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The Virus & The "Truth"

David R. Kotok

Thu Feb 27, 2020

Without a vaccine, the best medicine for an epidemic is the truth. Lies and cover-ups make matters worse; we all know it. We recently saw it in Wilmington, North Carolina, where a fake news report of coronavirus cases triggered disruption in the regional medical system. It is hard to catch a perpetrator of an internet falsehood; but if it is possible, good citizens want it done, and they want the punishments to be hard.

At Cumberland,
as we watch the global battle against COVID-19 unfold,
we offer a tribute to a young doctor in Wuhan, to other early
whistleblowers, to those who dare to exercise and to advocate for
free speech and to those who try to hold their governments accountable,
and, especially, to the thousands of nurses and doctors who continue to risk –
and sometimes lose – their lives to care for the ill. They and others like them are the
heroes upon whom the world now depends.

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The US has not been testing much for coronavirus so people are getting concerned that there could be many undetected cases in the US. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-health-usa-testing/tired-of-delays-us-labs-ask-fda-to-develop-their-own-coronavirus-tests-idUSKCN20I2G8> "As of Monday, only five U.S. states - California, Illinois, Nebraska, Nevada and Tennessee - have the capability to test for the virus, according to the Association of Public Health Laboratories (APHL)." Hat tip to Brent Donnelly.

Before we pay tribute to some folks who took life-threatening risks to report the truth, let's just add a recommendation with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic. The current explosion in South Korea is an example of a government fully engaged and reporting as much information as possible. South Korea has a virus cluster (Feb. 25 count over 977 confirmed cases). It promptly revealed details. It is testing thousands of people. It has activated all of its resources, and it is operating intensely at its highest medical capacity. Here are some links to tell the story.

On February 22, Scott Gottlieb, former commissioner of the FDA, recognized South Korea's efforts in this tweet: "Very detailed #covid19 reporting from South Korean health officials. They have tested, or are awaiting results on, almost 20,000 individuals; demonstrating a significant diagnostic capability. They appear to have a current testing capacity of more than 3,000 cases a day." (<https://twitter.com/ScottGottliebMD/status/1231078493322018816?s=20>)

"South Korea raises disease alert level to 'highest' as coronavirus cases surge," <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/east-asia/article/3051952/grave-coronavirus-situation-south-korean-city-daegu-mayor>

"South Korea screens thousands of religious sect members for coronavirus," <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/22/south-korea-tests-coronavirus-thousands-religious-sect-members>

Compare South Korea with the evolution of the outbreak in China. In October and November suspicions of a novel virus were quashed in Wuhan City and Hubei Province. A public health disaster began to unfold. Deaths were misattributed and wrongly recorded. We will never know the truth about the initial outbreak of the disease. Cremated bodies cannot reveal this history.

The Chinese government persisted in a cover-up. It suppressed well-meaning citizens. It is still doing so. The result so far is tens of thousands of confirmed cases (and a suspected threefold more that are unconfirmed). The official lethality rate is about 3%, and we still do not know what the true lethality rate is, though we know it varies by age and somewhat by gender. We may learn more about the deadliness of COVID-19 by watching outbreaks and the onset of community transmission in other countries like Singapore, South Korea, Italy, Canada – or, possibly at some point, the United States.

Sadly because it is an observation about the failed governance in America, the Trump administration is now in defensive mode. President Trump is finally awakening to the need for an emergency appropriation (\$2.5 billion) even as the effect of his three years of various health agency budget cuts have put the US on a poor response footing to this war against this virus. President Trump eliminated senior positions and hundreds of vacancies exist in our nation's health agencies. It seems the White House put the US-China Trade War negotiations ahead of the virus outbreak. Navarro, and company own that one. Kudlow's tepid defense is tragic. America's health agencies' professionals had the information in December.

The key dates fell between the middle of December and the middle of January. Notice how much information about the spread of COVID-19 was absent during that crucial period of trade war negotiations. We've written about that issue, outlining the chronology, here: "A Wuhan Coverup and the Trade Deal?" <https://www.cumber.com/cumberland-advisors-market-commentary-a-wuhan-coverup-and-the-trade-deal/>. Also notice how quickly the coronavirus news flow ratcheted up after the trade deal was signed. Readers can draw their own conclusions about who is responsible for what and when. Sadly, the Trump administration is still defending Xi and his regime and is silent on many of the issues concerning China's response to the virus.

Dear readers, were it not for courageous whistleblowers, we would never know what is really happening in China about COVID-19. That is true throughout much of the world – we need truth tellers everywhere. There follows a tribute to some of the known Chinese whistleblowers. One is now dead. Others are missing. Another suspected several hundred are either missing or secretly held without contact. The government of China is now trying to rewrite history to co-opt the doctor they suppressed by turning him into their hero. He is already a hero in the eyes of the millions of Chinese citizens who have taken the risk of expressing their views, including overt criticism of the Xi regime.

We offer the chronology below as a tribute to a courageous 34-year-old physician whose story must be told and respected. And we add what we know about others who are risking their lives to reveal the true situation in China. Thank you for taking the time to read the following chronology and to think about how truth is the critical element that protects all of us, whether from a virus or from a government.

We dedicate this tribute to Dr. Li.

On December 30, 2019, Dr. Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist at Wuhan Central Hospital, posted a fateful WeChat message to former medical school classmates: "There were 7 confirmed cases of SARS at Huanan Seafood Market." Dr. Li had seen on a patient's chart a lab result with a high confidence level for the SARS coronavirus that had originated in China and killed 774 people worldwide two decades earlier. (Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Li_Wenliang)

"Quarantined in the emergency department," Dr. Li wrote. "Everybody please be careful." An hour later he added, "The latest news is, it has been confirmed that they are coronavirus infections, but the exact virus is to be subtyped." He asked his friends to "remind your family members and loved ones to be on the alert."

Late that night, hospital authorities summoned Dr. Li and demanded to know his source of information. They asked him whether he had "realized his mistake."

Three days later, on January 3, 2020, the police detained Dr. Li and accused him of "rumormongering." They forced him to sign a statement that read in part, "We hope that you will calm down and reflect well, and we solemnly warn you: If you are stubborn and maintain your own view, and show no remorse, and continue to conduct illegal activities, you will be punished according to the law." ("The Coronavirus Whistleblower Died a Martyr for Free Speech in China," Daily Beast, Feb. 7, 2020, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/coronavirus-whistleblower-dr-li-wenliang-died-a-powerful-martyr-for-free-speech-in-china>)

"I never dealt with the police before," Dr. Li told Caixin, a Beijing-based media outlet. "I was worried that I could not leave without signing the statement, so I just went through the process and signed." ("How an ordinary doctor's death from coronavirus poses the greatest internal threat to Chinese authorities in years," *The Telegraph*, Feb. 8, 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/02/08/ordinary-doctors-death-coronavirus-poses-greatest-internal-threat/>)

As Li was being reprimanded and as China geared up for new year's festivities, the Chinese government quietly announced, on December 31, that it was investigating a novel coronavirus outbreak. Of course, we now know that the first patient to be later diagnosed with COVID-19 was treated at Wuhan Central Hospital on December 1, 2019, so there had in effect been a cover-up underway for a month when Dr. Li got the word out to his colleagues.

After his detention, Dr. Li returned to work. One of his patients was a woman with glaucoma who also turned out to have the new coronavirus. On January 8, Dr. Li fell ill with the virus, and the following day he was admitted to his own hospital, where he posted online, “I am curious why they haven’t announced that there is human-to-human transmission, and that medical staff have been infected.” On January 12, Dr. Li was admitted to intensive care. He was tested for the virus several times but did not test positive until January 30.

As Dr. Li’s condition worsened, he gave an early February interview to Caixin, whose reporters elected to remain in Wuhan when the city was quarantined. He told them, “A healthy society should not have just one voice.”

That simple statement was posted and reposted on WeChat and Weibo (China’s version of Twitter) millions of times. (“The Coronavirus Whistleblower Died a Martyr for Free Speech in China,” Daily Beast, Feb. 7, 2020, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/coronavirus-whistleblower-dr-li-wenliang-died-a-powerful-martyr-for-free-speech-in-china>)

Dr. Li’s condition was critical by February 5, and on February 6 state media reported that he had died.

However, Wuhan Central Hospital quickly released a statement that contradicted the reports of his death: “In the process of fighting the coronavirus, the eye doctor from our hospital, Li Wenliang, was unfortunately infected. He is now in critical condition and we are doing our best to rescue him.”

According to *China Newsweek*, Li’s heartbeat had actually stopped at 21:30 on Feb. 6, and extraordinary measures were used in the effort to keep him alive. That effort failed, and the hospital announced that Dr. Li had died at 2:58 AM on February 7. During the confusion over his status, at 1:49 AM more than 17 million people were watching a live stream for updates. (Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Li_Wenliang)

According to a person who was in the room and later spoke to a local reporter, one of the doctors trying to keep Li alive ordered the others, “Buy time for the organization [China’s leadership] to respond.” Government authorities then issued censorship instructions to media outlets:

“Regarding the death of Doctor Li Wenliang of Wuhan Central Hospital, rigidly adhere to standard sources,” they warned. “It is strictly forbidden for reports to use contributions from self-media, and sites may not use pop-up alerts, comment, or sensationalize. Safely control the temperature of interactive sections, do not set up special topic sections, gradually withdraw the topic from Hot Search lists, and strictly manage harmful information.” (“The Coronavirus Whistleblower Died a Martyr for Free Speech in China,” Daily Beast, Feb. 7, 2020, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/coronavirus-whistleblower-dr-li-wenliang-died-a-powerful-martyr-for-free-speech-in-china>)

Dr. Li left behind a pregnant wife and a 5-year-old son. His parents, too, contracted the virus. Dr. Li’s death set off an immense wave of mourning and anger against the authorities, which swept through Wuhan, across China, and around the world. According to Wikipedia:

“Wuhan citizens placed flowers and blew whistles at Wuhan Central Hospital, where Li worked and died, as a tribute to him. On the Internet, people spontaneously launched the activity themed ‘I blew a whistle for Wuhan tonight,’ where everyone kept all the lights off in their homes for five minutes, and later blew whistles and waved glitter outside of their windows for five minutes to mourn Dr. Li. Many people left messages in response to Li’s last post on Weibo.” (Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Li_Wenliang)

When Dr. Li’s death had been confirmed, people began repeating a literary verse to express their gratitude for his actions: “He who holds the firewood for the masses is the one who freezes to death in wind and snow.” (“Chinese doctor who tried to raise alarm on coronavirus in Wuhan dies on ‘front line’ of medical fight,” *Washington Post*, Feb. 6, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/chinese-doctor-who-tried-to-raise-alarm-on-coronavirus-in-wuhan-dies-from-disease/2020/02/06/8bf305a2-48f9-11ea-8a1f-de1597be6cbc_story.html)

“We want freedom of speech” quickly trended on Weibo in the early hours of Friday, February 7. By dawn, that hashtag had been eliminated by China’s censors, but another had taken its place: “We demand freedom of speech!” That one racked up 3 million views before the censors killed it.

Dr. Li’s death was the most-read topic on Weibo overnight on February 7, with more than 1.5 billion views, and was also widely discussed in private WeChat groups. Dr. Li was even mourned in blog posts from state media outlets, some of which issued veiled attacks on the Wuhan authorities who had harassed him.

Says *The Guardian*,

“The strong public reaction appeared to have drawn the top leadership’s attention. The central commission for discipline inspection, the Communist party’s powerful internal anti-corruption body, and the national supervisory commission, the country’s highest anti-corruption agency, issued a one-sentence statement on their joint website that investigators will be sent to Wuhan to carry out ‘a comprehensive investigation into the problems reported by the public concerning Doctor Li Wenliang.’”

(“‘Hero who told the truth’: Chinese rage over coronavirus death of whistleblower doctor,” *The Guardian*, Feb. 7, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/feb/07/coronavirus-chinese-rage-death-whistleblower-doctor-li-wenliang>)

Meanwhile, vigils of mourning and solidarity with Dr. Li sprang up around the world, in New York City, Boston, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Toronto, Melbourne, and Berlin. (“Grief and Wariness at a Vigil for Li Wenliang, the Doctor Who Tried to Warn China About the Coronavirus,” *New Yorker*, Feb. 11, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/grief-and-wariness-at-a-vigil-for-li-wenliang-the-doctor-who-tried-to-warn-china-about-the-coronavirus>)

But Dr. Li had not been alone in courageously attempting to get the word out about coronavirus. In fact, it appears he was not even the first person to be punished for doing so. On January 1, two days before Dr. Li was detained, the Wuhan police announced that it had summoned eight people who had recently “published and shared rumors online” about the new virus. The internet is not a land beyond the law. Any unlawful acts of fabricating, spreading rumors and disturbing the social order will be punished by police according to the law, with zero tolerance,” said the police statement on Weibo.

The police statement was broadcast across the country on CCTV, China’s state broadcaster, making it clear how the government would treat such “rumormongers.” Public anger swelled, though, and on January 28 China’s Supreme People’s Court took the unusual step of criticizing the Wuhan police for punishing the “rumormongers”:

“It might have been a fortunate thing for containing the new coronavirus, if the public had listened to this ‘rumor’ at the time, and adopted measures such as wearing masks, strict disinfection and avoiding going to the wildlife market.” (“This Chinese doctor tried to save lives, but was silenced: Now, he has coronavirus,” Fox6Now, Feb. 4, 2020, <https://fox6now.com/2020/02/04/this-chinese-doctor-tried-to-save-lives-but-was-silenced-now-he-has-coronavirus/>)

Outrage over the government’s handling of the virus continued to spread, and other courageous people stepped forward.

On January 24, Chen Qiushi, a lawyer and citizen journalist, slipped into Wuhan City just after a citywide quarantine took effect. He spent several days interviewing people about the coronavirus outbreak and filming what he saw. He knew the risks he was confronting:

“I’m afraid. In front of me is disease, behind me is China’s legal and administrative power,” he said. “But as long as I’m alive, I’ll speak what I’ve seen and what I’ve heard. I’m not afraid of dying. Why should I be afraid of you, Communist Party?” By early February, Chen had 430,000 YouTube subscribers and 246,000 Twitter followers. (Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chen_Qiushi)

On February 6, after several of his reports had circulated globally, Chen stopped responding to calls and messages. Chen’s friends said authorities told his family that he had been forcibly “quarantined” at an undisclosed location. He has not been heard from since. (“He ducked Chinese authorities to report on coronavirus in Wuhan. Then he disappeared.” *Washington Post*, Feb. 9, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/02/09/chen-qiushi-coronavirus-wuhan/>)

Fang Bin, a citizen journalist, was arrested on February 10 after videos he took of dead bodies piling up at a Wuhan crematorium went viral. He had previously posted several enormously popular videos revealing the drama that was playing out on the ground in Wuhan. According to [Vice.com](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/939qyz/china-arrested-a-whistleblower-who-shot-viral-video-of-coronavirus-corpse-in-wuhan), “Just days before he was taken into custody, Fang posted a video saying that the only reason authorities have not broken down his door is the fact that his videos had attracted too much attention. “‘If they don’t come to me, they’ll turn to you,’ he warned.”

In the end, firefighters did break down Fang’s door when he refused to leave his apartment as directed by police. (“China Arrested a Whistleblower Who Shot Viral Video of Coronavirus Corpses in Wuhan,” *Vice*, Feb. 10, 2020, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/939qyz/china-arrested-a-whistleblower-who-shot-viral-video-of-coronavirus-corpse-in-wuhan)

On February XX, civil rights activist and attorney Xu Zhiyong published a statement accusing President Xi Jinping of trying to cover up the coronavirus crisis. “Whenever you face a looming crisis, you’re clueless,” Xu wrote. “I don’t think you’re an evil man, you’re just not wise.... Mr. Xi Jinping, please step down.” (“Chinese activist detained after calling Xi Jinping ‘clueless’ on coronavirus crisis,” *The Guardian*, Feb. 17, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/17/chinese-activist-arrested-xi-jinping-clueless-coronavirus-xu-zhiyong>)

Xu was thereupon arrested. It wasn’t the first time. He had already spent four years in prison, from 2014 to 2018, for “gathering crowds to disrupt public order” in the course of building his New Citizens’ Movement. In 2013 he had been included among *Foreign Policy’s* “Top 100 Global Thinkers.” (Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xu_Zhiyong) Xu’s girlfriend, Li Qiaochu, a social activist, has also gone missing.

Those are a few whistleblowers we know about, but there are many more we don’t. We do know that in late January, at least 254 people were punished by the authorities for “spreading rumors” about the virus outbreak, according to cases investigated by Chinese Human Rights Defenders, a network of rights groups. Some people were detained for up to two weeks, while others “received fines, verbal warnings, forced ‘education,’ and forced confessions,” the organization said. In Shandong Province, authorities announced on January 27 that they had investigated and punished 123 individuals for “malicious rumors,” an indication of the scale of suppression even outside of Hubei Province.

Even as the wave of suppression rolled across China, desperately chasing the virus, the World Health Organization was gearing up to declare a global health emergency, which it did on January 30. “Authorities should recognize that censorship only fuels public distrust, and instead encourage civil society engagement and media reporting on this public health crisis,” said Yaqiu Wang, a

researcher for Human Rights Watch.

(“How an ordinary doctor’s death from coronavirus poses the greatest internal threat to Chinese authorities in years,” *The Telegraph*, Feb. 8, 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/02/08/ordinary-doctors-death-coronavirus-poses-greatest-internal-threat/>)

Had Dr. Li Wenliang and other well-meaning whistleblowers been heeded early on rather than having their voices quashed by Chinese authorities, the course of the COVID-19 epidemic might have been different. Actions taken very early to expose the novel virus and contain spread might have stemmed the firestorm of infections that has swept outward from Wuhan across Hubei Province and beyond, sparking cases and clusters around the world. The Chinese public’s outrage at the Communist Party’s suppression of the whistleblowers and of those who have called out Xi Jinping’s early mistakes have thrown the Communist Party and Xi Jinping on the defensive. Xi Jinping is now hardening suppression to regain control of both the narrative and an epidemic of outraged calls for freedom of speech. Party heads rolled in Wuhan and in Hubei Province, as if the early silencing of whistleblowers had been their doing rather than Beijing’s; and Xi now must stake his leadership on winning a fight against a virulent and highly transmissible virus. (“Everything Riding On China Leader Xi Jinping To Get Coronavirus Contained,” *Forbes*, Feb. 14, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kenrapoza/2020/02/14/everything-riding-on-china-leader-xi-jinping-to-get-coronavirus-contained/-bde00c523c20>)

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