

B. Proceedings

Conference-Roundtable—Coronavirus and International Affairs: Interventions

Interventions are short essays and other writings prepared by Conference-Roundtable participants and contributors in the lead up to the event. They form an integral part of the Conference-RoundTable proceedings and were written with two principal objectives. The first was to develop a contemporaneous record of various aspects of the pandemic at a time when COVID-19's scope and effects were only becoming known. They were, in this sense, meant to bear witness to the events as they unfolded. The second was to supplement the oral presentations and discussions during the Roundtable event. The interventions were to provide foundational materials and background to inform the final discussions held during the course of the April 2020 videoconference portion of the Conference Roundtable events.

Let There be Light

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As a first-generation Chinese immigrant living in the United States, often times I found myself in an identity crisis. Especially in times like the outbreak of a pandemic, and a lot of people directed their rage and sentiment towards you because of your Chinese identity. COVID-19, the ongoing pandemic caught the world by surprise, and China was its first victim. At the time of the outbreak in China, many people were preparing to celebrate the Lunar New Year with their loved ones; however, this infectious disease broke people's daily routine and created a "new normal".

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The only thing I heard in the early stage of the outbreak in China was the little information I could get from my family there; of the quarantine and the measures the government is taking trying to contain it. However, the mix of lies and exaggeration made it hard to retrieve truthful information about how infectious this disease is. I tried to ask my parents in early January, when they just returned back to China from the US, what their plan was for Lunar New Year. They told me about their travel plans visiting our family across the nation without knowing anything about the pandemic happening in Wuhan, China. It wasn't long after they reached their first destination, in Hainan province that they started to hear about person-to-person transmission of COVID-19 though Wuhan had a city-wide lockdown there are still risks of people travelling before the lockdown. My parents informed me immediately about the outbreak and asked me to be prepared since there are a lot of travelers coming to the US each year.

To be honest, I wasn't so much afraid of the epidemic itself, but was in fear about the anti-Chinese sentiment that might emerge from this epidemic. The first gesture from the international community in response to the COVID-19 outbreak in China was to close their borders to Chinese citizens and foreign citizens who had been to China in the past 14 days. This seemingly reasonable gesture made me even more scared about what will happen and what the effects might be on Chinese people overseas. It was a dark and helpless time in life that I wish I can do something for my family in China to bring them hope and calm their fear.

It wasn't long until COVID-19 made its way to the United States and had been spreading ever since, but a big portion of the population were treating it like a flu. At that time, I started to prepare for a potential outbreak here like it did in China and was wearing a face mask if I knew I was going to be in close contact with someone. There were a lot of times I walked on the street and people would walk pass by me, stare at me, cough a little and started laughing. I ignored it. One day at work, my boss asked me to remove my face mask when I am talking to people and I explained to her why I was wearing one. She laughed at me and said, "Only Chinese people will get it though, and it's just a bad flu, it's not a big deal". I did not argue with her and just simply did what she asked me to. When I heard that comment, I

had mixed feelings inside me that were too hard for me to express.

I wasn't angry, I was disappointed.

I was disappointed at my inability to educate them on how serious this epidemic is, and also how infectious it can be. I was disappointed about the sentiment towards an innocent community that is going through as much of a hard time as anyone else who are trying to contain the outbreak. I was disappointed by the international response as different nations all closed its borders with China, and it seemed like they were rather singling China out than help them to fight the virus. I was proud that China had strict rules for travel and had put in their best efforts to contain the global spread of the Coronavirus.

I was scared.

I was scared that this virus will spread quicker than anyone would know, and we would have a similar "new normal" life here like China did. I was scared that this will affect my graduation and employment if everything shuts down. "Will I still graduate?" "What about my job interviews?" "Can I still find a job?". I was drowned in uncertainty and couldn't find the light to light up my hope. I was scared that the anti-Chinese sentiment would affect my life, and I was worried about my safety when going out.

As the spread of the virus become more serious in late February early March, we cancelled my church trip for Spring break and decided to stay put. Also, schools have moved to online classes and non-essential business were closed down. People started to get a sense of urgency since the pandemic had paralyzed the economy, yet the only thing this pandemic did not paralyze are the Xenophobic comments and anti-Chinese sentiments in the society. Many referred to this virus as the "Chinese virus". I really don't like that term, since an epidemic does not have the idea of national borders, nor have a way to stop itself from travelling around the world. Hate crimes towards the Asian community in the US started to rise during this time, and the Chinese community are targeted in many ways. The Coronavirus became an invisible enemy for the world, yet

instead of working together to combat the disease, nations are diverging themselves from each other.

When school was moved online, we had immense support from the school community. Faculty and staff were trying their best to accommodate and arrange housing for international students who are stuck on campus. Professors are constantly check on their students to make sure everyone is doing fine. Students have adjusted to their new routine and started to enjoy their “virtual” life. Thanks to technological advancement, we were able to function without meeting in person.

I felt safe and relieved.

I felt safe that officials are doing their best to protect the staff and students. I felt relieved that these measures can effectively contain the spread of COVID-19 in our community. At the same time, I was also impressed by how quickly the schools across the nation responded to the crisis. I respect the frontline doctors who are so selflessly caring for those in need. The words of kindness and support from the school community made me no longer afraid to stand up to those who have misunderstandings towards Chinese people and had made it a goal to educate them on COVID-19. This outbreak reflects the uttermost humanity and the caring nature of mankind. Though there are still anti-Chinese sentiment going on, and might last for a while, I still believe there is light in the darkest of times

I see this outbreak as a lesson, a lesson for the international community to be prepared for such times, and also a moral lesson for those who were focusing on blaming China for it instead of taking effective measures to protect themselves. It is also a lesson for the Chinese community in the United States that they should not be afraid of such sentiment, but instead should educate people on the difference in culture as well as regimes that led to different types of response in the nation. Ultimately, this outbreak is a lesson for everyone to let there be light in the darkest times.

