A few days before my return to classroom teaching at Sichuan University, I was biking across a deserted stretch of campus when I encountered a robot. The blocky machine stood about chest-high, on four wheels, not quite as long as a golf cart. In front was a T-shaped device that appeared to be some kind of sensor. The robot rolled past me, its electric motor humming. I turned around and tailed the thing at a distance of fifteen feet.

It was May 27th, and it had been more than three months since my last visit to the university's Jiang'an campus, which is on the outskirts of Chengdu, in southwestern China. In late February, when the spring semester was about to begin, I had hurried to campus to retrieve some materials from my office. We were nearly a month into a nationwide lockdown in response to the coronavirus, which had started in Wuhan, a city about seven hundred miles east of Chengdu. The university had informed the faculty that, at least at the beginning of the term, all courses would be online.

In those days, it still seemed possible to escape the disease by leaving China, and a number of foreign teachers at the university had departed. At the U.S. Embassy and consulates, nonessential staff had been evacuated, along with the spouses and children of the diplomats who remained. Throughout February, I answered e-mails from worried friends and relatives in the U.S. I reassured them that my family was fine, and told them that we had decided to stay in Chengdu, despite numbers that, at least at that particular moment, seemed frightening. On February 20th, when I visited campus, China's official death toll reached 2,236.