

2020 Wuhan COVID-19 Lockdown Oral Histories

Kay Interview

March 15, 2023

Virtual Meeting

Reuther Library Oral History ID: WSOH003054_OH_006_B

This oral history interview was recorded as part of the 2020 Wuhan COVID-19 Lockdown Oral Histories on March 15, 2023, via a virtual meeting, which is a follow up to a first interview in 2021, as part of a student practicum project for the Wayne State University School of Information Sciences archival administration graduate certificate program. The interview has been deposited at the Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs and University Archives at Wayne State University. The interview may be used for research and educational purposes only.

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ROBERT BROWNING: Today's date is March 15, 2023, and this is a follow up interview with Kay about the last few years since the first COVID lockdown. Okay, so I want to just ask first, three years later, what are your feelings now about the first lockdown?

KAY: Well, I didn't prepare good, but like I said, I was super busy. So maybe my ideas wouldn't be too fluent. My first impression would be how much I can forget about things. To think back about what happened three years ago, it's like a dream for me. You know, in a way—are we going to interact or am I just going to be the only person? (Laughs)

BROWNING: It should mostly be you speaking, but I'll maybe ask a couple questions along the way.

[00:01:02]

KAY: Okay. So that would be my first feeling or impression if I am asked the question. But I still remember how horrified I was when it first happened. If you told me three years ago that I've been wearing a mask for three years that would be unimaginable for me, but three years went by. Yeah, you know, if that would be my first impression to the answer, I am impressed by myself how I forget or how I can move on after such a dramatic event.

BROWNING: Okay. [00:02:00] So what about what's happened since that first lockdown with all the many other lockdowns and other restrictions? Or anything else that maybe has impacted your life since that first lockdown?

KAY: (Laughs) I would say, well, maybe for many people they may have had people [who] passed during the event, or maybe they've lost close ones or friends. But for me, my life has changed in a good way since then. I'd say, personally, it made—how can I say?—it made my marriage happen sooner than expected, because my husband, we were together back then. So that would be how I was, in fact, influenced by that event. [00:02:59] And, well, to be honest, when I think about the lockdowns back then, I would remember how I was not very bothered by the fact that I was not free. Because you were so horrified by the fact that you might be dead in the next month, or something. But, you know, my life was not—I don't think I was very much influenced by the lockdown restrictions. You can't go out.

BROWNING: Um-hm.

KAY: Yeah.

BROWNING: So like you said your marriage happened sooner than you expected? Can you explain that?

KAY: Oh, yeah, that I can. Because my neighborhood was one of the most—how to say?—disastrous areas in the first year in Wuhan, so it was very difficult for us. [00:04:04] My neighborhood was one of the first ones to stop the elevators going [in buildings]. It was January or February, I forget, but it was the first wave of the lockdowns and, basically, we couldn't even use the elevator. And my husband and I we had to go out to hunt for food because most of the convenience shops they were just dropped empty. There was no instant noodles or flour you can pay for. So we had to hunt shop by shop for food, eggs and fruits for my grandparents who lived a fifteen minute walk from us. So we walked all the way there and we were lucky enough to find food for my grandparents. And then on the way back, we had to buy things for ourselves, for my family, for my mom, my husband and me. [00:05:03]

And by the time we arrived [at] my building, the elevator [had] stopped. They only gave us one hour at noon time to use the elevator. So we passed that time limit and we had to climb twenty floors, carrying all the supplies we bought. I still remember how terrified we were, because many people already died in in my neighborhood. In the building I lived, there were people [who] passed away because of COVID. So to walk out from our home was a great challenge for my husband and I and we had to wear masks when we were walking upstairs because we were afraid that there's a virus in the air. [00:05:57] So my husband, he would go upstairs carrying the eggs and fruits and then come down to pick up things from me. Because we bought everything we could. And that moved me a lot. [Speaks Chinese briefly to someone] Sorry.

BROWNING: That's okay.

KAY: Yeah, so I decided that I could trust this man for my whole life. You know, I was ready to spend the rest of my life with him. Yeah, I guess you understand something about Chinese marriage, the financial aspect in a Chinese marriage. So I'd say it was that event, or specifically that day that made me decide to overlook the financial—

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BROWNING: Situation? [00:07:02]

KAY: Situation, yeah, right. (laughs)

BROWNING: That's a very moving story there, actually. So, apart from your marriage during this time and the first lockdown, has anything else changed in your life since that time?

KAY: Just in my life generally, or linked with the lockdown?

BROWNING: Yeah, I mean, I guess so. I'll leave it up to you. You can decide how you wish to [respond].

KAY: Yeah, sorry. Apart from my marriage, one of the—well, not one of—the biggest thing in my life is I became a mom. (Laughs)

BROWNING: And when was that again? [00:08:01]

KAY: One year and a half ago. (Laughs)

BROWNING: Okay. Um-hm.

KAY: Thanks for being that imaginary friend. (Laughs) You're going to have to cut that part out, right?

BROWNING: Yeah, because I, of course, know, but the recording doesn't know that. (Laughs)

KAY: Oh, right. The machine doesn't know. The machine has no feelings. (Laughs)

BROWNING: Yeah.

KAY: Yeah, that was one year and a half ago.

BROWNING: Has there been any challenges raising your son during this, I guess, wild period of lots of lockdowns and restrictions? [00:09:04] Has there been any challenges?

KAY: There was like one thing for me, really. Well, because when my son was born there was one of the many waves [when] COVID came back. So the hospital had a restriction that they would only allow two persons to look after the woman, or just dealing with the baby. So it had to be my husband and

another person. We had to use that headcount for—how do you say? A babysitter or like a nanny? You know, the professional ones to take care of the newborns. So, I guess, that had some effect negative effect on my life. [00:10:00] Because my mom had some physical unwellness a day, the exact day before my delivery. So we had to hire another person who we don't know. And yeah, well, for me, it was a hard day, because most of the families had their family members to cook for you and they would send the food to the hospital and you can pick it up. You know, the people who are in the hospital, they can prepare (___???) and give it to the new mom. But it was just me and my husband, so I was the only one who had to eat cold fruit in the waiting room, you know. I don't know how to say it in English.

BROWNING: In the hospital?

KAY: It was like this specific area in the waiting room.

BROWNING: Right.

KAY: So you wait there with all the other big bellies until you are ready. [00:11:05] And when you are there, your husband and family, they can't take care of you. They could only send [food to my door] and the nurse would pick up the food for you. There would be a fifteen minute visiting time at lunchtime when one person could come in and see you. But because we're so inexperienced, I guess my husband, he was so young. He's still young. So I was the only who didn't have food. (Laughs) I had to wait until all the husbands were gone and then my husband showed up with the *dabao* [carry out] food for me. That was quite sad.

BROWNING: That was what?

KAY: That was quite sad for me. Because it was very painful, you know, it was very hurtful. I was the only person without any one around me during that fifteen minute visiting time. [00:12:04] And I guess if there were no such restrictions because of the lockdown, then maybe my cousins or my auntie's, they would come and prepare food for me. Yeah, but you know, that was just like one day. It wasn't such a big deal. And I would say, now I remember when I was pregnant, now and again, I would be very concerned about the COVID situation. I would be worried what would happen if I got infected.

But also, that's part of my feelings now [about] the lockdown. I don't know. Maybe it's the weakness of humanity that you move on and you forget about the scars? Because when I was pregnant, I was still at work. [00:13:02] And in my company there were many, many people, but everybody would ask. So, in a way, I was distracted by my work, of course, and I had a very bitchy boss back then. So, most of the time, I was not paranoid or I didn't think much about me potentially getting infected because there was no one around us getting infected during my pregnancy. That was one thing.

And, I don't know, now I just thought about one thing I'd like to share with you. You can decide to put [it on the recording]. But yeah, I remember before the first lockdown, you know, the first wave, I was bothered by my bitchy boss. [00:14:01] I would be unhappy and whining every day, all day, about my work. Like, why did I come here? How did these things happen to me? Why do I have such a bitchy boss? And then the next day all you think about is, would I still be alive next month?

BROWNING: Right.

KAY: So yeah, that was very—how do you say?

BROWNING: Maybe say—

KAY: Mindful change for me. Like, how I just quickly shifted the focus of my attention. Forget about your boss, you know? Just stay alive.

BROWNING: Um-hm.

KAY: Yeah. And I don't know if ever told you before, you probably still remember her, (name redacted). That's her English name, from Jiangda. [00:15:00]

BROWNING: Uh, yeah.

KAY: The boyish girl. Did I tell you about that before?

BROWNING: I don't think so.

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KAY: Her parents are the only close—if I can put [it] this way, the only people I personally knew who were infected by COVID during the first year. So her parents were put in—I don't know if I can hook you guys up, if it is helpful for you. You can interview her. It might be helpful for your [project], you know.

BROWNING: Uh, yeah, maybe.

KAY: Yeah, she speaks English. Anyway, continue.

BROWNING: What happened?

KAY: Her parents were infected. They caught COVID.

BROWNING: Yeah.

KAY: During the first year when the disease or symptoms were the worst. [00:16:02] So both of her parents were sent into the *huoshenshan*, the special hospital.

BROWNING: Yeah, the temporary hospital.

KAY: Right. I remember how terrified she was when just by chance contact, because it was her birthday in February, and I was like, How's it going? And she was like, Well, both of my parents are in the hospital and I am in the community hotel, because she was basically kicked out from her community. They wouldn't let her in.

BROWNING: Right.

KAY: Yeah, so that was my closest link with the people who were seriously infected by COVID.

BROWNING: Um-hm.

KAY: Sorry, my mind (___???) (Laughs)

BROWNING: That's okay. [00:17:02] But it obviously affected you, in some way.

KAY: You mean her family's situation?

BROWNING: Yeah.

KAY: Right. Yes, because I met her parents when I was in university. I stayed over [at] her place. You know, well, my father passed away more than a decade ago. Well, for me, at that time, I was, like, shit, what if both of your parents died? You'd become an orphan. That was how reacted, inside to myself, I didn't speak up. But, you know, I felt so bad for her because the situation was so bad in the first year. And one of my really close colleagues, he had his daughter come into life. (both laugh) [00:18:04]

BROWNING: You mean born?

KAY: (Laughs) Yeah, he was born either in January or February, so basically when the situation was at the worst, worst time. And it was like a war for him. And how he described, you know, what he went through to me. I was, like, shit. Yeah, I guess I'm just trying to say maybe I am one of the lucky ones, or ordinary ones. You know, I am outside the circle of the, you know, hurricane? Hurricane? What's that word? [had some trouble with pronunciation] [00:19:01]

BROWNING: Horror?

KAY: No, no. *Taifeng*?

BROWNING: Okay.

KAY: Hurricane, hurricane.

BROWNING: What? Hurricane!

KAY: Hurricane, right. I'm losing my English. So I am outside the hurricane. I saw it, but it's not like my life was turned upside down by it.

BROWNING: Right, you were kind of indirectly affected maybe?

KAY: Yeah, right, right.

BROWNING: Yeah, I understand. So I guess one last question is, what have you learned about yourself because of everything that's happened? [00:20:03] And a lot has happened to you, actually. (Laughs)

KAY: Sorry, say again.

BROWNING: A lot has happened to you, you know. So what have you learned about yourself?

KAY: Oh, myself. Oh, I didn't see that question. Oh, yeah, I overlooked it. I saw one, two and four. That's three. Uh, what did I learn about myself? I guess I became more grateful for my life. And I guess also my life would be—how do I put it? My life is very different from what I imagined than six or eight years ago. [00:21:02] I am leaving a very simple, more typical Chinese life, but I am very happy. And I guess I don't really know if I answered the question. But yeah, I guess I learned more. Or maybe I can say, I learned that I could live a seemingly—ah, losing my English. Uh, standard. I can live a standard Chinese life, but be happy. Yeah, and to be honest, when I first saw those questions, you sent me that day last week, I was, like, I haven't though for such a long time. [00:22:02] I had to prepare for all Robert's questions. I don't even know what I mean, living a Chinese life is very different from living an English speaking life. I don't really think that much.

BROWNING: Right. Yeah, well, I'm sure that you're very busy with work and just parenting and other responsibilities that you have, so it can be very difficult to take time to think. (Both laugh)

KAY: Yes.

BROWNING: Right?

KAY: Yeah, but, you know, I saw those questions and I was—how to say? Challenged in a good way because, I don't really think anymore. (Laughs) I think [about] things. You know, about work. How do I handle this report? [00:23:02] How do I [handle] my colleagues' relationships? How do I do parent? But I don't really think [about], you know, those [other] questions.

BROWNING: Right.

KAY: That's part of my standard Chinese life.

BROWNING: No, it is different for you, I'm sure.

KAY: Yeah.

Kay Follow Up Interview

BROWNING: Okay, so I think we'll end the interview here and before I actually stop recording, I'll say thank you and I really appreciate you doing this.

End of interview