

# Chinese Tycoon Who Criticized Xi's Response to Coronavirus Has Vanished

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[Asia Pacific](#) | Chinese Tycoon Who Criticized Xi's Response to Coronavirus Has Vanished

Ren Zhiqiang appears to be the latest government critic silenced by the Communist Party as it cracks down on dissent over the epidemic.





Ren Zhiqiang in 2012. He recently called Xi Jinping, China's leader, "a clown who stripped naked and insisted on continuing to be an emperor." Credit...Color China Photo, via Associated Press



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His nickname in China was "The Cannon," and Ren Zhiqiang's latest commentary was among his most explosive yet.

Mr. Ren, [an outspoken property tycoon in Beijing](#), wrote in a scathing essay that China's leader, Xi Jinping, was a power-hungry "clown." He said the ruling Communist Party's strict limits on free speech had exacerbated the coronavirus epidemic.

Now Mr. Ren, one of the most prominent critics of Mr. Xi in mainland China, is missing, his friends said on Saturday.

His disappearance comes amid a far-reaching campaign by the party to quash criticism of its [slow, secretive initial response to the epidemic](#), which has killed over

3,100 people in China and sickened more than 80,000.

The Chinese government is working to portray Mr. Xi as a hero who is leading the country to victory in a “people’s war” against the virus. But officials are contending with [deep anger from the Chinese public](#), with many people still seething over the government’s early efforts to conceal the crisis.

Mr. Ren, a party member, is well known for his searing critiques of Mr. Xi. In 2016, the party placed him on a year’s probation for denouncing Mr. Xi’s propaganda policies in comments online.

The government has monitored Mr. Ren’s movements intensely ever since, friends said, preventing him from leaving the country and deleting his social media accounts, where he had built a wide following.

His whereabouts was unclear on Saturday, and the police in Beijing did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

“We’re very worried about him,” said Wang Ying, a retired entrepreneur and friend of Mr. Ren’s. “I will continue to look for him.”

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In recent weeks, an [essay](#) by Mr. Ren began circulating among elite circles in China and abroad. In it, he blamed the government for silencing whistle-blowers and trying to conceal the outbreak, which began in the central city of Wuhan in December.

While he did not explicitly use Mr. Xi’s name in the commentary, Mr. Ren left no doubt he was speaking about China’s leader, repeatedly referencing Mr. Xi’s speeches and actions.

“I see not an emperor standing there exhibiting his ‘new clothes,’ but a clown who stripped naked and insisted on continuing to be an emperor,” he wrote.

Addressing Mr. Xi, he wrote: “You don’t in the slightest hide your resolute ambition to be an emperor and your determination to destroy anyone who won’t let you.”

Mr. Ren, 69, is the retired chairman of Huayuan Properties, a real estate developer. In 2016, Mr. Ren came under scrutiny after writing on his microblog that China’s news media should serve the people, not the party, contradicting one of Mr. Xi’s high-profile pronouncements. His remarks offered a window into growing frustration among Chinese intellectuals and entrepreneurs over Mr. Xi’s increasingly authoritarian rule.

The party moved quickly to censure him, saying he had “lost his party spirit.” But he [continued to speak out on other topics](#), such as China’s strict policies to limit the population in big cities.

As more details about China’s efforts to cover up the coronavirus outbreak have been disclosed by the Chinese news media in recent weeks, Mr. Xi has come under attack from several prominent Chinese activists and intellectuals.

Xu Zhangrun, a law professor in Beijing, published an essay last month saying that the epidemic had [“revealed the rotten core of Chinese governance.”](#)

Xu Zhiyong, a prominent legal activist, released a letter to Mr. Xi on social media, accusing him of a cover-up and calling on him to step down. [He was later detained.](#)

Activists said Mr. Ren's disappearance was a worrying sign that the government was escalating its latest crackdown on free speech.

“The epidemic has brought out the worst of Xi Jinping,” said Yang Jianli, a rights activist based in the United States. “He is so determined not to give an inch, rightly understanding an inch would mean hundreds of miles.”

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- **Should I wear a mask?**

The C.D.C. has [recommended](#) that all Americans wear cloth masks if they go out in public. This is a shift in federal guidance reflecting [new concerns that the coronavirus is being spread by infected people who have no symptoms](#). Until now, the C.D.C., like the W.H.O., has advised that ordinary people don't need to wear masks unless they are sick and coughing. Part of the reason was to preserve medical-grade masks for health care workers who desperately need them at a time when they are in continuously short supply. Masks don't replace hand washing and social distancing.

- **What should I do if I feel sick?**

[If you've been exposed to the coronavirus or think you have](#), and have a fever or symptoms like a cough or difficulty breathing, call a doctor. They should give you advice on whether you should be tested, how to get tested, and how to seek medical treatment without potentially infecting or exposing others.

- **How do I get tested?**

If you're sick and you think you've been exposed to the new coronavirus, [the C.D.C. recommends that you call your healthcare provider and explain your symptoms and fears](#). They will decide if you need to be tested. Keep in mind that there's a chance — because of a lack of testing kits or because you're asymptomatic, for instance — you won't be able to get tested.

- **How does coronavirus spread?**

It seems to spread [very easily from person to person](#), especially in homes, hospitals and other confined spaces. The pathogen can be carried on tiny respiratory droplets that fall as they are coughed or sneezed out. It may also be transmitted when we touch a contaminated surface and then touch our face.

- **Is there a vaccine yet?**

No. [The first testing in humans of an experimental vaccine began in mid-March.](#) Such rapid development of a potential vaccine is unprecedented, but even if it is proved safe and effective, it probably will not be available for 12 to 18 months.

- **What makes this outbreak so different?**

Unlike the flu, there is no known treatment or vaccine, and [little is known about this particular virus so far.](#) It seems to be more lethal than the flu, but the numbers are still uncertain. And it hits the elderly and those with underlying conditions — not just those with respiratory diseases — particularly hard.

- **What if somebody in my family gets sick?**

If the family member doesn't need hospitalization and can be cared for at home, you should help him or her with basic needs and monitor the symptoms, while also keeping as much distance as possible, [according to guidelines issued by the C.D.C.](#) If there's space, the sick family member should stay in a separate room and use a separate bathroom. If masks are available, both the sick person and the caregiver should wear them when the caregiver enters the room. Make sure not to share any dishes or other household items and to regularly clean surfaces like counters, doorknobs, toilets and tables. Don't forget to wash your hands frequently.

- **Should I stock up on groceries?**

Plan two weeks of meals if possible. But people should not hoard food or supplies. Despite the empty shelves, [the supply chain remains strong.](#) And remember to wipe the handle of the grocery cart with a disinfecting wipe and wash your hands as soon as you get home.

- **Can I go to the park?**

Yes, but make sure you keep six feet of distance between you and people who don't live in your home. [Even if you just hang out in a park, rather than go for a jog or a walk, getting some fresh air, and hopefully sunshine, is a good idea.](#)

- **Should I pull my money from the markets?**

[That's not a good idea.](#) Even if you're retired, having a balanced portfolio of stocks and bonds so that your money keeps up with inflation, or even grows, makes sense. But retirees may want to think about having enough cash set aside for a year's worth of living expenses and big payments needed over the next five years.

- **What should I do with my 401(k)?**

Watching your balance go up and down can be scary. [You may be wondering if you should decrease your contributions — don't!](#) If your employer matches any part of your contributions, make sure you're at least saving as much as you can to get that "free money."

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