

Letter from a student in China on the COVID-19 pandemic

A correspondent
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The following letter was sent to the World Socialist Web Site from a university student in China tracing his personal experiences and observations of the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

*A Mandarin version of this letter can be read [here](#).
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Right now in China, social life has returned to a degree of normalcy and preventive measures have been largely minimized. Public spaces have been opened. In most neighbourhoods, there is hardly any screening of those entering stores and supermarkets. Even though some still require a report on people's health conditions upon entry through scanning a QR code [explained later], hardly anyone uses infrared thermometers to check body temperatures any more. Only the QR code needs to be scanned when taking public transportation, and body temperature screening is no longer necessary. Although schools, corporations and social institutions still strictly restrict the entry of any outsiders, they have lifted restrictions on insiders who use a special purple QR code to go outside.

Nevertheless, I think, the threat of COVID-19 that has spread around the world in the past eight months is far from being eliminated, especially considering the recent flare-ups in Harbin and Beijing. I will discuss briefly my own experiences during the pandemic, especially when it caught most people off guard.

At the end of December in 2019, I first saw a news story about an unexplained pneumonia in Wuhan through Google's recommendation algorithm when I was looking outside the Great Fire Wall [the Chinese internet barrier]. This piece of news came from the Chinese website of the *New York Times*. I originally took this as the usual eye-catching news from a foreign media that's hostile to the Beijing regime. I was suspicious of its validity and did not try to learn more about it. I spoke to my mother a few times about this unexplained pneumonia in Wuhan later, but neither of us gave any serious considerations to what consequences it might bring.

Two weeks before the New Year, the Chinese media was filled with jubilation about the end of year and the upcoming Lunar New Year [January 25]. I did not see any reports on the unexplained pneumonia in Wuhan and gradually forgot about it. However, in the following week, news about this unexplained pneumonia in Wuhan started to grow rapidly. Most people in China would have learned about it, but still did not have a correct conception of how serious it would become.

I spoke to my friend who goes to college in Wuhan. He said his university was aware of the danger of the spread of this pneumonia, and had heard that the school year would end early. However, the semester still ended around January 10 as usual.

Around January 20, I had already returned home and was preparing for the Lunar New Year with my parents. I was already seeing more reports on the situation in Wuhan on TV and on the internet at this point.

From 10 a.m. on January 23, Wuhan announced that all buses, subways, cruises, and intercity bus service would be stopped, and residents of Wuhan were advised not to leave the city. All transportation centers such as the airports and train stations were also closed. Also starting on this same day, the central government mobilized doctors at state-owned hospitals in other cities to help staffing the hospitals in Wuhan.

All sorts of donations and resources from the government and from individuals reached Wuhan every day after this, and construction started for the two Fangcang shelter hospitals [large, temporary hospitals]. All these measures appeared in the news channels of CCTV [state-owned television] as a demonstration of the positive role of the Chinese government.

However, on the internet, people started to question the shortcomings of the bureaucratic system and the capitalist market economy. Here are a few I've seen online. First, a health official in Hubei appeared to be very ignorant about this virus and its spread during interviews. Second, the Hubei section of the government-backed Red Cross in China was suspected of profiting by selling the masks donated to it. The security guards of this organization also attempted to stop journalists from investigating. Third, some companies selling masks were involved in price gouging, hoarded a large number of masks, and pushed for the price to be entirely determined by the market.

What's even worse, as people started to trace back reporting on the disease, they started to suspect that the government had, in the beginning, tried to cover up and suppress news related to it. All these criticisms exploded into the open on February 7 when Dr. Li Wenliang [from Wuhan Central Hospital] died of COVID-19. This news started to be spread widely: he was admonished by the police for spreading fake news because he warned his friends of this pandemic on WeChat [Chinese social media] back at the end of December. He unfortunately was infected when he was treating patients in January. He published his experience on February 1. I have discussed this with many friends, and we were all angry

about the bureaucracy and questioned how authoritarian and myopic they are.

On the eve of and during the Lunar New Year, TV programs and the internet were still dominated by a festive, joyful sentiment, but this changed drastically after the Lunar New Year. I completely gave up any attempt to visit friends and family. My parents still insisted on getting together and having meals with their friends and relatives, but they also started to discuss the spread of the virus and the various measures imposed to contain it. Their conversations were not as light and joyful as previous years. The number of visits they made decreased a lot, and in the end, no one came to visit us like before.

Since then, I started a long period of staying at home. I hardly had anywhere else to go because most public spaces and stores were closed. Most places, including my own neighbourhood, implemented strict screenings upon entry. I also need to worry about not being able to get back in if I ever were to go outside, and such cases were reported in the news. I left most of my textbooks at school, and only had the internet and the TV as a means of studying and entertainment. Until the reopening of my university, I have only gone outside of my neighbourhood two or three times to get groceries and food at supermarkets. My mother went to buy groceries most of the time because she had more freedom to get into and out of our neighbourhood after she returned to work.

The stay-at-home existence made people panic at the news each day about the pandemic. From January 23 to February 10, the number of confirmed cases grew from 1,000 to 40,000. Also during this period, the percentage increase in confirmed cases oddly remained at 2.1 percent for many days in a row, indicating data forgery and cover-up by the bureaucracy. By the beginning of March, the number of total confirmed cases reached 80,000, but the number of new cases every day declined a lot. From mid-March to early May, under instructions from the government, the return to work and school has been carried out one by one in each province.

Initially, the seven-day national holiday for Lunar New Year was prolonged for another week by the State Council. My university asked us to wait for future notifications and not to return to school before that. At the same time, the university required us to report every morning our body temperatures and if our family members have been outside. My parents were required to do the same by their workplace.

During this 14-day break, since there had been cases where people lied about the fact they had been to where the outbreaks were, all provinces and cities strengthened their screening of each individual by implementing their own QR code for monitoring health conditions. This QR code requires everyone to report the whereabouts of themselves and their family members, their health condition, occupation, phone number, and ID number. Due to the collection of the last two items, this QR code has become increasingly helpful to authorities because it associates phone numbers with actual identities. Even if ID numbers are not required for many things, phone numbers will usually be required in most cases anyway. Also, the validity of one's self-reported whereabouts can be confirmed by checking cell phone connections to different base stations and ID registrations gathered when taking

inter-city buses or going through customs. There are also reports of widely-installed security cameras being used to physically prevent people from going outside in the countryside and from leaving neighbourhoods where there were clusters of cases in the cities.

Moreover, for those without smartphones, they could hardly go anywhere because this QR code could only be registered online. When asked to present this QR code by authorities, one has to display it on a smartphone with internet connections. Thus, there was a report of an old man who was forced to leave for another city to live with his relatives because he did not have this QR code.

After the Lantern Festival [February 8], my university announced plans for online classes. Most elementary and middle schools made similar plans so school could start as usual. All kindergartens postponed the start of their semesters.

After the Lantern Festival, my father, a civil servant, went back to work and was assigned a purple QR code so that he could go out freely. However, because my neighborhood was still strict in its screening of people coming in and going out, he went to live in another neighborhood near where he works. My mother, a technician at a major hospital, stayed at home for another two weeks since her work has nothing to do with respiratory diseases.

As I have mentioned, for stores and jobs in most cities, their return to work started after mid-March. However, the pandemic has hit many medium-sized and small companies hard, and many could not hire nearly as many people as before, leading to widespread unemployment. This has triggered a lot of discussion online. Many people are anxious about unemployment. Even for those who returned to work, many were forced to work for fewer hours, and thus lower salaries, leading to a lower life quality.

On social media, I have seen that even though the attitude of most people to the government improved, especially when compared to the handling of the pandemic by other countries, most realized the pandemic was creating intensified international political conflicts and global economic downturn. They are worried that on top of the hardship they have already gone through, they would face more unknown, long-term, and negative consequences from the crisis triggered by this pandemic.



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