

A Timeline

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The very start. A beginning.

A Chinese writer Jie Tao wrote in the book “The Girl Who Killed Quail,” “when you were standing at the cross-road of life, and there was a fierce undercurrent, it was only a dull and boring day recorded in your diary. At that time, you thought it was an ordinary day of your life.”

In December 2019, I was staying in China and enjoying the short three weeks of our winter vacation. One day I was regularly browsing the news from a Chinese social media Weibo, and I saw there was a hot topic named “there are 8 cases of pneumonia with unknown causes discovered in Wuhan.” A blogger warned, “Southern China Seafood Market has reported several cases of viral pneumonia. Please be careful; the SARS outbreak started just after the spring festival in 2003.” At that time, we were sending screenshots of news to our group chat just to tell one of our friends whose home was at Wuhan. We even made fun of the story and said: “Wuhan was so dangerous, we just went back to school as soon as possible.”

Not one of us was aware that day was going to be a turning point for everyone’s lives.

A broken semester.

There was a quote we used to tease ourselves, “if fighting COVID-19 is like a war, then China fights the first half, the rest of the world gets the second half, while international students and their families run the whole match.”

Only a few days after we started our spring semester, there was news popping up saying that the US was checking people who went to Wuhan or went to China specifically at US customs. Some Wuhan students were not able to return to school on time or reported symptoms after they arrived at school. My parents sent me messages saying that “you are so lucky that Vanderbilt starts the semester early, so you and your friends are not affected by the disease dynamic.”

COVID-19 made its outbreak more quickly than everyone could imagine, that no one was able to take enough precautionary measures. On January 20, Chinese academician Nanshan Zhong, who was the leader of National Health Commission expertise team, appeared on the media after several days of public anxiety. He previously contributed significantly during the national emergency SARS in 2003. He answered public’s confusion about this novel virus and then confirmed the disease could be spread through humans. As every day’s cases started to climb up, Wuhan's novel coronavirus infection prevention and control headquarters finally issued the announcement on January 23, 2020 to close Wuhan’s border. The public announcement read, “since 10 am on January 23, public transportations like buses, subways, ferries are suspended.

Wuhan’s citizens are not allowed to leave the city without special reasons. The airport and railway stations are temporarily closed.” It was only one day ahead of the New Year’s Eve. I and all of my Chinese friends called back home every day worriedly when we found out older people were more vulnerable to the virus. At that time, the connection brought by internet was so

helpless and weak, when you heard about thousands of articles saying the situation was pessimistic and you could only do nothing. On phone calls, we urged parents to stay at home and wear masks if they must go out. “We have brought some masks. There are very few foods left in the supermarket as everyone crazily pouring in and ‘robbing’ everything.” My family told me.

On the day of Chinese New Year, we were gathering around in VUCSSA’s (Chinese Scholars & Students Association) celebration. It was the first time I spent this annual big family night abroad and away from home. A mixture of proudness of adultery and independence, worries, missing, and loneliness arose from my heart. Across thousands of miles I felt I was closely connected with all my friends, family, and my homeland.

It was definitely a much rougher time for people who were still in China that were forced to stay at home watching thousands of bad news and feeling alone in a desperate world. A simple number increase in death toll meant a collapse of a family. Knowing many doctors had to wear protective suits the whole day without any rest and many hospitals were lacking essential epidemic prevention materials, people posted moods on social media and asked “when will we get better,” a question that nobody knew the answer. The indifferent and cold sentences in black and standard font were distorting and struggling, that I could felt those miserable and intense cries so loud to be unheard. Confronting the anger from the nature, we were tiny and helpless that we could only try sending back masks, helping to contact between different hospitals, and donating money to the epicenter Wuhan, in order to help our motherland that was suffering.

A month.

During the AIDS crisis, an art collective ACT UP initiated the women in AIDS day. One of the pieces read, “AIDS is caused by a virus and a virus has no morals.”

In February, US started to report local cases of COVID-19. There was anxiety among Chinese students that the pandemic may break in the US sometime. My parents began to send messages and urged me to buy some masks and disinfectants. One upperclassman who only wore a mask to cover acne on her face wrote that she felt people looked at her differently, “am I experiencing racism for the first time in my life?”

Near the end of February, my parents talked with me on FaceTime, “China is getting better now. Even though the first few weeks were tough, the government has now successfully controlled the disease. The growth rate of confirmed cases has slowed down, and hospitals are treated with enough goods. However, the US’s situation is pretty alarming. Keep yourself safe. Try to avoid crowded places.” When the demand for masks skyrocketed, and it was challenging to find deliveries of sterilizers on Amazon, my parents even sent me a pack of masks from China. It’s sarcastic that the flow has reverted in such a short time. However, we hardly wore a mask, being afraid of uneasy sights and curious questions. My friend told me she heard someone pointing at her and shouting “coronavirus” when she was wearing a mask on a scooter. Another Chinese friend who was studying at SVA told me she heard bad words like “fxxk Chinese” when she didn’t even wear a mask. One day when my friend and I were waiting for an Uber car, he whispered to me, “do you think he will refuse to ride us because we are Asians and wearing masks?” The Uber driver did take us, but the first word he said was, “just curious, are you

wearing a mask because you are sick?”

It's a cultural difference that was deeply rooted, differentiating the eastern world and the western world. While in China, the authorities and National Health Commission required everyone to wear masks, US's CDC explicitly stated on its website, "CDC does not currently recommend the use of facemasks among the general public." The lack of understanding of wearing masks, which was a way to protect both oneself and others, hindered the recovery of public health. Moreover, the stereotype extended to racism, xenophobia, and possible ethnocentrism, since people connected Asians, who wore masks to protect the spread of the virus among the community, with sickness.

It took courage to wear masks in western society when you might be perceived as a carrier of the virus. Unnecessary biases targeting Asian Americans increased and were prevalent, putting us in a dilemma. US President Trump wrote on his Twitter, "the United States will be powerfully supporting those industries that are particularly affected by the Chinese Virus. We will be stronger than ever!" A Chinese vlogger who studied in California posted, "when I was on the street, someone said to me, 'could you please take off your mask? You make me feel very scared; you make me feel you are very sick.'" Seeing the news made me feel sad, angry, as well as incomprehensible.

Wearing mask is not a fault. If a virus was claimed to have no morals during the AIDS crisis, now, the virus should not be associated with a particular country or race neither.

A week.

"COVID-19, you have truly ruined many people's lives."

I never thought my freshman year would end so hastily. I remembered when I came back from the Alternate Spring Break from Mississippi, I went to my Text & Image class at the Studio Art Center with tiredness. I never imagined this was the last class of my freshman year. I didn't have a chance to make a formal farewell or take pictures to keep the memory. I may never see my friends, who were seniors, again.

The week was just a mess. The whole campus was confused and chaotic when several articles from the Hustler reported consecutively that a Vanderbilt student was tested positive in Spain while other fellow students returned back to the campus, and several other students tested positive after the St. Patrick Day. The public's reaction was a combination of anger at Vanderbilt's lack of prevention and slowness of response, as well as fear while reported cases continued to climb up. The abundance of emails sent by chancellor didn't stabilize our emotions but made people more and more depressed and anxious. Only two days after Monday's email announcing the canceling of a week's class, the email on Wednesday read, "a VUMC health care worker has tested positive. All undergraduate should make plans to move out by March 15."

Memes were all around joking how the coronavirus destroyed all plans and made the semester gone. People were moving their belongings in the hallway, while one of my roommates came back and forth between school and home three times merely because of the sudden change of everyday situation. I was so stressed facing the unpredictable and seemingly uncontrollable

dynamic. Should I go back to China? It will be so lonely and anxious staying on campus with few people. But there were a lot of problems: the activeness of visa status, time difference that results in staying up late to attend online classes, the danger of infection during long-distance travel, as well as the unstableness to access US internet in China. But if I stay at school, I may get infected.

I made several calls to my parents every day and even cried out sometimes because I was so helpless, feeling I get no control over myself. I was lost and worried all day, being unable to focus on any coursework. After the report of confirmed cases at VUMC and Student Health Center, I became very anxious since I had been to the health center on Monday to look over my symptoms of diarrhea, sniffing, and coughing, which probably resulted from the traveling of ASB.

The virus was a challenge for everyone. That week was a test of me mentally and physically. The virus is telling us how unpredictable life is, that even you are unprepared and unwilling, you need to say goodbye. It teaches us a lesson of uncertainty and destruction, but it also tells us to cherish the chance to be alive breathing the fresh air. It is also an important lesson for us to think logically, calmly, and independently under chaotic situation.

A day.

“I wasn’t prepared for anything.”

On that Monday, March 18, I set my alarm at 8:40 to get ready for my 9:10 class. When I opened my phone, I saw several unanswered calls and my mom’s audios quickly saying that she booked a flight at 2:50 pm for me. The ticket to China was difficult to book, and last night we didn’t settle with a resolution. Because of the time difference, my parents decided to book the ticket when I was asleep, and that flight was the last one arrived at Hongkong that was allowed to enter Shenzhen, my home that was a city in China’s mainland. I was shocked and hastily packed my belongings in a rush in three hours. To be honest, I wasn’t prepared for anything. I couldn’t believe I was going to have a thirty-five-hour journey with three separate flights. I didn’t know what I packed in my two luggage. I wasn’t prepared to say goodbye to the campus and the Commons.

There wasn’t enough time, so I DIY my prevention materials. I soaked cotton pads in isopropyl alcohol, took my goggles from Orgo lab, brought twenty masks, pulled two big luggage cases, took several bags, and rushed to the airport with an Uber car. At check-in point, I was even notified that my baggage outweighed eight pounds, so I then crazily took stuff out in my carry-on bags in a hurry-scurry mood. I finally sat down at the departure gate, and all those things that happened in the last 6 hours just sounded incredible to me.

There were also sweet people that constituted my memory of the day. The Uber driver said to me when I arrived at airport, “goodbye sweetie, hope everything will be well with you, have a safe flight back home.” At security check point, my luggage was required to go through a second examination. After confirmation, the staff member helped me pack my things and closed my full suitcase. He said, “that’s group work! I am sorry for bothering you and I hope you arrive home

safely.” Listening the song “Grandpa (tell me ‘bout the good old days)” from my country music class, I was truly grateful for all the people I met and all the experience during my freshman year, even though it ended in a way we didn’t ever expect.

I was alone in my first two flights when I arrived at Los Angeles, walking from gate to gate with heavy rain, asking staff the correct way to go, and taking a massive mess of several bags with me. I then arrived in San Francisco when I met two other friends. Nevertheless, the final sixteen-hour flight to Hong Kong in front of us was the riskiest and the dreariest. I took my cotton pads with alcohol to wipe my seat and buttons every half hour. The goggles and mask were so tight that I could hardly breathe, and I didn’t even dare to eat anything on the plane. The sixteen hours were suffering.

More than thirty hours later, we landed in Hong Kong, and after a thirty-minute drive, we finally arrived at Shenzhen Bay. After a lot of waiting and careful checking for another six hours, I was brought to the hospital. Complicated processes, including CT, COVID-19 Nucleic Acid Detection, and blood test, were conducted. Two days later, I was able to stay in a quarantined hotel for another twelve days.

I was so tired, but I was finally home. I didn’t know how valuable that ticket was until a week later when Hongkong, Taiwan prevented flight transfers, and China cut international flights for each country to once a week only. Several of my friends were still stuck in the US. The price of a single ticket increased from 500 dollars to as much as 7,000 dollars.

A minute.

Fang Fang, a Wuhan writer, said, “every little dust of the era has become a mountain when it falls on everyone’s head.”

On Qingming Day, a traditional festival to hold a memorial for people that passed away, China started a national silent mourn for three minutes to appreciate those who fought for the pandemic. On April 7, people voluntarily changed their profile photos to black-and-white. At 10 o’clock, I stood with my mom in front of the television, when the world was silenced down for three minutes. Cars and trains stopped to whistle. The television screens switched to different places around the country, broadcasting scenes of people standing and lowering their heads.

It was just a single three minutes and 180 seconds. “But many people don’t even have the chance of this three-minute forever.” I said to myself. Thinking of Dr. Wenliang Li who sacrificed his life to be the whistler, other medical workers whose names were unfamiliar but whose contributions were indelible, and even my aunt who was still working all day for the pandemic, I was deeply touched with tears almost coming out.

A year.

My history teacher in my high school wrote a paragraph to his students when China was experiencing the peak of the pandemic, “when you are quarantined, I hope you can record some moments you observe, write about some valuable news you see, and write about your thoughts.

You are witnessing history, and what you write will become the materials of the historiography. Several years later, when you look back, the grandiose mainstream narration may be very different from every individual's personal experience. You need to try for yourself to keep those valuable memories, or you can never recover this historical event from textbooks completely."

Several decades later, when we are both old and reflecting on our lives, or if we go even further to several centuries later, try to imagine someone is reading the book about the history event in 2020. What do those concisely summarized lines of cold facts read? They may be too emotionless to include all struggles, efforts, and cries. They may record love, as well as hatred. They may not authentically report those ugly aspects.

In the vast universe, the year may seem very tiny. Every individual's own experience is small as compared to the history. We don't know what the year will be like in the future. The pandemic may be a test for human beings, or a catalyzer of the ongoing political situation. The virus may unite people together, or it may be used as a weapon to attack others. COVID-19 may bring a permanent "winter of despair," but it may also at last still turn out to be a "spring of hope."

"It was the age of wisdom. It was the age of foolishness. It was the epoch of belief. It was the epoch of incredulity. We had everything before us. We had nothing before us" (Dickens).