

CHINA

Be prepared, says epidemic control expert

Former Shanghai CDC chief attributes good control of COVID-19 to long-term planning

By LIN SHUJUAN in Shanghai
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Wu Fan remembers the first university class she attended and a story her lecturer told the students about how thankless working in public health can be.

The teacher shared a story from the *Han Shu*, the official history of the Han dynasties (206BC-AD 220), which tells the tale of a villager who built his chimney completely upright.

When another person reminded the villager to bend his chimney at the top and remove the pile of timber at the bottom to reduce the risk of fire, the villager ignored his advice. A fire started and his neighbors came to the rescue.

To show his gratitude, the villager prepared a feast for all his neighbors, except the person who offered the advice.

"By telling this story, our teacher was conveying the message that we should lower our expectations of receiving social recognition as a public health worker," laughed Wu, vice-dean of Fudan University Shanghai Medical College.

Wu, who has worked in disease control and prevention for nearly 30 years, said she is glad to see public perceptions are changing because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Never before has society attached so much attention to disease prevention and control," Wu said. "That's a big step forward for public health in China."

The 51-year-old earned the nickname "epidemic control wonder woman" earlier this year for the poise she exuded when fronting

news conferences as the leader of the Shanghai COVID-19 task force.

In the early stages of the outbreak, when little was known about the novel coronavirus, Wu had an inkling that the virus could be easily spread among people and suggested that local authorities immediately implement measures such as contact tracing and enforcing quarantines.

In recognition of her contributions, Wu was among 10 people recently honored as one of Shanghai's "most beautiful scientific and technological workers".

She said she sees the award as recognition of Shanghai's public health emergency response system, which the city has been improving for more than three decades.

"Public health doesn't work without a properly functioning system," Wu said.

Lessons learned

According to Wu, many Shanghai residents initially associated COVID-19 with the hepatitis A epidemic the city experienced in 1988. During that epidemic, about 300,000 people out of a population of 12 million were infected.

As a student at Shanghai Medical University, the predecessor of the Shanghai Medical College, Wu volunteered to assist at local clinics at that time.

"The Shanghai government has always been very rational in that it learns from its experiences," Wu said, referring to the fact that Shanghai has since invested significant resources in improving its public health management and epidemic control capabilities.



Wu Fan at her home in Shanghai. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

In 1991, Wu joined a local team specializing in disease and epidemic control. In the first few years, she found herself spending most of her time in Pudong, where millions of migrant workers helped transform a vast expanse of farmland on the east side of the Huangpu River into what is known today as the Lujiazui Financial Center.

"With the influx of millions of migrant workers, prevention of diseases such as cholera became a new

public health challenge at that time," she said.

To prepare for the new challenges, Shanghai set out to build a comprehensive public health network that allows for quick emergency responses.

In 1998, the city amalgamated several public health facilities into the Shanghai Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

The Shanghai CDC was the first center of its kind established in Chi-

na and is considered a symbol of the beginning of the reform of the country's public health system. It was the forerunner of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, which was created in Beijing in January 2002. Similar disease control centers have since sprung up in province-level regions across China.

Be prepared

The creation of the centers reflects more than just organiza-

tional restructuring, said Wu, who served as the director of the Shanghai CDC from 2007 to 2017.

"It was a policy response to the shifting of disease patterns, perception of disease, and governmental changes in China," she explained.

"One major challenge of public health is that the resources you have are always limited and you should always be prepared for the unexpected. That was why we had to build a system that was as responsive as possible."

Wu has said on many occasions that Shanghai's success in curbing the spread of the novel coronavirus was down to early detection, widely available and timely testing, effective contact tracing and 100 percent isolation of close contacts of infected people.

"This success could not have been achieved without the comprehensive public health network that the city has built over recent decades. Primary health care centers in communities have been very important," Wu said.

While the epidemic has also exposed gaps in the public health management system, Wu is confident that officials at all levels, including herself, will work together to quickly address the deficiencies.

She said nothing pleases her more than the fact that the public is now more willing to invest in health prevention, as evidenced by the heightened interest in flu vaccines ahead of the flu season.

"Public health measures cannot succeed without the contributions of every person in society," she said.

Peacekeeper helps defuse volatile situation in Africa

By LUO WANGSHU
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Police officer Zhang Kai remembers the exact time, date and place of his most frightening moment as a United Nations peacekeeper in South Sudan.

At 7:24 pm on Dec 13, 2018, Zhang and his colleagues arrived at a refugee camp's community center after a government agent was accused of gathering intelligence.

The cornered agent from Sudan's National Security Service had taken out an F1 hand grenade and pulled the pin.

Fortunately, the grenade did not explode, Zhang said, adding the area was crammed with women and children who had gone to the center for a movie night.

When he worked as a police officer at the Hefei police bureau in Anhui province, Zhang had battled criminal gangs and gained experience dealing with explosives.

He said he managed to put the pin back in the grenade, but there was still a chance it might explode. The nearest UN team that specialized in unexploded ordnance was 500 kilometers away.

As the commanding officer, Zhang decided to personally take the hand grenade to a safe area. He



Peacekeeper Zhang Kai (second from left) and four of his colleagues in South Sudan. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

cupped his hands around the grenade, and jumped in a vehicle driven "very slowly" by a Russian peacekeeper. The 1-km drive to a safe area took more than 25 minutes and the hand grenade was detonated the next day.

"It was a good call because if we had left the hand grenade there, it could have exploded at any time," Zhang said.

He said he was "very nervous but not fearful" when he held the gre-

nade. "All I thought of was to prevent the hand grenade dropping on the ground, which might trigger an explosion," he said.

However, when Zhang returned to his dorm, he said he was "filled with fear".

South Sudan attained independence from Sudan in 2011, but the country has faced ongoing challenges since a political standoff between two rival factions erupted into full-blown conflict in

December 2013. The conflict has produced one of the world's worst displacement situations with immense suffering for civilians, according to the UN.

Zhang, 31, said he wanted to serve as a peacekeeper when he was still young so he could create lasting memories that he could talk about for the rest of his life.

"I couldn't stand having no energy when life gets easier and more comfortable. Peacekeeping is a task my motherland needed to perform, and it was also something that I'm capable of doing," he said.

In April 2018, Zhang left the Luyang subbureau of police in Anhui and spent 879 days in South Sudan. His mission was originally for a year, but he extended it for another 18 months because of local needs and the COVID-19 pandemic.

He returned to China last month and was placed in quarantine in Hefei. As a police officer in the peacekeeping force, he handled many cases, from solving simple disputes to negotiating with local armed forces. Although Zhang's parents and girlfriend were supportive of his decision to serve as a peacekeeper, he sometimes felt guilty as he sensed they worried about his welfare.

"When I missed them, I talked to

them on the phone and looked at their photos," he said. "Luckily, they supported and understood what I did."

Zhang is one of more than 2,600 Chinese police officers who have taken part in nine peacekeeping operations around the world in the past two decades. Eight have died while carrying out their duties.

Chinese civilians, such as nurses and doctors, and military personnel have also played a key role in keeping the peace in South Sudan.

In January 2015, the People's Liberation Army dispatched a battalion of 700 soldiers to the United Nations Mission in South Sudan, according to the China's Armed Forces: 30 Years of UN Peacekeeping Operations white paper released last month.

Since then, six rotations of soldiers have been committed to the mission, the white paper said.

In July 2016, when an armed conflict broke out between government and opposition forces in the capital Juba, PLA soldiers risked their lives preventing militants reaching a camp where 9,000 civilians were sheltering. Corporal Li Lei and Sergeant Yang Shupeng lost their lives in the action and were awarded bravery medals by both the PLA and the UN. Chinese police officers were deployed for UN peacekeeping operations for the first time in 2000, when 15 were sent to East Timor.

Tianjin's 'blue bay' strategy paying off

By YANG CHENG in Tianjin
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Tianjin is stepping up environmental protection of its 153-kilometer coastline and improving water quality in the Haihe River and its tributaries.

The "blue bay" strategy adopted last year aims to improve ocean and river water quality and build a green corridor along the coast by 2035, said Lu Hong, director of the Tianjin Planning and Natural Resources Bureau.

Thirty five environmental restoration projects will be undertaken, including building a wetland park in the Nangang Industrial Zone, and a wetland area in the China-Singapore Tianjin Eco-City for protection of relict gulls. Construction of a national-level oyster reef protection zone is also planned.

Tianjin has toughened environmental requirements for new industrial projects and implemented a strict development plan for the natural coastline, Lu said.

Land reclamation projects that impinge on ecological protection areas will be dismantled, along with illegally constructed fish farms, salt ponds and boat docks, Xinhua News Agency reported.

As part of the strategy, the city began action this year to prevent pollution of the 12 tributaries of the Haihe River.

The action plan for the tributaries was released by the city's environmental department in March.

Other key projects include pollution prevention in the Yuqiao Reservoir, ensuring the quality of local drinking water and speeding up the building of wastewater treatment facilities.

Although in their early stages, the measures to improve the environment are already paying off, with the return of migratory birds in greater numbers.

Mo Xunqiang, a professor at Tianjin Normal University's School of Geographic and Environmental Sciences, said two of the nine global bird migration routes run through Tianjin.

"Each year, about 2 million birds stop to perch, rest, breed or spend their winter in the northern city and the figure is rising thanks to the city's escalating environmental protection efforts," Mo said.

Rural teacher rewarded by success of his students

By LI HONGYANG
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After Yang Ming saw a recruitment notice seeking volunteer teachers in rural areas in 2009, he quit his job in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, and signed up for the one-year project. Yang, then 25, could have earned 10,000 yuan a month working for a foreign trading company, but instead he chose to accept a volunteer teaching job in Guizhou province.

He taught Mandarin at Wachang Primary School in Qianxi county, Bijie, and received a monthly stipend of 500 yuan. Wang lived in a 30-square-meter room with another teacher and their only neighbors were cows. Sometimes fleas and mice kept them company.

Due to a water shortage in the county, they had to fetch water from an underground river in a cave. Every week, they walked 4 kilometers across hilly terrain to the nearest town to buy food and



Yang Ming gives a painting class to children at a kindergarten in Qianxi county, Guizhou province, in 2018. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

daily necessities. The project ended in 2010, but Yang decided not to return to Hangzhou. For the next decade, he dedicated himself to teaching the less-privileged children in Qianxi.

"At that time, my parents wanted

me to work for a company in a big city, but I preferred rural life and staying with children who reminded me of my childhood," Yang said.

"When they say 'Hello, teacher' to me, my heart is filled with happiness."

He now teaches math and computing to primary school students at Jinxiu School. As most of his students are left-behind children whose parents are migrant workers, Yang visits their homes outside school hours to witness firsthand the difficulties they face in their daily lives.

During a home visit last month, Yang learned that a student was having some psychological problems. The boy was being bullied by his classmates for having no parents. "The 10-year-old boy lives with his grandparents," Yang said. "His father died from disease when he was 8 months old, and his mother remarried and left the county. He always felt he was inferior to other children, which affected his academic performance."

Yang took matters into his own hands. "To make him feel secure, I told him that I would treat him like my own son and support him financially. After hearing that, he was so happy and kept calling me 'father'."

Over the past decade, Yang has

financially aided more than 100 students. He has given nearly 80,000 yuan (\$11,900) over the years even though his monthly salary was only 3,000 yuan, before recently rising to 5,000 yuan.

Yang is not only a teacher, but also a parental figure to his left-behind students. He takes them to the hospital when they are sick and during mid-autumn festivals makes mooncakes with them. During harvest season, he helps the children and their grandparents with farm work.

"I am happy being with them and seeing them grow up. They are just like my own children," he said.

Dong E and Dong Lan were two of Yang's students at Wachang Primary School. Dong E graduated from Fujian Normal University and Dong Lan from Guizhou University of Engineering Science this year, and both have applied for teaching jobs in the county.

"When they each told me on the phone that they had decided to become a rural teacher like me, I felt gratified to see students from the mountain return. My efforts had paid off," Yang said.