

2020 Wuhan COVID-19 Lockdown Oral Histories

Kay Interview

October 17, 2020

Virtual Meeting

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KAY Interview

ROBERT BROWNING: Hello, my name is Robert Browning, working in conjunction with the Reuther Library at Wayne State University. Today's date is October 17, 2020. This interview is with Kay about her experience of living through the COVID lockdown outside of Wuhan, China in early 2020. At the moment, Kay is located in Beijing. 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 gifts 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 closed to the public, including the case files for this oral history project. [00:01:00]

Okay, and you are from where?

KAY: I am from Wuhan, China.

BROWNING: And how old are you?

KAY: I'm thirty.

BROWNING: Okay, and so, we're going to talk about your experience in Wuhan during the Coronavirus lockdown and I just want to begin with some basic questions, like, when did you first hear of the coronavirus?

KAY: Um, I don't really remember. I think it's the end of January when I first heard about [it]. It's right before the Chinese New Year. My colleagues were saying there were rumors going on that we have SARS again, so that's the first time I heard about it, not officially. [00:02:01]

BROWNING: Okay, so you were in Wuhan at that time?

KAY: Right.

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BROWNING: So, how did you feel about this kind of news story at that time?

KAY: (Laughs) I just couldn't believe it because we were actually having an annual report to our boss, but we were sitting in one meeting room, and one person just said we had SARS coming up again. I just didn't believe it because, you know, we were having a very important meeting.

BROWNING: So when the lockdown began on January twenty-third in Wuhan, I believe, what were your feelings when that started?

KAY: Um, I started panicking three days before that. [00:03:00] I think I was still at work a few days before the lockdown and I just couldn't focus there. And I actually left the company with one of my colleagues to buy face masks and medicines for my family. That was before the lockdown and, actually, when the government actually announced the lockdown I actually passed my panicking time. But I would say I was less panicked than the few days before that, but still it was a big thing, like, part of me couldn't believe that.

BROWNING: So, what were you seeing from other people around the community, around the city at that time?

KAY: [00:04:00] Um, can you repeat that question again?

BROWNING: What were other people around you, like your family, or people in your community—what were you seeing? What were you feeling from them? You know, because you talk about being panicked, what were you seeing from other people?

KAY: Do you mean from the lockdown?

BROWNING: Yeah, yeah, like when it began.

KAY: Oh, like, um, I couldn't tell about my community because at that time we didn't communicate like neighbors. We don't know each other. But for my colleagues it was a big thing because a lot of my colleagues they are from Taiwan and—I mean we woke up to hear the news. [00:05:00] But there were people—uh, I actually forgot what time it was when they

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officially announced the lockdown. But there were colleagues catching *heidi* [black market taxis] for illegal transportation to run from our company to the nearby cities to catch the train or by airplane to flee to their hometown. (laughs) That is something to mention. Because my company is boarding [other people from] another city, so a lot of my colleagues I believe they ran to the nearby city Ezhou.

BROWNING: So, when this lockdown began, your company, did it shut down? Did you work from home? [00:06:00]

KAY: Um, our company we have—uh, how do you say?—we have employees that worked in a factory. They didn't go home, but for the employees who worked in the office we were on leave already at that time.

BROWNING: Okay, so that's a little bit about your company, but I kind of want to talk about your community or ask you something about your community at that time. How did the lockdown work in your community? What were the rules? What were the procedures? For example, how did you get food, you know, and anything that else you can share?

KAY: Well, there was a time they stopped the elevator [in our building]. [00:07:00] But there were volunteers in the community. They were really nice. So when we were short of food and vegetables, they delivered the food to our door because they got the connections for the—I don't know how to say—food suppliers. And, um, you couldn't go out unless it was [an] emergency. I remember my grandfather needed high blood [pressure] medicine and the volunteers actually offered to go get the medicine for my grandfather as long I didn't go out. And well, the elevator was crazy because you could only take it—at one time they ran [it] for one hour and then dinner time for one hour. Apart from those two hours, you had to literally walk up and down stairs, and so— [00:08:00]

BROWNING: And which floor did you live on?

KAY: Twentieth.

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BROWNING: Okay.

KAY: Um, so, for the community rules it took time to get more and more strict, so at first we could go out to buy veggies on the street, you know, [from] vendors and stuff. And then you just couldn't go out. Then they started—well, you know, I forgot—uh (laughs), it's been a long time. At first we could take the elevator two hours a day—that's when we could go out. We could out to buy veggies, but I remember because me and my husband we actually walked from the first floor to our home once because we missed the one hour elevator. And then after that we couldn't go out, but there were fruits and veggies delivered to our community, so they started running the elevator again. [00:09:03] But there would be a gathering center, so the food bus that came into the community and [then] we had to wait in lines, like, you have to stand one meter away from the person next to you. And the people who were delivering the food they all wore face masks and special uniforms, so that's how we got food for a long time in the community.

BROWNING: Okay, so basically, like a lot of people you were stuck inside, so one thing I want to ask, can you tell me what did you do during the lockdown besides shopping for food and/or trying to shop for food? How did you occupy your time?

(Cross talk)

KAY: Well, it was very boring, of course. Um, because I stayed with my mom and my husband, we played mahjong a lot. [00:10:03] And, well, at first we spent a lot of time reading news about the virus trends and stuff and watched videos about it, of course. And we have friends who organized—like, how do you say?—Um, you know, the Lumo Lu [ed. note: a main road in Wuhan] delivery thing. I have friends who were taking part in that trying to make things better. So I spent a lot of time reading, following the news. But, to be honest, after I think maybe after two weeks, it just started to be too much. So I [would] say personally I was trying to avoid it. Just trying to be lazy, to be sane, to be safe, to stay at home. [00:11:01] So we did Chinese New

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Year stuff, making Chinese deserts and just family stuff. Just trying to be happy and, you know, calm.

BROWNING: Okay, so jumping to when the lockdown ended in, I believe, April. What were your feelings then, when the lockdown ended?

KAY: Um, I went to my company straight after the lockdown finished, because my company is really big. So I didn't get to see what the city was like. Um, but, I think I was one of the people who left home before the—uh, I couldn't remember, but when I first walked out of my home the street was empty. [00:12:03] My home is not in the city center, but there was traffic. But when I walked out, it was just empty. And when I got to my company I had to organize other people from Hubei province to come back to Wuhan. That took a lot of effort because different cities and different towns had different regulations and traffic regulations as well. So I just jumped into that work immediately after I went to my company. And my company had a quarantine regulations as well. I was quarantined for 4 days before I got to the office.

BROWNING: This is at the end of the lockdown, right?

KAY: Uh, yeah, it was May fourth when I got to my company. [00:13:02]

BROWNING: Okay.

KAY: Oh no, no, May, early March, sorry.

BROWNING: Okay, so what were your feelings about the lockdown ending though?

KAY: Um, ah, it's hard to say. (Laughs) Because when we were at home, we had no connections to the outside world in a way. We couldn't go out. We all wanted to go out. But, actually, I had to leave home alone. My husband, he stayed behind for a few days. I was quite nervous when I realized I was going to be the first person to be, you know, out of my home, so I was nervous. And because I realized my husband would follow me off to accompany me a few days later, part of me was really worried for my mom because she had to stay home alone. [00:14:02] And, at

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that time, I couldn't get back home once I entered my company because they wouldn't let you go back home. So I think I got back home maybe, um, I forgot, maybe around one month—more than one month [later]. I didn't see my mom for a whole month until I returned home again.

BROWNING: Okay, last question, is there anything that you think that is different between the time the lockdown happened and now? [00:15:05] What has changed in your mind?

KAY: You mean, in general?

BROWNING: Yeah.

KAY: In my life? (laughs)

BROWNING: In your life, or just as a result of the experience of the coronavirus and the lockdown.

KAY: Well, personally I put on weight (laughs) and I did marry my husband. We were together, um, just half a year when the lockdown happened—less than half a year, like, four or five months. And we stayed home together for two months-ish. Every day we saw each other. And I think those intensive two months together being nervous and you don't know what's going to happen, really—how do you say?— [tested] our relationship. [00:16:05] So, you know, I would say that's one of the first things that come to my mind.

BROWNING: Okay, is there anything else that you want to share?

KAY: Well, um, I try to be more—how do you say?—open minded, more forgiving after the whole thing because you see how—ah, lost my English.

BROWNING: It's okay.

KAY: *Zhai*, ah, what's that *zhai*? Ah, it's frustrating! How weak life can be! (laughs)

BROWNING: Um-hm.

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KAY: Fragile, that's the word I want to say.

BROWNING: Right, fragile, yes.

KAY: How fragile life could be and because we were not the people who had to be the first—I mean, I still get emotional now talking about it with you. [00:17:04] I mean, I didn't really, you know, prepare before the interview and now we have to look back at those things. I still get very emotional because, in a way, I felt lucky that I was not one of those people who had to stay in the hospital, who lost their families, you know. So, I think we need to be braver for further life and I am definitely more respectful [to] doctors and nurses now after the COVID-19 stuff.

BROWNING: Okay, thank you very much.

KAY: Is that all? Thank you! (laughs)

End of interview