On January 20, 2020, in the news of China Central Television, 83-years-old Dr. Zhong Nanshan, who became a national hero for his courage to speak the truth during the SARS in 2003, solemnly announced on behalf of the high-level medical expert group of National Commission on Health that the new coronavirus pneumonia discovered in Wuhan can be spread among people. It has been more than a month after the official announcement of the first confirmed case found in Wuhan, Hubei province in central China. The next morning, I took a train from Beijing to Tianjin, my hometown to visit my parents for Chinese New Year — the Spring Festival.

There were only few passengers on the public transportation and almost everyone wore a mask on trains and buses. In Beijing and Tianjin, the two major vibrant metropolitan
cities in China, I hardly saw any vehicles and pedestrians except in front of the popular bakery shops where patrons queued up to buy the festival food for Spring Festival, indeed an unusual one in our lifetime. Two days later prior to the Chinese New Year eve, Wuhan was locked-down. The measure of blockage and confinement was soon imposed in the entire country to slow down the spread of the virus, as if the virus pressed a magic pause button to force a country with a population of 1.4 billion to hibernate.

However, some people are called upon to fight this war on virus, the vicious and cunning enemy which people still knew little about. Doctors and nurses from all across the country were deployed to Wuhan and Hubei provinces to support the health system that was on the verge of collapse by flooded patients desperately seeking diagnoses and treatment. By mid-April, it is reported that a total of 42,600 medical personnel supported Hubei, and women accounted for two-third of them.

One hundred days have passed since the lockdown of Wuhan, the glimpse of hope emerges after the darkest time. Spring has arrived. Hilarious children play in the parks as schools remain close. Major cities witness the traffic jam again. People tired of eating homecooked food can finally dine out in their favorite restaurants. It seems that life has returned to normal, except that everyone has to wear a mask whenever they go out of their homes and is required to present the code generated in their cellphone apps indicating that they are not from the high-risk area or have met the quarantine requirements. In China, new confirmed COVID-19 cases are mostly from Chinese who return from overseas, while the pandemic is violently rampaging around the world and threatening to humanity with no signs of wane.

April 4th is a China’s national day of mourning dedicating to more than 4,000 lives taken by COVID19, many of whom could have avoided death, if appropriate response measures, as simple as the openness and transparency about the epidemic or allowing doctors and media, to tell the truth, were taken by the authority in the early stages of the outbreak.

COVID-19 crisis is not a great equalizer, it is a great amplifier, which reveals and intensifies many crises we have long undergone — inequality, patriarchy, violence and discrimination, the crisis of care, the deficit of democracy and governance, ecological unsustainability and more. In addition to the climbing curve of COVID-19 cases, what disheartens me is the gender stereotyping portrayal of women in media – “nine-month pregnancy nurse keeps working on her post”, “a nurse returns to work in hospital ten days after the miscarriage”, “women doctors and nurses shaved their heads before going to support Wuhan”, “the local government says, in order for men to return to work with peace of mind, women should stay at home to take care of their children” , etc. etc. In the public domain, the contribution of women health workers at the center of the battle against the epidemic is complimented, but their needs are far from recognized. Even
worse, their merits are based on the perception of de-feminization. In the case of the private sphere, gender division of labor and women as the principal caregivers are left intact, ideologically, and practically.

China targets to eliminate extreme poverty by 2020. It is not yet possible to assess how the epidemic will affect the achievement of this goal. Undoubtedly, the epidemic exacerbates the harsh lives of people who were already in poverty and vulnerability – people living in remote rural areas, migrant workers, gig workers, people with disabilities, people affected by HIV, among others. For example, as the education has to move to online, not every student has the privilege to participate. According to the news reports, a girl in Sichuan province mountain area sat on the edge of cliff, where is the only place she could access to internet. Another girl from a poor family in Henan province committed suicide because she has no money to buy a mobile phone to take part online class. Even with the fairly good infrastructure and facility, online learning face other challenges too. Medical college students found the PPTs cannot display properly in online lecture, because they may contain some images of naked human bodies, which are detected automatically by the program of artificial intelligence as the illegal content of pornography.

In the days of quarantine, lockdown and social-distancing, people have never relied on the Internet as much as they are today — access to news and information, staying in touch with family and friends, purchasing the groceries, for purpose of education, work, entertainment. The outstanding ugly truth is, as 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 epidemic, this is no longer a hypocritical choice, but a forced obligation. At the gate of subdivision where I reside in the southern suburb of Beijing, the facial recognition system has been activated, although it can be easily flummoxed by the face masks.

Every resident and visitor who enters or exits the community needs to verify the Health Code on the mobile phone. It is a system that was first introduced in Hangzhou – a project by the local government with the help of Ant Financial, a sister company of the e-commerce giant Alibaba and now rolling out nationwide with the collaboration of other telecom companies and the Internet service providers. People sign up through its mobile phones and are assigned a color code – green (symptom-free or no contagion), yellow (had contact with an infected person or had not finished quarantine) or red (infected or had symptoms and waiting for a diagnosis) – that indicates their health status and determines whether they are allowed to enter malls, subway, board on airplane and train, or check-in a hotel. How the color being assigned is yet made public. The information and personal data gathered via app software are shared with the police.

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Pandemic accelerates the construction of the digitalization and data infrastructure in the society and escalates citizen surveillance to the new level. China is not the only country in the world that uses contact-tracking technology to fight the COVID-19 spread. But no indication or information on how long this could persist after the epidemic subsides.

Along my journey from Europe to Beijing at the end of March, I was able to experience the impressive efficiency of the new system. I received the phone calls from the police officer at the city where I was in quarantine (because no international flights are allowed to land in Beijing) and from the community workers at my residential subdivision to inquire my travel plan – whereabouts in the last two weeks and where to be in Beijing, means of transportation, itinerary, contact person, etc. On the train to Beijing, it took no time for conductor to identify me in the cabin full of passengers to double-check my ID and certificate of COVID-19 testing. In Beijing, just outside gate of the compound where I live, once again I was asked to register my ID, address, contact number, itinerary and show the security guard the code I was assigned, although they have all this information in advance.

This is the longest journey back home and it took more than half a month, including 14 days quarantine in a hotel in the city outside Beijing. There were some unforgettable moments as well – when cabin crew of Air China greeted the passengers, majority of them are young Chinese students studying in Europe, with “welcome home” during boarding; when a young man handed me a red carnation upon checking out the hotel, a gift to every guest who has ended the quarantine and saying “wish you a safe trip”; when I received an SMS from the community worker whom I have in contact with for more than a month since my tickets were changed several times “Your pass (without it, I am not able to enter and exit my compound) is ready for pick up at the gate. I am so glad to know you are finally back home safely”; when the train conductor whispered to me “I knew you just return from abroad, so I need to check your ID and certificate of testing. But I don’t want other passengers to feel that you were treated differently”. All these people diligently perform their duties. But the way they do it with understanding, respect, and humanity could make a difference. Kindness, sympathy, and solidarity can mitigate the fear and mistrust in times of social distancing as we see in many places in China and the world. While denial, arrogance, discrimination, and scapegoating are as deadly as the virus. In China, discrimination and blaming maybe fall on the people of Wuhan and Hubei, now foreigners and Chinese returning from overseas. Outside China, the scapegoats could be Chinese or East Asian looking people, people of certain ethnicity or religion, a certain sexual orientation and gender identity, migrants, etc. This list has always functioned as a good reminder for us to reflect who is at the bottom of the power structure in the respective context and the need to hold the people at the supremacy accountable.

Tags: DAWNTalks, covid19, news