COVID-19 and its impact on the world, as well as my Family

By Xiaolei Wang

On January 23rd, 2020 the world began to carefully watch the Chinese government impose “draconian” lockdown measures on the city of Wuhan (as well as two nearby cities) in order to slow the Coronavirus’ transmission to other parts of China. Global leadership spanning from the U.S to Europe cautiously observed China’s handling of the crisis in order to guide them on their policy and public health decisions, and how to beat the ferocious novel virus within their own borders.

Only a handful of events in the past century have emphasized the absolute necessity for strong global, regional and local leadership as much as plainly as the spread of the novel coronavirus. The virus has not spared anyone from the rich and the famous, to the poor, the strong and the weak. It has penetrated all societal barriers—cultural, ideological, state, families as well as the individual.

Previously, during the Ebola outbreak, the United States would be on the world’s center stage, using its distinctive superpower status to leverage its convening power, as well as its unparalleled military, economic and political strength in order to provide leadership and guidance for the rest of the world. Previously, the United States had as a general rule, viewed navigating global challenges and issues with China as a positive-sum game, but due to the unprecedented actions and policy changes by the Trump administration, this is no longer the current precedent. The Trump administration has even referred to the virus as the “Chinese Virus,” and have been firm on their position regarding their phrasing and wording of the pandemic. This has evidently led to further internal societal pressures and racial conflicts.

According to Ryan Hass from the Brookings Institute, as of late, many American policymakers view coordination with China on COVID-19 response as a self-harming exercise in a zero sum competition for global leadership. Such efforts in their view, confer legitimacy on a Chinese leadership that is unworthy of it. Furthermore, according to Hass, top Chinese officials have matched their US counterparts in their myopia, spreading fringe conspiracy theories about the virus originating outside of China and arguing that Beijing’s response to the virus outbreak demonstrates the superiority of the governance system. It is also important to note that Beijing is also attempting to rewrite the narrative regarding their initial botched response and cover-up that penetrated several levels of party leadership.

What I draw from these actions from both the U.S and China, has greatly changed how I understand US-China relations moving forward, and I believe that the current actions we are
currently witnessing may just be the beginning of what’s to come, as well as a glimpse of COVID-19’s possible legacy on foreign relations and diplomacy. It has altered my understanding of the status quo, and it honestly frightens me to see the dangerous path we may well already be on.

Personally, when I think about the potential long term impact of COVID-19, I also think of my family as well. My parents immigrated to the United States in the late 90s from China. My grandfather was in the People’s Liberation Army and grew up in the years of Mao and Deng Xiaoping and witnessed the rise of China. He opened to me recently about his years during Mao and Deng, and he told me how he “voluntarily” joined the military while he was on the brink of dying from starvation and joined in order to survive through the Mao years.

Following the conversation between me and grandfather, what really struck me was that, regardless of all the pain, suffering and death he personally witnessed and endured, he still regards Mao as a god-like savior. I also have a vivid memory of the 2008 Beijing Olympics when I think about China’s global rise. On the days leading up to the Olympics, excitement and chatter filled my house. And on the first day, I remember waking up to earsplitting noises coming from the downstairs TV that day, and when I came downstairs that day, I remember seeing my grandpa bursting with pride and happiness, while watching the opening ceremony.

Recently, I’ve already had plenty of emotional and heated debates with both my parents regarding the CCP’s response to COVID-19, and the credibility of the countless Wechat articles they’ve shown me.

And thus, these very memories have forced me to pause and grapple with the generational differences within my immigrant family, and how they may perceive China’s rise to the global stage, as well as the current pandemic we are all facing. In addition, I think about the potential impact COVID-19 may have not only on US-China foreign relations, but within immigrant families such as mine in which there are fundamental generational differences.

I grapple with the question, if US-China relations continue to sour, will it potentially drive a wedge in between Chinese immigrant communities, families and friends on a personal level?

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