

# **The death of the whistleblower Chinese doctor Li Wenliang: If China valued free speech, there would be no coronavirus crisis**

Sunday 9 February 2020, by [YU Verna](#) (Date first published: 8 February 2020).

**Country could have contained spread of disease if only it had learned lessons from Sars outbreak.**

The death of the whistleblower Chinese doctor Li Wenliang has aroused strong emotions across China. Social media is awash with posts mourning the death of a martyr who tried to raise alarm over the coronavirus but was taken into a police station instead for “spreading false rumours” and “disrupting social order”.

Grief quickly turned into angry demands for free speech. The trending topic “we want freedom of speech”, which attracted millions of views, and links to Do You Hear the People Sing, a song popularised in recent Hong Kong protests, were quickly censored by police.

In an unusual move, the Communist party’s powerful internal discipline enforcement agency swiftly announced it would dispatch investigators to Wuhan to look into “questions raised by the masses” associated with Li. The Chinese authorities are starkly aware that anger and raw emotions could easily boil over and spill on to the streets.

As in the past when health or safety scandals broke, it is likely the Chinese government will fire a few local officials to douse public anger. But this will only be an expedient measure that will not resolve the real problem – its citizens’ lack of a right to free speech.

We might remember a similar health crisis 17 years ago when the severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars) epidemic, which also originated from China, infected more than 8,000 and killed about 800 across 17 countries. In 2003 the authorities covered up the disease for months before another whistleblowing doctor, 72-year-old Jiang Yanyong, exposed the crisis. More recently Jiang, now 88, has had his contacts with the outside world cut off and movements restricted after he asked the authorities last year to reassess the 1989 Tiananmen pro-democracy movement. He is now confined to his home by the authorities.

Unfortunately, China does not appear to have learned lessons from the Sars epidemic.

Despite the flourishing of social media, information is more tightly controlled in China than ever. In 2013, an internal Communist party edict known as Document No 9 ordered cadres to tackle seven supposedly subversive influences on society. These included western-inspired notions of press freedom, “universal values” of human rights, civil rights and civic participation. Even within the Communist party, cadres are threatened with disciplinary action for expressing opinions that differ from the leadership.

Compared with 17 years ago, Chinese citizens enjoy even fewer rights of speech and expression. A few days after 34-year-old Li posted a note in his medical school alumni social media group on 30 December, stating that seven workers from a local live-animal market had been diagnosed with an illness similar to Sars and were quarantined in his hospital, he was summoned by police. He was made to sign a humiliating statement saying he understood if he “stayed stubborn and failed to repent and continue illegal activities, (he) will be disciplined by the law”.

China’s GDP per capita might have grown nearly eight times from 2003 but its citizens have not enjoyed more freedom and rights, which many predicted would come with rising economic achievements.

If Li had lived in a society where citizens could speak freely without fear of being punished for exposing problems the authorities would rather not see, and if his warning had been heeded and action swiftly taken, the virus could have been contained. Instead, it has already killed at least 724 and infected nearly 35,000 people, and the virus is still spreading.

Unless Chinese citizens’ freedom of speech and other basic rights are respected, such crises will only happen again. With a more globalised world, the magnitude may become even greater – the death toll from the coronavirus outbreak is already comparable to the total Sars death toll.

Human rights in China may appear to have little to do with the rest of the world but as we have seen in this crisis, disaster could occur when China thwarts the freedoms of its citizens. Surely it is time the international community takes this issue more seriously.

**Verna Yu**

• The Guardian. Sat 8 Feb 2020 12.50 GMT Last modified on Sun 9 Feb 2020 03.06 GMT:  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/08/if-china-valued-free-speech-there-would-be-no-coronavirus-crisis>

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## **‘Hero who told the truth’: Chinese rage over coronavirus death of whistleblower doctor**

**Demands for freedom of speech in the wake of Li Wenliang’s death have been censored by the authorities amid widespread outpouring of anger**  
**Coronavirus outbreak - latest updates**



*Li Wenliang’s blogs on coronavirus crisis in Wuhan were censored by authorities at end of December. He died on 6 February 2020. Photograph: Handout*

The death of a whistleblowing Chinese doctor who was punished for trying to raise the alarm about coronavirus has sparked an explosion of anger, grief and demands for freedom of speech among ordinary Chinese.

Li Wenliang, 34, died in the early hours of Friday local time after he was infected during the fight against the outbreak, said Wuhan central hospital, where he worked, in a statement.

Li warned colleagues on social media in late December about a mysterious virus that would become the coronavirus epidemic and was detained by police in Wuhan on 3 January for “spreading false rumours”. He was forced to sign a police document to admit he had breached the law and had “seriously disrupted social order.”

“They owe you an apology, we owe you our gratitude. Take care, Dr Li,” said a Weibo post from Xiakedao, an account under the overseas edition of Communist Party’s People’s Daily.

“Good people don’t live long, but evil lives for a thousand years,” said another post mourning Li’s death, with a candle emoji. An image also posted on Weibo showed a message, “farewell Li Wenliang”, carved into the snow on a riverbank in Beijing.

*RF Parsley*

*@sanverde*

*#FoundOnWeChat*

*Shared from Weibo*

*View image on TwitterView image on TwitterView image on Twitter*

1,045

4:48 AM - Feb 7, 2020 · Beijing, People’s Republic of China

His death crystallised the outrage and frustration felt across China over the initial cover-up of the deadly virus. On Friday, China’s social media was awash with posts expressing immense anger and grief.

Li’s death became the top-read topic on China’s microblogging site Weibo overnight on Friday, with more than 1.5bn views, and was also heavily discussed in private WeChat messaging groups, where people expressed outrage and sadness.

Even blog posts from state media outlets mourned his death and issued veiled attacks on the Wuhan authorities who censured him.

The strong public reaction appeared to have drawn the top leadership’s attention. The central commission for discipline inspection, the Communist party’s powerful internal anti-corruption body, and the national supervisory commission, the country’s highest anti-corruption agency, issued a one-sentence statement on their joint website that investigators will be sent to Wuhan to carry out “a comprehensive investigation into the problems reported by the public concerning Doctor Li Wenliang”.

Fearing that the uproar over Li’s death could spill over onto the streets, the authorities quickly deleted posts calling for action. A post forwarded on Wechat but now deleted said: “I hope one day we can stand on the street holding Li Wenliang’s picture.”

In Li’s last blog post on Weibo, China’s Twitter-like microblog, on 1 February, Li poignantly wrote: “The test results come out positive today. Everything is settled. It is confirmed.”

*Alan Wong*

@alanwongw

A history professor at Fudan University calls on the Wuhan authorities to build a statue in tribute to Li Wenliang, to be titled "The Rumormonger"

<https://twitter.com/Peidongsun1/status/1225639017976217603> ...

Peidong sun

@Peidongsun1

A statue for the late doctor Li Wenliang!

*View image on Twitter*

145

5:41 AM - Feb 7, 2020

Li was one of eight people who were detained for "spreading rumours" about the deadly disease's outbreak - the fates of the other seven, also believed to be medical professionals, are not known.

Images of Li were ubiquitous on Weibo and messaging app WeChat; a last photo of him lying on his hospital bed wearing a breathing mask; a pencil sketch of Li; a photo of the humiliating police warning document on which he signed "I understand" to admit "spreading false rumours" along with images of candles and white flower.

Many posts referenced his "confession", with people posting photos of themselves wearing surgical masks emblazoned with the words: "I don't understand". Others swore "We will not forget".

The outpouring of grief quickly turned into demands for freedom of speech, but those posts were swiftly censored by China's cyber police. The trending topic "#we want freedom of speech" had nearly 2m views on Weibo by 5am local time, but was later deleted. The phrase "#Wuhan government owes Dr Li Wenliang an apology" also attracted tens of thousands of views before it too disappeared.

*Nectar Gan*

@Nectar\_Gan

Replying to @Nectar\_Gan

The hashtag # I want freedom of speech # on Weibo is now gone. It had drawn 1.8 million views as of 5 a.m.

Even the phrase itself has been censored.

Not allowed to speak.

Not allowed to die.

Now allowed to be angry.

Not allowed to desire.

Are we allowed to at least remember?

*View image on TwitterView image on TwitterView image on Twitter*

501

5:17 AM - Feb 7, 2020

Caixin, a Beijing-based financial publication, posted a black-and-white selfie of Li wearing a mask with the title "A healthy society shouldn't have just one voice: Novel Coronavirus whistleblower"

Li Wenliang dies”.

In its Weibo post, the Economic Observer, a state-affiliated financial newspaper, demanded the vindication of all of the Wuhan “rumour mongers”.

“Dr Li is telling us [through his death] what kind of future we will face if we lose the ability to express ourselves. In the eyes of the people, Dr Li was the hero who bravely told the truth,” the post said. “Wuhan [authorities] should vindicate them and pursue those who abused their powers to suppress the ‘rumour mongers’.”

Elsewhere, posts from ordinary Chinese people continue to direct their outrage towards the authorities.

“You and I both know that the ones who killed were not bats,” said one. “The virus has infiltrated those people high up,” said another. “Those who won’t let you speak won’t let you live either,” fumed another.

Johnny Lau, a veteran China watcher and former journalist at Beijing-backed Wen Wei Po, said Li’s death has become an emotional flashpoint amid the tight control of speech under Xi Jinping’s rule.

“Here is a doctor with a conscience ... people on the frontline have been sacrificed but the officials have not been held to account,” he said. “It is an example of how evil has triumphed over the good.” He said the quick deletion of posts demanding speech freedom has aroused further anger.

“The authorities are anxious that his death would trigger a huge wave of anger, so felt the need to maintain stability and suppress people’s voices,” he said. “But this has aroused further pushback.”

Sarah Cook, a senior research analyst and China Media Bulletin Director at Freedom House, said the public outcry over Li looked “widespread and unified”, but it still unclear how big a turning point it could be.

As many inside China seethed, the death toll inside the country passed 630, with more than 31,000 people infected. Another 41 people on a cruise ship quarantined off Yokohama in Japan tested positive for the virus.

Australia became the latest country to advise any citizens inside China to leave as soon as possible. On Friday, North Korea recorded its first confirmed case of the virus.

**Verna Yu** in Hong Kong

*Additional reporting by Lily Kuo, Jiahui Huang and Reuters*

• The Guardian. Fri 7 Feb 2020 05.10 GMT Last modified on Fri 7 Feb 2020 11.44 GMT:  
<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/feb/07/coronavirus-chinese-rage-death-whistleblower-doctor-li-wenliang>

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**P.S.**

• *Articles of Verna Yu in the Guardian:*

<https://www.theguardian.com/profile/verna-yu>

- We [The Guardian] won't let Brexit come between us...

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