



How on earth did I lose friendships over COVID-19?

By Jingsi Christina Wu

2020 feels like 2016 all over again. Having had to reconcile the fundamental divides between some dear friends and myself over the presidential electoral results, I thought that we all got better at this business of separating the political from the personal. I thought that if we remained friends through the thick and thin over one of the most divisive presidencies in this country, then we will stay as friends despite our differences in many things. I thought we could continue to be in each other's life while being sensitive and respectful toward each other's opinions. Because to me, these friends that I had made back in China and since my migration to the U.S. are akin to family in this new land. These are the people who have played a role in much of my adult life, who shared with me happiness and sadness, gains and losses from such life-altering experiences as moving from China to the U.S. after college, pursuing a professional identity upon completing our postgraduate degrees, and establishing new roots here in America with the families that we are lucky to have started.

However, despite our best efforts at curbing unpleasant arguments that would result from our fundamentally different opinions of the Trump presidency, it took a public health crisis to rock such growingly tenuous friendships and solidify boundaries

that arise from our conflicting ideologies. So yes, I was shocked to find out in 2016 that some of my dearest friends were Trump supporters, that they were somehow able to reconcile the glaring contradiction between the president's anti-immigration rhetoric and their personal need to stay in this country and live out their "American Dreams", that the same kind and generous friends were able to accept such hateful speech that the leader of our country (yes, our country) unabashedly utters. I know I was not alone in having had to come to terms with all of that, and this challenge is not unique to the diasporic communities, despite the surprising boundaries it has erected internally.

With the ongoing 2020 elections aside, which can be divisive on their own terms, I thought the situation with COVID-19 would be different. For fellow Chinese immigrants currently residing in the U.S., we were privy to first-hand testimonials about how bad things were in China at the beginning of the year. With the blessing of modern technology, especially the global spread of WeChat, which now allows us to be ever more connected to life back on the homeland, we did not need White House level intelligence to see how quickly things went from bad to exceedingly worse in China. In particular, we learned how governmental inaction and initial coverup once again doomed China's potential chance of keeping COVID-19 within a much smaller region of spread and saving the rest of the world from the massive nightmare we are all living through at this very moment.

I am not a public health expert and there is so much more to learn about this virus. Years down the road, the consensus might be such that the virus was simply uncontrollable, that no matter how much China had done, this virus is simply different and would have gotten us exactly where we are sooner or later. However, could we have lost fewer lives on a global scale? Could we have been more prepared? Could we have saved America from as big an embarrassment as it is experiencing right now? These are questions that will haunt us for generations to come and I am deeply aware that it is so much easier for anyone to play the “wise guy” after the fact thanks to the collective wisdom of hindsight. However, even on the supposed “collective wisdom” part, I have been confronted with fundamental differences between some Chinese friends and myself.

Between January and February, I went through much handwringing. Knowing then the damage that could be incurred by the virus and the fact that asymptomatic people could nevertheless pass the virus onto others, I was nervous about going back into the classroom, I was nervous about participating in on-campus events that often position people close to each other, I was nervous about my spouse’s frequent work travels. It was reassuring to hear some of my friends (un)surprisingly endorse the same lines as the president. They told me that we were fine, we should have more faith in America, we should be mindful that such an authoritarian lockdown that China implemented was not without its price and violations.

In all of my naivety and desperate need for a sense of sanity, I listened to them and repeated similar lines to my family. Until things got worse in March. And quickly. I thought we would start to converge on an agreement that the U.S. government really needed to get its act together and do more. However, that was when some of my friendships actually unraveled. After all these years, after all these efforts at suppressing our political differences yet remaining as friends, after all the memories and moral support, we have shared with each other, I was cut off and pushed back. I was asked not to talk about the outbreak because what I had to say was an affront to Trump's governance because my liberal standpoint puts life before freedom because at the root of it all we are simply different. I mourned over the loss of my friendships but take comfort in the fact that the virus has also allowed me to rekindle old friendships. I tried and tried to see the other side of this massive societal quarantine, to appreciate the grave health implications if the economy continues to spiral toward a recession, but I simply could not wrap my mind around those protesting the public health measures for the common good. I feel so angry sometimes that people are willing to cut ties over politics, but I so hope that I can get my friends back for we have so much else in common.

