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## Unmasking Covid-19 through Freedom of the Press

Reconstructing the timeline of Covid-19 is difficult given its murky, censored origins.

As far as is known, the first reported cases occurred November 17, 2019 in the city of Wuhan in Hubei, China, and by the end of 2019, Chinese officials had identified 266 cases. At the initial outbreak, Ai Fen (a leading doctor at the Wuhan hospital) was reprimanded for alerting her superiors to the new SARS-like virus. *Don't act differently*, she and her staff were told. *Don't wear masks. Don't speak of this to anyone*. By January 21<sup>st</sup>, when the Chinese government finally acknowledged human-to-human transmittance, Wuhan's emergency room had already tripled its daily visitors to over 1500 people, and several other countries had been infected. Two days later, China cut off all travel out of and within Wuhan, forcibly dragging and isolating infected or potentially infect people in their homes in order to control the spread of the virus. These home deaths were not included in the Covid-19 reports, a deceit that has potentially cost thousands of lives as governments have made misinformed decisions.

I should mention: since her interview about China's blunders and lies, Ai Fen has disappeared. *Don't wear masks*, she was told. *Don't speak of this to anyone*. She followed the first of these two commands. She "provided the whistle" for Li Wenliang to alert the world to Covid-19, and following Li's death, she publicly criticized her government. Li Wenliang was killed by the virus, and by association, killed by the censorship that allowed Covid-19 to flourish. A part of me wonders if Ai Fen suffered the same fate, or if her government silenced her personally.

As an American, I often take the freedom of the press for granted. This year, however, I have been forced to acknowledge that my freedom is threatened by countries without this first amendment right. Freedom of the press is not just freedom of information: it is the freedom to make informed choices, to preserve human rights, to save lives. It is the real-world equivalent of unmasking villains. If China was a country with freedom of the press, the nascent virus would have been revealed, not concealed, and other nations could have prepared better for the oncoming pandemic. If these nations had been more prepared, travel could have been limited without total economic shutdown: who knows how many years we will suffer from this fiscal setback? Those of us that remain, that is. Some have died. And even in our grief, we can't properly mourn: quarantine restrictions

prevent more than ten people from gathering, even for a funeral. Instead, we walk alone on sparse streets – to get outside, to go shopping, to remain insane through quarantine – and we see masks everywhere. Homemade masks covering weary faces, so tired of this prolonged crisis. Freedom of the press could have unmasked us too by preventing the need for masks in the first place.

Freedom of the press isn't just an unalienable right: it's a vital necessity.

If necessary, I can also send in my sources for the information I gathered.