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5-11-2020

## The Wuhan Wildings

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### Digital Commons Citation

Herring, Mark Y., "The Wuhan Wildings" (2020). *Winthrop Faculty and Staff Publications*. 88.  
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## The Wuhan Wilding

Not so long ago—about a month to be honest—I sat at my desk reflecting on my upcoming retirement. The stock market was on fire, unemployment was at record lows for just about every individual category, and business was booming. I worked very hard to keep my focus on the job at hand, but after forty years in this profession, I looked more eagerly to retirement. I frankly could not wait until I no longer had to answer to anyone. Or, rather, only one person: she who must be obeyed. But I had been answering to her with more or less success—I would say more, she would say less—for more than 45 years so there was nothing new in that, just the same going forward.

About the time I began packing my office up after twenty-one years at the helm here, I noticed a little story about some illness or disease in a province in China I had only a little familiarly with: Wuhan. In 2003, my daughter spent less than a year in Handan, China, a “little” prefecture-level city located in the southwest part of the Hebei province, teaching English as a second language. (I put little in quotes because it harbored about 10 million residents.) Handan is southwest of Beijing and considerably north of Wuhan so, I knew a little about the general area. She came back with stories of very hard-working people who had little help from their government, roads that were as perfect as anywhere in the industrialized world, and roads as treacherous as anywhere in the Third World, too. She ate at a beautiful restaurant with cloth napkins and tablecloths that also cooked dogs out back in vats. To say it was an experience would be an understatement, but she thoroughly enjoyed every minute of it. We enjoyed most her homecoming as the China trip came on the heels of a year in Russia, which had been preceded by a year in England. When she said she was returning to go to Columbia, we thought it was the country, not our state capital. Whew is also an understatement but a parental one.

In any event, I chalked up the Wuhan notice to another hantavirus-type story. That is yet another sad chapter about a country in which its inhabitants, at least some of them, could not find enough to eat and so ate animals that the rest of the civilized world exterminated.

By the end of January, all of that changed. Early on, medical organizations promised that the Wuhan Virus (Kung Flu as a friend of mine dubbed it) could not be transmitted from human-to-human, but those same organizations by early March declared it the horrific and highly contagious pandemic we are all now in. Alexander Pope is *almost* to the point here: “What dire Offence from am’rous Causes springs/What mighty Contests rise from trivial Things.” While amorous is still off limits, it did seem at first to be trivial. Now that it has upended everyone’s lives, crashed the world’s economy, and sent millions into unemployment, it can hardly be thought trivial.

Nearly all of us are now working from our homes, thousands of small businesses are struggling to make it to the end of the day, much less the end of the month, and millions of students have had their semesters pitched online. Professors who pooh-poohed online learning are now wishing they had paid better attention to how that Zoom thing worked. Graduating seniors, whether in high school or college, are having to forego their commencements. It is indeed an interesting time in which to live though, I doubt anyone will regret its passing.

Stressful times bring out the best and worst in people. Hundreds of spring breakers stormed the Palmetto beaches with little thought for themselves or what they might bring back home to older

parents and grandparents. A Rhode Island middle school teacher offered to pay someone with the Wuhan Virus to cough on the President, and scammers—who have always worked out of their homes, cars, trailers—are working overtime to catch the unwary by preying on their fears.

But there are also hundreds of stories that give you pause to smile. People in Spain, France, Italy, Israel, and the United States stood on their balconies or porches and applauded health care workers all over the world. A group of neighbors sang Happy Birthday to an 80-year old woman locked down in Italy. And students in Nebraska made get well cards to send to those in isolation, while dozens of people on the Internet have tried to make us laugh. (The best of the latter, at least if you're Southern, may be comedian Darren Knight's [Southern Mamas Quarantined](#), but only if you're Southern).

Of course nothing can compare to the unstinting, unselfish work of those in the health care industry: physicians, nurses, physician assistants, orderlies and the like. They see what this Wuhan Wilding is doing to people every day and yet they still go back to work. As a famous philosopher once had it, "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." These men and women are risking their lives not only for their friends, but for people they have never known before. Our hearts go out to them and their families.

Only a month ago, I began looking about to see what it would take to clean out my office as I prepared to head into retirement. Today, I look out the window of my study hoping that some day I'll get back to that office to empty it. But it's small beer to clean out an office when you look on as the world is writhing with Wuhan now.

We all look forward to the day when this is past us. But now, in the middle of it or wherever we are in this long and unhappy experience, we can learn what we can from it. The trivial things appear to be less and less what began this horror and more and more what our daily lives were caught up in.

We can only hope, as we move on from this nightmare, that we have learned better how to laugh, a little better how to love, and a little better how to learn what is most important in life.