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A Personal Reflection on COVID-19

I spent my 2019 Christmas break at home with my family in Beijing, China, as I usually do. Unbeknownst to me, just a few hundred miles south in Wuhan, a “mysterious pneumonia” as it was known at the time began spreading to the first of what would eventually become millions of people.¹ When I departed Beijing on January 10th to return to Los Angeles, I was completely unaware of the chaos and panic that would soon engulf my home, as well as the entire planet. I had no idea that I was about to become a witness to an unprecedented event in human history.

The sheer magnitude of COVID-19’s impact on the world separates the pandemic from the likes of the 2002-2004 SARS outbreak and the 2009 swine flu (H1N1) pandemic - the other two significant epidemics that I have experienced in my lifetime. No other pandemic in recent history has caused so much global alarm or induced such extreme restrictive measures to prevent further contagion. In the six months since COVID-19 originated in Wuhan, 229 countries from every region of the world have already reported confirmed cases, compared to a total of around 214 countries for swine flu and a mere 29 countries for SARS.² In terms of its death toll,

¹ Branswell, Helen. “Cause of Mysterious Pneumonia Cases Still Unknown, Chinese Officials Say.” STAT, January 5, 2020.

<https://www.statnews.com/2020/01/05/cause-of-mysterious-pneumonia-cases-still-unknown-chinese-say/>.

² World Health Organization. “Summary table of SARS cases by country, 1 November 2002 - 7 August 2003.” WHO, 15 August 2003. https://www.who.int/csr/sars/country/2003_08_15/en/; European CDC. “ECDC Daily Update – Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 – 19 January 2010.” ECDC, 19 January 2010.

http://ecdc.europa.eu/en/healthtopics/Documents/100119_Influenza_AH1N1_Situation_Report_0900hrs.pdf

COVID-19 has far surpassed SARS and H1N1, with over 25,000 more deaths than swine flu's total and 307,391 more deaths than that of SARS so far, with numbers likely to increase in the coming months.³ To put it into perspective, for swine flu in 2009, there were around 12,000 deaths in a year, but for COVID-19, there were over 10,000 deaths in a single day.⁴ Thus, COVID-19 has undoubtedly become the most widespread and consequential epidemic that I have ever witnessed.

COVID-19 has also been the first epidemic to have caused significant troubles for myself personally and it has afflicted many of my friends and family. As the virus rapidly spread around China, my parents felt an immense change in Beijing's society and way of life. Strict lockdown protocols were implemented by the Chinese government to control contagion, and soon enough, the perpetually bustling streets of Beijing were virtually empty. My parents' company had been working on a project for years before coronavirus took hold over society, a series of large-scale theatre performances that were supposed to premier across China, but they had to postpone their show openings indefinitely and are currently awaiting a safer and more appropriate date. The COVID-19 pandemic has left my parents without a source of income and put them into unexpected financial hardship, a situation that tens of millions of people around the world now find themselves in. Until the COVID-19 pandemic, I had never missed a payment for rent or tuition. That is no longer the case. As a response to this situation faced by so many people around the world, many governments have taken to providing

³ Smith, Philip, and Shavon Anderson. "Differences in Disease: How COVID-19 Compares to SARS and H1N1." Miami University, April 21, 2020.

<https://www.miamioh.edu/news/top-stories/2020/04/how-covid-19-compares-to-sars-and-h1n1.html>.

⁴ European CDC. "Daily and Total Confirmed COVID-19 Deaths." Our World in Data. Accessed May 17, 2020. <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/total-daily-covid-deaths>.

important relief funds for those affected financially by the pandemic, a process that no other pandemic in recent history has brought about. This notion exhibits the severity of the economic impact that COVID-19 has already had on millions of people around the globe.

Additionally, COVID-19's ability to halt professional sports demonstrates the severity of the pandemic as well as its financial implications. The pandemic has caused the most significant disruption to the worldwide sporting calendar since World War II.⁵ Some sports have begun restarting their seasons already, but the stoppage has caused significant damage economically to many parties. For broadcasted sports, there were economic losses from the absence of viewership, sponsorships, and advertisements, among many other factors when they were forced on hold. However, it can be argued that some sports, with certain preventative policies in place, can become more lucrative in the COVID-19 era. Take mixed martial arts as an example. The Ultimate Fighting Championship was the first televised sport to return after all sports were paused. UFC 249, which aired on May 9th, 2020, "did very well" in financial terms and exceeded expectations, according to UFC President Dana White.⁶ The event hit 1.592 million viewers and amassed over 700,000 pay-per-view buys, surprisingly high numbers for a card with no proven PPV draws, meaning that there were no superstar fighters in the event who would usually assure high viewership. As the first major sport to return during

⁵ BBC. "Coronavirus: How the Virus Has Impacted Sporting Events around the World." BBC Sport. BBC, May 15, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/sport/51605235>.

⁶ Tabuena, Anton. "Report: UFC 249's Early Estimates Have It Drawing over 700,000 Pay-per-View Buys." Bloody Elbow. SBNation, May 12, 2020. <https://www.bloodyelbow.com/2020/5/12/21255602/report-ufc-249s-early-estimates-have-it-drawing-over-70000-pay-per-view-buys>.

the pandemic, UFC has proven that sports can continue during the pandemic, and be financially lucrative if done so, with the proper enforcement of strict safety guidelines and contagion prevention. Thus, a temporary shift in the guidelines for all major sports is essential for their return, but when implemented correctly, it can provide some impetus for economic recovery from the virus. This is just one of a myriad of different ways that society must adapt in order to prevent further spread of COVID-19.

COVID-19 has managed to halt much more than just professional sports. International travel, one of the initial main factors in the transmission of disease worldwide, has now been immensely restricted to reduce further spread of infection. On March 26th, China announced a new travel policy that suspended all entry to the country by foreigners and halted all international passenger flights in an attempt to prevent further influx of the virus into the country.⁷ With the new policy in place, I am currently still not allowed to return to my home and my family. My situation is one that thousands of international students can relate to, separated from my family and without the ability to travel at least for the foreseeable future. It is an uncomfortable and uneasy position to be in, but a necessary measure to slow the spread of COVID-19. Without immunity from the virus or a viable vaccine, populations that have not been exposed to the novel coronavirus are extremely susceptible and vulnerable. This notion has been repeated throughout history, such as when the Europeans brought smallpox and other diseases to the New World. The native population of the Americas was decimated by the arrival of germs and disease that they had never come into contact with, and

⁷ Bradsher, Keith. "To Slow Virus, China Bars Entry by Almost All Foreigners." The New York Times. The New York Times, March 26, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/26/world/asia/china-virus-travel-ban.html>.

smallpox ultimately wiped out up to 95% of the native inhabitants.⁸ The transmission of smallpox was much like the transmission of COVID-19 too in the sense that it spreads through person-to-person contact and saliva droplets. COVID-19 is projected to possibly infect 70% of the entire world population.⁹ Although modern medical technology has provided us with much better protection from diseases compared to the 17th century, we are still at risk of novel diseases that could impact populations all over the world. Until a vaccine is created, populations that have not been exposed to COVID-19 will likely be significantly affected by its introduction.

The COVID-19 pandemic has become a source of controversy as well, bringing along numerous instances of conflicts. There have been various cases of prejudice against Asian people around the entire globe. Never in my life have I heard of or experienced such harsh Sinophobia until the COVID-19 era. A Filipino man in Cagliari, Italy was assaulted by a group of men who mistakenly thought he was Chinese while they accused him of “bringing the virus” to Italy. Some Asians in Italy have also reported receiving anonymous messages from racists wishing death and sexual violence upon the Chinese.¹⁰ The President of the United States himself refuses to call the virus by its name, and instead refers to it as “the Chinese virus,” further propagating an atmosphere of hate and racism and leading to even more conflicts, despite objections from

⁸ PBS. “The Story Of... Smallpox – and Other Deadly Eurasian Germs.” PBS. Public Broadcasting Service. Accessed May 18, 2020. <https://www.pbs.org/gunsgermsteel/variables/smallpox.html>.

⁹ Axelrod, Jim. “Coronavirus May Infect up to 70% of World’s Population, Expert Warns.” CBS News. CBS Interactive, March 2, 2020. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/coronavirus-infection-outbreak-worldwide-virus-expert-warning-today-2020-03-02/>.

¹⁰ Liu, Yuebai. “Coronavirus Prompts 'Hysterical, Shameful' Sinophobia in Italy.” Al Jazeera. Al Jazeera, February 18, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/02/coronavirus-prompts-hysterical-shameful-sinophobia-italy-200218071444233.html>.

countless people worldwide.¹¹ Researchers at the Network Contagion Research Institute, who track misinformation and hate across social media channels, have revealed a surge in anti-Chinese sentiments online. They say that this Asian conspiracy originated in smaller internet subcultures such as 4chan, but has seeped into mainstream social media platforms such as Instagram, Reddit, and Twitter.¹² Due to the significant and potentially violence-inducing anti-Chinese sentiment that COVID-19 has brought along, my parents fear for my safety and worry that I might become a victim of a Sinophobic attack. Thankfully, I haven't been insulted or injured as of yet, but the increase of Sinophobic tendencies around the world because of the COVID-19 pandemic gives me feelings of discomfort and uncertainty for the future.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on societies worldwide, not only as a deadly disease that is killing people, but also for causing innumerable stoppages to many different aspects of society and breeding anti-Chinese sentiments. COVID-19 has proven to be an unprecedented event in human history, and the ways that society must adapt to fend off the spread of disease will be an interesting process. We are living through an important historical event, and its effect on the future of our societies is yet to be seen.

¹¹ Bloomberg News. "Trump's 'Chinese Virus' Tweet Adds Fuel to Fire With Beijing." Bloomberg. Bloomberg, March 17, 2020. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-17/trump-s-chinese-virus-tweet-adds-fuel-to-fire-with-beijing>

¹² Asmelash, Leah. "With the Spread of Coronavirus Came a Surge in Anti-Asian Racism Online, New Research Says." CNN. Cable News Network, April 10, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/10/us/sinophobic-racism-rise-coronavirus-research-trnd/index.html>.