

**WILLIAM
YANG**

**CHINESE POLITICAL
INFLUENCE OVER
CORONAVIRUS
NEWS**

DEFIANCE #026
WITH PETER MCCORMACK



DEF026 - WILLIAM YANG INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION

CHINESE POLITICAL INFLUENCE OVER CORONAVIRUS NEWS

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Peter McCormack: 03:09

Good morning from here, William, but it's afternoon for you out there in Taipei, right?

William Yang: 03:14

Yes. Good morning, Peter.

Peter McCormack: 03:16

Good morning. So, we're going to talk about coronavirus, obviously something everyone is interested in and I think has a certain level of fear about. I imagine the fears much worse out in China, but we are seeing infection rates grow across the world. So, I've got a whole bunch of things I want to ask you about. But I think starting point is just introduce yourself to my listeners, explain who you are, who you work for and why you have taken such a deep interest in this and so much focus on this recently.

William Yang: 03:49

So, my name is William Yang and I'm an East Asia correspondent for Germany's international broadcaster, Deutsche Welle. And I'm based in Taipei, Taiwan. And I cover mostly the big events happening in China, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, sometimes in Japan and South Korea, Singapore for my everyday work. But I also write about the region for other big media outlets, including The Guardian, The Independent, BuzzFeed News and Courts.

William Yang: 04:24

So, the reason why I'm taking a very deep dive into this issue, basically tweeting about it following the worldwide development of this epidemic is because of the fact that in 2002 and 2003 when I actually first moved back to Taiwan from the US at the time when I was a teenager, the SARS epidemic hit Taiwan really hard. And that left a very deep memory in my life and also in everyone's life here in Taiwan. So, when the epidemic in Wuhan first broke out and the transmission start to spread across China, people here in Taiwan, including myself, are very aware of the potential risk and be damaged that the epidemic could create for people here.

William Yang: 05:15

Because we know, A, the fact that I guess like an illness or mass scale virus events in China oftentimes can easily spill over to Taiwan because we have such a tight connection and also a very deep interaction with China on a daily basis. And the second reason is because of the challenges that Taiwan kept facing by being excluded from most of the international events like the World Health Organization. So, last time during the SARS epidemic, Taiwan was not able to receive any firsthand information until much later on. And that really created a lot more challenges when the epidemic start to spread out here in Taiwan.

William Yang: 06:00

So, this time around, the government and also the society here are taking a very serious precaution when events and cases start to pop up in China. We took preventative measures weeks before the whole world started to become more serious about how to fight against the spread of the virus and also how to track virus developments. So, that's one of the other reason why I think for someone like me coming from the background and the history that we had in Taiwan, it's very relevant for me to keep tracking this, the development of this at a global scale.

Peter McCormack: 06:40

So, Taiwan's exclusion from the WHO, is that related to the current political status of Taiwan?

William Yang: 06:46

Yes. So, basically that's under China's insistence that Taiwan can only join the WHO if the government here acknowledged that Taiwan is part of China. So, basically, it's China asking the Taiwanese government if you want to become part of the WHO ensure the firsthand information runaway, you need to bow to me and basically announce the government here is illegitimate and the only legitimate government that governs both China and Taiwan is the government in Beijing.

William Yang: 07:18

And obviously, that is not going to work for it either the government here or the people here as we have seen very clearly that Taiwanese people now are very determined to participate in global events as Taiwan rather than as part of China.

Peter McCormack: 07:35

Okay. So, just a couple of things because I think not everyone will be fully aware of the dynamics of the relationship between Taiwan and China, but also interestingly, I would have thought that the WHO would have been an apolitical organization, is that not true?

William Yang: 07:52

Yeah. I think that's where the gray zone comes in. They played by the rule that internationally, there is only one China. And unfortunately, because Taiwan's official country name is Republic of China. So, that's where the confusion comes in. And if we present ourselves as the Republic of China, then obviously the only China that will be recognized around the world, no matter if it's political-related events or not, the only legitimate government that will only be recognized by the international community will always be the government in Beijing. So, that leaves a very awkward position for Taiwan to come up with a very smart way of participating in global events around the world.

William Yang: 08:38

And like as we have seen, even though organizations like WHO kept emphasizing that they're apolitical, but the reality is whenever they categorize Taiwan's cases, including the death tolls and also the number of infection into part of China, then the event naturally become political. Because in reality, I think everyone around the world know that Taiwan is a functioning democracy

that has its own government, its own currency, its own constitution and everything. So, that's when everything naturally become political. Even if they don't want to very obviously mention or distinguish or hit on or touch on the issue of how do they categorize Taiwan or what's Taiwan status.

Peter McCormack: 09:31

Right. Okay. Final question on this, what is the dynamics of the relationship between China and Taiwan now? Obviously, the people of Taiwan, as you said, have a functioning democracy, their own currency, their own government, but what real influence does China hold over Taiwan right now, if any?

William Yang: 09:50

So, China has a lot of leverage in say over the trading with a lot of the major industries here in Taiwan, because China remains one of the biggest trading partner for most of Taiwan's most lucrative industries. And so, that's where it still has a huge impact on having a say or influence over Taiwan. But politically, the current government has been in office for four years now and they are from a position where they want Taiwan to remain its sovereignty and try to resist as much as they can against China's attempt of annexation or even trying to include Taiwan into part of China.

William Yang: 10:35

So, the government's stance, which is very firm, creates a very difficult position for any sort of high level governments to government conversation to happen. Also, under Xi Jinping, who also took a very firm stance on the fact that the only thing that he can accept is Taiwan eventually become part of China and he will do whatever he can to make that happen during his lifetime. That's what he has made really clear over the last two years.

Peter McCormack: 11:07

I guess one of the difficulties there though will be in some ways very similar to Hong Kong is that the people who enjoy a lot of freedom, you're enjoying the democracy, I can't see in any situation where there'll be a democratic vote for the people, for Taiwan to be ruled exclusively by China.

William Yang: 11:26

Right, exactly. So, and then obviously, the ongoing protests in Hong Kong is strengthening people's determination to continue to maintain the way of life as much as they can, even if China has been using different ways to try to sway or woo people over that becoming part of China is actually going to be better for Taiwan. But that cause or that call is just not very convincing anymore.

Peter McCormack: 11:56

No. Okay. So, looping back to the coronavirus and would you say it's fair to say that you have ... I mean, you might have more than two interests but I would say your two primary interest is one is high quality information for the people of Taiwan, but secondly, kind of a subpoint to that is trying to weigh through the misinformation or potentially looking into whether there is information that's been withheld.

William Yang: 12:22

Right, exactly. So, I think because of the fact that to be honest, like the information that the international community are relying on right now are mostly information that China is willing to reveal. But a lot of the more detailed or hidden information are oftentimes either hidden in the very local news media reports or even just through online discussions on social media platforms.

William Yang: 12:47

And this information oftentimes require the understanding about, A, China's overall political landscape and also the communist party's political tendency of controlling information of flow. And B, it also requires actually a connection to I think understanding about which media outlets in China are offering more authentic and more realistic reflection of what's really happening in Wuhan and across China.

William Yang: 13:21

So, I think that's where I come in as having the advantage of having lived in China before, having covered China for several years now. And I understand the language and I have connections to a local sources at Wuhan. So, these are really something that I think as a regional correspondent for an international media and then also a certain presence on Twitter aware. Actually a lot of the international community are getting most of their firsthand information from. And I believe that my role can actually help to really spread timely information for everyone around the world to stay on top of it.

William Yang: 13:55

And I also understand that it's probably also very hard for just one news organization to be able to offer information about the virus and the epidemic from different parts of the world. So, that's also why I kept this habit of like doing the daily updates on Twitter. I probably updated five or six times a day. And always offer hopefully not only the situation in China, but also new cases that are popping up around the world, including travel bans that are being announced in different parts of the world because I think that's also going to

have an impact on not only China, but also just in general, the world's interaction overall.

William Yang: 14:39

Because when a lot of the times like what we see in the US and Australia, they are banning any foreign nationals, not just Chinese nationals who have spent time or even transited in China over the last few days. Then that creates a huge havoc for everyone who are either planning their trips or they already planned their trips and they're unfortunately flying through China and what do they do now? So, I think that's very important for the world to really stay on top of that.

Peter McCormack: 15:08

Okay. So, yeah, one of the things we need to be clear about, and it's something that affects a lot of the work I do, is the flow of information/ disinformation. I was out in Bolivia recently and I was looking into the political unrest there relating to Evo Morales. More recently I've been looking at the Ukrainian downing of the jet in Iran. Initially, there was a lot of disinformation there as well. So, the information you are being provided with, we should be clear from the start. These are coming from sources. It's not that you can hundred percent corroborate everything you're saying. So, how do we balance these sources with trying to hold some kind of credibility to how factual this is?

William Yang: 15:51

So, I would say probably 80 to 85% of the information right now that I'm tweeting every day are based on official news release either from Chinese media or from other media around the world that, it's in terms of like the updates, like including the death tolls and those new cases come from. So, that's probably counted as an 80 to 85% of the information that I release every day on Twitter.

William Yang: 16:17

I think the only reason why I'm probably being mentioned or followed a little bit more is because I stay on top at the global scale. I tweet about whenever any part of the world has a new case, I tweet about it. And I strain it into a very coordinated way so that if it's a threat that's only about new cases popping up around the world, I dedicate that threat to that purpose.

William Yang: 16:43

But if it's about new information that are being released in China, like let's say the new findings about the virus that they released, then I only dedicated that particular threat to that purpose. So, I want whoever that's following me to be

able to very easily only find the information that they want or need for specific purposes. But at the same time, my conversation with the local sources, what I do is I tend to not only talk to them and only share whatever that they share with me.

William Yang: 17:13

I also see if they can share actual photos or videos of what they were describing. So, there are actually proof that these are happening and that's how I corroborate most of the authenticity of the information and the credibility of the information.

William Yang: 17:28

Unless it's also I see a repetition of, yes, this is similar amongst several sources, then I reveal it to the whole like my Twitter followers and out there. Because I think if you see a pattern, then that probably just reflects the reality on the ground.

Peter McCormack: 17:48

Yeah. So, I've been through your tweets. It's a very good source. You seem to have avoided a lot of the ... There's some kind of strange conjecture and conspiracy theory stuff out there, which you seem to have avoided, which is very good, which is good for me. One question I have is just help me understand how much influence the Chinese state has over the press in China. Do journalists have a fear of releasing certain information or is it a case of they will release information then they may receive some kind of pressure? Like what is the journalistic process?

William Yang: 18:19

So, usually in China, since Xi Jinping took office, the government's control over the information flow and release has been much tighter than before. And normally on very sensitive topics like the Xinjiang re-education camps or the Hong Kong protests, there are very strict rules that journalists have to follow whenever they're reporting or writing about it. There's a very specific perspective or narrative that they can only use.

William Yang: 18:50

Anything that's like deviate from that particular narrative would be considered as unlawful. And then oftentimes these articles would be taken off the website or online and then the news organization or the particular journalists would either face pressure from local officials or even from the central government.

William Yang: 19:12

But the interesting thing about this coronavirus, I think in the very beginning when everything is very unclear, the government try to contain the full extent of the information by calming the society and claiming that the virus is curable and also containable. That's the first official rhetoric that we saw and read in the local official media. But then when the infection rate and also the transmission really got out of control, then they came out and then admit that there are possibility of human-to-human transmission. And when that happens, they kind of like loosen the original tight grip that they have over the overall reporting about the situation in Wuhan and also around the country.

William Yang: 20:02

So, we see some particular Chinese media, like Caixin Media is one of those that are really staying on top of what's happening and reporting about it from different perspectives. And I think that's very helpful. But also, that just shows like at very critical times when the Chinese government actually want the world to know a lot more and seeking help from the international community, they are willing to like loosen up the tight grip that they normally have over the information flow in the country.

William Yang: 20:36

But once they received the certain amount of the support that they need from the international community, then suddenly that flexibility would just disappear again because of the fact that they have satisfied their needs and also the support that they need. So, they no longer need to maintain that space for the media. So, what most of the time the local media and journalists have to do is they need to be very adaptable to the government's sudden change of decision and sudden change of plan. And that's just the reality here in China, well, in China, when it comes to reporting about breaking news or major events.

Peter McCormack: 21:19

Well, yeah. So, that almost feels like there's a correlation between the containment of the virus and the containment of the news relating to the virus. I can see an almost pattern there, but I guess that gets to a point where we would use a term say it's got out of hand. The spread of the virus is now at risk. It's a global risk and actually China probably need support from the international community.

William Yang: 21:42

Right. But at the same time, one other thing that's very interesting is that we can see the types of information being released and categorize it by stages.

So, in the beginning when they desperately need the international community to really treat it as a very serious issue, they kept emphasizing on the number of new cases and everything and also the number of death tolls and how serious it has been spread to different parts of the country.

William Yang: 22:12

But now once they got some type of control over the epidemic, what they have been doing over the last few days is started highlighting their type of way to respond to counter the spread of the virus by emphasizing that China is now building multiple makeshift hospitals that are going to be dedicated to treating coronavirus patients and also the number of the people who have recovered.

William Yang: 22:39

They emphasize a lot about these cases over the last few days because then they want to recreate that more positive image about what China is doing to combat this and then also sharing the so-called China experience with the world that they are the successful case study for fighting a very unprecedented and very threatening global public health crisis.

Peter McCormack: 23:04

Okay. There is precedent here with SARS and the transparency around what was happening, right?

William Yang: 23:11

Yeah. They have definitely done a much better job in terms of being transparent about the overall information including the to some extent the severity of the infection and those of the transmission and they no longer withheld these very key information in terms of like when it comes to the scientific facts about the virus that the world hasn't really known about, then they release a much earlier than SARS. Because during the SARS epidemic, they withheld everything basically for months before it started spreading to Hong Kong to Taiwan. And then when it became a regional thing here in Asia, then they admit that it actually started months ago.

William Yang: 24:01

But this time around, I think it also has to do with the fact the maturity of social media and the internet over the last two decades actually improved a lot. So, that allows information flow to become a lot easier. So, they also understand I think that at this day and age, they just cannot use the same way that they contain, control the information flow as before.

Peter McCormack: 24:26

Okay. So, based on what you've been reporting, based on what you've been seeing, what are the areas of information you don't believe that we are receiving? So, I noted one source, which I think you included in which stated that the actual death toll figures might not be correct based on discussions with people working at the crematoriums.

William Yang: 24:45

Right. So, basically that starting point is that I saw a lot of posts on the Chinese social media, Weibo, about actual family members of the patients sharing how their families are like being left in the hospital for days without being diagnosed or being treated or seen by the doctor.

William Yang: 25:07

And then when their situation or their symptoms quickly deteriorated and some of the more senior and elderly patients then died from their complications and once they were dead, then the hospital would just immediately call the family members and urge them to immediately arrange the cremation centers to send the staff over and take the dead body to the cremation center directly and then have it cremated. And then just like they basically close off this potential case without proper doctor's diagnosis and also going through the medical examination, nothing of that ever happened.

William Yang: 25:48

And then this Chinese language media called Initium News, it's actually one of the most reputable news outlets in the Chinese speaking world. They are the constant winners of like big journalism awards here. And also, they're very known for their investigative reporting. They then came out with an article titled called the death tolls outside of the confirmed list. So, of course then this very much confirms a lot of these so-called social media sharings that these are not just people who held grudges against the government. Like these are actual situations.

William Yang: 26:28

And they interview staff, local cremation centers in Wuhan. And what the staff told them is that every day basically they would handle 30 to 60 such cases where the dead bodies were just immediately directly sent to the cremation centers from the hospital once they were dead. Usually you would do out autopsy. And then on these death certificate, sometimes these dead bodies don't even come with the certificate explaining what caused the death and these are just bodies being sent over and then they were ordered to cremate it immediately.

William Yang: 27:06

So, that basically confirms the fact that a lot of the actual death happened in Wuhan and also in China probably across in maybe other provinces were not being properly reported because there was just no such mechanism to record and also leave a record of these every single death and every single patient.

William Yang: 27:32

And why I also believe that this should be backed up is the fact that the level of overload at local hospitals, including people who actually have been to the hospital and were just sent home because the medical staff just have no time for them and the long queue that people have to wait in line even to just get into the hospital was just explaining how dire and severe of the shortage of the human resource over in Wuhan and Hubei province right now.

William Yang: 28:09

So, when the doctors can't even handle the living cases, how can we expect that they have someone dedicated to record every single death in a very thorough way. So, I totally think that this whole chain of effect would create the fact that the number of death toll in reality would be much higher than the 304 that we're seeing right now. Because also of the fact that people also think that the number of infected cases are much higher than what we are actually seeing right now.

Peter McCormack: 28:44

Well, yes, because we have the infected number, which is just over 14,000 but we also occasionally see the suspected cases number, which is always much higher.

William Yang: 28:52

Yeah.

Peter McCormack: 28:53

So, do we have any estimates on what the real death toll might be or would that be too much conjecture?

William Yang: 29:01

So, I've talked to medical experts in China and also what they say is like, it's almost impossible for them to really measure the actual death toll comparing to what's being released right now because of the fact that again, a lot of these cases probably like slipped through the loopholes even without anyone noticing or knowing. And for them to having to like go back and collect,

looking through the medical records, a lot of the times, again, maybe these people never were on the record.

William Yang: 29:33

So, for them it's almost impossible to really estimate what would be the actual number. But what they're saying, it's definitely couple of times more than the current number that we're seeing right now.

Peter McCormack: 29:48

Okay. So, what is the state now in Wuhan, right now in Hubei? Because a lot of this we have to base on what we see in the news and on Twitter, the things that I've seen that are slightly concerning for me are that I saw a video in a hospital shortly after one of the doctors who was treating people that died. And I can only describe it as a scene of chaos. I've seen videos of people collapsed on the street. I can't verify them, but that seems to be a situation where people are just dropping sick, dropping dead.

Peter McCormack: 30:21

I'm assuming that there is just nowhere near enough staff to actually cope with the number of infections, the number of the cases coming in. Like how challenging and how desperate is the situation right now in Wuhan and Hubei?

William Yang: 30:35

So, when the lockdown was first introduced in mid-January, in the beginning, people were panicking about like how long the lockdown would be enforced and everything. So, even everyday fresh produce were immediately in shortage. And that was the immediate reaction. But then once the government resupplied the everyday produce and the more concerning part is the basic medical supplies including masks and medical preventative clothings and goggles. Because this is again like we already know a super highly contagious virus that can go into your body through your eyes and nose and mouth or any openings that you might have.

William Yang: 31:16

And so, that situation you continue to be a huge problem in China because just yesterday, a local government in Wuhan officially posted on their official website that the local hospitals in that region have run out of like medical preventative clothings and masks for frontline staff. And so, even the local government is officially announcing this and calling for help, that just rebuild the extent of the fact that what we're seeing on Twitter, there's actually another new circulating that one of the biggest hospitals in Wuhan city, they ran out of the preventative clothing days ago.

William Yang: 31:58

And what they had to use in order to save themselves is actually using trash bags. When you're desperate, that's what you do. You use whatever that you can find around you to sort of like make something that you thought can potentially temporarily block you from being exposed directly to these virus and contagious environment. But imagine that you have to operate in an operation room with something that's not even tested or confirmed to be able to block, safeguard you from these infections. That's just how dangerous and desperate the situation is.

William Yang: 32:38

And as for the everyday life in Wuhan, yes, there continue to be people already showing very obvious symptoms of infection. But when they went to the hospital, they either would have to wait a week or more to even to just have a chest CT to see what's the status or situation of their lung, and also like being seen by a doctor. So, a lot of these people without like the immediate life-threatening symptoms are just being told that they have to go home and just self-quarantine.

William Yang: 33:15

But the thing is that when you're already showing symptom and you are being told to go home and without like a proper medication and everything, how can you expect the virus to be contained? So, a lot of the people continue to be very worried about actual level of the capacity of local medical facilities to deal with the amount of the cases that are emerging and also of the fact that a lot of the resources that are being sent from different provinces to Wuhan were not even being distributed properly to these hospitals.

William Yang: 33:50

There have been a very serious controversy over the last few days about the Red Cross in Wuhan City. What happened is that they are the one that are in charge of collecting all the donated medical supplies and redistribute it to medical facilities. But like the hospital that I mentioned, they still did not receive the medical preventative clothings. And when they questioned the Red Cross, they found out that because they were not even properly being listed on the list, but that's one of the biggest hospitals in Wuhan.

William Yang: 34:23

So, when you have things like this happen, the local bureaucracy that are really slowing down or delaying the efforts to really contain the virus or trying to fight against the virus in the epidemic, then you realize that this is the

systematic problem in China that has been happening over the last few decades or years that it's hampering the efforts to really help prevent the epidemic from expanding.

Peter McCormack: 34:54

Okay. God, there's a whole bunch of things to work through here. I've got some notes. Firstly, I just want to say, I think at some point we're all going to have to remember the absolute bravery of the frontline medical staff who are working in challenging conditions, who are risking their own lives in doing this. I'm sure there's a lot going to come out about that.

Peter McCormack: 35:15

It appears there isn't enough frontline staff to deal with this and this is an escalating problem. We're seeing the numbers escalate on a daily basis and they are the confirmed cases and the deaths. We have the suspected cases. So, I expect there will come a point where we may have people who can't be treated, who may be stuck in their home. Perhaps we have people who've even died in their home and nobody knows about it. Is that a potential?

William Yang: 35:43

I wouldn't rule that out for sure. But again, because of the medical fact about this virus is that it's less lethal than SARS. So, maybe it would allow someone with a lesser symptom to be able to survive for a longer period before there's like whole body or their health in general start to deteriorate because of the virus. But so far, there hasn't really been large amount of those reports coming out of China in terms of people being diagnosed with the infection or being told to self-quarantine at home and then died from it because of like deterioration of their symptoms.

Peter McCormack: 36:28

Well, yes. You say it's less lethal than SARS. I think the 2.2% is the rate currently for the coronavirus. I can't remember what was the actual number for SARS? Was it near a 10%

William Yang: 36:41

Yeah. So, I think the death rate or the mortality rate of SARS is definitely around 10%. So, there is still a gap and that's why some of the medical experts are saying the world should not overhyping the potential threat that the coronavirus is posing on people's actual death for this time because they were saying how even some more common flus are having a much higher death rate than the coronavirus at this point.

Peter McCormack: 37:17

Yeah. See, that's a number I struggled with about because you said there's a potential that somebody had been cremated without an autopsy, so there's a potential that the number could be higher. We're talking about 300 deaths at the moment, but say there were 300 bodies without autopsy, that doubles the rate. Also, we know there's an incubation period of up to 14 days. I don't know. The kind of numbers I hold with a pinch of salt. Do you understand why?

William Yang: 37:48

So, what's tricky about this virus is that even during incubation period, it's already contagious and transmittable and also because of the fact that the more recent cases that are popping up right now are cases without very obvious symptoms at all. So, a lot of the times, like the most recent case here in Taiwan is that the husband who was a Taiwanese businessman working in Wuhan, he was the person who brought the virus back home to his household.

William Yang: 38:20

But his wife was the first one who had a much severe symptom and got confirmed because of the fact that when he started to having symptoms, he only had like symptoms like runny nose and also some throat conditions and also cough, mild coughing. So, these a lot of the times going to be treated as a normal cold. And so, it's only when his wife started having the more pneumonia-like symptoms, then their household realized that maybe he is the one who brought the virus back into Taiwan.

William Yang: 38:52

And so, we are seeing actually like cases like this happening not only in Taiwan but in other parts of the world. So, I'm sure like this is also happening at a large scale throughout China, of the fact that people without very obvious symptoms are being let go because they ... So, that's what the complicated situation when it comes to containing the virus and fighting against the spread of it comes and public health experts are more worried about that than the actual death rates.

Peter McCormack: 39:25

Is there a particular demographic that are more risk? Is it young children? Is it old people? Has that been tracked?

William Yang: 39:33

So, based on the number in Wuhan and also in Hubei province, I think I shared a chart a couple of days ago that is basically rereleased by the local government has done, most of the cases are still people above 50, but since

the new type of these symptoms or maybe that's already a mutated strain that hasn't been confirmed yet. But since these cases with less symptoms popping up, then we are also seeing like infants, a few months old or a four-year-old and also young people in their 20s are also starting to be infected.

William Yang: 40:12

So, I think the trend is now that it started out as a virus that are potentially risking more older people, now to that anyone of any age could also contract the virus. But most of the death tolls are currently still happening to people with a weaker immune system, either they have other complicated medical issues or just people with a weaker immune system. So, we haven't really seen anyone that are I think under 45 that have died from this epidemic yet.

Peter McCormack: 40:52

Okay. Is there any risks to the local economy here, essentially with the shutdown of the business and it feels like whole cities in quarantine? What's the actual impact on the local economy? How are people coping? How are they surviving?

William Yang: 41:06

So, what's actually happening is that because China is such a huge manufacturing hub around the world, so like a lot of the manufacturing or tech companies actually worry about the impact of the businesses and factories just being shut down and suspend like the operation. For example, the biggest tech company here in Taiwan called Foxconn, I guess you probably heard about it at some point.

Peter McCormack: 41:35

Apple.

William Yang: 41:36

Yeah. So, Foxconn has a huge factory in Wuhan. So, since the outbreak, they have to suspend the operation of the factory and that is actually having a big impact on their everyday, the manufacturing rates and also the amount of the products that they're able to grow out. And I think it'll take time to really see the longer term impact at a global scale. But in China currently is just that everyone is being told to stay home. They cannot go anywhere and like group gatherings are not allowed.

William Yang: 42:11

So, obviously most of the industries in China would have been suspended and only very few, I guess industries that allow their workers to work remotely

would still be able to function as certain capacity. But even with that, I would totally imagine that this will definitely have a huge impact on China's economy in 2020 and also the global economy when the supply chain start to be affected at a very serious way.

William Yang: 42:46

So, some of the companies here in Taiwan are already considering some alternative plans to either move their production lines elsewhere or back to Taiwan so that they can still maintain a certain level of production even under the current situation in China of the fact that a lot of the cities in the industrial hubs are being forced to shut down and not able to function at all.

Peter McCormack: 43:13

What about staff? Do you know if staff are still being employed and still being paid? And how about access to basic foods, sanitary products like day-to-day living? I mean, I know here I have to go shopping every few days, right? I mean, I can stock up for a week or two, but there's certain things you have to replenish. Are staff being repaid? How are people replenishing what they need in the house?

William Yang: 43:35

So, I think right now is that the government is releasing or distributing the everyday fresh produce that every household need either to like concentrated place in the local area and then asking family to send a certain number of people in the family to perform the duty of like picking up these necessities.

William Yang: 44:00

But what I've been asking my local sources in Wuhan is the fact that there's no such shortage of like the everyday needs in terms of food and also ingredients, but there continued to be a huge and severe shortage of things like masks and disinfectants and the things that they actually need to prevent themselves from contracting the virus. And that's continued to be lacking I mean for all the households, because even at the frontline medical staff, they also do not have enough of these supplies to really support them and protect themselves.

William Yang: 44:41

So, I think at this point, people can still get by when it comes to food and also eating and the basic functioning. But when it comes to the more critical aspects of it, including preventing themselves from contracting the virus, that's really highly questionable. Like how people will be able to remain uninfected

until the lack of the basic medical supplies are going to start infecting them a lot.

Peter McCormack: 45:15

Okay. Is there any specific information that you are trying to get hold of that you are unable to get?

William Yang: 45:22

So, since the news about a suspicion about the death tolls and also the so-called underground way of like processing these dead bodies came out, it's been really hard to talk to frontline medical staff and also the funeral homes in Wuhan because I think that's what the international community are more suspicious and interested to know more about.

William Yang: 45:49

But the fact that apparently the frontline medical staff, couple of them originally probably would want to come forward and share their experience working on the frontline, have either had their family members being summoned to local police stations or even themselves being called over to basically being told that like, we do not want you to share the sensitive information with the world or especially the international media. So, right now that's become the biggest challenge.

William Yang: 46:21

And I think the other thing is just the fact that how much of the actual information about people recovered from these viruses in China are trustworthy because as we know, a lot of the times, a lot of these more positive news are being created or put in a certain way that they're not being presented in the original context but in a context that fits the Chinese Communist Party's rhetoric.

William Yang: 46:52

So, I am also very suspicious about how successful they have been in terms of cheering or like confirming that people no longer has the virus in their body. So, I think these are two very critical pieces of information that are currently very hard to verify and like if we were able to verify it, it would have provided the international community a much more clear picture about the whole epidemic.

Peter McCormack: 47:24

Do you have any awareness of any unrest or criticism of the communist party at a local level? Like is there a risk that as this escalates that we will start to

see any form of kind of protest or anger? Because I know within China, a lot of people have fear about protesting against the communist state party, but are we seeing anything there? Any kind of reaction to this, any anger towards how the government dealt with it so far?

William Yang: 47:56

So, so far most of the frustration have only been expressed online and I think people are not at the point where they think it's necessary for them to take it in a more physical way of like taking it to the streets because of, I think again there were conditions that would convince them not to do that in terms of if they put them themselves again out in the public, it increases the risk of themselves contracting the virus. Because at this point these cities, especially in Hubei province continue to be highly contagious, and so such gathering is probably considered as not ideal by most of the locals.

William Yang: 48:34

So, they tend to channel their angers and frustrations online by using a very subtle way of complaining about it, including the language are very extremely subtle when it comes to like the extent that they are willing to go to criticize the Chinese government. So, that is what we're seeing right now. But it would be interesting to like keep an eye on if this escalates into a more physical one.

William Yang: 49:04

If the Chinese Communist Party continue to fail to really decrease the level of threat that this epidemic is imposing on the local community, including the need, the ongoing and the continuation of the lockdown because I think the longer the lockdown remain there, the higher the chances people will start to become very agitated and there would then be probably a tendency of local communities questioning the effectiveness and the purpose of the whole lockdown strategy.

Peter McCormack: 49:38

Okay. You're obviously a lot closer to this than most people. I assume this is around the clock job for you right now. You're trying to wade your way through the various bits of information. It's kind of a broad question, but like what's your kind of overall view on the situation now? Do you think people should be concerned? How do you take it all in?

William Yang: 50:00

I think people should remain very highly aware and stay on top of the latest developments just because there is so little that we know actually. Like even until now, there's no confirmed I guess trace of transmission like even the top

medical experts in this field, in the infectious disease field, they don't know how the virus, they cannot be very assured about how the virus is being transmitted. They could only possibly tell you it could be transmitted through this way or that way, but there's no such confirmation.

William Yang: 50:36

And so, I think that's actually a very alarming aspect that people should continue to stay on top of the development and also the relevant news that are coming out. But at the same time I think the world, the international community should not be overly panicking about this because we are again already seen some racism incidents popping up around the world against Chinese-looking people. Sometimes these are not even people from China. There are people from Japan or Korea, but because they look Asian, so, they were immediately being suspected of coming from China and then being questioned or being unwelcomed locals like restaurants or stores.

William Yang: 51:19

So, I think that's going to be another aspect that the world should really keep in mind as that, yes, this is an epidemic, but the epidemic should not be the justification for any sort of very targeted discrimination against certain groups of people around the world. So, I think these are the two things that I would definitely say like from my point of view, the reason why people should continue to remain engaged with this topic, but at the same time not be overly panicking over the information that are coming out.

Peter McCormack: 51:57

Okay. All right. Last couple of questions, how are things in Taiwan?

William Yang: 52:00

So, the situation here is actually the society continues to be very highly alert, but the government is in fact doing a pretty good job at continuing the spread. So, so far there hasn't been cases of like the virus being transmitted in public events or spaces. Most of the cases are individuals coming back from China or with a history of traveling to China and then returning to Taiwan.

William Yang: 52:27

And these cases are being immediately quarantined and also isolated from the rest of the society. So, there hasn't been the spread at the local level, which is great, but medical supplies such as masks continue to be of shortage, people stock piling up certain things so that they are prepared for anything that could escalate from here.

Peter McCormack: 52:51

Okay. Last thing, as a journalist, what do you make of what happened with Zero Hedge being banned from Twitter for sharing particular articles relating to conspiracy about whether this is some kind of biological accident.

William Yang: 53:05

I think that's a very sensible way of doing it because again, when we know so little about this virus and when the whole world is urgently trying to find the facts about this, what we don't need is some sort of conspiracy theory or again going to stereotype a certain group of people assuming the Chinese government, I mean right now, while such conspiracy theory could potentially fit certain groups of people's narratives or portrayal of China that they preferred, I don't think it is a strong enough case that will eventually be able to be confirmed because of, again, the complexity or the lie behind this whole epidemic and also how it originated.

William Yang: 53:59

I don't think even the Chinese government could really have a very clear answer or the route of the initial infection even in a few months' time because of the fact that again, it's spread so fast and then like it had a very murky origination. So, I think what the world should do is to collaborate in a very scientific and medical basis so that the information that are out there are not going to blur up most of the efforts that the world is trying to do to fight against this epidemic and try to get it under control.

Peter McCormack: 54:42

Okay. Look, thank you for everything you've done. Your Twitter feed was very helpful to me. I've followed you now and I will share it out in the show notes, but if anyone's listened to this and they want to follow your updates on your work, can you just tell them where to go?

William Yang: 54:54

Yes. Definitely follow me on Twitter. My Twitter handle is William Y-A-N-G 120 and I basically do the update around the clock five times, six times a day and also, I am continuing to report about this in the more long form way through either media appearances or my own reporting. So, yeah, I think just make sure to follow the Twitter handle and also, yeah, just stay on top of what's coming out from major media outlets around the world as well because basically I think this is the biggest news topic that the whole world is focusing and tracking right now.

Peter McCormack: 55:38

Okay. Well listen, I appreciate your time and yeah, let's stay in touch and anything else particularly you think I should be aware of then, please let me know. But thank you for everything you've done.

William Yang: 55:49

Thank you so much.