HOW CHINA SUCCEEDED IN THE COVID-19 EPIDEMIC PREVENTION AND CONTROL

Interview with Associate Professor Leijie Wei, Editor of *Waiting for Dawn: 21 Diaries From 16 COVID-19 Frontlines*

Leijie Wei and Shuoying Chen

Leijie Wei is Associate Professor at the School of Law, Xiamen University, China. He has published books and articles on topics relating to law, politics, sociology, and international affairs. Email: weileijie99@126.com

Shuoying Chen is an associate professor and academic editor at the Academy of Marxism, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. She is specialized in political economics. Email: csyjackie@163.com

Abstract: The book *Waiting for Dawn: 21 Diaries from 16 COVID-19 Frontlines* takes a global perspective, examining the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on governments and the public around the world. Associate Professor Leijie Wei, editor of the book, believes that the reasons why mandatory tracking, testing, and quarantine measures have been effectively implemented in China center on the unified leadership provided by the Communist Party of China (CPC), the active response by state-owned enterprises and institutions, and the full trust of the majority of the public in the government's anti-pandemic measures. In an effort to win elections, meanwhile, politicians in Europe and the United States are politicizing the pandemic and making China a scapegoat. In contrast to socialist China's policy of ensuring all those in need are hospitalized with free testing and treatment, the essentially capitalist public health models applied in most Western countries have brought more concrete and explicit class conflict, and the drawn-out pandemic in the West has exacerbated various forms of social injustice. The COVID-19 epidemic is a reminder that a country's governance ability should not be judged on the basis of simplistic conceptions of democracy, and that the needs of Mother Earth must be considered in the collective building of a community of shared future for humankind.

Keywords: COVID-19; epidemic; pandemic; socialist China

Shuoying Chen (abbr. SC): *To begin with, how did you come to the idea of producing a collection of diaries from different countries around the world?*

Leijie Wei (abbr. LW): In 2020, China faced a very dangerous first few months, but through the efforts of the whole nation, it achieved an epic reversal. The global pandemic began in February when the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) broke through the threshold of extraterritorial spread, and the world then fell gradually into the “darkest moment” of the pandemic. Since that time, we have had to rethink COVID-19 from a global rather than a local perspective, taking into account especially how other countries are different from or similar to China in terms of their experience of fighting the pandemic. With that in mind, I invited 21 contributors from 16 countries to document the lives during the pandemic of people around the world, recording what they have seen, heard, felt, and understood during this period, with various narrative perspectives and in the form of diaries. Various pandemic diaries kept by Chinese people in quarantined cities, based on personal experience and with a strong literary flavor, undoubtedly have their value. Nevertheless, their unidimensional focus on a single area and lack of a multi-dimensional comparative perspective may lead to narrow and idiosyncratic accounts. This collection, entitled *Waiting for Dawn: 21 Diaries from 16 COVID-19 Frontlines*, covers 16 countries on four continents, including Asia, Europe, North America, and South America. The authors are from various social backgrounds and differ in their social status. With its multi-dimensional and global perspective, the collection offers particular promise as a way of examining the impact of COVID-19 on different governments and populations, and as a history of everyday life in the age of the pandemic, it will also serve in future years as a first-hand account of this unforgettable experience.

Preparations for the book began in early March of 2020, when the epidemic in China was at its worst, with all sorts of true and false information flying around. In cyberspace, the middle class was engaging in heated debates, quarrels, and recriminations, especially with regard to the government’s response to the disease. Many Chinese simply dropped off chat groups or blocked people because they were unable to persuade each other. People in China seem to be very fond of discussing current events, and tend to hold onto their own set of preconceptions, whether or not these are well grounded. However, raising your voice doesn’t mean that your ideas and propositions are correct, and neither are ideas and propositions wrong or absurd simply because they don’t for the present have any support. It’s like a math exam, in which you can’t score marks simply by coming up with the answer if you don’t show the procedures you used to reach the solution. Some would say that this love of disputation is a compulsion of intellectuals, something they can’t help doing. In fact, it’s not so much a compulsion as a pastime, a habitual way of life. It’s characteristic of a group of well-to-do people

with a lot of spare time for online chat, who nonetheless are still more or less subject to social pressures, and who therefore find it easy to form opinions and sentiments about the difficulties of other people. They need a channel to release these sentiments. The thing that impressed me most in listening to them was that many of their arguments simply amounted to “keyboard governance,” of the kind that doesn’t solve anything or even make sense. Empty talk never places a country in danger; it only wastes time. Where it lacks the perspective of “putting yourself in other people’s shoes,” the debate in cyberspace can easily become pure mouthing-off, and the inherently loose character of cyberspace makes it impractical to take it seriously. If the best that today’s newly-educated intellectuals can do while facing a great crisis of the people and the country is to mount a war of words and personal feelings, then their existence seems worthless and insignificant. For this reason, at a time of confusion, loss, and struggle, I began to think hard about how I could escape the endless empty talk of this class, how I could look beyond these behavioral oddities, that arise obscurely out of people’s consciousness and reflect vices that are hard to guess at, and how I could do something really meaningful and leave something behind. Those were the origins of this book.

SC: *At the beginning of 2020, when people in China were celebrating the New Year and welcoming the arrival of the new decade, they had little idea that the world would soon be so sharply divided and in such turmoil. Then during the last Special Spring Festival, when everyone was in a state of panic, they wouldn’t have guessed that China today would be one of the safest countries in the world, a country where the novel coronavirus has basically been eliminated, while much of the outside world remains in a hopeless quandary with out-of-control outbreaks. With many scholars already presenting their own judgments as to why the outcomes of epidemic prevention and control efforts have been so different in China and the West, how do the contributors to this book cast light on the reasons for these great differences through their narratives of concrete life experiences?*

LW: Reading through this collection of diaries with their observations of the pandemic, it’s not hard to see that when the outbreak began in Europe, the United States, and also some Asian countries, the main reaction of most of the diarists in foreign countries was to conclude that “this country is too reckless, sooner or later something will go wrong.”

On 30 January, the United States declared a public health emergency following the WHO’s declaration—hardly anything happened in behavior. On 4 March, California declared a state of emergency but not much changed; only on 11 March, when WHO declared a pandemic, and the United States declared a national emergency, that changes started to take place. (Wei 2020, 422)

Many Dutch people assume that COVID-19 is just a more serious flu, one that isn't easy for children to contract, and that young people with stronger immune systems can recover quickly if they're infected. Even frontline doctors hold the same idea. A family doctor went out jogging after being diagnosed with COVID-19, and even appeared on a television show, with no concern about infecting others. (Wei 2020, 115)

On March 12, Germany announced the cancellation of all events involving more than 1,000 people. For that reason, the Mannheim University of Music and Performing Arts (Mannheim HfM) limited the audience at its concert to 999, and went ahead with the event. (Wei 2020, 295).

On the way back to my dormitory, not a single Russian was wearing a mask. Ordinary Russians felt no nervousness about the coming epidemic. The situation everywhere is getting worse at every moment, with masks out of stock, friends being diagnosed, and companies shutting down. I told my Russian friends and classmates about the real situation in China, urging them to buy masks and disinfectant as soon as possible . . . but they didn't care, and even sneered at me: don't be scared, this is Russia, not China. (Wei 2020, 390)

These Chinese people in foreign countries became aware of the severity of the epidemic in Wuhan through watching daily news reports, even though they weren't in their own country and experiencing the epidemic there. The combination of online fear and the sense that their host country's epidemic prevention policies were inadequate led to anxiety at the potential danger, making these people extremely cautious in the face of the epidemic. They would always wear a mask when leaving home, and as soon as they returned from the supermarket, wash their hands and sterilize their clothes and the goods they'd purchased. Even before the outbreak reached Europe, local Chinese communities had begun to encourage proper food storage and the purchase of disinfectants. People returning from China, especially Hubei, in the second half of January would go into self-quarantine for 14 days. They got free face masks from community organizations. Certain Chinese employers would dismiss workers who refused self-quarantine. Chinese landlords would refuse to re-admit international students if they got back from China but refused to quarantine themselves for 14 days in some other rented apartment. This active response, as if in wartime conditions, was in stark contrast to the nonchalance shown typically by Westerners in the face of a severe epidemic.

This does seem to be related to a cultural difference. People in the West don't wear masks in their everyday lives. In their minds, masks are reserved for people with illnesses. If someone wears a mask, it's usually because the person is carrying a virus and is trying to avoid infecting others. If you wear a mask, people are

liable to assume that you're sick. In that case, you shouldn't go out; otherwise, you're deliberately spreading the virus. According to one of the contributors to the book, who has lived in Germany for more than ten years, he doesn't remember seeing anyone wearing a mask on the streets of Germany. Pharmacies have a box or two simply because they're required by law to keep masks in stock; otherwise, they'd never have such items that no one ever inquires about (Wei 2020, 287). Meanwhile, although plague has always been part of the historical narrative in Europe, people's consciousness of epidemics was until recently much less vivid than in Asian societies. When SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) swept through East Asia in 2003, most European countries remained almost unscathed. In public health terms, the times had been peaceful for so long that the only cases for reference were the distant Spanish flu of 1918, and World War II. One might ask: didn't the public and the elites see what had happened in China, that had just experienced the first period of the COVID-19 epidemic? Surprisingly, in this age of globalization with its fast information flows, the answer is no. Behind this blindness lurks a deeply rooted "pride and prejudice," based on a perceived racial and civilizational superiority. China's data, the story goes, have consistently been falsified, so any figures that emerge from China are "not to be trusted." In the eyes of many Westerners, COVID-19, like SARS, MERS (Middle East respiratory syndrome) and EVD (Ebola virus disease), is something with obvious racial and regional characteristics, a far-off "Oriental problem" that deserves a look of compassion.

SC: *Mandatory tracking, testing and quarantine measures have played a huge role in China's fight against the epidemic. In the liberal and individualistic context of the West, such compulsory measures are seen as a violation of individual freedom and privacy. What do you think of the different trade-offs in various countries between freedom and fighting the epidemic? What does this have to do with the different political systems of China and the West?*

LW: It can be said that the unified leadership of the Communist Party of China, the positive response of state-owned enterprises and institutions, the full trust of the majority of the people in the government's anti-epidemic measures, and their own generous contributions to the struggle have unquestionably played an important role in the control of this epidemic. Many epidemic prevention measures in China are carried out on a compulsory basis. Some of these are government measures, while others are initiatives at the level of institutions, communities, or even residential blocks. More often than not, these measures become stricter at the grassroots level. However, neither the use of "health codes" nor in-person tracking for epidemic prevention has provoked much discussion regarding confidentiality and privacy issues in China. The attitude of the public to people who are reluctant to reveal their whereabouts for personal reasons is more of

anger and condemnation than of understanding and sympathy. Meanwhile, there's general support for mandatory tracking, testing, and quarantine measures. Compared to the infringements of privacy and the use of the public power to enforce decisions, it seems that people are more afraid that their own communities and local governments aren't sufficiently tough, and are leaving possibilities open for the virus to spread. In contrast, Western countries and even some Asian countries seem to be more inclined to stress non-coercive means, to prioritize individual freedom and privacy, which may explain to some extent their initially cautious and slow approach to taking lockdown measures. Even if they're forced eventually to put lockdowns in place, different countries and different regions within each country define "lockdowns" in different ways, in terms of the intensity and the people who are banned from going out. That's not to mention the differences with China's hardcore anti-epidemic model. The severity of the Wuhan lockdown can be seen as resembling the curfews imposed in various Western countries, while the measures taken in the West and even some Asian countries amount at best to conditional administrative control. To a large extent, this has to do with the national character of most Western countries and of some Asian countries deeply influenced by Western civilization, as well as with the division of political power within them. To enforce strict top-down control of all social behavior through the coercive power of the state apparatus, it's necessary to establish a highly centralized mobilization system. Unlike China's power structure, however, the three representative cases in this book—the United States, Germany and Japan—all feature a division of power between the central and local administrations. Although their central governments still have a strong mobilizing capacity, this isn't remotely like the all-powerful system in China. In Japan, local government officials at every level aren't appointed by the central government, but are elected by voters in their own districts. As a result, the relationship between the central and local governments in Japan isn't a hierarchical one of leaders and the led, but a parallel partnership. This structure gives them a great deal of flexibility in dealing with problems, though naturally, they can't move in unison throughout the country. The case of the United States may be more telling, in that the historical peculiarities of its constitution effectively make the US federal government a typical "small government" designed to maximize personal freedom. The expectation that Americans have of their government is, in general, along the lines of: "Stay out of my business!" People in China were surprised that the US government's response to the outbreak was so weak, but there has not been much complaint from the US public. Instead, there have been rising voices criticizing the anti-pandemic measures and even protests against them.

Under such circumstances, asking people to exercise self-control and self-discipline to stop the spread of the novel coronavirus may seem like a feeble

response, but it may be the best that the central governments of these countries can do at the present time. Even as the pandemic intensifies, forcing these governments to adopt stronger and stronger measures, it has not been the one-step process that the Chinese people hope for, but more like a slow, step-by-step policy adjustment. The reason is very simple: in electoral politics, overreaction or underreaction will both cause problems for political leaders. If things turn out not to be as bad as imagined, the leaders are laughed at for overreaction, while if they're worse the politicians are condemned for not taking action. Making correct decisions is not easy. In the politics of a confrontational election, opponents and critics are equipped with hindsight, and intent on creating doubt, damage, and mistrust, relentlessly blame others. At the same time, the difficulty of making prompt, informed political decisions has been substantially increased by the high information asymmetry of this sudden and unprecedented outbreak. This applies in the power structures both of China and the West. At first, most Chinese may have grumbled about the problems that arose in Wuhan's responses to the outbreak. In retrospect, however, the complaints may appear somewhat harsh, even if Wuhan could have done better. Wuhan, after all, was the point at which the epidemic was first identified by humans, and therefore had to face greater uncertainty than any of the places that followed. Initial neglect or inadequate responses may have largely reflected the lack of knowledge concerning the outbreak. Although there were lessons to be had from the SARS epidemic in 2003, the current epidemic has differed sharply in various respects. One such difference has been the large number of asymptomatic cases, and the infectivity of the novel coronavirus is far greater than was the case with SARS. In short, the COVID-19 epidemic presents a new challenge with regard to the decision-making process: how are decisions to be made, and lived with, under conditions of broad uncertainty? Other problems caused by the epidemic, such as the decline of globalization and the weakened pursuit of new technologies, will further exacerbate the uncertainties in our lives. It may be concluded that the world is experiencing an enormous change, with the COVID-19 pandemic as the watershed. Rather than being the reason for this change, the pandemic is better seen as a force driving its acceleration. An era of uncertainty, instability, and unpredictability has arrived, which means that in future we will not be "shooting at fixed targets, but at moving ones" (Lee 2020). We will have to get used to living in uncertainty for a long time.

SC: Although China is the best-performing country in terms of COVID-19 epidemic control, Western politicians such as Donald Trump continue to attack China, playing up its role as the source of the novel coronavirus. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic they even oppose necessary measures such as the wearing of face masks, just to show their opposition to China. What do you think of this politicization of the pandemic in the West?

LW: The pandemic is a wonderful mirror, which not only reflects the differences in cultural traditions and governance structures between China and other countries, but also highlights the internal mechanisms and logic of actual political operations in Western countries in the midst of an extraordinary situation. In addition to taking an in-depth look at the cultures, societies, and traditions of countries around the world during the pandemic, the book also explores the political drama surrounding COVID-19, with politicians trying through a variety of means to achieve their goal of winning as many votes as possible. For Italy's far-right parties, COVID-19 as a foreign disease provides a tool for attacking political enemies and provoking xenophobia. In their COVID-19 narrative, these parties refer obliquely to Africa. A post on a far-right website, for example, suggests that illegal immigrants from Africa, where China has a significant penetration, brought the novel coronavirus to Italy.¹ In Belgium (and Europe in general), false information about the health risks of 5G technology began to spread on the internet as early as 2018, and after brewing for two years, these allegations with their associated "China label" have exploded during the current pandemic. Behind the China-related rumors in Belgium are mostly far-right parties from the (French-speaking) Walloon Region. To increase their political influence and support among the population, they use this opportunity to stir up public disquiet and to attack parties in the (Dutch-speaking) Flemish community that have opposing positions (Wei 2020, 366). Similarly, as the pandemic grew worse in China's Hong Kong SAR, trade unions threatened to strike unless the government immediately and completely sealed its border with the Chinese mainland, though not with the rest of the world.

Of course, it is the United States that has politicized the situation to an extreme degree. For much of the past year, political news in the United States has generally had two keywords: Donald Trump and China. News channels that side with Donald Trump say he is doing well, while others call him stupid and ridiculous. US elites and news outlets now blame China for almost everything because China has committed the original sin of not playing by American rules. The Communist Party is not credible; China is lying; the World Health Organization is too pro-China; Chinese masks are defective, and so on. The real problem, though, is that the United States has not been prepared for dealing with COVID-19, even though there was a long gap between what happened in Wuhan and the outbreak in the United States. Donald Trump's strategy is to pass the buck: it's China's fault, it's the WHO's fault, it's the CDC's fault, its state governors' fault. With Washington's short-sighted politics and the white-hot fight of the election year, Donald Trump seems to care more about getting the economy moving and resuming campaign rallies for his re-election than about American lives. In the face of such pressing political needs, even wearing a mask has been interpreted as a political declaration

of a culture war. Far from bringing American society closer together, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing tensions during an election year that has also seen an economic breakdown. Meanwhile, massive protests have broken out across the country over the death of George Floyd, an African-American man who was asphyxiated when a white police officer kept his knee pressed on Floyd's neck. Not only has this situation contributed directly to the resurgence of the epidemic in the United States, but it has also brought to the fore the racial and political conflicts, the gap between rich and poor, and various social and economic inequalities that have long existed in that country. Identity politics and culture wars are heating up. The problem in the United States is not just that the epidemic is being politicized, but that Donald Trump is desperately trying to capitalize on the epidemic. As a result, Trump has not been able to coordinate either internal relations with Democratic governors or external relations with China. Even if Trump's strategy succeeds, how much do the American people have to lose?

SC: *China's Ministry of Finance said at a press conference in April 2020 that as of March 13, 2020, the government had spent RMB 116.9 billion yuan on COVID-19 prevention and control. As of March 15, 2020, the total cost of medical treatment for newly diagnosed and suspected COVID-19 patients in China exceeded RMB 1.039 billion yuan, while the total for the settled accounts of 44,189 patients nationwide was over RMB 750 million yuan, an average of almost RMB 17,000 yuan per person (China News 2020). When it comes to the cost of treating COVID-19 patients, China has demonstrated the superiority of the socialist system, which does not allow a single COVID-19 patient to be denied treatment because s/he cannot afford it. In addition to the mandatory tracking, testing, and quarantine measures, hospitalizing each and every patient in need of treatment has been another major factor in China's success in combating the COVID-19 epidemic. Why can't the West do the same? What are the differences between the various strata of the population in Western countries in terms of testing for the coronavirus, treatment of diagnosed patients, and the impact of the epidemic?*

LW: In the book, one of the authors provides data showing that economic output fell by 31.3% after the [British] government imposed a stricter lockdown in March 2020, which meant a loss of up to 2.4 billion pounds per day (Wei 2020, 193). This fact alone should make it easy for us to understand the powerful impulse behind the protests that were mounted against lockdowns in many Western countries, as well as the calls to restart the economy after the initial success of epidemic control measures. People prefer to risk being killed by the virus than to lose their jobs. What is more, the lockdowns and continued epidemic control measures further complicate already difficult social problems, or else formerly hidden problems start to surface. The problems of social injustice and class conflict are two typical issues, as quite a few of the authors in this book mention. China, in its

epidemic prevention and control, has hospitalized all diagnosed patients and provided free testing and treatment, while the responses of most Western countries show a classic capitalist pattern that makes existing class contradictions more concrete and explicit. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, Western governments have repeatedly stressed that mild cases do not need to be tested, maintaining that self-isolation is sufficient. Paradoxically, many elite figures, including celebrities and politicians, have tested positive, generally with mild cases. Of course, the gap between rich and poor is not only reflected in unequal access to COVID-19 testing, but also appears in daily life. For people to survive the epidemic, strong immune systems and adequate wealth are highly desirable, but these are scarce among the lower orders of society. Forbes reports that from private medical facilities, many wealthy people can get injections of high doses of vitamin C, immune-boosting amino acids, and zinc, which is essential for the immune system to function. In addition, many business executives avoid commercial flights during the COVID-19 epidemic and fly on private jets. Since the outbreak of the epidemic, the number of applications for elite private tutoring services has risen sharply, according to Tutors International, an education agency, and the majority of applications are from wealthy families (Williams 2020).

By contrast, the lower and middle classes often lack the financial resources to deal with the epidemic. As a result of the epidemic, many people are forced to work from home. Heating, internet, computers, refrigerators, and other household essentials, as well as enough disposable income for food, may be luxuries for those on low incomes or in precarious jobs. Manual workers cannot work from home. Among those who struggle to make ends meet, loss of income due to illness or from self-isolation for medical purposes can cause large numbers to fall into debt. The foreign workers in the narratives of authors from Singapore and Malaysia are vivid examples. Their wages are often well below the local average, and most of them live in employer-provided dormitories where conditions are poor, with as many as 15–20 people in one room. Maintaining social distancing is a real luxury for these workers, since staying home would mean the end of their livelihood. The governments in these countries require employers to bear the cost of COVID-19 testing, and only people who pass the test can work. The employers, however, may be reluctant to resume operations because of concerns about increased costs due to the testing, and fears of concentrated infections among migrant workers. For vulnerable groups, a nationwide lockdown not only brings with it the threat of unemployment, but can lead directly to deaths from starvation. The poor may be forced to choose between dying of COVID-19 and dying from lack of food. While religious and charitable organizations are active in helping the poor, over time they will inevitably run into financial difficulties.

In the discussions on social inequality provoked by the drawn-out epidemic, educational inequality is another issue of particular concern. When schools are closed, children have to study at home. Different family backgrounds have already created inequality in education, and the lockdown has substantially aggravated this inequality. Some families with poor living conditions cannot provide their children with a good learning environment; others have no computer or internet connection (according to a Malaysian diarist, a survey conducted by the Ministry of Education during the lockdown period shows that 36.9% of students in the country are unable to study online at home because they do not have access to electronic devices).² There are also parents who do not have the time, or whose own level of education is too low for them to help their children. Parents who can work from home are mostly white collar and middle class. They have time to supervise their children's homework and even to teach them. But many of the most important people for the functioning of society are in its lower layers, and many of these people, such as delivery workers, couriers, and garbage collectors, cannot stop working because of the pandemic. Their children may lose the opportunity for education and counseling, losses that would threaten to exacerbate social polarization and class stratification in the future. In the Chinese media, we see many complaints about children staying at home, mostly from parents and especially mothers, who tend to bear most of the burden of taking care of the needs of their children and supervising their study. I think we should also realize that people who can complain online are in fact relatively better off. People who are really in difficulty are easily overrepresented, but their voices are often not heard.

This epidemic without borders has not brought people together to work hard in unity, but has created much hostility, antagonism, and even conflict within and between nation-states. Beyond the narratives of nation-state and politics, the impact of the epidemic is ultimately carried by every ordinary individual in their everyday life. Something that might seem like a grain of sand for our times as a whole can be a mountain when placed on the shoulders of an individual. We have to note this reality of politics in China and the West, and acknowledge that the epidemic has only made an already brutal reality more brutal. As the fight against COVID-19 drags on and spreads about the world, countries will have to gradually lift their lockdowns and resume work, which inevitably will expose some countries to the risk of the epidemic running out of control. It also means that outside China, a continuing pandemic is likely to be a sad reality until an effective vaccine is on the market and the global population is widely vaccinated. With the passage of time, the COVID-19 epidemic is growing from a minor, temporary setback to a disaster. In many countries it will intensify social contradictions at all levels, while

acting as an external catalyst for geopolitical risks. The multiple contradictions and consequent risks will have a profound impact on the world order in the post-Cold-War era. The future is more unpredictable for an increasingly unbalanced earth and for the parts of the world that are already on fire.

SC: *People always have to ask “what” and “why” questions. When the Black Death swept through Europe and “no wisdom or human foresight on earth could be of any use” (Boccaccio 2003, 5), a reassessment of the Christian moral order began, and the spirit of humanism took hold. Now that the novel coronavirus is sweeping the world, panicked populations are no longer able to enjoy their normal way of life, but have to stay at home. Dialogue and questioning have become the new normal, through which we seem to be able to reduce the distance created by isolation and to regain some control over our lives. As the compiler and editor of this book, based on many vivid and diverse accounts, what do you have to say about the occurrence, development, and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on human society?*

LW: Well, I’d like to talk about three things. The first is about the relationship between human beings and nature. In a report carried by *The Daily Mail* on April 3, 2020, scientists researching carbon emissions stated that this year has witnessed the biggest drop in carbon dioxide emissions since World War II, because the COVID-19 pandemic has brought economies around the world almost to a standstill.³ However, this improvement has been achieved by closing factories, grounding flights, and forcing thousands of people to stay home. After 2.5 billion people were forced into isolation, the rest of the earth began to come back to life. What a surprise, and how ironic! During the COVID-19 pandemic, humans, who survived two world wars, have been stunned by the virus, and the world has seemed to fall back into the hands of nature. In Venice, Italy, muddy canals have become clear due to a dearth of tourists and a sharp drop in traffic. Air pollutants in and around New Delhi have dropped by 70% (Wei 2020, 202) as a result of the lockdown, making this year significantly cooler than previous ones, so that it has seemed unnecessary to run air conditioners 24 hours a day from mid-April as before. In Nara, Japan, deer from parks have begun foraging in empty city streets since the number of visitors, and consequently deer feeders, declined dramatically. In Nanjing, China, a baby fox recently broke into a kindergarten, where the staff found it in a storage room and thought it was a specimen. It turned out to be a living thing, not afraid of people and with a very cute look when they fed it. In the midst of a global pandemic, these amazing images are both shocking and awe-inspiring. The human race is suffering, and the earth is quietly being revitalized. This situation forces us to rethink and reexamine our symbiotic relationship with the earth. If we overexploit the earth, it will restrict us in its own way in order to

recover. COVID-19 seems to be a warning, a cleansing, a punishment meted out by the earth to human beings. As a news commentator suggested, “You think you avoided the devil, but when you look in the mirror, you are the Devil!”⁴ The Gaia hypothesis, as a new view of the earth system, has the ethical implication that all living things are descendants of one Earth Mother; humans are neither the masters of the earth nor its managers. I believe that future generations will experience more events such as the current epidemic, and only if we follow the laws of nature and demonstrate an awe for Mother Earth can all things live in harmony and human beings have a real future.

The second thing is about people and their countries. Based on evidence from the recent period and from the past decade, it’s reasonable to conclude that if the United States had been the first to have to respond to the threat of the novel coronavirus, its performance in epidemic prevention and control would have been self-centered, sloppy, tone-deaf, or even worse. In this sense, the Chinese people have been both unlucky and blessed. It’s universally acknowledged that Asian countries, with their different cultures and political systems, have recorded great achievements in containing COVID-19, with better performances than in Europe and the United States. In other words, the leaders of many Asian countries—China (including Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan), South Korea, Singapore, Vietnam and others—have done far better than their Western counterparts in fighting the epidemic, and have saved more lives. Practice speaks louder than theory. For a long time, most Chinese intellectuals have had only an indirect or one-sided understanding of Western civilization, much like a distorted image of the moon in the water or flowers in the mist. At a cognitive level, the basic implication of the current pandemic is perhaps that governance capacity cannot be judged using the simplistic criterion of “democracy.” In evaluating China’s system, the most important premise is that the achievements of China’s modernization, and consequently the various problems and contradictions during this process, have been concentrated into the last 40 years, and have made up the equivalent of a process that took nearly 100 years as experienced by European countries and the United States. This is the context within which many synchronic and diachronic issues today are to be understood. Major historical progress often takes place in the wake of major disasters. I hope that after the ordeal and baptism of fire provided by the COVID-19 epidemic, the governance capacities of countries around the world will be enhanced, and that more intellectuals will abandon their obsession with certain stereotypes and look at China, the world and our times with greater rationality and tolerance.

The third and final thing is about the relationships between people. An unusual time always demonstrates more about the relationships between countries and

about the people in different countries. There are many who say that in the circumstances of disaster, and just as during similar periods in history, they are constantly seeing attacks, recriminations, finger-pointing, shirking of responsibilities and even elements of *schadenfreude*. But there are plenty of people who draw the opposite conclusions. They believe that the epidemic has shown us that in many cases, the world is concretely connected as an indivisible community of shared future for humankind. The epidemic does not seem to have made people more fearful of one another. Rather, they are more eager to bond together and to unite in order to cope with the disaster. The COVID-19 epidemic is showing once again that human beings are a community and have a shared future. All things can grow together without harming one another, and the laws of the world operate without contradicting one another. The concept of the community of shared future for humankind answers a range of questions that have puzzled and concerned human society and countries all over the world. The far-reaching implication of this concept is that the international community should seek a win-win approach, and allow multilateral win-win efforts to open up a new future for humanity. In advocating worldwide solidarity in fighting the COVID-19 epidemic, and in strengthening international coordination and cooperation, China undoubtedly provides a vivid interpretation of the concept of a community of shared future for humankind. The rationale is simple: the spread of the novel coronavirus is blind to skin color and political system, in the same way as other global issues such as climate change, mass migration, and interconnected and fragile economic and financial markets. In the face of these problems, no country on its own can remain prosperous or survive without being harmed. Globalization is the channel through which COVID-19 spreads rapidly, and through globalization, we must work together to defeat the virus. Moreover, this major emergency will not be the last that humanity experiences. A variety of conventional and non-conventional security issues will continue to bring about new challenges and tests. With this in mind, in the era of economic globalization, the international community needs to build a sense of community of shared future for humankind. We need to help and support each other, to work together to confront risks and challenges, and to build a better home on earth.

Notes

1. See, <https://voxnews.info/2020/01/27/virus-cina-e-arrivato-in-africa-gia-50mila-infetti-in-citta-cinese/>.
2. See, <https://www.orientaldaily.com.my/index.php/news/nation/2020/08/18/358410>.
3. See, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-8272129/Global-carbon-emissions-historic-declines-energy-use-slumps.html>.
4. See https://www.sohu.com/a/386756580_100941.

Acknowledgements

This article was translated from Chinese by Dr. Zixu Liu at the Academy of Marxism, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

References

- Boccaccio, G. 2003. *The Decameron*. Translated by G. H. McWilliam. London: Penguin Books.
- China News. 2020. "Medical Insurance Alone Costs More than 1 Billion Yuan! How Much Has China Paid to Fight the Epidemic? Look at This Set of Numbers." [In Chinese.] <https://www.chinanews.com/gn/2020/04-29/9171709.shtml>.
- Lee, H. O. 2020. "Compared with the Failure of Western Countries, China and South Korea Have Created an Anti-epidemic Model That Works." [In Chinese.] *Shanghai Xinmin Evening News*, July 7.
- Wei, L., ed. 2020. *Waiting for Dawn: 21 Diaries from 16 COVID-19 Frontlines*. [In Chinese.] Beijing: Contemporary World Press.
- Williams, O. 2020. "How the Rich Are Protecting Themselves against Coronavirus." *Forbes*, March 11. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/oliverwilliams1/2020/03/11/how-the-rich-are-protecting-themselves-against-coronavirus/?ss=wealth-management&sh=43d5d5b54a00>.