

## THE ROLE OF TRANSPORTATION IN THE “EXPORT” AND “IMPORT” OF COVID-19

BY SHWE YEE OO

*Shwe Yee Oo ([shwe@pacforum.org](mailto:shwe@pacforum.org)) is a Non-Proliferation Research Fellow at Pacific Forum.*

China confirmed that the novel coronavirus was a human-to-human transmitted disease on January 20 after finding new cases in Guangdong province that had been caused by [human transmission](#). The World Health Organization (WHO) issued a [statement](#) two days after China’s announcement that it also found evidence of human-to-human transmission during the delegation’s field visit to Wuhan. Since then, fear has mounted and state actors rushed to treat the disease to prevent an outbreak. By [January 20](#), there were 282 confirmed cases: 258 in Hubei Province, 14 in Guangdong Province, five in the Beijing municipality, one in the Shanghai municipality, and four outside of China.

Although the disease may have been travelling outside of China from December 2019, only after the official announcements was data recorded and the ground situation reported. Thus, according to the [WHO’s situation reports](#), countries began reporting their first

cases in January. The number of countries to which the virus spread seemed few at first, but that number rose at the end of February. Throughout March the number of affected countries rose sharply, demonstrating the rapid spread of virus (see Figure 1). The following will analyze how the virus spread to so many different territories within a short range of time—despite countries’ strict provisions.

To understand the rapid spread of the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, one must reflect on its recent history. When China confirmed that the disease is transmissible, authorities took draconian measures. Wuhan was [locked down](#) on January 23 and other nearby cities put under lockdown soon after despite a huge economic cost. Internal travel and domestic flights inside China were restricted from the last week of January. International flights in and out of China continued until March, however. Only [in the last week of March](#) international flights from and to China were limited. By that time, the disease had already been declared a global pandemic for three weeks. Based on the information stated in WHO situation reports and international media sources, 29 countries—including Italy, the United States, France, Australia, Thailand, Singapore, South Korea, and Iran – received their first COVID-19 cases through travel from China (see Figure 2).

Italy reported [its first COVID-19 cases](#) on January 30 from two Chinese tourists arriving from China. The government announced a ban on flights to and from China on January 31. [Local transmission](#) of the disease began in the country’s north on [February 20](#)

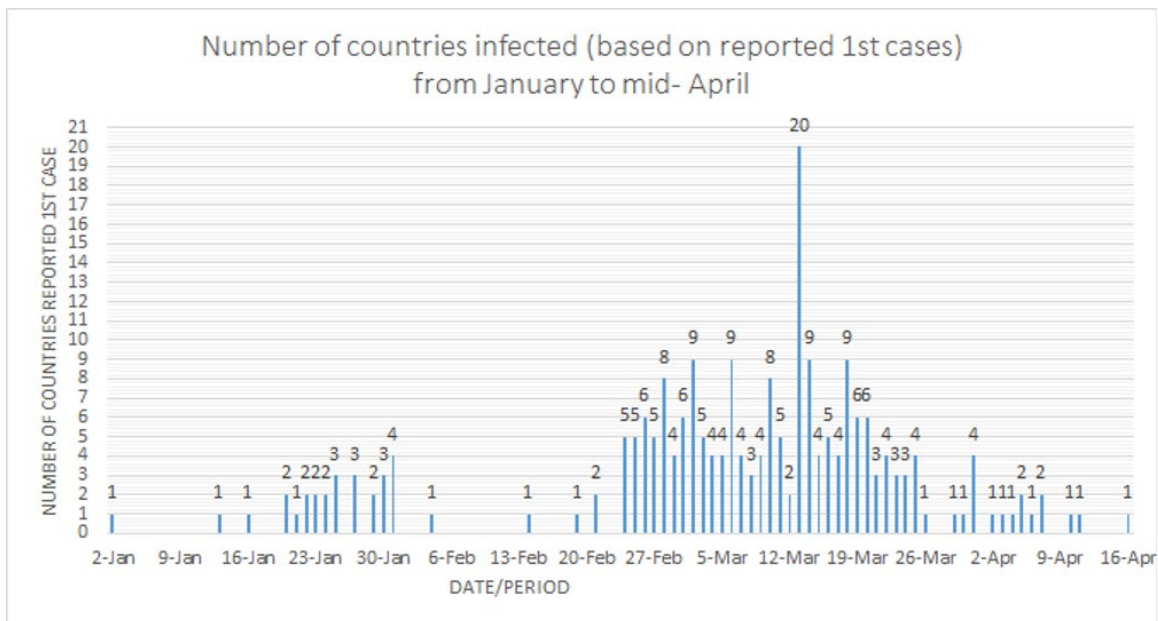


Figure 1 Number of countries reporting first coronavirus cases (January to mid-April 2020)

[in a 38-year-old man](#) who had not traveled to China but is believed to have met someone who had recently been to China. From then, the COVID-19 positive cases rose steadily in the northern region and gradually throughout the whole country. The northern part was placed under lockdown on [March 8](#) and the lockdown measures were extended nationwide on [March 10](#), restricting all non-essential travel. Foreign visitors were still not banned from coming. Indeed, a few media outlets reported that some Italian international airports [were still open](#), with a long list of cancelled flights on the monitors. Nevertheless, the

United States still has many active cases of the virus. As of May 15, there are 1.48 million cases and around 8,600 deaths across the country. Most US states were put [under lockdown](#) by the end of March. Travel [restrictions began in February](#) with a ban on flights to and from China, and a [ban on travelers from the EU](#) countries in March. Despite the lockdowns and travel restrictions, information from the WHO situation reports and international news sources show that 13 other countries received their first cases through travel from the US. A similar pattern applies for the UK, Spain, Iran, and so on. (See Figure 2)

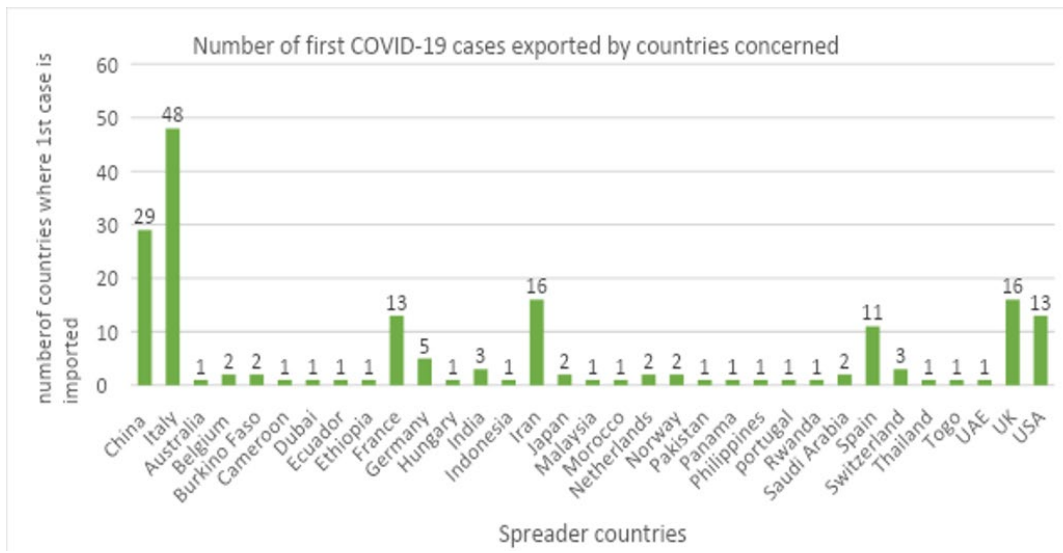


Figure 2 Reported first COVID-19 cases and their exporter country (January-March)

Italian government [published](#) many rules to be strictly followed by those who entered the country. By March 10, the total confirmed cases inside Italy had reached 9,172, with 463 deaths. According to WHO situation reports and Italian media sources, by the end of March, 48 countries received their first COVID-19 cases from Italy via travel. (See Figure 2)

France, Spain, the United Kingdom, Iran, and the United States are countries, in addition to Italy, known to have suffered a great number of cases and deaths from the virus. Table 1 below shows that these countries received their first COVID-19 cases from China through travel. These countries then spread the virus to more countries by travel, which enabled the virus to travel around the world. France found its [first cases on January 24](#) but commenced a complete [national lockdown](#) and border closure (as [EU commission imposed](#) on all member States) on March 17. By the time France entered lockdown, there were already 6,012 cases, 127 deaths, and 400 people in critical condition. Information from the WHO situation reports and news media showed that 13 other countries received their first COVID-19 cases from France by means of air travel by mid- March. The

While the effect of travel restrictions on the containment of the virus is unclear, it is undeniable that that human travel served as an engine for the spread of the virus. Regarding the patterns described above, the virus could only cross the world and countries from east to west and north to south through human travel via air, land and water. Thus, the medium that makes travel happen – transportation – can be considered the principal factor in the spread of COVID-19. Since it was confirmed as transmissible, authorities focused on protective measures such as wearing masks, using sanitizer and avoiding crowds. The important medium that causes the most human contact, transportation, was left to take action upon. Travel restrictions were imposed only as the last resort. This may be due to the economic importance of transportation and its importance in contracting distances. Yet this example of the COVID-19 pandemic raises the question: does transportation function as a dual-use tool in spreading harm as well as goods and people? As long states do not have strategic measures to manage the pros and cons of transport, transportation will continue to pose a threat for the spread of viruses, chemicals, dangerous equipment and destructive weapons.

Table 1. First COVID-19 cases and source (January – March 2020)

DATE	COUNTRY CONFIRMING FIRST COVID-19 CASE	IMPORTED FROM	DATE	COUNTRY CONFIRMING FIRST COVID-19 CASE	IMPORTED FROM
2-Jan	China	ORIGIN	9-Mar	Panama	Spain
13-Jan	Thailand	Wuhan, China	10-Mar	Bolivia	Italy
16-Jan	Japan	Wuhan, China	10-Mar	Burkina Faso	France
20-Jan	South Korea	Wuhan, China	10-Mar	Democratic Rep. of Congo	France
20-Jan	United States	Wuhan, China	10-Mar	Jamaica	UK
21-Jan	Taiwan	Wuhan, China	10-Mar	Jersey	N/A
22-Jan	Hong Kong, Macau	Wuhan, China	10-Mar	Mongolia	France/Russia
23-Jan	Singapore	Wuhan, China	10-Mar	Northern Cyprus	Germany
23-Jan	Vietnam	Wuhan, China	10-Mar	Turkey	Europe
24-Jan	France	Wuhan, China	11-Mar	Cuba	Italy
24-Jan	Nepal	Wuhan, China	11-Mar	French Polynesia	France
25-Jan	Australia	Wuhan, China	11-Mar	Honduras	Spain/Switzerland
25-Jan	Canada	Wuhan, China	11-Mar	Ivory Coast	Italy
25-Jan	Malaysia	Wuhan, China	11-Mar	Reunion	US
27-Jan	Cambodia	China	12-Mar	Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	UK
27-Jan	Germany	China	12-Mar	Trinidad and Tobago	Switzerland
27-Jan	Sri Lanka	China	13-Mar	Antigua and Bermuda	UK
29-Jan	Finland	China	13-Mar	Aruba	US
29-Jan	United Arab Emirates	China	13-Mar	Cayman Islands	Cruise
30-Jan	India	China	13-Mar	Curacao	Netherlands
30-Jan	Italy	China	13-Mar	Ethiopia	Burkina Faso
30-Jan	Philippines	China	13-Mar	Gabon	France
31-Jan	Russia	China	13-Mar	Ghana	Norway/Turkey
31-Jan	Spain	Germany	13-Mar	Guadeloupe	Cruise/Dominican/Republic
31-Jan	Sweden	China	13-Mar	Guatemala	Italy
31-Jan	United Kingdom	China	13-Mar	Guinea	Belgium
4-Feb	Belgium	China	13-Mar	Kazakhstan	Germany
14-Feb	Egypt	N/A	13-Mar	Kenya	US/UK
19-Feb	Iran	China	13-Mar	Kosovo	Italy
21-Feb	Israel	Japan	13-Mar	Puerto Rico	Cruise
21-Feb	Lebanon	Iran	13-Mar	Saint Lucia	UK
24-Feb	Afghanistan	Iran	13-Mar	Sudan	UAE
24-Feb	Bahrain	Iran	13-Mar	Suriname	South America via Netherlands
24-Feb	Iraq	Iran	13-Mar	US Virgin Islands	International Travels
24-Feb	Kuwait	Iran	13-Mar	Uruguay	Italy
24-Feb	Oman	Iran	13-Mar	Venezuela	Spain/Italy/ US
25-Feb	Algeria	Italy	14-Mar	Central African Republic	Italy
25-Feb	Austria	Italy	14-Mar	Congo	France
25-Feb	Brazil	Italy	14-Mar	Equatorial Guinea	Spain
25-Feb	Croatia	Italy	14-Mar	Eswatini	US
25-Feb	Switzerland	Italy	14-Mar	Mauritania	Europe
26-Feb	Georgia	Iran	14-Mar	Mayotte	N/A
26-Feb	Greece	Italy	14-Mar	Namibia	Spain
26-Feb	North Macedonia	Italy	14-Mar	Rwanda	India
26-Feb	Norway	China	14-Mar	Seychelles	Italy
26-Feb	Pakistan	Iran	15-Mar	Akrotiri and Dhekelia	N/A
26-Feb	Romania	Italy	15-Mar	Bahamas	N/A
27-Feb	Denmark	Italy	15-Mar	Guam	Philippines
27-Feb	Estonia	Iran	15-Mar	Uzbekistan	France
27-Feb	Netherlands	Italy	16-Mar	Benin	Burkina Faso/Belgium
27-Feb	Nigeria	Italy	16-Mar	Greenland	N/A

27-Feb	San Marino	N/A	16-Mar	Liberia	Switzerland
28-Feb	Azerbaijan	Iran	16-Mar	Somalia	China
28-Feb	Belarus	Iran	16-Mar	Tanzania	Belgium/Sweden/Denmark
28-Feb	Iceland	Italy	17-Mar	Barbados	US
28-Feb	Lithuania	Italy	17-Mar	Gambia	UK
28-Feb	Mexico	Italy	17-Mar	Montenegro	US/Spain
28-Feb	Monaco	N/A	17-Mar	Sint Maarten	UK/US
28-Feb	New Zealand	Iran	18-Mar	Bermuda	US/UK
28-Feb	Wales	Italy	18-Mar	Djibouti	Spain
29-Feb	Ecuador	Spain	18-Mar	El Salvador	Italy
29-Feb	Ireland	Italy	18-Mar	Kyrgyzstan	Saudi Arabia
29-Feb	Luxembourg, Qatar	Italy	18-Mar	Mauritius	UK
29-Feb	Qatar	Iran	18-Mar	Montserrat	UK
1-Mar	Armenia	Iran	18-Mar	New Caledonia	Australia
1-Mar	Czech	Italy	18-Mar	Nicaragua	Panama
1-Mar	Dominican Republic	Italy	18-Mar	Zambia	France
1-Mar	Saint Bartheleme	N/A	19-Mar	Angola	Portugal
1-Mar	Saint Martin	N/A	19-Mar	Chad	Cameroon
1-Mar	Scotland	Italy	19-Mar	Fiji	N/A
2-Mar	Andorra	Italy	19-Mar	Haiti	N/A
2-Mar	Indonesia	Japan	19-Mar	Isle of Man	Spain
2-Mar	Jordan	Italy	19-Mar	Niger	Togo/Ghana/Ivory Coast/ Burkina Faso
2-Mar	Latvia	Italy	20-Mar	Cape Verde	UK
2-Mar	Morocco	Italy	20-Mar	East Timor	Indonesia
2-Mar	Portugal	Italy	20-Mar	Madagascar	N/A
2-Mar	Saudi Arabia	Iran	20-Mar	Papua New Guinea	Italy/Spain/Istanbul
2-Mar	Senegal	France	20-Mar	Uganda	Dubai
2-Mar	Tunisia	Italy	20-Mar	Zimbabwe	UK
3-Mar	Argentina	Italy	21-Mar	Aland Islands	N/A
3-Mar	Chile	SEA & Spain	21-Mar	Eritrea	Norway
3-Mar	Gibraltar	Italy	21-Mar	Transnistria	N/A
3-Mar	Liechtenstein	Switzerland	22-Mar	Dominica	UK
3-Mar	Ukraine	Italy	22-Mar	Grenada	UK
4-Mar	Faroe Islands	France	22-Mar	Mozambique	UK
4-Mar	Hungary	Iran	22-Mar	Syria	N/A
4-Mar	Poland	Germany	23-Mar	Belize	USA, USUK, N/A
4-Mar	Slovenia	Morocco	23-Mar	Myanmar	US/UK
5-Mar	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Italy	23-Mar	Turks & Caicos Islands	N/A
5-Mar	Martinique	N/A	24-Mar	Easter Island	N/A
5-Mar	Palestine	Pakistan	24-Mar	Laos	Thailand
5-Mar	South Africa	Italy	24-Mar	Libya	Saudi Arabia/Tunisia
6-Mar	Bhutan	India	25-Mar	British Virgin Island	US/Europe
6-Mar	Cameron	Ireland & Spain	25-Mar	Guinea-Bissau	N/A
6-Mar	Colombia	Italy	25-Mar	Mali	France
6-Mar	Costa Rica	US	25-Mar	Saint Kitts & Nevis	USA
6-Mar	Peru	Spain/France/Czech	26-Mar	Anguilla	USA
6-Mar	Serbia	Hungary	30-Mar	Botswana	UK/Thailand
6-Mar	Slovakia	Italy (2nd contact)	31-Mar	Burundi	Rwanda/Dubai
6-Mar	Togo	France	31-Mar	Sierra Leone	France
6-Mar	Vatican City	N/A	31-Mar	Sint Eustatius	Netherlands
7-Mar	Maldives	contact Italy	31-Mar	Somaliland	UK/China
7-Mar	Malta	Italy			
7-Mar	Moldova	Italy			
7-Mar	Paraguay	Ecuador			
8-Mar	Albania	Italy			
8-Mar	Bangladesh	Italy			
8-Mar	Bulgaria	N/A			
9-Mar	Brunei	Malaysia			
9-Mar	Cyprus	Britain			
9-Mar	Guernsey	Spain			