

2020 Wuhan COVID-19 Lockdown Oral Histories

Nemo Interview

August 13, 2021

Virtual Meeting

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Nemo Interview

ROBERT BROWNING: All right. My name is Robert Browning, working in conjunction with the Reuther Library at Wayne State University. Today's date is August 13, 2021. This interview is with Nemo, which is a pseudonym about her experience of living through the COVID lockdown in Wuhan, China in early 2020. Nemo is located in Wuhan. This interview is being recorded remotely and will be housed at the Reuther Library, which is part of Wayne State University.

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All right, so we're going to get started. Are you, Nemo, connected to Wayne State University in any way?

NEMO: No.

BROWNING: Okay. Are you originally from Wuhan?

NEMO: Yeah, I was born and worked here my whole life.

BROWNING: Okay. Where are in Wuhan you located?

NEMO: I'm located in Wuchang District.

BROWNING: Okay, Wuchang. Okay. All right. And can I ask you, what do you do for a living?

NEMO: Well, I'm a recruiter for some schools. [00:02:01]

BROWNING: Um-hm. Okay, so you help them find teachers?

NEMO: Yeah, I help schools that range from kindergarten to universities to hire mostly foreign language teachers.

Nemo Interview

BROWNING: So how long have you been doing that?

NEMO: I have been working [in this occupation] since I graduated in 2017, so it's been four years.

BROWNING: Okay. Not bad. All right, so I just always ask a little bit about the background of the people. So I want to go back to the end of 2019 or early 2020. [00:03:02] I just want to know, when did you first hear of the Coronavirus?

NEMO: Well, I can't remember the exact date, but I think it was one week or ten days before the lockdown, I think.

BROWNING: Okay. What did you think? Do you remember how you felt about it?

NEMO: Well, firstly, it was like a rumor had it that some cases broke out in some hospitals and people talked about that the virus was like SARS. [00:04:09] But we didn't buy it. We didn't trust that before the lockdown. And several days later, maybe two or three days later, the government officially announced the news about the virus. So, at that time, we realized that it was true. But we didn't expect that the virus would become that serious. And then, like, three days later, the lockdown—

BROWNING: Began, right?

NEMO: Yeah, yeah. [00:05:00]

BROWNING: Okay, so what were you doing the days before the lockdown began?

NEMO: Well, before the lockdown, I was working as usual, every day. But one thing, I felt lucky because it was winter. I usually easily get a cold during the winter, so I started to wear masks before I knew [about] the virus.

BROWNING: Okay, yeah. Understandable. So you were busy with work. Were you preparing for the Spring Festival, the New Year holiday?

Nemo Interview

NEMO: Yeah, yeah. Sure. [00:06:00]

BROWNING: Yeah. Is your family in Wuhan?

NEMO: Yeah, all of my family are in Wuhan.

BROWNING: Okay.

NEMO: And we even planned some small travel on the Spring Festival.

BROWNING: So obviously that changed, right?

NEMO: Yeah, yeah.

BROWNING: Like so many things.

NEMO: Yeah.

BROWNING: All right. So can you tell me like when the lockdown began, what did you think?

NEMO: Sorry?

BROWNING: Like when the when the lockdown began. The lockdown began January twenty-third.

NEMO: Yeah, yeah.

BROWNING: Could you tell me what did you think? [00:07:01] What did you feel when it began? Or just before it began?

NEMO: Okay. Actually, before the lockdown, we already finished work and the company started the holiday in advance so that we could return home as soon as possible. So on the twenty-second of January that morning I was at home actually. I can clearly remember that I woke up by a phone call from my boyfriend who left Wuhan just two days before the lockdown. And I was told that it was announced that Wuhan was to be locked down. At that time I freaked out

Nemo Interview

and then hurried to get up and informed all my family. [00:08:07] And then the whole family rushed to the supermarket to get some food.

BROWNING: So you were home with your parents?

NEMO: Yeah, yeah.

BROWNING: Okay.

NEMO: At that time, yes, because we were going to celebrate the Spring Festival. We gathered together.

BROWNING: So where was your boyfriend at that time?

NEMO: Oh, my boyfriend left to return to his hometown in Hunan.

BROWNING: Okay. All right. [00:09:00] So you hear the news of the lockdown and you and your family maybe go out and do shopping. Was there anything else that you did to prepare for the lockdown even though it was a surprise?

NEMO: Not that much, I think. Just wanted to prepare food and masks and some basic medicine. But even [though] the government announced the lockdown, we didn't expect the lockdown would last for so many days. When I told my father that we needed to prepare some food, my father told me, It was okay. [00:10:01] I guess in may be one week it would be better. So we just need to prepare food for one week. That's enough.

BROWNING: Right.

NEMO: Obviously, that was not enough. (both laugh)

BROWNING: Yeah, right. So besides food, were there other challenges about the lockdown when it started?

Nemo Interview

NEMO: About the challenges, I think at the beginning, it was okay, we just worried about the virus. We worried about if we would get infected. [00:11:02] But after several weeks, I think the challenge was about our jobs. Like, my job, I'm a recruiter, as you asked me, and because of the virus people are afraid to come to Wuhan. And the people outside of China were afraid to come. So that affected my job a lot at that time, I think. For some others, like the people who worked in restaurants and some real—how do you say *shiti gongzuo*? [00:12:01] Like some—

BROWNING: International companies?

NEMO: No, not international company, I mean those restaurant owners or something like that. They couldn't open and couldn't work. I think that is the challenge.

BROWNING: Um-hm, right. I guess I could probably ask you about how this affected your job because, as you say, you have to find English teachers, right? Or foreign teachers from countries outside of China. [00:13:00] Could you tell me more about how it really affected your job?

NEMO: Oh, well. At that time, I think the situation was getting worse and worse. At the beginning, some teachers who were going to start a new job would be affected at first and then the whole country in China. Later many provinces in China also got affected and then all of the schools were required to postpone the starting date. [00:14:00] So that was the first step to influence my job because people couldn't start a new job. I couldn't earn a commission. That was the first step. And after the postponement, some schools in other province can finally start to return to school, but many teachers we hired were from overseas. At that time, the flights were canceled, so people couldn't come in. So that is a second step. [00:15:00] And then when it came to April, when the lockdown is over, we could return to our normal life. But many foreign language teachers outside China couldn't return due to the worldwide virus situation.

BROWNING: Yeah, because I mean, by April, I think for many countries, you couldn't find an airplane ticket, right?

Nemo Interview

NEMO: Yeah, yeah. It felt like in China, we're finally safe and we can restart. [00:16:00] And hope we can start our normal life again. But for my job, people couldn't come in. It's also a very bad thing for me. I couldn't—how do you say?

BROWNING: It was quite stressful? I'm sure.

NEMO: Yeah, yeah.

BROWNING: After the lockdown started, and even after the lockdown ended, did you have trouble finding teachers who were willing to come to China? I mean, like you say, it was just difficult to get to China, right?

NEMO: Um-hm, Um-hm.

BROWNING: Did you have the experience where people were maybe worried about going to China, or something like that? [00:17:05]

NEMO: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. In February, when the situation in China is still not that clear, there was still some chance for people to come to China, but many people were too afraid to come. I remember I recruited a German teacher who was going to teach in a high school in Hangzhou. In February, the school HR told him that he could come as soon as possible. [00:18:00] The school would pay the whole winter vacation, the full salary for two months with no workload. But the German teacher was still very worried and refused to come at that time and he wanted to come after the situation was clear. But, yeah, you know, later on, in May or July, the situation is getting better in China and outside of China is getting worse. The German teacher wanted to come back, immediately. [00:19:00] But many flights had been canceled, and, also, the school started to worry about the virus, too. So, in the end, the German teacher couldn't come until now.

BROWNING: Oh wow. Now recently?

NEMO: Yeah, but he was desperate to come, actually, because his girlfriend is in China.

Nemo Interview

(both laugh)

BROWNING: Understandable then. Understandable.

NEMO: I know a lot of teachers were in the same situation.

BROWNING: Right, maybe they have a relationship in China with someone, and because of the virus, they were kind of split apart, I guess. [00:20:02]

NEMO: Um-hm, yeah.

BROWNING: Wow, very messy for your work situation. Okay, so I guess I want to return to the lockdown in Wuhan in your home with your family. What did you do during the lockdown?

NEMO: During the lockdown what we mostly cared about is what we will eat. (laughs)
[00:21:00]

BROWNING: Yeah.

NEMO: And actually in China most families started to try all kinds of cooking. All kinds of homemade cooking. Like we seldom baked in the past, but, at that time, we baked *dangao* [cake]. Oh, we baked cake, and homemade barbecue, something like that. And also do some sports at home to make us, you know, feel strong. [00:22:00]

BROWNING: Right, you mean you do exercise or something like that?

NEMO: Yeah, yeah, do exercise.

BROWNING: When you think about the lockdown, what do you remember feeling during that time?

NEMO: You mean during the lockdown?

BROWNING: Yeah, what do you remember feeling or thinking about?

Nemo Interview

NEMO: At the beginning, I felt very freaked out. Very panicked, I think. And watched the news many times a day and also worried, like I said, the whole family worried if we got infected.

[00:23:13] But after fourteen days of the *qianfuqi* [incubation period] –after fourteen days, we felt we were safe and as long as we stayed home and when the situation got better, it is fine. After one month during the lockdown, we felt a little bored and started to worry again about work. [00:24:03] Because for me it is okay, but for many of my friends or people older than me, they have to pay for their house or their car. So it was a big pressure, at that time, but as I remember it, during the lockdown the government gave assistance for that. Like the bank— how to say? The people in Wuhan during the lockdown do not need to pay their bills and can pay for that after the lockdown. [00:25:11]

BROWNING: Right. Yes, we had similar things here in America where people, for example, who rent a house or rent an apartment during the lockdowns here they did not have to pay rent.

NEMO: That is good. Yeah, something like that. But, for rent, it is not the policy, but some landlords would provide that voluntarily.

BROWNING: Right.

NEMO: They told their tenant that you don't need to pay for the rent during the lockdown. [00:26:00]

BROWNING: Okay. So I always ask people that I interview, in your community, how did you and the people in your community buy groceries or other goods during the lockdown?

NEMO: During the lockdown, on the one hand, in our community, every unit had one staff from the community we called it a graded member, *wanggeyuan*. The staff would help us to order something that we need. And, on the other hand, our neighbors would set up a group [in WeChat] that was used to help every unit to order food, fruit and anything you want. [00:27:09] Such as, there was a girl in my unit who wanted to eat strawberries and she contacted with a fruit shop and ordered [some]. Then she set up a group to ask the whole community who

Nemo Interview

wanted to buy strawberries and we made a list. She handed the list to the fruit shop owner and the fruit shop owner would send the fruit to our community. Then we went downstairs to get the fruit one by one, something like that. [00:28:03] Actually, in the past, before the lockdown, I felt that the relationship between our neighbors was very cold. People seldom talked even though we lived door to door. But, during the lockdown, it was the first time that I felt that the power of unity actually.

BROWNING: Okay. So you felt you kind of got to know your neighbors more, or got to know them better?

NEMO: Yeah, yeah, that's true.

BROWNING: You may be felt together because of this experience, right?

NEMO: Yeah, yeah. I still keep the WeChat group started during the lockdown. [00:29:09]

BROWNING: Very good. Very interesting.

NEMO: We created the *tuangou*. Do you know *tuangou* [collective buying]?

BROWNING: No.

NEMO: It means like group shopping.

BROWNING: Oh okay. So you still make use of that?

NEMO: Yeah, like, you know, people in Wuhan are already used to doing that. Like I mentioned, recently, there are some cases coming again. We still can go out, but people in Wuhan are trying not to go out. And we started to do the group shopping again. [00:30:03]

BROWNING: Interesting. Well, that makes sense. It's understandable. I can understand that. All right, so let me see, so another question about the feelings you experienced during the lockdown. Now I've read that, and you said earlier, even your father said something about it. I think from what I've learned, many people thought that the lockdown would be very short,

Nemo Interview

right? [00:31:00] Like your father said, like one week. But then it went on longer and longer and longer. How did that make you feel? Did you feel that it was never going to end or it was going on too long? What did you think about that? Like, not really knowing when it was going to end?

NEMO: Well, at the beginning, it was desperate, because we thought that our local government—the Wuhan government, couldn't deal with this properly. We were angry at that time, and [when] we saw the news, we were very upset and felt desperate. [00:32:05] And after one week, I think, or three days, I couldn't remember—it seems the central government—

BROWNING: The central government.

NEMO: Yeah, the central government started to notice the situation in Wuhan. So all the medical staff from other provinces came to support Wuhan and then we started to feel confident again. [00:33:04] When we see the situation is getting better and better, we are sure that we can finally make it. Especially the first day when we saw the news that there was zero new cases. That day was the happiest thing during the lockdown. We were so excited. After that, every morning, when we woke up, the first thing we did was to check the news to see if we kept to zero cases. [00:34:01] And we calculated—one day, one day, one day, one day, one day. The more zero days we had, the more we felt safe and confident and we just waited for the government to announce that the lockdown is over.

BROWNING: Right. So you became more hopeful?

NEMO: Yeah.

BROWNING: Interesting. Very good. So, let me see, I should go back to your community a little bit more. Got a few questions maybe. Did you know of anybody that got sick in your community? [00:35:01]

NEMO: Yeah, I think no less than ten or five in my community. [For] every case that came out, the community staff would send notice to the community group, so people will be more careful. But there's no one that I was familiar with who got sick.

Nemo Interview

BROWNING: Like, no family members or anything like that?

NEMO: Yeah. No family members and no friends, but my friend's family were. I know that.

[00:36:01]

BROWNING: Great, so you were a little lucky.

NEMO: Yeah, I feel very lucky.

BROWNING: And another question I commonly asked people, because Chinese live in different kinds of homes compared to Americans, in your parents' home, what floor is that on in your your building?

NEMO: What do you mean? What floor do we live in?

BROWNING: Yeah.

NEMO: The fifth.

BROWNING: The fifth? Okay. So not too high.

NEMO: Yeah, not that high.

BROWNING: Okay. And one last question about your community, how did the lockdown actually work in your community? Like, what were the rules? [00:37:01] What were the procedures for the lockdown? How did it work? Could you tell me a bit about that?

NEMO: Can you repeat the question?

BROWNING: Yeah. In your community, how did the lockdown operate? In your community, what were the rules? What were the procedures that you had to follow?

NEMO: Um, the most important thing is that, at the beginning, we were required to stay at home and we need to check our temperature every day. [00:38:00] If someone got a fever, [we]

Nemo Interview

needed to report to our community and the community would arrange the person who got a fever to check in the hospital, or something like that. After the situation was getting better, we can go downstairs to walk around in our community, but not go outside of our community during the lockdown. But if you had something urgent, like, you needed to get some cash from the ATM, it was fine. You just need to tell the guard about it and you need to come back as soon as possible. [00:39:09] That's it.

BROWNING: Right. So in your community, could you go walk around outside in the community?

NEMO: Yeah, yeah.

BROWNING: Okay. So if you wanted to just go and get a little exercise you walk around the community for a little bit?

NEMO: At the beginning, when the situation was worse, at that time, we didn't go out. We would just go out to pick up food and keep a long distance from each other. Only when the situation was getting stable, [when] we felt a little bit safe, we could go downstairs and walk around in our community. [00:40:05]

BROWNING: Okay, let's see. I want to go back a little bit to your work situation. From what you told me, I assume during the lockdown you were still kind of working, right?

NEMO: Um-hm, yeah.

BROWNING: But just working from home.

NEMO: Yeah, working from home.

BROWNING: And did it affect your financial situation at all?

NEMO: Sorry?

BROWNING: Did it affect your financial situation?

Nemo Interview

NEMO: Yeah, yeah. For sure. [00:41:02]

BROWNING: Were you making less money?

NEMO: Yeah, yeah. Like I said, the school postponed the starting day. People couldn't return to school. I couldn't get commission, so only the basic salary, so I earned less. For sure.

BROWNING: Okay, all right, so I kind of have less questions to ask you now. [00:42:00] So we're kind of coming to an end actually. But you told me about the feeling of waking up every day and looking at the numbers. Every day you would check to see if there zero cases and you and everybody else I'm sure started to feel more hopeful. But when you knew the lockdown was going to end? How did you feel?

NEMO: Well, I felt very, very excited and ready to have a new life. [00:43:00] Also, at that time, I feel very honored that we finally made it and we can cherish our normal life as usual. Also, I was very excited because since the lockdown I was separated from my boyfriend. Nearly seventy days, more than that. So, on the first day the lockdown is over, my boyfriend came to Wuhan and we finally met. [00:44:01]

BROWNING: Very good. So that's basically the next question I was going to ask you was what was the first thing you did after the lockdown ended? And I guess you met your boyfriend, right?

NEMO: Yeah, yeah. For me, yes.

BROWNING: You maybe went out and had a dinner or something.

NEMO: Well, no, we just meet and we had food at home. [We were] still kind of afraid to go out to have food.

BROWNING: Right, right. Okay, well, still good. [00:45:00] All right, since this happened, what do you appreciate more in life?

Nemo Interview

NEMO: What do you appreciate? I think it is the government, I think. Yeah, I appreciate that.

BROWNING: Why do you say that?

NEMO: Sorry?

BROWNING: Why do you say that? The government?

NEMO: Yeah, because especially after the virus was in Wuhan and compared to the situation now, I think our government dealt with it in a very good way. [00:46:00] At that time, we thought seventy-six days was very long. But looking at what is going on now, I think our government did a great job. So I can understand that now and feel very honored.

BROWNING: Right. Is there anything else that you may be appreciate more?

NEMO: I also think I appreciate those doctors, nurses, medical staff. Yeah, they did sacrifice a lot. A lot. A lot. I really appreciate their efforts. [00:47:00] Also everyone that follows our government guidance to stay at home, like, in China, when the government told us that we better to stay at home, then we would follow them and stayed at home. That is what we did. And I know that in many Western countries, people, you know, want their freedom. They still want to go out and they still want to have party even though the virus is very serious.

BROWNING: Yeah, yeah.

NEMO: Yeah. So I also appreciate people who sacrificed a lot and stayed at home.

BROWNING: Yeah, that's definitely a problem we have here in America. Maybe not everyone wants to listen or cooperate. [00:48:00] All right, so what about the current situation? Like with what's happening now? How do you feel about the current situation?

NEMO: Currently, the Delta is a more serious virus, I think. But, at this time, I think people are more confident. Actually, there are not so many cases in Wuhan, I think. Twenty or thirty, I

Nemo Interview

think? The first case was on August first, and now the cases are less than thirty, I think, and two districts in Wuhan were blocked.

BROWNING: Okay. [00:49:00] Like locked down or?

NEMO: Those two districts have the most cases, so the two districts were blocked. [It's] kind of a lockdown for them, but people are very used to cooperating with it. And in those two districts, people did the nucleic [acid] test for two days or three days. And one of my friends lived in one of the blocked the districts now, in Jiangxia District. And she already took six tests, I think. [00:50:01]

BROWNING: And she's okay?

NEMO: She's fine. She's fine. She's okay. Yeah. But, at this time, there's no problem for the food, for the fruit or something. There's no worries. The government arranged all things for those people. And for other districts, we are not blocked. And we are still free to go out, but only for the necessary work we will go out. For others, we prefer to stay at home to reduce the risk of infection. But today there's zero cases again. [00:51:02] So we are happy again. We just hope for the zero cases. And we are expected to return to work and, for me, I hope the schools can be opened as planned, like, on the first day of September(??).

BROWNING: Right, right, right. Yeah, because here in America, school will be starting soon. So it's the same in China, right?

NEMO: Yeah, yeah.

BROWNING: Yeah, so it's kind of a similar issue here. [00:52:00] You know, people are very concerned about schools opening, you know, and things like that.

NEMO: Yeah.

BROWNING: All right.

Nemo Interview

NEMO: I think this time it is going to be fine soon.

BROWNING: Yeah, I hope so. I hope so. All right, so I guess the last question I'll ask you is, is there anything else that you wish to share? Anything else maybe I did not ask about? Anything else you want to say?

NEMO: Actually, I thought of one thing. [00:53:00] Because of the virus, because of the lockdown, actually, many people lost their jobs. As I know, our government adjusted some policies so that the people who lost their job can easily apply for the unemployment—bonus?

BROWNING: Yeah, benefit.

NEMO: Yeah, the benefit. It is easier to apply for the benefit than before, because of the because of the virus. I think that that is very helpful for people.

BROWNING: Right, right. For the everyday people. [00:54:01]

NEMO: Yeah.

BROWNING: Okay. All right. Well, I think that's all the questions I have for you. And I want to say thank you for doing this. I do appreciate it.

NEMO: Okay, my pleasure.

End of interview