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By David Walsh
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76 Days:

On the front lines of the coronavirus battle in Wuhan

76 Days, a documentary about the 11-week lockdown (January 23-April 8) in Wuhan, China, the city where the pandemic began, was one of the best movies at this year's Toronto film festival. It contains some of the most authentic and memorable drama. The documentary is now available on "virtual cinema" platforms in the US.

The film is credited to Hao Wu, Weixi Chen and Anonymous (a local reporter in Wuhan who wishes to remain anonymous to protect his identity).

Wu, a Chinese-American film director (*Beijing or Bust*, *The Road to Fame*, *People's Republic of Desire*), edited the video footage shot in Wuhan by his two collaborators.



76 Days

The documentary does not offer any overall assessments or analyses. It is very much a close-up. Nearly everyone is a virus-infected patient or a health care worker. The intense immediacy is a limitation, but *76 Days*, at a time of unrelenting propaganda by the US government against the new "Yellow Peril," introduces its audience to the humanity and suffering of the Chinese people in an intimate and entirely legitimate manner.

Even more generally, it is a blow to the callousness and indifference of the media and political establishment everywhere, who argue—or imply—that the portion of the population

primarily succumbing to the coronavirus is valueless, dead weight, somehow less than fully human.

In the documentary, we see a woman begging frantically, but vainly (for health reasons), to see her dying father one more time. “Papa! You’ll stay forever in my heart,” she cries. In another scene, one of the most poignant and revealing, a desperate crowd of the sick presses for access at a hospital entrance. “Please cooperate!” the staff members plead. They promise that everyone will eventually be admitted.



76 Days (2020)

A nurse collects the ID cards and cell phones of the dead. The latter, often with images of the deceased or family members, are like small, glowing ghosts. A woman infected with the virus gives birth. “It’s a girl.” But the baby is taken away immediately, because of the mother’s health. Later, we will see both her and her husband waiting anxiously for their child. The happy reunion takes place as a nurse cheerily tells them the baby was a “big sleeper and a good eater.”

One “naughty grandpa” keeps getting up and roaming the corridors, looking for a way out to go home. Somebody says, “He was a fisherman. He’s restless.” Sick and frightened, he weeps. “I’m already one foot in the grave.” However, he turns out to be one of the lucky ones and survives. When he is finally released, staff members gather near the elevator to say goodbye to him. “I will never forget you,” he tells them.



Desperate people trying to enter hospital in 76 Days

In one of the final sequences, the conscientious nurse returns a dead parent’s belongings to a family member. “I’m sorry,” she says. “We tried everything.” “I know” is the simple response, as the crying woman turns to go.

In his director's statement, Hao Wu describes his reaction in the early days of the pandemic as it "became increasingly clear that the local government had lied and suppressed whistleblowers to conceal the outbreak. It also became apparent that the situation was dire in Wuhan—people were dying, hospitals were overwhelmed, and medical personnel did not have adequate protection so they were getting sick and dying too."

Later, in New York, he felt as though he were "reliving the Wuhan stories all over again in America—underprepared government, lying or scientifically ignorant politicians, scared residents, and exhausted doctors and nurses with no protective equipment. It shocked me even more, this second time around, because America supposedly had a top-notch public health infrastructure and a far-superior political system."

Frankly, without glorifying the role of Chinese officials, it is preposterous to suggest that the US "relived" the Wuhan experience. The lockdown in the latter city and accompanying measures contained and suppressed the virus. China has now fallen to 77th on the list of countries ranked by number of deaths, with 4,600 fatalities. The US, with one-fourth the population, has suffered 290,000 deaths, thanks to the homicidal government policy.

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In any event, *76 Days* is a valuable and moving work.