

2020 Wuhan COVID-19 Lockdown Oral Histories

Donghu Interview

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Virtual Meeting

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Donghu Follow Up Interview

ROBERT BROWNING: Okay, hello, my name is Robert Browning and this is a follow up interview with Donghu about the events since the first COVID lockdown. So I'd like to begin by asking you, three years later, what are your feelings about the first lockdown in Wuhan?

DONGHU: Yeah, usually, we have a better memory of the events close to us. Over the last three years, the most impressive memory is the first lockdown, not the lockdowns [that happened] later. Because it was as an emergency and everybody never experienced some similar situation like this. [00:01:02] So it just very, very suddenly happened. Yeah, and just the feeling right now, for me is that you can say it was just a hugely chaotic period. Everything in Wuhan was chaotic, was out of control, out of organization. Especially something happened in [the] hospitals. Just, you know, what was weird is that everybody had to face the chaotic situation through media because nobody could go out. Actually, you can go out. [00:02:03] Just at the beginning, just before the lockdown. And even at the beginning of the lockdown, some of the people had a right to go out. But just what I'm trying to say, maybe it is my first time in my life to learn how important the media is in your daily life. Because you have to learn to know everything on WeChat, on websites. You know, even by just person to person. So [there were] a lot of rumors.

And yeah, simply I'd like to say, I want to share that the speed [of] self-organization in Wuhan is much, much faster than everybody imagined. [00:03:07] Just maybe three, four days after the lockdown notice, I mean, maybe in one week a lot of self-organization came out, including some teamwork with hospitals, work with medicines, work with transportation. And it worked very well, to be honest and compared to the later lockdowns, especially the lockdown last year in Shanghai, I have to say the lockdown situation in Wuhan, the first lockdown, is not that bad. Just about all of lockdowns, the first lockdown is the best. [00:04:02] It is the best period I experienced over the last three years.

BROWNING: The best of a bad situation?

DONGHU: Yeah, right. Yeah, exactly. And one of the reasons I have to say that the government, or you can say the authority of the state, they don't know how to deal with lockdown either. So, as a result, they didn't get involved [with] the regular people's life. Or they wanted [to], but they didn't know how to do that. So there was a very big space to leave to regular people to handle their situation, to handle

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their problems. And yeah, that's a crucial reason why the self-organization worked very well during the first lockdown period. [00:05:09]

BROWNING: Okay, so just one follow up question I have for you about that is, and it's related to the next question I think a little bit is you talked about how maybe the people self-organized themselves or organize themselves in Wuhan in an efficient way, proper way, a good way, what have you. And then the later lockdowns were not so much well organized or maybe the lockdowns in other cities, the people didn't organize themselves so well. So why do you think there was a difference? [00:06:03]

DONGHU: According to my understanding, the biggest difference between the first lockdown and the later lockdowns is, as I mentioned before, is the role the government played. Just after the first lockdown, or you can say during the first lockdown period, I think, everybody, both the regular person and the government were trying their best to learn how to face a big emergency like that. And as a result, the government, you can say the state, the nation, the country, they have learned how to control the situation. [00:07:04] Like, how to control the information system, control the media and, of course, including a lot of other things like how to work with the transportation system, to work with even the police system. So the lockdowns after the first one, I mean, in 2021 and 2022 they happened in other cities, the government used the abilities, or you can say the knowledge they learned from the first lockdown to control everything. Especially to limit the self-organization of the regular people in China. [00:08:02] Yes, there's a phrase in Chinese we say *jinchang*. It means the government came in. They came into the lockdown. And they controlled everything, including infrastructure, the medicine, even you can say the material production, masks. Even everyday shopping. Yeah.

BROWNING: Right.

DONGHU: But what they did was not good at all. I mean, so (___???) that you can say—how to say it? Yeah, just, generally speaking, it got worse and worse. [00:09:01] The worst point during the last three years is the Shanghai period.

BROWNING: Right.

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DONGHU: Yeah, you can say Shanghai is the biggest city in China and just a regular person in Shanghai, *Shanghairen*, they actually have a very strong self-organization, you can say a tradition, but every good aspect didn't work because everything was controlled by the government. You can't do this, this, this or that. The only thing you can do is follow the instructions by the government.

BROWNING: So they limited what people could do themselves?

DONGHU: Yeah, yeah, even there was not a very strong—how can I say? Just self-organized truck drivers' team in Shanghai, but during the first lockdown there were a lot in Wuhan. [00:10:05]

BROWNING: Uh-huh, right. So did these other lockdowns affect you in any way?

DONGHU: Yes, they did.

BROWNING: Could you tell me about that?

DONGHU: Yeah. Yeah, let me think. Give me one minute.

BROWNING: Yeah, no problem.

DONGHU: I'd like to say the first lockdown impact on me was very direct because I was in Wuhan during the lockdown period. [00:11:00] Yeah, just my parents, my family were locked in my apartment and every single day we have to just live in a very, very special situation. Like, you have to make a plan about everything, even including the food. Yeah, but the later lockdowns happened in other cities.

BROWNING: Right.

DONGHU: Yeah, I experienced one of them in Beijing, but because I was in a campus during that time. It's a little bit different, because, you can say I was a little bit used to the lockdown after the first lockdown.

BROWNING: Right, right.

DONGHU: So the biggest impact, [that] shocked me by the later lockdowns you can say was some emotional shock or cultural shock. [00:12:09] Yeah, I experienced a lockdown by the media, actually.

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So, um, of course, I was getting involved in some self-organization during the later lockdowns, but it's not that direct on myself. You know what I say?

BROWNING: Yeah.

DONGHU: I think this is one of the differences. And, yeah, just I can say that.

BROWNING: Um, okay. What about the restrictions? I think there were a lot of restrictions, maybe about traveling or going from place to place. [00:13:08] Did this impact you in any way? I mean, when we spoke in 2021, you had a situation, I think, in Hangzhou or Suzhou. Were there any other instances of the restrictions affecting your life at all?

DONGHU: Yeah, for sure. Yeah. As you mentioned, the traveling restriction was very strict. Just after the middle of 2021 and to late 2022. And just both city to city and even inside one city. [00:14:01] One of the major new things is that we had the [QR] codes. You have to scan codes, code by code, every time, every day. Sometimes you have to scan a lot of codes in every entrance, maybe like just twenty or thirty times [in] one day. Even just [to] go out to buy something, buy food or buy drink, you know, and even go to a shopping mall. And I think these strong restrictions I experienced so strongly. And when I came to Toronto late last year, one day, my wife and I went to a shopping mall and she stopped at the entrance and she was trying to find a code. [00:15:08] And, suddenly, she realized that, come on, it's Canada. There are no codes at all. You can say [that's] how we experienced the scanning code period, or you can say just two years of scanning codes.

BROWNING: Right, right. It became a like a habit.

DONGHU: Yeah, that's right. In Beijing and Shanghai, you know, these two cities were stricter than Wuhan. We go to just a maybe convenient store to buy some food and we forget our cell phone to pay for the food. So we have to come out to go home to bring the cell phone again to pay for the food. [00:16:03] Maybe it's five or six minutes. But if you do that, [when] you enter again, you have to scan the same fucking code.

BROWNING: Wow.

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DONGHU: Yeah, yeah. You know, you just go out to [a] store and you enter the campus [to scan] one code and go out [of] campus, two codes. But, [you can] go into the store again, the third code.

BROWNING: Right, yeah.

DONGHU: That's in 10 minutes.

BROWNING: Yeah, amazing. So as you mentioned, you are now in Toronto and I know, of course, that you came before the protests took place.

DONGHU: Yeah.

BROWNING: You were in Toronto before all that happened, but I do want to ask, how do you feel about maybe living abroad when those protests were happening? [00:17:08]

DONGHU: Um, yeah, I'd like to share some experiences. When I was in Toronto, just after I arrived two weeks the protest came out and it didn't shock me strongly because, you can say, the protest was in my expectation. Yeah, I did believe something would happen after two years and a half. [00:18:00] And, firstly, because I am abroad so I am not suffering in that. But I was still just very anxious and worried about my friends and family and just everyone in China, because it looked very large and strong on the media. And a huge number of friends got involved in the protest. Some would just go out in their neighborhood to do something, to argue with the security or the policemen and some just go out on the street to make some political—just attitudes and a certain number of my friends who I know were arrested actually. [00:19:04]

BROWNING: Okay.

DONGHU: Some of them are still imprisoned right now, in jail, and [with] no result at all. The police never informed us just what [the] process is or the situation of my friends. Just two or three days ago, one of my best friends came to Toronto to visit me and we discussed a lot of topics, especially about this question. He said because he was deeply involved in helping the protestors, he said even in Beijing right now there was still a lot of arrests of the protesters. [00:20:02] Even though now there are

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maybe, like, eighty or ninety, or just less than a hundred in jail and the number must be larger than our estimates.

BROWNING: Right. So with your friends who were arrested, you and your other friends maybe received no notification that they were arrested, right?

DONGHU: Yeah.

BROWNING: Right. So it's like they just disappeared.

DONGHU: Yeah, yeah, exactly. Even their parents didn't know where they were. Yeah, which prison they were in. Yeah, just no notice at all. No information. [00:21:02]

BROWNING: Wow.

DONGHU: And what they did was just go out on the street and show a piece of white paper.

BROWNING: Right, right.

DONGHU: Yeah.

BROWNING: And just so we can maybe get it onto the recording here, what does the white paper mean?

DONGHU: Oh yes, good question. Yeah, there was a lot of discussion about the meaning, or political meaning of the white paper in the protests in China. But, for me, I think it's a very simple thing. It means I do like to show something, to tell you something about the situation. But just hold my mouth, to shut my mouth. [00:22:02] Yes, what I can do is—just [be] a mouth without any voice. A paper without any symbol, any character, any letters and any content. Just, you know, it's a very basic and pure and simple political gesture, but I think it's very, very strong. It means a lot.

BROWNING: Uh-huh, right.

DONGHU: Yeah. Just like, You state, you authority, just don't want us to say anything and write anything. Show anything. But I can show a thing without any information. Yeah, just stand in front of

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you and be silent. [00:23:02] But, you know, in my mouth, in my mind, in my brain, there are a lot of things I want to tell you. I want to share with others. Yeah, somebody called the protests a white paper revolution. I don't think it's a very typical revolution, but it's a very, very specifically Chinese protest method. Yeah, it come out in a very, very specific situation in contemporary China.

BROWNING: Right.

DONGHU: Yeah, that's how I feel. So, you know, the weirdest thing [is] that I heard somebody tell me after coming out from the jail, coming out from the prison, she said, Donghu, it's very strange.

[00:24:08] The policeman asked me, What do you want to say? She said, Nothing, nothing. There was nothing on my paper.

BROWNING: But that—

DONGHU: But she was still suffering in one prison in Beijing for forty days. Just for a piece of white paper.

BROWNING: Yeah, well, it's amazing that just something like just a white piece of paper can become a symbol that has so much meaning.

DONGHU: Yeah.

BROWNING: [00:25:00] Okay, um, so I guess the last question I have for you is, it's very general question so please respond to it in any way you think is best, but what have you learned about yourself because of all this that's happened?

DONGHU: Um, first of all, what a single person in China can do is much, much more than he or she imagined before COVID-19, just before the pandemic. What I'm trying to say is a single person could do a lot of things to help himself or herself, help their family, help their community, help their friends. [00:26:06] Even the society, even some people he never knew before. And yeah, that's about the ability to handle oneself or others in [the] pandemic. And, secondly, I'd like to say what I learned is that self-organization is very, very important. It's very crucial in contemporary China. Yeah, I don't want to say the government is purely bad or they cannot do anything good. Yeah, it's really complicated. But I

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have to say that self-organization played a very, very important role in the social life in China. Just before the pandemic, I know theoretically, but I never experienced how important self-organization should be and could be in my life. [00:27:13] Thirdly, after experiencing all of this stuff, I have to say I became a little bit more authentic or honest than before because you sometimes have to face the elephant in the room. Just never try to pretend it's gone. It is there. And just face the situation and try your best to handle the elephant in the room. [00:28:05] The last thing I want to share with you is what a person did made sense. Just everything will have a result. Yeah, we have to believe ourselves. Just never say that what we did is useless. It is useful. Yeah, maybe the effect may not come out very quickly, but maybe just in [the] future.

BROWNING: Could you maybe possibly give me an example of a situation where you maybe faced this elephant in the room? [00:29:03]

DONGHU: Yeah, um, excuse me. I was thinking.

BROWNING: Yeah, no problem.

DONGHU: Yeah, there is an example. For me because, as you know, I was trying to write something. Most of it is about music. But, you can say, I wrote something on media on WeChat, on my account, and I think I was learning during the last three years how I can write in front of the elephant. [00:30:16] Every time I plan to write an article, I have to tell myself that there is censorship. And I have to write something against the censorship and at the same time protect myself and my friends, but I just have to know how to write something against the elephant, but let the elephant know. [00:31:01] At the same time, just make some protections just for me. Yeah, yeah. That's very, very complicated to share, but you know what I'm saying.

BROWNING: Yeah, I do. I do. And I think that's a good, good example. It's a good personal example.

DONGHU: Okay.

BROWNING: Okay, so I think before we wrap up, is there anything else that you wish to share?

DONGHU: Um, yeah, that's all. Yeah.

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BROWNING: Okay. All right. Um, so I think we'll wrap up here. First, I'd like to say thank you again for doing this.

DONGHU: Oh, no problem.

BROWNING: And if you could just stay on the call for a minute that would be good, okay?

DONGHU: Yes, sure. Yeah.

End of interview