

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM
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April 2, 2020

The Honorable Michael R. Pompeo
Secretary
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Pompeo:

On February 13, 2020, the *New York Times*' podcast *The Daily* loosely outlined the story of Dr. Li Wenliang, from Wuhan Central Hospital in China, and the suppression of his message about the novel coronavirus (COVID-19).¹ Dr. Wenliang succumbed to COVID-19 but has been hailed as a heroic whistleblower; his early warnings and candor about the virus saved countless lives by helping global health professionals more quickly understand the dire situation we are currently confronting.²

China, like many authoritarian regimes, tightly controls its internal information flow and media. Misinformation from China over the past several months has severely crippled global action to combat the global pandemic and undermined efforts by the State Department to work with other nations around the world to bring a swift end to this crisis.

In late December 2019, Chinese health officials reported their first cases of an unknown virus connected to a market in the city of Wuhan.³ On January 11, 2020, China reported its first death related to COVID-19.⁴ Since then, the World Health Organization has named COVID-19 a global pandemic,⁵ and COVID-19 has infected over 900,000 people worldwide—over 200,000 in the U.S. alone—and killed over 45,000 people worldwide.⁶

¹ *Fear, Fury, & the Coronavirus*, N.Y. TIMES, *Daily* podcast (Feb. 13, 2020), available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/13/podcasts/the-daily/coronavirus.html>.

² *Id.*

³ Holly Secon, Aylin Woodward & Dave Mosher, *A comprehensive timeline of new coronavirus pandemic, from China's first COVID-19 case to the present*, BUSINESS INSIDER (Mar. 27, 2020), <https://www.businessinsider.com/coronavirus-pandemic-timeline-history-major-events-2020-3>.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ See WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 (Mar. 11, 2020), <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>.

⁶ *Id.*; Coronavirus, COVID-19 Global Cases by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CCSE), JOHNS HOPKINS <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html> (last accessed Apr. 1, 2020).

Since the discovery of the virus in December 2019, China has taken extraordinary efforts to hide its origination and early spread. These include:

- 1) **Alleged mass coordination between Chinese health officials and the Chinese government to conceal the spread of COVID-19.** According to a recent report from the U.S intelligence community, China severely underreported both its total number of cases of, and deaths caused by, COVID-19.⁷ The report details efforts by the Chinese government to continually alter their reporting methodology which, at different points, left out individuals who tested positive but were asymptomatic—despite their ability to remain contagious.⁸ The global health community relied on these early Chinese reports to plan responses in other countries, and such underreporting may have led other countries to operate under false assumptions regarding the spread of the virus.⁹
- 2) **Alleged government-led propaganda campaigns to blame other countries for the spread of COVID-19.** According to a cyber security report, Chinese state-run media began shifting the blame for the pandemic away from China and instead painted China as a global leader in the response to the pandemic.¹⁰ A spokesman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry openly blamed U.S. servicemembers for originating the virus in China.¹¹ China further censored and detained any Chinese official, including doctors, who tried to warn of the true origins of the virus.¹²
- 3) **Reported efforts by the Communist Party of China to censor and silence whistleblowers and scientists.** Dr. Li Wenliang died last month from COVID-19 after raising the alarm about the disease in late December. Before his death, Chinese officials forced him to sign an agreement not to discuss the disease further, only to rescind the order after the World Health Organization declared the disease a pandemic.¹³ Another report indicates eight doctors who discussed the outbreak on social media in December

⁷ Nick Wadhams & Jennifer Jacobs, *China Concealed Extent of Virus Outbreak, U.S. Intelligence Says*, BLOOMBERG (Apr. 1, 2020), https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-01/china-concealed-extent-of-virus-outbreak-u-s-intelligence-says?utm_source=twitter&utm_content=business&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=socialflow-organic&cmpid=socialflow-twitter-business&twitter_impression=true.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Insikt Group, *Chinese State Media Seeks to Influence International Perceptions of COVID-19 Pandemic*, RECORDED FUTURE (Mar. 30, 2020), <https://www.recordedfuture.com/covid-19-chinese-media-influence/>.

¹¹ Jane Li, *A conspiracy theory linking the US army to the coronavirus now has official Chinese endorsement*, QUARTZ, <https://qz.com/1817736/china-fuels-coronavirus-conspiracy-theory-blaming-us-army/>.

¹² Nicholas Kristof, *I Cannot Remain Silent*, N. Y. TIMES (Feb. 15, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/15/opinion/sunday/china-coronavirus.html>.

¹³ Emma Graham-Harrison, *The whistleblower doctor who fell victim to China's coronavirus*, THE GUARDIAN (Apr. 1, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/06/li-wenliang-coronavirus-whistleblower-doctor-profile.>; Chun Han Wong, *China Rescinds Penalty for Late Doctor Who Warned About Coronavirus*, WALL ST. J. (Mar. 19, 2020) [https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-rescinds-penalty-for-late-doctor-who-warned-about-coronavirus-11584637545.](https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-rescinds-penalty-for-late-doctor-who-warned-about-coronavirus-11584637545); Helen Branswell, *WHO declares the coronavirus outbreak a pandemic*, STAT (Mar. 11, 2020) <https://www.statnews.com/2020/03/11/who-declares-the-coronavirus-outbreak-a-pandemic/>.

were detained by Chinese officials.¹⁴ Further, Chinese officials gagged researchers who had sequenced the virus in late December by ordering them not to release their findings and to destroy their samples.¹⁵

- 4) **China expelled American journalists from the country.** On March 18, 2020, the Chinese government announced the withdrawal of press credentials of at least thirteen journalists, including correspondents for the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Washington Post*.¹⁶

Any of these actions taken alone would have hampered the ability for a coordinated global response. Taken together, however, the course chosen by Chinese officials dating back to December 2019 has led to economies broken across the globe and billions of lives upended as a result.

Chinese disinformation efforts have worsened the impact of the coronavirus pandemic and led to indescribable suffering around the world. It is essential the U.S. government works to combat this string of Chinese misinformation. As such, please provide a staff-level briefing no later than April 9, 2020 on State Department efforts to address China's misinformation. This briefing may be conducted remotely for convenience and safety issues. To schedule the briefing, please contact Committee staff at (202) 225-5074.

The Committee on Oversight and Reform is the principal oversight committee of the U.S. House of Representatives and has broad authority to investigate "any matter" at "any time" under House Rule X. Thank you in advance for your cooperation with this inquiry.

Sincerely,



Jody B. Hice
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on
Government Operations



James R. Comer
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on
Environment

¹⁴ Brendon Hong, *China Arrested Doctors Who Warned About Coronavirus Outbreak. Now Death Toll's Rising, Stocks Are Plunging*, THE DAILY BEAST (Feb. 3, 2020), <https://www.thedailybeast.com/china-arrested-doctors-who-warned-about-coronavirus-outbreak-now-death-tolls-rising-stocks-are-plunging>.

¹⁵ Tobias Hoonhout, *Chinese Authorities Gagged Laboratories in December over Coronavirus-SARS Connection*, NAT'L REVIEW (Mar. 17, 2020), <https://www.nationalreview.com/news/chinese-authorities-gagged-laboratories-in-december-over-coronavirus-sars-connection/>; Gao Yu, et al., *How early signs of the coronavirus were spotted, spread, and throttled in China*, THE STRAITS TIMES (Feb. 28, 2020), <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/how-early-signs-of-the-coronavirus-were-spotted-spread-and-throttled-in-china>.

¹⁶ Tony Munroe, Humeyra Pamuk & Helen Coster, *China expels American journalists as spat with U.S. escalates*, REUTERS (Mar. 17, 2020), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-china-media/china-expels-american-journalists-as-spat-with-u-s-escalates-idUSKBN2143AN>.



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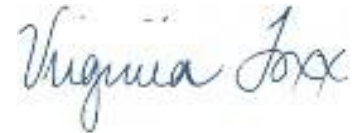
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The Honorable Michael R. Pompeo

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cc: The Honorable Carolyn B. Maloney, Chairwoman
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