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the other SARS epidemic

By John Hughes '02

In the weeks before I left for my job teaching English in Wuhan, in central China's Hubei province, I worried about whether I would be a good teacher, how I would cope with spicy Sichuan cuisine every day and even whether Chinese girls would like me. I didn't, however, give a thought to the possibility that a deadly disease—and the even more invasive rumors that accompanied it—would consume my life so fully that, in the end, I would count masks as I walked down the street, trying to time my breathing so I exhaled as I passed large groups of people in the congested city of eight million.

Before the disease was named Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome in the Western press, it had a Chinese name that I never was able to pronounce. One heard vague references to it in conversation, and soon it had spread through the population—the rumor, I mean. Not the infection.

It was the speculation that decimated our English-language classes, not because students were sick, but because they were afraid. In the days before our classes were officially postponed, there were more and more empty seats. A colleague told me of a hospital on the outskirts of the city that was supposed to house a number of SARS patients and had supposedly been quarantined. I heard from another colleague's student, a doctor, that a couple of hospitals around Wuhan held SARS patients. Yet the official tally of SARS cases in my province of 60 million people remained at a single patient. Rumors sparred with increasingly drastic government anti-SARS initiatives until I no longer knew what to think.

My school finally shut down temporarily after the government advised that people avoid public places. I was left with little to do other than observe and absorb the fear that was percolating around me. I watched scores of people in protective suits swarm the buses around the city to spray every last surface with disinfectant. I wondered why masked doctors in white scrubs sat like sentinels at the gate of the Wuhan Infectious Disease Hospital on my street, though there weren't supposed to be any SARS patients there. After the government shortened the May holiday, the Hubei Foreign Affairs Office went so far as to discourage expatriates from leaving the province by proclaiming that any who did try to leave would be fired from their jobs. All this in a province that had a reported infection rate so minuscule it was almost nonexistent?

In reality, the numbers did not reflect the fear that swept through the city. Every day hundreds of rumors in Wuhan accompanied the official SARS count increases country-wide. When the case count for Hubei did finally jump from one to two, it involved a man who took a train from Beijing to Hankou station, a couple of miles from my apartment, and then hopped on a bus that took him to the rural countryside north of the city. The man became the second official SARS statistic, but enough rumors flew about others he may have affected on the train and bus to make me wonder whether anybody had been spared. I heard of countless friends of friends of friends who had ridden the train to their homes in the city and were now sick. What if even a handful of the rumors were true? And what about all the other rumored



patients I had heard about that did not make the news?

Of course, not everybody in Wuhan wore masks. I didn't, because someone told me that a mask wouldn't do much good unless you wore gloves and took other preventive measures, too. In Wuhan people continued to live and work as normally as they could. Still, somewhere among us, we were sure, was a potentially fatal disease that had no known cure, infected both young and old alike and spread mysteriously. It could be living on the stalks of the vegetables I bought in the markets or on the elevator buttons in my 20-story high-rise apartment building—buttons that people pressed countless times daily.

Vegetables and elevator buttons could transmit SARS, at least according to the rumor mill. The rumor mill—and the fear it produced—turned out to be an epidemic in itself.

In the end, it was fear rather than the actual SARS cases that caused me to cut my stay short. I was weary of waking up every day wondering whether I was developing a dry cough. I didn't want to have to worry when a friend or colleague was locked away in an isolated SARS ward somewhere in the city.

I left China, and my friends and students, and returned to the United States. Here the story continued with reports of SARS outbreaks in Toronto and disagreement over travel bans there. SARS surfaced in Russia, and back in China they introduced spitting bags, portable spittoons to keep the virus from spreading on the streets. Reported cases waned in China, but a few still popped up in Hong Kong. Officials from the World Health Organization conferred with Chinese health officials to prevent outbreaks in the future.

Of course, I won't show up in any of the statistics related to the SARS scare. But it seems that there should be a category for people like me, if the true impact of the disease in our increasingly global society is to be measured. After all, like many of us infected by the contagion of fear, I was a SARS victim without ever becoming sick.