

Transcript of Vice Minister Le Yucheng's Exclusive Interview with National Broadcasting Company (NBC) of the United States

On 28 April 2020, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng spoke with Janis Mackey Frayer of the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) at an exclusive interview. The following is a transcript of the interview:

Le Yucheng: First of all, it's my pleasure to do this interview with you. It is my first interview with a foreign media during this COVID-19 situation. I worked in New York for nearly four years, and I feel really sad when I see the once bustling Times Square, Broadway and Fifth Avenue have become so empty these days.

So I want to take this opportunity to convey through NBC my heartfelt sympathies to the Americans and New Yorkers when they are in the fierce fight against the virus.

This morning, I woke up to learn from the news that the US has nearly one million COVID-19 cases. I feel very sad to know this.

Now at this critical and trying moment, China and the US must put aside all the differences, all the disagreements, just forget them, and join hands to confront our common enemy, the virus. I believe that together we will win and together we will make a big difference for the world. That's my opening remarks.

Janis Frayer: To follow your opening remarks, do you believe we are now in a situation where the virus has become too politicized?

Le Yucheng: Unfortunately, some politicians have gravely politicized the COVID-19 issue. This is not something we want to see. Under the current circumstances, it is the time for solidarity, for working together to combat the virus and tide over the difficulties. It is not a time for accusation and political manipulation.

Janis Frayer: This is a time when people are calling for transparency on all sides. Can you take us back to the beginning of the time line here in China, the early days of when the cases were first being acknowledged by the CDC officials in Wuhan to when the lock down happened in Wuhan. What was happening within China's government during that period? Take us inside.

Le Yucheng: China has been open, transparent and responsible in its COVID-19 response. We did not cover up anything, and did not delay any efforts. We have already publicized the time line of how we have shared the information on COVID-19.

I would like to highlight three important points in time: First, 3 January. Starting from then, China has been updating the WHO and relevant countries, including the United States, about COVID-19 on a regular basis. On the following day, the heads of CDCs of China and the United States touched base with each other.

The second one was 12 January. China timely shared with the world the whole genome sequencing of the coronavirus, which has been critical for diagnosis, treatment and vaccine development in relevant countries.

The third one was 23 January. We put Wuhan, a city of over 10 million people, under quarantine. That was a momentous decision that was unseen before in our history. It was a massive action that has caught the world's attention. The US government should have become fully aware of the severity of the issue. If it were anything less serious, how could we lock down an entire city?

As for the early stage of China's COVID-19 response, we invited a WHO-led joint expert mission for a field visit in China, which included two US medical experts. The group went to Beijing, Guangzhou, Sichuan and Hubei. Following the visit, it released a comprehensive report which gives full recognition to China's response efforts. President Trump himself, during his phone call with President Xi Jinping and in his tweets, spoke highly of China's transparency and response efforts. He said that the data China shared was helpful for the US in COVID-19 response.

Janis Frayer: The US intelligence has suggested that China has artificially lowered the case numbers and the deaths and there were multiple revisions to the way that China was counting for coronavirus cases. So is it understandable that there is some skepticism about the numbers that China has been reporting and whether they are real?

Le Yucheng: You mentioned US intelligence services. As is known to all, for more than once what they said caused disasters to the world. It was the US intelligence which claimed that Iraq had "weapons of mass destruction", yet till this day those weapons are nowhere to be found.

China has been open, transparent, with good faith, and truthful when it comes to the release of data. We bear in mind our responsibility to history, to the people and to the lives lost to COVID-19. What we've done can stand scrutiny. There is no need for cover-ups. This is all about real people. It is literally impossible to hide anything. On the contrary, some countries once said that COVID-19 was just a common flu, and in fact that is cover-up. Now we are restoring economic activities across the board and have lifted travel

restrictions on Wuhan. How could we have been confident in so doing if the case numbers were artificially lowered and not real?

The revision of the case numbers was done out of a sense of responsibility. It is also a common international practice. To my knowledge, New York also revised its local case numbers recently. Challenging the truthfulness of the numbers of confirmed and fatal cases China has reported is highly disrespectful to the 1.4 billion Chinese people, especially millions of Chinese medical workers. The numbers we have released point only to the effectiveness of China's response efforts. What they reflect is China's experience, not China's cover-ups.

Janis Frayer: So Americans can be one hundred percent confident in the numbers?

Le Yucheng: Yes, absolutely.

Janis Frayer: There are a lot of questions that are swirling about the origin of the virus. A lot of theories about the origin of the virus. How willing is China to allow an independent international investigation into where and how the coronavirus started?

Le Yucheng: Some say that, for thousands of years, mankind has been battling against all kinds of viruses, but never seems to be able to claim an ultimate victory. Viruses can be really cunning. Their source is a serious and complex matter of science that must be studied by scientists and medical experts. Something strange now is that a few political figures, who supposedly are economists and intelligence people, are giving sensational accounts of the source of COVID-19. It is widely confirmed by experts that COVID-19 is not from labs. But some politicians are so insistent on the assertion of COVID-19 coming from a lab in Wuhan. Don't you think this is preposterous? A joint statement by 27 professional experts published at the Lancet, a world-class medical journal, also reaffirms that COVID-19 has a natural origin, and is not artificially synthesized. We need to listen to experts, rather than politicians. We need to respect science and refrain from resorting to conspiracy theories.

You mentioned international investigation. We are candid, and we are open. We support professional exchanges between scientists, including exchanges for reviewing and summarizing experiences. What we oppose, however, is unfounded charges against China. One should not accuse China first and then run so-called international investigations just to make up the evidence. This is arbitrary investigation based on the presumption of guilt. That is what we firmly oppose. As I said just now, the WHO-led expert group visited Wuhan timely. As for the Wuhan Institute of Virology, it is open to international communication. Ever since its establishment, it has received visits by many

international scientists, including those from the United States. Just recently, the head of the Institute took an interview with a foreign media, and made it clear that the Institute has neither the intention nor the capacity to engineer any kind of virus.

Janis Frayer: But could a science-based investigation satisfy some of these questions and expectations we have apparently on China's part? And perhaps help countries that are still currently fighting COVID-19, help them adapt their responses in real time?

Le Yucheng: The international investigation, if there is any, should have a solid basis. Why is this investigation only targeted at China? Is there any evidence to show that China does have problems? Why isn't there any investigation of other countries? Even for the sake of reviewing for improvement, then science-wise, don't those countries with rapid spread and surge of confirmed and fatal cases have their own problems? We oppose politically-driven investigation for the purpose of stigmatizing China.

Janis Frayer: There have been some state media that have reported this theory that the virus was actually linked to the US military. And this is a theory that was amplified on social media by Chinese embassies, some Chinese ambassadors. Is this an official Chinese position? If not, why allow this disinformation?

Le Yucheng: Chinese government officials, the general public and individual citizens are outraged as some US political figures are using COVID-19 to slander China. They are entitled to express their feelings, to question and rebut those slanders by various means. Here in China, business leaders, customs officials and diplomats are working so hard and around the clock these days to produce and pool together supplies for COVID-19 response in the US. But what we have heard all the time is bashing and slandering against China by some US politicians. Try to put yourself in our shoes: how would you feel if you were the Chinese people? Even worse, a Republican campaign memo goes so far as to advise the candidates to address COVID-19 issues by directly attacking China. Such flagrant moves have taken political manipulation to a level beyond anyone's imagination. Of course the Chinese people find them unacceptable, and have every right to express their outrage.

Janis Frayer: So it is a disinformation war? If the US is engaging in disinformation, is that why China is engaging in disinformation as well? Merely asking if it is the position on the Chinese side to allow this sort of disinformation or theories to be distributed or amplified by state media and on the websites of Chinese embassies.

Le Yucheng: Are you suggesting an international investigation on the relevant disinformation? China's position is clear. This virus is cunning, and its source is a complex issue that has to be addressed by scientists rather than politicians.

Janis Frayer: You started our conversation talking about your time living in the US and being very concerned for friends who are there. What is your view on how the US has handled the pandemic?

Le Yucheng: I don't want to comment on the COVID-19 response in the US, otherwise I would run the risk of "interfering in US domestic politics". But since you raised this question, I would like to put forward to the US government this suggestion: better find the real enemy in the future. The National Security Strategy that the US issued at the end of 2017 described China as a "strategic competitor". Some in the US used that as a basis to paint China as an enemy, clamoring for a whole-of-government and multi-pronged posture against China.

What has turned out to be now is that the true enemy of the US is COVID-19, not China. The virus has claimed 56,000 lives in the US. China is a partner fighting the virus alongside the US. If the US had taken the virus and other non-traditional security threats as its major enemies since 2017, things might have been different today in the US and beyond.

It reminds me of one famous saying from Chairman Mao Zedong: a first-order question in revolution is to discern the true enemies and true friends. I hope that in the future, the United States will identify the true enemy with greater precision, and will not mistake partners as opponents again.

Janis Frayer: Is China willing to accept a degree of responsibility for how the virus spread and how it became a global pandemic? This is certainly a question on the minds of a lot of Americans, not just politicians.

Le Yucheng: I must first correct your framing of the question. COVID-19 was not caused by China. It is a natural disaster. China is a victim, not an accomplice to it. China has contributed to the global efforts against COVID-19, and has been a partner of the world along the way. A virus can come and go without any trace. It can appear in any place in the world. Holding China accountable for the spread of COVID-19, or even demanding reparations from China, is a preposterous political farce. It has no legal basis. There is no international law that supports blaming a country simply for being the first to report a disease. Neither does history offer any such precedent. Second, it runs counter to common sense. China was among the countries hit by the first wave of COVID-19. China has suffered enormous losses and made big sacrifices in curbing the virus. We have

gathered important experience, gained precious time and made a big contribution for the world's battle against the virus. What China deserves is fair recognition, not groundless accusation.

The unreasonable and legally unfounded demand for China's reparations is not different from blackmail. The intention is nothing but shifting blame to China for the inadequate response of someone else. Blame game finds little support, and ends up nowhere.

Janis Frayer: With an increasingly negative view of China in the United States given this extraordinary situation, with it now appearing as though President Trump is molding part of his re-election campaign along an "Anti- or Blame China" strategy, what is your outlook for US-China relations, particularly in an election year?

Le Yucheng: Inside the United States, there are some negative views or comments with regard to China. But I also know that many Americans with fair judgment are calling for more cooperation with China. They oppose decoupling and a new Cold War. The China-US relationship, being such an important relationship between two major countries, should not be defined or handled in a way that serves only the purpose of one election. Nor should election be used as an excuse to shift groundless blame to China, undermine China-US cooperation, or pit the two peoples against each other. That is simply shortsighted and irresponsible. Whatever differences or disagreements between China and the US, they look pale when we consider the well-being of the Chinese and American peoples and their shared aspiration for a better future.

Our two countries, China and the United States, can and should engage in cooperation. The United States is making America great again, and China is pursuing national rejuvenation. These are two historical processes that could run hand in hand without conflicting each other. China and the US are actually in a good position to help each other succeed and achieve greatness together. We must not let this relationship be led astray or brought to a wrong course by a small bunch of extreme forces. At stake is the future of our two peoples.

Looking ahead, I think the two countries must first of all work together to advance a relationship based on coordination, cooperation and stability, which is an important common understanding reached between the two presidents. Specifically, the two sides should move forward in three areas and reject three ill-tendencies. We need to step forward to: first, maintain frequent communication between our leaders as well as dialogue and coordination between the relevant departments on both sides; second, advance practical cooperation in all areas; and third, promote international cooperation on COVID-19 at multilateral platforms. At the same time, we must reject: No.1, stigmatizing

China and politicizing the virus issue; No.2, disruptions or damage to bilateral cooperation; and No.3, a zero-sum game in the context of COVID-19.

Janis Frayer: The US has, or President Trump, has said that he's going to withdraw funding to the World Health Organization in large part because what is seen as the organization's deference to China, that the WHO is too pro-Beijing. How will China respond to those accusations.

Le Yucheng: The WHO has done a great job in living up to its duties and responsibilities. It is very professional, very responsible and highly efficient. It does not center around any particular country. It is devoted to protecting lives and health of mankind. Its performance has been widely applauded by the international community. Besides the United States, I have not heard any leaders and any international organizations criticizing WHO's performance. The US decision to halt financial contribution to the WHO is not a wise one. At this critical moment, what the US needs to do is to focus on combating the virus, instead of opening fire at the WHO which is coordinating the international efforts in fighting the virus. By so doing, the United States actually has chosen to pit itself against the whole world. Such moves will only undermine WHO's efforts to coordinate the international response and save lives, especially the response in developing countries, African countries in particular. I don't understand what logic the US is following.

Janis Frayer: I have two more questions if that's okay. I realize that we are nearing our time. Being at this point in the time line of the epidemic here in China over the past several months. Are you satisfied, is China satisfied with its response to the outbreak here, to the epidemic in China and to the pandemic that's spread around the world?

Le Yucheng: China has gone through a lot in the past months, and has finally stemmed the spread. Along the way, considerable experience has been accumulated. Let me mention the following:

First, we have put people's lives front and center. We have adopted a people-centered approach. We spared no efforts and no resources in saving lives, without worrying too much about economic cost. If lives are lost, what's the point of money? We have always taken saving lives our utmost priority. In Wuhan, for instance, more than 10 COVID-19 patients over 100 years old were cured.

Second, as a nation we looked out for each other. Nationwide, more than 40,000 health workers were rallied and sent to support the battle against COVID-19 in Wuhan, which was hit the hardest. From my home province Jiangsu alone, over 2,800 medical workers went to Wuhan and Hubei to join the fight.

Let me share with you a touching story. There is a young nurse who works in Wuhan. Her name is Gan Ruyi. During the Chinese New Year holiday, she was in her hometown 300 kilometers away from Wuhan. When she saw the news about the lack of health workers in Wuhan due to the lockdown, this young lady in her 20s, did not hesitate a minute to travel 300 kilometers back to Wuhan. Since there was no public transportation, she biked and walked for four days and three nights. She just wanted to play her part in this fight. This story is deeply touching for me.

Third, we actively engaged in international cooperation. Receiving help from other countries, we have also managed to help others. China has provided to the world an astronomical number of protective equipment, including over 20 billion masks, and billions of protective suits and protective goggles.

We also gained much experience in the fight against COVID-19. We adopted proven practices such as early detection, early reporting, early quarantine, and early treatment. We pulled together the best medical and technological resources and health professionals to improve treatment. We combined traditional Chinese medicine with western medicine in therapeutics. We mobilized nationwide joint containment and control efforts. These measures have proved effective and enabled us to control the situation, save lives, achieve a cure rate of 93.5%, and now restore economic activities.

Of course, COVID-19 has also exposed the areas where we need to improve. For example, this unprecedented situation reveals to us that we need to ramp up our medical teams and medical supplies reserve. Our community-level medical agencies shall be better equipped. Our R&D capacity for the therapeutics for some major diseases must be further enhanced. We also need to improve public education on hygiene, disease preparedness, etc. All in all, we will improve our work, build up the institutions and mechanisms for infectious disease containment and enhance public health emergency response.

Mankind has emerged stronger from the battles against the scourge of diseases, from smallpox, to the Black Death, to Ebola, to H1N1 flu. Each of these diseases has left mankind with valuable experiences.

Janis Frayer: Given the criticism coming from many quarters of the world that there was a slow response in the beginning, that there was information from whistle-blowers that was ignored or suppressed, that there was a slower response to what was recognized as potential for a pandemic, how do you then go about reassuring the international community that there have been lessons learned from this epidemic?

Le Yucheng: I think in comparison with some countries, China was fairly fast in responding to COVID-19, especially given the fact that China was among the countries hit by the first wave of COVID-19. Let me give you an example. On 23 January when Wuhan went under lockdown, the United States reported only one case. But on 13 March when a national emergency was announced, the United States reported over 1,600 confirmed cases. There are quite a number of US experts working in the WHO, and the US government was fully aware of the situation. And there are as many as 50 days of interval. How could anyone blame China? Where have those 50 days gone?

Janis Frayer: Lastly on a slightly different topic. There is a lot of speculation on media about the health of Chairman Kim Jong-un of the Workers' Party of Korea of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). Given the close relations between China and the DPRK, what can you tell us about his health?

Le Yucheng: I don't have information for you, and I don't know the source of the speculation that you mentioned. One thing I would say is that for things related to the top leadership of a country, media reporting needs to be based on a serious and prudent approach.