

## **2020 Wuhan COVID-19 Lockdown Oral Histories**

**CX Interview**

July 20, 2021

Virtual Meeting

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## CX Interview

**ROBERT BROWNING:** Okay, we'll get started. My name is Robert Browning working in conjunction with the Reuther Library at Wayne State University. Today's date is July 20, 2021. This interview is with CX, which is a pseudonym, about her experience of living through the COVID lockdown in Wuhan, China in early 2020. CX is located in Beijing at the moment. This interview is being recorded remotely and will be housed at the Reuther Library, which is part of Wayne State University.

The Reuther Library will keep administrative information about this oral history project, such as interview releases and deeds of gift in its case files. Case files are in a locked nonpublic area of the building accessible only to the Reuther Library staff. In the event of a criminal investigation or legal discovery proceedings, the Reuther Library could be compelled to turn over holdings and case files that are otherwise close to the public, including the case files for this oral history project. [00:01:09]

Okay, so are you connected with Wayne State University in any way?

**CX:** No.

**BROWNING:** Okay. And so are you originally from Wuhan?

**CX:** Yes, I am originally from Wuhan. I grew up in Wuhan.

**BROWNING:** Okay. Where in Wuhan are you from? Which district?

**CX:** Ah, my parent's home is located in Qingshan District, which is where the Wuhan Steel & Iron Corporation is located. It's the biggest state-owned factory. [00:02:00] So my parents worked for a university, so we live in a residential area for the teachers and staff of that university.

**BROWNING:** Okay. So what do you do for a living now?

**CX:** I'm doing a postdoctorate in Beijing.

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**BROWNING:** Okay. All right, so those are just some little preliminary background questions I have for you. And so I want to go back to maybe late 2019, early 2020. And just begin by asking you when did you first hear of the Coronavirus?

**CX:** When did I first hear of the Coronavirus? [00:03:01]

**BROWNING:** Yeah, do you remember?

**CX:** It was the time when I was still in Canada. I think that's January first or January second of 2020. And I saw a message in a WeChat group of my family members and it was like a picture of official documents that notified some of the residents in Wuhan that they are going to do some investigations about whether in that residential area people have something like a fever and lung disease. So I think those documents stimulated the fear of SARS. [00:04:02] That was the first time I heard about that there was a kind of—at that time, we thought it might be rumors because nobody had the evidence that SARS will come back again. But those were unusual documents and it stimulated a few discussions in the WeChat group among my family members. I think that's the first time. But just a few days later, there was some news on the internet, on social media, that said that these kinds of messages were not supposed to tell people that there were [a new] SARS. [00:05:05] Yeah, I think that's the first time I heard about the virus that we now call COVID-19, Coronavirus.

**BROWNING:** Right. So can you tell me a little bit about what you were doing in Canada?

**CX:** Ah, I was a PhD student. I finished my PhD degree in Toronto in November 2019. I planned to do a postdoctorate in Beijing, so I flew back in mid-January from Toronto to my hometown in Wuhan. [00:06:03] I originally planned to just to spend the Lunar New Year's vacation with my family and then go to Beijing.

**BROWNING:** Okay. So, obviously, your plans changed?

**CX:** Yes.

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**BROWNING:** So when did you return to China or Wuhan?

**CX:** I arrived in Wuhan on January fifteenth and I remember that night when I got off the plane and I met my parents. I remember the first few questions I asked my parents was about the so-called rumors of SARS. [00:07:03] They seemed to be quite surprised why I was asking these questions because for them they were totally rumors. I remember that my mother even said that the most advanced labs in Wuhan, the P4 research labs, were the most advanced labs in Wuhan. So those research institutes were supposed to prevent the virus, the SARS, so there should be no dangerous virus in Wuhan. [00:08:03] And then, of course, they thought it was rumors, even though they also heard about news about a lung disease of unknown reasons. There were a few cases of them. I remember there was news about the reported cases and they, of course, read some news through social media. And that was January fifteenth. I stayed at home for a few days and I remember that weekend—that should be the seventeenth and eighteenth—and that was the last weekend before the New Lunar Year. [00:09:05]

So usually there are family gatherings on that weekend. My husband and I went to a restaurant to meet all of our family members. We went out that weekend and there were a few quite weird things that happened I remembered during that weekend. The first thing I think which impressed me was—that was on January seventeenth—we went out for lunch and we needed to take the subway to get to a restaurant. [00:10:04] I remember most of the people were not wearing face mask then, though some had heard about the virus. I remember I told my husband, Just for safety reasons, we need to take the face masks with us. But I saw one guy was wearing a long raincoat and wearing I think the medical level mask and even a pair of protective glasses. This was in the subway station. So when I saw him, I was surprised. [00:11:08] I felt that maybe the situation with this kind of disease was more contagious than I imagined because someone had already started to wear all the protective gear. That was quite a strange moment, I think, on that day. Then I think people were spreading messages about these worries on social media, especially from the reports in Hong Kong. I remember there were a few reports in Hong Kong about cases. They found some cases in Shenzhen or somewhere else. [00:12:00] So the

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media outside of China began to notice this was a very contagious virus and even can be compared to SARS. So I think everything started from that weekend.

So most of my family members became quite anxious about this situation. And on January nineteenth, that was the day when Chinese doctors were on the CCTV to tell everybody there is definitely a contagious virus and people needed to start to protect themselves. [00:13:04] That night we heard the confirmed statements about the virus—that was January nineteenth. But what makes me feel quite anxious was that whole day, we could not find any more face masks and medical alcohol. Or any sanitary gear. They were all sold out in the pharmacies. [00:14:00] I remember I went out with friends for lunch on that day and then I went to a pharmacy near Wuhan University and asked one staff whether they have any more face masks, or *any* kind of face mask, and they told me that they were sold out. I asked them, When were they sold out? And their answer was in the morning, I guess, when they got the first group restocked, they were sold out immediately. It was at that moment I feel the situation was getting worse and it's out of control because it proved that more people were getting infected and there was obviously this fear and anxious feelings in Wuhan city on that day. [00:15:00]

**BROWNING:** Right, so could you tell me more about what the city was like? You know, what you saw when you maybe were moving around the city? What was your feeling or impression from the nineteenth to the twenty-third?

**CX:** From the nineteenth to the twenty-third? Uh, frankly speaking, after Zhong Nanshan and the experts gave the confirmed answer that this is a contagious virus and people can be infected, I think most people and everybody were afraid that night. [00:16:10] So the first thing I remember on the day of the twentieth, I think for my family members, the first task was to go to the grocery stores to buy as much food as we can. So this stimulates, I think, all of the fear and the grocery stores were full of people and that made the situation worse. I remember I think I went to the grocery store with my mother on that day. [00:17:01] The prices were okay, but you could see the grocery stores were like a fish tank with people buying food and all the necessary daily goods, yeah.

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**BROWNING:** Yeah, I mean I can remember there would be sometimes where the grocery stores in China could be pretty busy, but I can only imagine around that time it was probably *very* busy.

**CX:** Yeah, that day everybody went to the grocery store to buy as much food as they could. And after we bought groceries and any other necessary goods, we didn't go out. [00:18:08] I remember that. Yeah, but my father told me that when he went out, he was afraid. He went out and took the public transportation, the bus, on the date of the nineteenth, it was a Monday and he saw a man faint on that bus and fell down. He was leaning on my father's back. [Laughs] [00:19:00] There was a kind of fear that anybody who felt uncomfortable would be infected by this virus, so my father was terrified. I think for a few days he suspected he was infected by that man. [Laughs] Now we think it is funny, but, at that moment, we do feel that the contact between people was quite—people would be terrified by contact by sick people. Yeah.

**BROWNING:** Right. So your family was pretty cautious kind of early, I guess. At least a little early. [00:20:00] So when the lockdown actually—

**CX:** I remember the day of lockdown. I woke up quite early because I was still jetlagged. I remember that day because during those few days you can see lots of information through social media and I received all kinds of pictures, discussions from the WeChat groups, from my friends and family members. They were always circulating photos from Wuhan hospitals and how many people were queuing outside the hospital to get a bed. [00:21:00] And, of course, the reported number of patients surged during those days and, in Wuhan, people did expect that the state had policies to regulate, at least to regulate the worsening situation for medical care. But we didn't imagine there would be a lockdown. Because I had an experience of SARS in 2003. I was in Beijing in 2003, so I went through the whole SARS in university in Beijing. [00:22:00] So when I heard about the Wuhan virus, I just thought SARS came back again, even though all the researchers, scientists and doctors didn't confirm that it was SARS. But I thought the worst situation was starting to come back again. I didn't imagine that it was a new kind of coronavirus that's more contagious, more dangerous. Far more dangerous than SARS.

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And on the date of January twenty-third, I woke up quite early and I saw a message from my friends that the state had launched the lockdown of the city at midnight. [00:23:00] Obviously, they didn't want people to leave the city, so the message was sent at midnight. I think I was one of the first groups of people who saw the message because I woke up quite early. And when I saw that, it was a big thing. That had never happened in history. [00:24:00] And so that moment I thought everything was going to change, at least during that month or those few months. The whole city would be different. That was my first reaction. So I just wanted to go out and see what were other peoples' reactions. I just walked around my neighborhood. I was so stressed out that morning because I was living in a university and there were some areas where older people would gather. There was some public spaces that older people would gather together to dance in the morning or at night. [00:25:02] It is called *guangchangwu* [square dancing].

So that morning at six o'clock, I saw some grandmas, like, older women gathered together who were still playing music and dancing. They didn't even know that the city would be locked down that morning. Everything was changed, so that was a really strange moment. I think it was a totally weird moment for me, because even though there was this huge change, but the everyday routines—

**BROWNING:** —still carried on? [00:26:00]

**CX:** Carried on, yeah. So there was kind of split there. But, yeah, it was as if people were living in two different worlds and two different times even though they were in the same city. Many others were already suffering from the disease at the hospital. Some others may have already received the message of the lockdown and prepared to flee out of the city. But some others were still in this environment that they thought the normal daily routines could be carried on.

**BROWNING:** Right, like there was nothing going on?

**CX:** Yeah, yeah. [00:27:00]

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**BROWNING:** So when the lockdown began, for you, your family, I guess even your husband, too, what were the immediate challenges when it began?

**CX:** The immediate challenges. Um, of course, the first immediate challenge is that you feel that you have to get enough medicines or face masks or alcohol to protect yourself. And, you know, that the transportation became difficult, because all the public transportation shut down.

[00:28:02] Even though all of us had a car, you knew that meeting people would become hard. I lived with my parents those days and my husband lived with his parents. We were in totally different districts. Our two families were quite far away. Like thirty or forty minutes by taxi.

**BROWNING:** So is your family still living in Qingshan?

**CX:** Yeah, my family still lives in Qingshan District. [00:29:00] Yes. And, of course, we knew that we have to minimize our activities outdoors. I remember the first two weeks, like, my father or my mother went out once or twice a week to the grocery store to buy food. And my father had to be totally equipped with the mask, the hat, the glasses, when he went to the grocery store.

[00:30:01] Another difficult moment I felt it was hard to get [certain] services. For example, there was one day before lunch and we found that there was a problem with the gas stove in the kitchen. And my family, my parents, got quite nervous because they knew that, at that moment, they didn't want somebody else to come to our home to fix the gas stove. [00:31:00] And I think those workers would not provide such kind of service, because everyone wanted to minimize face to face contact. But without their service, we could not even use the gas stove. So that was a moment when we found out if all the services shutdown, it will be a problem. But luckily, my parents called the gas company. They provided the service through the phone, so we luckily solved that problem. [00:32:00] That's one moment I felt was difficult.

And because nowadays the state media often claim that community workers would provide services if the residents had any difficulty. But during the first two weeks, frankly speaking, you couldn't get help from the community workers because everybody was terrified and everybody wanted to minimize face to face contact. And everybody was [trying to] make sense of what



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was happening. So, during the first two weeks, basically it was about self-help. [00:33:00] So everybody was trying to make sense [of things] so each family can live independently with themselves in that situation and try to minimize face to face contact and try to minimize the chance to go to public spaces, or especially the hospital.

**BROWNING:** So could you tell me more about this system of community workers? Can you explain that to me?

**CX:** Um, so I think the community workers, you know, the Chinese system has this *juweihui* [neighborhood committee] system. It's like a neighborhood committee. [00:34:03] It was a socialist legacy. When it was socialist times, the neighborhood committees—the *juweihui*—was like, how do you say that? The units that represented the state at the micro level. So each residential area, I think the municipal government would distribute a plan and each residential area will have one neighborhood committee. [00:35:07] Usually the committee members, some of them were assigned by the local municipal government and some of them were just hired public servants with quite low salaries. And before this incident, before the Coronavirus, for a long time the *juweihui* system didn't play an active role in peoples' daily lives because of the fall of the *danwei* [work unit] socialist system and because nowadays the residential areas have become more commercialized. [00:36:06] Uh, for the commercialized residential area, the condos, or the apartments, they have their own company management that managed service for the condos, apartments and other commercial residential areas. So, for a long time, I didn't see any role that the *juweihui* played in the daily lives of local residents. [00:37:00]

But because of the Coronavirus, the state and the municipal government found that these local units of neighborhood committees should be revitalized again. So they had to take the responsibility to provide basic public services for local residents. But during the first two weeks, just like I said, it was totally messy. For two weeks, the neighborhood committees themselves were figuring out what was happening. [00:38:00] And most people were, just as I said, were hired with low salaries and they didn't even train, for example, to have any professional service to take care of suspected patients or to take care of those families who have any other

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difficulties, because each family had different problems. Like, some families have older people. They would go to the hospital regularly and they needed a car or other public transportation to help them and someone else would have all kinds of needs—basically, each family had problems. Some would not dare to go out. [00:39:00] I think some of my neighbors were afraid that whenever they went out, they would get infected. So I remember one of my neighbors I think for two weeks they didn't even go to the grocery store. They must have been short on food, but that was a situation where they also needed some help.

**BROWNING:** You know, I mean, I'm sure even families with small children or babies had challenges.

**CX:** Yes, yes. And yeah, also each community had some pregnant women. [00:40:00] So, the first two weeks, there were lots of complaints about the sudden shutdown and the messy situation and the incapability of the neighborhood committees. I would say the first two weeks there were just complaints, because they didn't know what to do. They were not trained to provide such services, but they had to face this quite challenging situation. So, there were a lot of conflicts between the residents and the neighborhood committees, *juweihui*. [00:41:00]

**BROWNING:** In your community or neighborhood?

**CX:** In my community, and I think in most of the communities, because I heard lots of complaints through my WeChat groups. I heard a lot through my friends. One of my friends complained that because the municipal government assigned basic antivirus stuff, like the alcohol, and they spray the medical alcohol and—how do you say? *Xiaodushui*? [disinfectant] But, anyways, they have to do the daily cleaning all around the residential area. [00:42:04] But one of my friends complained that some of the neighborhood committees would [just] perform, took pictures and didn't even clean the whole area and then just went back home.

**BROWNING:** Right, did as little as possible.

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**CX:** I partially understand because they were all human beings. They were afraid. They, at that moment, wanted to also protect themselves. So what I want to say is during the first weeks, actually, the whole so called neighborhood committee system, *juweihui* system didn't work at that time. [00:43:03] The first two weeks was all about self-help. People helped each other through WeChat. For example, the community that I was living was in a residential area of the university. My parents had worked for the university, now they are retired and live in the residential areas of the university. The university was like a *danwei* system and usually the neighbors know each other and they set up their own WeChat groups. [00:44:00]

And people found it was dangerous to go to the grocery stores because there were reported cases that people got infected in a grocery store. So people were afraid and didn't want to go to the stores to buy food. So they found a way to set up WeChat groups to collect information from somebody who knew a food provider and then then they sought to find—I remember there was a farmer who grew vegetables in another city Laohekou in Hubei province. [00:45:00] Because one teacher had connections with that farmer, so he just thought that maybe we can collect all the information, like, how many families who need food, and they would send vegetables and meat and rice, other kinds of stuff. They would send food directly from that city, from Laohekou to Wuhan. It's quite far away from there, but the connections were built through the social relations within the community, then they find a WeChat group to manage the food supplies. [00:46:00]

**BROWNING:** Right, and I would assume other kinds of other situations or challenges and problems, too, maybe. Like find people that you know to help you, I guess. So the first two weeks for you and your community were kind of chaotic, and in other places in the city of Wuhan, so did you feel that situation improved or got better in some way?

**CX:** I think it was not until late February that things got better. [00:47:04] Yeah, I felt that during the first two weeks I didn't even see a hope for solving these problems. Because there was a fast-spreading virus and each day you would see unbelievable increases in the number of

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patients, even though there were two new hospitals under construction, but you would still see a shortage of medical care. [00:48:00]

I think, for me, the turning point was the setup of the makeshift hospitals, the so called *fangcang yiyuan* [temporary hospital]. At first, there were rumors that people feared that it might be like another concentration camp, because there was this fear and nobody knew what was going on at that moment. [00:49:00] And the state recruited employees from state owned companies to help set up the *fangcang yiyuan*, to reconstruct some of the public spaces, like the gyms and the exhibition halls in Wuhan. I remember when it was first launched, some people feared that it might be like a concentration camp. But one can see that [once] it became effective, more infected patients were received to get treatment team in the makeshift hospital. [00:50:04] I think that was that moment that we saw the hope that there was a way to control the spread of the virus. Uh, so yeah—

**BROWNING:** —were you going to say something else?

**CX:** What I was going to say is that I think it was in February that many universities, including my parent's university planned for some of the dorms and classrooms to receive more patients. [00:51:00]

(crosstalk)

**BROWNING:** Yeah, go ahead.

**CX:** Yeah, even though later on the patient numbers decreased and they used those dorms and—

(crosstalk)

**CX:** They planned more places to host patients.

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**BROWNING:** Right, I see. I understand. Okay, so I want to go back to your personal situation. [00:52:02] Like, you were basically stuck at home. How did you keep busy? How did you avoid boredom?

**CX:** Yes, the first two weeks there were no restrictions for who can go out, even though you didn't dare to go out. For two weeks, you still had the freedom to go out of your residential areas. At first, I was overwhelmed by the information explosion. [00:53:00] I had never seen so many miserable messages all day. I didn't want to read all those messages, but because of the anxiety and I think the fear that you still wanted to keep up with the latest information to see if there's ways to solve these problems. So, basically, I think for the first two weeks, my family would keep reading messages from social media and the messages sent through the WeChat groups, or other information platforms. [00:54:06] My mom was lucky because she found a way to spend time to think about how to cook with limited food. (laughs) The funny thing is because in February, as I just said, we participated in the WeChat group to order some food directly from the farmers and you had no choice. Basically, what they sent you, you would eat. So it was just like cabbages and radishes, just these two kinds of vegetables. (laughs) [00:55:05] So there were lots of cabbages and radishes. We had to think of ways to cook those two kinds of vegetables for us three during those two months. And I think we ate those radishes until late March, for like almost two months. Radishes saved us for those two months.

**BROWNING:** Right, you probably were pretty sick of it.

**CX:** Yeah, for those two months. [00:56:00] Definitely. But at least we have these food supplies directly from the farmers. And we sought to find a way to do exercise at home and in the residential areas. Because we were told there was no effective medicines or any other treatment to cure this disease, so the best way for you to protect yourself is to exercise to stimulate your immunity. So we saw we exercised every day. [00:57:00] What else? Um—

**BROWNING:** Oh go ahead.

**CX:** Yeah.

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**BROWNING:** I want to go back a little bit. You talked about you and your family were reading messages and you were overwhelmed by the amount of information?

**CX:** Yes.

**BROWNING:** I mean, it might be an obvious question, but could you tell me more about the messages? And I guess you're kind of referring to news as well. But can you just tell me a little bit more about what kind of messages and information you were getting? [00:58:02]

**CX:** Oh, I remember, at first, it was messages and reports about the concealed information in the early stages, in late December and early January. So, obviously, the municipal government concealed the information from the public. So, at first, I was totally angry about this when I read more information about it and the so-called rumors would come through the WeChat groups. [00:59:03] And we found there were lots of cases concealed during those moments. That was my first reaction about the early controls of the municipal government.

The second thing was about the people who would seek help from Weibo or from WeChat, especially from Weibo. [01:00:04] They sent short messages—many of them were, like older people, or older people living with young children. Some of them didn't even know how to use cell phones and they needed to ask somebody else to publicize their message. And, you know, in the early stages, the infection was within the families. So if one family member got infected, in most cases, all the family members would get infected. [01:01:06] I think it was the most of horrible news in my life, even more horrible than horror films. Like a pregnant woman who was waiting outside a hospital or to wait for an ambulance to transfer her to another hospital. [01:02:00] Because most of the hospitals, at least in Wuhan, \_\_\_\_\_?? and especially for some special cases, like for pregnant women who got infected, most of the hospitals wouldn't have doctors or treatment to help them. And it was at that moment, I think the self-help media infrastructure to gather and spread this information was important. [01:03:01] I think there were a few people built up some WeChat groups, who would make up Excel forms to update each day how many patients [there were] and what kind of help they needed at that moment.

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**BROWNING:** Right, it's pretty complicated and had to be overwhelming, I'm sure. [01:04:00]

**CX:** Yeah, there were updates and during the first two weeks, there were rumors and news updates and statistic reports. I think almost each hour. Because, at first, you had lots of complaints about the municipal government and authority groups who received more medical care or more face masks than others. Oh, so there were these complaints about the Red Cross in Wuhan who totally didn't know how to manage the situation. [01:05:06] It totally collapsed at that moment. The NGOs, the so-called state sponsored NGOs were not effective at that time, so there lots of complaints and also the emergencies for people for requiring help.

Of course, there were lots of rumors. For example, there were rumors, I think in early February or during the time that the makeshift hospitals were set up. [01:06:05] There were rumors that the whole city of Wuhan would be governed by the army. They would launch another way to govern the city because they found it's hard to control the mobilizations, control the contact between the people and, of course, that makes it difficult to control the infection. [01:07:02] So there were rumors that [Wuhan] will be governed by the army, at the moment. There were these kind of rumors about something—there was a lot of information. I remember something was circulated through our family WeChat group that there was something like a virus or other contagious elements in the water. So you need to treat your water very carefully. [01:08:00] And, of course, there will all these special ways to protect yourself from the disease by taking the hot water baths and eating garlic or ginger. (both laugh) That was—

**BROWNING:** Wow.

**CX:** Yeah.

**BROWNING:** All right. So the first two weeks were pretty crazy. And, as I know, at some point they locked down the entire city, right?

**CX:** Yes, I remember it was in late February and, finally, they found a way to—because after most of the patients received treatment in the hospital, the government would close all the

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residential areas to prevent further infection. [01:09:00] So it was around the time of late February that each residential area prevented the residents to go freely outside. And that, of course, at first, caused many problems. [01:10:00] First of all, it's also about how to buy daily goods, like, cigarettes. Somebody needs cigarettes, even though they were not as necessary as food, but somebody would still need cigarettes or *youyangjiang* [soy sauce] or batteries. Our family was short of batteries. It was like the whole market system shut down suddenly, you could use online shopping, but it was hard to buy anything you need. [01:11:02] So there were all kinds of black markets, mini black markets, in each community. I think at that time there were regulations that most of the stores, or the grocery stores, should be shut down without permission of the municipal governments. But because of the needs of the people, some of the store owners were still secretly selling stuff to people. [01:12:00] I remember in our community, the *xiaomaidian* [small shop], they were like half open, half shut down where if you need anything, like, salt or vinegar, you can tell them and they will pick up the goods for you and you pay for it.

**BROWNING:** So they weren't exactly allowed to be open, but they kind found ways to do business?

**CX:** Yeah, they found ways, because they know people need things and if they can, they still want to do business. I saw people doing business across their doors or fences. [01:13:00] They would open little holes, so they could deliver stuff over the fences or doors to do business with the store owner outside the residential area. And then another thing, for our residential community, there were enclosures, so there were walls and fences and doors, but there were clear entrances [into residential areas]. But, for many old residential areas in Wuhan, there were not enclosures, especially for those old *danwei* residential areas. There were just roads and buildings and you didn't see enclosures, so the municipal government built several temporary blocks along roads. [01:14:06] Of course, there were no cars on most of the roads or public transportation. But they set up some temporary blocks on the roads in order to enclose a residential area.



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**BROWNING:** Right, to keep the people in.

**CX:** Yeah, to keep the people in and—

**BROWNING:** Could they go out in their neighborhood and walk around?

**CX:** Yeah, you can.

**BROWNING:** Like, in your community?

**CX:** Yes, you can walk around within that neighborhood. But, of course, they are trying to persuade you to stay at home as much as possible. But you can still move around within the community, otherwise, people will go mad. I would go mad. [01:15:04]

**BROWNING:** Right.

**CX:** So I think that started from late February, for my community, and I went out once around the time of January twenty-fifth, or sometime around that. I went out to buy face masks because, at that time, there new supplies at the pharmacy that you can go order online and pick up the face masks. So, if you have some reasonable need, then they will let you go out. [01:16:00] So I reported to the neighborhood committee that I would go out to pick up my face masks. On that day I went out, that's the first time I saw what it was like when the whole city was shut down. There were almost no cars on the roads, but there were moto cars, like, the people sent deliveries and community services would move around with a few moto cars. [01:17:06] And it was almost spring, at that time, in Wuhan and you can see that there was crazy birds creeping and dogs barking. (laughs) I remember it so clearly that you can hear the animals' voices. (laughs) Because [with] the decrease of human activity, the city became quiet, so—

**BROWNING:** Yeah, I'm sure it was kind of almost like a party for the animals.

**CX:** Yeah, yeah. [01:18:00] And I remember the only way for me to get to the pharmacy was to walk from my home. I saw, what I just mentioned, roadblocks to enclose some of the

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residential areas. So the Google map, the Baidu map, doesn't work because we didn't know that some of the roads were temporarily blocked. Most of the restaurants and grocery stores were shut down, but the pharmacies were still open. But you have to order online and pickup.

[01:19:03] I remember I went to one mini store next to the pharmacy because I wanted to get some orange juice and the mini store was like it was just robbed. It was totally messy; the displays were all chaotic and no one was managing all the goods and you have to try your best to find the things you need. [01:20:02]

**BROWNING:** Right, so within your community did everybody cooperate or did you have people that would fight or argue?

**CX:** Yeah, just like I mentioned, during those days communities have their own WeChat groups. The basic need was to set up a group to buy food together, because deliveries became difficult. If you can set up a large group, there were [special] fees and other efforts for delivery.

[01:21:00] So if you can make one hundred or two hundred orders at one time and the grocery stores or the companies would prefer to send whole packages of food at one time. So, almost, I think every community had several WeChat groups, and my mom joined WeChat groups.

**BROWNING:** Right, but was there ever anybody that would give trouble in your community? Or did you hear anybody that gave trouble about not following the guidelines, or about wanting to go out or some something like that? [01:22:00]

**CX:** Uh, it did not happen in my community, but I heard lots of complaints. Around mid-February, there were a few patients who had just light symptoms. [01:23:05] They just wanted to stay at home and didn't want to go to the hospital because of the chaotic situation during the first two weeks. Some of the patients didn't trust the government and the hospitals. They basically wanted to stay home, if they have only light symptoms, like coughing. But they were these conflicts that the neighbors pushed them to move out, to force them to go to the makeshift hospitals to get treatment, even though they didn't want to. So there were these kinds of conflicts. I remember I saw in other communities there these brutal ways. So some

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would—how to say? [01:24:02] Like, even ask the police to cuff them and send them to the hospital. But in my community, it was not that brutal, but I heard that there was this conflict. They called the neighbors who complained in the WeChat groups, because they feel stressed by those patients with light symptoms. They feel that it was not safe to live with them.

**BROWNING:** Did you—

**CX:** So yeah, finally I think several—*lingdao*—

**BROWNING:** Leaders? [01:25:00]

**CX:** The leader of the university persuaded them and I think they had a few meetings and, finally, persuaded those patients to go to the hospital.

**BROWNING:** Right. So, during the lockdown, my impression is that, and even here in America, you never really knew when it was going to end, right?

**CX:** Yeah, I think so.

**BROWNING:** So how did you feel about that feeling, just not knowing when is this going to be over?

**CX:** I think during the first two weeks were the most terrifying feelings. [01:26:00] You didn't know where it would go. Yeah, you don't know how it was going. You would see the numbers always increase, like, jumping up and never see it go down. So it was really terrifying, because Wuhan was the first place of the outbreak and no one had ever had the experience before. Really you didn't know during the first two or three weeks when it will end. I didn't know, at that time. I feel that my sense of time stopped at that moment. It was like my whole life was drifting with all the information and all my plans stopped. [01:27:00] The luckiest thing is that I was still safe, at that moment, and my parents lived with me and they were safe. That was the only thing I can control and other things were totally uncontrollable. Yeah, but I think when you saw the makeshift hospital became effective and the numbers of reported cases dropped

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down, I think that was quite a relief. And, in late February, because of the harsh restrictions they shut down all the residential areas, so I would say it was quite brutal. [01:28:03] And in some ways, it's even inhumane, but you still know that because of the harsh policies, the cases would definitely drop down.

**BROWNING:** Okay.

**CX:** So yeah.

**BROWNING:** So there had to be a time when you realize that the lockdown was going to end, right? You know, maybe it was announced or you just had a feeling? I don't know.

**CX:** I had a feeling. I think maybe it was in March and you didn't see any newer cases. [01:29:05] You saw there were lots of assigned teams of medical workers from all around the country. They all came to Wuhan to help the hospitals. And you heard the news and my mom once worked at the university hospital, so we kind of got information that things were getting better in the hospitals and some of the medical workers finished their jobs and returned home. [01:30:10] At that moment, yeah, we saw that maybe is the time—

**BROWNING:** —right, things were getting better—

**CX:** —that things would get better.

**BROWNING:** So on April eighth the lockdown ended. What was the first thing that you did?

**CX:** The first thing I did was to get a haircut. (both laugh) [01:31:02] I think in late March things we're getting better and we heard the community was providing free haircuts for older people. I even took pictures of them in public spaces within our community. All the hair salons were reopened after the lift of lockdown. So I remember on April eighth, the first thing I did was go to the hair salon and get a haircut. I remember I also got a new pair of glasses.

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**BROWNING:** Nice and simple. You know, but understandable. [01:32:00] You didn't go out and party or anything like that. Nice and simple. All right, so I have just a few more questions, but I should ask, did you have any relatives who got sick or people you knew that got sick?

**CX:** Yes, but they were not close friends. I know my friend's uncle passed away. [01:33:01] She was my high school schoolmate and she lives in Macau now. And, of course, when her uncle passed away, she was not there. That was one of the early cases I heard. Some of my parents' friends, one was a quite famous professor who was a friend of my father, a quite a distinguished professor at Huake University [Huazhong University of Science & Technology]. And my father remembered that they were having dinner, during January, and he told my father that he wanted to see the dentist before the Lunar New Year with his wife. [01:34:00] And that was the last meeting between them because later my father found out that they got infected when they went to the dentist. Because the dentist was in Tongji Hospital, a large hospital, who received most of the infected patients during the early stages. He was eighty years old.

**BROWNING:** Okay. [01:35:00]

**CX:** Yeah. So he passed away around time of the new year—late January. I remember that my father felt quite sad during that time.

**BROWNING:** Uh-huh, of course, that's understandable. It's unfortunate.

**CX:** But most of my close friends and family members were safe. My grandparents lived in another city, in Huangshi.

**BROWNING:** Okay.

**CX:** And they were taking care of themselves. I think that was the only thing that our family worried most about because they were over eighty. They needed to take care of themselves and they didn't know how to use cell phones. [01:36:02] They had to go to the grocery market

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to buy food. So, at that time, our family was worried, but, later on, because my aunt joined a WeChat group to order food for them. I think that was better.

**BROWNING:** I see. Okay. All right, so just a couple more questions then we should be able to wrap up. So, in your mind, and this is kind of a big question, how have things changed since the lockdown?

**CX:** Uh, how have things changed since the lockdown?

**BROWNING:** You could answer this in any way you wish. [01:37:00]

**CX:** Yeah, I know. Of course, it disrupted my whole plan. It changed my whole plan. I planned to begin my postdoctorate position in Beijing in February, but because of the lockdown and the shutdown, or the closure of all the universities, my work paused for a long time. I didn't start the position until late October 2020. [01:38:00] And I think that, for me, some part of my feelings, but I still don't know how to find a lucid way to express this, I just felt that some part of my mind, my body was frozen on the morning of January twenty-third, the day of the shutdown. Just like I mentioned earlier, it was like feeling of a split in time. [01:39:00] You feel that some part of your feelings still live with the feelings of the lockdown, with the Coronavirus, and you are living in an exceptional situation of that time and that exceptional situation, part of it, now became part of your normal life.

**BROWNING:** So do you still feel that way now to an extent?

**CX:** I still feel that way now because I think even though now in China there are not many cases and most people have gone back to normal life. [01:40:03] But I feel that—how to say? Uh, on the one hand, all of the surveillance infrastructure was more different than ever before. Everywhere you go there is surveillance because they need to control of all your trajectories and all the places you go and what kind of people you meet. All of your information will be obtained when you meet people. [01:41:00]

**BROWNING:** Right, do you think it's to manage the health situation or is there more to it?

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**CX:** Part of it, of course, is to manage the Coronavirus. It's a way to manage how we respond to the Coronavirus, but one of the ways is about social control. It's partially about that, yeah. Ultimately, it's a way to control the social relations, social connections, I think.

**BROWNING:** Amazing. [01:42:00]

**CX:** I find that, at least now, when I'm in Beijing, I feel that some of daily life is different because [now] people do even more online shopping. And people tried to reduce, at least, to reduce your chances to eat or meet in public. Even though things might be much better. And, of course, the small businesses—restaurants, cafes, cafeterias and bookstores were affected very much by this. [01:43:00] At least I know that some of the cafeterias and the vegetarian restaurants were shut down after the Coronavirus in Beijing.

**BROWNING:** Right, so how do you feel about the future?

**CX:** How do I feel about future? That's a big question. At least, we still need to have hope. I really don't know, but I do think that we need to learn how to live with the Coronavirus. [01:44:07] Instead of controlling it or defeating it, because it's evolving. It's been quite clear now that human beings are living in an age of many uncertain situations, like, climate change and the evolution of all kinds of viruses.

**BROWNING:** Yeah, there's a lot we could talk about there, but I'm going to wrap things up and ask one more question. Is there anything else that you wish to share? [01:45:02] Maybe there's something that I did not ask or maybe something that you feel like you want to say.

**CX:** Uh.

**BROWNING:** We've talked about a lot.

**CX:** Yeah. Anything I want to say? I think that's—how can I say? It's a life changing experience for me, of course. Now I still regret that I didn't write more journals or keep more documentation during those first two weeks. [01:46:04] But now when I recall the moment, I

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think that when the Coronavirus spread everywhere around world, I kind of expected what was going to happen. Because I have already experienced the whole lockdown and how the virus may have affected daily life. But I still think when you first encounter that situation and you didn't know what was going on. [01:47:00] I don't know how to say that, but now I regret that. I should have left more traces for myself, at least in the first two weeks. Many years we will be needed to write this history.

**BROWNING:** Yeah.

**CX:** Yeah, I think maybe the early stage was crucial, still crucial. And still there were mysteries, secrets, rumors about it. And, of course, disputes about whether the virus was invented or originated in Wuhan. [01:48:00]

**BROWNING:** That is something I can definitely agree with, with recording it and getting it down.

**CX:** Okay.

**BROWNING:** Okay, so I think if it's okay, I think we're going to finish up here. I think that's a good way to kind of end the interview on a way to remember the history of it.

**CX:** Yeah.

**BROWNING:** And the memory of it. Okay, so I'm going to stop this for a moment and I'm going to just say a couple things afterwards, okay?

**CX:** Okay.

End of interview