

# Memoirs From A Month in the Future

LOUIS A G WILKES



After finally being let off the plane by a fully suited and booted contagion specialist, my wife and I arrived back in Nanjing, China on the 8th of February. A week prior - at the end of a Spring Festival that will be signified in history as the beginning of this contagion - we had been about to embark on our return flight home, after a trip to Finland. In the literal last hour we decided to cancel our return flight, divert to Cambodia, and stay for a week hoping to wait out the virus. Little did we know. The panic in China was at its height, and we would later find out the bell curve of infections wasn't far behind. Since then we have been living, with a few distinctions, a month (or so) ahead of what the 'Western World' is going through now.

I should clarify with a disclaimer that my situation is relatively stable - due to the protections of Chinese Labour Law I am entitled to half pay. This has mitigated against the acuteness some will suffer from work related anxiety, or indeed being unemployed. On a primal level, there was anxiety; a fear of a direct threat to ones physiology. However, I stress that this waned early on. Now the anxiety takes on a softer character. Not a worry about personal safety, but one of societal cohesion with all its forms and faces: Will the largesse of those in power be rightly distributed? There are many who need assistance - that I have the time to worry about these abstractions from daily life belie a luxury. I am frustrated when I think those most vulnerable and marginalised





will likely become further entrenched; I don't see on the horizons a new and lasting 'New Deal' to rupture the status quo.

This leads to noting a distinction between China and the Anglosphere: the authoritarian-collectivist/democratic-individualist, socio-political systems. In the Anglosphere our 'vox populi' mentality, with the fourth estate (albiet crumbling); a righteous justice system; adherence to human rights etc., make social engineering and realpolitik cumbersome. While the Chinese are more pragmatic and less inhibited by normative conventions (because why worry about what you cannot control?) The government decides what is best for its citizens, and that is that. The relationship between dissemination and enactment is different. The CPC ordained social-distancing; and the shutting down of businesses, and it happened. I want to be as clear a possible when i say that social distancing is crucial. I worry that our individualist mindsets may in these testing times protract the problem. It is ill suited to deal with a pandemic response. This is the time to temporarily adopt a collectivist mentality.

That aside, what has been my new typical, and what can you expect 'a month in the future'? Ultimately, holding off ennui and indolence.

Remain calm, and adjust. After the initial week of anxiety came adjustment. China is quite self-sufficient - the agrarian demographic matches the new urbans almost one for one - so there is enough food (If sensibly managed). This is evident to me here and now; but in the first few weeks, there was a real sense of worry. In some cases it was panic and hysteria. The shelves were often bare, but the chain of production adjusted, as did we. Similarly, the miopic and irrational hoarding of toilet roll is comparable to the fever pitch in China for face masks. Not altogether irrational, but a little misguided.

Get real. If you are fortunate, the worst part of this crisis will be the realization that Hollywood realism, is just that. Previously, during my most self-enamoring daydreams, I had high hopes that if something life-changing ever happened, I would embark upon a voyage of transcendence into the inner depths of Self. Make a profound discovery. Not so. So far, this situation has been more 'lifestyle-changing'. For the majority of us our personality will remain the same and our character will not even be tested. When all of our professional distractions, and social obligations are unburdened, we do not in fact, self-actualize. Arguably this is optimal. How we conduct ourselves during this time should be moderated - I think that counts as an existential realization, so it's not without merit - and for many of this publication's readership this may be the biggest 'crisis' experienced.

Busy oneself; try to keep a routine. This benefited my general mental well-being by providing a sense of continuity, and maintaining a boundary between 'work and play'. The days go by markedly swift, so orderliness and keeping a routine is important during this arrested development - furthermore, i've heard this applies when trying to



alleviate the aforementioned work anxiety. Sadly, I have no cure for paradoxically sluggish months. Small measurable victories will keep the days ticking over. Finish a 'to do' list; get through unread books; groom a beard; surpass a press-up limit or do yoga (the Hieronymus Bosch jigsaw I completed and the poem I wrote instilled a surprising sense of achievement). Take a deep breath and slow your expectations. Make yourself a little more rounded by getting around to those niggles and 'put-off into perpetuities'.

Reflect. I have counted myself very fortunate during this time: to be employed, yet not really working; rounding my edges; shortening lists; philosophizing about what is most important and peeking under the 'hyperreal'. There will be disruption, but if people practise social distancing there is no need to panic. However, it is important to be mindful that although we are getting more socially distant, we should make an effort to be more socially aware and civil. If you are physically and economically secure this week, take stock that things could be worse, and if you can, help others who aren't so fortunate (even if it's simply sharing out some of the oxorbitantly numerous hundred and eighty eggs your step mother just gifted you). You have the time now and the opportunity. If you can temper the ennui and indolence and find time to safely help others in some small way, then that is optimal.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Louis holds an MA Social Anthropology from the University of Sussex and has been working in adult education in Nanjing, China since 2017.