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Beijing Protests a Lab Leak Too Much

By Perry Link

I am as eager as anyone to follow the world's virologists as they try to determine how Covid-19 emerged in Wuhan, China. But as a longtime student of Chinese Communist political language, I will need considerable persuading that the disease came from bats or a wet market. The linguistic evidence is overwhelming that Chinese leaders believe the Wuhan Institute of Virology was the source.

Many years ago a distinguished Chinese writer, Wu Zuxiang, explained to me that there is truth in Communist Party pronouncements, but you have to read them "upside down." If a newspaper says "the Party has made great strides against corruption in Henan," then you know that corruption has recently been especially bad in Henan. If you read about the heroic rescue of eight miners somewhere, you can guess that a mine collapse might have killed hundreds who aren't mentioned. Read upside-down, there is a sense in which the official press never lies. It cannot lie. It has to tell you what the party wants you to believe, and if you can figure out the party's motive—which always exists—then you have a sense of the truth.

A few years ago another outstanding Chinese writer, Su Xiaokang, brought me one step deeper. You Westerners, he explained, are too hung up on the question of whether propaganda is true or not. For the regime, truth and falsity are beside the point. A statement might be true, false or partly true. What matters is only whether it works. Does it advance the interests of the party? The top leaders hand out words and phrases for their minions to use, like trowels in a garden. The minions dig with them.

After the Communist Party locked down the city of Wuhan in winter 2020, a local writer named Fang Fang began recording the conditions and moods of the people around her and posting entries on the Internet. "Fang Fang's Diary" quickly attracted a large following, and the author became known as "the conscience of Wuhan." Michael Berry, a UCLA professor of Asian languages and cultures who was translating one of the author's novels, went to work on her posts as well. They were published last summer by HarperCollins.

The book, "Wuhan Diary," consists of plain truth-telling. It is unadorned, simple language that stood out in Wuhan only because no one else was daring to write anything. But the regime's response was to attack Fang Fang more ferociously than any Chinese writer has been attacked since Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s. In his day, Mao had made "struggle" a transitive verb: to struggle someone was to surround him or her, in the street or on a stage, and hurl taunts, insults, threats and demands for confessions; no bystander would dare speak for the struggled for fear of becoming the next target. Verbal abuse often led to physical beatings, sometimes even to death.

Xi Jinping has revived struggle in a form that might be called “cyberstruggle.” The young zealots of Mao’s era, called Red Guards, have been replaced by equally frenetic strugglers nicknamed “Little Pinks.” In spring of 2020, Little Pinks and others struggled Fang Fang: “Down with the imperialist running dog and traitor to China, Fang Fang!” To them, the diary was a “pile of messed up garbage and

Strong evidence the virus escaped: the Communist Party’s vicious attacks on anyone who speaks out.



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fabricated rumors [that] should be called ‘Fang Fang’s Sexual Fantasies!’” She received death threats. A witch hunt identified her supporters and began to struggle them, too. Mr. Berry, her translator, wasn’t spared. Hundreds of text messages arrived on his cell phone: “You ugly white devil, feasting on the flesh of man and drinking human blood, the eighteen realms of hell were created especially for you!”; “If you ever set foot in China again I will kill you”; and others.

The invective may tell us something about the origins of Covid. Two facts are worth noting. First, the attacks are coordinated, not a random explosion of vitriol. Second, they are much stronger—orders of magnitude stronger—than other verbal attacks on individuals in China recently have been. These two facts, taken together, make it all but certain that the campaign against Fang Fang came from the top.

Borrowing Wu Zuxiang’s technique of reading “upside down,” what the Fang Fang campaign tells us is that Xi Jinping is extremely worried that the world will hold his regime responsible for the pandemic. The most radioactive question has been where the virus originated. Fang Fang made no mention of whether the virus originated in a wet market or a lab; she merely documented all of the suffering that began in Wuhan. The regime’s focus on the origins question alone all but screams a truth.

The Chinese Communist Party’s official account of the virus is that it “jumped” from bats to humans at a wet market not far from the Wuhan lab. The city government was quick to close down that market, seal it off and provide the world with photos showing that the sealing had been done. Why were the authorities so swift and conspicuous? Because they suspected the wet market or because they wanted the world to? If they were certain that Mother Nature was the culprit, why silence their scientists and seal laboratory records? And why begin a vicious cyberstruggle against someone who records daily life as she sees it?

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