

2020 Wuhan COVID-19 Lockdown Oral Histories

Joe Interview

August 1, 2021

Virtual Meeting

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Joe Interview

ROBERT BROWNING: Okay, so first the statement here. My name is Robert Browning, working in conjunction with the Reuther Library at Wayne State University. Today's date is August 1, 2021. This interview is with Joe, which is a pseudonym, about his experience of living through the COVID lockdown in Wuhan, China in early 2020. Joe is located in Wuhan now. 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. [00:00:59] In the event of a criminal investigation or legal discovery proceedings, the Reuther Library could be compelled to turn over holdings in case files that are otherwise close to the public, including the case files for this oral history project.

All right, so we are ready to get started. So the first question here is, are you connected to Wayne State University in any way?

JOE: No, no.

BROWNING: All right. Are you originally from Wuhan?

JOE: No, just nearby Wuhan, in a small town.

BROWNING: Okay, in a small town. So where in Wuhan do you live right now?

JOE: Wuchang.

BROWNING: Wuchang. Okay, and what do you do for a living, for work?

JOE: I am doing electrical construction work.

BROWNING: Okay, so construction? [00:02:02]

JOE: Yeah.

Joe Interview

BROWNING: Okay. And how long have you been doing that?

JOE: Two years.

BROWNING: Okay. All right, Joe, so I want to go back to maybe the end of 2019 or early 2020 and ask, when did you first hear of COVID?

JOE: The first time is, I guess, early December. I heard it from the Internet. [00:03:00] Someone reported it and I guess maybe it's a true thing.

BROWNING: Okay, did you have any other feelings about it?

JOE: Other feelings? At first, no, no feelings. Because we didn't feel the dangerous part. We didn't feel that.

BROWNING: Right. So what were you doing the time before the lockdown began?

JOE: Before the lockdown began, I was just doing my work every day. [00:04:00] I didn't wear any mask or anything—

BROWNING: —right—

JOE: Until the lockdown.

BROWNING: So you thought it was true, but you maybe did not think it was a big deal, right, I guess?

JOE: Yes.

BROWNING: Okay. So you were in Wuhan at the time, right?

JOE: Yeah.

BROWNING: Okay. So when you heard about the lockdown what did you think? [00:05:00]

Joe Interview

JOE: I heard in the early morning of January twentieth. Oh, the lockdown began twenty-third here. That old man—

BROWNING: Zhong Nanshan?

JOE: Yeah, he said, Be careful and wear a mask. It was very, very dangerous.

BROWNING: Okay, so what did you think about the news of the lockdown?

JOE: It was early in the morning of the twenty-third, like, two a.m. My boss, he called me and told me, Joe, pack your stuff and run. Just run.

BROWNING: Wow.

JOE: Don't stay. Yeah. [00:06:00]

BROWNING: So how did you respond to that?

JOE: I just feel, Oh shit, it's a big situation. Yeah, it's not okay. It's very horrible, very terrible. I packed my stuff and I slept.

BROWNING: You slept? (both laugh)

JOE: Yeah, I slept. When the morning came, I went to the high-speed railway station to take the train to go back home. The last train. I was a little lucky.

BROWNING: So you did leave Wuhan?

JOE: Yeah, yeah.

BROWNING: Okay, and you made that made it to the last train? [00:07:02]

JOE: Yeah.

Joe Interview

BROWNING: So can you tell me when you went to the train station that day, what was that like?

JOE: It was a normal winter day in Wuhan. It's very cold. And everyone—no one talked in the station and everyone is watching the time and the trains' numbers and what was the time. No one talked.

BROWNING: Right.

JOE: Yeah, I never saw that before. I never saw that.

BROWNING: Yeah.

JOE: Yeah, it was fucking weird. At that time, maybe you can feel the end is coming. [00:08:04]

BROWNING: Right.

JOE: Yeah. (laughs)

BROWNING: Yeah, the train stations are usually pretty noisy in in China. I guess lively places sometimes.

JOE: Yeah.

BROWNING: Interesting, so you made it home, I guess, to your family's home, right?

JOE: Yeah, my family's home. Yeah.

BROWNING: And what were things like at home at that time?

JOE: At that time, in my hometown everyone still feels okay. No one is too worried and few people wear masks.

BROWNING: Right. They were just acting normal for the most part? [00:09:05]

Joe Interview

JOE: Yeah, normal. During that time, most people feel normal. Just a few people feel very worried because they focus on the news and that the bad news would always be true.

BROWNING: So were there eventually any problems with COVID in your hometown?

JOE: Yeah. After I was back in my hometown for, like, two or three days, then one city, one by one, started to lockdown. All the provinces. Every city was dark(??). [00:10:02]

BROWNING: Who did you stay with?

JOE: My parents, my parents. Yeah. My brother, my neighbors.

BROWNING: How long was your hometown locked down?

JOE: How long? One and a half months.

BROWNING: Okay. All right. So maybe not as long as Wuhan.

JOE: Yeah, it was not as long as Wuhan. Wuhan was longer.

BROWNING: Um-hm. Wow, you were so lucky to get out of Wuhan, I guess.

JOE: Yeah, yeah, I got a bit lucky. I ran away. I didn't have any masks before I left because I couldn't buy them anywhere. [00:11:04] A friend gave me one. He said, Please, you can get out of the city. If you don't have this, you can't go anywhere.

BROWNING: Who gave you one?

JOE: My friend (redacted).

BROWNING: Okay.

JOE: Yeah, he's a painter.

Joe Interview

BROWNING: So can you tell me about the lockdown in your hometown or in your neighborhood? What was it like? Like, for example—

JOE: It's, like, no one is allowed to go out. You can just stay at home. Because my hometown is a village, so we have a yard. [00:12:02] You can stay in the yard. So there's a little space. It's a little better than the city.

BROWNING: Okay. So what did your parents do? Are they retired or do they work?

JOE: No, my parents are still working.

BROWNING: Okay.

JOE: They couldn't really work anymore [during the lockdown]. Because my dad, he sells very big machines. Yeah, but he always need to go outside to another province, so he just stayed home [during that time]. Stayed home and watched the news every day. [00:13:02]

BROWNING: So could you go outside? I mean, so your parents had a yard—

JOE: Yeah, I can.

BROWNING: But could you go out? Could you go out into the city?

JOE: Yeah, I could go out nearby [my home]. I need to breathe. I can't stay home twenty-four seven.

BROWNING: Right, so you could go out for a walk or something?

JOE: Yeah, yeah, for a walk. You can go everywhere in the village.

BROWNING: Okay. So it wasn't so bad, huh?

JOE: Yeah. For the village, it's maybe not so bad as the cities where people can only stay home. [00:14:04] There was nowhere to go.

Joe Interview

BROWNING: Okay. So but you're normally in Wuhan, I guess, for most of the year?

JOE: Yes.

BROWNING: But you stayed in your hometown for all this time during the lockdown?

JOE: No, I stayed home for one month.

BROWNING: Okay.

JOE: And then I went back to Wuhan on, like, March twentieth, maybe. At that time, the city was still locked down. You can only go into the city, not go out.

BROWNING: Okay, so when you were at home, what did you do? [00:15:03] How did you use your time?

JOE: I just watched movies and paid attention to the news. Read and wait.

BROWNING: Read and wait. Okay, were you worried about anything, like, worried about the virus, worried about friends?

JOE: I had a friend who asked for help in the WeChat *pengyouchuan* [friends' circle]. He just wrote that he needs help and that he felt very bad in a hotel. [00:16:02] At that time, in Wuhan there were many people who felt something [sick] and they cannot be sure if they had the COVID, so the hospital didn't take them. Because if you want a cure or go to the hospital, first you needed to be confirmed. If you are confirmed a patient, okay, you can go with them [into the hospital]. If you're not that way, maybe you would wait to die. Some people they just died in the hotel. I heard from my friend. He's a tattoo artist.

BROWNING: So he was sick or thought he was sick? [00:17:02]

JOE: Yeah, he was there. He was in the hotel.

BROWNING: Right, so he was sick?

Joe Interview

JOE: Yeah, he was sick.

BROWNING: Okay. Did you know anybody else that was sick? Any family?

JOE: Uh, any family? Maybe a lot of my friends get a little fucking lucky. That close friend, he was not too sick. But I think with COVID was everyone scared. The fear was more terrible for everyone. [00:18:00]

BROWNING: Right. Especially in Wuhan, I guess. But then in many places, people probably experienced that same feeling later, you know. So obviously you did not work, right?

JOE: Yeah.

BROWNING: So that part of things must have been enjoyable. Got to maybe relax in that way. So did you have any other challenges or problems that you faced during the lockdown period? [00:19:00]

JOE: The lockdown period, um—

BROWNING: Any other problems?

JOE: When I came back to Wuhan, at that time, the city is still locked down and I can go out. I can go out with my workmate because we're doing the electrical construction. If you're doing this job, you can go back to work early.

BROWNING: Oh okay, interesting.

JOE: The power or the water, yeah. You can begin working. And when we went out, some people they can drive cars and go anywhere. [00:20:05] But old folks or someone who needed help, they can just stay home. They just stayed at home, but they can't go out for help because of COVID-19. Maybe someone has a heart problem, maybe any problem, because [with] the COVID-19 they could not go into to the hospital, so they just walk back home and take some medicine at home.

Joe Interview

BROWNING: [00:21:00] Right, okay, so let me take a look here at my questions, so just hang on one moment. So basically you were in Wuhan when the lockdown started to end, right?

JOE: Yeah.

BROWNING: And you're working, so can you tell me if was there anything that you experienced? What was it like in Wuhan at that time when you came back? Or when you went back to work? What was—

JOE: At that time, there's no public taxi or bus or subway. [00:22:09] And a lot of people, most people, they still stayed home. They were not allowed to go out. And when I walked down the streets, there was nobody. Early in the morning I walked to my company and there was no one in street. Everywhere it was very quiet. Sometimes you would see some ambulance and some army trucks pass by. Like, they take some people and drive by so fast. Just go [drive] away.

BROWNING: Right. Wow. [00:23:00] That must have been very strange.

JOE: Yeah, that's very strange. Like, I don't know how to describe. The feeling is very strange, yeah.

BROWNING: Yeah, because Wuhan is, usually, so busy.

JOE: Yeah. Yeah, it's a noisy city.

BROWNING: And so many people. Yeah, that would be very strange. All right. So when the lockdown started to kind of come to an end, how did you feel about that? Like before—
[00:24:00]

JOE: I feel—

BROWNING: Yeah, go on. Go ahead.

JOE: Before the lockdown, right?

Joe Interview

BROWNING: Yeah, before it ended. I think there was a period of time where people maybe realized that it was going to end, right? They had a feeling that it was going to end. So what were you thinking, at that time, or feeling?

JOE: At that time, I felt this was a very, very, very horrible thing. Maybe it would not end, like, so early. Because when I went back to my hometown, I told my friends, my parents, it's real and it's really terrible. [phone vibrates in background] Everyone stayed at home and no one went out and [you could just] call friends and family to make sure they're okay. [00:25:06] That's all. So we stayed at home, because there's the Chinese Spring Festival and we need to go to [see our] families, to visit them and they visit us. But [with] the COVID it was dangerous.

BROWNING: Right, so how did you feel when the lockdown ended in Wuhan? I mean you weren't you weren't there for most of the time, but you were there for the end.

JOE: Yeah.

BROWNING: What did you think?

JOE: Before the actual end came, we were working or living outside for almost twenty days—three weeks. [phone vibrates in background] [00:26:02] Day by day, the people could go out more and more, but everyone is still very careful. Most people, many people wore two or three masks and wore glasses and a hat. Before it was never like that. They just walk very fast. Maybe everyone's thinking is a little bit insane. Just [wanted] keep away from others.

BROWNING: Right, still a little worried.

JOE: Yeah.

BROWNING: So when the lockdown actually ended, how did you feel or what was Wuhan like? [00:27:06] Can you tell me about the—

Joe Interview

JOE: My real feeling was that, at that time, you know, Robert, I think it was maybe a little early. Yeah, because we had a lot of patients still in the hospital. And if the train stations started to open, everyone would be traveling, but at that time there just a few trains working.

BROWNING: Right, so when it ended, did you do anything special? [00:28:00] Like, I mean have beers to celebrate in some way? Something like that.

JOE: We did not celebrate. We, you know, Robert, I don't know how to say—for this lockdown, we have nothing to celebrate yet. I remember in April last year, one night (redacted) sent me a message and told me before the lockdown ended, like three or four days before, and she said, Joe, come to Prison [Bar]. We are open tonight. Just for friends. We drink, we talk. We fucking meet each other. (laughs)

BROWNING: So did you go?

JOE: Yeah, I went to Prison Bar. [00:29:01] Yeah. And, at that time, there were lots of friends there. I saw (redacted) there. (laughs) And because, at that time, we already knew the day the lockdown would end and everyone felt maybe the government already controlled this [COVID] or at least some. Because we knew they could not control it, like, Okay, everyone is okay. You can go out. Not like that. You know, we felt a little bit relaxed, because everyone can go out. [00:30:03] Yeah, you could go out for a breath or for buying something for your living. Just like that. Because the lockdown was a lot for us. A lot.

BROWNING: Okay, also you said earlier that there was nothing to celebrate. Maybe this is an obvious question, but why do you say that? I'm just curious.

JOE: Because in Wuhan too many people died.

BROWNING: Right.

JOE: We knew that. We just can't figure out the real number, but everyone knew lots of people passed away. [00:31:00] Because I heard a friend tell me, he is teaching in *Dizhi Daxue* (China

Joe Interview

University of Geosciences), and he told me some people they got COVID-19, but they didn't feel anything.

BROWNING: Right.

JOE: Yeah. Throughout that time they felt nothing. In their school, they got the teachers and the workers for the school. They got like 3,000 and, like 200-300 got COVID. But most of them they felt nothing. Just one or two, three old people, old folks, they felt bad. [00:32:00] So as for those numbers, we can figure out how bad it was in the city.

BROWNING: Yeah, it's very difficult to know, right?

JOE: Yeah. It was a school, so it was maybe a little safer than other public areas for defense against COVID-19. There's so many people that were sick. Though we couldn't figure out because ten million people live in Wuhan. Maybe fifteen million.

BROWNING: Well, also too, you know, the virus started in Wuhan and it's kind of a new virus. And in the beginning, there was no test. [00:33:00]

JOE: Yeah.

BROWNING: So because of that it's difficult to know, you know?

JOE: Yes, yes. At first, Dr. Li—

BROWNING: Um-hm, Li Wenliang?

JOE: Li Wenliang, yeah. He figured out it was very serious, but when he reported this, his leader—his leader is a fucker, just like the Chinese government leaders (??). But he didn't want him to talk about the bad news. Because if bad news came, they would pay for it. Yeah, maybe all the Chinese government leaders would do that. [00:34:02]

BROWNING: Can I—

Joe Interview

(cross talk)

BROWNING: Go ahead.

JOE: When the bad news came, they never wanted the people to know, at that time. But they changed something. Just change something [policies] later. And they would tell you, Okay, it's okay. Don't worry. [The government] will take care of you. Yeah, that's what the government did.

BROWNING: Right. Can I ask you, what do you think of Dr. Li?

JOE: Dr. Li, he's a good man. He's a good man and a brave man. If he can do that, he's a brave guy. Because in this system, in this country, no one is anything. [00:35:01] Most of the people know what the government is doing. They know. And they know if you do something, if there is an unhappy [incident], maybe you will be punished by them. In a dark way, yeah.

BROWNING: Yeah.

JOE: They often do that.

BROWNING: So this makes me think, I guess one other question, is that what do you think, in your mind, has changed since the lockdown? [00:36:00]

JOE: What things have changed since lockdown, right?

BROWNING: Yeah.

JOE: After the lockdown, in the beginning, when we went anywhere, in or out of the building, or the public area, we needed to scan some 2D code.

BROWNING: Oh okay, QR code?

JOE: Yeah, a QR code, to show them I was there and I was there at what time and stayed how long and when I left. Even [when you] used a bus or the subway or taxi.

Joe Interview

BROWNING: Really? Wow.

JOE: Yeah. When you go out, you have to do that.

BROWNING: Even to a store? [00:37:01]

JOE: Yeah, yeah. When you go to a store, the owner will ask you to scan your code and you can come in for shopping. If you didn't do that, you can't [go in]. Everyone did that. Every shop and public place and company building.

BROWNING: Right, so how do you feel about that?

JOE: I hate that. Yeah, I hate that because everyone is under control.

BROWNING: Right, so do you think has Wuhan changed at all? [00:38:00]

JOE: Sorry?

BROWNING: In your mind, has the city of Wuhan changed since the lockdown?

JOE: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, of course, it's changed. For the shops or the stores tons (??) lots closed. One by one closed. And lots of people lost their jobs and their stuff.

BROWNING: Even now?

JOE: Even now lots of shops are still closed. Because even though the lockdown ended, you still can open your shop, or you stop. [00:39:05] Especially your bar or KTV, this part you cannot keep open.

BROWNING: Right. You mean just after the lockdown or even now?

JOE: Uh, after the lockdown.

BROWNING: Okay.

Joe Interview

JOE: Oh no, actually for this half year, some shops, they started to open and started doing their work, but it changed a lot of stuff. Before it was a strange world, now it's more strange.

[00:40:00]

BROWNING: More strange?

JOE: Yeah, now it's more strange.

BROWNING: Why do you say that? Because of all the changes or—

JOE: Before in Wuhan, Wuhan has a lot of used guys(??). Yeah, you stayed in Wuhan for some years. You know that.

BROWNING: Yeah, yeah.

JOE: And the young people they can and they are changing. The COVID came and everyone is—I think the life is the most changed. [00:41:08] For these times, I don't know if you know, around the last ten days Nanjing has some patients.

BROWNING: Yeah. I've heard a few things.

JOE: Yeah, and some places, they are starting to worry and put out the notice, Okay, everyone when you go out, take a mask and stop traveling because it's dangerous. [00:42:00]

BROWNING: Yeah, you know, the virus has changed, too.

JOE: Yeah. Yeah, it's changed so fast. It's more dangerous.

BROWNING: Yeah, still even here in America it's that way and in many other places in the world. All right, so I guess maybe two more questions for you. Okay?

JOE: Okay.

BROWNING: How do you feel about the future?

Joe Interview

JOE: How do I feel about the future?

BROWNING: Yeah, in general.

JOE: For the future, I think, I don't know, Robert. (laughs) I don't know. For now, I can't feel that. [00:43:00] I'm just doing my things and I hope people can really take care of the environment. Yeah, that's a real serious thing. We have to take care of it. Yeah, maybe it's this virus or that virus that comes from nature. How can we know? We can't know tomorrow's things.

BROWNING: Yeah, that's true.

JOE: That's one thing. Everyone take care of themselves and take care of your environment and other places. Yeah, that's all. If most people do that, we can press(??) more days.

BROWNING: Right. [00:44:00] Okay, so my last question is, is there anything else that you wish to say? Is there anything else? Maybe there's something I did not ask, but you want to share and talk about?

(Pause in recording)

Are you there?

JOE: Yeah, yeah, I'm here. Maybe I want to talk about some of my friends. They are stuck outside, in a foreign country. Like, (redacted). Yeah, he's stuck in Portugal. And been stuck there maybe for almost two years. [00:45:00] So it's more difficult because he can't do anything there. No job. So maybe life is more difficult. For me, I think that's the first thought. I think about my friends.

BROWNING: So you're talking about Chinese living abroad? Living in foreign countries?

Joe Interview

JOE: Yeah. Some Chinese they are stuck in foreign countries now. Still. Some are rich, so they can rent a plane to come back or through a relationship can come back. But the normal people, they don't have enough money. [00:46:00] They can't come back. They want to, but they can't.

BROWNING: You mean during the lockdown or just in general?

JOE: In general. I think maybe the government can do something for those people.

BROWNING: Okay, right.

JOE: Yeah, they could do something.

BROWNING: Yeah, to help them return, I guess.

JOE: Yeah.

BROWNING: Okay. So I guess that's all I have to ask. Before I finish before I stop recording, I always tell people thank you very much for doing this. [00:47:00] I appreciate it. You know, so thank you.

JOE: My pleasure, my pleasure. Now my English is worse than before.

BROWNING: No, it's okay.

JOE: So yeah, some feelings I can't express. I can't use the right words.

BROWNING: Right, it's okay. You did pretty good.

JOE: Thank you.

BROWNING: And thank you.

End of interview