DAWN
TALKS ON
COVID-19

A Chinese feminist's reflections on the surveillance state during the pandemic
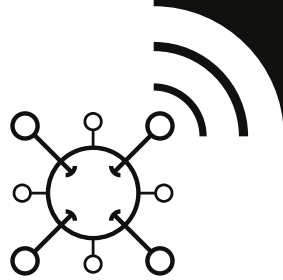
CAI YIPING

On January 20, 2020 83-year-old Dr Zhong Nanshan solemnly announced on CCTV—on behalf of the National Commission of Health—that the new coronavirus pneumonia (discovered in Wuhan) is transmittable amongst people. After a month had passed, Cai Yiping took a train from Beijing to Tianjin to visit her parents for Chinese New Year—the Spring Festival.

She noticed the few passengers travelling on public transport wearing masks and the lack of vehicles and pedestrians in the two cities. The exception, were the patrons queued up to buy festival food at the popular bakeries in preparation for the Spring Festival. Two days before the Chinese New Year, Wuhan was locked down. Movement of people was stopped and confinement measures were soon nationally imposed and it was as if the virus pressed a magic button putting into hibernation 1.4 billion people.

Soon after, doctors and nurses across the country were deployed to Wuhan and Hubei provinces as the health workers were on the verge of collapse—a result of the flooding in of patients seeking diagnosis and treatment. By mid-April, it was reported that a total of 42, 600 medical personnel supported Hubei, two-thirds of which were women.

100 days have passed since the lockdown of Wuhan and a glimpse of hope emerges. Children are now playing in parks, major cities now witness traffic jams, people are dining out at their favourite restaurants and it seems that life has returned to normal. However, certain measures have been implemented; everyone must wear masks once they leave their homes and are required to present the code on their mobile apps to signify, they are not from high-risk areas. The new cases of COVID-19 are mainly from Chinese returning from overseas travels.

> **"This pandemic has accelerated the construction of the digitization and data infrastructure in society and escalated citizen surveillance to unprecedented levels."**

COVID-19 is not a great equalizer, it is a great amplifier. Revealing and intensifying the many struggles we have long undergone—inequality, patriarchy, violence and discrimination, crisis of care, deficit of democracy and governance, ecological unsustainability and more. In addition to the climbing curve of COVID-19 cases, it is disheartening to see gender stereotyping of women in the media. In the public domain, the contribution of women health workers is complimented but their needs are far from recognized. Even worse, their merits are based on the perception of de-feminising. In the case of private sphere, gender division of labour and women as the principal caregivers are left intact, ideologically and practically. Furthermore, the epidemic exacerbates the harsh lives of people who are already living in poverty and are vulnerable—migrant workers, those in rural areas, gig workers, those with disabilities and HIV, amongst others.

In the days of quarantine, lockdown and social-distancing, the reliance on the internet—to access news and information, stay in touch with family and friends, for education, work and entertainment and purchase groceries—has never been more prevalent. Robin Li, the CEO

of Baidu, the largest Chinese search engine company, once stated "Chinese people are willing to give up privacy for convenience". In the context of the pandemic, this is no longer a hypocritical choice, but a forced obligation. Every resident and visitor who enters or exits the community needs to verify the Health Code on their phones. This pandemic has accelerated the construction of the digitization and data infrastructure in society and escalated citizen surveillance to new levels but it also gives no indication or information on how long this could persist post-crisis.

Yiping experienced this new efficient system on her journey from Europe to Beijing in March. She received calls from the authorities and verification on travel plans, she was also directed on where to go, whom to meet, the duration of her stay, etc. Despite the length of her journey back home—took more than a month and a half—there were unforgettable moments where people performed their duties diligently in a respectable and humane manner. Kindness, sympathy and solidarity can mitigate the fear and mistrust in the times of social distancing, whilst denial, arrogance, discrimination and scapegoating are as deadly as the virus. This is a good reminder for the world to reflect on who are at the bottom of the power structure (in the respective contexts) and the need to hold people (those in supreme positions) accountable.

This is a short version of Cai Yiping's original text written in May 26, 2020.

CAI YIPING

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She co-leads **DAWN's Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR)** activities.*
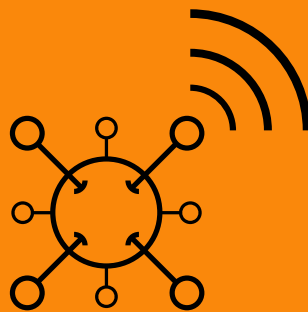
*She participated in creating several vibrant women's NGOs in China after the **4th World Conference on Women, held in Beijing** (1995).*

Yiping has deep experience working with government, international agencies and non-profit organizations.

Her areas of focus include media and communications, gender-based violence, SRHR and gender mainstreaming.

Her current work focuses on the sustainable development agenda, the ICPD and Beijing review processes.

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A SERIES OF FOUR CONVERSATIONS WITH DAWN FEMINISTS ABOUT THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.

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available via **Zoom** | *spaces are limited*
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4:00 pm Beijing | 1:30 pm New Delhi | Suva 8:00 pm | UTC 08:00

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