbreak in Beijing back in 2002-2003.

1. Multiply the official numbers by 10

Since the Chinese population is 1.3 billion, or approximately 10 times more than that of Japan, when it comes to new types of disease in China I always multiply by 10 the number of patients or casualties that has been initially announced by the central or local governments in China.

If they say "41 infected and two dead," as announced by the Wuhan municipality government on Jan. 11, it's safe to assume the real number of the infected could be 410 and that of the dead around 20. In fact, the numbers announced on Jan. 22 reached more than 470 infected and nine dead.

2. Bureaucrats always evade responsibility

People wonder how this could happen. The answer is simple. The underestimation is a wishful thinking on the part of bureaucrats. No mid-level Communist Party officials wish to take responsibility because their higher-ups will never. The best way is to announce less-than-actual numbers so that people won't pay due attention. From Jan. 11 through Jan. 18, the Wuhan city government made no announcements about new patients and said many of the people infected with the virus were recovering. Meanwhile more patients were found in Thailand and Japan. Users of Weibo, China's major social media website, contributed rumors of a "patriotic" virus that only spreads overseas. Of course, no virus is patriotic.

3. They eat whatever is potentially edible

The 2002-2003 outbreak of SARS reportedly originated in a population of horseshoe bats. Then the virus started to spread via civets sold in wild animal markets in Guangdong. Chinese officials did not notify the World Health Organization until February 2003. China officially apologized later for its early tardiness.

Once again, this time the new virus is believed to have originated in wild bats and was transmitted via Chinese bamboo rats, badgers or snakes that had been illegally sold by a seafood market that also marketed animals for food. In short, Chinese people still consume animals that we would never eat in our part of the world.

4. "Saving face" is more important than casualties

Last weekend, Chinese President Xi Jinping finally called the outbreak a "grave situation." In 2002-2003, China's lack of openness caused delays in the efforts to control SARS, resulting in the international community criticizing China. Similarly, this time any mishandling of the outbreak could cost Xi his political reputation or "face." The Chinese Communist Party bureaucracy may be forthcoming and tell the truth only when it realizes that the political prestige and reputation of China's top leaders, and therefore their own as well, will be challenged. That's why I wonder if Beijing has learned the SARS lessons. Former U.S. Secretary of State Collin Powell once said, "Bad news isn't wine. It doesn't improve with age." Since there are no "Colin Powells" in Wuhan, the response has been too little, too late. In 2003, Beijing shut down wild animal markets nationwide, but they were reportedly reopened a few years later. How long will the Chinese continue to repeat the same old mistakes that they have made for centuries? Of course, we all know that completely

containing a new virus is impossible. Without dramatically changing ordinary people's lifestyles in remote provinces, however, China will most likely fail to become a modern civilization in the 21st century.

“What goes up must come down, spinning wheel got to go 'round.” Yes, China is now the second-largest economy in the world and seemingly is catching up with the United States. I wonder, however, how many times China will experience deadly virus outbreaks like this? Eighteen years after SARS, the country is still missing something. Beijing seems to be determined, or even destined — at least for now — to dominate its domestic and international competitors. Yes, China was a great empire until the 19th century and deserves to occupy a higher place in the international pecking order. The only problem with China's rise is that it's coming at the cost of its own people.

If a country's government cannot protect its people from the outbreak of a deadly disease, there is no reason for such political leaders to be in power semi-eternally. As in the case of some celebrities in Japan, “a big break without prudence means eventually going up in flames.” China seems to be at a historical crossroad.

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