

## **2020 Wuhan COVID-19 Lockdown Oral Histories**

### **Roger Interview**

April 30, 2021

Virtual Meeting

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## Roger Interview

**ROBERT BROWNING:** Hello, my name is Robert Browning, working in conjunction with the Reuther Library at Wayne State University. Today's date is April 30, 2021. This interview is with Roger about his experience of living through the COVID lockdown outside of Wuhan, China in early 2020. At the moment, Roger is located in Beijing. [00:00:58] 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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Okay, so my first question, Roger, is, are you associated with Wayne State University in any way?

**ROGER:** No, I'm not.

**BROWNING:** Okay. Are you originally from Wuhan?

**ROGER:** Yes, I was born and raised in Wuhan.

**BROWNING:** Which district in Wuhan?

**ROGER:** Wuchang District. [00:02:00]

**BROWNING:** Wuchang District. Okay, and could I ask you, what do you do for a living?

**ROGER:** Do you mean now or during the time of the lockdown? Because it was different.

**BROWNING:** Maybe both is good.

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**ROGER:** Okay. Currently I'm working as a journalist for an English news agency here in Beijing. But during the lockdown, and even a few months after the lockdown, I was working in Wuhan where I worked for an education company as a manager to oversee hiring and staffing of teachers from outside of China.

**BROWNING:** Okay, so what were you doing before the lockdown began? Like the days or months before the lockdown. [00:03:00]

**ROGER:** Before the lockdown?

**BROWNING:** Yeah.

**ROGER:** I was doing that same job that I was just telling you.

**BROWNING:** Okay, okay.

**ROGER:** Yeah.

**BROWNING:** All right, so when did you first hear of the Coronavirus?

**ROGER:** When did I first hear about the Coronavirus? I want to say probably in, uh, late December 2019, or probably early January 2020. That's when I think it was a screenshot of some WeChat conversation between the doctor, who is known as the whistleblower of the COVID-19 outbreak, Li Wenliang and with someone else. There was a screenshot of his chat history that went viral among people in Wuhan on WeChat. [00:04:02] And it was brought to my attention by my wife. We talked about it over dinner. And I didn't really think much about it because it was talking about SARS making a comeback. And I was like, no way. There is no way that is happening, so I didn't really think much about it. I don't think anyone in our family took it very seriously.

**BROWNING:** So the days before the lockdown was before the Spring Festival I know. And so those days just before the lockdown, or just after the lockdown, were you still in Wuhan at the time? [00:05:01]

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**ROGER:** Before the lockdown, yes. Uh, I believe the lockdown was imposed on the twenty-third of January in 2020. And I was, technically speaking, still in the city of Wuhan that morning. I was driving with my wife and my daughter to my in-law's house, which is not very far from Wuhan, just right outside of Wuhan, in a small town called Jingzhou. It's about 120 miles outside of Wuhan.

**BROWNING:** Okay, and so, for the most part, you stayed there during the lockdown?

**ROGER:** We arrived in Jingzhou on the twenty-third, which was the first day of the lockdown.

**BROWNING:** Okay.

**ROGER:** And, uh, we left Jingzhou and went back to Wuhan. I believe it was the eighteenth of March. [00:06:04]

**BROWNING:** Okay.

**ROGER:** Yeah, and the lockdown ended in Wuhan on the eighth of April, so we stayed in Wuhan from the eighteenth of March till the eighth of April.

**BROWNING:** So going back to when the lockdown began, and even though you were outside of Wuhan at that time, what did you and your family do when it started?

**ROGER:** We got on the road on the twenty-third. We already knew about the lockdown. But when we left the city that morning, the only thing that we were told is that they were shutting down all public transportation, which includes the airport, the high-speed rails and all the buses that are going out of the city. [00:07:02] But they didn't really mention anything about the highway, so that's why we were driving out of the city. I really have to point out that we weren't really escaping the city, because my wife and I, we had planned that trip two or three months before the Spring Festival. We both agreed that we'll be spending the Spring Festival of 2020 at her parents' house, instead of my parents' house. So that morning when we woke up to the news that the city is going to lock down at 10 a.m. in the morning, my wife asked me, Are

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we still leaving the city? I was, like, Yeah, why not? We already loaded our trunk with all our stuff. And we were like, We're still leaving, because we didn't really think much about it.

[00:07:56] Because I don't think anyone that is alive has ever experienced something like this, so I thought this could last at most a week or something and so we went on the road and we drove out of the city to her parent's house. My parents were still in Wuhan and my grandparents from my mom's side. My parents and most of my family members they were still in Wuhan at that time. And we went to Jingzhou on the day of the lockdown. And then once we got there, we knew that they closed the highway as well, so we were stuck in Jingzhou.

**BROWNING:** Right. So you got out just in time, basically.

**ROGER:** Right. So we got out in time and the first few days when we went to Jingzhou, Jingzhou was fine. [00:08:57] Obviously, they closed a few main roads and intersections because of the COVID situation in Wuhan. But I would say life was still kind of normal in Jingzhou. You can still walk around. You can still go to the supermarket. You can still go to the grocery store and go to restaurants at that time. But then I think it was four or five days later, the entire city of Jingzhou also went into a lockdown just like Wuhan. And I think many people outside of Wuhan, or outside of China, didn't really realize that the lockdown wasn't just imposed on the city of Wuhan, which is the capital city of Hubei Province. But during the initial outbreak of COVID, the entire Hubei Province was under lockdown, not just Wuhan. So Jingzhou was one of those cities that went into lockdown as well. [00:10:00]

**BROWNING:** So when the lockdown began for you, do you recall what were the kind of immediate challenges in the beginning?

**ROGER:** Uh, I think when we first went into lockdown, the first thing was, obviously, all the main roads were blocked. So I can't drive my car around. Whenever I have to go to a grocery store, or a supermarket, I'll just have to ride a bike or I'll just have to walk there because the buses weren't available either. Fortunately, for us at that time, we had a supermarket which was just two blocks away. But, at the beginning of the lockdown, they were already limiting the

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number of people going into the supermarket every day. [00:10:59] So there was a huge line outside of the supermarket and they would only allow a few people to go in at a time, so that was one of the challenges. Another challenge was I was desperately trying to go back to Wuhan, because that was already after a week or something. I was desperately trying to go back because my parents and my grandparents were still there. And they told me that if you have to get your car on the road, you're going to have to apply for a special permit with the local transportation authority. So I had to go to that transportation authority every day, but the situation was that the entire COVID situation was escalating so fast. It was changing so fast every day. So the first day that I went there they told me, Oh, we are closing the office, so you can come back tomorrow morning. [00:11:59] We'll issue the permits. Then the next morning that I went there, they say, Oh, we can't give you a permit anymore. So, and then, I think for a week, or two, I was just calling the office every day and, then gradually, they were closing all the communities as well. We weren't allowed to go outside our own gated community. We couldn't even go to the supermarket anymore, so I believe that was just a week after the initial lockdown of Jingzhou city.

**BROWNING:** Something that I want to ask, before we continue your experiences of going through the lockdown, is that I heard that Wuhan, Hubei people, when this first began, maybe were seen as kind of seen in a negative light or had a negative perception of them because— [00:13:06]

**ROGER:** Like being discriminated?

**BROWNING:** Yeah, yeah. Did you ever have any experiences with that?

**ROGER:** Uh, I want to say I didn't really experience any of that discrimination firsthand, because the entire time I was inside Hubei. But I did hear about some of my fellow Wuhanese who were being discriminated [against] outside of Wuhan, even when they are not even Wuhanese. I heard about one of my coworkers at that time. She's a teacher. She's not even Chinese. She's British. And she left Wuhan, I think, one or two days before the lockdown. She went to a coastal

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city to spend Spring festival and, she told us later when she came back that for the first two days when she was there, she wasn't even able to check into a hotel. [00:14:10] Because when people found that she came from Wuhan, people wouldn't even check her into a hotel. So, eventually, I think she had to contact a local British Consulate to help her with her accommodation. But, personally, myself, I didn't really experience any of that discrimination because the entire time I was still inside Hubei province.

**BROWNING:** Right, right. Understandable. So to continue on with the experience of the lockdown, what were your general, common emotions that you remember during your time in the lockdown in Jingzhou? [00:15:01]

**ROGER:** I think at the very beginning of it, like I was saying, we were just being skeptical or even in complete denial of the situation because I don't think anyone in our generation or even in our grandparent's generation had ever experienced something like this. So, for the first few weeks, we were thinking this could end very soon. This is probably just some new strain of a flu or something and this could end very soon. And then, we're still talking in our work groups because we were supposed to reopen our schools. I was working for this education company, which had a lot of schools in Wuhan. [00:15:59] We were supposed to reopen our schools, which I believe was towards, uh, the last week of February. And so as we got closer and closer to the last week of February, there was still no sign at all this lockdown ever coming to an end. And that's when we started to just slowly accept the reality. And, also, feeling—I want to say helpless, because we didn't really know what to do. We were just following, basically, watching TV twenty-four seven and following the news trying to figure out what is happening out there. And just waiting. Just waiting.

**BROWNING:** So were you anxious? [00:16:59] Were you and your family anxious about anything? Or was it just mainly feeling helpless?

**ROGER:** Um, there was definitely some anxiety, but it wasn't really about some big issues. Because, first of all, it wasn't a very ideal situation. We were all locked inside of our own house,

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so we feel very safe. We had all the supplies and food delivered to our door by community workers. So we didn't have to worry about a shortage of anything that our lives depended on. But anxiety wise, I did worry about my parents, and especially my grandparents, because at the time, a few weeks into the pandemic, all communication was done through WeChat. [00:18:02]

**BROWNING:** Right.

**ROGER:** Like with your neighbors, with your community coordinator; about the groceries; about some of the basic supplies; if you have to get medication delivered to your door, everything was being done on WeChat. And, obviously, my grandparents—both of them were over 90 years old, so they can't handle WeChat or any of that kind of technology, so I was a little anxious about that. Fortunately, my parents they do live very close to my grandparents and also the community workers at my grandparent's neighborhood were also taking very good care of my grandparents. [00:19:02] So that was part of my anxiety, and another anxiety was we didn't really know when we would be able to go back to work. So, during the lockdown, we're still getting paid, but only the minimum wage.

**BROWNING:** Right.

**ROGER:** I was being paid a little over 2000 yuan every month and, because I was a manager, I was actually being paid a little more than some of our entry level employees. Some of our employees were just getting paid 1500 or 1700 per month. Even if you don't have to go to work; even if don't have to buy anything; even if you don't have to commute every day, that is still way below the basic amount of money for you to get by every month. [00:20:04] So, at the time, I still have to pay for my car loan every month, which was already about 2400-ish. So my monthly income wasn't even enough to cover that, not to mention other bills and things that we have to buy for our daughter. So that was definitely the biggest part of my anxiety. Because we didn't know when we will be able to go back to work. Yeah, that was that.

**BROWNING:** Okay, so how old is your daughter, may I ask?



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**ROGER:** My daughter right now she is three years and seven months old. [00:21:07] And at the time of the beginning of the outbreak she was two. Two and a half.

**BROWNING:** So, even in America, during our lockdowns here, we had a lot of spare time. So how did you and your family occupy your time during the lockdown? What did you do?

**ROGER:** Uh, one thing—because I also lived a few years in the United States, there's a huge difference between lockdown life in America and lockdown life in China. Because in China, most people live in apartments. We don't really have a house of our own. We don't have a front yard or backyard. [00:21:58] So, at the time of the first month of the lockdown, we weren't even allowed to go outdoors. We weren't allowed to even go downstairs. And even if we were allowed, my wife and I were just very concerned about the air that she [his daughter] breathes in, if she goes out. So for a very long time, she had to spend every day inside the apartment. We had some puzzle games for her. I had to go hunt for all kinds of cartoons and Pixar or DreamWorks movies for her. All the movies that I had watched as a child, I have to go find them on TV and download them, purchase them and just play them on TV. [00:23:03] But she was very young. She couldn't really understand most of them and, as you can tell, it's not very good for her eyes to be watching TV all day long. So every day we have to figure out something different for her to do. Sometimes, it's a little toy. Sometimes, it's like puzzle games. We do have one very small grocery store open right outside of the community gate during the entire time of the lockdown. So even for those two months, we weren't allowed to go outside of the community, but we're still allowed to go to the gate of our community and purchase things from that very small grocery store. They had some very cheap toys. So every once in a while, I'll just go to that store and buy some very cheap toys for my daughter. [00:24:00]

**BROWNING:** Okay, so I kind of want to ask some questions about your community, your kind of immediate neighborhood area, during the lockdown what kind of rules, procedures or guidelines were in place in Jingzhou, in your neighborhood that you were in?

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**ROGER:** In Jingzhou, like I was saying, the first two weeks into the lockdown, uh, we were still allowed to travel outside of our community to purchase the daily essentials for our family. [00:25:03] But, I think at the very beginning, every day only one family member from each household can go out of the community and that person must come back before the end of the day. And, then a few weeks later, I think it was one or two weeks later, one family member from his household can leave the community once every other day. And then, all of the businesses shut down, including that one big supermarket near our community. They also went into a complete shutdown because of COVID, so there was no point of going out anymore and we weren't allowed to go out anymore. But then I think we went into the worst few weeks of the initial outbreak and, for those weeks, we weren't allowed to even go downstairs to take a walk in our community, in the garden. [00:26:04] So, for those weeks, we had our daily essentials, our food delivered to our door. I'm sure if you've followed the news, you probably knew that for a few weeks we had food donated to us from all over the country.

**BROWNING:** Right, I read about that.

**ROGER:** From as far as Xinjiang. We had meat, dairy products, frozen meat, frozen fish and vegetables donated to us, so the good side is we don't have to starve. We always have food. We always have more food than we need. The downside is you don't really have a choice. [00:27:00] You can't choose what you want. They're just putting a little something of everything into bags and deliver it to your door by community workers. I believe the first two or three days we saw an entire fleet of military trucks pulling into our community and just dumping cabbages or potatoes or frozen meat onto the ground and then the trucks left. Then community workers will go there to distribute all the food. They put those things into bags and then they deliver those things to your door. And while they deliver the food, they'll also be checking our temperatures. So we have to report—[for] the first one or two weeks—they came to our door and checked our temperatures in person. [00:27:59] And then later we just had to report our temperatures every day in the WeChat group. So that was that.

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And then I just—it was a year ago, so I don't remember for how long we had to do that, like, we couldn't even go downstairs. And then [things] started to slowly, slowly loosen up. We were allowed to go downstairs, but most people were still scared to do so. But it was a few weeks later, I think it was a month later, we no longer had that donated food, so we had to start purchasing our food again. So delivery businesses were open. The supermarkets outside of our community, they were open, but they were not open to the general public, because the general public were still ordered to stay inside their own houses. [00:29:00] So, the delivery people, they were allowed to go pick up an order and deliver it to your door. We could order things on our smartphones and have those delivery people deliver things to our community gate. And we just went downstairs, and we picked up our orders right at the gate.

And then there's that one tiny little grocery store open right outside of gate of our community. So they would put out a blackboard and at their gate every day and tell us what they have in the store every day. Like, the snacks, the groceries, the vegetables, the meats, eggs and dairy products. They'll put out a blackboard every day that says, This is what we have, and you can go there and purchase things. So that was that. And then gradually things started to loosen up and we're allowed to go downstairs. [00:29:59] You started to see more people walking around downstairs in the garden. And, eventually, I think it was around the fifth or the eighth of March, finally, our community gate was opened. We were allowed to travel outside our community. We can go to Riverside Park. We can go to some open public places, but still not like museums or restaurants. We still couldn't go to those places.

**BROWNING:** Right. Very different from America. So, during this period, did everyone cooperate in your community with all of these kinds of restrictions? Or cooperate with the system of getting food? Were there ever any issues that you heard about? [00:31:01]

**ROGER:** Um, not that I'm aware of. Occasionally, we'd see on the news that some individuals were defying the orders to stay inside. They went into the street, and there would be a warrant or put into custody of the local police. Occasionally we'll see that on the news, but in our community, we didn't really see any of those or neither have we heard anyone complaining in a

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WeChat group. So I think most people were—it was not an ideal situation, but I think most people knew how serious that was and, really, there's nothing that you can do. What can you do? Even if you go downstairs, even if you go outside of a community, there's nothing out there for you. [00:32:02] Everything is closed. You have no public transportation. You can't get your car outside from the community. You don't have any businesses open out there. So, yeah, I didn't really experience any of those in my in-law's community.

**BROWNING:** Okay. Did you know of anyone getting sick in that neighborhood or any relatives who were sick with COVID?

**ROGER:** That neighborhood, yes, uh, we did. Because every once in a while, the community workers would update us with the new cases, the new deaths, in our community WeChat groups. Because every time we have a new case, every time we have a new death, our lockdown would be extended. [00:31:01] So that's when people got really frustrated, because everybody is counting on things getting loosened up a little bit the next week. And, then suddenly, we have two or three new cases from our community, even though it's a very big community. We have forty or fifty apartment buildings in that community. It is a very big community. And some of the cases that were being reported in our Wechat group were very far from where we live, but every time we got a few new cases our lockdown got extended.

I think it was a month, or a month or two, into the lockdown, most of the local communities have different lockdowns. [00:33:57] Like extension policies, like for example, if this community of yours, you don't have any new cases for a few weeks, then the lockdown policy for this community can loose up a little bit. You can have your residents coming downstairs, walk around in the garden, but if you have new cases coming up every week, then no. All of the residents still have to stay inside and none of the residents could come out. So I think we didn't really actually know those people who got infected, but we did get updated every day by our community workers in the WeChat groups and we kept a very close eye on those figures because it, for us, really mattered.

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**BROWNING:** So when you heard those figures every day, or almost every day, and the lockdown was maybe extended in your community, how did all of that make you feel?

[00:35:04] What did you guys think, you know?

**ROGER:** I think it was just sheer frustration. First thing we couldn't understand, how do you get infected if you are for this entire time been staying inside? The only chance of you getting infected in the middle of a community lockdown is that you must have defied the order and went outside—went downstairs—got into contact with someone else who got infected. That's the only possibility. So I think every time we were told there are new infections in our community was just sheer frustration for us. Because we knew that our lockdown will be extended again for possibly a week or two. [00:35:58] Um, but actually for my wife and I, it didn't really make much of difference for us, because if our daughter wasn't able to go anywhere, we weren't really planning on going anywhere, either. Because we had to make sure that it is completely safe. If the entire city opens up, then that's when we will bring our daughter outside. So for us, it didn't really make an actual difference for us.

**BROWNING:** Right, understandable. So it sounds like where you were the lockdown started to begin to be relaxed in early-middle March, right?

**ROGER:** Right.

**BROWNING:** Okay.

**ROGER:** Which is a month before Wuhan actually reopened. [00:37:01]

**BROWNING:** Right. I mean, so in your situation, where you were, how did you feel when the lockdown began to be relaxed a little bit? And you can maybe go out a little bit more? How did you feel?

**ROGER:** Ah, I mean, [laughs] it was definitely positive, but I'm looking for a more accurate word to it. What is it? Relieved? I want to say relieved. Yeah, because we were finally seeing the end of it. Or, probably, not the end of it. We're still in the global pandemic right now. But, finally,

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we're seeing the beginning of the end. We're finally seeing our lives getting back on track.

[00:38:00] And, finally, we're able to breathe the air outside and take our daughter to parks and all that kind of stuff. So we felt relieved, yeah.

**BROWNING:** I'm sure. So, as I recall it, you said that you returned to Wuhan on March eighteenth.

**ROGER:** Right.

**BROWNING:** Now was that related to your work situation, or the restrictions being relaxed in Jingzhou? Or both? How did the—?

**ROGER:** It was mostly because things got relaxed in Jingzhou. It had nothing to do with my work at that time. Because even as we got into April, even after Wuhan reopened there were still no sign, no official announcement of whenever the schools will be reopened. [00:38:59] So it was mostly just about Jingzhou getting relaxed and we were finally able to get that permit to get our car back on the road again. And like I was saying I was worried about my family in Wuhan and so as soon as we were able to get that permit, we just went back.

**BROWNING:** And, in your mind, when you returned to Wuhan, what did you think? Do you remember?

**ROGER:** Yes, I still remember. Um, the day we went back to Wuhan, the eighteenth of March, there was literally no cars, no people in that city. Because Wuhan, even though for many foreigners outside of China [have] probably never heard of it before this pandemic, it is still a major city in China. It has a population of the eleven million people, so it's massive. [00:40:00] It's a very populated city. And that day when we went back, we almost didn't see any people walking in the street. We almost didn't see any cars on the street. It was only whenever you came to a big intersection while waiting for the traffic lights you would see two or three cars from each direction. Those were the only cars that we saw that day when we went back to Wuhan. We also saw a lot of stray animals. A lot of stray dogs still with there a leash on. A lot of

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stray cats on the streets. My wife and I, we thought it was because many people left Wuhan right before the lockdown, right before the Spring Festival began. They thought that they would probably be back just in a few days. [00:41:00] But a few months later they were still not able to come back so a lot of their dogs and their pets ended up on the streets. So we saw a lot of stray animals on the streets, and it was heartbreaking. And we made it all the way back into our community where my parents lived at the time. And there was nothing. They live on a very busy street. They live on the busiest street in Wuchang District, which is literally the city center. There was nobody. There were no cars on the street. The entire street was empty.

**BROWNING:** So you were able to see your parents and other family?

**ROGER:** Right. Uh, we do have our own place in Wuhan, but we rent it out to someone else. [00:42:00] So we don't really live at our own place. So whenever we are in Wuhan, even to this day, my wife and my daughter, they still live with my parents. So as soon as we got back to Wuhan on the eighteenth of March, we went back to my parent's place.

**BROWNING:** Okay, so you stayed with your parents?

**ROGER:** Right, right.

**BROWNING:** Okay, okay. All right. Interesting. Wow. So now I want to go to your work situation. What was the process of returning to work? And how did that happen? And did it take place before Wuhan opened backup?

**ROGER:** Ah, I must say I never actually returned to work. [00:43:01]

**BROWNING:** Okay.

**ROGER:** I quit my last job at the beginning of July 2020 and, it was even till that day, we still hadn't heard from the local authorities when our school will be able to reopen later that year. So it was out of sheer frustration. For an entire six months, we were only getting paid a little over 2000 yuan every month, which is a little over 300 bucks every month.

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**BROWNING:** Right.

**ROGER:** It was just impossible to get by with that kind of money every month. So I think many of our coworkers they also quit because they didn't know where this was going. Some of our coworkers were able to go back to work. [00:44:00] Obviously, their positions were seen as more essential than our positions. They went back for some of the maintenance work for the school. So, yeah, but for me, until the day when I actually resigned from my last job, we still actually weren't able to get back to work.

**BROWNING:** Okay. So what did you do?

**ROGER:** Well, definitely, still working. I was still working from home every day. I was actually working longer hours than I normally did at the school, at the company that I used to work for. Because we waited and we waited until late April when our company decided that we had to give kids online classes. [00:45:00] Now, most of the kids, they were kindergarteners or preschoolers. They were very young, so in order to keep their attention for an hour for an online session was very hard. And, at that time, many of our teachers weren't Chinese nationals, so many of them actually left China before the lockdown. There was a time I had to coordinate with teachers from six different time zones for about twenty or thirty of our online classes. So I have to coordinate with those teachers from different time zones. I have to be their tech person because I was the only dude on our team. [00:46:02] Most of the other team members, they're female teachers, they don't know how to handle this online Zoom stuff, so I was the tech person.

I had to coordinate with all the teachers. I had to help with the schedules and then we had teachers on the other side working with the students and working with the parents. So that all started in late April and worked all the way into—it lasted all the way into early July until I actually resigned. And, also, starting in June, when some of our teachers realized that they probably weren't able to come back anytime soon, they still have their landlords asking them to pay the rent, which is impossible for them. [00:46:59] There's no point at that time for them to



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keep their apartment in Wuhan. So I had to drive out there in my car to help these teachers move all their things outside of their apartment and negotiate with their landlords every day. So during the day, I'll be doing a lot of heavy lifting and, in the evening, I had to do a lot of negotiating with the landlord. So there's just too much frustration, too much unpredictability and my position was to oversee the staffing and hiring of teachers from outside of China.

**BROWNING:** Right.

**ROGER:** And, at that point, it is just like you don't see any hope for your job. You don't see borders reopening anytime soon. You don't see these teachers from outside of the country being able to come back to Wuhan anytime soon. [00:47:59] You don't even know when your school is going to open soon. And at that time for my position, even though the city was already back to life and many people went back to work; many people went back to their business, for me, for those of us who were working in the education industry, we still didn't really see any hope. It was still a lot of frustration.

**BROWNING:** Right. Huh wow. Very, very unstable situation for you.

**ROGER:** Um-hm.

**BROWNING:** I want to go back to just before Wuhan opened back up and you returned to Wuhan on March eighteenth. Wuhan opens back up officially on April eighth, but the lockdown was slowly relaxed before that. [00:49:01] So how did you feel about things beginning to be relaxed in Wuhan?

**ROGER:** Ah, I think it was two or three weeks before the actual official reopen when things started to relax a little bit every day, in Wuhan, in our area. But it was also depending on how many cases you have in that community of yours.

**BROWNING:** Right.

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**ROGER:** Because even after the official reopen of the entire city, for those communities that were still reporting new cases every once a while, they were still in lockdown. Luckily for us, we were able to, actually, get out of our community even before April eighth. [00:49:59] I think the first day that we got out was on the sixth or the seventh, which is a day or two before the official reopen. Again, it felt refreshing. It felt relieving. One of the first things that we did is to get some fast food [laughs] that I had been craving for during the entire lockdown, because I love fried chicken so much.

**BROWNING:** Okay.

**ROGER:** And, funny enough, the first restaurant that reopened on our street was Kentucky Fried Chicken. So two or three weeks before they lifted the lockdown, we were able to order a Kentucky Fried Chicken from right across the street and have it delivered downstairs to our community. [00:51:01] So it was feeling like things are finally getting back to normal, bit by bit. Not completely, but bit by bit. We felt relieved and we're finally able to, you know, take our daughter outside, because one of the things that really got my wife and I concerned was the mental and psychological health of very young daughter.

**BROWNING:** Right. How so?

**ROGER:** Because for her age she wasn't supposed to be staying inside the apartment every day and just playing games and iPad or watching TV. That was not what she was supposed to be doing. She was supposed to be out there running around. She was supposed to be at a park. [00:52:00] She was supposed to be playing with other kids her age. She was supposed to be at the outdoor playground.

**BROWNING:** Right.

**ROGER:** So for those months, I think one of the things that really got us very anxious and concerned was the mental health of our daughter. And if I felt that kind of frustration from the isolation, then we could probably assume that our daughter was going through something

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similar. Probably not the same, but definitely something where she was definitely being influenced by being locked inside our house every day. She's definitely getting some of that negative influence, so as soon as we were able to get her out, we probably just did it right away.

**BROWNING:** She could probably feel a little bit of maybe whatever anxiety you and your wife felt, I guess, you know. [00:52:57]

**ROGER:** Right, and the first day we took her out, which was still before the official reopen, we drove to a to a park very, very far away. Because we felt people are coming out already and, but at the time of the reopening, we still didn't really have any public transportation. So we thought, Well, for those parks inside the city is probably going to get very crowded. Because for people who didn't have cars, they had to rely on public transportation. They couldn't go very far. So for us, luckily for us, we had a car, so we had to go somewhere far enough to stay away from the crowds. So we went to a park very, very far away and just like we thought we almost didn't see anybody in that park. [00:54:00]

**BROWNING:** That must have been very strange, but also felt good in a way.

**ROGER:** Um-hm, um-hm.

**BROWNING:** Okay, so I just have maybe two or three more questions for you. And the first question is kind of a heavy question in that, I just want to know, since the lockdown has ended, how have things changed for you, personally, your family and even for Wuhan in your mind?

**ROGER:** Uh, for me and for my family, it has changed a lot—a lot. Because if it wasn't for the pandemic, I would never have thought about leaving my daughter and my wife behind and me going to a completely different city. Not to mention going to a completely different industry, where I had no experience or no background or anything at all. [00:55:05] And not to mention coming to Beijing, because, actually, Beijing is among some of my least favorite cities in the world. So if it wasn't for the pandemic, I'd never thought about doing any of that. But, as I was

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saying, for the job that I was doing before and during the pandemic, you just didn't see any hope. For people still employed in that industry, in that nature, they still don't see any hope ahead of them, even though COVID is already very far behind us in China. But for people employed in that sector in that industry, there is still little hope. [00:56:00]

For a few months, after I left my previous job—I left that job in the beginning of July—I was taking care of my daughter every day. I was basically being a full-time babysitter for my daughter every day because my wife was already back at work and, also, during the same time I was looking for a job. I was trying to look for an English teaching job in Wuhan. But I didn't want to go back to the training centers all over again because I knew that the English training centers—all of them are probably going to have a very rough few years ahead of them. So I wanted to go back to schools. But, for me, I didn't really have a teaching credential in China. I didn't have a Chinese teaching credential, so I couldn't apply for public schools. So I could only go to private schools. I had applied for several private schools over the course of two months. [00:57:03] And, at the beginning of it, I thought I'm not very confident about my personal skills, but I think the least I can do is go to a school to teach English. But, no, I didn't hear for a month. I didn't hear from any of the schools that I applied for, and I was just so—I was just so disappointed in myself. I was like, What is happening? Why am I not hearing from any of these employers?

And then, eventually, when I was talking to a friend of mine, who was working at a private school at a time, she told me, Say, hey, a friend of mine, he's a principal at one of the best private schools in Wuhan. He could not hire you, but he can sit down and talk with you and possibly explain to you why. [00:58:02] I was, like, Okay. So I went to his office, sat down with him and asked him, Why am I not hearing anything from any of these employers? And he said, Well, it is not because of you are not good enough. For your qualification, for your background, you are more than qualified to become an English teacher at any of these private schools. But it's because of COVID. A lot of the students, a lot of families, they have stopped sending their

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kids to private schools. For most families who decided to pay much more to send their kids to private schools, it is because they expect their kids to go abroad after high school.

**BROWNING:** Right.

**ROGER:** And then COVID happened. The border closed. [00:58:59] And, like all of this, even most of the universities in the U.K. and the United States also closed. They were only able to offer online classes. Most of these parents just don't see any point of having to spend more to send their kids to private schools anymore. So, as a result, they sent their kids back to public schools.

**BROWNING:** Right.

**ROGER:** And so for most of the private schools in Wuhan, they saw a major decline of new admissions in 2020 for as much as 20, or even 40%.

**BROWNING:** Oh wow.

**ROGER:** So he was telling me, This is what we're facing. A lot of our existing teachers, even after our school reopens, they probably don't have a class to teach anymore. So we probably have to let some of our existing teachers go. [01:00:00] Not to mention hiring new teachers. That is the fact that we're facing right now. So, that was that, and eventually this news agency job came along. And also, at that time, I wasn't able to secure any of the teaching jobs in Wuhan and eventually just had to choose this one and leave my family behind. I'm very grateful that my family, without my presence, they are going to have a lot of more burden on their shoulders, my wife and my mom. But they were very supportive of me coming to Beijing and they're very supportive of me changing my career, even at the age of thirty-three. [01:01:00]

**BROWNING:** Right.

**ROGER:** For my family, that's a huge change. For my family, it is probably, I think, one of the biggest changes since I graduated college. And, uh, it's not ideal, but in a situation like this, we

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just really didn't have a good choice. Like I was saying, I waited for two months. I couldn't get a teaching job in Wuhan.

**BROWNING:** Yeah, but it's a new direction, that's for sure. So I guess one last question I have for you, is that now that it's been more than a year since the lockdowns or lockdown in Wuhan ended, in hindsight, is there anything that you think is important now, that wasn't before for you? [01:02:00]

**ROGER:** Anything that is important now that it wasn't before for me? Oh, that's, uh, that's a big one. I'm not sure. Well, I'm not entirely sure what you mean. Do you mind giving an example?

**BROWNING:** Maybe what do you appreciate more? Is there anything that you appreciate more that you didn't before since everything happened?

**ROGER:** Um, I think one of the biggest changes, for myself, is now I value personal health. Much more than ever before. For example, I have always been a very active person in terms of a lifestyle. [01:02:58] Back when I was living in the United States, my wife and I, we'd go hiking every week, but I almost never went to a gym. And we never really thought much about eating healthily. We pretty much just ate whatever we want. And now that I'm living in Beijing, in the post pandemic era, I think I value my personal health much more than ever before. I tried to keep up with a healthy diet as much as possible. For example, I've been counting since last October—I have already had 170 bowls of grilled chicken salad. So, basically, it's like, one of every two meals I'm having a salad and I go to a gym at least four to three days a week. [01:04:01] Sometimes six days a week or seven days a week. I think all of these changes are because of COVID. It taught me you have to stay strong. You have to stay healthy. Because you never know whenever something like this will hit again. And you have to be prepared. You have to get ready for it.

And, also, I think some small personal hygiene habits. Now every everywhere I go, I keep a small bottle of hand sanitizer with me everywhere I go. And many people do that. Many people in China do that now. I didn't know any people around me doing that before the pandemic.

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Now everywhere I go, I see a lot of people carrying a small bottle of hand sanitizer whenever they go out. They clean their hands before they eat stuff. [01:05:01] They clean their hands before they get to work. Uh, and that is a huge change and I think that's a positive. One of the many positive changes in the post pandemic era.

**BROWNING:** Right. Yeah, definitely. What's the feeling among the public of the post pandemic situation and so on?

**ROGER:** In terms of—

**BROWNING:** In terms of life now compared to before. I mean, what is the feeling out there among the public about how things are right now at the moment? [01:06:04]

**ROGER:** I think most people that I have talked to are hopeful about the future ahead of them even though I think a lot of people really lost everything they had. For people that had small businesses in Wuhan, like people running restaurants; people running small grocery stores; people running small cafes, a lot of people lost everything they had. Everything they had worked so hard to put together. For example, a friend of mine he had about four or five coffee shops all over Wuhan before the pandemic. And after the pandemic, he had to close almost all of them and just keep one because he couldn't make enough money to keep all of them running. [01:07:06]

He had to close four or five of them, then just keep one running, and that's the same story for me as well. At the beginning of January 2020, because before 2020, my wife and I were in a lot of debt. I lived in the United States, where I went to grad school for a few years and worked there. So, for those years, there were just a lot of spending. We couldn't really make much money and my wife, at the time, she didn't really even have a job. We gave birth to our daughter there, so that was also a lot of money. [01:07:59] So we were in a lot of debt before the pandemic happened and, right at the beginning of 2020, we finally saw some hope. We're paying off most of our bills. We got a car. Our life was finally moving in the right direction and then the pandemic came. It hit and we lost our paychecks. Well, I didn't lose my job. I quit. But,

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you know, for almost an entire year, I didn't really have an income. So that for us was a huge issue.

But I think back to your question, I think most people are hopeful about the near future. Rebuilding in terms of our economy and our own life. Uh, yeah, I think most people that I've talked to are very hopeful. [01:08:59] For many months now, we don't really have almost don't really have any cases in China. That is one thing that we don't have to worry about, the potential danger of getting infected again, and that is something we don't have to worry about. So all things that we have to worry about is to just look ahead and just for whatever negative impact that you have in your life, because of the pandemic, you just have to rebuild that. There's nothing to look back to now.

**BROWNING:** Well, I think, unless you have anything else that you wish to share, I think that's a kind of a kind of a good way to end this interview.

**ROGER:** I do have one small thing to share.

**BROWNING:** Okay, go ahead.

**ROGER:** Because you didn't really ask about it. But I think at the beginning of the lockdown, in Wuhan and Jingzhou as well, not only was it that we felt anxious, but I was also very frustrated for a few weeks. [01:10:00] Because every day when you turn on a TV, you see how many lives are being lost; how many new cases are being confirmed every day in Wuhan. And, also at the same time, you see how many people are voluntarily putting their lives at risk to do as much as they could to help. Like those food delivery people, they're delivering food for the patients and the medical workers. And you have those drivers. They're driving medical workers to get home every day after work.

And I think for those weeks one huge part of my frustration was, there was nothing that I could do to help because I really, really wanted to help. [01:10:59] Not only that I could help, because I had a car and I am healthy. I was healthy. But, also, because it was my city, you saw all those



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medical workers from all over the country flooded into Wuhan to help. And you, being a Wuhan resident, there's nothing you can do at the time. So it was that kind of—you know, you felt frustrated. You felt really helpless. And, really, you also feared the—what is the word? Um, you just really—you felt useless as a person. As an adult, you felt useless. There's nothing you can do to help those people out there. [01:11:59] And I think for a very long time and, in the middle of the lockdown, that was a huge part of my frustration because there was nothing that I could do.

**BROWNING:** Right. Wow. Yeah, I could totally imagine. I mean, here it's kind of the same way. You can only do so much. You also have to take in your own situation and any risks to those people around you, but it's completely understandable. And I really understand that kind of feeling. So, I guess with that, Roger, I am finished.

**ROGER:** Okay.

End of Interview