



A Coronavirus Diary across China, India, and the United States

By Shaunak Sastry

December 16, 2019: University of Cincinnati Main Campus

It is the last day of my undergraduate seminar on Communication, Culture, and Globalization. After the last presentation is delivered, hands shook and anxieties about final grades mitigated, a few of the eager students linger as I collect materials. One of them asks – “So, after this entire semester that we debated what globalization is and is not, what does it mean for you, Dr. Sastry?” I ponder the question and allow myself to provide an answer that is authentic and yet more vulnerable than I would usually provide during the semester –which technically ended three minutes ago. I say something like, “I think the way globalization shapes my life is not that I am impervious to national boundaries, but that national boundaries are continually appearing and disappearing around me without much warning.” My students shrug, underwhelmed, in that quintessential Midwestern gesture of polite incomprehension. I meant this in a broad philosophical sense –chronicling my transitions from “nonimmigrant alien” to “legal permanent resident”, but in the next few months, this quote, carefully curated for a college senior audience, would turn out to be prophetic in the banalest of ways.

Through December, reports of a local pneumonia outbreak of unknown origin were eventually traced to the Huanan Seafood Market in Wuhan, Hubei Province, in China (武汉华南海鲜批发市场). What eventually became the global COVID-19 pandemic first started entering mainstream news discourse as the “Wuhan virus” in late December. A retrospective analysis in *The Lancet* revealed that the index case (first documented case) for COVID-19 was a 70-year old man with Alzheimer’s Disease, admitted on December 16.

January 2, 2020: Cincinnati, OH

4:00 AM on the second day of the new year – my spouse and I are locking up our house, checking faucets and windows, counting bags and covering furniture. This is the first day of our year-long sabbatical. Over a quick coffee before waking the kids for the flight, we are reassuring each other out of our anxiety about leaving home (and the US). This is so ironic – both of us, who first came to the US within a week of each other, began and graduated our doctoral degrees on the same day, two diasporic émigrés that truncated a life back home to begin one here. Now we realize that we’ve not been away from the US for as long as we plan to be in the decade since we first moved in. In a month, I will begin my semester-long fellowship at the Communication University of China, where I am scheduled to deliver four public talks around my scholarship, and potentially collect data for a new project. Before we get to China though, we are taking a quick detour to India, so that the kids can meet their grandparents, and so that Z can make arrangements for the fieldwork that she is going to do in India later in the Spring.

The plan sounds delightful: the kids and I will be in Beijing, at the University apartment, and they'll go to the local school and daycare, while Z is in India doing fieldwork in rural Gujarat. It is our small gesture to the intercultural mosaic that makes up our life –an homage to each other's place of origin.

On January 2, 2020, the Trump Administration received the first briefing of a novel coronavirus-based pneumonic infection that had suddenly flared up in Wuhan, China, and a coronavirus-based global epidemic was the most predictable public health threat across several models.

January 21, 2020: Mumbai, India

Less than 24 hours to our flight to Beijing, and the news coming in from China is chilling. Mainstream Indian newspapers are now carrying daily status reports on disease incidence (new cases per day). Across China, there are more than 200 estimated cases. There are 13 confirmed cases in Beijing, and reports of cases in Shanghai and Fujian province. Z recalls her time as a journalist in Guangzhou, reporting on the SARS epidemic in 2002. Masks, she says, we need masks. Even as we debate postponing our travel by a week or so ("until this thing settles down," a friend says), we rush to a pharmacy to buy surgical masks. "How many do we need?", I ask Z. "How many do they have?". Surely, this is an overreaction. The pharmacist certainly thinks so –mildly annoyed that we make him go to the back of the store and buy out each one of the 200 or so that he has in stock. Later that evening, we decide to take the flight.

In a publication accepted on January 21, 2020, in The Lancet, a group of researchers associated with China's National Health Commission discusses key clinical features of the SARS-COV-2 transmission, including the fact that there was a high probability of human-to-human transmission. No such mention is made to the public in China, nor the international community, even though speculation is rife. Is this neo-SARS? Is this just a "bad flu?"

January 31, 2020: Nanjing, China

We have been in China for over a week now, at my spouse's parents' home, and have not left the house. COVID-19 lockdowns coincided with the Chinese New Year Holiday, which was extended twice, for a week each. As the extended holiday winds down, the official lockdowns begin. Travel is restricted, temperature screenings are ubiquitous. The city of Wuhan has been sealed off. It is said that nearly 3,00,000 people fled the city between the announcement of the sealing and its enforcement, seven hours later. There is uncertainty everywhere. Our kids, 6, and 4 are enjoying this newfound freedom of unlimited TV and treats. I want to go down for a walk, but we can't afford to "waste" a mask. The 200 masks we bought are literally all we have, and there are no masks available in the market. The municipal government rations 20 masks per family, but that involves a long queue, which seems to defeat the purpose. Masks are an everyday debate. My parents in India want to ship us some masks, but UPS and FedEx

have stopped operations. It seems unthinkable that in three months, by April, we will be shipping masks to our friends in Europe and the United States.

On January 31st, the World Health Organization formally announces the PHEIC (Public Health Emergency of International Concern), meaning that there is now a formal, global, acknowledgment that the epidemic requires a coordinated response. All travel to and most travel from China has been restricted.

February 24, 2020, Nanjing, China.

We have now been in lockdown for a month. Our kids haven't stepped out of the house, except for one trip to a local park. Homeschool schedules have been set.

Perhaps coming to China was a bad move. Should we go back to India? We're not hearing about any cases from there at all (What naivete, in retrospect...). My spouse's visa to India has been canceled. I spend a week speaking to consulate officials in Shanghai and Beijing trying to get her a fresh one. Apparently, I will need a certification from her employer that her temperature has been screened for a week. "But her employer is in the United States," I complain. "Well, then ask them to provide it!" Things are getting bizarre. Groceries are available, not scarce, but clearly limited. The apartment complex that we live in is now a "cordon sanitaire", and entry/exit from one's own home now needs an Exit Pass and a mandatory temperature check. My fellowship will clearly not happen now, as all University campuses are shut, and I won't even get access to the apartment that I was supposed to receive. Here we are, six of us, two

kids, two grandparents, my spouse and I, in one apartment in downtown Nanjing. We can't go to India, don't know if we should expose our kids to a 16-hour flight back to the US, and don't know how long I will be able to legally stay in China.

COVID is now a global pandemic, and European countries like Italy and Spain are the new global hotspots. Even though the US has now banned all "foreigners" from Europe and China into the US, there is fear there is a widespread community spread in the US, undetected due to the lack of testing. In India, all incoming flights have been canceled, and citizens have a short window of time within which to return before the border closes to all.

March 25, 2020, Nanjing, China

What two months mean in a pandemic! Things have changed. There are "only" 78 new cases in China on this date, of which a majority are "imported" cases. COVID-19 is now a full-fledged pandemic: death tolls in Italy have crossed 6000, with the overall caseload of around 70,000. In the United States, there are more than 1500 deaths, with a caseload of nearly 100,000. Even as I think of how our beautifully planned sabbatical has unraveled, I am reminded of how everything has unraveled. In China now there is special scrutiny of anyone who is a "foreigner", now that the only cases are "imported". How quick public memory fades. I've been noticing that the usual stares I get when I am downstairs, or at the grocery store, have got longer, and more questioning. Yesterday, I got called out by the security guard of the apartment complex for not

wearing a mask on my solo run. Around me, five adults are playing basketball, none of them masked. I fetch the mask from my pocket and put it on.

On March 25, the Government of India imposed a nationwide lockdown, scheduled to end on April 14. After denying the possibility of community transmission, the Modi Government instituted the lockdown with four hours' notice. Police were given blanket powers to force and or/detain anyone found violating lockdown. The torment of the millions of Indian migrant workers was about to begin.

May 10, 2020, China

Project Corona Amnesia is well in place in Nanjing. Businesses are open, traffic snarls return to normal, and stores do more than just delivery. Masks, masks everywhere, of course, but no social distancing of any sort. Our kids go play downstairs with their friends, I resume my usual task of buying street food breakfasts for the family. We are not in lockdown, but there is no sharp end to the feeling of living the quarantine life: this just doesn't end all of a sudden. I go to the closest Starbucks every now and then for a coffee, where I meet other foreigners who have also been here through this four-month process. We read news from the US and India with familiar fatigue and think about how pandemics exacerbate all that is messed up in society – with the dramatic racial inequalities in COVID mortality in the US, and the brutalities inflicted on the most vulnerable sections of Indian society. We are increasingly fatigued by the bellicose Chinese rhetoric about the US and the “China bought the world time” discourse. The

schadenfreude is overblown. Even as news of the second wave of infections trickles in, we keep ignoring the uncertainty our future holds –return to the US now, wait for the summer to let the US epidemic peak? We no longer have “mask rashes” on our faces, as we did the first two months.

Two days ago, an animated video created by China’s official news agency, Xinhua went viral, rebutting the US allegations about the “China virus” and claiming an aggressive “we did our job, you didn’t” line that is now commonplace here. In India, in Ahmedabad, where I grew up, an overnight spike in infections has prompted an even stricter set of lockdowns for a week, where only pharmacies and dairies will be allowed to operate.

