

0. Pre-read for context.

1. Close read the text for understanding.

2. Perform one of the five analytical reading tasks.

3. Write a one-page reflection, connecting this article to your own experiences, reading, or observations.

Coronavirus Lockdown is a 'Living Hell'

by anonymous resident of Wuhan, China, NPR.org, March 3, 2020

Editor's note: The author of this essay asked for anonymity for fear of reprisals by authorities for speaking critically of the Chinese government.

As residents of Wuhan, China, my family and I are living in hell.

The city has been locked down for more than a month. Every night before falling asleep I have been confronted by an unreal feeling and many questions:

I know that coronavirus is the reason for the lockdown — but did life in Wuhan have to become a living hell?

Why were we notified about the city lockdown at 2 a.m. on the second to last morning before the Lunar New Year?

Why have I not been given any instructions from a government officer about how to cope when an entire city is on lockdown?

I'm nearly 30 years old. My family members and I have devoted ourselves to our jobs to build a better life — and we have largely succeeded. There's only a little more to do before we reach the level of middle class.

But along the way, things did not go exactly as I'd hoped. I have been working hard in school since I was small. My dream was to become a journalist, and I passed the test to enter the best school for journalism in China.

After school, I learned that government supervision of the media meant that telling the truth was not an option. So I gave up my dream and turned to another career.

I kept telling myself that my hard work would reward me in my personal life. And to protect myself, I decided to shut up, to be silent about politics — even when I saw people treated unfairly by the government. I thought that if I followed that path, I would be secure, I would be one of the fortunate ones.

Now I realize that this is an illusion. A secure life is not an option with a political system that does not give us freedom to speak out and that does not communicate with us truthfully.

At the moment when the city was first locked down, I hoped with all my heart that China's political system, known for concentrating resources to get big jobs done, could save the Wuhanese. But infected patients were treated in the hospital in Wuhan as early as the beginning of December, and for unknown reasons, the government held off informing the public and taking effective action.

So they missed the best window of prevention due to this cover-up.

That knowledge has made me fall into desperation. The order to lock down the city appeared from nowhere on Jan. 23 at 2 a.m., without any sign or explanation to residents — even though everyone knew what was up.

People rushed to shop at 24-hour convenience stores at 3 a.m. to gather necessary food and other items. We tried every method to escape from Wuhan, but the cage was already locked. On new year's eve, Jan. 24, I watched the glorious performances from a gala aired on CCTV, Chinese television. But our celebratory meal was sparse, pieced together from the few ingredients I'd been able to buy in that last-minute shopping trip.

Then on the second day of the new year, another order arrived out of the blue, notifying us that the Wuhanese shall not drive. But this order only survived for less than six hours — perhaps because the authorities realized that, with public transportation shut down, cars would be needed to drive medical staffers to work and back home. So community officers called upon residents of Wuhan to provide rides for many of these workers — and to get permits to do this driving. Under the pressure of massive criticism, the government had to revoke this order for residents to provide rides.

Other orders were issued that reflected the chaos. Residents were asked to donate rice and oil to feed the medical staffers at Wuhan's top hospital since there was not enough food to guarantee meals for them. But we are the taxpayers. Shouldn't the government be able to provide?

From former schoolmates who now work in the medical profession, I learned that medical workers were not given medical supplies and were exposed to a risk of death. Many people wonder: Why didn't they go on strike? It is because they were informed that if they went on strike, their licenses to practice medicine would be revoked and their family members' jobs would be affected.

Before this coronavirus, I always thought it was OK to sacrifice some level of democracy and freedom for better living conditions. But now I have changed my attitude. Without democracy and freedom, the truth of the outbreak in Wuhan would never be known.

What has happened in Wuhan is as if your house caught on fire and all your neighbors knew but forbade you from jumping out of the window. Only until the fire is out of control, and the entire town ablaze, do they slowly begin taking responsibility while highlighting their own heroic efforts. Not everyone has the same privileges and rights. Because I knew how to get outside of the Great Firewall that blocks the Internet, I was able to obtain masks.

The younger generations, born after 1995 and in the 2000s, have good impressions about the Chinese system, putting the nation before all because they have been living in an era of prosperity and have yet to experience adversity.

The things that happened during this outbreak have greatly surprised those kids. For example, a young man scolded others on Weibo in the early days of the outbreak. He accused them of spreading rumors and argued that if we don't trust the government, there is nothing we can trust. Later, he said, when a member of his family was infected with the coronavirus but was unable to get treatment in the overcrowded hospital, he cursed and called for help.

When Li Wenliang, one of the doctors who first reported a mysterious SARS-like illness, died of the disease himself, a student commented on the Internet: "It was just the virus that killed him, so we should focus on the epidemics." But then the student's dormitory was appropriated for quarantine patients — and he was shocked and dismayed.

This is the lesson these young people are learning. When someone says we can accomplish something but we must pay a price, do not rush to applaud.

One day you may become the price that is paid.

There is a saying in Chinese that has taken on new meaning in this coronavirus era: "When the stick hits my own head, I finally understand the pain — and why some others once cried out of pain."

Perhaps it is true that only China can build a hospital in 10 days, only China can mobilize so many people to devote themselves to the anti-epidemic agenda, only China can lock down a city with millions of people at lightning speed.

But people are not thinking critically. They do not understand that if we had human rights, democracy and freedom, we would have learned about what happened in Wuhan one month earlier. And the first whistleblower would not have died for nothing.