

The Death of A Rumorer<sup>1</sup>  
——In Memory of Doctor Li Wenliang (1986-2020)

He signed “能” (I can) and “明白” (I understand),  
dipped in the red inkpad, and fingerprinted  
on the LETTER OF ADMONITION  
issued by the Wuhan Police Bureau.

He was a rumor, the very first one  
to scare people on December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2019:  
“There are seven SARS-like patients confirmed  
at the Wuhan Central Hospital. Be careful!”

In spite of his confession in front of the police,  
He told a journalist later in an interview:  
“A healthy society shouldn’t have one voice only!”  
What an unrepentant weasel!

Thank goodness he died! On February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2020,  
after infected by the virus during his work  
as an ophthalmologist. Now he had no chance  
to quibble or pretend his innocence.

He is a rumor, forever, on his tombstone,  
signed and fingerprinted by himself.

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• <sup>1</sup> Zhang, K. (In Press). The death of a rumor. *Lily Poetry Review*.

A Wuhan Family's Chinese New Year<sup>2</sup>  
——In Memory of Chang Kai (1964-2020) and His Family

I cook the New Year's Eve re-union dinner myself,  
very rare for me as a busy film director.  
Originally, I had the dinner all arranged  
in a luxury hotel, but it was cancelled,  
for the city was locked down. Everyone  
quarantined at home.

But my parents are happy  
to taste the dishes made by their son—  
braised Wuchang fish for “wealthy”,  
home-cured chicken for “lucky”, and  
lotus root pork rib soup (their favorite).  
We have Chinese wine,  
toast to the new year.

The next morning, my son calls  
from the UK to give us new year's greetings.  
My father asks me to teach him  
how to send an electronic red envelope  
to his grandson through Wechat.

Soon after, my father started to cough,  
and a fever, and difficult breathing.  
I don't believe. I don't believe.  
He also got it?

The first hospital is flooded by patients.  
So is the second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh...

My parents were doctors before retirement.  
I also know numerous doctor friends.  
I call, I call, I call, I call,  
I call Emergency. I call Police.

In the last hospital, I knee on the floor,  
begging and crying. Useless—  
too many people have done it.

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• <sup>2</sup> Zhang, K. (2020). A Wuhan family's Chinese new year. *The Roadrunner Review*, 4. Retrieved from <https://roadrunner.lasierra.edu/a-wuhan-familys-chinese-new-year/>

On the third day of the new year,  
my sister came to take care of our father.

On the tenth day of the new year,  
my father died in his own bed.

On the fifteenth day of the new year,  
my mother died in the same bed.

On the twenty-first day of the new year,

I didn't know  
my sister died in the same afternoon  
with me.

## Immunity

No, no. Not me. Not my family. Not here.

Those people are older.

Those people have preconditions.

Those people are alien.

Those people are unlucky.

Those people buy wild animals.

Those people eat bats!

Those people are Kung Pao chicken.

Those people are pepperoni pizzas.

Those people manufactured the virus!

No, no face mask. (Out of stock anyway!)

No test. Not covered. Not necessary.

And it's just like a cold! Why panic?

Let's cruise! Let's party. Let's marathon.

Let's school. Let's subway. Let's Corona beer!

Wash your hands. That's it!

No, no. Not me. Not my family. Not here.

Not today!

## After the Pandemic

I was in my last year of middle school,  
when SARS ran amuck in 2003.

I was supposed to concentrate  
on the high school entrance exam prep  
during the quarantine. But I was thrilled  
by *The Count of Monte Cristo*, reading  
under the covers in bed with a flashlight.

My home was sour enough  
to faint a roach. People believed  
vinegar can kill the virus.

The disaster ended soon, as expected.  
Scientists confirmed the culprit—  
guozili (the masked palm civets),  
who transferred the virus  
from bats to human.

All the guozili were killed  
for their sin to marry SARS.

Medical staff who died on duty  
were awarded the title  
of Revolutionary Martyrs.

Most people were satisfied  
with the government measures.  
Chinese economy still grew by 8%.

I didn't pay much attention  
to the abandoned temporary hospitals.

I went back to school, high school,  
college, went abroad for graduate school,  
got married, gave birth to children  
who are second-generation Chinese Americans.

Maybe SARS did the same  
at her last gasp, birthing an orphan,  
who is now a 17-year-old avenger,  
*COVID-19*.

### Quarantine<sup>3</sup>

I'm sure he has forgotten  
how he'd quarantined  
peacefully in my womb  
for nine months.

Now we're quarantined  
with chicken flying, dog jumping  
in a womb-like home,  
waiting for rebirth.

I try to teach him to play  
fan hua sheng (a string game),  
just like he toyed  
the umbilical cord.

But soon he asked, again,  
for swings and slides, the blue  
mushrooms that spray water,  
flamingos, guo bao rou (crispy  
sweet and sour pork slices)  
from the Chinese restaurant.

"Why can't we go out?"

"Virus, invisible,  
but everywhere."

I swallowed the second half:  
"and hatred,  
especially for you,  
an Asian face."

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• <sup>3</sup> Zhang, K. (In Press). Quarantine. *Mom Egg Review*.

## Parents Hooray!!!

All the struggles are over now.

It doesn't matter if you can't afford  
the housing in the best school district.  
It makes no difference whether you live  
in New York city or a vast cornfield.

You don't have to make choices  
among Tae Kwon Do, piano, violin,  
swimming, baseball, tennis, chess,  
or green for those more exquisite,  
such as horse-riding and skiing.

Thank the virus for eradicating  
bullying, inequity, peer pressure,  
and even English is no longer  
that important.

It becomes possible to raise  
a real Chinese man in the U.S.

My son doesn't need  
to risk talking with strangers.  
They all become shadows  
with vague smiles 6 feet away.

Now, everyone looks similar and unreal  
on Zoom, just like Grandparents  
across the Pacific Ocean.

## Health Code

*In China, people need to report their health and travel info for 14 consecutive days. Then they'll be graded and granted a Green or Yellow or Red QR code in their cellphones.*

“Beep” “Beep” “Beep” ...

The security guys at the entrance  
of your residential community,  
workplace, school, subway,  
shopping mall, scan your Green.  
Your ID number & photo  
jump out on his screen.

Don't be surprised  
or attempt to argue  
if your code suddenly  
turns Yellow or Red one day.  
After all, you bought Tylenol  
in the pharmacy across the street,  
saw the pediatrician for a shot,  
chatted with old Wang  
in the market, picked up  
a package, and brought home  
your favorite bubble tea.

Now you become a risk  
to others, but it doesn't  
need to bother anybody  
to force you to quarantine.

You'll be automatically  
locked wherever you are,  
waiting to be Greened  
again.



## If I Get Kicked Out Overnight<sup>4</sup>

I'll donate our king-size mattress,  
two cribs and a sofa to Goodwill,  
free belongings for pick-up,  
drop the key at leasing office,  
gift my car to a friend.

Regardless of social distancing,  
I have to give my advisor  
a bear hug for teaching me  
equity, inclusion, diversity  
in the university classroom.

I'll thank the department chair  
who offered me a faculty job  
(though I'm accused  
of being a thief, as an alien  
stands out in the open search,  
stealing a job from an American).

I'm not sure where we'll home  
next. "Go back to China!",  
as they yelled. No choice  
amid the pandemic.

My American-born sons  
might be interested  
in coming back someday  
to this strange country.

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• <sup>4</sup> Zhang, K. (2020). If I get kicked out overnight. *K'in*, 5. Retrieved from <https://kinliteraryjournal.com/poetry-zhang-issue-5>

## The Chinese Red

The Spring Festival is red.  
Bride and groom are wearing red.

China has a red regime.  
When two communists fall in love,  
they are red lovers.

The emperor's comments  
on the officials' reports  
are in red.  
The government-issued documents  
are called Red Header.

Even a red armband  
empowers ordinary people.  
They'll obtain the right  
to break into your home,  
overturn the table, rebuke you  
for playing Mahjong with your neighbor,  
violating the quarantine regulations.

But please be cautious!  
Red is not always good.  
You absolutely don't want  
a red health code in your cell phone,  
which means a complete stop,  
wait for 14 days to restart.

And you can't write one's name in red.  
That's for the decapitated prisoners only!

## A Story Shared by My Taiwanese Friend<sup>5</sup>

“If you don’t mind, could you please keep social distancing?”  
At the checkout, I politely turned to another customer.  
She took a few steps back, not offended by my words, I think.

But the cashier snapped, “You are so funny! You came from China!  
You are the one who brought the virus here!”

“Excuse me, what did you say?”  
“Nothing”, she said.

But when I asked again, she started yelling, inserted my credit card  
more than 3 times. “I need to talk to your manager!” “He’s not here!”  
I rushed to the door, ready to leave.

“She is Chinese and dares to ask people to stay away from her!”  
She roared. “What did you just say?” This time she repeated it  
louder and louder right to my face.

“Get out of the store”, she shouted, along with two other workers.  
“Get out of the store!!” Some customers also joined.

“Calm down! Calm down, everyone!” I heard a young man’s voice  
before I held back my tears and slammed the door behind.

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• <sup>5</sup> **Zhang, K.** (In Press). A story shared by my Taiwanese friend. *DoveTales: A Writing for Peace Literary Journal of the Arts*.

## A Killing in a Georgia Suburb

His death brought me back 10 years ago,  
when I was teaching Chinese in Lagos,

where a group of teen boys played football,  
two used tires on the ground as a goal.  
Their bare feet kicked up the dust, dribble,  
tackle, sprint, shoot. They shouted, laughed  
in Yoruba. One boy jogged to me, asked  
if I could take a picture with him.

He called me "Ayibo" (white person),  
though I'm categorized as "yellow"  
in the U.S.

I didn't know Ahmard Arbery,  
but I did see him 10 years ago  
in Nigeria.

## Face Mask Stories<sup>6</sup>

3 months ago, a man punched,  
kicked an Asian woman  
in the New York City subway,  
called her “diseased”,  
for wearing a mask.

Last week, a customer was asked  
to leave a Costco store after refused  
to wear a mask. He disputed,  
“I woke up in a free country!!”

Yesterday, I said hi to the black guy  
who’s sanitizing shopping carts in Walmart.  
“Thank you”, he said, “thank you  
for wearing the mask.” I smiled back,  
forgetting that he can’t see.

I really wanted to share with him  
my mom wore a face mask every day  
when I was in elementary school  
in Northeast China. She rode a high bicycle,  
with me sat on the rear rack.  
The heat exhaled from the mask  
frosted her glasses. In a sudden,  
we fell together on the rutted ice road,  
“Aiyou!!!” (like ouch in English).  
Mom took off her mask, checked  
if I was injured. “I’m fine,” in the long  
pink down coat, wool hat, scarf,  
sheepskin mittens, red snow boots.  
Mom put on her mask, again.  
We lift up the bicycle, kept going  
to and/or from school.

Nobody ever thanked her  
for wearing a mask.

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• <sup>6</sup> Zhang, K. (In Press). Face mask stories. *DoveTales: A Writing for Peace Literary Journal of the Arts*.

## Alternative Ways of Going back to China from the U.S.

*China's government launched its "Five One" policy in March in a bid to curb the COVID-19 crisis, limiting all domestic airlines to one international flight per week to each country, while foreign airlines can fly into China no more than once per week, which makes millions of Chinese citizens get stuck overseas.*

You can set up a grand goal—  
become the first person  
to swim across the Pacific Ocean.  
Don't forget to make a big fortune  
by live streaming your journey!

Or you can take a ship, like the first  
dispatch of 30 Chinese boys  
(the Chinese Educational Mission) did in 1872.  
Each of them had a long hair braid  
behind their gown and mandarin jacket.

Or you can fly to Alaska, wait for ice  
to be locked up on land and sea levels  
drop, then walk back to Asia  
across the legendary Bering Land Bridge.  
If you're lucky enough, you may make  
an archaeological discovery, the footprints  
of Native Americans 10,000 years ago.

Or you can dig, dig, and dig a tunnel  
through the center of the earth, then  
leap down to China in 40 mins,  
inspired by Jules Verne's words  
in his science fiction in 1864.

What? All these ideas are stupid?  
Okay, let me tell you the easiest way:  
The next time when people yelled  
"Go back to China!", you must rush up,  
beg them to spend one more minute,  
show you how.

## U.S. Taboos

For me, the word is  
xenophobia,  
not racism,  
though I'm black  
haired, brown eyed, as fair skinned  
as white people, I'm called yellow.

In the BLM protest, people asked me,  
*Why are you even here?*

I heard the same question  
in Owens-Thomas House in Savannah,  
where a black woman served  
as a guide to a group of tourists,  
all white except me  
and my non-English-speaking parents.

I did my best to whisper in Chinese  
the parts I could understand:  
*See the roll of mat under the bed?  
It's for the slave to sleep on the floor,  
so she can take care of her master's baby  
in the night.*

*Why are you guys here?*  
The guide asked me  
with a smile  
at the end of the tour.

*Well, we come to see the house.*

I didn't mention my interest  
in the history, a topic  
I may not be legitimated  
to touch,  
like a bleeding wound  
to be re-traumatized.

## When We're Waiting for Trump's New High-Skill Immigration Restrictions

Mom disagrees with us buying a house  
unless we TRULY settle down  
(be able to work, retire and die  
somewhere).

That seems to be an impossible goal  
when both of us are still holding student visas,  
though our sons are American-born.

We're even not qualified  
for a home loan, making "homeowner"  
a joke, but I do own a home  
in our rented apartment.

My husband has an obsession  
in buying a house, for that's the only way  
we can install a high suction range-hood,  
which can keep us from tearing up  
when he cooks Kung Pao chicken,  
chili fried cabbage, spicy hot pot.

I also dream of a house  
with a small yard where I can plant  
some tomatoes, cucumbers, green onions  
several bamboos and a cauliflower.  
I want the branches and leaves  
bind us to the land,  
their roots run  
as deep as the foundation.

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